

**School Self-evaluation and
Development Planning in the
Maltese Context:
the impact on School Improvement**

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February 2026**

A thesis presented in the Faculty of Education at the
University of Malta for the degree of Ph.D.
February 2026



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I Abstract

Strategic planning and reflection are essential in today's educational environment. School self-evaluation leading towards development planning is a process which aims at supporting schools in reflecting on their vision for improvement through a consistent exercise of analysis and evaluation. However, both research and practice in schools show that this process is not always carried out effectively and does not necessarily lead towards school improvement. This affects how educators not only approach but also adopt internal quality assurance and strategic management in schools.

This study investigates the different areas of the School self-evaluation process, how these impact each other within the same process and ultimately how these parts are taken into consideration by schools. The study raises several questions which lead towards reflection on the process within the bigger picture of strategic management and quality assurance within compulsory education. Is there a clear understanding of how school self-evaluation and development planning processes can be used effectively towards improvement? To what extent do leaders and educators understand the importance of consistency and evaluation in carrying out the process especially considering different contexts and realities? These are some of the questions which the study aims at addressing through a review of the relevant literature as well as through a case study approach carried out within a Maltese compulsory education context.

The research was carried out through a longitudinal case study on the role of school self-evaluation and development planning within two primary schools in Malta, with special focus on evaluation and how educators view this aspect of the process.

A mixed method approach was adopted where seventy-five educators participated in the study. Two sessions of in-depth interviews were carried out with ten educators and focus group sessions were held with Senior Leadership Teams of both schools. This study aimed at approaching the process in a different way not only by looking at school self-evaluation in its entirety but also through the analysis of the different components which make the process. The research aimed at looking at possible pitfalls which might be faced by schools while also reflecting upon ways of how the interaction and synergy between educators and school development processes might be enhanced towards effective school improvement.

Findings from the research show that breaking down the process is an important step in understanding how and when it works. This is especially true in relation to the monitoring and evaluation phase which, during the study, was found to be the weakest link in the process. This in turn brought about an impact on the perception which educators held towards the effectiveness of School self-evaluation and Development Planning. Findings in this regard were especially poignant in relation to leadership and the approach which is taken towards the process. By reflecting on the different parts of the process especially the monitoring and evaluation phase, educators were given the opportunity to make tangible a process which is usually perceived as abstract. Findings in this area helped in opening the door to strategy and foresight into strategic management at school level with special attention given to national compulsory settings.

II Dedication

To my dear mother and father, your gentle push initiated this journey, your silent support accompanied me through most of it but, alas, you could not finish it with me.

Thank you, Mum and Dad. I love you and will miss you always.

III Acknowledgements

The Government of Malta for funding this study through the Tertiary Education Scholarship Scheme (TESS) issued in 2020.

All participants who took part in the research through responding to the surveys, participating in the semi-structured interviews and focus groups. I would especially like to thank the two heads of school who participated in the study. Their commitment and honesty throughout the process were determining contributors to the process and outcomes of the study.

My supervisors Professor Christopher Bezzina and Professor Angelo Paletta. I would like to especially thank Professor Christopher Bezzina for listening, discussing and for always giving depth to my many thoughts and ideas. This admirably conveyed not only through academic insight but also through a real connection with schools and a real sense of empathy with the many tribulations which come alongside educational leadership. I truly appreciate your constant support and your trust in my work.

My colleagues, who as practitioners in the field of quality assurance helped me immensely in fine-tuning my research tools. However, their contribution did not stop there. I deeply appreciate the many times you sat with me and listened to me speaking about my research enthusiastically. I also thank you for encouraging me during the more difficult and less enthusiastic times.

My friends and family, especially my late father, who have been of support in so many ways, not only by silently walking with me along this journey but also for lifting me back up the many times I was about to falter. I truly appreciate you.

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List of abbreviations

CoPe	Courses for Professional educators.
CPL	Continuous Professional Learning.
DP	Development Planning.
DQSE	Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education
FACTS	For All Children to Succeed.
LOF	Learning Outcomes Framework.
MUT	Malta Union for Teachers.
NCF	National Curriculum Framework.
NMC	National Minimum Curriculum.
PDCA	Plan-Do-Check-Act.
PMP	Professional Management Programme.
QAD	Quality Assurance Department.
SDP	School Development Plan
SICI	Standing International Conference of Inspectorates
SIRS	School Internal Review Support.
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
SMART	Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Relevant,
Timely.	
SSE	School Self-Evaluation
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats.

Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction

Where do I start? I believe that I should initiate this journey by introducing myself as an educator, as this is essential to the context of the research I will be sharing in the coming chapters. I started my career in education twenty-five years ago, where, as a secondary school teacher, I embarked on the beautiful but challenging role of becoming an educator, a teacher, a professional whose career, like so many others on the same path would be one laden with constant change. In true honesty, through my training to become an educator as well as during my fifteen-year stint in the classroom, the role of School Self Evaluation (henceforth SSE) and Development Planning was minimal. I could recognise that something in my professional role within the larger school context was missing. I felt that my significance to the school and its plans for improvement should not be solely relegated to the time I spent in the classroom. Of course, my first loyalty was always towards my students, especially in facilitating their journey not only through their academic path but also the path leading towards their goals in life as well as their wellbeing. However, I felt that even in that endeavour I was still failing them, because I was missing the bigger picture: I was missing the collective shared vision towards a common objective, a common goal. As my teaching career progressed, so did this void. I was not isolated as a professional, I shared thoughts and discussed my daily successes and tribulations with my colleagues. However, I feel, in hindsight, that I was never part of a professional learning community. The support I was finally receiving was more akin to mentoring and immediate problem solving. Today, in retrospect, I feel that I was somehow robbed of an important aspect in my development as a professional and a leader. Today, I also believe that this was

primarily due to a lack of general understanding by the general educational community as well as myself of what strategic management entails, both at school and national level and its importance to school improvement.

I started to understand what was really missing in my professional journey when I moved into the area of educational quality assurance. As an education officer of quality assurance, more commonly known as a school inspector, I started visiting several schools from different sectors and conversing with leaders and their leadership teams. The overwhelming feeling which I was getting on a regular basis was that schools were consistently struggling to find different ways of coping with change and reform while simultaneously planning for improvement. It seemed that the general perception was that these two concepts were disassociated from each other. Through these conversations, I realised that part of what I felt was missing was first, the limited understanding of strategic management and development planning, and secondly, the ability to put in tangible action ideas and plans for improvement. The latter often originated as good ideas but remained as such because there wasn't a clear process or system which could put them into action. A self-evaluation and development planning process which would bring the school together as a professional learning community towards improvement was painfully missing. Within the national context, this was unfortunately a very common feeling amongst leaders and educators within schools. The feeling that that they are in constant crisis management and that their vision for improvement revolved solely around resolving immediate problems.

As my professional career continued moving forward in the area of quality assurance, I started becoming increasingly interested in the different ways in which schools approached strategic planning and how these finally contributed towards school improvement. It was always fascinating to me how so many different factors can influence the way the process is developed, implemented and evaluated, and how all these pieces work towards bringing together a much bigger picture, that school's improvement plan. However, the more I related to its different parts, the more I realized that this process is like a very important puzzle which ultimately

aims at showing a school's way forward and that each piece of that puzzle was a complex unit which determined the vision of that bigger picture. As a practitioner, as well as a researcher, this important puzzle drew my interest, especially because of its everchanging nature and its dependence upon the mindset and perception of those who ultimately must work towards bringing all the pieces together.

The review of the literature and the research which follow in this work gave me the opportunity to delve into the different pieces of this puzzle separately. In addition, looking at the different components individually also helped in bringing them all together towards the identification of what, based on literature and findings from the research are the main strengths and pitfalls of the process. This also led to a discussion on how these may be addressed so that schools can make effective use of such an important tool towards school-wide reflection and development planning. The research also gave me the opportunity to delve into the Maltese context, as part of my approach, to reflect on practices which are being carried out in the area within the local context.

1.2 The Maltese Educational System

Malta's educational system has developed from a historically British-influenced structure to one which now operates as a predominantly state-funded system offered by different providers, and which guarantees compulsory schooling to students between the ages of five and sixteen (Eurydice, 2023). Throughout the years, the Maltese system has been shaped by regular strategy reform and policy initiatives introducing major structural and curricular changes (Calleja, 1994; Bezzina, 2024). However, although there was a substantial evolution since national independence, the system continues to exhibit broad structural similarities to the British model while reflecting Malta's specific constitutional, cultural and socio-political context (Cutajar, 2015).

The right to education is embedded in Malta's Constitution and the Education Act, which collectively establish a state obligation to guarantee access, regulate provision and secure standards (Cap 605, Education Act). Compulsory education is provided through State, Church and Independent schools, which together enrol approximately sixty, thirty and ten per cent of the student population respectively (Eurydice, 2023). Compulsory schooling is typically structured as six years of primary education followed by five years of secondary education, both of which are offered free of charge in State schools across Malta and Gozo.

A landmark agreement in 1991 between the Holy See and the Republic of Malta rendered education in Church schools free of tuition fees, while allowing parents to make voluntary donations to support the operation of these schools (Celata & Mifsud Bonnici, 1991). Independent schools, by contrast, function as fee-charging institutions, although parents may benefit from targeted tax-relief measures and grants designed to mitigate the financial burden. State schools are governed by central authorities within the Ministry responsible for education, whereas Church and Independent schools retain organisational autonomy within the national regulatory and curricular framework. This type of structure creates a diversified system in which governance, funding and accountability arrangements vary by sector while remaining aligned with overarching national policy and legal objectives (EC, 2020).

Within the Ministry of Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, central authorities are organised into Directorates and Departments, whose configuration has evolved over time in response to changing policy priorities and administrative needs. Until 2006, Departments formed part of a one Education Division that combined regulation with service provision responsibilities. From 2007 onwards, these functions were separated into two main Directorates: one for Quality and Standards in Education, serving as the national regulator for early years and compulsory education, and another for Educational Services, primarily responsible for the provision and support of State schools (Mifsud, 2021).

All schools are required to implement a common national curriculum, currently framed by the National Curriculum Framework of 2012, which sets out key competences and the foundations for lifelong learning (NCF, 2012). Learning at the end of compulsory education is assessed through high-stakes, national standardized examinations, which strongly influence teaching practices and student trajectories. Following compulsory schooling, students can pursue different programmes of studies and pathways in both academic and vocational institutions.

1.3 Research Background

Alongside many other countries around the world, in the early nineties the Maltese education system started looking into how it could move away from a centralized system of education which was led by central government authority towards a more decentralized system which gave schools a certain level of autonomy. This would allow them the opportunity to decide on how to manage several aspects of their operation, among which the right to self-evaluate and decide on the areas for development based on the school's particular context and needs. The catalyst document which first outlined this vision was *Tomorrow's schools: Developing Effective Learning Cultures* (Wain et al., 1995). This document purported, for the first time in Maltese Education, a way forward and a re-examination of the current practices aiming at the development of a new culture of learning and effective learning environments (Wain et al., 1995).

This document served as a tool for reflection and initiated the discussion on decentralisation and greater school autonomy for schools to better respond and to be held accountable for meeting students' needs (Fabri, 2008). This led to the subsequent publication of the revised *National Minimum Curriculum* (NMC) in 1999 by the then Ministry of Education. Fundamental tenets of the NMC included the promotion of lifelong learning and to effectively set in motion the much talked about process of decentralization of the Maltese Educational system. This document aimed at the reculturing of the Maltese education system so that it could

better cater for all learners through a more focused effort on enhancing the learning and teaching process. To do this, schools needed to adopt a system where they could investigate their own practices and develop a plan for improvement. The concept of school self-evaluation and development planning was also directly mentioned in the document as a tool which would serve to portray the school's vision, goals and present a 'realistic strategy' on how these goals can be reached (NMC, 1999, p.56). This was an important step in the recognition of the importance of structural planning at school level especially in relation to the development of a vision and educational goals that are realistic and which belong to the school. It also advocated the need for the different stakeholders within the school community to come together and own the SSE process considering the principles and aims of the NMC.

The NMC started off with depicting many of the important principles which underlie school development planning; one of the most important being the involvement of all stakeholders in the process and creating a sense of collaboration, communication and consultation. The final section of the NMC ends with a specific reference to development planning which was depicted as a pivotal tool for schools to be able to implement the curriculum set out throughout the document. This final section outlined that the schools should set out this 'plan of action' which should demonstrate the school's "clear curricular vision" with "well defined curricular goals" and a realistic strategy on how these goals are to be attained (Ministry of Education, 1999, p.70). All this was to be carried out in the light of the school context. This was beneficial as it connected from the start the concept of decentralisation and school autonomy in implementing the curriculum to SSE and Development Planning.

The next seminal document in the path towards a new decentralised educational system was *For all Children to Succeed: A New Network organization for Quality Education in Malta* also known as FACTS, which was published by the then Ministry for Education, Youth, and Employment in 2005. This document proposed a major shift in governance and the centralized approach to the management of

schools through the formation of school networks where state-maintained schools would be sectioned into different 'Colleges'. This was done on the premise that;

‘a well-designed and an effective application of the principle of subsidiarity, through greater autonomy of schools and decentralization of services, ought to better facilitate the improvement in the quality and standards of children’s and students’ educational experience and performance’ (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2004, p.29).

Apart from a further push towards decentralization and the autonomy of schools, this move was also intended to reduce the isolation of schools and provide a tangible opportunity to create learning communities among school leaders as well as teaching staff. The College system was eventually launched in 2007. Schools started at this stage to become more accountable for their development and overall improvement. FACTS refers to self-evaluation in the light of a need for the school to carry out an ‘internal quality audit’. It also commits as MED (Education Department) to ‘provide and monitor the implementation of guidelines for school development planning’ (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2004, p. 31). As regards financial support, it states that the Ministry will consider and negotiate with State Schools their development plans (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2004, p. 35).

The fact that these seminal documents considered SSE and development planning as an important tool to help in strengthening schools’ newfound autonomy was the right step towards providing schools with a tangible process to plan strategically and become accountable for their own improvement. On the other hand, although in the NMC self-evaluation was mentioned broadly as a tool which could unite the different stakeholders towards the common good and improvement of the school, FACTS approached the concept of SSE differently. In fact, the document links SSE to the concept of monitoring where it now becomes the remit of the Ministry to produce ‘guidelines’ and monitor the implementation of these guidelines. Moreover, major projects which might transpire from the SSE exercise were to be approved financially by the Ministry for Education. This meant that although decentralization was being pushed and autonomy was being preached, a centralized system was still predominant and exercised its executive power to decide if schools

could carry out their own plans for development or not. To a certain extent this dimmed the prospects of SSE to develop effectively as a strategic planning tool which schools would reach out for and believe in to bring about the improvement which they, as practitioners who know the school, would have sought to identify.

1.3.1 SSE and Development Planning in Maltese Schools

School Self Evaluation (SSE) and Development Planning within the Maltese compulsory education system started taking shape in 1997 when several Assistant Directors within the then Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment who had shadowed Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) at the Scottish Office in Edinburgh explored the idea of launching the process within the local context. This was carried out through a pilot project which involved several Heads of School hailing from different sectors and schools in Malta. Later, during that same year, as part of this project, training on how to conduct school self-evaluation was delivered in Malta by inspectors from the Scottish Office. This seminar initiated the process of launching self-evaluation and School Development Planning in Maltese schools (Knowing our School, 2004). In January of 1999, the outcomes of the pilot project which saw the development of several trial School Development Plans in a sample of the schools, was presented to the committee which had been formed to spearhead the launch of the SDP process in Malta. Following the pilot, a committee was tasked to prepare a set of proposals which could be considered as SDP guidelines and Performance Indicators (PIs). The product of this endeavour would eventually be developed in the *Knowing our School* guidelines published for the first and only time in 2004.

As stated by Cecilia Borg, then Director General Operations within the Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment in the preface to *Knowing our School* (2004) the introduction of school self-evaluation in Maltese schools was part of a bigger project which included the development of the Performance Management Programme (PMP) for administration and staff as well as the devolution of funds to schools as a major push towards school autonomy. The main objective was to

have the different stakeholders involved in collaborative planning. The PMP programme initiative was largely unsuccessful and would eventually be stopped by the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) after a few years. However, SSE and school development planning is still a process which is carried out by all schools, to various degrees, on a continuous basis. By the year 2006 it was common understanding, or possibly, a general perception, that all Maltese schools hailing from the different sectors, had at least a basic idea of what SSE consisted of. Schools were also provided with guidelines on how to implement it. These guidelines, the *Knowing our school* policy was heavily reliant on the Scottish system at the time and echoed the tenets and principles conveyed in the Scottish document *How good is our School* which also, at the time focused its process mainly on performance indicators and checklists.

The official national policy on SSE and development planning is the *Knowing our school* document published in 2004. To date, there have been no updates to the policy. However, there are two other documents linked to SSE and Development Planning which have been used intermittently by schools in Malta. The first one was published prior to the policy and is entitled, *Opening doors to School improvement: an introductory handbook* (Bezzina, 1999) published with the aim of being an introduction to the concept of school development planning. The document is an easy read for schools and describes why Development Planning is important and the benefits which can be reaped from the process, especially in relation to the importance of decentralisation and school autonomy which was already being envisaged as the necessary step forward for education in Malta. Another document entitled *School Improvement through self-evaluation* (Quality Assurance Department, 2010) which was informally disseminated by the Quality Assurance Department (QAD) and describes the process of school self-evaluation more formatively by discussing the importance behind every part of the process. Arguably, the latter was developed as a supplement to *Knowing our School* which was more focused on quality indicators and checklists and gave limited scope to notions such as reflection and evaluation.

1.3.2 Teacher Professionalism and the SSE process

Teacher professionalism and professional development are inherently linked to the ecosystem of school improvement (MacBeath, 2012). The way educators view their role and agency as professionals impacts the sense of ownership and mindset which are fundamental towards the success of the SSE and Development Planning process (Gardezi, 2024; Goldstone, 2022; Vassallo Medici, 2022; Thang et al., 2025).

At policy level, teacher professionalism is increasingly linked to autonomy as well as the ability and agency to take data-informed decisions and participate effectively in collaborative structures such as professional learning communities (Bezzina, 2002; Blaik-Hourani, 2019). The international push inherently veers towards a professional who is a central agent of change, who is more inclined to support teacher leadership in curriculum design, assessment practices and school improvement (OECD, 2024). This is integral to SSE and Development Planning processes which by nature assume that teaching staff can critically examine practice, interpret evidence and design appropriate responses (Brady, 2016; Goldstone, 2022; Privitelli, 2007). Problems arise, however, when teacher professionalism in relation to quality assurance is viewed mainly as obedience to external standards or inspection demands, where autonomy is merely narrowed to a compliance exercise (Brough & Tracey, 2013; Bubb & Earley, 2009). As a result, SSE and Development Planning risks turning into a paperwork exercise geared towards external accountability rather one that promotes internal development both at professional and school level (Gardezi, 2024).

In most contemporary frameworks, SSE and School Development Planning are designed in a cyclical way. SSE generates evidence about strengths and needs. This evidence in turn informs a development and improvement plan (Caldwell, 2005). Subsequently, an approach where professional development is seen as determining serves to build the capability required to implement and evaluate that plan for improvement (Bezzina, 2002; Gardezi, 2024). When this cycle functions effectively, then the SSE and Development Planning process can truly serve not

only as an effective exercise in evaluation but also as a valuable experience of professional development (MacBeath, 2006). The way stakeholders view and perceive teacher professionalism becomes therefore pivotal. If teachers are recognised and supported as learning professionals, they are more likely to co-own the SSE process, align their development goals with school priorities and sustain a continuous cycle of evidence-informed improvement.

1.4 Problem Statement and Research Objectives

When looking into the literature related to SSE and Development Planning it is easy to see the correlation with the development of the movement linked to concepts such as decentralisation, accountability and especially school autonomy. Primarily because the process was being looked upon as both a strategic management tool for schools to be able to effectively manage that newfound autonomy, as well as one for governing structures to hold the schools accountable for their plans for improvement. Through works by John MacBeath such as *Schools Must speak for themselves* (2006), the concept of school autonomy in relation to school self-evaluation was expanded to include different aspects which form the SSE process, such as the importance of listening to the voice of educators and allowing the schools to understand their own strengths and decide on their areas for improvement. Another seminal work in the area by the same John MacBeath, *School Inspection and School Evaluation* (2008) also looked at the integral importance which SSE and Development Planning can have in relation to external quality assurance, governance and policy development.

Experts in the field of school self-evaluation have often written on the need for research to be more context specific with deeper analysis at school level. Schildkamp et al. (2012) argue that enhanced case study research in SSE and Development planning would help in clarifying complex questions about the process and investigate how certain elements of school self-evaluation are developed during the actual process. Hoffman et al. (2009) query if and how school

self-evaluation can help schools become better professional learning communities and bring about improvement. In addition, McCrone et al. (2009) argue that SSE as a tool can be an extremely important tool for schools to enhance and examine stakeholder voice.

The already existing literature and research on the area of SSE and development planning, was in most part resonating with my professional experience within schools. It was evident that there were several issues which were common within most educational systems and were being discussed at different levels and in various fora. However, I felt that the discourse related to this area was being kept at a general level and the issues were being skimmed over but never delved into in a structured way to understand why in so many instances the process was not being entirely successful. Locally, within Maltese education, the discourse on Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) was somewhat more prevalent in higher education due to accreditation processes and regulatory checks. However, at compulsory level, the process was and is still not discussed at more complex levels. There are in fact few publications on SSE and development planning related to compulsory education in Malta. This spurred me to focus on two aspects which following research, I believed, proved a lacuna in research. Firstly, it is important to define the main research problem, that is, why SSE and Development planning are not always effective in schools. I wanted my research to focus on the specific aspects of the process but also on the surrounding, less tangible aspects which might be influencing the process. The second issue I wished to address through my research is the specific local Maltese scene as I strongly believe that for the process to work there needs to be investment in understanding how it is viewed locally and what approach might be taken in a typical Maltese school.

1.5 Research Questions

The research questions developed as the basis of this study have been structured into one main research question and relevant sub-questions emanating from the literature and main problem statement (see Table 1). This main research question

focuses broadly on the aspects which might be impacting the process. The research objective is to develop tangible awareness of these aspects by focusing on specific areas. The relative broadness of the main research question has been countered by the subdivision into three sub questions. These sub-questions were directly linked to the literature and research on the area of SSE and Development Planning. However, they also reflect my professional experience in the field within the local context.

The first sub-question focuses on the approach and perception which educators have regarding the process and how this ultimately influences its success. This area aims at not only looking into educators but also leadership teams with particular emphasis on their ability to ensure that it is structured and managed effectively. The aim of this research question is to delve into this approach to understand if a particular mindset can influence the success of the process and how a change in mindset could also impact the way it is viewed by educators and thus improve its effectiveness.

The second sub question delves into the actual process. As mentioned earlier, one of the objectives of this research is to look at the different parts of the process effectively to see if ultimately tackling different aspects individually is more effective in targeting issues than looking at the process as a whole. At this juncture I chose to specifically focus on the monitoring and evaluation phase. This was considered, following the identification of the gap which exists in literature about monitoring and evaluation within the process as well as my professional experience with the actual lived process in schools. This area also piqued my interest as it is an aspect that goes beyond what happens in schools and spills into policy development which in many cases suffers when faced with any form of evaluation.

The last sub question looks at the impact which external forces such as external quality assurance mechanisms as well as governing structures can have on the process. Literature in the field of internal quality assurance often blames external quality assurance on the limitations posed on SSE and Development Planning. In

many cases, the latter is viewed as just another accountability exercise. The study will investigate this process but will also consider the local scene in this regard and how, external QA mechanisms, policy makers and governing bodies influence the way SSE and development planning are implemented. Table 1 depicts the main research questions and the different sub-divisions.

Table 1 - Research Questions

<p>Main Research Question:</p> <p>What are the main factors which impact the success of school self-evaluation and development planning in Maltese Compulsory education?</p>
<p>1.The importance of approach and perception.</p> <p>How do leaders and educators perceive the SSE and Development Planning process and to what extent does this influence mindset?</p>
<p>2.Understanding the process</p> <p>What is the importance given to the process especially the monitoring and evaluation part of the process by both leadership and educators and how does this impact the success of the SSE process?</p>
<p>3.External factors influencing the process</p> <p>What is the impact of external factors such as external quality assurance and governance on the SSE and Development Planning process?</p>

1.6 Research Structure

The research follows a social constructionist approach which in the context of the research focuses primarily on how the knowledge, perception and understanding of the SSE process can be changed and moulded. The approach taken in this research is that of a case study with two primary schools in Malta which form part of the Church School sector and who have familiarity with the process. Moreover, both schools have been relatively consistent in their application of the main

principles which govern SSE and Development planning. The latter being an important factor within the research considering that the research in schools was carried out immediately following the Covid-19 pandemic.

The study is a longitudinal study which takes place over two scholastic years. The first part of the research focuses on understanding the way the educators and leadership teams look at the process and their mindset in relation to it. The research methods consist of a mixed methods approach. A survey was distributed by the researcher among educators at the beginning and end of the research to gauge initial impact as well as eventual change. However, the study is primarily a qualitative one, where educators were invited to dialogue on the process through semi-structured interviews and focus groups for leadership teams. The role of the researcher as critical friend during part of the research is also an important aspect in relation to the findings as it triggered the awareness in both schools of the need of support in strategic management.

One of the aims of this longitudinal study is to be able to carry out changes and see its effects throughout the span of the research. This approach was essential especially in relation to the research questions which asked for observation of the process with special focus on the monitoring and evaluation stage. The fact that changes were implemented, and the researcher could see how these influenced the way the process was perceived is also testimony to the importance of carrying out in-depth case studies when researching processes and aspects related to strategic planning.

1.7 Summary of Chapters

This *Introduction* chapter serves as a first approach to the study and the research questions. It also gives me the opportunity to introduce myself as researcher and professional within the field of quality assurance.

The second chapter, the *Literature Review*, looks into the different aspects which characterise the origins of SSE and Development Planning within the sphere of education and the impact it can have, as a process, on school improvement.

The third chapter proceeds to look into *The Maltese Context in Relation to SSE and Development Planning*. This chapter presents an in-depth documentary analysis into the relevant literature in relation to the local context through research of policy and legislation.

The fourth chapter, *Research Design and Methodology*, discusses in depth the approach to research taken in this study focusing on the epistemological stance as well as the different factors which characterise a case study approach. It will also discuss the different research tools used and the reasoning behind this choice of methods.

The fifth chapter, *Findings*, depicts the findings which have emanated from the research carried out in the two schools as part of the case study approach. Findings, analysed through NVivo, are divided into different themes which will all be linked to the main research question and the respective subsections.

The sixth chapter, the *Discussion* section discusses the findings in the light of the research questions and will closely look at the different themes in the light of the literature as well as the local context.

The seventh and final chapter, *Conclusion*, will conclude the study through an analysis of the findings and discussion chapter and will offer a set of recommendations with the aim of facilitating the understanding of the SSE and development planning process.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Working so closely with the area of quality assurance allowed me the opportunity to reflect on the process and examine the different areas of literature related to SSE and Development Planning. This gave me the chance to view different perspectives and delve into a spectrum of studies focusing on different educational contexts linked to internal quality assurance. It also provided the ideal context to be able to associate what I had been observing as a practitioner to relevant theory as well as research in the field. The research questions aim at looking at determining aspects which can possibly influence the SSE process, focusing especially on the characteristics of the different components which make up the process and how these are viewed and ultimately implemented by schools. This meant that the different parts of the process needed to be approached individually to further understand the gap in research as well as in practice.

The first part of the chapter gives an insight into the origins of SSE in education in relation to *Neoliberalism* and *New Managerialism* and how the process has evolved along the years within the sphere of education. Determining aspects such as accountability, autonomy and the notions associated to an audit culture are also approached within an educational context and how this perception of quality assurance impacts educators. At a later stage this will also be linked to the local context, namely, how SSE originated in Malta and the current approach towards its implementation. As part of the research questions posed, this chapter will also

consider the approach and mindset of educators, including leadership teams towards the process. Literature reviewed in this regard details the relevance and impact of school leaders in pushing the process, implementing it as well as evaluating its success or otherwise. Leadership skills are discussed with particular attention to the ability in using the process to bring educators together through professional learning communities.

The literature analysed as part of this research also highlights the relationship which exists between internal and external quality assurance, especially in the way it is viewed by schools and educators. The review also investigates how this relationship is viewed by international bodies and how a new dimension to the symbioses between the two quality assurance mechanisms is being developed. The different facets which emerge from this relatively new relationship will also be discussed as part of this research.

2.2 Tracing Developments in SSE and Development Planning

Evolving practices in education linked to school decentralisation and therefore the spheres of autonomy and accountability in education brought about the need for quality assurance mechanisms which would ideally support schools to better understand where they stand in relation to improvement within their background and context (MacBeath, 2006). Broadly defined, SSE in most educational systems is often found to be a systematic process, including cyclical activities such as goal setting, planning, evaluation and the defining of new measures for improvement (MacBeath, 1999). As argued by Swaffield & MacBeath (2005), school self-evaluation, as the term itself implies, should be a process which schools “do to themselves, by themselves and for themselves” (p.239). The authors here clearly portray the original intent of the process, that of being used as a practical tool by schools in their journey towards improvement.

The overarching goals for school self-evaluation are twofold: to improve the quality of the organisation and to improve the actual teaching and learning which

happens in the classroom (Kyriakides & Campbell, 2004; McNamara et al., 2022). These are the building blocks which determine the stability of any educational institution and are essentially the focal areas of both internal and external quality assurance mechanisms. In addition to these overarching objectives, MacBeath (1999), argues that school self-evaluation is a process for communicating, building support and developing a shared vision among the school community. The aim of self-evaluation is to convey the message that schools are intelligent and independent organisations that can consciously, through the development of professional learning communities, decide what is best for them and how to achieve intended objectives (O'Brien et al., 2019; Bezzina & Paletta, 2022). The more stakeholders are given the opportunity to play a significant part in the process, the more likely it will be that strong relationships, conducive to lasting and sustainable action are forged. The power of self-evaluation as an internal quality mechanism, in contrast to external quality assurance, resides in its potential for helping people identify the type of journey they are embarking on, how that journey can be facilitated and whether ultimately, they have reached their destination (Herman, Aschbacher & Winters, 1992). Furthermore, as MacBeath (2008) argues, SSE is a continuing process of reflection which involves a paradigm shift from a passive and compliant role which characterised centralised systems to an active role where teachers are given more autonomy as professionals and are the main protagonists of their own individual, collective and continuous professional development. As MacBeath, (1999) debates, over the last few decades school self-evaluation has offered schools the opportunity to improve through critical self-reflection. A process which can serve as a catalyst towards the development of learning and teaching both within the classroom and as well as professionally through the nurturing of learning communities (Quinn, 2021).

2.2.1 Neoliberalism, New Managerialism and the development of an audit culture

The development of internal quality assurance mechanisms in most educational systems around the world can be linked to the development of managerial

contemporary systems during the last fifty years. Determining movements related to quality assurance are *Neoliberalism* and *New Managerialism* which have reached deeply into the everyday life of schools, shaping not only policy framework but also the minute routines, language and priorities that structure teachers' and leaders' work. The following sections will explore how these systems have influenced the educational sphere with reference to perception and approaches towards internal quality assurance.

Neoliberalism as a political-economic movement was central to a myriad of changes throughout its development (Hastings, 2019). Most important is the perception of the individual and the professional in the world of work. Harvey (2005) describes neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advocated by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free market and free trade” (p.2). This meant that the attention was now focused on the output which could be produced by the individual and therefore the subsequent quality of that output (Quiggin, 2022). The concept of accountability started shifting in meaning and understanding from a vague notion of generality to a more focused structure which was now in the hands of the individual worker (Knafo, 2019; Jones & Ball, 2023). Neoliberalism also influenced the notion of state power which had been previously described by the Liberalist movement as oppressive to the individual. It offered a new perspective, one which portrayed the state as working towards developing the conditions and laws necessary towards giving the individual the freedom and power to flourish (Olssen 1996; Apple, 2004).

In the 1990s Neoliberalism was also strongly aligned to New Managerialism, which at that time was a predominant feature in literature and areas linked to economics and business management (Dutta et al., 2022). There are strong links between Neoliberalism and New Managerialism but there are also important differences. Neoliberalism is generally used in discourse as an encompassing term that touches upon different areas and whose terminologies are prominent but not

necessarily focused on a particular aspect. On the other hand, New Managerialism is essentially a model of corporate governance guided by the promotion of market values and practices in the public sector (Sowa et al., 2018). This close-knit relationship with the business world led to the development of more focused terminology linked to New Managerialism which started including references to customers, producers, consumers, empowerment, charters, excellence, and performance indicators (Deem et al., 1995). The phenomenon that ensued was that this type of language and vocabulary started to permeate throughout different areas and sectors including education (Thompson, 2017).

The influence of this type of terminology can also be seen in the formulation and development of educational policy especially that related to quality assurance due to its 'auditing' and 'monitoring' nature and the inherent link to accountability (Lynch, 2014). This has created an environment of educational policy on quality assurance linked to words such as accountability, transparency, decentralization, responsibility for performance (McNamara & O'Hara, 2008). As Harvey (2005) argues, this kind of jargon tends to become embedded in our daily language as well as in the way many of us interpret, live, and understand the world around us. This led to the coining of concepts such as 'audit culture', terms which contribute towards influencing the perception of educators towards internal quality assurance and evaluation mechanisms (Jones & Ball, 2023). Another determining aspect of new managerialism is that it is fundamentally a system of values that attributes more importance to the concept of achieving 'product and output' over 'process and input' (Lynch, 2014). New Managerialism is regarded by theorists in most literature as more of a political ideology rather than a technical one. An ideologically motivated approach whose aim is to manage the public service by aligning organizational practices with those in the market system (Ball, 2009). To achieve this, focus inevitably turns on mechanisms that can help monitor the attainment of these goals and therefore the development of a system of public auditing aimed at assessing and measuring the quality of service delivered. Thus, there is a collective push towards the development of a form of control through competition and public monitoring (Clarke & McLaughlin, 2000).

New Managerialism brings along several important changes, not only where the concept of governance is concerned but also in a shift in moral purpose to one which is modelled mainly by principles followed by business and industry. Education is one of the areas where this shift has been more prominent throughout the years as it has inevitably had to adapt by changing its way of managing from one which is based on the concept of nurturing and growth to one which is linked to a market-model of control which needs to produce tangible outputs (Lynch, 2014). In this kind of model, the educated person becomes a concept that is market-led. As Hastings (2019) argues, the definition of education is morphed into one which is defined, as stated earlier, in terms of capital acquisition. In the light of this economic model, one does not purely learn and grow for the sake of becoming intrinsically a better person but primarily to make oneself skilled for the economy and the world of work (Huang, 2017). Although the results and improvement obtained by Neoliberalism and New Managerialism can be termed as more tangible, they also tend to promote the development of an extremely focused but also limited citizen, one which is educated to become rational and competitive, a cosmopolitan worker built around a calculating entrepreneurial and detached self.

Within the educational sphere, Neoliberalism and New Managerialism were translated into a quasi-worldwide exercise of power devolution from the centre to the individual schools. The cry for the individual schools to be autonomous and accountable for their development and management became resounding and resulted in an exercise of decentralization in most educational contexts, albeit to various degrees (Bezzina, 2006). Those in favour of the Neoliberal and New Managerialism movements encouraged these changes as necessary for schools to be those who define and are accountable for their improvement strategies. This would result in more efficiency, effectiveness, and less waste of money. Meyer (2002) argues that proponents of New Managerialism in education are necessary to respond to the demands of a changing environment with dramatically increased degrees of uncertainty in a knowledge-dependent society. On the other hand, fundamental values such as care, respect, tolerance, trust, and equality have been

to different extents, morphed and blurred due to the obsessive drive to achieve results (Coatzee, 2019). This kind of management system will inevitably create agendas both at the governance and personal level where achieving results becomes the goal of one's professional life especially in managerial and leadership roles. This doubtlessly will shift the nature of relationships in the workplace to become more transactional. The final goal is the same for everyone: high performance and productivity.

Thrupp and Willmot (2003) argue that managerialism in education presents teachers and students with several challenges. While 'managing' a school includes elements such as structural changes, planning, budgeting, personnel relations which can be said to apply to any organization others are purely related to the sphere of education. The emotional investment which running a school entails cannot be quantified or standardized to a common set of goals across the board (Machin, 2017). The nurturing skills required to help students grow into respectful and functioning citizens cannot be set in any budget plan or managed according to set goals. Feeley (2009) argues that the eventual gains and losses from having or not having care and nurture in education will only be felt over time.

Further problems arise when educational contexts which cannot be solely considered as businesses do not deliver on the planned objectives. Governing structures, including state-controlled systems are encouraged to trust schools with a certain level of autonomy. However, a caveat to this devolution of responsibility is that in one way or other, through different mechanisms, including internal and external quality assurance there needs to be an enhanced level of accountability as proof of tangible improvement is often demanded (Weilend & Salokangas, 2021). This kind of influence has seeped in slowly through the years and has become ingrained in everyday language and practice and has to a certain extent influenced the way practitioners in schools as well as leadership teams look at internal quality assurance, development planning and ultimately monitoring and evaluation (Neiche et al., 2021). Because managerial principles originated in a commercial context where the process is subordinated to output and profit, management values

show themselves in education through the promotion of forms of governance (measurement, surveillance control, regulation) that are often antithetical to the caring that is at the heart of education (Lynch, 2014). As Bottery (2014), argues, when goals are set, their achievement is to be policed through regulation processes, quality assurance, quality control, audit, benchmarking, evaluation and inspections. As also discussed by Lynch, Grummel and Devine (2012) the development of these performance indicators and the availability of surveillance mechanisms make the task of managing and controlling the professional easier than it had been before. Thus, as learners became the customers, schools needed to be empowered and staff within schools were required to come up with performance indicators that would render them accountable for their school's improvement plan.

The kind of governance promoted by Neoliberalism and New Managerialism promotes a worker who is independent, flexible, autonomous and who can exercise reflection, introspection, calculation, and judgment (Rose & Miller, 1992). Notwithstanding, this transference of control and responsibility has also created several issues and insecurities which ultimately need to be controlled and checked in one way or another. Audit culture is a phenomenon closely linked to what sociological theorists have termed 'risk society' and the 'political economy of insecurity' (Cottle, 1998). The increasing use of audits arises largely because of growing concerns about 'quality assurance', 'operational risk', and the 'crisis of trust' that is said to afflict most professions today. This leads to what Leys, one of the most prominent analysts of this trend, believes are the repercussions of the development of this audit culture:

(There is a) proliferation of auditing, i.e. the use of business derived concepts of independent supervision to measure and evaluate performance by public agencies and public employees from civil servants and school teachers to university (faculty) and doctors: environmental audit, value for money audit, management audit, forensic audit, data audit, intellectual property audit, medical audit, teaching audit and technology audit emerged and, to varying degrees of institutional stability and acceptance, very few people have been left untouched by these developments. (Leys, 2003, p. 70)

The widespread nature of these evaluative and measurement pressures, and their ability to become parts of our daily life, push away other conceptions of

effectiveness and democracy (Apple, 2004). Instead of developing a society with enhanced trust in the public's ability to handle democratic power to ensure an adequate level of effectiveness through the use of the resources available to them, there emerged a society of 'auditees' anxiously preparing for audits and inspections (Foner, 1998, p. 119). The ultimate result of an auditing culture of this kind is not the promised decentralization that plays such a significant rhetorical role in most theories linked to Neoliberalism but rather a process of de-democratization (Apple, 2004).

In daily school life, neo-liberal concepts can transpire in a number of ways especially through the prominence given to attainment of data, the centrality of examination results in school development plans as well as the use of performance indicators and benchmarking used in different fora to evaluate teachers and departments (Arar et al., 2019; Apple, 2006; Ball, 2003b). In the long run this is often carried out at the expense of less quantifiable work such as pastoral care or community engagement which is however, exponentially becoming determining towards the wellbeing of students (Deem & Brehony, 1995). SSE and Development Planning originally conceived as formative tools for professional learning, are recoded as technologies of surveillance and control. For example, lesson observations become quasi-inspections (Barber, 2004; Blaik-Hourani & Litz, 2019). Any reflective discussion risks being framed around checklists where developmental plans are written to satisfy external templates more than to address locally felt needs (Bouranta et al., 2021; Dutta et al., 2009). The perception towards the SSE process can be influenced negatively if leaders and educators find themselves continually assembling evidence for audits, data spreadsheets and monitoring logs (Chapman, 2000), thus, risking the subordination of routine work of teaching and relationship-building (Brady, 2016).

2.2.2 Autonomy and Accountability in Education: towards school-based management

Since the mid-1980s the implementation of systems of accountability has been an important aspect and perhaps the most powerful trend in educational policy at international level (Barber 2004; Caldwell, 2005). Through what was termed by Alkin (1979) as ‘educational accountability’, schools were becoming more tangibly responsible to their investment in what children learn not only to the children themselves but also to the greater community (Popham, 1972). In the field of education, accountability can take different forms. This includes compliance with regulations, adherence to professional norms and ultimately accountability which is results driven and which is often considered as the most difficult to measure tangibly and which is usually mostly influenced by political involvement or interference in the quest towards achieving national plans for school improvement (Anderson, 2005). Schools and educators often find themselves trying to manage all three accountability systems simultaneously, trying to understand and balance the requirements which are presented by each system which are also at times conflicting (Ydesen & Bomhalt, 2020).

The move towards a school-based management system which would hold the school accountable for its plans for improvement and subsequent results proved to be quite dramatic for schools, especially those educators who held leadership roles (Huyen, 2024). This required a change in mindset from one which was mainly focused on the educational provision being given to students to a system that required leaders to look at the wider picture and provide improvement plans which were not solely relevant at classroom level, but which included the whole school and its associated stakeholders (Møller, 2008). Schools had to become more autonomous in areas such as planning, self-evaluation and the choice of professional development. In several systems this also meant financial autonomy which therefore also included a strong element of budgeting and distribution of resources which they were ultimately accountable for. Skills needed to be amplified, and new systems started to be introduced. Quality assurance systems

such as external review systems as well as internal quality assurance mechanisms started to take a more prominent role (MacBeath, 2008). This was necessary, especially where accountability was concerned. These systems were seen in many cases as mechanisms that monitored whether schools were able to handle the responsibility of this newly gifted autonomy (Fullan, 2016; Oktarina et al., 2023).

Although schools have always been accountable to external stakeholders (Beadie, 2004) this shift meant that a new level of accountability was in play which was accompanied by an equally high level of responsibility. The ultimate objective was to promote school-based management making schools autonomous and accountable for their development and therefore for their improvement. As defined by Malen, Ogawa, and Kranz, (1990):

‘School-based management can be viewed conceptually as a formal alteration of governance structures, as a form of decentralization that identifies the individual school as the primary unit of improvement and relies on the redistribution of decision-making authority as the primary means through which improvement might be stimulated and sustained.’ (p. 290)

This move towards school-based management took several years but was ultimately taken on by most education systems around the world. This also meant the development of external accountability mechanisms created by actors outside of the schools, those who ultimately held the power to decide if the school was working well or otherwise (Octarina et al., 2023). These mechanisms which were often driven by common standards also impacted individual schools who had, notwithstanding their context, to report their progress to different stakeholders (Knapp & Feldman, 2011). This determining change also shifted the definition of accountability for schools. The expectations which had been brought forward by external actors became radically more demanding and wide-ranging. Firstly, greater attention and emphasis were placed on summative results which naturally meant that the attention was now being moved from the input to the output (Noguera, 2004; Anderson 2005). Moreover, external mechanisms demanded the development of common standards and performance indicators to be able to assess these outputs (Lueger & Vettori, 2008).

The influence of external accountability mechanisms can be said to overlap internal ones in several ways. With standards, assessments, and strategies which demand tangible results, leadership teams in schools are often placed in a position where instead of evaluating the work of their staff purely for internal improvement they are being pushed to evaluate the school for external accountability purposes (Bush, 2008; Cutajar, 2020). This requires school management to often link what happens in the classroom to state-determined assessments and standards (Knapp & Feldman, 2011). This poses the risk of losing that internal focus which is so determining to the individual school, and which has the power to bring a school together on different grounds. Furthermore, this brings about great demands for the school and the individuals to rise to the ‘high expectations’ which are set for them irrelevant to their background or school context. Early educational research carried out on school leaders on how to adjust school practices to align to external expectations reported strong feelings of resistance (Mintrop, 2007), as well as confusion and denial (Carnoy et al., 2005). As the implementation of these processes settled in, school leaders, to a certain extent, managed to assimilate the new standards and criteria to align to the external requirements but in many cases, this required a struggle and a redefinition of the way the individual schools were being defined and assessed. All this ultimately started bringing about a feeling of continuous monitoring both through external bodies as well as the introduction of new internal quality assurance mechanisms. This kind of adverse reaction to accountability is often linked to Goodhart’s Law which argues that if a goal or objective becomes a target to be measured externally, then it ceases to be a good target (Elton, 2004). The development of these new assessment strategies based on concepts such as ‘performance indicators’, ‘success criteria’, ‘benchmarking’ and the subsequent intersection between external and internal quality assurance mechanisms have also influenced the way educators view both processes and the attitude and approach which is presented whenever they are implemented.

One of the fundamental roles of any quality assurance mechanism is its effect on the environment into which it is introduced and often the consequences which

cannot be always predicted. As Power (1994) argues, the development and spread of quality assurance mechanisms means that organizations as well as individuals are finding themselves scrutinized and audited formally and despite any explanations outlining the benefits of these processes and protocols these individuals now must see themselves as auditees no matter their background and where they are hailing from. What Power is trying to point out is that, notwithstanding the objective of the quality assurance mechanism being used, those under 'scrutiny' perceive themselves in a different way in relation to any form of quality exercise. They are pushed to look at themselves and their professionalism as well as personal qualities and measure them against 'benchmarks' and 'performance indicators'. Notwithstanding how far these are carried out in a non-threatening and formative way, they still feel that they are being 'audited' and therefore judged. As Ball (2003a) aptly argues, quality assurance brought about great changes not only in the way professionals relate to each other but also in the way they view themselves on a personal level. When speaking about school leadership and management, becoming accountable and assuming responsibility for the improvement of all the school has a determining impact on the leadership style, the classroom environment and, to some degree, the way teachers view their profession and themselves (Anderson, 2005; Bush, 2011).

The dramatic changes affecting the educational sphere mentioned in the previous sections led to the inevitable introduction of formal quality assurance in schools (Kyriakides & Campbell, 2004). The development of external quality assurance mechanisms and the inevitable link to internal quality assurance has led to a contradictory and often confusing understanding of the role of an employee especially within professional fields such as education (Alkin & Daillak, 1979; Barber, 2004; MacBeath, 2008). As an educator, as a professional, you are being told that you are allowed to be autonomous and to reflect on your profession but at the same time you perceive that those who govern are still considering you as a crude calculable unit of economic resource. Audit methodologies may have worked in the long run towards improving the economy and accountability within the workforce but in the process have changed the concept of professional thought

and practice to something which needs to be quantified to be accountable (Foucault, 1977, 1991; Bouranta et al., 2021). This has, through the years, influenced the way these professionals look at their work and those who govern them. This type of impact on the educator further highlights the importance of leadership and the determining role which the leader plays in relation to attitude and mindset in relation to both internal and external quality assurance mechanisms.

What originally aimed at improving the productivity and improvement strategy of the individual schools has resulted in the gradual but steady development of a general feeling of having an ‘audit culture’. This is in direct contrast with the caring and nurturing nature of education. This focus on measurable accountability might be further fuelling a top-down culture which is in direct contrast with the autonomy, transparency and trust which these mechanisms are meant to promote (Shore, 2008). This is thus making it more complex for schools to practice their agency in developing their practices and working more autonomously towards school improvement.

2.3 The evaluative positioning of SSE in schools

Among the most frequently adopted approaches used by schools when implementing their SSE is *Participatory Evaluation* (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998) which is characterised by the involvement of the different stakeholders of the area being evaluated. Campilan (2000) indicates that participatory evaluation is distinguished from other forms of evaluation as it focuses on why the evaluation is being done, how it is being carried out, who is doing the evaluation, what is being evaluated and for whom this evaluation is being done. The advantages of participatory evaluation techniques are linked to the increased ability to focus on a specific area and evaluate in detail and therefore improve performance (Nunez et al., 2021). It also facilitates the bringing together of different groups of people towards the building of teams and learning communities. Such approaches, however, take a lot of time to process, require increased level of resources and must

maintain consistency in carrying out the research, analysis and evaluation (Gujit, 2014).

In SSE systems which are highly evolved, *Participatory Evaluation* can also develop into *Empowerment Evaluation* (Fetterman et al., 2015) which whilst closely linked to *Participatory Evaluation* focuses more specifically on actively enhancing the involvement of stakeholders. Empowerment Evaluation is designed in such a way as to provide stakeholders with the necessary tools and knowledge to monitor and evaluate their performance to plan and accomplish their objectives and goals. The aim of empowerment evaluation is to foster self-determination and sustainability by focusing on the ownership factor of the whole process (Fetterman, 1994). Both participatory and empowerment evaluation are characterised by consistent dedication and understanding of every step of the evaluative process and how the data can be researched through gathering, analysing and evaluating (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Through this consistency, empowerment evaluation helps in the development of important skills which allows those who employ this strategy to become reflective practitioners, independent problem solvers and ultimately decision makers (Zimmerman, 2000).

Fetterman et al., (2015) describe empowerment evaluation around specific principles which concentrate first and foremost on creating an environment geared towards improvement through community ownership, inclusion and the democratic participation of all the relevant stakeholders. Empowerment evaluation uses evidence-based strategies which produce results which are geared towards capacity building and organisational learning where schools learn from their own experiences and carry out regular and informed changes to their strategic planning. It can also present several issues along the way which influence the effectiveness of the process. First and foremost is the understanding that this is ultimately a research ‘tool’ which is used for evaluation and that it is brought to life by individuals who are ‘empowered’ and motivated towards improvement (Gujit, 2014). If motivation and investment in this type of research are not present or is

influenced negatively by external forces then the effectiveness of this evaluative tool can be compromised (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020).

Table 2 below depicts the most popular and discussed evaluation models and how they are used. A few such as Kirkpatrick's Model and Phillips ROI focus specifically on the outcomes and results produced by the training models being evaluated. In fact, in highly evolved evaluation settings these models can be used by educators to evaluate the effectiveness of learning and impact through assessment. Both models are frequently applied within higher education contexts (Reio et al., 2017; Cahapay, 2021). The CIRO Model can be linked to the Kirkpatrick's and Phillips ROI model, however, it focuses specifically on evaluating management training (Ambu-Saidi et al., 2024).

Other models such as the Brinkerhoff's SCM focuses on the identification of specific problems and looks in detail at the narrative of the problem and how this can be resolved. This model also assumes that any initiative will always include some success as well as some failure, and learning can always occur through analysing the particular case (Falletta, 1998). There are also other models such as the Tyler, Taba, Stake and Cronbach models which are designed for academia and many a time are used to evaluate curriculum with special focus on higher education (Stufflebeam & Coryl, 2014).

Table 2 - Evaluation Models

Model	Key Focus Areas	Purpose	Description
Kirkpatrick Model	1. Reaction (satisfaction) 2. Learning(knowledge/skills) 3. Behaviour (application) 4. Results (organizational impact)	This type of model aims primarily at evaluating the effectiveness of training programs.	Widely used in corporate training; foundation for many modern evaluation models. Its 4 areas delve deep into the learning which goes on within a particular programme.
CIPP Model	1. Context 2. Input 3. Process 4. Product	Also mainly used to evaluate programmes, looking into every stage of management.	Emphasizes continuous improvement and decision-making
Phillips ROI Model	Builds on Kirkpatrick's 4 levels + ROI (Return on Investment)	Links training outcomes to financial returns.	Adds a fifth level to quantify training's monetary value
Brinkerhoff's SCM	Identifies success stories and barriers to implementation	Focuses on what works well and what needs improvement	Qualitative and narrative-driven approach
CIRO Model	1. Context 2. Input 3. Reaction 4. Outcome	Specifically used for evaluating management training	Similar to Kirkpatrick but with a focus on management training
Deming's Model (PDCA)	1. Plan 2. Do 3. Check 4. Act	Continuous quality improvement in processes and systems	Also known as the Deming Cycle or Shewhart Cycle; widely applied in quality management.
Other Models	- Tyler Model - Taba Model - Stake's Model - Cronbach's Model	Used mainly in specific curriculum and educational program evaluation	More academic in nature, often applied in schools and higher educational institutions

As discussed by Knouse et al., (2009), organisations, including those within compulsory education mainly adopt a process of SSE which is based on a system of four implementation stages as set by Deming (2012) to reflect a cycle referred to as *Plan-Do-Check-Act*. This is usually so because the Deming model allows for a Total Quality Management (TQM) model which is broader and can encompass other areas apart from those which are specifically academic (Lohr, 2012). The latter being an aspect which is crucial for schools. The model also includes a strong focus on the evaluative aspect which is also a determining aspect for the continuity and consistency of evaluative plans in schools (Zamir, 2019). For the process to be a thorough one this system must be embedded within the core operation of the school. The cycle starts with the plan-phase which includes the internal review,

collection, and analysis of data from the different stakeholders to eventually come up with the priorities the school intends to work on. This is a determining phase, and a lot of energy is employed by schools at this stage to collect the information necessary to define their goals (Krein & Sciefner-Rohs, 2021). The do-phase is the implementation phase where the defined actions are implemented by the school. This is a crucial phase as the monitoring of implementation needs to be well structured as it will feed the next phase which is the check-phase and involves the monitoring and evaluation of the actions implemented. The latter is a sensitive phase as it can confirm the success of the school in achieving goals set but it can also transpire that these goals were not successful and might have not been identified as the right ones in the first place. This is usually where the process suffers as several factors including fear of judgement, accountability and mindset play an important role (McNamara et al., 2021). The last part is the (act/adapt-phase) which addresses how the school processes the information obtained in the evaluation. If the process is carried out effectively the results at this stage can lead to tangible improvement which can be sustained through practice. Processes can also be revised or improved according to the evaluation. Research shows that schools who are successful in the process are those who consistently and continuously look for effective ways to reach the goals they set (Hofman et al., 2009). The issues which arise at this juncture are usually linked to the rigour in implementing the steps of the process. This is one of the main reasons which influences ownership of the process, and which instils a sense of frustration in educators who feel that this process is not leading towards tangible improvement (Gardezi, 2019).

Moreover, this kind of exercise needs consistency in its application if it is to work. The process and its different facets are too complex for time to be haphazardly assigned to the individual parts (Copland, 2003; Kallemeyn, 2014; Lachat & Smith, 2005; Schildkamp et al., 2012). In their research Marsh and Farrell (2015) outlined that the lack of time available together with limited organization of the actual time available to schools was one of the reasons why teachers did not feel such a strong sense of ownership. On the other hand, there also needs to be a balance and

flexibility in gauging the time dedicated to the internal review processes as rigid frameworks may lead to work overload, stress and further induce cynicism and resistance (Karagiorgi, 2012; Nelson et al., 2015).

2.3.1 School Self-Evaluation as a developmental process

Throughout the last decades, the way SSE has been viewed by schools, as well as governing bodies, has evolved in different ways (Nevo, 2010). A variety of research studies in schools have led towards the notion that there needs to be a shift from the market model of evaluation mentioned in the previous sections, to one which is simpler and more straightforward, and which can be better managed by members of the school community (Vanhoof & Petegem, 2007; McNamara & O'Hara, 2008). Through experience with schools and evaluation of the processes adopted, it has become more evident that the more complicated the processes the less it will achieve the desired outcomes (Hopkins, 2005; MacBeath, 2006; McNamara & O'Hara, 2008; Vanhoof et al., 2011; European Commission, 2018). The benefits of a developmental approach are two-fold as it would allow schools to be more focused on improvement agendas linked to their context and promote a sense of belonging as they would be the ones to design and promote the process.

Helen Simons (2013) defines the internal review process as a type of evaluation which has a specific purpose, and which is the main tool used to provide an informed view into students' education experience beyond what can be measured through test data. Educational systems have been working to move away from a system of assessment which is mainly summative, based on results and scores to one which also gives its due attention to key processes carried out as part of the learning and teaching experience within the classroom. As internal review and SSE are intended to be part of the formative fibre of the school, the objective is to also embed this kind of shift in the way the process is adopted in schools (O'Brien et al., 2015; McNamara et al., 2022). This will entail a stronger emphasis on the continuous professional development of staff as well as frequent evaluation of goals and objectives set. This kind of approach aims to promote a 'collective

capacity-building’ approach that is based on quality enhancement and trust and which focuses on securing quality improvement rather than quality control which is usually characterized by market models (Simons, 2013).

One of the main problems in carrying out the shift from a summative to a developmental and formative approach to internal quality assurance is that the ‘market approach’, and the encompassing feeling of being continuously audited is a state of being which, as discussed previously, has also been ingrained in the mentality of those who must make the processes work on a daily basis. Moreover, those who look at the processes from the outside will find it difficult to understand that a developmental approach within a context such as education is not always able to ‘assure’ results. This factor is often put in question especially when evaluating the validity of processes and research methods taken up by the different schools. This also links to frequent questioning on the research design used as part of the research process of SSE, which is often predominantly qualitative. The validity and reliability of the data gathered, and the tools used in the data collection and evaluation processes are often discussed in the light of how this data can be effectively used to design the school’s improvement plan. The shift towards a developmental approach to internal review and SSE can also be influenced by the type of evaluation stance taken up within the different education systems. A ‘high stakes’ accountability system which tends towards adopting a market model approach can have a pronounced impact on the effectiveness and validity of the self-evaluation process (European Commission, 2018). This is because these kinds of systems usually promote a standardized way of evaluation and often impose specific broad criteria and outcomes on schools that are not always relevant to their individual needs. An example of such methods would be the imposition on schools to fill in SSE reports which are uniform and the same for all.

2.4 Stakeholders in the SSE process

One of the main reasons behind the implementation of an evaluative process in schools is to facilitate the dialogue between the school and those stakeholders

outside of the school direct community who demand accountability in different ways and on different levels (Brown et al., 2021). The European Commission (2020) report *Supporting school self-evaluation and development through quality assurance policies* which focuses on bringing key considerations on self-evaluation to policymakers includes a definition of what meaningful SSE should be:

(SSE) requires a broadly shared vision on aims for education, a well-designed policy framework, and broad engagement of stakeholders. School self-evaluation needs to be evidence-led. The motivation and capacity of all main actors to gather, analyse, interpret and use a range of qualitative and quantitative data to develop clear strategies for school development are vital. These main actors include local administrators, school heads, teachers and other school stakeholders.’ (EC, 2020 p. 5)

An earlier European Commission report entitled *Better Learning for Europe’s young people* (2018) identifies SSE not only as an important tool which can help schools move towards improvement but also as a way of bringing together stakeholders relevant to the school community towards what Nevo (1994) terms as ‘evaluation mindedness’. In other words, developing a workforce who is reflective and who possesses a mindset which promotes a continuous culture of research, development and evaluation.

In most educational settings within compulsory education, different stakeholders are encouraged to participate in the SSE process by responding to questionnaires or participating in interviews targeted on the school’s improvement strategy (Kurum & Sinkir, 2019). In educational systems such as *Education Scotland* and *The Department of Education* in Ireland, the involvement of the different stakeholders takes on a deeper level which goes beyond simple consultation but focuses on a more intensive involvement in the design and execution of the SSE processes and the planning of the improvement agenda (European Commission, 2018). This includes involving parents and students in the design of the surveys used for self-evaluation as well as in their interpretation and analysis. Furthermore, parents and students are brought on the organising teams which are tasked with the development of the improvement plan and are also involved in its implementation.

This kind of approach aims at developing a culture of stakeholder engagement at every step of the process. It helps in increasing the ownership towards the SSE process as the different stakeholders will see the value of their input and will tangibly know that their feedback is valued and that they are truly part of the school community (Siafwa et al., 2019).

An important aspect which has been mentioned earlier is the role of the policy makers and governing structures as stakeholders in the SSE process. The main issue which is frequently discussed in this regard is that due to certain impositions from above schools are not always given their own freedom and autonomy in designing their school development targets to meet their own priorities (European Commission, 2020). The 2018 EC report goes on to expand on the need for policy makers to understand that the SSE and development plan are not just another tool to be used by governance structures outside the school community to impose goals which are often linked to political intentions. This can frequently lead towards a high stakes accountability structure where governing and regulating bodies not only request access to the SSE but also demand to be able to influence it in different ways. The EC report on better learning argues that the SSE is a tool which is there to promote the school's own ability to reflect on its improvement strategy and any excessive external influence risks affecting the integrity and effectiveness of the process and therefore the way it is viewed by the different stakeholders.

2.4.1 The impact of self-evaluation on the school community

For SSE to be a meaningful strategic tool for evaluation it also needs to become part of the life of the school (Van der Westhuizen, 2014). Developing an environment where internal quality assurance mechanisms become an integral part of the school community requires time and a robust system which can be sustained throughout without becoming a burden on the same community. Research in the area of school self-evaluation and development planning is often found to argue that there needs to be a considerable amount of time dedicated to the process, including the collection, analysis, and evaluation of data as part of the internal

evaluation as well as the articulation of clear goals towards improvement (Copland, 2003; Cosner, 2011; Dembosky et al., 2006; Farrell, 2014; Marsh & Farrell, 2015; Ryan et al., 2007; Schildkamp et al., 2012; Supovitz & Klein, 2003; Wayman & Stringfield 2006; Wohlstetter et al., 2008). The internal review process will initially be perceived as bringing an increase in the everyday workload of educators. This was a particular issue that was often mentioned by participants in different research studies reviewed. The general feeling was that this was an added task to their already demanding life at school (Wong & Li, 2010; Vasques & Sallan, 2014). In discussing the system adopted in Hong Kong, MacBeath (2008) stated that SSE increased the workload and brought about high levels of stress as well as anxiety among educators. MacBeath continues to stress the importance of effective school leadership in this regard and the development of professional learning communities.

Another significant factor towards the effectiveness of the internal review and also one of the research questions within this research is the approach, mindset and subsequent ownership of the process by the school community. This can be linked to restrictions which can be brought about when outside forces and governing structures impose their views and policies on the school through its development plan (Arar et al., 2019). Croxford et al (2009) continue to argue the effectiveness which a top-down approach may have on educators, where the main goals are set by higher authorities and governing structures. In these authoritarian settings one highly questions the sense of ownership and to what extent this becomes a matter of complying with pre-established goals set by others aimed towards performance rather than a self-developed plan towards improvement (Simons, 2013).

SSE and Development Planning are part of a complex exercise which as mentioned earlier includes several different phases and processes. One of the most difficult parts of this exercise is that it constantly asks educators to critically question their existing practices, reflect on the collective values which structure their strategies, and the pedagogy used in class (Nelson et al., 2015). In his book *Schools Must Speak for themselves* (1999) MacBeath describes how SSE and Development

Planning allow schools to know themselves better and to have the opportunity to give an account of their achievement and ultimately extend this opportunity towards being able to not only reflect on their practices as a school but also grow personally as professionals (Snyder & Snyder, 2023). The above reasons should be enough for management structures within schools and even at governance level to push for the careful and continuous implementation of the process.

Research and studies reviewed interestingly outline common issues faced by schools in managing the process (Blaik-Hourani & Litz, 2016, 2019; Brough & Tracy, 2013; Ehren et al., 2015, Ehren, 2020; Greatbatch & Tate, 2019; Hattie, 2008). Cohesiveness within the system is essential for the SSE process to be effective and when this is present, it can lead to significant development and improvement. However, its main pitfall is that if one of the steps of the process is not functioning effectively, then the whole process risks to fail and create uncertainty, doubt and frustration within the school community. This means that the process risks becoming counterproductive to its main objective as a strategic management tool. The following sections look into what literature defines as crucial aspects of the process and which in turn could present serious pitfalls towards the general effectiveness of SSE as a tool for improvement.

Within the context of stakeholder involvement, it is important to re-centre student learning and wellbeing as the ultimate purpose of any quality assurance or improvement agenda (Conley & Glasman, 2008). Professional practice shaped by neo-liberal and managerial logistics, such as data driven monitoring, performance target-setting and intensified documentation, only have educational legitimacy when they lead to richer learning experiences, deeper understanding and greater equity of outcomes for students (Cowen, 2008; DeLuca et al., 2015). Improvement in professional practice should therefore begin from and continually return to, an analysis of learners' needs, interests and contexts, using evidence not simply to prove performance but to diagnose barriers to learning, adapt pedagogy and strengthen relationships in the classroom (Demie, 2003). When SSE, Development Planning and external accountability are aligned with this learner-centered

orientation, they can support educators in exercising informed professional judgement rather than merely complying with metrics (Stensaker & Matear, 2025). This helps in ensuring that the impact of macro-level paradigms is ultimately judged by their contribution to students' holistic development rather than by performance indicators alone (Snyder, 2019).

2.5 Data collection and analysis

One of the areas often mentioned in research as influencing the success of internal evaluation in schools is the school's ability to effectively use data gathered during the whole process to plan for development (Lewis Prieset et al., 2022; Nield et al., 2022). This is an area that is targeted as being problematic, often emphasizing the need for educators to be fully aware of what data can be used, how it might be useful to the school, and in what ways it can be evaluated (Nelson et al., 2015). This knowledge is seen as essential if clear targets and objectives are to be identified as well as sustain professional development within the school.

Data for internal review purposes is partly gathered from the different stakeholders which make up the school community. According to MacBeath and Mortimore (2000) self-evaluation may be described as fulfilling two primary objectives: 'To stimulate dialogue on objectives, priorities and quality criteria at school and classroom level and to achieve objectives through the use of appropriate and easily accessible tools' (p. 292). An effective internal evaluation plan encourages schools to use an array of tools to gather data such as lesson observations carried out within the school, evaluation of student work as well as collection of feedback from educators, students, and their parents. The gathering of data can also be linked to previous action plans developed by the school or follow up research to specific areas of interest which might in future act as priorities for the school. Schools may also consider carrying out research on areas of interest within the school or hailing from previous plans for improvement (Ancess et al., 2007; Baumfield, 2012). These would usually involve educators from the school itself and outside support such as centralised area experts. This would ultimately provide data for the school

to push forward that area of interest as well as plan for professional development needed in the area. Other sources of data can be national statistics or results of research provided by the national education system as well as evaluations carried out by external agencies within the school. These system-level stakeholders can highlight different perspectives and a range of topics if data is used well (European Commission, 2020). Through school self-evaluation, educators are being empowered to carry out targeted research as professionals who know the school well and can identify the needs of their students effectively (Chapman & Sammons, 2022).

The arguments presented in relation to this aspect revolve around the need for schools, through school leaders and leadership teams as well as educators to possess a level of expertise in evaluating data, ideally having a background in education, the ability to significantly read and analyse student data while also keeping in mind the context of the school. (Chapman, 2000; Coburn and Talbert, 2006; Cosner, 2011; Stringfield et al., 2008; Wayman et al., 2012). A frequent contention to this reasoning is linked to the professional development offered to staff who work in schools in relation to carrying out research and data analysis. This is not only related to the abilities of the leadership team to interpret results but also includes the skills which need to be developed by educators to be able to read, analyse, understand and implement this information towards planning for school improvement (Gejsil et al., 2010). Earley and Bubb (2014) emphasize the need for research literate staff in schools. In their research, they go on to refer to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) who advocates the need for teachers to be:

equipped to engage in inquiry-oriented practice having the capacity, motivation and opportunity to use research-related skills to investigate what is working well and what isn't fully effective in their own practice. (BERA, 2014, p. 30)

The main argument put forward by BERA concerning the kind of research carried out by schools is that if they are literate in research and subsequent analysis and

evaluation they will be better able to identify problems together with possible interventions which are likely to lead to improvement (Marsh et al., 2010; Malen et al., 1990). McNamara & O'Hara (2008a) also highlight that frameworks and any support documentation such as guidelines usually provided on internal evaluation and self-evaluation in schools in most cases do not specifically address the different ways in which data can be analysed and evaluated. Focused support on any other level in this regard is also very difficult to come by unless it is sought specifically by the school and this kind of support, unfortunately often not considered as a priority for the school. Educators who are conscious of their limitations with regard to their evaluative ability, might feel a sense of frustration which would in turn influence not only the improvement plan for the school but also the way they perceive and approach the whole process (McNamara & O'Hara, 2012). When this scenario occurs, it also presents another indication of the lack of understanding of the process as a collective exercise and the importance of being able to look at data not only for development planning purposes but also as part of the internal reflection which should be integral to each educator's professional journey (Dembo et al., 2006; Ryan et al., 2007; Uzuner, 2018). The context of the school needs to be kept in mind and for the process of data analysis to be successful, educators need to develop an attitude towards growth and understand that an effective evaluation of data can lead to support of the individual child in the classroom as well as help them improve professionally (Demie, 2003). As MacBeath (2004) states, 'The criteria we use to evaluate learning, teaching, ethos, and leadership form a delicate mosaic, reflecting different interests, needs, and imperatives' (p.90) If the skills to interpret data and translate findings into goals for improvement are missing, then the whole process can be adversely influenced not only in achieving the set goals but also vis a vis its reputation as a reliable and effective evaluation tool (Verheaghe et al., 2013; Farrell, 2014). Moreover, the lack of availability or the ability in using these tools can also lead to band aid solutions through the development of basic processes which are aimed to be used across the board by everyone, irrespective of the school, its background, and needs (Wohlstetter et al., 2008; Hartong, 2012).

Time is also one of the most frequently mentioned resources needed if the collection, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of data is to be done effectively (Nelson et al., 2015). It is fundamental for schools to be given the opportunity to learn how to read data and most importantly the time to be able to engage with it (MacBeath, 1999). If schools do not integrate strategic management and planning at school level, they will never be able to appreciate the benefits of effective data gathering and analysis. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, for this kind of research and data analysis to be effective and relevant to the school it needs to be mainly context based. However, it should also be able to transcend that context where necessary and be used by governing structures and policy makers as useful information for change on a broader scale. If the research carried out in schools and the data collected is not trusted enough to be considered as valid for nationwide policy development, then the effectiveness of the process is once again put into question (Militello et al., 2013).

2.6 The impact of school Leadership on SSE

An important research question¹ focuses on the role of leadership, in relation to the process as well as the impact on the different stakeholders, primarily educators (Bezzina, 2006). This role is fundamental not only on the level of planning and structuring the process but also leadership who is intuitive, inspirational and who can motivate and lead educators towards owning the process and believing that this exercise will help push the school forward towards effective improvement (Bush, 2014). While it is generally understood that SSE should be the responsibility of all stakeholders within the school community, the role of the leader is often considered as key in ensuring that all stakeholders are meaningfully involved and oriented towards growth (Earley & Bubb, 2014; EC, 2020). Facilitating time to work on the process is vital and the role of the leader is crucial in creating spaces where

¹ 1.1 How do leadership teams and educators perceive the whole internal review process and to what extent they link the process to school improvement?
1.2 How important is the mindset and approach on the parts of Educators and leaders towards its success?

educators are given the time to reflect and decide on the goals they want to achieve as a school community (Bubb & Earley, 2009; Devos & Verhoeven, 2003). This is why school leaders need to be given first and foremost the trust and the autonomy to promote an environment which supports learning communities who can not only reflect but who are empowered to be accountable for the actions they take and the improvement they are aiming for (Bush, 2015; Bubb & Earley, 2019; Bendsten et al., 2021). The SSE process provides an opportunity and the tools necessary for leaders to be able to translate their vision into a structured improvement plan and involve all the staff in the process. It is, however, not only a matter of using the process but more importantly knowing how to use it and which pitfalls to avoid throughout the process.

The sustainability of SSE is also closely linked to how school culture frames leadership and professional agency. In schools where leaders cultivate a culture of positive leadership and agency there is automatically a space for critical dialogue (Alanoglu & Karabatak, 2025). An approach which aims at explicitly protecting time and space for collaborative review can promote a Development Planning process which becomes part and parcel of the school culture (Aydin, 2012). On the other hand, where leadership emphasises performativity and short-term results, the culture often privileges quick fixes aligned to external indicators (Barber, 2004). This leaves little room for more gradual, iterative work of building shared understanding and long-term capacity which is a natural requirement for strategic management tools such as SSE and Development Planning.

An important link with SSE and Development Planning is the ability of the leader to direct the relationship educators and stakeholders have with the concept of quality assurance (McNamara et al., 2020). This is especially valid when considering the different contexts which exist within schools and how these have influenced the current perception of the process. An important consideration is the way educators view SSE in its capacity as a research tool, the collection of data, its subsequent analysis and eventual evaluation. Leading a reflective group of practitioners who believe in and understand the relevance of the process is

laborious and many a time quite difficult to achieve (Niesche et al., 2023). The role of leader and his/her stance towards internal review and SSE can help shift the way of thinking and support educators in understanding that although they do know their students well, effective data collection and analysis can still be a fundamental eye-opening tool in their plans for improvement not only as professionals but also within their own classroom (Wayman & Stringfield, 2006). Essentially, leadership teams are consistently called to be cultural leaders who can translate external demands into internal narratives and set the tone for how evaluation is approached (Acton, 2021). Their choices about participation, transparency and how feedback is handled influence staff trust and willingness to engage and thus the sustainability of the SSE process and Development Planning (Boylan, 2018). This is what will help gradually shift the mindset towards a school culture which embraces collective responsibility and agency.

Studies carried out by Lachat & Smith (2005); Marsh and Farrell (2015), Murnane et al., (2005); Neil and Johnson (2005); Schildkamp et al., (2012), Schildkamp & Visscher, (2009); Schildkamp et al., (2014) show that leaders which are committed to the effective use of the different elements of the process such as data collection and analysis as well as evaluation develop a sense of strategic foresight which allows the process to be used in different contexts and scenarios. Schildkamp and Visscher (2012) in fact, worked on two projects in the Netherlands that placed the head of school as central to the SSE and Development Planning process. Heads of school were observed in those skills which would ideally help in making the internal review process in schools more effective. These skills were fundamentally based on the ability of the leader, in this case, the head of school, to build effective learning communities within the school which would help in the facilitation of the process of implementation (Liou & Canrinus, 2020). Within these learning communities, the leader was encouraged to promote a culture that is improvement-oriented, collaborative, and which is equipped to be able to develop a clear set of goals (King, 2014, 2019).

This brings up an important aspect connected to the professional development of leaders and the importance which is attributed to SSE and Development Planning throughout their professional learning journey (Muijs et al., 2007; Sebastian et al., 2016). This includes not only the training required to be able to read and analyse statistics and data but also that of maintaining the momentum of the process through the stance of a reflective leader. A substantial percentage of leaders will be able, to various extents, develop these skills, collaborative attitudes and positive dispositions, however, only a handful will be able to consistently ensure the necessary conditions towards successful internal review and SSE (Anderson et al., 2010; Bush, 2020). In many cases where the leader is the sole driver of the process, sustainability becomes an issue and the process is often interrupted due to external forces or sheer exhaustion at having to maintain the momentum of reaching set demands without, however, having clear processes in mind. When reflective and forward-thinking learning communities are developed successfully, the leadership of the various initiatives can be distributed among key members of staff so they can support the leader in achieving the goals set (Bush, 2015, 2020; Bezzina & Paletta, 2022; Bezzina, 2024; Vanhoof & Van Petegem, 2007). This will not only facilitate the sharing of tasks and reaching objectives, but it will also help increase the sense of ownership of staff. Copland (2003) describes the role of the school leader as a ‘catalyst’ especially at the initial stages of the process where everyone is still unsure of how the process will work out. The role of the leader can be developed as that of facilitator once the school has built a stable learning community (Earl, 2009).

Taking on this transformative stance requires complete trust in the school as a forward-thinking organisation, faith in the ability to motivate those who surround you and developing an effective synergy (Bush & Middlewood, 2006). All this needs time to develop. There are different reasons which may influence the transformative stance to leadership, including the external context, especially demands on accountability often placed on leadership. In systems where there are high external accountability demands, the vision established by the leader in relation to internal quality assurance will inevitably be influenced. These demands

impact both leaders and educators, not only limiting the creativity and spontaneity of their job but also the scope of their professionalism (Fryer, 1996). In countries where there is a modicum of centralised control, the role of educational leaders inevitably leans more towards those of functionaries, following central direction where motivating staff becomes even more of a difficult feat (Bush & Middlewood, 2006). On the other hand, Fullan (2003) argues that a leader's moral purpose cannot be restricted to the silo of his/her own context but must also be aware of the 'bigger picture', in other words, how centrally determined objectives are working in other contexts and how these can be adapted to effectively work in one's own context. This brings to light an important discussion on how contradictions between macro-level discourses and local values can place leadership teams in a difficult situation (Brazer et al., 2019). They are expected to simultaneously champion autonomy and to deliver centrally defined performance agendas. In navigating these tensions, SLTs may adopt pragmatic compromises that limit the transformative potential of SSE and Development Planning, for example by protecting staff from external pressures but at the cost of narrowing internal evaluation (Bubb & Earley, 2009).

The particular context's external accountability system of regulatory bodies is also a determining factor for leadership and SSE processes. In the case of systems that follow a developmental approach, the leader can adopt what Ehren et al., (2014) define as a facilitator approach between the context of the school and the demands presented by external accountability to influence policy and structures within the school. In the case where a system adopts a market approach towards external evaluation, this kind of 'facilitator' role might be a bit difficult to take on as the ultimate objective would be that of producing a set of results which had been predetermined by external bodies and not the school community.

2.6.1 Nurturing a culture of reflective professional communities

As mentioned in the previous section, for internal review to function effectively there is a need to develop and maintain a culture of inquiry which is reflective, evaluative, can propose change towards improvement and can develop a shared ownership of the evaluation process (MacBeath, 2008; Montecinos et al., 2014). This is dependent on a climate of trust within the school, where the staff is effective at reflection and communication (Sugrue, 2011). Ideally, this type of professional culture is also sustained by the ability to critically understand the SSE process as a tool towards effective school improvement. All this enhances the need for the development of professional learning communities within the school who are ready to support as well as challenge each other where necessary (De Luca et al., 2015; Ridge & Lavigne, 2020).

The above statements, however, depict an ideal scenario which does not reflect the issues brought about by the different realities which exist in schools and which school leaders and staff must face daily. There are several factors that influence the dynamics of cultures within schools and as a result, the impact of the SSE process. These factors are strongly linked to the human element, the background of the school, the staff, learners and the national/local context in which they operate (Day et al., 2020; Alanoglu & Karabatak, 2025).

A fundamental aspect that is determining in building learning communities within schools that can work on an effective SSE process is the element of trust. This does not only concern the trust which staff have in their leadership but also trust which exists among the members as part of a thriving learning community. Bringing about this kind of trust necessitates time and stability in building a community that focuses on an agenda for improvement and has the good of the school and learners as its priority. Before anything strategic is attempted as regards SSE and Development Planning there needs to be an established community of trust where nobody is blamed for any shortcomings and there is a sense of achieving together as a team (Earley & Bubb, 2014; Marsh & Farrell, 2015; Vanhoof et al., 2012; Wohlstetter, 2008; Bezzina, 2024). In their research, Wohlstetter et al., (2008)

found that when discussing strategies they used in class, teachers described how they had discussed them with their colleagues during meetings related to improvement planning. This was echoed by Schildkamp et al., (2011) who found that collaboration among teachers facilitated their identification of elements which made the internal review process within their school effective. The opportunity presented by the internal review process helped nurture their reflective skills further and allowed them time to discuss improvement planning for their school. Notwithstanding, in both studies, a prevalent sense of teamwork and collaboration already existed among the staff. This served to facilitate the effectiveness of the internal review process. Continuously nurturing a culture of learning is therefore determining when building professional learning communities (Coleman & Earley, 2005; Wenger, 2021).

A study carried out by Paletta et al., (2021) entitled *School Evaluation and Development (VALES)* in Italy which focused on the introduction of a new school self-evaluation system within national primary and secondary education systems produced interesting findings with regards to the correlation between improvement in the classroom and the development of a reflective professional learning community. It showed that there is an inherent and important link between teachers' innovative practice in the classroom and the collaborative culture within the school increases when leaders and staff agree on processes adopted. The development of common goals emanating from reflective learning communities have a strong impact on the tangible improvement which happens within the classroom (Vangrieken et al., 2015; Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes & Kyndt, 2015).

The role the leader takes within this culture of learning is also determining. As Senge (2000) argues effective leadership depends not merely on how you set up the circumstances for people to learn together, but on how you learn with them. Learning and developing together as a team will strengthen that bond, the trust as well as the ownership and initiative among the different stakeholders which form part of the school community (Paletta et al., 2021).

The element of trust is also, once again, influenced by the type of external accountability present within a particular educational setting. Trust together with transparency and effective communication among the different stakeholders play pivotal roles in the implementation of SSE processes (E C, 2020). If teachers are afraid of expressing their concerns because they feel they will be judged in one way or another, then the level of trust in the school and the SSE process will be affected (McNamara & O'Hara, 2006). Moreover, it can also influence the effectiveness of how actions implemented are evaluated. Herman and Gribbons (2001) define this as a 'siege mentality' where educators believe that everyone is out to judge and blame them and therefore any kind of analysis and evaluation is carried out defensively. This, unfortunately, defeats the fundamental purpose of SSE which is identifying the real strengths and areas of improvement for the school. The issue of trust may also influence the reliability of data collection and analysis which might risk succumbing to bias and selectivity. In many instances, this is influenced by the way educators are led to believe that they always have to be told what to do and that they cannot determine their own change strategies. Their understanding of accountability is often debilitated by fear of being judged or even worse fear of failure.

A shift from what Dweck (2017) defines as a 'fixed' mindset to a 'growth' mindset needs to take place. The latter mindset is strongly linked to looking forward and believing in the ability to continuously change and improve. This shift is to work towards supporting school actors to engage in a continuous and structured cycle of improvement. A shift in mentality and a change of ingrained habits can ultimately come about after a process of transformation which requires time, patience, and a fundamental culture of trust (EC, 2020). As Elmore (2006) argues, willingness and capacity to change are often linked; willingness to change comes with having the capacity to do so while capacity will only be built where there is a willingness to change. This capacity can be developed through continuous professional development and training where changing a fixed mindset (Dweck, 2017) often includes a process of negotiation to gain trust and thus develop a better approach towards change (Christie & Monyokolo, 2018).

Effective leadership, therefore, becomes even more crucial and such changes need to be gradually, strategically, and consistently implemented (Bubb & Earley, 2009; Lachat & Smith, 2005; Meuret & Morlaix, 2003; Schildkamp et al., 2012; Schildkamp & Viischer, 2013; Vanhoof & Van Petegem, 2007; Vanhoof et al., 2011). Changing people's beliefs and behaviour is dependent on how far the leader manages to create a community around them where their ideas can be expressed and nurtured (Zepeda, 2019). The leader however needs to be able to clearly understand the culture and context within the school and gauge to which level the process can be pitched or implemented with staff before going forward with SSE and development planning. The idea that a quality assurance process through SSE and Development Planning can automatically fix school issues and promote change by forcing staff to work together is unfortunately a frequent misconception which at the end becomes counterproductive to the process. Several conditions need to be in place before internal review and school self-evaluation can work effectively (Hall & Noyes, 2007). If SSE is implemented in an environment of resistance, scepticism, and fear then the process becomes very difficult to manage and, in many cases, can become counterproductive (Supovitz & Klein, 2003).

Some interesting studies in this field experiment with ways in which educators' confidence and motivation vis a vis SSE can be addressed. This concerns mainly the establishment of fixed processes, protocols, and routines which can be adopted by staff throughout the process. Ancess et al., (2007) and Cosner (2011) develop these protocols as fixed structures and tools, such as specifically designed data gathering tools which can, through their consistency and functionality help in building learning communities through spurring confidence in reflection and dialogue. The reasoning behind this focuses on the fact that if educators are confident that the data collected is real and reliable and cannot, therefore, be doubted, then they will start considering it at face value and work on addressing any areas for development that might be gleaned from it. Gallimore et al., (2009) investigated an inquiry-based system with grade-level teachers. The protocol helped to structure teams and provided guidance in setting goals, planning, and

monitoring. The strength behind having established routines and protocols is that these can store information and data which can be regularly accessed, discussed, and interpreted by educators (Kallemeyn, 2014). In most cases, though this is complemented by external support to the school throughout the various steps of the process.

One of the fundamental elements to the success of the process is linked to the ability to give those who work with it, tangible proof that the process is working thus developing trust in the process and who is leading it. As Kotter and Cohen (2002) state “people rarely change through a rational process of analyse-think-change” (p.11). It is more probable for them to integrate into the process through a ‘see-feel-change’ sequence where they can see process with which the improvement took place and therefore believe in it. MacBeath (2000) stated that “self-evaluation has no beginning; it has no end, either, because it is always growing and improving” (p.94). This presupposes the stakeholders’ desire to continue as it is more often the case that the project ceases when the project period has finished without careful evaluation if it really has finished or not. When dealing with longer time scales and projects, stakeholders have to develop a moral sense of community and a network of knowledge covering different aspects and capacities that can be mobilised when required. This is where the role of the leader is really put to the test as it needs to build a school community which has as a central value and understanding that a project or endeavour can be ‘unfinished’ but still be successful in many aspects. This is done through the building of a community which continuously seeks to understand and support new theories of practice through continuous professional development (Haar & Foord, 2013; OECD, 2009; Zepeda, 2019).

The approach and attitude of those who develop and lead the evaluation system influence all stages of the process. Educators, who should be in close contact with the process need to understand the tool and its validity in the journey towards school improvement (Brown et al, 2021). This validity however needs to be emphasised and consistently monitored for each part of the process. This

understanding is closely linked to educators' mindsets towards change and improvement and the ability to reflect, often critically, on their practice (Boylan, 2021). A study carried out by Barrett (2009) found that although staff in schools within the specific study were offered the support of an expert, it had little to no influence on the way teachers viewed evaluation and the analysis of data. The study outlined that the 'expert' support was trying to work against the current of a particular mentality in relation to data. The research clearly outlined that any hope for improvement in the way data is used necessitated a whole shift in mentality and an exercise in re-culturing in the way data was viewed.

2.6.2 Developing a growth mindset and a positive school culture

The shaping of a growth mindset towards an evaluative stance in relation to change and improvement need to be developed in educators early on as an integral and continuous part of their professional development as teachers (Bendsten et al., 2021). Lasky et al., (2009) argue that exposure to healthy evaluative practices will enhance critical and reflective conversation anchored in student data and will help to sustain school improvement plans as well as plans linked to teaching in class. The EC report working group ET 2020 on supporting school self-evaluation and development through quality assurance policies encourage educational systems to invest in capacity building for evaluation for all key actors at every level of the school education system. The report continues to argue on the futility of training leadership teams to analyse data when educators, who are the recipients of that data cannot understand what it is saying and how conclusions can be reached. The seeds of effective evaluation need to be planted early in the training of an educator. This will not only develop their skills to read and analyse data but also to reflect on it and evaluate it in relation to their context so it can best serve their real needs. This can also possibly help them shape their mindset to one which focuses on reflection and continuous evaluation as well as shape a positive and sustainable school culture which is forward driven towards growth.

SSE and Development Planning are more likely to be experienced as a collective professional endeavour in a school culture where the prevailing mindset is characterised by trust, collaboration, openness to inquiry and a shared commitment to student learning (Farrugia, 2021). In positive school cultures development planning tends to emerge from genuine dialogue and draw on the multiple voices within the school community (Bezzina, 2004). Conversely, in school cultures marked by low trust, fear of judgement or strong hierarchical control, SSE processes are easily reinterpreted as surveillance mechanisms rather than opportunities for learning and growth. Over time this can undermine the sustainability of SSE and Development planning where initiatives are launched but not embedded and plans are written but ultimately not owned. This is where cycles of evaluation fail to translate into deep changes in teaching and learning.

2.6.3 Leadership, monitoring and evaluation

One of the main gaps in literature when discussing SSE and Development Planning is the consideration given to one specific step of the process: the monitoring and evaluation stage. There are studies which focus on the process in its entirety and the value which such a process can provide schools (Barry et al., 2022; Figueriedo et al., 2024) but very few link the success which the process might have to this stage of the process. This limited understanding on the importance of evaluation within the educational context is what has led to a specific research question focusing on monitoring and evaluation and the way in which schools look at this part of the process. Following the development of the literature this was also amplified during the research carried out within the schools as part of this process. Keeping in mind the specific nature of the research questions and the research itself, the monitoring and evaluation phase can be best discussed and expanded upon when linked to the role of leaders and the development of professional learning communities.

The approach taken on by school leadership also influences the implementation and evaluation stage of the SSE process. If an internal evaluation is to lead to

improvement, then action plans set must be objectively monitored and evaluated (Fullan, 2005). In the literature on internal review, especially that linked to the role of the leader in the process of SSE a lot of attention is usually given to the initial stages of the process such as the ability to collect, read, analyse and use data as well as the importance of developing clear goals to drive that improvement (McGinty et al., 2022). However, when it comes to the monitoring and evaluation of actions and implementation, which is ultimately a crucial phase, it is generally given less attention, especially in literature and research. Several questions arise at this stage, which mainly focus on the readiness of leaders to acknowledge that the process could have possibly failed and the repercussions of that failure. The sense of community that was so painstakingly built with staff to develop and work towards these goals might be lost if the evaluative stance is not maintained. On a personal level, it might not place the leader in a good light especially in systems where internal review is evaluated as part of external quality assurance. An interesting interpretation of evaluation which depicts it as necessary, but which can also be taken on subjectively is given by House (1973);

‘Contrary to common belief, evaluation is not the ultimate arbiter, delivered from our objectivity and accepted as the final judgement. Evaluation is always derived from biased origins. When someone wants to defend something or attack something, he often evaluates it. Evaluation is a motivated behaviour. Likewise, the way in which the results of an evaluation are accepted depends on whether they help or hinder the person receiving them. Evaluation is an integral part of the political processes of our society’ (House, 1973, p.5).

Evaluation of actions may be also sometimes conveyed as the be all and end all of the process and therefore might instil in leadership teams the fear of being judged or found lacking. This can lead to this determining part of the process to be skipped or carried out superficially, in certain cases also sketchily. The issues which arise by holding back from this part of the process is that the whole process and the work which comes along with the implementation could be jeopardized due to lack of evaluation. This often creates a chasm which is very difficult to reduce and many a time either renders the exercise futile or frustrating for those who have worked on developing and implementing it as there is no tangible evidence that this has been a successful endeavour. Moreover, it can also disrupt the road to improvement

taken on by a school. The way in which leaders and educators view evaluation therefore becomes a crucial aspect within the process.

Also linked to evaluation is the concept of 'succession planning' which is also scantily considered in literature as a process which emerges following evaluation of actions implemented and how these can be further sustained and not lost. In the Welsh 'high-reliability project' schools in the research carried out by Stringfield et al., (2008) developed a plan where the project principles were in use five years after their introduction. Schools continued to use these principles, and academic progress was recorded throughout the rest of the process following this exercise. Staff working in the schools were continuously re-engaged through training and professional development focusing on sharing good practices and on discussing any issues within the project. Monitoring was also kept in motion to ensure that leadership succession planning was in place to ensure that any other leaders who followed were familiar with the goals of the project. Although rarely considered, succession planning is however an essential mechanism to ensure that the outcomes of any endeavour taken on by the school are further sustained and developed. Succession planning is also strongly linked to involvement of leadership in the SSE process. To what extent do leaders plan for the maintenance of those successful endeavours which were a result of the SSE process? It depends on their awareness and mindset vis a vis continuous professional development and improvement.

The role of leadership within the SSE process is the pivot that can mediate accountability demands within the process (Bush, 2011). However, the main challenge for the leader is to keep objectivity in sight and focus on what is good for the school rather than what will put it in good light with any external source tasked with measuring external accountability (Scheerens, 2012). This will help in promoting a culture where internal evaluation is seen as an opportunity to learn, one which can be moulded around the shared values and aims of the school. It is through embedding internal evaluation in the way of working of the school that learning and improvement can be sustained (Nelson et al., 2015). The ultimate

objective is to provide a better learning experience for learners. To do this, the leadership teams are encouraged towards developing a mindset where SSE and Development Planning become a way of life within the school. This can be achieved if there is consistent drive towards becoming an effective learning organization where development is continuous and regenerative (Plowright, 2007; Grek & Ozga, 2012; Simons, 2013; Marsh & Farrell, 2015).

The EC ET2020 report *Supporting school self-evaluation and development through quality assurance policies* outlines the importance of raising awareness and motivation within the school community as one of the main targets to strengthen SSE and make use of its results as evidence towards improvement. For SSE to succeed it needs to be a process owned by the whole school not solely by the leadership team or selected teachers (Brown et al., 2021; Chapman & Sammons, 2022). A recent study by Proudfoot and Boyd (2022) has shown that even in a context where there is a dominant culture of performativity particular school leaders are able to motivate their staff and create “the humanizing spaces that advance professionalization rather than detract from it” (Proudfoot & Boyd, 2022, p.365). At the same time one of the tasks which often appears daunting for leadership teams is instilling that sense of motivation and ownership in all members of staff. Unfortunately, the voices which work against the process are usually the ones that are most vociferous, and which cause more discouragement and harm. This motivation can also be strongly linked to the particular context of the country itself as well as the separate schools and their individual background. A case in point is the local educational historical background in Malta which clearly attests to the strength of the Malta Union for Teachers (MUT) in determining work conditions and initiatives taken on by the educational system. In the long run these types of highly unionised settings influence the way educators view improvement and can act as a trigger to the motivation which is necessary for a system of internal quality assurance to be developed. This aspect will be tackled at a later stage as part of the understanding of the local Maltese context.

2.7 External collaboration and negotiated self-evaluation

In the previous sections I have argued that effective leadership is essential towards the development of SSE and school improvement (Silinis & Mulford, 2002). Often, however, external support might be necessary for leadership to be able to sustain this important role. While discussing this topic, Fullan (2001) concluded that some form of external support to leadership is essential. As also discussed by (Nelson et al., 2015) external support can also be determining to the development of evaluation literacy through facilitation, discussion and the interpretation of data with educators especially at leadership level. This is often sustained through professional development and training given to staff which focuses on improving the evaluation techniques adopted by the school as well as provide enough expertise to help schools work the system effectively themselves without the continuous need for external support (Demie, 2003; Janssens & van Amelsvoort, 2008). This kind of professional development is important as it helps schools access research tools which can in turn help them develop their improvement plan based on their own context (Honig & Ikemoto, 2008; Karagiorgi, 2015; McNamara et al., 2012; McNaughton, Lai & Hsaio, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2015). The development of context-based research tools also helps schools increase their sense of ownership and therefore improve their evaluation of data (Hartong, 2012).

Interestingly, a significant number of studies on external support outlined the effectiveness of partnerships between schools and researchers from institutions such as universities (Ancess et al., 2007; Davidsottir & Lisi, 2007; Hermann & Gibbons, 2001; Sjøbakken & Dobson, 2013). These relationships can be mutually beneficial as schools get the necessary support and expertise while the experts from these institutions can make use of data gathered by schools for research related to education especially when this data concerns practices in the classroom. In their study Supovits and Weathers (2004) describe a system of peer-reviewing where schools are visited periodically by a team of district officers and other school leaders who share and discuss the data they have brought to the table collected from the respective schools through their SSE process. The fundamental concept

behind the system used in this study is that it is non-judgemental and can lead to healthy and important professional conversations as constructive feedback is given from the ‘expert’ outsider. This kind of collaboration and peer support acted as an incentive to validate the research carried out in their own school as well as develop a more enhanced sense of purpose and ownership. It enables the perception of the process to move from one which is solely linked to external accountability and judgment to one where the data gathered, and the plans set will not only support their school but can be used to provide information to support the bigger picture in relation to education and policy. This also means that the responsibility of providing accurate and well-analysed data increases as it makes the school accountable not only for the improvement of their school but also for any influence they can have on policy. Moreover, the recognition of their ability to self-evaluate and carry out the whole process helps in motivating the school to engage further in the process and implement changes (Nelson et al., 2015).

The role of the ‘critical friend’ is described in detail by Swaffield (2004) as one who can offer a different perspective, ask questions, and generally act as a sounding board. Later on, Swaffield and MacBeath (2005) elaborate on the role by adding that the role of the critical friend as moderator is also very important especially in confirming the validity of the process and therefore the results of the internal evaluation. Hofman et al., (2010) also emphasize the role as that of a moderator and further add that an important aspect of SSE is that ultimately it becomes reliable enough to be effectively validated by external evaluators and considered as valid information about the school. This will provide the data with the legitimacy to be shared with the different stakeholders.

In most of the literature which describes the impact of the role of the critical friend on internal review processes the support given was external in nature, as it provided an outsider’s perspective on the priorities which are developed by the school (Dunn, 2025). Although the possibility of an internally appointed critical friend was not actively discarded, the advantages of an external eye always triumphed over that of an internal critical friend who is often too immersed in the goings on

of the school to be completely objective in their accountability (Sjøbakken & Dobson, 2013, p. 216). According to MacBeath (2001), it is important for the critical friend to be chosen by the school and should include individuals with both professional and lay expertise. It is also essential for critical friends to have high levels of consulting and interpersonal skills (Swaffield, 2004). Moreover, they need to possess listening and observation skills, be able to pose reflective and relevant questions, be able to manage conflict and have knowledge in team building skills. These are all determining criteria which might not be easy to manage if the critical friend is internal to the school (Swaffield, 2002).

An interesting concept linked to the role of external support is that of negotiated self-evaluation. This kind of self-evaluation takes place over a longer period of time, even up to a period of eight years and the external support given to the school is considered as a major determinant to the success of the exercise. Although negotiated self-evaluation necessarily involves the different stakeholders such as teachers, school leaders, parents, students and external actors, the focal point of the process is the external support given by the researcher who is supporting the school and the tools used to carry out the research towards the formulation of the plan for improvement (OECD, 2013). Sjøbakken and Dobson (2013) recontextualize the main conceptual distinctions which belong to negotiated self-evaluation and identify three possible models namely technical, practical and emancipatory. In the technical approach, negotiated collaboration is governed mainly by the researcher who is external to the school; in the practical approach the collaboration is more equally distributed among internal stakeholders and researcher while the emancipatory approach is a model where the school stakeholders hold a defining role in the decisions and the research carried out at the school. Sjøbakken (2012) undertook negotiated collaboration with a single school in Norway for a period of eight years. He used a qualitative mixed method approach which ranged from student input through work and assessment to teacher contributions through video diaries of their lessons. The school's basic priority, to improve professional capacity in adapted education, was kept throughout the study. What is interesting is that throughout the study there was the development of what the author terms as

a ‘pendulum’ movement between the three methods of research. This was also substantiated by Zuber-Skerritt (2015) who developed the notion that along the period of development a school inevitably must go through the three phases suggested by Carr & Kemmis (1986).

The outcomes of this study dealing with negotiated self-evaluation touch upon two important aspects; the need to reflect on the duration of a school development plan and the importance of using mixed methods when carrying out research at this level and on a longer term so as to be able to enrich the experience over time. During my research with schools participating in this study, I took on the role of the external researcher as well as critical friend especially when discussing the process of self-evaluation. The study’s duration was two scholastic years, so approximately, a period of 18 months. As a researcher, it took me the first scholastic year to clearly understand the context and background of the school to be able to gauge exactly what kind of approach would firstly best suit the context of the school and consequently the research tools which would be more effective in this particular context. Moreover, the support over a period of time had to focus also on the building of a relationship of trust between the researcher and school as it was a fundamental prerogative of the study to ensure that the leadership and educators were comfortable enough to share with me their perspectives and opinions. O’Neill (2002) and Bottery (2003) both argue the importance of trust which is attributed to the critical friend in this kind of relationship where critical information might emerge from the research and thus determine the dynamics of that relationship.

2.8 External Quality Assurance in Education

Educational systems around the world have developed different mechanisms of external quality assurance in schools usually focusing on the context and type of evaluation and monitoring system currently adopted within the particular country (OECD, 2013). In many cases, this role is taken on either by a national inspectorate or a quality improvement agency which is given the role of the external evaluator

for that school. Based on research from the different inspectorates hailing from different European countries, the EC report *Better Learning for Europe's Young people (2018)* links the functions of external evaluation to three main succinct areas.

- Providing public assurance and accountability.
- Providing an evidential basis for professional advice to inform the development of national policy.
- Acting as a mechanism for the spread of 'best practice' across the system.

For many years accountability in education was systematically linked to external evaluation. In most European countries this was carried out through inspections by fully fledged inspectors (United Kingdom, Scotland, Ireland) and in other countries such as the United States, it was performed mainly through assessment programmes carried out at district level. Inspectorates such as the Education Review Office (ERO) in New Zealand and Ofsted in the United Kingdom conducted general systematic school reviews which also incorporated student assessment programmes (Nevo, 2010). In a world that is in continuous flux, and which is characterized by change, the influence of external evaluation on schools depends highly on the push it is given by the current government and how change within public services such as education is managed (OECD, 2013). Approaches to external evaluation can be seen to span across the spectrum of two distinct settings: government-based accountability and market-based accountability. The policies established on external evaluation and how these are linked to the way of governance at that point in time impact strongly on the way SSE is seen and developed in schools (EC, 2018). On the one end, there are systems where the state and/or the relevant public authority focusing on external quality assurance are responsible for the quality of education and use external evaluation to ensure that the required standards are met. Whereas on the other end there are systems where schools are accountable to the public or market at that point in time. The latter would encompass market-based accountability where quality is evaluated on the best education prospects offered to students. Outcomes of these processes are usually shared with the different stakeholders. On the other hand, accountability

which is government-based allows the evaluator to use tools that can impact the performance of schools such as incentives, sanctions, and allocation of funds among others (Eurydice, 2015).

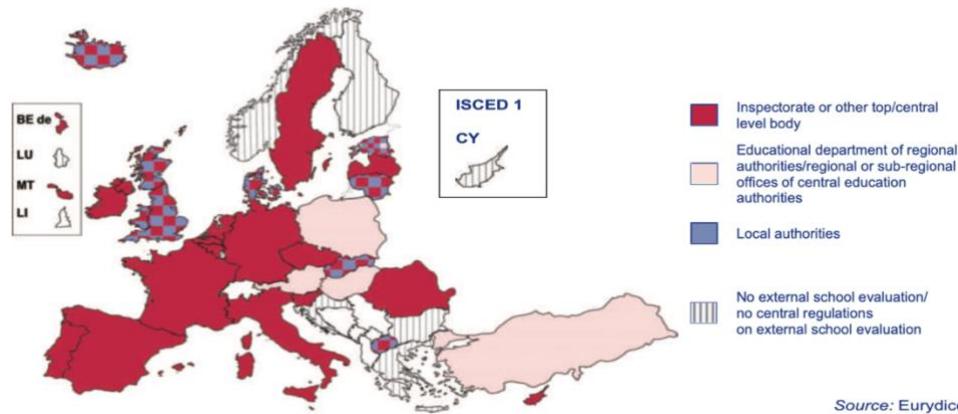


Figure 1 - Bodies responsible for carrying out external evaluation of schools, full-time compulsory general education, 2013-2014 (Eurydice, 2015).

Figure 1 above, extracted from the Eurydice Report *Assuring Quality in Education* (2015), is the latest research carried out by the EC concerning external quality assurance, shows the bodies responsible for carrying out the external evaluation in schools in compulsory education in thirty-one European Countries. The figure clearly shows that top central control is predominant among European countries followed by central education authorities. The ET2020 report on supporting school self-evaluation defines top-central control as ‘high stakes accountability’ where the focus is mainly on regulation and accountability and operates on fixed and frequent cycles of inspection to provide regular monitoring reports on improvement happening within schools following standardized tools. This means that inspection becomes ‘high stakes’ for the schools themselves and thus influences operation especially in relation to SSE and Development Planning. This could be through, for instance, typical staging planned especially for the external evaluator where the real situation of the school is manipulated. Schools may, unfortunately, also resort to the manipulation of data and results to minimize any negative impact which might be brought about by the external evaluation carried out in their school (ET 2020 Report). The pressure brought about by external accountability may limit the understanding of the data available and the broader aims and goals of education might be neglected in the process of collecting data (Simons, 2013). This can contribute to the level of cynicism attributed to the validity and value of the SSE

and Development Planning processes especially when it is compared to the rigour of external evaluation. Hence, the role of SSE as a strategic management tool can also be seriously influenced by the relationship between internal and external evaluation.

The encompassing benefits of having external evaluation revolve around the perspective offered by the external observer. One who is not part of the school, who is objective and can provide an unbiased view of how the school is doing as there is no vested interest to represent it otherwise (MacBeath, 1999). According to Barber (2004), a sound external evaluation system which views the picture of the school in its entirety, can also help the school focus on aspects beyond academic achievement and more on the role of the different stakeholders in developing a healthy school environment (Brown et al., 2016). As a counter argument, external evaluators have often been criticized for strictly adhering to set procedures and protocols and not keeping in mind the context of the school in gauging improvement (Bockhove et al., 2023). An effective evaluation system can also provide an opportunity for objective policy evaluation and implementation as it can offer more rapid feedback through inspection as well as the possibility for tweaking in implementation strategy if necessary. Finally, as Barber (2004) argues, a strong independent system of inspection can serve not only to hold schools accountable but also the different strata of governance.

2.8.1 External quality assurance and School Self-Evaluation

Stake (1995) states that there is no way to judge the overall quality of a school by one single criterion or a justified combination. That is, external evaluation on its own cannot possibly convey the entire picture of the school. On the other hand, it is very difficult to completely assure that the SSE of any school is completely neutral and unbiased (Oktarina et al., 2023). After all, the core aspect of the SSE process is that it is carried out by those who know the school best, and that background knowledge is used to convey a realistic picture. One of the main tenets of external quality assurance, in fact, is to counteract the issues presented by the

possible subjective nature of SSE by evaluating through the stance of an outsider. Moreover, external review mechanisms can provide schools with expertise and guidance in several areas, especially when it comes to data collection, analysis, and evaluation which, as outlined earlier in the chapter can often be problematic for schools (McNamara et al., 2020).

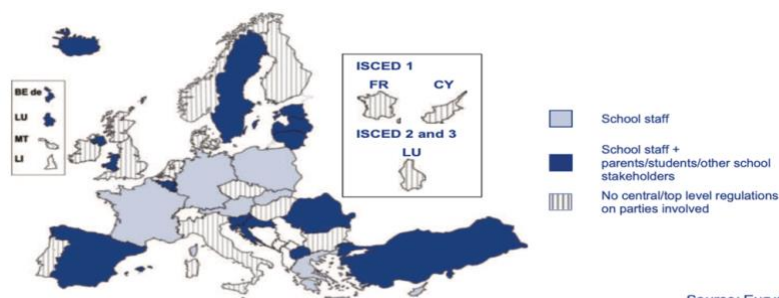
As Nevo (2001) argues, when there is an external school evaluation, an internal evaluation mechanism must be established and when the school has an internal review process mechanism it should also seek some form of systematic external evaluation. Both internal and external evaluation mechanisms are processes that try to make sense of complex activities which have to be carefully evaluated (MacBeath, 2008). Processing the value of these mechanisms requires time and patience and inevitably, a certain level of trial and error. This is probably one of the main issues with both mechanisms especially in relation to education which is inherently linked to human perception and its propensity to be in a constant state of flux (McNamara et al., 2020).

The way in which inspectorates and the inspection processes are linked to self-evaluation in schools can have a significant impact on the success of SSE practices within a school. This can happen especially when the external evaluation system currently in place uses SSE as one of the inspection tools to gather data about the school. In these cases, schools will find it very difficult not to carry SSE processes and ultimately, planning for improvement, without considering the results obtained from the process and the plan itself as one of the requirements set by the external evaluator. Though national standards set can be used as guidelines, they should not be the sole determinant of the school's improvement plan. This would defeat the final objective of the SSE process to be exclusively designed by the school to cater to its own needs and areas for development (Eurydice, 2015). Most inspectorates depict their use of the SSE as a document that can tell them more about the school, however it often becomes difficult to separate the two mechanisms in the eyes of the school, especially when it comes to the leadership team who knows that at the end they will be accountable for what is conveyed in the SSE document especially

if it is evaluated by the external evaluator. This kind of scenario happens mostly where evaluation processes are at high stake and focus heavily on their regulatory role (EC, 2018).

In the Eurydice report compiled in 2015, where the practices of internal and external quality assurance measures of thirty-one educational systems were evaluated one of the most interesting findings concerned the interdependence which often exists between internal and external mechanisms. In two-thirds of the educational systems where internal and external quality assurance is carried out, external evaluators made use of internal review findings as information analysed before carrying out the external review visit. The information gleaned from this process often allows the evaluator to develop a profile of the school to be visited. The question which arises at this stage is the reliability of the information produced especially if schools are aware of the determining importance of what they will present. This awareness might consciously or subconsciously lead them to depict the school in a better light than it actually is. In the long run, this might also once again put into question the veracity and reliability of the process on a larger scale thus influencing the general effectiveness of SSE as a tool for improvement.

External Evaluators, especially inspectorates and entities which are state led can influence the internal review process through the development and dissemination of guidelines, manuals, and templates or through shared indicators that allow schools to compare with others. These elements of support can act as both an incentive as well as act as a possible deterrent to the development of SSE. Some schools may be confident enough with the process to allow these documents to act as they are intended to, that is, guidelines. However, in other cases, these might be mistaken as set rules to follow and thus limit the scope of the exercise. The Eurydice report (2015) however states that in the case of the European systems evaluated it is very rare for the process to be determined by education authorities and in the great part allow for participatory approaches in the development of SSE where there are set guidelines, but which however can be adapted by the schools according to their needs.



Source: Eurydice.

Figure 2 - Internal evaluation of schools according to central/top level regulations (2013-2014) Eurydice, 2015.

These types of participatory approaches focus on putting the stakeholders at the centre of the School Development plan where the main needs of the school are determined through a bottom-up approach. This is a type of evaluation where stakeholders reflect on their practice and their role in relation to the school community and together identify areas to encourage improvement in student and professional learning (Chapman & Sammons, 2013 p. 2). As can be seen in Figure 2 above, the internal stakeholders are always included as important parties in the internal evaluation of schools with many countries stipulating the participation of school staff, parents, students and other stakeholders as necessary.

The general feeling towards quality assurance mechanisms is that everyone seems to hate external evaluation while nobody trusts internal evaluation (Nevo, 2001). However, during the last decade, there has been a determining push to redefine external quality assurance to one which focuses more on quality enhancement and on building a relationship of trust rather than one where the external evaluator exercises control over the school (Gustaffson et al., 2015). Nevo (2001) continues to argue that evaluation must be perceived as a means for ‘understanding rather than judgment’. The challenge at this stage is for regulatory bodies to keep their quality assurance role while using systems that are more flexible and less standardized and where the focus of the visit will not expressly be measurement against the standards set but that of quality enhancement of education and a healthy push towards improvement focusing on the benefits for the specific school and its context (McNamara et al., 2023). This kind of system would be based on

developing a professional dialogue with schools based on guiding rather than judging, thus rendering the external quality assurance process more formative. An external review system that promotes improvement rather than one based solely on regulation and accountability can help in developing a more enhanced use of the SSE within schools (EC, 2020).

2.8.1.1 Building the synergy between internal and external Quality Assurance

The proposals linked to the relationship between internal and external quality assurance focuses on the fact that a healthy relationship can benefit both mechanisms (OECD, 2013; EC, 2018). Although we discussed earlier that the influence of external review on internal review can be a hindrance, on the other hand, however, if internal and external quality assurance processes are not well connected then the development of internal review and SSE can be undermined. What most research in the field is proposing is for the two mechanisms to work together and complement each other. Both should work towards focusing on effectively guiding schools towards the promotion of school improvement (ET2020; EC2018). Internal and external evaluation are both needed and can co-exist constructively if an appropriate common ground can be created for a dialogue between the two (Nevo, 2010).

The real challenge in developing this relationship is that of maintaining a balance between the two mechanisms (DQSE, 2023). Try as we may to mitigate its influence, the truth remains that external quality assurance has the backing of legislation and policy thus making it a dominant mechanism when it comes to assuring quality (EC, 2018). In many cases, external evaluation will also seek to evaluate strategies which are being pushed by the governing system of the particular structure which they form part of, thus trying to give the education system within that country a set direction. The risk is that this type of power might make it the stronger mechanism in the relationship where the SSE and Development Planning process is undermined because it does not hold as much

clout or backing especially vis a vis resources (OECD, 2013). Although this relationship has been advocated for several years, this imbalance in power makes it difficult to achieve that necessary balance. One also needs to keep in mind the way the mechanisms are viewed by those who work with them daily. Notwithstanding the way this relationship is depicted, the fear of judgment from the side of educators and leaders will always be present unless there is a change in the culture and mindset. Ultimately this shift has to be two-way where it does not only happen with educators in schools but also with officials and governing structures who manage the different external review mechanisms within a particular system.

2.8.2 Parallel external system analysis in Malta, Cyprus, Ireland and Scotland

Across several countries including Malta, Cyprus, Ireland and Scotland, inspection and external evaluation systems show clear parallels in structure and intent where all combine external scrutiny with different forms of school-led evaluation, and all position quality assurance as a driver to school improvement rather than solely as control (Eurydice, 2023, 2025). Each system, however, balances accountability and support differently, and varies in how strongly it integrates SSE and into inspection processes (SICI, 2025).

In Malta, external review is conducted by the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) which inspects all early years and compulsory age institutions and explicitly anchors in the national framework that requires schools to undertake self-evaluation to inform their development planning (DQSE, 2023). External reports provide feedback on strengths and areas for development but are not currently published or used to grade schools, signalling a relatively formative orientation compared with more high stakes systems. Cyprus, similarly, relies on a central inspectorate within the Ministry of Education and Culture, whose inspectors supervise public schools, appraise teaching staff and ensure legal compliance in private schools, while internal evaluation typically takes the form of

an annual summary report prepared by the head of school and staff (Eurydice, 2023). Here, internal review is less formalised as SSE and the model remains more traditional and inspector-centred with less explicit emphasis on the complementarity of internal and external evaluation (SICI, 2025; CYAA, 2025).

Ireland and Scotland have gone further in formalising the link between SSE and external inspection through a history of policy guidelines specifically aimed at internal quality assurance. In Ireland, SSE is mandatory and structured through regularly updated national guidelines, with the inspectorate explicitly describing internal and external evaluation as complementary processes that share a common focus on improvement in teaching and learning (Department for Education and Youth, 2024). External inspections are required to take account of schools' SSE reports and improvement plans. Recent policy work has focused on strengthening this complementarity (Department for Education and Youth, 2019).

Scotland, through Education Scotland, also frames inspection as an opportunity for schools to demonstrate how they 'know themselves inside out' and use self-evaluation to drive improvement, drawing heavily on the 'How good is our school?' framework (HMIE, 2025). Prior to inspections, headteachers prepare self-evaluation summaries and improvement evidence that are then used by inspectors as a central reference point, indicating a strong expectation that internal self-evaluation is the foundation of external review (HMIE, 2025).

Taken together, these four systems illustrate a shared European trend towards integrating self-evaluation with external inspection, but they differ in the maturity and depth of that integration. Malta and Cyprus are closer to a classic inspectorate model gradually incorporating internal review within their educational systems, whereas Ireland and Scotland present more developed frameworks in which SSE is formally structured, mandatory and explicitly recognised as the starting point and reference for external evaluation, with inspection increasingly framed as a validation and support for schools' own improvement journeys.

The evaluation frameworks analysed across these four countries have not emerged in a vacuum but are the product of complex educational histories that continue to shape how evaluation is understood and enacted in school. While all four systems rhetorically frame quality assurance as a driver for school improvement rather than as a narrow control mechanism, the balance between accountability and support remains heavily influenced by earlier inspectorate traditions and how strongly SSE has evolved and become embedded over time. In Malta and Cyprus, for example, the central inspectorate model has gradually incorporated internal review, yet the culture of evaluation is still marked by legacy notions of supervision and compliance, with SSE frequently viewed as a formal requirement rather than a deeply owned process of inquiry (Eurydice, 2023). In contrast, Ireland and Scotland illustrate how a longer history of policy guidance on SSE and explicit expectations that schools ‘know themselves inside out’ has normalised SSE and Development Planning as a starting point for external review.

This comparative perspective is crucial because it shows that the impact of evaluation on learning does not flow automatically from the existence of frameworks but from how these frameworks are interpreted and used within historically shaped educational cultures. When evaluation is experienced primarily as episodic external scrutiny, it is less likely to change classroom practice. However, when SSE becomes part of the school’s ‘fibre’ through sustained leadership, collaborative inquiry and data-informed development planning, research indicates that it can strengthen teacher reflection, foster professional learning communities and translate into measurable gains in student achievement (NcNamara et al., 2020; Chapman & Sammons, 2021).

When viewed through this lens, Malta’s current trajectory can be read as a system in transition, moving from a historically inspector-led culture toward a more integrated model in which SSE and external review are recognised as complementary pillars of school quality assurance and better learning (Cowe, 2008; EC,2018). The shift places particular responsibility on heads of school and leadership teams whose agency is critical in reframing evaluation as something

which is done for the school in the service of learners. Where leaders succeed in cultivating a growth mindset SSE becomes a power lever for autonomy and improvement (Bezzina & Paletta, 2022; MacBeath, 2006).

2.9 Conclusion

The literature on SSE analysed as part of this research nearly always included studies carried out in schools on development planning (Brown et al., 2021; McNamara et al., 2020; Nevo, 2010; Vanhoof et al., 2011). In many of these cases, research shows that given the appropriate conditions SSE can be highly beneficial to schools and can sustain their push towards autonomy and improvement (McNamara et al., 2008; Chapman & Sammons, 2021). In most situations carried out in schools the main elements towards the success of the process concentrated on critical common aspects mentioned throughout the chapter and which were also frequently reflected in the Maltese context. One of the most defining aspects in relation to the success of the process is the role of the leadership team, especially the Head of School, in effectively ‘leading’ and ‘guiding’ the school towards using the SSE process towards improvement (Bezzina, 2024). The success of the process is strongly linked to the ability of the leader to inspire a growth mindset focusing on motivation and collaboration among staff (Bush, 2014). This kind of attitude sets the scene for a positive working relationship within the school which in turn leads to more dialogue, reflection about the development of learning communities focused on improvement (Bezzina & Paletta, 2022). The study carried out by Neil and Johnston in 2005 is a clear testament to the importance of cultivating this relationship. In this study teachers who were asked to keep a reflective journal for four weeks on their practice were able to develop a higher level of critical reflection. This was subsequently shared with their colleagues during grade meetings and therefore led to improvement in their teaching. When staff is motivated and committed to becoming a learning community and the right mindset is in place then improvement becomes part of the fibre of the school (Coenen et al, 2021; Kowalczyk & Underwood, 2021). As seen throughout the literature, there

are numerous variables, such as the time factor or lack of expertise in the analysis of data which hinder the possible success of the process (MacBeath, 2006, 2008; Nevo, 2010). The literature also links the leadership to evaluation of what is being implemented and how this is determining to, not only the effective implementation of the process cycle but also its success. The context and the culture of every school and the relationships among staff and especially with leadership are ultimately fundamental towards the success of the process.

Caputo and Rastelli's (2014) study on the impact of self-evaluation on a training programme in Italy found that the quality of internal planning and evaluation played a determining role on student achievement. When the action plans developed by the school were analysed, it transpired that when the schools were led to seriously consider the self-evaluation process and carry out a thorough evaluation of the school context and produce more specific improvement goals this transpired in more specific goals and therefore higher achievement compared to other actions plans which were less specific. Cowen (2008) found that when school self-evaluation was consistently carried out for over two years, it brought about relevant improvement in several schools in England, especially in those schools which were identified as under-achieving. These case studies in schools draw the attention to the fact that SSE cannot be effective if it is carried out sporadically and inconsistently over months without a clear evaluation of actions previously developed. An interesting study by Lain and McNaughton (2013) describes a model of internal evaluation which spanned over three distinctive phases which were developed following Deming's Plan – Do – Act - Check cycle but each phase was developed separately. The first phase was the careful analysis of findings from data collection and an initial discussion; the second phase included the identification of areas for development and subsequent link to professional development needed to achieve identified targets and the final phase consisted of the development of professional learning communities focusing on the objectives of implementing specific changes within the school context. Following the analysis of this system for three years it was found that students' gains were quite substantial. Also, a study by Timperley and Parr (2009) found that professional

development linked to the needs identified by the SSE process brought about better student achievement with improvement recorded in low achieving schools. This happened since the analysis of the internal review process led the schools to focus on the specific needs of learners within their class and therefore could better cater for their needs.

Data gathering and evaluation are also important aspects that can help in developing a successful internal review process. Studies with schools in the USA (Cosner, 2011; Gallimore et al., 2009; Marsh et al., 2010), Canada (Dunn et al., 2013) and Wales (Stringfield et al., 2008) show that where data collection and analysis was structured and focused on specific contexts and areas of the school there was a surge in recorded improvement. A study carried out by Farrell (2014) in the USA on the use of data gathered at the secondary level shows that when this data was specifically analysed and carefully evaluated the results could be linked to specific changes which affected everyday practice in class. The literature also focuses on the ability of educators to effectively analyse and use the data gathered.

The way governance and policy makers look at the process is also determining as can be seen in the literature in part 2 in relation to the local Maltese context. This can be seen through the approach which is taken towards SSE and development planning as well as how proactive any system is in offering schools the tools and the support necessary to be able to effectively implement their improvement plan effectively. In recent years, there has been a substantial push towards promoting the role of SSE in ensuring quality education.



Source: Ecorys

Figure 3- Six Strands on Quality and Practice on School Quality Assurance (EC Report, Better Learning, 2018).

The above diagram shows the six important factors towards the promotion of a framework focusing on bringing about better learning (Better Learning for Europe’s young people 2018). It is relevant to note that school self-evaluation and external evaluation are considered as two of the six pillars towards providing better learning in schools and the enhancement of quality education in schools. The importance of SSE and external evaluation should not only be considered independently but it is also important to look at the synergy which exists between the two mechanisms and how they are impacting each other.

The next chapter will investigate the theory discussed along this chapter within the specific Maltese compulsory education setting. A clear look at the policy development in relation to SSE and Development planning as part of the history of the Maltese educational scenario will help the reader understand the way it is viewed today. This type of analysis is also essential in supporting the preparation of the researcher in relation to the research carried out in schools forming part of the study. It will allow for a better understanding of certain behaviours and attitudes towards the SSE and Development Planning process which have transpired from the research.

Chapter 3

The Maltese Context in relation to SSE and Development Planning

3.1 Introduction

The research undertaken as part of this study is strongly linked to the Maltese educational context. As with any educational system, the Maltese context has a historical background which shapes and determines the way it functions and the way it is approached and viewed by the different stakeholders within their different realities. This part of the chapter will look into a detailed documentary analysis and criticism of legislation, policy and strategy which shape the way the Maltese educational system views and approaches SSE and Development Planning. I believe that this is an important aspect of the research questions posed as the way governing bodies, policy makers and legislators look at the process will inevitably influence the way it is implemented by the different stakeholders within schools.

3.1.1 Policy review on SSE and Development Planning in the Maltese context

The *National Curriculum Framework* (NCF) published in 2012 proposes an overarching tenet that focuses on providing children and young people with the entitlement which is due to them and which can help them reach their full potential as citizens of Malta. Its main objectives are essentially to move away from a curriculum which had been for many years a prescriptive one towards a framework based on learning outcomes which would help in building school autonomy and support the schools in developing a programme of learning which follows established aims and objectives, but which is at the same time also linked to the school's own individual needs. It ultimately aimed at providing a clear focus on

improving the quality of education thus promoting improvement and raising achievement levels (NCF, 2012, p. 13). School self-evaluation is mentioned within the policy document specifically in Principle 5:

“Quality Assurance is to be realized through a system of ongoing self-evaluation, monitoring and review within schools complemented by an external review system that together foster school improvement” (NMC, 2012, p. 43).

This very clearly outlines the importance which internal quality assurance through SSE and Development Planning has on the school. It clearly delineates that the school is to develop a system of self-evaluation which is carried out on a continuous basis, and which can be then complemented by external evaluation. Therefore, the NCF is acknowledging the determining role of the school in shaping its own plans for improvement. Subsequently the role of external processes are described as important in sustaining the school’s capacity at internal evaluation.

Later in the document (p. 42), it goes on to define the type of evaluation which should be developed in schools:

Evaluation: Quality Assurance Mechanisms:

‘Schools are expected to constantly develop their capacity to be communities of reflexive practice through:

- The process of school development planning that has inbuilt mechanisms for self-evaluation
- Mentoring
- A performance appraisal system that incorporates features of accountability and professional development
- External reviews carried out by the Quality Assurance Department within the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education.

To constantly develop their capacity to be communities of reflexive practice, schools need to:

- plan purposefully for learning and teaching according to shared beliefs, criteria, and targets
- implement these plans critically and flexibly.
- Set standards based on assessment and review of practice and improvement
- Review their planning and the school’s development planning according to this feedback keeping in mind the possibility of reviewing their shared beliefs, criteria, and targets.

In the evolving model of quality assurance, schools continue to be supported in their capacity to develop and implement School Development Plans (SDP) that have inbuilt mechanisms for self-evaluation. This self-evaluation component focuses on the extent to which projected actions have been carried out and the extent to which planned improvements have been achieved. The SDP builds upon progress to date and incorporates other priorities and realities that must be addressed in their school. ‘(pg. 42)

At this stage the policy document is clearly guiding schools towards adopting SSE as the main tool towards bringing about improvement within the school, a concept which was then subsequently included in the renewed *Education Act Cap 605* issued in 2021. It clearly links the SSE process to the need for schools to develop reflexive learning communities, moreover, linking the process explicitly to professional development. The second section provides further detail by briefly listing the process of planning the internal review process and development planning. This shows that during the development of this national policy the need was felt to outline to schools the steps for implementation of the process. It also clearly indicates the importance of evaluation and monitoring of any plans developed and to be ready to discuss and re-establish targets according to the feedback received.

The inclusion of SSE and Development planning in the NCF keeps on substantiating the need which was felt for this tool to be enhanced within Maltese schools. Moreover, it also demonstrates the importance of SSE in the development of learning communities and the educator as a professional. An important step forward brought by the NCF also includes the link between internal and external quality assurance which conveys SSE as a fundamental aspect towards school improvement. Additionally, it offers a new perspective of quality assurance particularly in how it depicts the relationship between internal and external quality assurance mechanisms. It promotes a type of quality assurance structure where the focus lies on the capacity of the school to carry out SSE and Development Planning and where external quality assurance builds on the work done by the school to push towards improvement. It is the first concrete step towards dismantling the notion that external quality assurance makes use of internal quality assurance merely as a tool for evaluation rather than one which helps understand the school's context and hence its needs in relation to development and improvement.

Notwithstanding, the new direction given to SSE and Development Planning in the NCF, the policy on SSE, *Knowing Our School* issued in 2004 following the pilot project was not substantiated with further documentation and remains to this day

the only policy giving official direction on SSE. This lack of specific direction as well as the limited tangible immediate support given in the area to the individual schools following the publication of the NCF did not provide enough opportunity for this innovative vision to be developed further.

3.1.2 Knowing our School

Knowing our school was the first official document on school self-evaluation to be published by the *Department of Operations* within the Ministry of Education in 2004. As mentioned earlier, this policy follows closely the *Knowing our School* framework which was at the time being implemented in the Scottish Education system. This can be easily seen through heavy references and adaptations from the Scottish system at the time throughout the Maltese document. This handbook mainly takes the shape of an instruction guidebook bearing a substantial array of key areas and quality indicators which the schools need to consider when looking into their school development planning. The document guides schools to evaluate their plans through checklists which are entitled ‘Health Organisational Checklist’ for each key area and quality indicator. The document goes on to divide the process into the ‘Broad view’ which guides the school towards ‘monitoring and updating priorities for long term planning’. The ‘Close view’, on the other hand, goes into more detail and asks the school to internalise a considerable number of checklists which can aid in the development of the school plan. The last part of the handbook goes on to illustrate a rubric sectioned in levels for each quality area.

Figure 4 below, extracted from the policy, depicts the core elements upon which it is based. The first diagram entitled *School Development Planning* gives an idea of how the internal ‘audit’ is to be carried out. This is essentially the collection of data from the different tools, such as ‘organizational health checks’, ‘review processes’, and ‘SWOT’ analysis so that priorities can be chosen and developed into action plans. The feeling conveyed by the document can be clearly gleaned through the use of the word ‘audit’ which conveys the negative perception that even at this stage of internal evaluations, the school is going through a judgement process. The

second diagram is based on the Deming (PDCA) cycle and shows the structure of the school development plan which indicates the steps schools need to follow to keep the process flowing.

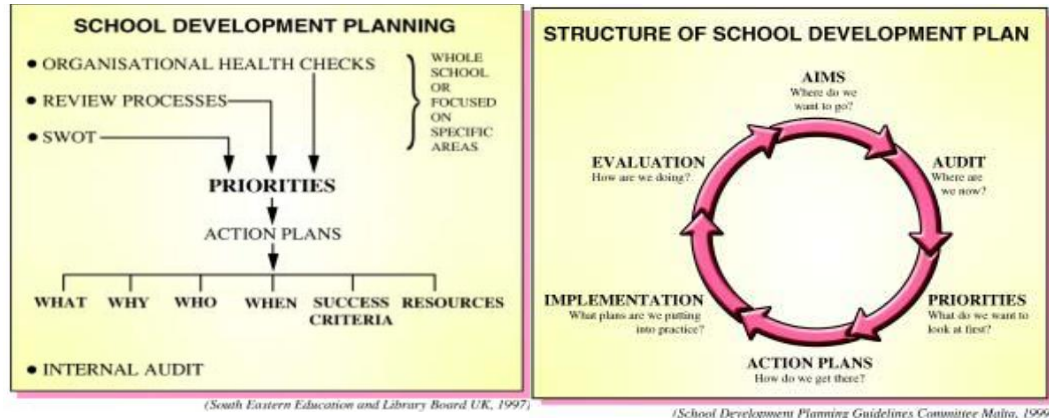


Figure 4- School Development Planning and the Structure of the School Development Plan. *Knowing our School*, 2004 (p.6).

Upon careful evaluation and from my personal experience with schools, *Knowing our School*, may have been seen as an overwhelming document, especially in the light of it being the first official publication on SSE for Maltese schools who, at the time, had little to no experience with structured internal quality assurance. The level of detail in the quality indicators and the checklists included may have been too daunting for schools and may have been at the time, perceived as micromanagement, and possibly affected the initial impact of school self-evaluation and development planning on Maltese schools. The constant reference in the document to ‘internal audit’ does not help in the perception among educators that they are being judged, even if this is an internal exercise and should ideally be seen as a safe space to help the school move forward and improve on targeted areas. The language used in the handbook is clinical and is purely one which instructs the schools on how to carry out an ‘audit’ through several checklists. A rationale explaining the importance of SSE as a tool for reflection is significantly missing and there is no reference to how a SWOT analysis can be built or on how to develop action plans. Moreover, it does not specify that the plans for improvement are to be monitored or evaluated.

This might be seen as understandable considering that this was the first publication of a document which dealt specifically with school development planning and was heavily based on the system adopted by Education Scotland in 2004. However, there have been frequent updates to the original Scottish policy *Knowing Our School* which acted as the first source, whereas there have been no official updates or changes in the position of the SSE and development planning policy within the Maltese education system.

3.1.3 School Improvement through self-evaluation

In 2009/2010 the *Quality Assurance Department* within the *Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education* developed a handbook on SSE entitled *School Improvement through self-evaluation* which, however, was disseminated unofficially in schools and was never effectively published as a handbook to be used in schools to help in developing their SSE. This handbook takes on more of a formative approach towards SSE and tries to promote a sense of reflection throughout the internal review process and the need for a stronger collaborative approach within the school community to be able to achieve school improvement. It strongly emphasizes the importance of self-evaluation as:

‘it enables schools to provide a clear direction, a common set of goals, an agreed set of priorities, a collegial approach and a consensus in developing schools as learning communities’ (School Improvement through self-evaluation, 2010, p. 4).

In addition to the push towards the development of self-evaluation and development planning through a more collaborative environment, the document also recognizes the need for a more tangible set of guidelines on how to carry out school self-evaluation. The document makes it very clear that the main concern must be to improve ‘teaching and learning’ within the classroom and that the role of self-evaluation must therefore be inherently linked to school improvement. This kind of reasoning automatically leads to the importance of devising a development plan whereby tangible objectives can be reached.

The handbook also attempts an approach towards understanding the concept of evaluation. It highlights the notion that in any institution with clear aims and objectives, evaluation happens naturally and involves numerous members of staff. It also argues that ‘a more open and systematic approach to evaluation would bring significant benefits’. The purpose of evaluation vis a vis improvement can only be achieved where the outcomes are used to assess continuing needs and to re-orientate efforts towards systematically meeting these needs and this is what self-evaluation and SDP are all about. It also states that:

‘A systematic approach to evaluation and the planned management of change should lead to improved and increased staff development opportunities to better utilization of these resources’ (School Improvement through Self-Evaluation, 2010, p. 6)

The document also goes into how schools can go about developing action plans and emphasizes on the fact that:

‘The plan of action should set achievable targets and establish priorities; it should marshal identified expertise and draw on available external and internal support to address areas of concern against a realistic timescale.’ (School Improvement through Self-Evaluation, 2010, p.7)

It is a pity that this document was never officially published as it conveyed very important aspects linked to the understanding of the purpose of SSE and development planning such as the promotion of clear objectives and the integration of action plans within the daily life of educators. On the other hand, this handbook seems to work on the premise that schools are aware of how the internal review process and development plans are to be developed and assumes that there is the right attitude among educators towards the process and willingness towards developing SSE. Considering that the processes used in schools and the way they were being adopted had never been evaluated at that stage, this might have been an overestimation. Valid as it might be in idealistic terms, this handbook although practical does not address the root of the possible problems which might be present in relation to SSE, which is the perception which educators have of the process and its effectiveness as well as the ability to manage the different aspects which it includes such as efficient data collection and management as well as monitoring and evaluation.

This leaves us, to date, with a policy which has not been updated in the last decade and riddled with clinical checklists where the SSE process is rendered as a compliance exercise and a handbook which reflects the ideals of SSE and development planning but does not link in any way to the *Knowing our School* policy. When one speaks to Heads of school or leadership teams who have been in their position for some time, their recollection of the SSE process and School Development plan is usually one where they remember that they had to address all the different areas in the policy without fail, irrelevant of the priorities of the school (This was often mentioned during interviews as part of the research with case study schools). This naturally did not achieve what should have been the main objective of the SSE process and which left educators, especially school leaders with a misshapen idea of what the process's goal was. The focus of the official policy wasn't on carrying out the process effectively to achieve the end result focusing on improvement but rather limited itself to satisfying the imposition of developing a plan which ticked all the necessary boxes in the checklist and included all the areas mentioned in the *Knowing our School* policy.

The *Knowing our School* (2004) policy preceded the *National Curriculum Framework* (NCF) which was published in 2012. Notwithstanding the NCF and the fact that there have been a number of shifts in direction vis a vis strategy and implementation structures, the *Knowing our School* policy has remained stubbornly unchanged. Had SSE been considered as an important tool for improvement, the policy would have been amended to reflect the direction taken by the NCF which as mentioned earlier emphasises the importance of the internal review process in schools. Through the current *National Education Strategy* (2024-2030) which focuses on the learning outcomes paradigm, the Maltese educational system is trying to move away from a prescriptive approach towards education to one where learners are more cognisant and can shape their own learning (NES, 2024). This is not what the *Knowing our School* policy, with its myriad of checklists puts forward. This renders the policy increasingly irrelevant and burdensome as time goes by especially considering that the approaches towards

education are constantly in flux and changing towards one which is more focused on the continuous and consistent development of the individual learner. This unfortunately leads to a scenario where governing systems seem to have a rudimentary idea of the importance of the SSE and development planning process, however, they are not aware of how this important mechanism can be really implemented in schools. It does not bring forward the understanding of how it can facilitate the use for schools through well written and relevant professional development, policy framework and guidelines.

3.1.4 The role of SSE in national legislation: The Education Act

In 2021 Malta submitted a rehaul of the *Education Act, Cap 327* of the National legislation. The previous education act was published in 1988 and upon analysis of the various amendments throughout the years, it was noted that none of these concerned specifically School self-evaluation. The new *Education Act, Cap 605* which was presented in 2018 and passed through parliament in 2021 took on a different approach towards SSE and Development Planning.

As can be seen in Table 3, in the latest legislative document there has been an interesting evolution when considering the role of SSE in legislation. In previous legislation, SSE was mainly depicted as being the responsibility of others, mainly the Ministry of Education and the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (Education Act, 1988, Paragraph 9 part 2). This approach possibly conveyed the message or gave the impression that SSE was yet another tool in the hands of governing bodies to ‘judge’ and ‘evaluate/ check’ schools. Indirectly this was acting against the proposed decentralisation and devolution of power to schools through the newfound autonomy which the Ministry of Education was promoting through its various policies along the years. Moreover, there were no subsequent amendments in the law which showed a prospective change in stance as regards SSE and development planning. This is indicative of the way SSE was viewed nationally. It gave out the message that SSE and Development Planning were just initiatives and policies which were introduced at a point in time in 2004

and which was never really monitored or evaluated to see if they were being as effective and if they were reaching their intended goals.

In the new legislation, published in 2021, the stance changes to one which disconnects SSE from the functions of the directorates of education (Part II) and includes it expressly as the business of the schools and the college. According to law, SSE and development planning processes are to be used by the schools to guide them in their school management and improvement plan. There is also change within this section in relation to the responsibility and ownership of SSE plan. In the 1988 legislation the responsibility was mainly attributed to the College Principal and the Council of Heads as part of the governing body. Moreover, the wording used to refer to the responsibility towards SSE was also rather vague. Conversely, in the 2021 legislation, the responsibility for the development and dissemination of the school development plan is placed on the school which is also considered as responsible and accountable for developing the school development plan. This is to be done in collaboration with the school's teaching staff and involve the relevant stakeholders in the process (Education act, Cap 605, 2021, para. 17). Apart from determining further the importance of the SSE and development planning for the individual schools and their own contexts, it also constitutes an important move towards increasing the ownership of the process. The most important and determining change can be detected in Part III (para. 17) which shows the school development plan as:

‘The main educational policy and implementation tool and shall, in particular, aim to facilitate the implementation and pursuance of the learning outcomes framework given the differing contexts of every school and the particular needs of the students’

Although the role of SSE and development planning has always been relevant in legislation, the changes implemented in the revision of the law, as we have seen, are quite significant. However, if one looks in depth at the quote above from paragraph 17 of the legislation as shown above, it is clear that the role of SSE and Development Planning, albeit improved in positioning within the said legislation is still not fully understood. While “different contexts of every school and particular needs of students” are mentioned, it is still stating that the

implementation tool is to facilitate the implementation of the *Learning Outcomes Framework* which is ultimately a national initiative towards specific and changeable educational reform. This creates a paradox within its definition where schools are being told to look at their context to specifically implement national policy. On the other hand, systems of governance and policy makers aiming at implementing the learning outcomes framework will inevitably investigate quality assurance mechanisms to evaluate if and how the framework is being implemented in schools.

These changes inevitably bring to light several questions. While there has evidently been a significant push towards changing the perception and attitude towards SSE and development planning, the way it is included in the legislation can still be associated to a monitoring role, thus once again limiting that purpose of allowing schools to be autonomous in their choice of what improvement plans are best to be adopted as per their individual context. This change in legislation was not accompanied by a proposed change in policy development and this might be further indication of the way governing bodies, policy makers and legislators still do not clearly understand the role SSE and Development Planning (EU, 2020) play. Although this shift in legislation is placing the ball in the school's court, in reality it might not be perceived by schools as augmenting their autonomy but rather as increasing responsibility for educators especially for school leaders who now are instructed by law to use the SSE and development planning to implement national policy.

Table 3 - Comparison of the role of self-evaluation and School Development Planning: Education Act (Cap 327, 1988) and Education Act (Cap 605, 2021).

	Education Act Cap.327 (1988)	Section 2018	Education Act Cap 605 (2021)
Part II – Constitution and Function of the Directorates of Education.	<p>(Para 9. Part 2) In particular, the functions and duties of the Directorate for Standards in Education shall include:</p> <p>b. to provide the required guidelines among other things for the better implementation of the education policy and services, including each school’s development plan, the syllabi, the establishment of standards, performance assessment, and examinations.</p> <p>e. in support of the evaluation and the internal audit of every school, to implement every inspection, evaluation and external audit of educational programmes and services of the operations undertaken of the physical environment of every school, and of the results obtained by them, to ensure that the curriculum is being followed in every school, that good practices are being promoted, that the quality in and the coordination of each part and at every level of the educational system are ensured, and also so that children and students are helped so that they may obtain in the best possible manner the set learning targets and necessary skills.</p>	Part II – Constitution and Function of the Directorates of Education	No direct mention of school self-evaluation or School Development Planning found in Part II of the 2018 legislation.
Part IV Colleges and State schools	<p>Para 51. It shall be the function of each College to:</p> <p>f. ensure the promotion and dissemination of a culture of evaluation within the schools of the College, including the implementation of a process of internal educational auditing and full participation in the external quality assurance processes.</p> <p>Para 55. In each College, there shall be a Council of Heads of schools forming the College to be presided by the Principal. The council shall:</p> <p>c. ensure an exchange of experiences of the School Development Plans, Performance Management Programmes, and the policies and practices with the participation of the school community as required.</p>	Part III – State Schools	<p>Para 17. (1) The school development plan shall be the main educational policy and implementation tool and shall, in particular, aim to facilitate the implementation and pursuance of the learning outcomes framework given the differing contexts of every school and the particular needs of its students.</p> <p>(2) The school development plan shall be for a three-year period. It shall be prepared by the Head of School as provided in article 21(2)C</p> <p>(3) The Head of School shall review the implementation of the school development plan on an annual basis.</p> <p>Para 21. (2) Amongst other functions the Head of School shall in particular: (c) develop the school development plan in alignment with the school needs, national education targets, business plan, and classification; (d) implement the school development plan together with the senior management, educators of the school, psychological team and in consultation with learners, parents and the local civil community;</p>

3.2 External Quality Assurance within the Maltese Context

External Quality assurance for pre-compulsory and compulsory education (0-16) in Maltese schools is carried out by the *Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education* (DQSE). The *Malta Further and Higher Education Authority* (MFHEA) is responsible for quality assurance of institutions at post-secondary and tertiary level. As the research in question focuses on compulsory education, I will investigate the link which exists between external and internal quality assurance within compulsory education as managed by the DQSE. The Directorate was established by virtue of the *Education Act* with the objective to establish, regulate, monitor and assure standards and quality in the programmes and educational services provided by all schools, whether managed by the state or otherwise, catering for pre-compulsory to compulsory education (0-16) (Dqse.gov.mt). External reviews are carried out by education officers who have a teaching/school management background and relevant experience. The DQSE is also a member of the *Standing International Conference of Inspectorates* (SICI) which allows opportunities for collaboration and networking with the different inspectorates around Europe who form part of this group. The DQSE is also responsible for the licensing of schools in Malta and Gozo.

External reviews in Maltese schools follow a developmental approach where schools are not given a grade at the end of the review visit but are issued a set of recommendations which they are bound to address following a set timeline. This kind of approach is based on the development of a dialogue with schools which focuses primarily on the school's own vision for improvement and how it plans on achieving that vision. Hence, the DQSE attributes a lot of importance to the school's development planning when implementing models of external Quality Assurance in schools (DQSE, 2023). In fact, if one looks at the documents outlining the structure of the external reviews, the internal review process and school development planning are included in all the current models implemented in schools by the department (dqse.gov – external reviews handbook).

3.2.1 SSE and Development Planning in the National Quality Assurance framework



Figure 5- A Quality Assurance Framework for General Education (0-16).

Figure 5 above has been extracted from the *National Framework for Quality Assurance (0-16)* published by the DQSE in 2023. This framework is the first of its kind within Maltese regulatory environment for compulsory education. The framework focuses on the internal review process and school development plan as the core aspects for internal quality assurance for schools. It is the school who knows its context and can plan for improvement thus deciding what type of funding and external support it needs and how to communicate these plans to school governing structures and parents. External quality assurance comes into play at the end of the process to evaluate how the school is planning for improvement, how the data gathered through the internal review process has been analysed and finally how the improvement plan of the school is in line with National legislation and National Standards. Even though the evaluative stance is still present as part of the DQSEs work as regulatory body, the system is not imposed on the schools. The framework centres around the school's plan for improvement and ultimately aims to develop a sustainable system of quality assurance which aims at aligning that

plan with national objectives without removing the school’s autonomy to set its own improvement plan (DQSE, 2023).

3.2.2 The National Quality Standards (3-16)

The *National Quality Standards (3-16)* were published alongside the *National Quality Framework (0-16)* by the DQSE in 2023. The aim of these Standards is to set common guidelines for both the DQSE as the regulator and schools towards improvement.

NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARDS IN EDUCATION (3-16 YEARS)		NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARDS IN EDUCATION (3-16 YEARS)	
<p>Standard 1.2 Internal quality assurance mechanisms are embedded in the school's culture and in its capacity for improvement.</p> <p>1.2</p>	<p>Success Criteria</p> <p>1.2.1 The school's culture is one that is open to constructive review and improvement opportunities. The Senior Leadership Team and educators own the internal review and the school development process.</p>	<p>Quality Markers</p> <p>School development processes</p>	<p>1.2.6 The school development planning document has appropriate structure and content. It includes SMART action plans that are formulated by educators. These action plans clearly indicate the steps to be taken to address agreed-upon priorities.</p> <p>Action plans</p>
	<p>1.2.2 The internal review process focuses on the school's vision and goals, the school's effectiveness as a learning community, and improvement processes.</p>	<p>Internal review</p>	
	<p>1.2.3 The internal review process follows the principles of transparency and accountability. This reflects the school's context, involves various stakeholders, refers to national priorities, policies and initiatives, and employs different methods and tools for collecting data.</p>	<p>Data collection</p>	
	<p>1.2.4 The Senior Leadership Team employs an effective data analysis exercise to interpret the data and understand trends. Together with educators they identify priority targets.</p>	<p>Data analysis</p>	
	<p>1.2.5 The chosen priorities for development indicate the way forward for the school community. Staff professional development linked to the chosen priorities forms an integral part of development planning.</p>	<p>Development planning</p>	

These standards can be generally

Figure 6- National Quality Standards - Standard 1.2 - Internal Quality Assurance.

followed as the guidelines for schools when developing their SSE and school development plan as they focus on three main areas (Leadership and Management, Learning and Teaching and School Ethos) and include different criteria specifically relevant to each area. The National Standards do not specifically prescribe any particular focus or approach. The main gist is that of keeping the child at the centre of the learning journey (DQSE, Quality Framework 2023; DQSE, National Standards 2023). One of the standards within the Leadership and Management section focuses specifically on internal quality assurance and school development


planning. As seen in Figure 6 above, this standard aims at giving schools an indication of what is necessary for an effective school development plan to be developed and implemented.

The Success Criteria and Quality Markers are seen to follow the standard SSE process taken on in schools by starting with looking into the culture and approach which the school has towards the processes. It then moves towards the SSE process through the internal review, data collection and subsequent analysis. The quality markers then move on towards the actual Development Planning, the development of relevant SMART action plans and most importantly the final quality marker which focuses not only on implementation but also on monitoring and evaluation. The latter also being the focus of one of the research questions forming part of this research. A determining aspect which, as seen in the previous part of the chapter, is not always given its due importance. It zooms in on the internal review process and on how an effective school development plan can be structured. The structure of these standards is an important milestone for the process within the local scenario as it will lead schools to reflect on the same process during external reviews. However, this prominence given to SSE and Development Planning in the *National Quality Standards* can also, in certain cases, be perceived as added pressure on schools to ensure that their SSE and Development Plans are up to scratch so that they can ultimately comply to National Standards.

3.2.3 The external review process, SSE and Development Planning

The DQSE requests several documents from the school prior to the external reviews being carried out as seen in Figure 7 below. The School Development plan is one of the main documents requested from schools prior to external reviews when these are pre-announced especially during whole school external reviews and focused reviews (item 7 in Fig 7 below.). As a pre-requisite for the external review the latter two models also require the Head of School and leadership team to

develop a pre-review SSE where the leadership is given the opportunity to reflect on the quality standards vis a vis their own school context (item 6 in Fig 7 below.). This helps in establishing the concept of self-reflection as fundamental for leadership teams within schools as it gives them the opportunity to reflect upon their own context and identity and identify which of the standards they are achieving and which they need to further develop. As was discussed earlier, having the time and opportunity to reflect does not always come easy for school leaders. This exercise, albeit imposed by the external evaluator, is asking leadership teams to reflect on their school and what their vision is.

 **The Quality Assurance Department** **Last reviewed: August 2014**

**Documentation Required for External Review by
STATE SCHOOLS**

Items	Gathered Internally by Review Team	Provided by HOS prior to Review	Provided by School during Review
1. Teaching Staff List indicating class	X		
2. Sp. Educ. Staff list indicating class and learners	X		
3. Peripatetic Staff list	X		
4. Lists with responsibilities of Asst Heads, teachers and minor staff		*	
5. School Calendar of activities for latest full scholastic year		*	
6. Pre-external review school self-evaluation		*	
7. Latest School SDP document		*	
8. School annual results/bench-mark results/SEC for previous 3 scholastic years		*	
9. National averages for annual / SEC results for previous 3 scholastic years	X		
10. Records of learners following complementary education and documentation of learners' progress.		*	
11. Plan of the school indicating location of classes and other rooms		*	
12. School Timetable including activities during review week		*	
13. Class timetables including information on LSAs and student teachers.		*	
14. Timetable of peripatetic staff for Review week		*	
15. Schemes of Work for each teacher for the current term, including peripatetic staff			First day of review
16. Class Registers			As Requested
17. Record of class visits/lesson observations by SMT		*	
18. Any school publications, newsletters etc			As requested

Figure 7- Documents requested by the DQSE prior to the external review (dqse.gov.mt) - external reviews.

The school Development plan is also one of the main documents which is requested when teams carry out one day unannounced visits. The DQSE attributes significant importance during these visits to the internal review process and the relevance of

the priorities chosen by the school towards school improvement. The class observations during the visits also focus on how these priorities are integrated within the lessons and how tangible improvement is being brought about in the learning and teaching process (dqse.gov.mt – the external review). Following these visits, schools are also asked to include the recommendations brought forward into SMART action plans which will be then followed up by the team during the follow up visits.

Interestingly, one of the resources on the DQSE webpage also focuses on internal quality assurance. This includes a handbook on internal quality assurance and how schools can approach the process. As shown in Figure 8 below, this section also includes a template which can be used by schools when developing their own action plan. This action plan template guides schools to be very specific in the development of their plans especially including a section where each action needs to be described through specific steps to be taken towards achievement. The monitoring aspect is also given its due importance.

School Development Action Plan				
KEY AREA:				
Priority Development Target	<i>WHY? Indicate your school priority development target for this action plan</i>			Link to national policies <i>Identify the national policy you are responding to</i>
Success Criterion/Criteria	<i>Ask questions like: By the end of the year what is the improvement you expect in this priority development area? How will you know that you have achieved the priority development target? What will learners gain after the implementation of this action plan?</i>			
Implementation: Enter the year group / subject department				
Actions	Steps to be taken	Timescale	Coordinator	Monitoring and evaluation
<i>WHO? WHAT? Indicate the action that will be taken by the teaching staff in your year group/department to reach the Priority Development Target.</i>	<i>HOW? List in bullet form the specific steps you need to follow in order to implement the action to be taken.</i>	<i>WHEN? Indicate frequency and/or completion date and/or review date of the specific steps</i>	<i>Name the year group/department member coordinating the implementation of this action</i>	<i>Indicate the SMT member who will monitor this action and the specific tools required to evaluate</i>
<i>WHO? WHAT? Indicate the action that will be taken by the teaching staff in your year group/department to reach the Priority Development Target.</i>	<i>HOW? List in bullet form the specific steps you need to follow in order to implement the action to be taken.</i>	<i>WHEN? Indicate frequency and/or completion date and/or review date of the specific steps</i>	<i>Name the year group/department member coordinating the implementation of this action</i>	<i>Indicate the SMT member who will monitor this action and the specific tools required to evaluate</i>

Figure 8 -Action Plan template explained (dqse.gov.mt) - Internal Review.

It can be said that the remit of assuring the implementation of the internal review process and school development plan falls squarely on the shoulders of the DQSE. As discussed previously, the link which exists between internal and external quality assurance is one which is necessary however there needs to be an important balance in the relationship so that the power which is usually attributed to external evaluation does not adversely influence the development of the SSE and development planning. The developmental approach taken on by the DQSE with schools from all sectors, might help mitigate this feeling as schools look at the exercise as an episode in the life of the school which will help them reflect further on their improvement plan and where they want to go. However, the influence of the external inspectorate is quite heavy not only due to its position of power but also because ultimately, notwithstanding the approach and guidance, this is an evaluation exercise and judgement will be passed through recommendations issued. This necessitates a strong awareness and knowledge by the inspectorate of the real purpose and intent of internal quality assurance so that priorities are not imposed on the school especially following an external review exercise.

3.3 Support to schools on SSE: School internal review support unit

The *School Internal Review Support Unit* (SIRS) was launched in 2016/2017 as part of the Directorate for Support Services within the Ministry of Education. Although there is no direct documentation or online reference which explains the remit of the unit, the services of SIRS are offered to schools who need support in their internal review process and school development planning. This help can range from the use of tools for internal review processing to the writing of action plans. Ultimately, the role of SIRS differs from that of the DQSE because there is no evaluation exercise involved; it is basically support through a ‘critical friend’ approach. Moreover, the guidance which the regulator can provide spans the length of the external review and may extend to the follow up or further reviewing whereas SIRS has the opportunity through the service which it provides to build a more lasting relationship with schools.

However, the lack of documentation available denoting the role of the unit is detrimental to the scale of support which this department may offer schools. The development of this unit by the Ministry for Education was a move in the right direction towards recognising the importance of SSE and development planning as tools which can help the schools implement their plans for improvement. However, there is a lack of depth in how this unit could be developed effectively to provide the support needed by all schools in Malta.

3.4 The impact of the Malta Union of Teachers

The *Malta Union of Teachers* (MUT) is the one of the two unions currently representing educators in Malta and it stands as the oldest and largest sectoral trade union. It is also the only trade union representing educators who enjoys collective bargaining power as recognized by law. The MUT represents educators and allied professionals across the whole spectrum of education from kindergarten up to

university level (MUT website about section: accessed 29/11/2022). Moreover, Maltese schools are highly unionized with the union standing behind more than 10,000 members (MUT website www.mut.org.mt). This naturally means that any direction/directive which is issued is highly followed by both the state and non-state sector thus significantly influencing practice.

The MUT is a highly active body especially in the frequency of directives issued to its members especially in relation to the implementation of strategies and respective workloads on educators. SSE and development planning have also been in the limelight directive wise, where in most cases the union directs its members to stop collaborating with the leadership team on the development of the School Development Plan. The latest and most significant set of directives on school development planning started in October 2020 which corresponds with the beginning of scholastic year 2020-2021 and the highest peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. As can be seen in the timeline presented below, educators in schools were immediately directed to stop working on the School Development plan. It is interesting to note that since the first directive in October 2020, there have been eight ‘reminders’ to schools that the original directive was still in force. These reminders come from complaints which members, sometimes on an individual basis, would have made with the MUT directly when they feel schools bypass directives. These frequent ‘misdemeanours’ by schools towards directives might indicate that certain schools feel that their context cannot possibly function without any strategic planning and therefore resorted to some form of SSE and Development Planning practice. It is also indicative that this directive came at the worst time possible for schools, amidst a pandemic, where schools were closed for a number of weeks. In this kind of scenario, strategic planning and carrying out an internal review to gauge the areas which the individual schools needed to focus on were fundamental.

The nature of the directives included below clearly show a lack of understanding by the union of the importance of the process for schools to be able to plan for improvement. The fact that schools have not had the opportunity to effectively

carry out the SSE process for the last five scholastic years and subsequently plan for improvement has left a dire impact on schools themselves, their leadership and learning and teaching. This approach has also impacted the development of the process itself in schools, especially with regards to the shaping of learning communities which can work on the school’s improvement plan. This is also influencing the effective identification of professional development needs and other training/ upskilling opportunities for educators. This is going clearly against the MUT’s own statute which states that one of its objectives is to ‘raise the teaching profession to that dignity and comfort to which it is entitled within the State, and strive to maintain high status (MUT Code of Rules Section I – Title and objects of the Union (pg. 1). These directives are effectively limiting the possibility for growth of educators who form part of the union as well as those who do not.

Table 4 - Timeline of directives issued by the Malta Union of Teachers on School Development Planning (MUT website)

Date	Directive on SDP
14 th October, 2020,	<p>The MUT is hereby directing all members to refrain from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carrying out any work on SDPs; • Holding/attending school briefings outside of school hours. <p>This is in view of the situation which is affecting the workload of educators.</p>
13 th October, 2021	<p>The MUT has communicated with the Ministry of Education and is objecting about the re-introduction of SDPs in schools without consultation. The re-introduction was announced through a letter circular issued to schools, which provided tight timeframes whilst it did not take into consideration the pandemic circumstances within which schools, which provided tight timeframes whilst it did not take into consideration the pandemic circumstances within which schools are still operating. To this effect, the union is directing all members to refrain from carrying out ANY work on SDPs.</p>
19 th October, 2021	<p>The MUT has protested with the Ministry on its attempt to bypass the directive on SDPs. A circular issued in the past days gave fresh instructions to colleges and schools regarding the SDP process which is to be followed by college personnel together with schools. These instructions ignored the directive in force. The union would like to clarify that the directive issued to refrain from carrying out any work on SDPs covers all its grades including Educators, SMT and Colleges personnel in the grades of Teacher and EOs.</p>
3 rd February, 2022	<p>The MUT would like to remind all members about the directive to refrain from carrying out any work on</p>

	SDPs. Any pressure should be reported to the MUT through the usual channels.
13th October, 2022	The union reminds members that the directive to refrain from carrying out any work on School Development Planning (SDP) is still in force. Contrary to what is being said, the directive is unrelated to the pandemic. Any pressure should be reported to the MUT through the usual channels.
22nd November 2022	The MUT is following requests by HCNs to schools regarding College SDPs. Whilst the union has its ongoing directive on SDPs in schools, it is clear that colleges are trying to bypass directives through their SDPs. The MUT has already objected with the Ministry and shall be issuing directives should these directions persist.
30th November, 2022	MUT issues directive on Colleges SDP The union has objected with the Education Ministry regarding the implementation of colleges SDPs in some schools. This follows communications with some Head of College Networks requiring schools to work on college SDPs. Schools are being inundated with tasks and targets to be attained to satisfy SDPs of colleges. Whilst the direction has been withdrawn by some HCNs, others are persisting with it, leading the union to issue a directive to all SLT members and all educators to refrain from working on Colleges SDPs. It is clear that this direction to schools is a way to bypass the current directive by the union on school SDPs.
5 th May, 2023	MUT reminds members that the directive to refrain from carrying out any work on School Development Planning (SDP) is still in force. MUT reminds members that there are still directives in force regarding ticking of LOs. Members are directed to refrain from filling any ticking on LOs in any platform including online.
8 th January, 2025	The MUT reminds that the directives to all schools on SDP and on the ticking of LOs/BLOs are still in force. Any pressure to carry out duties on SDP or the ticking of LOs/BLOs needs to be reported to the MUT for action.

The impact of these decisions is even more significant in the wake of a global pandemic which influenced schools in a substantial number of ways. The SSE and development planning are crucial tools for schools especially during dire situations as it helps in giving a direction and a sense of belonging and security to staff. Halting this at the beginning of the pandemic has contributed towards the alienation which educators experienced during these two years of the pandemic as well as the sense of disorientation felt on returning to ‘normal’ school life without any form of strategic planning. The fact that the Ministry of Education has so far done nothing tangible to lift this directive towards schools is also indicative, as mentioned earlier of the limited understanding of the importance of SSE and

strategic planning in schools. This, I believe is one of the main problems which the Maltese educational system is facing in relation to SSE and Development Planning; a lack of understanding of the process by those who should be pushing it in schools. There is also limited awareness of the balance which needs to exist between internal and external quality assurance mechanisms.

3.5 Conclusion

The local analysis of SSE and Development Planning in Malta illustrates dynamics that are increasingly visible across education systems worldwide. There is a pronounced need to shift from prescriptive, centrally driven control towards frameworks that formally promote school autonomy, internal quality assurance and improvement oriented on learning outcomes (EC, 2018; OECD, 2024). However, these remain constrained by legal policies, cultures of compliance and uneven capacity. In a number of instances the local scenario exemplifies the tensions which many systems face as they attempt to develop schools as reflexive learning communities while still relying on tools and discourse originally designed for external auditing and accountability (Knowing our School, 2004).

The trajectory traced in this chapter, from the early ‘Knowing our School’ policy with its checklist-driven, audit-oriented approach, to the more formative, community-oriented vision in the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) and the revised Education Act, mirrors a broader international move towards the promotion of internal quality assurance and distributed leadership as key levers for school improvement. At the same time, the persistence of outdated guidance on SSE, the lack of coherent updates aligning policy instruments and the suspension of school development planning reveal the fragility of these reforms when they are not underpinned by consistent policy implementation, sustained support and clear recognition of SSE as a core professional practice rather than an administrative add-on.

More generally, the Maltese case underscores three wider lessons for education systems. First, positioning SSE at the heart of the curriculum and legislative frameworks is necessary but not sufficient. Without attention to how policies are interpreted in schools and how they interact with existing beliefs about evaluation, internal quality assurance can easily be experienced as a judgement rather than a joint enquiry. Secondly, alignment between internal and external quality assurance is crucial: external review needs to build explicitly on school-generated evidence and development plans if it is to reinforce, rather than displace, local professional agency. Thirdly, the effectiveness of SSE and Development Planning ultimately depends on system-level investment in professional learning, data literacy and leadership capacity so that educators can move beyond ticking boxes towards using evaluation as a continuous, collaborative process of diagnosing needs, designing context-sensitive responses and monitoring impact.

In this light, Malta's evolving framework for SSE and Development Planning can be seen as part of a wider global reimagining of educational governance, where responsibility for quality is shared more deliberately between the centre and schools, and where improvement is increasingly expected to emerge from within professional communities rather than being imposed from above (EC, 2018). The gaps and inconsistencies identified in the local context such as the outdated policy instruments, limited guidance and mixed messages about the value attributed to SSE are not unique but they highlight how delicate this rebalancing act remains, and how essential it is for systems to translate high-level commitments to autonomy, reflexivity and learning outcomes into coherent, updated and practically usable frameworks that genuinely enable schools to become self-evaluating, self-improving organisations.

Chapter 4

Research Design and Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This research study came about at a particular time in the history of education, not only nationally within the Maltese context but also worldwide. The research forming part of this study took place during the years where education systems worldwide experienced the Covid-19 pandemic and the immediate aftermath. Alongside many other aspects of everyday life as well as the learning and teaching in schools, the pandemic also disrupted, to different extents and for different reasons, the strategic planning carried out by schools through SSE and development planning.

The reasoning behind the core research questions remained unchanged. However, the landscape presented to me as researcher was substantially different and more complex than the one which had been envisaged at the beginning of the study. Moreover, decisions taken by the local authorities in this regard were determining in their influence on the SSE process in local schools. Schools, following directives by the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT), for instance, halted the SSE process and development planning in March 2020 following the first period of school closure due to the pandemic. This was then temporarily re-activated in September 2021. However, following a further dispute between the Malta Union of Teachers and the Ministry for Education, the SSE process and school development planning was again stopped soon after in October 2021. This directive impacted schools from all the different sectors (State, Church and Independent) within the Maltese Education

system for compulsory education. This meant that at the point when the research in schools started, school in Malta had been allowed already for two years, to go without any form of formal strategic planning or adopt any process in relation to SSE. These directives stretched throughout the research and upon completion of this work, that is end of scholastic year 2024-2025 they were still in force.

While carrying out initial research with schools in relation to the selection for the case study, it was evident that even though many schools kept on working on some initiatives, this was done in most cases in a sketchy and unstructured way for fear of going against the union directives. This, many a time, resulted in the process being low-key and not given the importance it was given pre Covid-19 especially in the day-to-day management of the school. This meant that the local scenario presented during the span of the research was one laden with a wide spectrum of practices on SSE and School Development Planning within the different schools on the island and across the different sectors. This presented a shift from the pre-2020 scenario where all schools followed a relatively standardized SSE process.

Considering all the above factors, a qualitative approach towards research was taken as it was important to delve deep into the nuances of the process and how context, leadership and different experiences of the world around those who use the SSE process influences their perception of the process and therefore their view of improvement (Freebody, 2003). Qualitative research methods would allow this observation of the natural phenomenon to be carried out with as little disruption to the natural process as possible (Merriam, 1998). As a researcher, I was mainly interested in understanding how people, in this case educators, constructed meaning in relation to SSE and development planning and how they made sense of their world and the experiences which they live through daily. Therefore, in the context of the research, my direct concern was in observing how educators lived and felt the SSE process and development planning (Sherman & Webb, 1988). A qualitative approach gave me the opportunity to understand the uniqueness of the setting and the different aspects which characterise it. Considering the variability of the current setting and context, qualitative research also allowed for a certain

level of adaptability (Guba & Lincoln, 1981), this therefore also allowed for the use of mixed methods to better understand how this process was being perceived in schools.

It was also important for me, as a researcher to understand and redefine my philosophical assumptions and ultimately my role within the study and embed it within my chosen research paradigm (Cresswell, 2013). In fact, Crotty (1998) argues that researchers bring a number of assumptions to the chosen paradigm, often dictated by past experiences but also the present context and before any approach is embarked on these assumptions need to be clearly articulated. I needed to understand and accept my own stance and bias as a leader and practitioner in external quality assurance. It was therefore very important, throughout the research to keep in mind where I was coming from as a researcher and how I view myself within the research (Creswell, 2013).

4.2 The ontological stance towards research

Ontology in research is a philosophical pattern. It is fundamentally a science or study of the nature of the reality we live in or which we decide to research and analyse (Furlong & Marsh, 2002). It is the way the individual who is experiencing that context interprets and represents an aspect of life. Burr (2015) states that ontology is the study of being in existence in the world and understand how the fundamental categories linked to this existence are constructed. The way knowledge is created is through the development of a shared understanding of reality. This could be something which relates to a standard occurrence in one's life but can also deal with the way an extraordinary situation is looked at and dealt with.

One of the most prominent features of SSE and Development Planning process is its changeability. Its scope for existence is primarily to instigate and spur improvement and change in schools. Therefore, the process needs to be bound to the individual contexts and characterised by what is happening around that

particular context in real time (Stylianides & Stylianides, 2020). The process is consistently influenced by school leadership, the success the process has had previously, and to what extent the change brought about was in fact determining on the school's journey towards improvement. The effectiveness of the SSE process is strongly linked to how the different actors who work within this process perceive it and therefore construct it according to their own background, mindset and experience. It investigates how everyday conversations are gathered and aligned with ideas and behaviours to transform new knowledge (Charmaz, 2008). Thus, the effectiveness of the SSE and development planning process is strongly linked to and influenced by people's interactions.

The one relatively stable aspect of SSE and Development planning is that schools can choose to and most often do follow a step-by-step process to make use of this management tool. Although, there are varieties on how this is adopted there are fixed points within the process which are determining towards its development and success such as data collection methods and analysis techniques. Keeping this in mind, and to be able to link the everchanging nature of SSE to a fixed process, the research design and methodology adopted in this research necessitated to be one which focuses on the way knowledge is moulded by the different actors who participate in this process to bring about improvement. The study's main aim is to understand how this construction of knowledge can impact the effectiveness of the process. Considering the everchanging nature of SSE and development planning, the epistemological stance chosen needed to effectively convey how the process is continuously evolving and how this is impacting on the consistency of the process on school improvement.

4.2.1 Epistemological stance: A Social Constructionist Worldview

Social constructionism revolves around the observation that human beings possess different understandings of how society works and actively mould culture based on these understandings. Social construction therefore aims at understanding how

people create meaning, with special emphatic understanding of the cultural context which surrounds a particular reality (Charmaz, 2008). Moreover, as a broad paradigm it also highlights how subjective meaning is both varied and multiple and therefore is “formed through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individual lives” (Creswell, 2013, p. 25). As Merleau-Ponty (1962) argues, the world and its objects are indeterminate. They may be laden with potential meaning, but the actual meaning is dependent on the engagement of human consciousness. Social constructionism moves away from the view that the acquisition of knowledge is pre-determined and that we are born in a world where meaning has already been set and where, as time passes, we learn to accept some of these meanings and reject others (Weinberg, 2014). It strives to reject the traditional notion solely based on the cognitive learning process where knowledge is acquired following a pre-established number of steps. Nothing can be considered as fixed because social situations can modify any previous unquestioned uncertainties (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Contrastingly as a research paradigm it moves towards the idea of learning as a process where people construct and create knowledge rather than discover it. To a social constructionist, the way people interact in every aspect is determining as it presents the opportunity to take a critical stance towards ‘taken for granted’ ways of understanding the world and our reactions to it (Burr, 2015). This means that according to social constructionists, knowledge can change over time as it is socially constructed by people according to their different contexts, cultures and therefore mindsets. The Covid-19 pandemic which hit the world in 2020 is a perfect example of how reality can shape and shift knowledge in a matter of months and affect the actual psyche and life of people. The world, its way of viewing education and consequently the way it views planning for improvement changed drastically as society had to assimilate the ever-changing situation and create new knowledge and way of doing things, especially in the area of learning and teaching, in an attempt to cope with what is being presented to them. The way knowledge is constructed is a continuous debate and finding one definition has been an elusive feat. Since Berger and Luckmann’s (1967) work ‘The Social construction of reality’ launched the area of social constructionism there have been various attempts at investigating if reality

can be socially constructed. No matter how it is viewed, the fact is that social constructionism is defined and made by people who naturally have differing opinions (Hollander & Gordon, 2006). Everyone thinks that the way they view certain aspects in their own reality is the right way and this is where conflict is usually created. However, it is the common acceptance of a particular knowledge construct which gives it power. Usually, this common acceptance is shaped by those who are dominant and lead in society (Burr, 2015). And yet, in reality, these ideas are also changeable because ultimately it is interaction among actors within a particular social setting which influences social dialogue (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Saraga, 1998).

Social constructionism is extremely relevant in the context of education, especially in relation to both strategic management and quality assurance which are continuous aspects within the school environment which are based on change and striving for improvement (Gergen, 1985). Each school is linked to a variety of individuals with different backgrounds, mindsets and therefore perspectives. The context is also unique to the individual school and the way it functions. This in turn influences the mindset of the primary actors within the process, that is educators, and the way they shift and construct the knowledge they have of the process and how it functions (Gergen, 1985). My background and experience in quality assurance, both external and internal has led to a number of different experiences in different schools where I observed the influence which the particular context and background (social and historical) of the school has on the construction of knowledge and the way research towards improvement planning is carried out. The way the separate aspects of the process is viewed is also determining. Earlier sections discussed how the fear of judgement may influence the way the actors within the process, educators, view the evaluation part of the process. The development of this perception may be at points the fault of outside forces which put pressure on the schools to function in a particular way or move down a path which they would not be convinced about. All this influences the way the information and knowledge about the process is constructed not only by educators in schools but also by those who lead. In situations where the pressures are less

prominent, educators might feel less cornered and judged. In these circumstances, the mindset would be easier to shift and therefore the knowledge constructed would be more conducive to one which allows the process to flourish.

When viewed in this light, social constructionism can pose significant challenges to the way knowledge and the creation of knowledge is normally viewed as it tries to position knowledge as inherently linked and somewhat dependent on social interchanges (Gergen, 1985). As social construction is a process of inquiry and everchanging, it is not easy to understand and accept that knowledge can change and adapt as new knowledge is consistently constructed. In the area of SSE and School Development planning, it can therefore be a challenge for schools to accept that SSE has to evolve and change due to particular circumstances which may have affected the school at that point in time. Moreover, the strategic management which is involved in effectively managing the SSE process and Development Planning is characterised mainly by the need for change and is a tool which can be used by schools to manage that change. The process is ultimately how schools can understand the information and knowledge which is available at that point in time and how this can be constructed towards improvement.

However, I have observed, through my professional experience with schools the construction of new knowledge and the way this is adapted are frequent stumbling blocks towards school improvement. This is especially true when they have to face ‘judgement’ and evaluation of practices through external quality assurance mechanisms such as external reviews where recommendations for change and improvement are the crux of the exercise. This is mostly due to the traditional fear of change and the effects of a fixed mindset. Another case in point in relation to this aspect is the way in which schools have approached the SSE process during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some schools could not handle the change, resorted to chaos management and discarded the whole process. Others recognised that knowledge had to be modified due to the current circumstances and used it effectively to at least cope with the situation but also to bring about change and in some cases also improvement. In fact, one of the main and crucial hurdles when it

comes to SSE is recognising that the process and the knowledge generated from it is everchanging and those who work with it need to be able to recognise this.

The education setting in Malta is heavily influenced by the historical and cultural background of the island especially in relation to its development in education (Cassar, 2019). The colonial influence for instance, though mitigated throughout the years by the different realities and changes in society can still somehow be felt especially within particular educational contexts hailing from specific backgrounds (Chircop, 2020). This can, for instance, influence the ability to change the mentality that a particular context has towards SSE and development planning. The context of the sector (state, church and independent schools) also influences the way in which the process is perceived, implemented and evaluated.

Knowledge is also influenced by the context of the country at that point in time. In the Maltese context, for instance, the central governance of the Ministry of Education, holds a certain level of influence and power over what goes on in schools (Bezzina, 2006; 2019). This kind of influence may often be disproportionate to that of a sector, a school, an educator and ironically, even to a much lesser extent, a student whose future is being determined through these decisions. All this and how change is implemented has a ripple effect on the shift in how knowledge is seen and constructed (Sultana, 2009). If, for instance, governing bodies decide to impose initiatives in schools through the use of the SSE process and development planning, that imposition will influence the way knowledge about the process is perceived and translated into practice.

4.3 Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

The conceptual framework depicted below was my fundamental reflection process in shaping the lines of inquiry for the research. It consequently helped greatly in spurring further reflection naturally linked to my professional background and experience in external quality assurance and subsequently the development of the research questions as depicted in Figure 9, and the choice of research approach

which would best fit the research. Experience in the field of both internal and external quality assurance as well as extensive evaluation of the literature present in the field of internal quality assurance and strategic management in schools, shaped the main foci outlined in the conceptual grid (Varpio et al., 2020). Eventually this also helped in the choice of the social constructionism as the epistemological stance used throughout the research and subsequently the choice of the case study as my research approach. Ultimately, the main direction which transpired from the research focused on the need to observe, over an extended period, how the process is perceived by leaders and educators.

Research in the field tends to focus both on the SSE and Development Planning process as a whole as well as on different separate aspects of the process such as data gathering, analysis and interpretation. However, there is limited literature on how the success of SSE in schools is linked to the role of the Head of School and senior leadership team. The attitude and mindset towards the process and how it is viewed by the main stakeholders especially educators is also not an area which is extensively researched. The evaluative part of the process is also given limited focused attention in literature. This led to the train of thought on the importance of evaluation which is, naturally also linked to the perception and mindset with which educators approach the exercise on a regular basis. In turn this also tied to the element of external evaluation and the impact on effectiveness of the SSE tool on school improvement. I am also aware that this link to external quality assurance stemmed from my professional background which focuses expressly on external regulation and how this is implemented in schools. The strong links which emerged from the framework led to the understanding that the research might fundamentally benefit from a type of approach which studied the process within a determinate segment of time and which specifically focused on understanding the perception of a group of educators who had been working with the process and therefore had been given the opportunity and time to live the process and shape their opinion (White & Arzi, 2005).

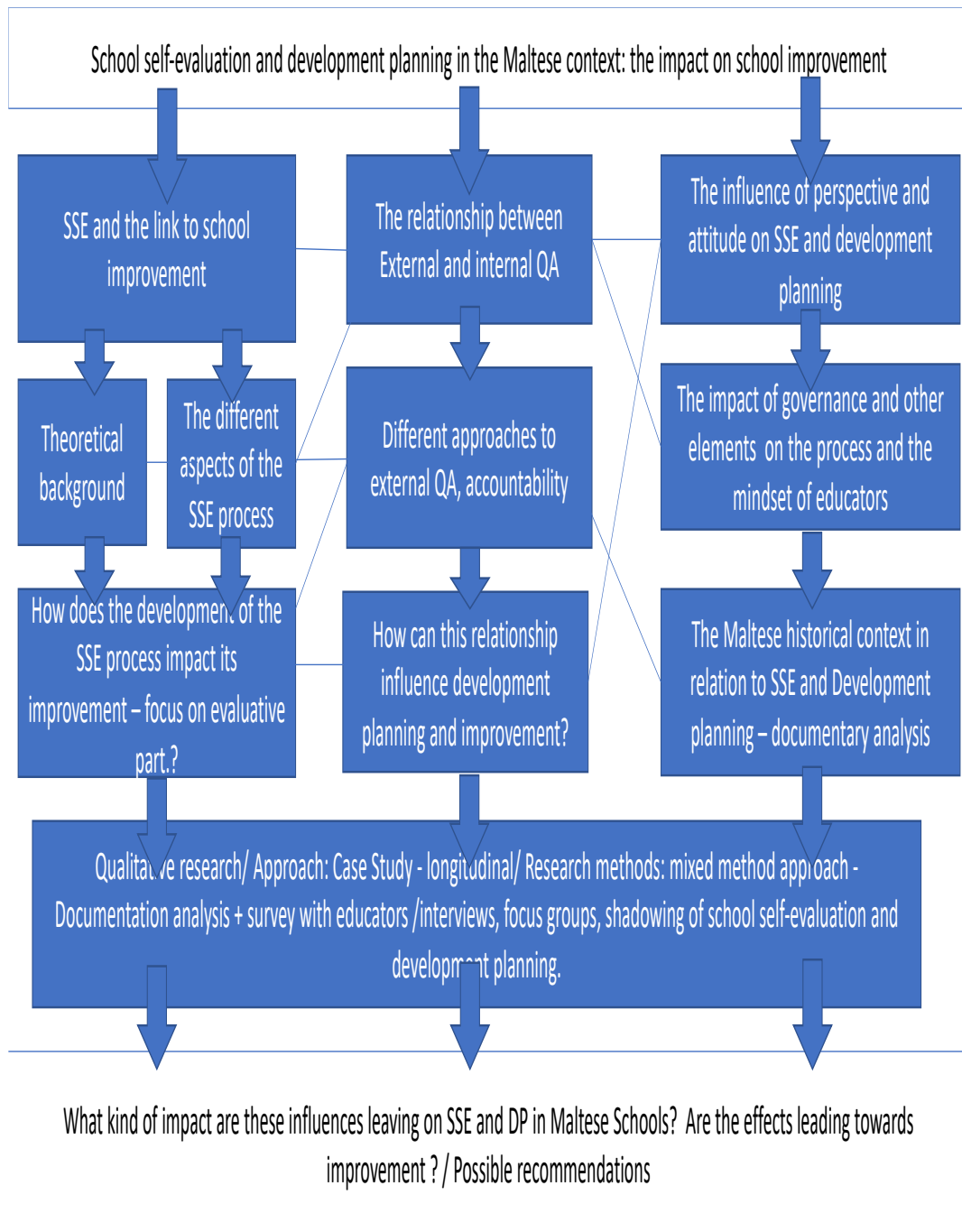


Figure 9- Conceptual Framework

The research questions, depicted below for ease of reference (see Table 5), follow closely on the process which schools take in regard to SSE and development planning. The social factor linked to the research is also determining and strongly linked to the context which schools and society in general are living at that particular point in time (Bornmann, 2012). One of the main aims of the study was to understand to what extent the perceptions, attitudes and emotions of school-based practitioners impact the implementation of the process and its success.

Table 5 - Research Questions and sub-questions.

<p>Main Research Question:</p> <p>What are the main factors which impact the success of school self-evaluation and development planning in Maltese Compulsory education?</p>
<p>Sub Question 1 – The importance of approach and perception.</p> <p>How do leaders and educators perceive the SSE and School Development process and to what extent does this influence mindset?</p>
<p>Sub Question 2 – Understanding the process</p> <p>What is the importance given to the process especially the monitoring and evaluation part of the process by both leadership and educators and how does this impact the success of the SSE process?</p>
<p>Sub Question 3 – External factors influencing the process</p> <p>What is the impact of external factors such as external quality assurance and governance on the process?</p>

The structure of the research was developed with the objective of observing both how past experiences influenced this perception and mindset and how change within the system and reflection could also provide a change in perception towards the better (Spapen & Van Drooge, 2011). Moreover, the nature of the research questions signified that the process had to be observed thoroughly and interaction with educators was necessary if their perceptions of the process were to be investigated and their reasons recorded, analysed and interpreted. These perceptions are also strongly linked to the way in which educators, with particular attention given to those in a leadership position, look at the evaluative part of the process. This meant that the entire process had to be observed and the approach to evaluation had to be seen in real time while the process was being adopted by the

researchers. All this led to the need for the study to be more context based and specifically linked to schools which had kept the SSE process running albeit the pandemic.

4.4 Research Methodology: The Case Study Approach in education

In recent years, case study research has become a more popular choice as a research methodology in education (Cresswell, 2002; Merriam, 1998; VanWynsberghe & Khan, 2007; Yin & Campbell, 2018) especially as case studies can be used to analyse in depth particular sets of issues within different educational contexts (Grauer, 2012). Researcher Robert K. Yin defines case study research as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its own reality especially when the boundaries between phenomena and context are not clearly delineated and in cases where multiple sources of evidence are used (Yin & Campbell, 2018). Yin also goes on to highlight that case study is not a method of data collection, but more of a research strategy or research design to study a social aspect at that point in time. Keeping this definition in mind, from a Yinian point of view, a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates ‘cases’ by addressing the ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions in relation to the phenomenon being studied. Yin considers case studies as particularly significant when dealing with the evaluation of programmes as well as processes especially within schools. This renders case study methodology a unique way of approaching an educational problem, collecting and analysing data and reporting results. The use of multiple data sources also improves data credibility (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013).

The most important aspect of case study research is that it delimits the object of the study (Merriam, 1998). Miles and Huberman (1994) define the case as a bounded system which exists within a particular context and Stake (1995) continues to expand on the case study as an ‘integrated’ system. These definitions lead to the understanding of the case as a unit around which there are definite boundaries (Merriam, 1998). The case study is ultimately the examination of an instance in action to reveal the properties of the class to which the instance being

studied belongs to (MacDonald & Walker, 1975; Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Case study research has in fact been pointed out as different from other research designs by what Cronbach (1975), calls ‘interpretation in context’ whereby focusing on one particular aspect the researcher aims at discovering significant factors of the phenomenon. The case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). As sometimes these variables are difficult to separate, the case study approach can offer a solution due to its longitudinal approach as often these variables are able to be separated over time (Wilson, 1979; Yin & Campbell, 2018). Stake (1981) argues that the use of case studies as a research design differs from the use of other research knowledge as it is more concrete, vivid and sensory rather than abstract. Case studies are by nature more contextual where experiences are rooted in the particular setting and knowledge.

The case study approach to research facilitates the exploration of a phenomenon within its particular context by giving the opportunity of using different data sources. This warrants an exploration through multiple lenses which allows the different facets to be revealed and evaluated (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This is done through the possibility of adopting a wider array of research methods such as direct observation in a natural setting which allow the researcher to access different perceptions, ideas, thoughts and emotions. As argued by Sanders (1981), case studies can help in understanding processes, programmes and events and shed light on aspects that research methods with a narrow focus would not be able to identify.

Due to the embeddedness of case studies in real-life situations, they are an ideal tool that can help the researcher expand the readers’ experiences about a particular phenomenon. The insights gleaned from case studies can not only help in understanding a particular reality or situation but can bring about the development of hypothesis which can help structure future research and advance the knowledge base of a particular field. This is also why case studies are often used as an approach within the sphere of applied fields such as education especially when it comes to practices which are innovative and dependent on continuous change, examples of

which are SSE and school development planning. Case study research into processes such as SSE can bring about a kind of understanding that can influence practice as well as policy and bring about improvement.

4.4.1 SSE and Development planning in the Maltese Context – A case study

The school self-evaluation process in schools has, in recent years, become a topic of interest in a number of international fora as well as from a national perspective, especially linking to the notion of better learning and improvement within schools (EC Reports, 2018, 2020; Education Act, Cap 605). Internal quality assurance is consistently being positioned as an essential element towards development especially in its relationship to external quality assurance. However, as emerging from relevant literature in the area, the different stages of the process and the multifaceted aspects related to school self-evaluation and development planning make it quite a complex process to understand and implement successfully. The nature of a case study approach to research helps in facilitating the understanding of a complex issue such as school self-evaluation, it also helps in extending the experience and adds strength to what is already known through previous research. It also allows for a detailed contextual analysis of one event and the different facets related to it which might be presented by this context (Grauer, 2012).

The main research questions emerging from the literature analysis on school self-evaluation and development planning concerned the analysis of parts of the process and how the elements emerging from this analysis contributed to the success of the process. The study in fact aims to observe all the aspects of the process but focuses, as per research questions, especially on the importance given to the evaluation of the priorities chosen by the school which is a pivotal aspect of the entire process as well as the influence which attitude and perception of leaders and educators has on the success of the process. This necessitated a research approach which allowed for longitudinal observation of the SSE structure taken by a school which has been working with the process consistently for a number of years. It also aimed at looking into how specific school contexts, such as the two schools which formed

part of the research approach changes within the SSE process, both from a logistical sense as well as and more importantly from an attitudinal point of view. The social constructionist stance which I had researched and assimilated as part of my methodology also helped in shaping the direction which I wanted my study to take; that of creating an opportunity of observing how knowledge could be not only changed towards shifting towards a different mindset towards the process but also how knowledge could be created through reflection and the development of professional learning environments. I believe that this kind of positioning was influenced both from my interest in the area of internal quality assurance as well as from my professional background as an educator and expertise in the field of external quality assurance.

The use of different data collection tools throughout the research, especially the sessions linked to school development planning and conversations with the school leadership team helped in providing insight on the way this process and any changes brought to it were planned and considered by those who work with it. The different research methods used provided a deeper insight on the matter from the part of educators. Each data source proved to be an important piece of the puzzle with each contributing to the researcher's understanding of the whole phenomenon which is SSE and Development Planning. This convergence adds strength to the findings as the various strands of data are braided together to promote a greater understanding of the case under analysis (Grauer, 2012).

The case study approach to SSE can be clearly linked to social construction as it promotes a close collaboration between the researcher and participant while enabling participants to tell their stories through the researcher's quest to find data (Lather, 1992). As discussed by Yin & Campbell (2018) the case study approach is a good tool to better understand the way a particular programme or process works. This includes the ability to convey the effectiveness of the programme or progress through rich description gleaned through observation and conversation which can lead to important findings and can open doors for future knowledge. Merriam (1998) also argues that through a case study approach processes can be

looked at in two different ways. Process as monitoring where the context and population of a study are described, and the second aspect is that of discovering the extent to which this process has been implemented. The second type is process as causal explanation, discovering or confirming the effect or otherwise of the influence and effect this particular programme had. In the case of SSE and development planning within this study, both aspects are investigated. This is carried out by researching the way the SSE process is progressing in its various phases, the importance attributed to key phases and the effectiveness of the SSE process on school improvement. Merriam (1998) also argues that the case study approach leans more towards interest in the process rather than its outcomes, the interest is in how the context influences the process rather than the result itself, in discovery rather than information. In the case of SSE this is extremely relevant as it is ultimately the way the process is tackled which influences the final outcome.

The SSE process and the study of this phenomenon in schools can be termed as a heuristic study. Longitudinal case studies give the researcher the opportunity to develop an overview and a deeper understanding of the changes which might be happening over a period of time (SAGE, 2009). The study has the potential of bringing about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader's experience with the process and confirm what is already known in the literature related to the field. Moreover, previously unknown relationships and variables are likely to emerge from this type of case study which might lead to a rethink of what is being studied and evaluated (Stake, 1981). Guba and Lincoln (1981) also state that the case study approach is also an important tool in reporting evaluations as it helps provide rich descriptions and are grounded in everyday reality thus facilitating the simplification of data and the communication of tacit knowledge.

The case study phenomenon researched as part of this study aims at looking into what can be termed as a 'cycle' of development and implementation of priorities which are relevant to the school in relation to improvement. The whole process from the internal review process to collect data to implementation, monitoring and evaluation will be observed with the two schools forming part of the research over

the span of two scholastic years. The collection of data and its subsequent analysis will enable the researcher to observe the reflection patterns and processes which the school adopts when developing its plan for improvement (Yazan, 2015). The longitudinal stance of the study will also allow for an extended observation of how this exercise is impacted by existing approaches and attitudes towards the process and how these can be investigated in relation to the research questions (Yin, 2018). The study also aims at looking into the process in its different aspects, such as the implementation stage and especially the monitoring and evaluation stage as an area of interest directly related to the research questions. The structure of the case study will allow the researcher to observe knowledge as it is formed and moulded and look into the details which characterise this process and the influence which it can have on its success and the different stakeholders who form part of it (Woodside, 2010).

4.4.2 Limitations of the case study approach

There are significant advantages in choosing a case study approach for research into SSE especially when one considers the benefits which the longitudinal aspect of the study can bring to the findings spanning over two scholastic years. Notwithstanding, its longitudinal position can also be considered one of its most problematic limitations especially in the light of the emphasis in the research world on the importance of data consistency especially while the researcher is on the field gathering the actual data.

The major risk is obviously that of collecting too much data which might not be relevant. A longitudinal study will inevitably produce voluminous amounts of information and therefore planning and a high level of focus is necessary at the initial stages. Miles (1979) aptly described the amount of qualitative data which can be gathered as ‘attractive nuisance’; it is attractive due to its richness, but it is a feat to find analytical paths through that richness. I was very much aware, through experience, that this type of study could present problems when collecting data. Hence, I ensured that lines of inquiry emanating from the literature review and

research questions were clear from the very beginning of the study in schools. In hindsight, I believe that this helped in avoiding loss of time and it was easier to deal with information which may not be relevant to the research questions such as operational concerns which naturally transpire during interactions with interviewees, especially during the focus groups with leadership teams. This finally helped limit the possible subjectivity which would inevitably arise if too much data is considered. Moreover, 'irrelevant' data collected might be too lengthy or too complex for practical implementation by policy makers (Merriam, 1998). This would diminish the scope of carrying out a case study in the first place as it would minimise the opportunity for the findings from the study to be considered as transferable to similar situations (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). The nature of the case study as a mainly narrative endeavour also tends to produce lengthy pieces of work which might be left unread by those who the study was intended for as the primary audience.

Yin (2014) compares case study as a research design to a 'craftwork' which needs to be carefully designed where the purpose of the research, the research questions, the type of tools used to carry out research, the sampling method and size are given the utmost attention. A good research design focuses the researcher in the right direction (Priya, 2021). This involves a certain level of knowledge from the part of the researcher on techniques on how to conduct interviews and carry out observations. The kind of training is not always available and often the lack of expertise is evident in the analysis and development of the findings. Many a time, researchers are left to rely on their own hunches and instincts, and this is not an ideal situation especially vis a vis the need for reliability and validity of the study. It was important for the terminology to be used during interactions with interviewees to be clearly explained from the start. A research plan with established protocols including, time deadlines, a clear format for narrative reporting and field notes, guidelines on how documents have been collected and a clear explanation for procedures used while gathering data on the field was developed and discussed with my supervisor before embarking on the research (Grauer, 2012). This helped

in focusing the research on the main lines of inquiry emanating from the research questions.

Guba and Lincoln (1981, p. 377) note an additional limitation to case study narratives linked to subjectivity. They argue that case studies possibly oversimplify or exaggerate a situation leading to erroneous conclusions regarding the real picture. They also continue to emphasise that if the nature of case study research is not clear to the reader, he/she might wrongly believe that the study is a whole whereas the objective of the case study approach is to focus on the particularity of a situation, that famous 'slice of life'. Hamel (1993) observed that the case study has been faulted because it sometimes fails to be representative since it generally considers one moment in time, that bounded case. On the other hand, it is through this kind of longitudinal focused research that the 'why' of things can be researched and eventually adopted to better an existing process. In the case of research within quality assurance mechanism, especially SSE and development planning, that slice of life is necessary to understand what thought processes leaders and educators experience when thinking about the process and implementing it. The scope of the research questions is that of understanding what exactly contributes to the success or otherwise of the process. My experience in the field clearly indicated that looking at the process as a whole was not going to help me reach that level of depth that I was seeking. I needed to look into the 'slice of life' of these educators to understand what their mindset towards the process is and what pitfalls they were finding in its implementation.

Longitudinal case studies also require the development of an extended relationship between the researcher and the researchees. This relationship also needs to be nurtured with extreme caution and care. The nature of the feedback and information gathered from case studies is often termed as being highly prone to subjectivity due to the nature of the relationship which is inevitably developed between the researcher and the participants in the case, especially if the study is a longitudinal one. Researchers who carry out longitudinal case studies have to be able to open up to the environment in which their subjects are working and

understand how they function and work in that same environment (Grauer, 2012). This is necessary to be able to fully understand the data which is being gathered throughout the research. As a researcher, especially considering my background, I made sure that the context of the study was clear and that my role was that of a researcher. This was not only emphasised for the sake of the researchees but also myself as researcher, especially considering my background and my current role within the Maltese education system. My final objective was to build a relationship with the researchees which is based on honesty, trust and respect (Grauer, 2012). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the mostly qualitative approach taken during the research allowed time and opportunity for me as researcher to make sense of people's experiences, perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours given their particular context (Clissett, 2008). SSE is a fluid process, one which easily lends itself to being influenced by the specific context and what is happening both at micro and at macro level. Any changes which are brought about by SSE and development planning initiatives will inevitably influence the daily life of both educators as well as students. Issues ranging from accountability to added workload will doubtlessly have an impact on the way educators engage with the research, especially with regards to what it might add to their workload during implementation as well as following completion. This can act as a limitation as it might increase the participants subjectivity in engaging with the research.

The sensitivity and integrity of the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection is also of utmost importance when considering case study research (Merriam, 1998). The background of the researcher and any familiarity with the area might be of an advantage but it also requires serious consideration and training especially in managing the research tools used during the study. Cresswell (2014) addresses the definition of a case study by focusing on the role of the researcher who explores in depth a program, event, activity, process of one or more individuals. An important feature of the case study approach is the longevity of the study which inevitably impacts the involvement of the researcher with the research subjects and the impact which this developing relationship might have on the research (Cresswell, 2014; Bryman, 2008). The immediate relationship between

the researcher and the research also needs to be given particular attention especially if the results can have an impact on policy and practice on a large scale. As a researcher I was constantly aware of the importance of triangulating evidence by using more than one method or source so as to stay objective and keep personal opinions and biases under control (Yin, 2014; Bryman, 2008).

4.5 Reflexivity in the role of the researcher

The reflexive dimension of this study is very closely bound to my professional history and positionality as an educator, evaluator and crucially an insider to the development of national quality assurance systems and policy. SSE and Development Planning have long constituted a central component of my everyday practice and have therefore resulted in extensive experiential knowledge but also in interpretative frameworks that could inadvertently shape how the field is approached. Throughout the research process, sustained reflexive work was therefore required to acknowledge how this insider position might facilitate or constrain access, influence the generation and interpretation of data, and challenge the aspiration to maintain analytical neutrality (Cohen et al., 2011).

From the outset, the choice of social constructionism and of case study methodology was informed by my familiarity with SSE as an important practice within schools, rather than a purely technical procedure. This alignment, while methodologically coherent with the epistemology chosen also heightened the risk that prior beliefs about what good quality assurance looks like could subtly guide the focus of observations and the framing of school practices. While recognising that ‘the personal self becomes inseparable from the researcher-self’ (Creswell, 2013, p. 182) in such contexts, particular care was taken to make explicit the assumptions carried over from the researcher’s role as an external regulator, such as expectations about documentation, evidence use and compliance as potential lenses rather than neutral reference points.

The insider status to quality assurance also had concrete implications for access and relationships in the field. Existing professional credibility and familiarity with SSE appeared to lower barriers of entry, foster trust and encourage school leaders and staff to speak openly about their experiences, including doubts and resistance, thereby enriching the depth and candour of the data. At the same time, this dual role could also create perceived power asymmetries: participants might construe the researcher as a quasi-evaluator, potentially tempering criticism or aligning their narratives with what they believed an external quality assurance officer would deem appropriate. Reflexive attention was therefore directed towards how questions were framed, how feedback was given and how as a researcher I presented my role, in order to reduce evaluative overtones and foreground the exploratory, non-judgemental nature of the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Giddens & Sutton, 2014).

Interpretation and neutrality represented further areas where positionality required active management. Being steeped in quality assurance discourse made it easier for me as a researcher to recognise patterns, jargon and implicit assumptions in school documentation and conversations, but it also increased the danger of ‘reading in’ preferred meanings or over-valuing practices that resonated with policy ideals (Mason, 2002). To counter this, the analysis involved iterative questioning and initial impressions, the deliberate search for disconfirming evidence and a constant effort to differentiate between what schools actually enacted and what the researcher, as an insider, might hope to see. Maintaining personal reflexive notes, articulating moments of empathy, discomfort and surprise, and periodically revisiting these notes during coding and interpretation helped surface how the insider perspective was shaping sense-making at different stages of the study.

Finally, my role as a ‘critical friend’ intensified the need for reflexivity. Over the two scholastic years, the shared aim of understanding and improvement led schools to seek advice on refining their SSE and Development Planning processes, especially following repeated discussions with SLT teams. While this

collaboration enriched the study by allowing the observation of change and its consequence, it also risked blurring the boundary between facilitation and evaluation, and between supporting practice and steering it in the line with the researcher's own quality assurance preferences. Addressing this tension involved making the advisory dimension explicit, negotiating with schools which forms of input were appropriate at the different points in the cycle and continuously asking how each interaction might be affecting the direction of the process and the data subsequently collected. In this way, reflexivity functioned not only as a methodological addition but as an ongoing discipline through which my insider's positionality was recognised, problematised and as far as possible harnessed as a source of insight rather than an unexamined bias (Mason, 2002).

4.5.1 The role of the researcher as critical friend

As the first year of the research progressed, it was evident that both schools were missing the presence of a peer external critical friend. Through the different sittings with the school's SLT it transpired that both schools felt the need to carry out specific changes to the SSE process and structure. These changes mostly included a revision of how action plans were being developed as these were previously solely written by the Senior Leadership Team and the structure which they should take. Both schools wanted to involve educators more prominently in the writing of these action plans to facilitate implementation and develop stronger focus on specific areas of improvement (Schildkamp & Visscher, 2012). It was clear that at that stage they could not handle these changes without some form of support. This was primarily what led to my involvement as critical friend during the initial stages of the research. A potential learning community (Mertler, 2017) was being shaped by the educators themselves within the school through SSE and Development Planning process. It was part of my role as critical friend to support the learning process within the context of the study through focused guidance (Eyler, 2018). This role would also serve as a catalyst towards changing the mindset of how educators viewed themselves in relation to the process. They are not mere recipients of information but are empowered to bring about change through

research carried out as part of their work. (Palinscar, 1998; Bush, 2015, 2020; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Waters-Adams, 2003; Noor & Shafee, 2021)

The changes proposed involved a whole school exercise, throughout the first year of the research which included professional development sessions with both SLT teams and members of staff. This culminated at the end of the first year of the research where staff met up with the SLT to discuss the priorities emanating from the internal review process and together as a team develop action plans to be implemented during the following scholastic year. It was decided that action plans which concerned learning and teaching would be developed by year group as there were separate foci and priorities which the different year groups as well as the school wanted to focus on. It was also a different way of working with the aim of increasing ownership of the action plans by the school community and a greater insight into the educational experience of learners (Simons, 2013). This served as a reflection exercise for both schools, addressing the perception that the school had to fit into a pre-set sequential process rather than the process be used by the school according to its contextual needs to facilitate improvement (Kyriakides & Campbell, 2004).

The role of the researcher as critical friend concentrated not only on providing the basic training in the writing of action plans for SLT and educators but also as a sounding board throughout the first year of the research in relation to the changes which both schools wanted to implement (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014; Blake & Gibson, 2020). During the second year of the research, especially during the first and second term, the role of the researcher as critical friend was purposefully dialled back to be able to observe how the process was implemented and how the priorities, through the action plans were being approached, implemented and evaluated. The findings emanating from these changes were then discussed with the two heads of school during Term 3 of the second year of research.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Considering the nature of the case study approach as well as my professional role in the field of quality assurance, ethical considerations were at the forefront of the study. During most of the research my experience in the field served well towards understanding aspects pertaining the process and the practices of the school and also helped in reflecting on and clearly establishing my position as researcher. I ensured that as a researcher I had formal and informal critical support to maintain as much as possible an objective approach towards the research. The context of the study, that of a small island where schools and most educators are familiar with each other was also kept in mind especially with regards to maintaining the anonymity of the schools and participants.

It was important, first and foremost, to ensure that the participants did not feel pressured in participating in the research and therefore ethics procedures set by the Faculty of Education Research Code of Practice at the University of Malta were carefully followed (Bærøe et al., 2022). Informed consent from all educators was requested from both schools and those who did not want to participate were noted. The consent forms (Annexe 4) clearly explained what was going to be requested from participants during the research and any queries were clarified before the research commenced. No pressure was placed on the educators to participate as I am aware that as a researcher, I must ensure that volunteers have freedom of choice if informed consent is to be fulfilled (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 80). They were in fact given ample time to decide if to participate or not in the research. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any stage of the research study. At the preparatory stage, I met with the school leaders and management teams of both schools on different occasions to explain the remit of the study, how the educators would be involved and how the different stages would evolve. The research questions were discussed in detail with the schools, and it was made clear that the crux of the case study would be to observe how the schools used the various SSE tools and implemented the process over a period of time. They were also informed that the perception and current mindset of educators towards the process

would be investigated through the questions posed in the questionnaire as well as during interviews and focus groups.

A copy of the questionnaire (Annexe 1) as well as the interview and focus group questions (Annexe 2 and 3) were sent to the Principal of the school who held the role of gatekeeper as well as the heads of the two schools for approval before they were distributed among the participants. This was done during both phases of the research. Individual emails were also sent to the educators which were chosen to participate during the interviews and focus groups prior to the exercise to explain in more detail what the exercise would consist of. Questions were also sent to participants who requested them to help them feel less anxious during the interview.

When the interviews and focus groups were being carried out, participants were informed that the sessions would be audio recorded and that the recordings would be used solely by the researcher and supervisor exclusively for the scope of the research. They were also informed that the material obtained, including the recordings, would be destroyed once the research was completed. As this had already been communicated to them through the documentation at the beginning of the research there were no reservations from the part of the participants to being recorded.

As is common practice in academic research, especially in longitudinal case studies, the identity of the schools or the research participants was not disclosed in the research and findings. This was done first and foremost to protect the participant's right to privacy. Knowing that their identity would be kept anonymous also helped participants feel less inhibited when expressing their own opinion about SSE and the processes which came along with it. Participants were also informed that they would get a copy of the research when this was completed. As SSE is a process which is carried out on a whole school basis, the distribution of the study can itself be of benefit to the outcomes of the research as the participants, those who implement the process on a regular basis, have been given

the opportunity to carry out research on the process and reflect on the process. This will help in bringing about an awareness of the process and how it can be improved for the benefit of their students and the school.

No monetary payment of any kind was offered to the schools or participants throughout the study. This was done especially not to distort the researcher-participant relationship and create a situation where participants could say something only because they were being paid for it (Cohen et al., 2011). However, as I was maintaining regular contact with the schools, it was evident that the relationship I was building could be mutually beneficial and that the schools could tap into the experience I have acquired in relation to SSE and development planning. Considering the length of time of the study and the nature of the research it was evident that part of my role was also that of acting as a 'critical friend' in both schools by offering and sharing my views and knowledge about SSE. I was constantly and consciously reminding myself of the importance of maintaining the balance between the role of researcher and that of critical friend as during the course of these meetings, schools asked for advice regarding the process of implementation. I was acutely aware that any feedback or guidance given to the school needed to be separate from the research as much as possible. This aspect of my role however, was made clear to the participants at the beginning of the research and in the consent forms and documentation which was given to them at the beginning of the study.

At no stage of the process were findings obtained from the research withheld from the schools. The Leadership teams of both schools were regularly updated with what was going on in the schools as well as with any findings which might be of interest. Any lateral data findings which were not relevant to the study, but which might be of importance to the schools were conveyed with the utmost respect towards anonymity. This factor was also included in the information given to schools at the beginning of the research. Using reflexivity as a very important part in the research process was determining in helping me outline any ethical dilemmas or issues which came up during the research.

4.7 The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the research

The School Self-Evaluation process and development planning are highly reliant on continuous and consistent practices conducted by schools. As discussed in the literature review each step of the process is extremely important as any disruption to the flow of the different aspects might strongly determine and influence its success.

The original plan for this research study was to use a research methodology where data on SSE was collected from different schools hailing from the different sectors (primary and secondary) as well as from the different types of school found in Malta: State, Church and Independent. However, this plan was severely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Firstly, schools in Malta and Gozo were shut down on two occasions over an extended period (March-September 2020 and March/April 2021). During the stretch of time when online learning was being held, the notion of keeping the internal review process and development planning active was not a priority for most schools. Secondly, as detailed in the literature review, at the beginning of the Covid – 19 Pandemic, schools were issued a directive by the Malta Union of Teachers not to work on SSE and Development Planning. This meant that before the research started most schools in Malta and Gozo had already spent two scholastic years without having a clear plan of action for improvement. Whereas before the pandemic schools across the island and across sectors were using relatively similar practices as regards SSE and development planning, now the situation was far from stable. Carrying out research in such a scenario would have posed the serious risk of bringing about highly skewed data especially since educators were not in the right mindset to be able to think clearly about how they feel and perceive SSE and school development planning. To be able to properly address the research questions put forward by the literature review, it was important for data to be gathered from schools and educators who had been working with the process consistently for several years without any extreme break in the process.

Covid-19 restrictions also played an important part in the research process especially due to the fact that the rate of infection determined the opening and closure of schools and therefore influenced the rate at which the process was being implemented. For instance, one of the main research questions and lines of inquiry, deals with evaluation of actions and priority targets as part of this process. The disruption to this process was a factor in the effective implementation of all the steps in the process especially the evaluative aspect. In most cases, even if any plans were in place, schools never managed to get to that stage as the process was halted halfway through.

The scenario which was presented at that point in time necessitated a rethink on the type of approach to be taken. The effect of the Covid-19 pandemic was determining in the choice of the case study approach involving schools who were affected by the pandemic but still managed, to a certain extent, to keep the process going. The research necessitated a certain understanding about continuity in the educator's mind which would help shape the articulation of their thoughts about the process and its effectiveness. A longitudinal case study would also, to a certain extent, allow for the fluctuations and tribulations of a pandemic which unfortunately reared its head quite often during its lifespan. The research was in fact planned over a period of two scholastic years, which would give ample time for the researcher to carry out the necessary research notwithstanding the threat of the closure of the schools. The research was also planned in a way which would allow interviews to be held online, if necessary, especially to mitigate the fear which educators might feel when having to face an outsider.

4.8 The choice of the two primary schools participating in the case study

A purposeful sampling strategy was adopted by the researcher in the choice of the schools participating in the case study. Purposeful sampling can be linked to three main considerations; the decision as to who is selected to participate, the specific type of sampling strategy and the size of the sample to be studied (Cresswell, 2013). I believe that the choice of schools was an important aspect at this stage as

it is closely linked to the understanding of the main research questions and the central phenomenon of the study.

Considering the inconsistency in the implementation of the process nationwide throughout the span of the study, therefore, from scholastic year 2019-2020 till scholastic year 2024-2025, the first hurdle during the early days of the research was to identify schools that had implemented the SSE and development planning process regularly during the two years preceding the commencement of the study. This specific criterion was important to the study as it firstly determined the familiarity the participants would have with the process and therefore their ability to speak about it and express their personal opinions based on their experiences. If they are unfamiliar with the process, the objective of understanding their context and where they are coming from in terms of SSE and development planning would be useless and at worst counterproductive. To this effect, the invite which was passed on to schools to participate specifically included this criterion as an important requisite for participation.

At the initial stages of the study, an expression of interest was communicated to schools within the different sectors asking if they were interested in participating in the exercise. Six schools from the different sectors showed interest. Two of these schools hailed from the State sector, three were schools within the church sector, two of which belonged to the same college and one from the independent sector. During the initial interviews held with the schools, the two State sector schools and one of the church schools indicated that although they were implementing the process, they feared that educators might go to the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) if they felt that the school was breaching directives. If the latter happened, they stated that they would immediately halt the process. The independent school which showed interest was also looking into employing external support to help her manage the process. This aspect, although favourable to the development of the process within the school would have however possibly skewed findings. The remaining two church schools hailed from the same college and had been working on the process for a number of years so educators were used to the system adopted

by the school. The school ethos and culture were also similar as they hailed from the same college and religious denomination.

When evaluating the different aspects of the research I concluded that working with two schools would be the best course to take as it gave me ample opportunity to visit the schools on a regular basis to assess the context and observe educators in their daily lives at school. This last aspect was of determining importance to me as a researcher especially when considering the social constructionist nature of the study. I am cognisant that this does place a limitation on the scale of the research as a number of findings will be situation specific. However, there are many elements which are linked to a process which is majorly carried out by most schools, so a substantial amount of information can be transferred and used in other domains. Ultimately, the objective of the study was never about quantity but looking into the phenomenon of how educators view a particular process happening in their school and how these outcomes are associated to school improvement. I understand that this study does not represent the views of all school leaders and educators in Malta as the objective of qualitative research, especially through a case study approach is to look at a select number of individuals and collect information about them (Cresswell, 2013).

The fact that they were two schools with similar settings allowed for the replicability of a number of aspects but also offered interesting variations such as the leadership style which was interestingly different in the two schools. In fact, one of the schools was working with practically a new Senior Leadership Team (SLT) whereas the SLT in the second school was quite seasoned in their role. This factor alone spurred interesting considerations especially in relation to perspective and mindset. The educators in both schools include teaching staff ranging from Early Years Educators to Primary Class teachers and Subject teachers. In both schools there were also a substantial number of Learning Support Educators (LSEs). A stratified sample of educators spanning over the different year groups were included as part of the study.

The school Ethos presented by both schools, that of a Maltese Catholic school, placed a strong value on the sense of community and love towards the school. This was shown through the importance they attributed to including the school's background as part of their introduction and on how they wanted to work on a school development process which would help them boost their sense of ownership of the improvement plan as well as their ethos as a catholic school which they felt had been affected by the pandemic. This was one of the main factors in the choice of the schools for the research as it presented a scenario where there was a relatively strong sense of belonging by the staff towards the school and the initiatives which it chose to take on. The importance given to school ethos and the sense of belonging to the school community is a relatively common factor among the church school sector in Malta and Gozo. This was also tied to the fact that albeit not assiduous in consistency, because of the pandemic, both schools had an SSE and Development Planning in place and were familiar with the process but were also open to implement changes which would render the process stronger and provide clearer goals.

As a college, both schools fell under the overarching leadership of a Rector, which at that point in time was relatively new to the position. As a researcher I held several preliminary meetings before the commencement of the research with the college Rector, Heads of School and the Senior Leadership Team. This interaction was an important part of the first phase as it gave me a clear perspective of the college structure. The proactive and positive approach shown by the Rector towards the study was also determining as it gradually started setting the scene for a possible change in mindset in relation to SSE and Development Planning which could be triggered and further developed through the research.

4.9 Research Methods: Using Mixed methods in a case study approach

The depth which is usually characteristic of longitudinal and evaluative case studies is aimed at providing educational actors or decision makers with the necessary data which will help them inform policy or improve existing

programmes (Bassey, 1999). Although characterised earlier as a qualitative study, there were considerations which warranted the use of a quantitative method, through questionnaires during two specific points of the study. One of these considerations was related to an important research question which queried the impact of the mindset and attitude of educators towards the SSE process. Although the choice of case study was characterised by the need for a deep analysis of the process, the scenario of two schools presented an opportunity to gather intermittent feedback from more educators which would further support the data on mindset, approach and consequently later on in the research, feedback about the changes carried out by the schools. Hence, the use of the questionnaire and the shift towards a mixed method approach within a mainly qualitative study. Other methods used during the research included interviews and focus groups. Field notes, researcher journals and documentary analysis were also used to gather other relevant data. The use of multiple techniques of data gathering also provides further opportunities for triangulation during the analysis phase and therefore increases the possibility of validating information (Langridge & Ahern, 2003).

Prior to the beginning of the research, all methods used underwent a piloting process. As I am fortunate enough to work in the area of quality assurance, I first piloted the questionnaire, interviews and focus group questions with my colleagues. I ensured that the pilot consisted of several colleagues with a background in education as well as others who do not have that kind of background. The questionnaire was piloted with ten participants, and the interview questions were asked to four different participants. The feedback obtained on the questionnaire was quite relevant as respondents drew my attention to the importance of linking subsequent questions clearly so that these questions could ultimately sustain each other. On the other hand, the feedback obtained on the pilot interviews focused on the need to further simplify the wording used in the questions as unknown jargon might destabilise the interviewees, making them uncomfortable and thus jeopardizing the effectiveness of the data collected. Suggestions were implemented. I believe that the piloting phase was an important step in the validation and fine tuning of the tools used. As the second set of tools

used during the second year of the research were closely linked to the findings emanating from the first part, these were discussed with my research supervisors who proposed changes based on the initial findings obtained from the first set of results.

4.9.1 Questionnaires with all educators

The role of survey questionnaires is that of examining a sample from the population (Groves et al., 2009). In the case of the research on SSE and development planning, the population of educators at the schools where the case study was carried out represent a sample of the population of educators in schools in Malta and Gozo who, as per national policy (*Knowing our School*, 2004) generally apply the same steps to the SSE and Development Planning process. The questions included in the questionnaire in fact maintained a general stance towards SSE and development planning without going into the specifics and details of the cultural background of the schools. The findings emanating from the study were subsequently used to sustain and support other research tools used during the duration of the research.

Making use of questionnaires during the research served several purposes. Following the initial meetings with the Senior Leadership Teams of both schools participating in the case study, the first official contact between the researcher and the educators participating in the research was through an anonymous questionnaire which provided a general overview of the knowledge the participants had of the process, their beliefs, and also aimed to get an initial glimpse into their attitude and perceptions towards SSE and development planning. As a tool, it served its purpose well as it gave the research a sound start. The results also helped me as the researcher to further fine tune the questions to be used during the interviews and allowed a deeper perspective into where I could zoom in during interviews.

Table 7 below depicts the timeline of the questionnaires, the different respondees and the type of questions asked. As can be seen, the number of questions during

the second questionnaire were substantially diminished as, at this stage, the questions focused specifically on the impact of the changes which were carried out following the first year of the research. Both questionnaires are included as Annexe 1.

Table 6 - Questionnaires distributed with schools.

Timeline	Respondees	Close-ended (Likert Scale)	Open-ended	Total number of questions
Year 1 of Research – Initial Survey Questionnaire	Senior Leadership Teams Educators Learning Support Educators	9	2	11
Year 2 of Research – Half-way survey Questionnaire	Senior Leadership Team Educators Learning Support Educators.	4	2	6

The use of survey questionnaires proved to be especially useful in the attempt at maintaining a consistent level of objectivity. The anonymity of the questionnaire also helped in keeping that level of sincerity, balance in the methods used during the research and increased the validity of the research tool as it increased its objectivity (Young, 2016). Whereas in interviews and focus groups participants might have felt vulnerable because the researcher was listening in to what they were specifically saying, the survey tool allowed them to express themselves freely. Open-ended questions were also included to this effect to allow the participants to express their thoughts regarding the process and the effectiveness of the tool. Data emanating from the survey questionnaire was analysed using coding and the results were used to gather a general idea but also to make the questions adopted during the interviews more relevant.

4.9.2 Interviews with educators

As a qualitative research tool interviews allow for an in-depth exploration of matters which are unique to the experiences and insight interviewees and how they perceive a certain phenomenon (McGrath et al., 2019; Wisker, 2001; Kvale, 1996). An important aspect to keep in mind when working with interviews is that of

considering them as important data-collection instruments which can be used to gather insight on the research questions, rather than informal conversations with interviewees (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005; Cohen et al., 2011). Qualitative interviewing in the case of SSE is an ideal tool as it can be applied to address different types of research questions especially when a substantial part of the study is concerned with individuals' subjective perception of the SSE process and how this perception was developed rather than a generalization of the system.

This implied that accurate preparation from the part of the interviewer were necessary including conceptual and practical preparations to identify the type of questions which are relevant to the research, especially in the development of open-ended questions (Brinkman & Kvale, 2005; Brinkmann, 2014). As mentioned earlier, interview questions were also piloted to test the feasibility of the questions asked but also for testing the ability of the researcher to create an environment which is non-invasive and which promotes an open dialogue with the interviewees which, considering the nature of the research, was essential. As it is difficult to build trust between researcher and interviewee in the short time dedicated to the interview (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), a short summary of the research aims was sent to the interviewees prior to the interview informing them of what to expect and what would be discussed during the interview and the reasons why this is an important topic for discussion.

The role of the researcher is determining in all research methods as the primary instrument of data collection however it is more so when interviews are carried out because of the direct contact which is created with the interviewee. To this effect, I was aware of how my role might impact the conversation during the actual interviews. My final objective during the interview sessions was to create an environment where the researcher and the interviewee were creating data together, where my experience and previous knowledge played an important part in understanding the context and experiences of the interviewees. My role as an interviewer was not that of being a passive player but one where my abilities and experience were used to facilitate the conversation held during interviews (Lingard

& Kennedy, 2010). These interviews were vital as a next step as they gave me the opportunity to gain rich, personalized information about the process (Mason, 2002).

When designing the questions for the interview component, it became clear that the most effective way to delve into the mindset of the interviewees regarding SSE and Development Planning was that of conducting semi-structured interviews. Questions were a mix of predetermined text including jargon which was common to all interviewees as well as open ended questions which were aimed at reaching the subjective view of each individual interviewee. Care was taken in developing questions which would not mislead the participants or open up the conversation to topics which are not relevant to the area, and which might thwart the response. In other words, the objective of the questions was that of keeping a balance between relevance but at the same time giving enough space to the interviewees to be able to respond and give information which might be relevant to the study. This also allowed the researcher to develop any follow-up questions which were deemed as appropriate at that point in time following responses given by the interviewees during the same interview. In this way participants felt free to express themselves and define the world from their own perspective and not solely from the perspective of the researcher (Algozzine & Hancock, 2017).

Considering that the study was taking place amidst a pandemic, interviewees were given the option of having the interview in person or else online. Most opted for the online option as it was also quite convenient as the interviews could be carried out in their own time. This facilitated the interaction and the meetings were carried out via TEAMS and recorded. Table 8 below indicates the number of in-depth interviews held with educators. It also indicates the coding used in the Findings Chapter.

Table 7 - In-depth interviews with educators.

Timeline	Respondees	Educ.	School A (Code)	School B (Code)	LSEs	School A (Code)	School B (Code)	Tot
Year 1 of Research – Interviews	Educators/ Learning Support Educators	6	Teacher A Teacher B Teacher C	Teacher D Teacher E Teacher F	4	LSE A LSE B	LSE C LSE D	10
Year 2 of Research Interviews	Educators / Learning Support Educators.	5	Teacher A Teacher B Teacher C	Teacher D Teacher E	4	LSE A LSE B	LSE C LSE D	9

The initial acceptance letter sent to all educators at school included both teachers and educators. To sustain the objectivity of the study participants were chosen randomly among those who accepted to participate in the research. The choice of interviewees included a sample from the educator cohort as well as the LSE cohort. These were randomly selected from the staff lists provided by the school. This was done to ensure that all educators understood their relevance to the process. Moreover, it also ensured that the voice of LSEs as an important stakeholder was also heard. Interviews as a research methodology were carried out with educators rather than other research methods such as focus groups to allow interviewees to speak freely especially due to their possible lack of familiarity with the process. Participants were informed that the research results would be anonymous and that they would be informed of the findings.

4.9.3 Focus Groups with Senior Leadership Teams

As a qualitative research tool, focus groups are ideal as they provide a setting for a relatively homogeneous group to reflect on the questions asked by the interviewer (Denscombe, 2010). Focus groups are also an ideal tool to triangulate data emanating from other research methods as part of a multi-method study as it gives the researcher another angle on how people are influenced or influence others' pattern of thinking on a particular given issue or topic (Casey & Krueger, 2000; Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan, 1997). Focus groups also allow participants the opportunity to manage their individual identity within a group while still allowing

the researcher to gather a collective interpretation of their thoughts and perceptions about the topic under discussion (Barbour, 2007, p. 39). As argued by Morgan (1997), focus groups are very good at showing what participants think but they are even more significant in helping to understand why participants act the way they do, an aspect which is highly compatible with the social constructionism paradigm which links the individual and group interaction process to wider concerns and processes (Barbour, 2007, p. 39). The role of the interviewer during focus groups is that of moderator to facilitate the group interaction rather than lead the discussion (Denscombe, 2010, p.177). The moderator, in fact plays a determining role in the organisation and ultimately the control of the focus group process to ensure the quality of the data generated. To be able to carry out this task, the moderator needs to be non-judgemental as regards the information which is being developed during the session and show a certain level of sensitivity towards the participants and their opinions. Once again, the researcher as moderator needs to strike a balance between the benefits of knowing the area and the need to keep an objective stance so as not to steer the conversation during focus groups to other areas which might skew the research towards a particular outcome (Kreuger & Casey, 2000).

The decision taken to favour focus groups rather than interviews with the SLT members of both schools was specifically done to promote the concept of dialogue with the context of a professional learning community. It helped in pushing forward an important aspect of the study which promoted the importance for leadership teams to work as a team rather than independently from each other. As a leadership team, insights from the dialogue within the focus group would also sustain further development of the process. The focus group sessions which formed part of this research were carried out with the SLT teams from both schools participating in the study. From the literature on SSE and through experience with the process, the role and stand of leadership is extremely important and a determining factor in understanding why the process is successful or otherwise. One of the central research questions focuses on the importance of leadership and how their state of mind influences the process. As with the individual interviews, the objectives of the focus group were closely tied to those of the research questions

posed in the study. The participants were advised regarding the objectives of the focus groups in advance. The questions developed and the cues given for discussion were constructed with the aim of stimulating discussion but were also focused enough not to allow for aspects which might deviate from the original research questions. The focus group questions can be found as Annexe 3.

Table 8 - Focus groups held with Senior Leadership Teams.

Timeline	Participants	Head	SA (Code)	SB (Code)	Assistant Heads (Total)	SA	Code	SB	Code
Year 1 of Research – Focus Groups Leadershi p	Senior Leadership Teams	2	HOS A	HOS B	8	4	AHA AHB AHC AHD	4	AH E AH F AH G AHH
Year 2 of Research – Focus Groups Leadershi p	Senior Leadership Teams	2	HOS A	HOS B	8	4	AHA AHB AHC AHD	4	AHE AHF AHG AHH

As both SLTs were leading targeted research and change within the process, the focus of the questions and the conversation developed within the focus group sessions centered around the role of leaders throughout the process in motivating their own mindset, how this influenced the staff as well as their process of evaluation and how this might influence the success of the process or otherwise. In this sense focus groups are an effective qualitative method as they excel at providing insights into the details of the process rather than the outcome (Barbour, 2007, p.30). During the sessions, members of the SLT were given the opportunity to pause and reflect together with their peers on the different segments of the process and to what extent, in their opinion, these segments were being successful. It also provided the chance for them to identify possible problems which are affecting the process, such as the lack of time for SLT to meet up, and consequently brainstorm possible solutions. The focus group sessions also acted as a clear example to both SLTs of how a community of reflective practitioners can be developed and the importance of consistency when it comes to finding time to reflect.

4.9.4 Documentary Research

According to Cohen et al., (2011) documentary research helps to provide access and ease the researcher into three areas related to knowledge about human social activity. The first relates to the concept of looking into the past of the particular area. The second and third area of knowledge go into the identification of what is specifically necessary for the study in question. This is inherently related to how for example current structures, relationships, behaviours and processes within the context of the study have evolved and how they are currently being implemented (Cohen et al., 2011, p.248). In the case of this study, as a researcher I had to understand where SSE and development planning originated within the Maltese context, its influences both nationally and internationally and how through different documentation the process has evolved into what it is today.

This type of documentary analysis was also linked to processes which focused on the interaction among individuals and how the researcher seeks to understand the process of interaction in their specific contexts (Cresswell, 2013, p.25). A social constructionist worldview makes use of documentary research as a method where close examination can highlight important aspects of the relationship which exists between individuals as well as the reason why these relationships have been shaped the way they have (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 253). Ultimately, what is fascinating about documentary research is that the researcher can trace the history of a process and the relationships between different groups of individuals and different contexts which have shaped the present situation.

The documents analysed as part of this research fall under two main categories; official documentation, policy and legislation which were issued on SSE and development planning in Malta and internal documents provided by the school which trace the way the process is investigated by the school and actuated. A thorough exercise was carried out on selecting the relevant documentation and how to effectively embed the aspects which emanated from them within the actual research. The official documentation focused mainly on the main legislation, the

Education Act, which effectively mention the role of SSE and development planning in Maltese Education and how this has evolved from one legislation to the new updated education act as well as the policy dedicated to the area which was published in 2004. As a researcher, I also looked into other official support documents and templates which central governmental structures distribute and promote among educators to facilitate the development of the process.

The templates which are available for the schools to work with, such as the SSE profile and the action plan template were analysed in two different ways. Firstly, the empty templates were reviewed considering the areas which they focused on and their relevance. This indicated the extent to which central authorities, in this case the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) who is the official regulator is viewed as important in relation to the SSE process and development planning. As these templates are adapted by most of the schools hailing from the different sectors in Malta and Gozo, it was important to understand the nature and objectives of these templates and if they were facilitating the process or focusing on specific areas and not others and therefore influencing the way school leadership teams and therefore educators were looking at the process. This was especially relevant in relation to the evaluation aspect of the process which is one of the research questions of the study. This was then corroborated through the analysis of the filled in templates by the schools which were undergoing the case study. The way these templates were filled in and how they affected the process was tackled during interviews and focus group sessions, where educators were asked if they found the process to be a straightforward and simple one to access and push forward.

4.10 Research timeline

The research kickstarted with a set of informal meetings with the Heads of School of both schools where the nature of the research and the methodology was clearly explained. These meetings also served as an initial understanding, on the part of the researcher of the character and context of both schools, as well as the leadership

style of the heads of school who were going to form part of the research and ultimately lead any changes which were going to be implemented. These discussions led primarily the leadership teams to reflect on the way the school development plan was being carried out and if the priorities and action plans developed were implemented and if they were being effective. This reflection and consistent dialogue with the researcher who at that point was also acting as a critical friend, led both schools to reshape their process where educators were made more active in choosing their priorities and played a more prominent part in developing action plans. Table 10 below, shows a timeline of the sessions and meetings held with both schools during the first year of research.

Table 9 - Timeline of Research (Year 1 and 2).

Year 1	Year 2
<p>Term 1</p> <p>Questionnaires distributed among all staff of the two schools participating in the case study. Appendix 1</p>	<p>Term 1</p> <p>Meetings with Heads from both schools to discuss implementation of changes. Reviewing of action plans developed during Term 3 SY 2021-2022.</p>
<p>Term 2</p> <p>Interviews with 10 educators from both schools. Interviewees included both teachers and learning support assistants. Appendix 2</p>	<p>Term 2</p> <p>Interviews with the same 10 educators from both schools who had been interviewed in SY 2021-2022. This methodology was adopted due to the changes which were being implemented by both schools so any change in attitude and perception towards the process could be measured. Appendix 4</p>
<p>Term 3</p> <p>Focus groups with Senior Leadership Teams from both schools. Appendix 3</p>	<p>Term 3</p> <p>Interviews with the 2 heads of school following changes implemented. Appendix 5 Questionnaire distributed among all staff of the two schools participating in the case study following changes implemented. Appendix 6</p>

Research Year 1	School	Activity
Year 1 Term 1 - September	School Principal A+B	Meeting with College principal to discuss research objectives.
Year 1 Term 1 – October	School A and B	Meetings with Leadership Teams of both schools to discuss research objectives and timeline.

Year 1 Term 1 – November		
Questionnaire distributed to School A and School B		
Year 1 Term 1 – December	School A and B	Session with Leadership Teams to discuss outcomes of Questionnaire and way forward regarding changes they want to implement.
	School B	CoPe session with staff – How to develop an action plan.
Year 1 Term 2 – January	School A	CoPe session with SLT – How to carry out the internal review process and develop an action plan.
Year 1 Term 2 – March	School A	CoPe session with staff – How to develop an action plan.
Year 1 Term 2 – March/April		
Interviews with Educators – School A and School B		
Year 1 Term 3 – May		
Focus groups with SLT members – School A and School B		
Year 1 Term 3 – June	School B	Feedback requested on action plans developed by staff for next scholastic year.
Year 1 – Summer	School A	Feedback requested on action plans developed by staff for next scholastic year.

The first term of Year 1 included the questionnaire with all educators which primarily focused on gathering an initial understanding of the perception which these educators had of the process and if they believed that this process could bring about improvement. The questionnaire also looked into the factors which, according to educators, hinder the process and what they believe would improve it. This conversation was then amplified during the second term where interviews with 10 educators (5 from each school) went in depth on their understanding of the SSE process. The last part of the first year included two different focus groups with members of the SLT of the two schools where the approach was discussed from a leadership perspective. The questions focused on their understanding of the process, the way they see it in relation to improvement, the pitfalls and their vision for the coming year.

The primary role of research during the second year mainly focused on the impact which the changes carried out by both schools had on the implementation of the process and how this implementation changed the impact on improvement. The

aim was also to see if these changes could possibly impact educator ownership of the process or otherwise and the factors which contributed towards this. To effectively observe the impact of these changes the role of the researcher had to be downscaled during the second year of the research. Both schools asked for feedback on the action plans which they had developed at the end of the first year and this was given to them at the beginning of the first term. Following this, contact with schools was deliberately reduced during the rest of the first and second term to allow for the school to implement the process at their own pace and for the researcher to understand which parts of the process had been implemented and to what extent.

The last segment of the research was then held during the third term where the researcher distributed a final questionnaire with educators from both schools as well as held follow up interviews with the same participants who were interviewed during the first year of the research. When it comes to leadership, the last part included an in-depth reflective interview with the Head of School of both schools which then extended to members of the leadership team. The different meetings held with schools during the second year of research are shown below.

Research Year 2

Year 2 Term 1 – September	School A and School B	Meeting with SLT to discuss the second year of research and action plans for the current year/ implementation plan by schools.
Year 2 Term 1 / Term 2 - (October – March) Implementation phase – Researcher consciously removed from scenario to allow schools to implement process.		
Year 2 Term 2 – April Questionnaire School A and B – Educators		
Year 2 Term 3 – May Interviews School A and B – Educators		
Year 2 Term 3 – June Focus Groups – School A and School B – SLT		
Year 2 Term 3 – June	School A and School B	Closing meeting with Heads of School – feedback from research and way forward.

4.11 Analytic generalisation in case studies

Case study research is often questioned as regards its stance on ‘generalizability’ (Firestone, 1993; Herriot & Firestone, 1983; Gerring & Press, 2007; Tellis, 1997; Woodside, 2010) and validity (Byrne & Ragin, 2009; Huberman & Miles, 2002). Yin (2014), considers case study generalisation as ‘an effort to generalize from a small number of cases to a larger population of cases’ (p. 325). It is an attempt ‘... to learn from one (case) and understand many (cases)’ says Campbell (2003, p. 15). Cronbach (1975) discusses the problem of generalizability in case studies as being linked to the changeability of the culture which that same case study seeks to investigate and observe. This reasoning eventually led to the development of what is defined as ‘complexity theory’ where human action is seen as being constructed not caused, thus leading to the rationalisation that expecting generalizations when describing human action and purpose is very difficult and cannot be completely valid due to its changeability. Therefore, the highly descriptive nature of case studies, renders researchers wary of drawing any specific conclusions emanating from this kind of study. This is also because it deviates from the standard rules of evaluation which usually give clear and objective instruction of how data should be interpreted. Case studies seem to lean towards a more subjective evaluation which often enough does not sit well with the scientific community (Kennedy, 1979). Lincoln and Guba (2000) also argue that the problem with generalizations is that they cannot be related to the particulars and the exact nature of case studies is to deal and try to understand those ‘particulars’ through observing and understanding different phenomena.

When looking into case study as an approach, the first aspect to consider is the final objectives and the purpose of why the case study is being chosen to approach the research. It has to be understood and taken into serious consideration that qualitative intensive research which is usually associated to the case study approach is praised for its descriptive accuracy however generalizability is not considered its main strength (Firestone, 1993). Conducting case study research is more akin to an attempt at creating hypotheses (Firestone, 1993; Ruddin, 2006;

Woodside, 2010; Yin, 2018) rather than the concern of quantitative research of stating facts. Cronbach (1975) works on the idea of the 'working hypotheses' which means that findings emanating from case studies will work towards accepting or denouncing other hypotheses or creating new ones. Yin (2018) argues that case studies are not intended to generate data which changes from samples to entire universes. Data gathered from case studies serves to build theoretical premises and assertions like the one studied, especially if similar findings are found. Analysis of data from single case studies follows what is termed as 'analytic generalization'. This is usually a twostep process where researchers first show how the findings from their case studies influence a particular process or theory and the second step deals with looking into how that information gleaned from the findings can influence other similar situations which follow the same sequence of events (Yin, 2014).

In their discussion on generalisability Lincoln and Guba (1985) have tangibly worked on the reconceptualization of generalizability and proposed new terminology; they talk of transferability where they work on the assumption that research findings will always be only working hypotheses. They speak of the degree of transferability to be a direct function of the similarity between two contexts. If the different contexts are 'sufficiently' congruent, then the working hypotheses from the originating context will be applicable to the receiving context. In the case of SSE and development planning in schools, the process and the tools used in schools are similar, even though there are cultural differences between sectors and types of school, there are themes and processes which can be considered as common. In this kind of scenario, which includes a common process, findings can be considered as 'transferable'. Generalisability can also be linked to external validity. An alternative to reliability and validity is put forward by Lincoln and Guba (1985) where they develop the notion of trustworthiness in research. This is linked to Stake's (1995) notion of naturalistic enquiry which is in turn connected to the ethics and respect for truth which needs to be a characteristic of case study research.

4.12 Data Analysis and interpretation

The discussion held so far in this chapter on the epistemological stance, the choice of research approach as well as the methods used have all led to influence the way qualitative data is analysed. As Creswell (2009, p.183) argues, data analysis is an exercise where one gradually moves deeper into understanding the data, representing the data and ultimately producing an interpretation of the larger meaning of data. Merriam (1998) defines data analysis as ‘the process of making sense out of the data’ (p. 67). And making sense out of the data involves consolidating, reducing and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read – it is the process of making meaning. While working on the area of SSE and development planning, it was clear from the beginning that the research would lead towards particular areas of interest within the process. The premise of the study was already clear from the beginning, that as a researcher I would delve into the different aspects of the process to see how educators look at the different phases and the importance which is subsequently given to these phases towards the success of the process in its entirety. The literature review in the area, as outlined in the previous chapters, also led to clear research questions which were distinct aspects but also closely linked to each other. The identified areas of focus subsequently informed the methods and tools used during research and data was gathered systematically. Additional information which transpired from the research was also analysed in relation to the main research questions but also separately when necessary.

The systematic structure adopted during the gathering of research data led me towards following a thematic approach towards analysis. I followed the approach detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006) who describe thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analysing and reporting significant patterns emerging from data. The structure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) helped greatly in making the analysis of data more tangible especially due to the interpretative nature of the social constructionism paradigm and qualitative data.

I started familiarising myself with the data collected in both schools following the first year of the research within schools. As I was directly involved in the research through my ‘critical friend’ stance and because I carried out the interviews and focus groups myself, it was important that I undertook the analysis of the data. This allowed for a careful and in-depth analysis of the findings to be able to connect data across the different methods. Listening to the recordings and transcribing the interviews and focus groups myself helped me as a researcher to familiarise with the information gathered and to reflect upon how this could be structured to effectively address the research questions. The data collected during the first year allowed for the development of the main codes and gave me a clear idea regarding the key themes which I wanted to address. This was then substantiated further through the research carried out during the second year of the research (as outlined in Table 10). The main themes identified through the data analysis process are discussed in detail in the findings chapter.

The familiarisation phase led to data reduction into manageable and comprehensive proportions of data (Cohen et al., 2011). Understanding the type of data I had collected helped in the filtering process which led to the subsequent generation of the initial codes. This understanding also determined the approach to analysis which I needed to take when analysing the data.

An example of this filtering process was the focus groups carried out with members of the SLT. During these focus groups, researchees felt free enough to speak their mind on various subjects and areas which although most of the time linked to the areas being discussed might not have always been entirely relevant. An aspect related to this, which is also mentioned in the findings chapter, is the discussion of the behaviour policy within one SLT group. Although important to the SSE process as a potential area for improvement, it was not entirely relevant to the strands which were being observed as part of the research. During the analysis phase this data needed to be filtered to extract data which would be relevant to the study and the research questions. As common with this type of qualitative approach to research, data generated led me to take an inductive approach to where the data gathered

served to develop patterns which I would then discuss in relation to literature and theory (Woiceshyn & Dailenbach, 2018).

All data gathered during the research was analysed through the NVivo research tool which allowed for a clearer display of the data for analysis and was especially fundamental for the coding phase. Kerlinger (1970) describes coding as a process of assigning responses received from respondents to specific categories of analysis. The generation of the main set of codes started during the first part of the research linking directly to the research questions. The data gathering process and analysis for the second year of the research was structured in such a way as to supplement the first set of codes identified during the first year. Through this process of data analysis and coding three main areas were identified which were directly linked to the conceptual framework and research questions. These were then divided into smaller codes which shaped the arguments outlined in the findings chapter. Table 11 depicts the way the coding exercise was divided.

Table 10 - Phase 1: Developing Codes and sub-codes.

Research Questions	Main codes	Sub-codes
Main Research Question: What are the main factors which impact the success of school self-evaluation and development planning in Maltese Compulsory education?		
Area 1 - The importance of approach and perception. How do leaders and educators perceive the SSE and Development Planning process and to what extent does this influence mindset?	Educator knowledge and perceptions and their impact on SSE and improvement The importance of Leadership within the SSE process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Educator involvement in process ○ The role of the leader within the process ○ Developing learning communities
Area 2 Understanding the process. What is the importance given to the process especially the monitoring and evaluation part of the process by both leadership and educators and how does this impact the success of the SSE process?	The evaluation phase of the SSE process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Frequency of Evaluation ○ Importance attributed to evaluation by educators/SLT ○ Awareness of the need to evaluate
Area 3 External factors influencing the process. What is the impact of external factors such as external quality assurance	The influence of external QA on SSE and DP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Stakeholder involvement ○ Documentary evidence on impact

and governance on the process?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Educator perception on link
	Improving the process towards more successful outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Suggestions for improvement by educators gathered through questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and meetings grouped into suggestions for improvement

This categorisation facilitated the analyses of data and clearly set the three core areas emanating from the study. The impact of leadership and educator perception on SSE, the importance of the evaluation phase on SSE and the relationship between external and internal reviews, and the impact on improvement. The second year of the research produced added information. However, they still focused on the three identified areas, however, more emphasis was placed on Area 1 and Area 2. Table 12 below shows how the data gathered during the second year of the research was added to the first set of data to further substantiate the eventual development of the themes which would then be analysed as part of the research. Data during the second year of the research was collected following changes made by the school to the process. These changes included, for instance, a more pronounced involvement of educators in the writing of action plans. Therefore, questions asked during interviews and focus groups during the second part of the research also focused on how educators perceived these changes and how it influenced the SSE process and improvement.

Table 11 - Phase 2: Development of Themes

Research question	Codes/Themes	Sub-codes/Nodes
Area 1 How do leaders and educators perceive the SSE and Development Planning process and to what extent does this influence mindset?	Theme 1: Perceptions, attitude and mindset towards SSE and Development Planning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Relevance attributed by stakeholders ○ Educator involvement/Stakeholder involvement ○ Perceived impact on school improvement. ○ Positive aspects ○ Negative aspects
	Theme 3: Leadership and the SSE Process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How the process is viewed by leadership

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Pitfalls identified specifically by leadership teams ○ Developing learning communities through SSE ○ SSE support mechanisms – the role of the critical friend.
Area 2 What is the importance given to the process especially the monitoring and evaluation part of the process by both leadership and educators and how does this impact the success of the SSE process?	Theme 2: Involvement (Educators, stakeholders) in the process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Awareness of the process ○ Writing action plans as a school community ○ Identified pitfalls in the process
	Theme 4: Implementing the process. Theme 5: Evaluation and Monitoring.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ SSE as part of the educator’s planning process ○ Continuous professional development through evaluation ○ Monitoring of the process ○ Time
Area 3 What is the impact of external factors such as external quality assurance and governance on the process?	Theme 6: The impact of external bodies such as external quality assurance and governing structures on the process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The perceived influence of External QA over Internal QA. ○ The impact of external impositions by governing bodies on SSE.

4.13 Trustworthiness of Data

Data trustworthiness and validity are key features of effective qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2011). As the study works within the paradigm of social construction which is determined by the changeability of knowledge, it was important to consider the data under the four pillars of trustworthiness, namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Adler, 2022). Within the study these criteria were operationalised through design choices, data generation strategies and analytic procedures that sought to ensure that the findings offer a plausible contextually grounded and well-documented account of SSE and Development Planning within the two schools chosen as part of the case study (Whitbeck, 1995).

During this study credibility was supported first through prolonged engagement and continuous observation in the two case-study schools over an extended period,

which enabled me as a researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of local routines, language and dynamics around SSE and Development Planning. Multiple research methods were used to build a rich multi-layered picture of the process under investigation, allowing convergence and divergence across data sources to be identified (Cresswell, 2013). Credibility was further enhanced through triangulation of data sources and methods, whereby accounts from different stakeholder groups and different forms of evidence such as policy documents, school plans and interview transcripts were systematically compared. In addition, emerging interpretations were periodically shared with participants in the form of informal conversations, inviting clarification and correction of my understanding, as a researcher, of certain episodes and practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

To support transferability, the study situates the two case-study schools within the wider Maltese policy and legislative environment for SSE and Development Planning, drawing on national frameworks, regulatory documents and templates that are common to all schools. By linking school-level processes to these shared structures, the research demonstrates that the cases are not idiosyncratic but exemplify how national expectations are interpreted and enacted in practice (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The description of the organisational context, including school size, governance, staff composition and prior experience with the SSE and Development Planning process enables readers to assess the degree of similarity between these cases and their own settings (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Rather than claiming universal generalisability, the study offers theoretically informed, context-rich accounts that may be transferred to other schools or systems facing comparable policy demands and cultural conditions (Whitmore et al., 2001; Gerring, 2007).

The pillar of dependability was addressed through the development of a clear audit trail that links conceptualisation of SSE and Development Planning in the literature review to the formulation of research questions, the design of data-collection tools and the stages of analysis. Decisions about sampling, access, interview protocols, observation foci and analytic coding were recorded alongside with reflections and

adaptations made in response to field conditions. The longitudinal nature of the case study also supported dependability by allowing the researcher to observe processes over two scholastic years rather than relying on single time-point snapshots. This temporal depth made it possible to distinguish between one-off events and more stable patterns in how SSE and Development Planning were understood and enacted and to check whether interpretations remained consistent in the light of newly collected data (Cresswell, 2013; Yin, 2018).

Confirmability relates to the degree to which the findings are shaped by the participants and the phenomena under study, rather than by researcher bias, motivation and interest (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Giddens & Sutton, 2014). Given my insider status as an educator and quality-assurance professional, particular attention was paid to reflexivity and the management of subjectivity throughout the research process (Cohen et al., 2011). Triangulation again played an important role in supporting confirmability (Yin, 2014). Claims arising from one source were checked against other forms of evidence, such as staff interviews and planning documents. The maintenance of an audit trail including raw data, coded transcripts and decision logs created a transparent chain of evidence that allowed external readers to see how interpretations were derived from the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Taken together, these strategies contribute to a coherent approach to trustworthiness that aligns with the four pillars while still remaining sensitive to the constructed nature of SSE and Development Planning in the context of Maltese schools.

4.14 Conclusion

This chapter looks at the various aspects which were considered when designing the research framework for this study on SSE and development planning in the Maltese context and the impact on improvement. The chapter started with an exploration of the philosophical assumptions and the epistemological stance

underlying the study. These assumptions together with the analysis of the outcomes emerging from the literature review and the development of the conceptual framework for the study led to the development of the main foci and the research questions linked to the study of SSE and development planning in Malta.

The core focus of this research is to investigate to what extent SSE and development planning as a phenomenon is influenced by the human perspective, the background and outside factors such as external quality assurance which influences the process and its intended impact on improvement. This led towards the adoption of a social constructionist stance towards the research, which investigated the factors which shape knowledge about SSE and Development Planning. Understanding this kind of perspective necessitated an approach towards the study which allowed the researcher to delve into the process and how it is seen by the main actors who implement it daily. To this effect, a case study approach was adopted where the context, history and present context of two schools was looked into over a longitudinal case study spanning over two scholastic years. A mixed method approach was taken where participants were exposed to questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and the opportunity to discuss the process and its impact towards improvement. The critical friend role adopted by the researcher also led to an important and necessary exercise of reflexivity throughout the research. This was especially determining because of the role of the researcher in the field in relation to the way research was approached and the resulting data interpreted.

The chapter also details how the data gathered was analysed and interpreted especially in the light of generalisation and validity when using a case study approach. The use of Nvivo to analyse the qualitative information gathered during the research was important as it allowed for a smooth transition in the development of the main codes of research extracted from the substantial amount of data collected throughout the study. The next chapter will look into the findings obtained from the research and how the different identified themes contribute

towards understanding the role which SSE and Development Planning have in relation to school improvement.

Chapter 5

Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is based on the findings gathered through a case study which was carried out in two Maltese primary schools hailing from the Church School Sector². As discussed in the Research and Methodology Chapter, these two primary schools were chosen as they were familiar with the self-evaluation process and were looking into ways of redefining the way they operated the process to make it more effective. This type of setting would also facilitate the engagement with a longitudinal case study whose foundation, was that of observation of the process and how the schools looked at, understood and operated each part. During the analysis of the data obtained throughout the research in relation to the different themes, it transpired that there were very strong similarities in the responses provided by both schools in relation to the process, especially in relation to leadership and educator approach. The few pronounced differences between the two case studies were mainly linked to idiosyncracies. Further into the analysis it was clear that due to this similarity the combined data could be used to strengthen trends and themes emanating from the research. This allowed for more impact in the interpretation of findings, especially those parts of the process which were considered as a strength and those which were causing the process to be less effective and why. The similarities as well as the marked differences between the schools have been noted in the outcomes section following the data presented by theme.

² The Maltese Education system for compulsory education includes three main sectors. The State School Sector, The Church School Sector and the Independent School Sector.

The research questions depicted in detail in Table 13 below outline how these objectives were then expanded throughout the span of the research. The main foci linked to the research questions and the subsequent areas identified were strengthened during the first part of the case study research which spanned over a whole scholastic year. These included an investigation of the general perception towards School Self-Evaluation (SSE), the cognisance of their role as leaders and educators within the process and their understanding of the different parts of the process and their importance towards achieving improvement. They were also asked their opinion in relation to the link which exists between internal quality assurance and external quality assurance mechanisms, the influence which this might have on the effectiveness of the process and the way it is viewed. Educators who participated in the case study were also asked to share their opinion on how the current process could be improved. This gave them the opportunity to reflect on the process.

The main aspects which emanated from the literature and subsequently the data obtained from the research were analysed through the NVivo research tool and were divided into main codes which were linked directly to the research questions. This subsequently led to the development of a coding framework which helped in the structure and development of the findings into main themes. The research tools used during the first phase of the research include the questionnaires, interviews and focus groups³ all of which are linked to the areas outlined as main codes. The same method, using the same research tools was adopted during the second year of the research to maintain consistency as well as to ensure alignment throughout the research (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

³ Reference to Annexe 1 Questionnaires/Annexe 2 Interview questions /Annexe 3 Focus groups.

Table 12 - Research Questions linked to Themes

Research question	Codes/Themes
Area 1 How do leaders and educators perceive the SSE and Development Planning process and to what extent does this influence mindset?	Theme 1: Perceptions, attitude and mindset towards SSE and Development Planning.
	Theme 3: Leadership and the SSE Process.
Area 2 What is the importance given to the process especially the monitoring and evaluation part of the process by both leadership and educators and how does this impact the success of the SSE process?	Theme 2: Involvement (Educators, stakeholders) in the process
	Theme 4: Implementing the process.
	Theme 5: Evaluation and Monitoring.
Area 3 What is the impact of external factors such as external quality assurance and governance on the process?	Theme 6: The impact of external bodies such as external quality assurance and governing structures on the process.

Table 13 above also shows how the different themes emerging from the research findings are linked to the research questions. However, the initial picture in relation to research questions indicated that a binding exercise was necessary to be able to focus the research on the task at hand. This binding exercise was carried out by limiting the focus mainly to definition and context (Miles & Huberman, 2019) as well as time and activity (Cresswell, 2022) thus ensuring, as much as possible, that the study remained reasonable in scope. The questions included in the research tools were very closely linked to the research questions and this allowed the data to be quite compact and manageable during the process of analysis. This was also valid for the second year of research where the questions mainly focused on the impact of the changes carried out during the first year. As this was longitudinal research it also allowed for better connection and cohesion when analysing the data through the NVivo research tool. This also greatly helped alignment during the analysis of the data as it allowed for all the feedback from the different research tools, to be aggregated under the theme being discussed.

5.2 Theme 1: Perception and mindset towards SSE and Development Planning

5.2.1 Introduction

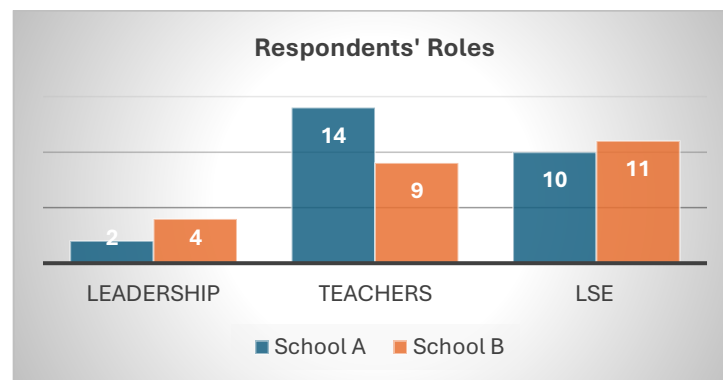
The way the main actors within any process view that said process, the type of mindset, perception, as well as attitude is fundamental to its success (Gover et al., 2019; Snyder & Snyder, 2023). The constructionist worldview also attributes great importance to how that view is critical in shifting and creating knowledge and how in turn that knowledge is transformed in practice to determine the success of the end objective (Cresswell, 2013). This stance also lends itself to the view that deep understanding or true knowledge is generated by blending the collective viewpoints of the respondents about a situation, idea or process (Crabtree & Miller, 2025; Searle, 1995). This can be attributed to the SSE and development planning process where every day occurrences may influence the setting at that point in time.

The questionnaire which was undertaken with educators in both schools, who henceforth will be named school A and B, aimed at gathering a general understanding of the perception which educators had towards SSE and Development Planning and explore the circumstances which might have influenced the formation of that perception. The second phase related to this theme was addressed in more depth in the interviews with ten educators, five from each school. As a researcher, I felt that this aspect was the baseline from which I could look closely into their views and attitudes towards SSE and where these perceptions were coming from. It would also provide the possibility to track for changes in the follow-up interviews with the same educators during the second year of the research. This would also help in looking into how changes affected could possibly influence the perception and mindset of individuals (Snyder & Snyder, 2023).

The results from the responses of fifty respondents to the questionnaire given during the first year of the research were analysed and categorized within specific

themes. Table 14 provides a breakdown of the respondents who participated in the first questionnaire. The demographic distribution below shows an important factor within the Maltese Education system, that of the substantial presence of Learning Support Educators within schools. Learning support educators, whose role is to support children with a statement of needs, are present within each classroom and are also an important presence within the school population. Their contribution to the SSE and development planning is in fact one of the aspects which emerged from the findings, and which will be discussed later in the chapter.

Table 13 - Respondents' roles in School A and B.



5.2.2 SSE and Development planning as important tools towards school improvement

The first part in the questionnaire was aimed at instigating reflection about the perceived importance of the process and if, as educators, they believe that these are important tools towards school improvement. The choice given ranged from ‘extremely important’, ‘important at times’ to ‘somewhat important’. The category ‘not important’ was not offered as a choice to spur reflection upon the process. In fact, 70% of the participants believe that the process is extremely important. All the members of the SLT who answered the questionnaire fell within this category. This was followed by somewhat important, with 20 % where LSEs topped the category and respondents who chose this response. The last category, ‘important at times’ gathered 10% of the responses. Notably, this is the least marked response,

however, it gives an indication that to some of the educators, the process is not always relevant and becomes relevant when it is directly linked to them. (Snyder & Snyder, 2023)

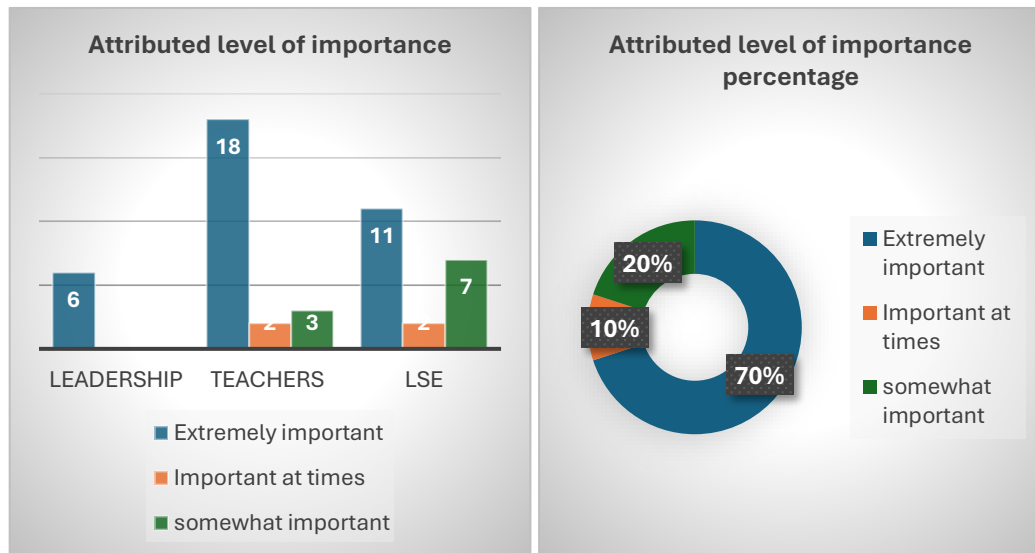


Table 14 - Attributed level of importance to SSE process.

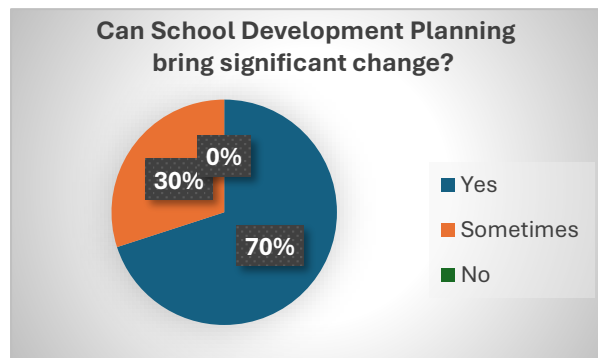
The fact that all members of the leadership team marked ‘extremely important’ is a positive aspect as the leadership team is an important driving force when it comes to understanding and leading the process forward. The response of ‘somewhat important’ given by LSE’s was further substantiated during individual interviews where LSEs generally questioned how involved they are in the process and that they should be more involved, as it is important for them as support both for the learners under their care as well as teachers. This possible lack of involvement also influences their perception of the process and attitude towards it.

5.2.3 SSE and Development planning as a tool for change

Participants were also asked if they feel that SSE and development planning processes could bring significant change to the school. The questionnaire was structured in a manner which would spur reflection towards a particular sequence,

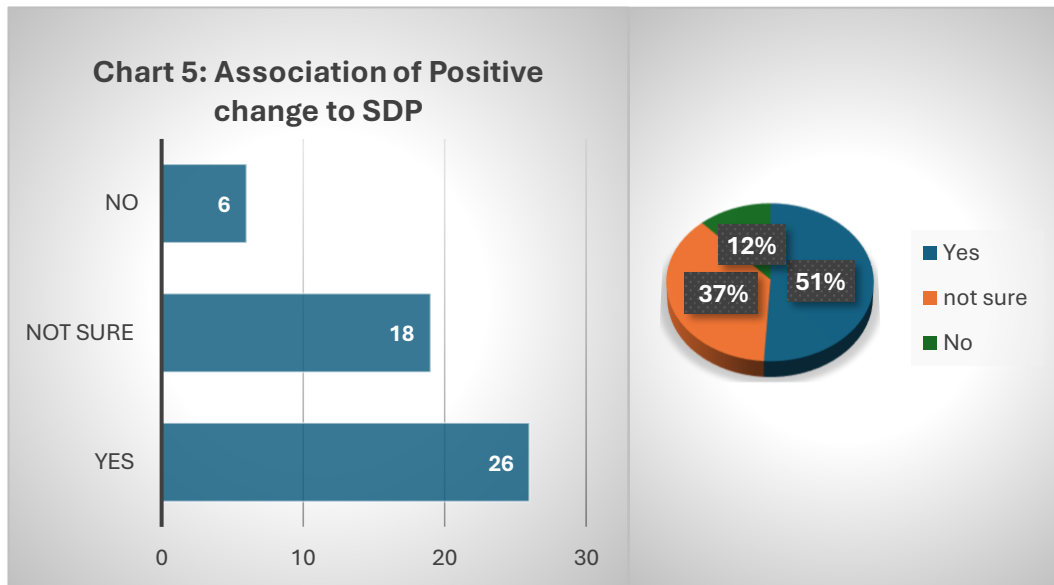
however, in this case a categorical ‘No’ was given as an option alongside ‘Yes’ and ‘Sometimes’. The ‘I don’t know’ option was never used to avoid giving respondents an easy way out and to keep on promoting reflection. Once again 70% of respondents felt that the process brings about significant change, 30% answered that sometimes the process can be used to bring about improvement. No respondents believed that SSE is not a tool which can bring about improvement. However, in the open-ended section, many also argued that for the SSE process to bring about change, it needs to be relevant and well-structured. The importance of the guidance provided by the SLT was also mentioned in the responses by educators as a determining factor.

Table 15 - Can Development Planning bring about significant change?



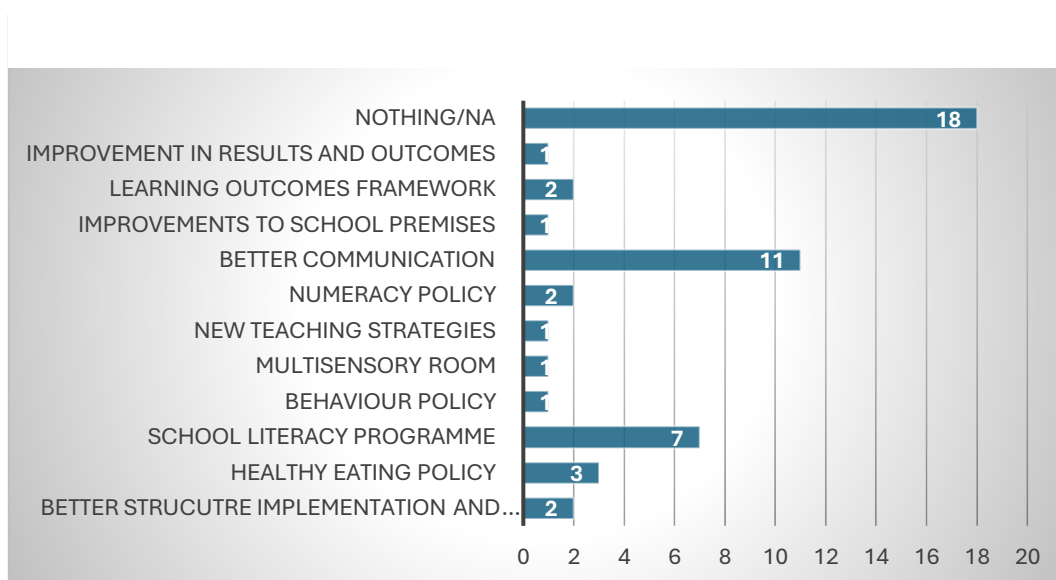
During in-depth interviews with educators, significance was usually attributed when an initiative impacted the participants tangibly and could be clearly remembered by interviewees. In fact, participants were also asked if they could associate an improvement or positive change in their school (both past and present) which was an outcome of the school’s Development Plan. Table 17 below depicts the results obtained from the questionnaire. As can be seen 26 participants, that is half of the participants, can associate the SSE process and school development planning to a specific aspect, whereas 18 of the respondents are not sure if the changes they have experienced at school are included in the school development plan process. Finally, six respondents do not associate the School Development Plan to any tangible improvement which goes on at school.

Table 16 - Association of Positive change to SSE and Development Planning.



As respondents might answer that they do associate a specific improvement to the SSE process without understanding it this really was the case, a follow up question which specifically asked to describe the change in question was posed to respondents. This helped in filtering what was really a tangible change and could possibly be traced back to past development plans, against others which were merely a perception that the change was the result of school development planning. Table 18 shows the responses provided. It can be noted that a substantial number of responses were quite specific in nature. However, an important result to note is that the highest percentage, that of 37%, do not associate the SDP to a specific and tangible change. This means that when they reflect on the process, they do not immediately associate it to improvement. This may, in the long run, influence their perception of the process as a worthwhile investment of their time at school.

Table 17 - Initiatives associated to School Development Planning.



It is important to notice in Table 18 that ‘Better communication’ and ‘School literacy programme’ are the two most mentioned aspect. From documentary research carried out through the analysis of previous SDP documents provided by both schools, communication and school literacy were indeed action plans which gleaned tangible results. These could be traced down to improved systems of communication as well as new literacy programmes for all year groups. The below contributions extracted from data obtained from interviews evidentiates the link which SSE and Development Planning process carried out by the school in previous years to the specific areas of improvement mentioned above.

“The last SDP we had was carried out by the previous head and ABC used to mention it frequently and so we were made aware of it. The last one which was held was on communication. As you know we are a big school, and it was felt by all of us that communication needed to improve..... there were numerous ways of communicating and the message used to be lost sometimes. I believe that through the SDP action plan on communication we improved a lot in that department. We focused mainly on that issue and resolved it.”
Teacher A SB.

“There were important things we discussed during SDP sessions such as communication which were eventually tackled and resolved. I believe that improvements in technology and unfortunately the fact that we

had to adapt during Covid-19 helped in understanding the need to improve communication. However, I believe that because it was identified as a priority in the SDP we made it a point of working on it because we all felt the need for it and owned it.” *Teacher E SB*

“I think the process has improved. At the beginning we lacked a bit of organization skills, as teachers we were not really aware that we had to pull towards the same direction and how to do it... such as the behaviour policy and especially what we are working on now... the language priority ... the literacy programme. These were addressed because they were part of the SDP. Every time we work on it we are more aware of what is expected of us and we are always improving. It is a difficult thing to do but I think every time we are getting better.” *Teacher C SA*

These in fact were the priority areas which both **School A** as well as **School B** respectively had focused on during previous years. This shows that when the change directly impacts educators, or in the case of communication, was elicited by them, it is directly felt and associated to the SSE process.

Other aspects mentioned, such as the learning outcomes framework and the numeracy policy were national endeavours which were also included as part of the school development planning but did not come directly from the school. The other aspects mentioned by participants could not be traced back to school development plan actions. However, from conversations with the SLT it transpires that these might have been undocumented or non-evaluated by-actions developed throughout the year. This also indicates that even though not necessarily aware of what the priorities are, educators will link to the SSE process any initiatives which are being addressed by the school. This shows that there is an underlying baseline understanding of the strategic objectives of the SSE and development planning process. During the in-depth interviews with educators, when asked the same question, the priority of communication came up in different instances. Two different educators from the same school specifically mentioned this aspect during interviews. There also was an interviewee from school B who specifically mentioned the literacy aspect.

During the in-depth interviews teachers were also asked if they felt that the process had any impact on the school’s improvement and if it is an effective process. They were also asked which of the factors had influenced their opinion. The data which transpired from the responses to these questions was quite varied and will be seen

as we progress through the findings. However, at the same time findings led to clear lines of inquiry such as the importance of time, consistency and evaluation throughout the process. The importance of the involvement of the educators themselves in the process was also mentioned especially in relation to ownership of the implementation process as well as its sustainability.

5.2.4 Outcomes for Theme 1

- Results from both School A and School B show that educators understand the importance of SSE and Development Planning towards change.
- Educators from both School A and School B can link the SSE process and Development Planning to significant change thus impacting their perception of the process. School A – Communication and School B – Literacy.
- Educators from School A and School B understand the importance of effectively structuring and leading the SSE and Development Management Process.
- There were also a significant number of educators who could not come up with a specific change which could be attributed to the process. This aspect was more prominent in School B.
- Both cohorts of educators from School A and School B can clearly pinpoint what is hindering the process and hence influencing their perception and ownership of it.

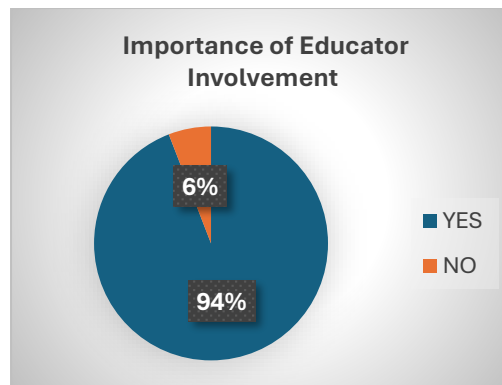
5.3 Theme 2: Involvement in the process

5.3.1 Educator Involvement

The level of involvement in the process and how this involvement materialises in tangible terms was one of the questions asked to participants as part of the questionnaire as well as during the one-to-one interviews held. This was an aspect which was also discussed in depth with the leadership teams of both schools, as it is finally this involvement which influences the perception, ownership and hence the mindset towards the process (EC, 2020; Mulford,2003). The involvement of educators also influences different parts of the process especially linked to the evaluative aspect (Davidsdottir & Lisi, 2007). Table 19 below shows that most of

the educators who responded to the questionnaire feel that the involvement of the educator is extremely important with only 6% stating that they believe it is not important. This can be viewed as an important finding, confirming the fact that educators feel the importance of their contribution to the process and the eventual outcomes.

Table 18 - Importance of educator involvement in SSE and Development Planning



During interviews, educators were also asked to comment on what they believed their level of involvement in the process is and ultimately to what extent they believe they should be involved and in what ways. Most responses revolve around the importance of ownership which is brought about by educator involvement in choice of priorities as well as the opportunity to discuss important aspects regarding the action plan. They also mentioned the importance of being given the time to reflect on aspects associated to improvement. The below are extracts from interviews with educators shared their perception regarding the process and their involvement in general.

“I think that the origin of the idea behind the SDP is a good one but I feel that many a time you feel that the idea has originated from the SLT and transposed in the SDP. For instance, a new literacy or numeracy programme is introduced without the involvement of educators... I feel that if this originated from the staff, then things would be taken more seriously.” **Teacher B SA**

“Personally, I strongly believe that there is always room for improvement and development so when we meet up at the end of the year to develop the action plans, I am always excited to see what we are going to be working on during the coming year. However, I feel that this is often disrupted by the continuous bombardment on schools by requests, new policies, strategies to implement etc. It then ends up the other way round, when the next year comes along, you are angry and frustrated that you did not manage to implement the plans which you had set and which are the real needs of the school. There is the opportunity to start over again but this affects staff morale, it’s unfortunately often demoralizing.” **Teacher C SA.**

“The SDP process is the vision of the school and where it is heading to, a shared sense of community where everyone’s contribution is the same, a sense of community, belonging, improvement, growth both personally and as a school. It gives you that opportunity to reflect on your practices. Personally, I think that when you are asked to reflect, in this chaos we are living in is not easy, however some personal reflection related to the school vision and if it is being followed is important... to be in line and see that your contribution to the school is a valid one.” **Teacher D SA**

At this stage, the idea of lack of time being an adversary to the effectiveness of the process already started emerging, with educators as well as SLT members stating that the time factor hindered a lot of the opportunities they had to involve educators in the process. Most respondents mentioned that the difficulty in finding time due to the various demands presented to them during their day at school is a major factor hindering their involvement in the process and therefore the process itself. This impacted for instance, the time available to meet as a team during curriculum time. Another important factor mentioned to this effect is that time set aside for reflection and discussion is often taken up by other activities or initiatives which are often perceived as being imposed by the school. They added that these initiatives are often not related to the SSE and Development Planning, thus creating a disconnect from the flow of the process.

An interesting comment by one of the educators, focused on the way SSE is being perceived as continuous change which is not always welcome by educators:

“The SDP process is something which is needed; however, teachers don’t like it. They perceive it as an added burden. I think because it is perceived as bringing extra work. Many teachers are set in their ways so if you change something they will not be happy. Change is not always comfortable, but it is necessary, otherwise we will remain stuck in our old ways.” **Teacher C SB**

The fear of change is unfortunately one which is quite common in most professions, including that of educators especially if they are not actively involved in developing that change and how it is going to be implemented. The approach towards the process, its consistency and its level of evaluation are obviously important contributors towards this. The more educators become familiar with the process, the more ownership exists, the more they can view the process as a tool which can help them approach change in a structured way rather than an added change which they need to address.

5.3.2 Learning Support Educators' involvement in the process

Something relatively unexpected which emerged from the research linked to the area of educator involvement is the limitations to the effective involvement of LSEs in the process and in the development of action plans. I include the word 'effective' as the feelings which emerged frequently during interviews as well as through the questionnaire was that LSEs were often used to replace teachers to take care of children while teachers were discussing action plans and development planning. The main complaint which surfaced was that they are rarely effectively involved in the discussions leading to the development of the action plan. During interviews carried out with LSEs from both schools, similar traits emerged. These often concerned their understanding of what involvement in the process entails. This ranged from actual participation in writing the action plan and being involved in its implementation to considering involvement as merely responding to the questionnaire which was distributed as part of the internal review process.

"As a school LSEs are very much involved, even during weekly meetings, the LSEs are also present, even with the SLT we can discuss. I do not see the division between teacher and LSE as they ask for the contribution of both a teacher and an LSE when the form is distributed at the end of the year. So, we are involved in that way. It is the same questionnaire filled in by everyone." *LSE A SA*

"Yes, I know that the school works on an SDP. To be honest, I was never overly involved in it. As in, there is an SDP, we are going to work in a small group and such, so I never went into too much detail about the process, but I know about it." *Interview LSE B SA*

In another case, it was just basic awareness that the process exists but that's it, there is no understanding of why the process is held and what kind of expectations exist of the process.

"I feel that there is a divide between teachers and LSEs, so we do our best to link it together, however it is not always easy to breach the divide. During the SDP sessions, when it comes to learning and teaching, rightly so, they seem to focus on teaching staff but when they discuss issues such as behaviour, school ethos etc then we discuss it together. I believe that we, as LSEs should always be included as we are also in class with the teacher. I feel that try as we may, this divide is difficult to close." *LSE B SB*

"I feel the lack of involvement of LSEs, there are times where I feel it more than others.... sometimes I say its part of the job, you accept it and move on. However, SDPs are important to our school and for us as educators, as lately we have started working more in groups and teams. This has improved the dynamics of the team, so I believe more involvement in the SDP process is necessary at this stage." *Teacher D SB*

5.3.3 Stakeholder involvement

Most respondents (46 out of 50 – 92%) believe that the role of stakeholders within the process is very important. This question was followed by an open-ended question asking who they feel are the relevant stakeholders from whom the school needs to gather feedback when carrying out self-evaluation.

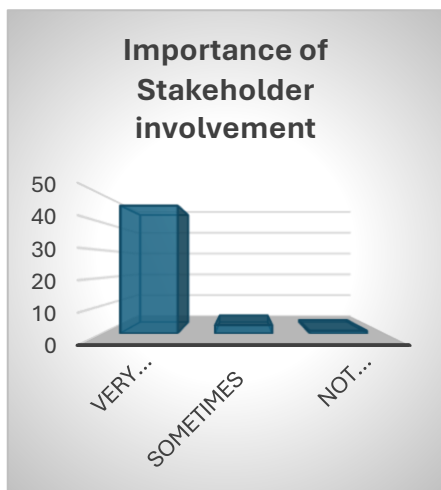


Table 19 - Importance of stakeholder involvement.

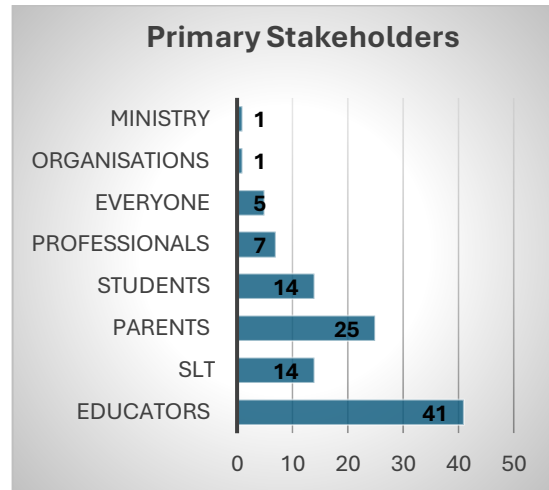


Table 20 - Primary stakeholders

Stakeholder involvement is also a crucial aspect of the SSE and development planning process, especially when it comes to students and their parents. The level of involvement of parents and students in development planning has been quite prominently mentioned in literature especially in reports developed by organisations such as OECD and the EC (EC, 2020; Maxwell, 2018). Most suggest a more active role in SSE and Development Planning. The importance attributed to stakeholder involvement by school B in particular is also indicative of the collaborative stance which exists at the school and the level of sharing which goes on especially in relation to improvement. Both school A and school B attribute substantial importance to both the role of the parents as well as of students which are the highest mentioned stakeholders by respondents following educators themselves. However, when this was discussed with SLT teams during focus groups and individual meetings, it was evident that the communication with parents

was one which was mainly one way, that is, parents were merely recipients of information. Both schools seemed to shy away from communicating with parents due to past experiences where they felt that parents were too intrusive. The fear of being judged also plays an important part in this lack of involvement. Talking about parental involvement in the decision-making process one of the Heads of School stated:

“We do not have a PTA at school. The one we had was not constructive. In our case the involvement of parents was always at the lower end.... I try to involve them by asking them for their opinion but we need to involve them further...”

“Sometimes the people who apply for these councils are not ideal.... they are vociferous but not in the right way.” *HOS B*

On the other hand, educators feel that if parents are involved more, then in a number of cases, they would not have to struggle so much to communicate important aspects of their child’s educational journey. Other stakeholders worth mentioning is the involvement of students in the process which at this stage is relatively limited and happens through feedback collected through their parents. Fourteen out of the fifty participants specifically mentioned students, which is an indication that albeit induced by the research, reflection on the process is starting to happen and is indicating that the voice of students should be given more attention.

The involvement of the SLT is also one of the highest responses mentioned by educators. What is interesting to notice at this stage is that educators who gave SLT as a response do not seem to consider members of the leadership team as ‘educators’. This could be indicative of several differing factors. It could show a certain level of divide in their perception of leadership team and educators or else a lack of effective understanding of the SSE process which ultimately aims at bringing together all members of the school community as a professional learning community geared towards improvement. It could also, however, be indicative of the importance which teachers and learning support educators naturally attribute to the leaders in the process and their guidance. This aspect will be dealt in more detail at a later stage when the involvement of the SLT is discussed.

5.3.4 Outcomes for Theme 2

- Both educators from School A and School B seem to understand the importance of their involvement in the process; however, it is not clear if they understand what this involvement entails. This was more prominent in School B.
- Few educators from both School A and School B mentioned how they could be actively involved in the implementation or the evaluation of action plans.
- Educators from both School A and School B realise the importance of their role within the process as part of the reflection process instigated by the research.
- Involvement of stakeholders in the process is relatively limited.
- The involvement of parents featured predominantly in the research. As indicated by one of the Heads of School involved in the research this could be fear of ‘vociferous’ judgement or having parents on the school council who are ‘not ideal’. The limited involvement of parents was more prominent in School B rather than School A. The latter did not consider limited parental involvement as a major issue. Parents were more actively involved in School A.

5.4 Theme 3: Leadership and the SSE process

5.4.1 Introduction

The role of educational leadership is one which is naturally given prominence in literature on SSE and development planning. The conversation with leadership teams was relevant not only during the focus groups held but also throughout the different meetings held during the span of the research. Similarly to what was addressed with educators, leadership teams did not solely focus on their perception of the process but also on what they believed their role was, how they approach the process and what they believe are the pitfalls which they encounter as leaders. Also of interest, is that although not directly solicited through a specific question,

educators also frequently gave their opinion regarding the role of leadership in the process. Findings on the role of leadership were gathered during both years of the research.

5.4.2 The role of leadership according to educators

Research findings related to teachers' contribution to the team showed four distinctive aspects emanating from the different research tools which focused on the perceived role of leadership within the process. A very common aspect which was brought forward by educators is the role of the leadership team as facilitator and manager of the process. The responses provided during interviews were very clear in this regard as can be seen below. The main responsibility for the process, according to educators lies on the leadership team.

By having all the staff on board and owning the plan and SLT referring to it in order to keep the process alive.” **Teacher C SB**

“SLT should give us less administrative duties so we can do our job. Too much on our plate already.” **Teacher B SB**

“SLT need to manage the process by gathering data from all stakeholders, process it and priorities identified. This will lead to developing action plans from the three categories and SDP written for the coming two/three years.” **Teacher B SA**

“SLT need to ensure that targets are more specific.” **Teacher C SA**

Educators also expect leadership to be active in listening as well as being an effective communicator when dealing with the process. Moreover, there should be active participation in the process from the part of leadership. The latter feedback can be linked to the monitoring and evaluation phase, as this part of the process is where leadership can exercise a strong participative stance.

“SLT need to take decisions together with the staff. The SDP should not be imposed, there is no ownership if this is done.” **Teacher B SA**

“SLT needs to listen more to what educators say... and consult with members of staff.” **Teacher E SB**

“By genuinely listening, understanding and taking on board practical feedback from all stakeholders. It is useless having these processes if there is a goal which needs to be reached regardless of the feedback from staff/parents/students, thus rendering the feedback void.” **Teacher F SB.**

“Maybe SLT can participate in lesson and give direct feedback.” **Teacher B SA**

“SLT can guide staff on giving more focus on how to improve teaching and learning. Researching about highly effective methodologies and take more risks to move away from text books and give the teacher more autonomy to be creative and to be able to create a more interesting learning environment for students. There would still be ways for the SLT to gauge what learning is being done in class. This would of course require training teachers.” **Teacher B SA**

However, one of the strongest comments centres around the role of the SLT in providing time and the opportunity to discuss.

“SLT should give us more time to carry out the process if they believe in it.” **Teacher C SA**

“SLT to organize meetings so all this can be discussed as a team.” **Teacher C SA**

“SLT should offer more opportunities for PD and SDP would help educators more in their profession to grow holistically.” **Teacher E SB**

“SLT should ensure that everyone is involved and is given the opportunity to give his/her opinions in the planning. Then once implemented, it has to be reviewed to check if it is working out well.” **Teacher D SB**

From the interactions with educators during the research as well as the findings it can be clearly seen that educators believe that the role of the SLT in the process is pivotal. Evidence shows that educators keep on externalizing that a certain level of guidance is needed to navigate the process and this, to their advice, can only be offered by the SLT who are not only seen as the ‘leaders’ and ‘managers’ of the process. They are also viewed as ‘facilitators’ who ensure that the factors which are necessary for the process to function are effectively in place. This kind of facilitation includes the provision of professional development as well as the facilitation of the necessary time needed to be able to discuss priorities and relevant queries.

The time factor was nearly always associated to the role of leadership where it was the head and assistant heads who had the power and the responsibility to give them that time to discuss either through better distribution of work or acting as a buffer to incoming initiatives from outside which might hinder the process.

Communication and active listening, which are pivotal for the process to work were also common factors frequently mentioned by educators. This shows that educators are looking towards a view of quality which is dynamic, flexible, adaptable and strategic (Van Kemenade & Hardjono, 2018).

5.4.3 The role of leadership according to the SLT teams

The focus group sessions held at the end of the first year with both SLT teams focused primarily on their perception of the process especially in relation to their role as leaders. As discussed earlier, the conversation also led to the discussion on the factors which they believe are hindering the effectiveness of their role as leaders. An aspect mentioned by both leadership teams is the importance of instilling a sense of belonging and ownership of the process in staff as being fundamental. This is already indicating that there is a certain recognition among the leadership teams that preparation in embarking on the process is essential.

“I believe our role as leaders is very important because it is our role to explain to them that this is a process which we are working on together. The fact that this year we worked together in smaller groups really helped them because they had the opportunity to talk at grade level.....

..... we are giving them the importance which they deserve as educators within their grade... this is not something which is coming from above and you have to do it no matter what, this is something which was developed by you.” **AHF SB**

“Before it was an exercise which was carried out by the Head of School after school hours simply to have an SDP, there was no ownership, and we believe that the ownership factor is fundamental when it comes to implementing action plans. “**HOS SA**

An important aspect which correlated with feedback obtained from educators is the belief by SLT that their role is central to the process. As leaders they seem to be very much aware of their responsibility within the process especially when it comes to the management aspect and ensuring that educators get the necessary training.

They also take it in a relaxed way, not as seriously as they should. It is a day where we do not have children so I can switch off... unfortunately that is the attitude. This is why I feel that when action plans are written we need to be there, and not let them work completely on their own and then join at the end. They need to feel that we are present. Personally I really feel it helped when we were developing the action for the early years and I had the presence of the HoD and we worked on it together, so there was the expert in the subject, myself who knows the curriculum and the staff who have to implement it and worked really well and it was already less on me as a leader” **AHE SB**

“I think the leadership team should facilitate training and professional development especially in relation to what is being considered as a priority in the SDP.” **HOS SB**

“As leaders we need to ensure that the process is not hijacked in one way or another by particular individuals who have personal agendas. It is our role to facilitate but also manage the process.” **AHG SB**

“To be realistic as well, as we cannot only see the silver lining, as my colleague is saying, it is easy to dream but then you have to push it to become a reality... that is an entirely different matter.” **AHC SA**

However, they also acknowledge that managing the process is no easy feat and that there are several pitfalls which are encountered along the way. First among their main concerns, similar to what educators mentioned in their interviews, is the perception that the time at their disposal to carry out the process is limited.

“the hours which have to be dedicated to it (speaking about a particular process implemented by the school) ... this drained the staff and the SMT and left us no time to dedicate to teachers’ wellbeing and it is showing a lot, at teachers’ level... educators’ level and even the relationship we have with the educators themselves. Personally, with the years which I take care of, there are so many things going on that you have to cater for throughout the year. The number of training hours on Learning Outcomes for example... there are no days for us to dedicate to teachers’ well-being.” **AHF SB**

“The most crucial aspect is the time factor, which is a big issue, all this is great, but if you do not have the time to implement it, it becomes useless... when can we meet to evaluate? There is no time. The three development days were all taken this year. We never met to evaluate.”

..... there is huge lack of dialogue and professional conversation because we do not have time.”

..... this is when it becomes a document written in the office because there is no time... and that is why there is that apathy and that lack of ownership. I would like to implement the ideal however, if there isn’t the ideal setting where this can be carried out then we can plan all we want but it will never materialize.” **AHG SB**

Lack of ownership and resistance to change were also mentioned as important aspects towards facilitating and managing the process. Their contributions clearly acknowledge that without these factors, it will be very difficult to change. The need to change is also something which was highlighted during the conversations with both teams.

Another point which I would like to add is that I feel that the way staff look at the SDP is a burden, it is not something which they own, and this in itself hinders the process itself and makes our role even more difficult.”

“I have been an assistant head for a year and a half now and I still carry a lot of baggage from when I was a teacher in class, and I see the difference when it comes to ownership from the perspective of an educator and the perspective of a member of the SLT. We seem to be constantly focused on targets and timeframes which we have set and educators might see this in a different light, sometimes I am sorry to say, as a burden.

... It is something which we need to work on so that we are on the same level as regards approach, not as a burden but because we believe that the school is at a point where careful planning is needed for improvement...

what I mean is that we still maybe need to see that its importance is understood by all stakeholders.” **AH H SB.**

Unfortunately, there is always that resistance to change which worries them especially the development of new initiatives which then go up gradually at every level. The idea of moving towards something new, a new approach... there are different levels of apathy and resistance.” **HOS SA**

The need for support was also mentioned on different occasions by the SLT of both School A and School B, especially with reference to the lack of experience and in the management of data and the selection of priorities.

“I do not have as much experience with SDP as my colleagues, but as a person I like to plan... it helps me a lot... let alone in a big school such as this one, it is necessary towards improvement but so many things happen in between... the reality is that we often lose focus, it becomes difficult. I believe that we need external support in managing the process. A critical friend or something similar who is an expert in the area” **AHA SA**

“... the number of things which come from the data, how am I going to manage them? When we discussed this, you (researcher) mentioned the need to select the most salient priorities... and I agree with having finally to select the most important... but how do I manage the rest?

... what happens is that a lot of data comes out of the general questionnaires, however you also get a lot of individual feedback, for example the lack of appreciation for Maltese in a particular year group ... should I ignore that to include something else which was pinpointed by the majority of educators for the whole school? I ultimately chose to address it somehow...

... this is the greatest dilemma, teachers come up to you after they answer the questionnaire and tell you... but in the analysis other things came out as important too... why didn't we tackle them. Maybe it's not the main priority, but to them it is a priority... unless we are clear in explaining the remit of the SDP process at that point, we risk making them more resistant to the process.” **HOS SB**

The aspects outlined in this section are important as they permeate throughout the study. The time factor, which is frequently mentioned as a deterrent to the success of the process is an essential element in the eyes of the leadership team. However, at this stage there is no reflection on how the time allocated to the process is managed by the school. At a later stage following changes and further reflection on the process, the aspect of how time allocation is managed will be addressed by SLT teams themselves.

Another interesting factor mentioned by SLT as an issue is the lack of ownership from the part of the educators, who, according to SLT members look at the process as a burden. The resistance to change, which although can be linked to ownership,

also concerns the ever-present issue of the need for a mind shift; that from a fixed to a growth mindset. However, both aspects are directly linked to how leadership approaches the process as well as the concept of improvement. Snyder (2019) argues that the issue with most organizational leaders is that they find it difficult to strike a balance between culture and structure to sustain quality in times which are complex and difficult. As seen earlier educators feel that the role of the SLT is to manage the process wholly, whereas the SLT believes that educators need to have more ownership of the process. The ability to manage the data and the selection of priorities was also an important aspect mentioned by both teams. Another point mentioned is the need of support specific to the management of the process. This is also something which as a researcher I perceived quite frequently during the duration of the study due primarily to the regularity of requests for support from both leadership teams. Developing the scenario for effective change within a relatively complex system such as a school requires leaders to shift from thinking in linear, static ways to more dynamic ways of thinking (Snyder & Snyder, 2023).

5.4.4 Outcomes Theme 3: The role of leadership in the process

- All educators interviewed in School A and School B acknowledge that the limited time factor is an important element for both educators and leadership team. However, it was more frequently mentioned by the SLT members of both School A and School B.
- There is a perceived lack of ownership and resistance from the part of the educators. This was more prominently displayed by the SLT of school B.
- Understanding the role of the SLT and educators within the process is not always straightforward.
- The Management of data during the internal review process and the selection of priorities was also an aspect mentioned throughout the research.

5.5 Theme 4: Implementing the SSE process

A key factor of the SSE process and school development planning is the ability to formulate and develop and implement practical and focused action plans which delineate the school's path towards improvement especially in relation to the priority targets chosen. Educators are actively encouraged to involve themselves in this part of the process, not only for the sake of ownership of the school's development plan and sense of belonging towards the process but also because they will be the ones who will effectively operate the action plan in the classroom and therefore have to know why and how the actions detailed will be structured and implemented (MacBeath, 2006). Literature relevant in the area often questions the ability of teachers to not only interpret the data but to also be able to translate it into something practical, such as an action plan, which will bring about improvement (Vanhoof et al., 2012; Gaertner, 2014). Table 22 shows the responses given by participants when they were asked how confident they felt in writing an action plan, thus also impacting how they would then subsequently implement the actions and carry out the evaluation process.

Table 21 - Educators' confidence in writing action plans.



When looking into the responses, one can clearly see the uncertainty educators transmit when it comes to their perceived level of confidence in developing action plans as 70% of the respondents feel that they are not always confident, whilst 16% do not feel confident at all. Interestingly 14% feel very confident in writing action

plans. During interviews held with educators it transpired that this uncertainty in writing can stem from different aspects. A main concern is their knowledge of the subject matter about which they are writing. If there is a certain level of ownership of the priority and it is directly linked to their work in the classroom, especially as a year group, then their confidence is strengthened. All interviewed educators were asked if they felt they needed more training and support in understanding the process and in writing action plans. They all felt that this is necessary, but some also mentioned that this kind of training should be continuous rather than a one-off episode. They also mentioned that they would prefer hands on training rather than an exercise where one just listens to how the process works. Others mentioned that during this training they should be given the time to sit down and write action plans and then discuss them with their peers. The below extracts from the interviews give an idea of what support educators believe is relevant to a better implementation of the process.

“It is always good to have clearer guidelines to facilitate our work... I think training would be ideal” **Teacher A SA**

“To be honest, I think we did have at some point, the issue is how things are explained and how they are taught... that is the problem... we expect teachers to be creative but when it comes to practicing what we preach, we are just given a lecture... I preach you listen... this is how things should be done and that’s it. I think this kind of training should be continuous, especially because of staff turnover and new teachers who do not have the experience of that one off training. Again, this is a double-edged sword.... you need to train people but when can you do it? How do you find the time?” **Teacher E SB**

“I don’t feel too confident in writing action plans.... but the fact that we work in a group is already very important as we help each other and discuss things while we are writing... Plus the leadership team usually tells us how to word action plans so we do get support in that way. We are directed on what to write... you look at the model action plan and you work around it according to your needs. We usually have a specific background to work on.” **LSEC SB**

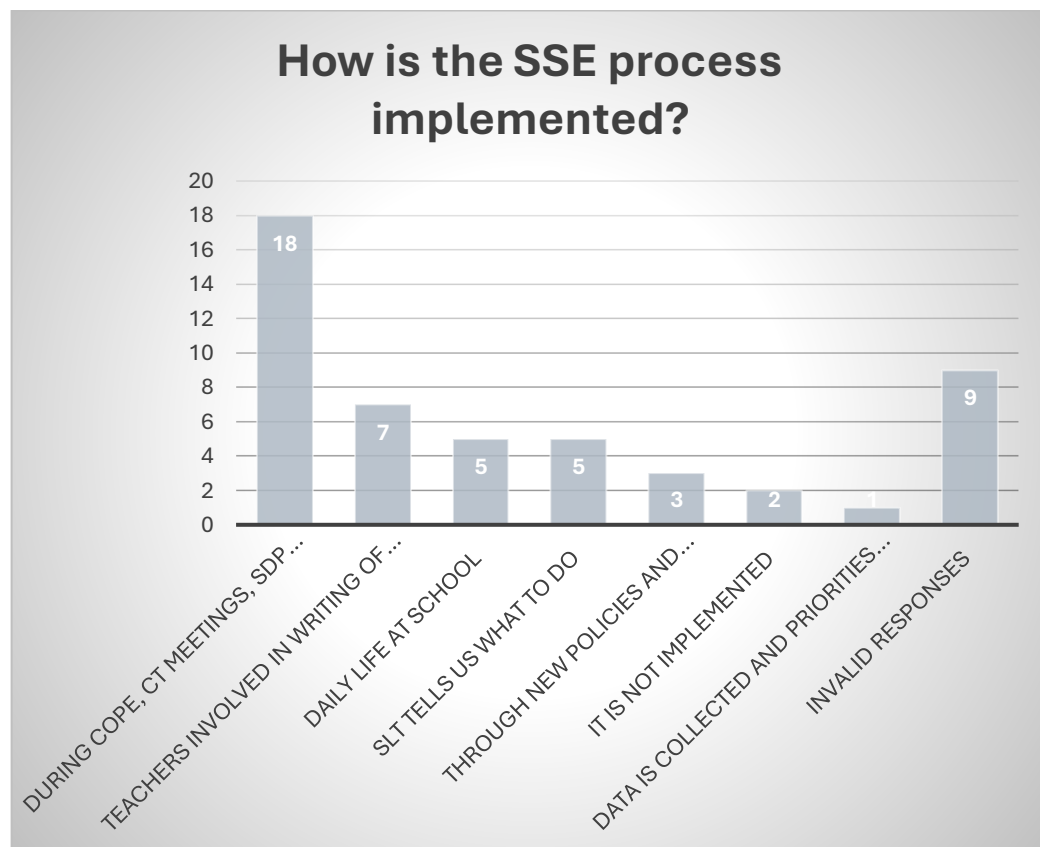
“I think we do.... yes... in fact I was a bit panicked when I was told that I was going to sit for an interview with you because I do not feel that I know enough about the process... in fact I had to research a bit. For us it was always a kind of process where we were told what we have to do and we have to discuss it in year groups.” **LSC C SA**

“Personally, I believe that support through professional development is very important, either from the secretariat⁴ or the ministry for education. I feel that a lot of strategies and initiatives are ‘imposed’ on us however we are not given enough resources for us to be able to implement them effectively.... especially through the SDP process.” **AHF SB**

⁴ Secretariat for Catholic Education (SfCe) is the management structure for Church Schools in Malta. The role of the secretariat is primarily to offer support to schools.

As can also be seen from the contribution brought forward by these educators, the time factor is also an important aspect which is considered when training on any aspect is approached. This also ties to the priority being discussed at that point in time and the importance which is attributed by the school to proficiency in strategic management and planning and in a school-wide approach towards implementing the process. Both these aspects, as can be seen in quotations by interviewed educators above, tend to lend themselves to a school development plan which is directed by the leadership and is not an effort brought forward by the whole school. Educators were also asked about their understanding of the process. The question focused on asking how they believed the process was implemented at school. Not to provide respondents with hints on how to answer this was included as an open-ended question.

Table 22 - How is the SSE process being implemented?



The responses (see Table 23), albeit varied, could be contained, following analysis, within a manageable number of areas. It is interesting how the most frequent

response concentrated around the staff speaking about or discussing the improvement plan during Curriculum Development Time⁵ (CT) and during professional development sessions and SDP sessions. Apart from the CT time which is carried out every week, professional development sessions and SDP sessions are one offs which are usually used for training in particular areas. Another important aspect focused on the fact that educators were being involved in the writing of the action plans and the fact that they had started planning for it as a team or year group. To these educators, this is equivalent to the process. Taking nothing from the fact that this is a positive improvement to the process, the responses mainly focused on just one section and not on how it is implemented in stages and the actual evaluation of the actions implemented. This indicates that in most cases their understanding of the process is far from being a continuous exercise which is regularly evaluated. Their knowledge and understanding are relegated to isolated incidents such as a staff meeting, a training session or in some cases a CT time. The latter is the closest to a process of evaluation, however it is also mentioned in isolation and not an exercise which happens regularly. At no point did any of the participants mention the aspect of evaluation separately or as part of the process.

Respondents also mentioned that these were implemented as part of their daily life at school, which is a relatively vague response which does not indicate any awareness of how the process works. On the other hand, an equal number of respondents stated that the SLT tells them what and how to implement aspects of the SDP process. Two of the respondents clearly said that the process is not implemented while nine respondents gave invalid answers, which may indicate their lack of awareness of what the process really and truly entails and how it is implemented.

⁵ Curriculum Development Time (CT) is time dedicated to year group meetings. These are usually weekly sessions carried out during school hours where students are either with a peripatetic teacher or have their PE sessions.

5.5.1 Support in the implementation of the process

An interesting aspect which repeatedly emerged during the individual interviews with educators as well as during focus groups with the SLT is the notion of the critical friend. In hindsight, during analysis, this interest in the aspect might have been a reaction on the part of educators and leadership to my involvement as researcher within the process especially during the first year of the research. In fact, both schools had been given at this stage, a workshop on how to write effective action plans which also included practical support. This might have given the idea of an alternative way of looking at support, not merely as a one-time session but one which is continuous and involves hands on activities. When it comes to the internal review process it was clear that what is needed is a continuous process which is not linked to any form of judgement such as external evaluation but one which focuses on supporting the school and which has the interest of the school at heart in a non-conflicting way.

“I think the session we had with you last time helped a lot⁶. I think it is important; however it needs to be continuous not just a one-time thing. First because staff is constantly changing so they would need upskilling, secondly certain things from one time to the next are forgotten. We need to be upskilled at least once every two years....

..... It is also important for staff to understand that a critical friend is not there to assess them because ultimately that is what we are afraid of... the external review... the audit... this is not an audit because automatically it would have negative repercussions about it. This is a friendly conversation about the school’s development plan... its not an audit... not an assessment ... then I believe everyone will be on board” **Teacher C SA**

“I think that support is always important especially someone who is external and can give feedback which is not biased... at the end of the day it is an extra help for growth. If I were part of the SLT, I would appreciate the help.”

“If there is someone who mentors the process, an expert in the area... I believe it would definitely help.” **LSE C SA**

Following the sessions held with both schools on the writing of an action plan, a follow up exercise was organised where the SLT monitored the writing of action plans closer to the end of the scholastic year and these were then sent for feedback to me as researcher. The analysis of these action plans helped in gleaning where the educators stand in understanding the reasons behind the development of these

⁶ Both schools asked the researcher to deliver a training session on the writing of action plans. This was held in December 2021 – 2 hour session.

actions and if they understood the importance of writing action plans which are SMART⁷ as this was highlighted and discussed during the training sessions as well as during the school sessions where they had to write the action plans as a community.

In the case of those action plans which concerned directly the year group and implementation within the classroom, educators were more confident in writing their actions and clearer in outlining the steps to be taken as well as who was responsible for that particular action. When the area was generic, such as behaviour, or well-being, then action plans struggled to become relevant as educators were not confident in the priority target and how it could be developed. This also indicates the commitment of leadership in the process, to what extent a priority is discussed and if educators are given time to reflect before embarking on the writing of the action plan.

5.5.2 Outcomes Theme 4: Implementation of the SSE process

- Both interviewed educators from School A and School B have limited understanding of the different parts of the process.
- Both educators from School A and School B link the SSE and Development Planning process mainly to the writing of action plans.
- In both School A and School B the monitoring and evaluation of action plans in the classroom is not an active part of the daily routine of educators.
- In both School A and School B educators strongly feel the need for support in understanding and implementing the process. However, this was more frequently mentioned in School B.

⁷ SMART – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time bound.

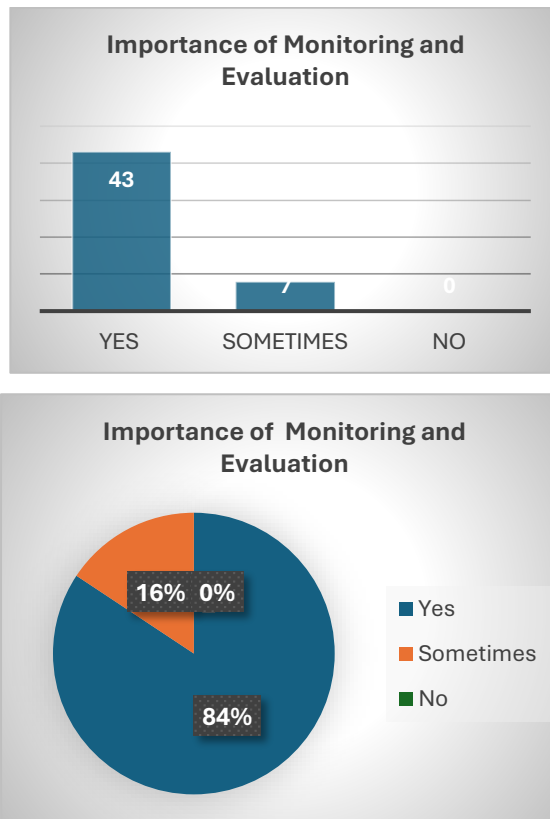
5.6 Theme 5: Monitoring and evaluation as part of the process

One of the determining parts of the SSE process is evaluation. Findings within the different themes discussed previously in the chapter are leading towards a general lack of understanding of SSE as a ‘process’. It seems to be generally viewed as a fragmented and disjointed series of actions which are sporadically carried out by schools. This can be attributed to a lack in consistency in the implementation of the process as well as a lack of ownership and understanding of how it works. The concept of evaluation is one of these aspects, the absence of which was felt in the process but was never tackled in tangible terms. During the span of the research various aspects regarding monitoring and evaluation were discussed, however, these primarily revolved around the perception of evaluation and not what was really happening.

5.6.1 Educators’ perception on monitoring and evaluation.

What was interesting during the research was that although there was a direct question which specifically focused on evaluation, most interviewees led to the importance of evaluation or lack of it as an issue without any direct prompting. This was a clear indication that the conversations which were developing during the interviews were proving to be an exercise in reflection for both the interviewer and interviewee. As will be seen later on in the chapter, this conversation led to further reflection regarding the need to improve the evaluative part of the process. The interviews themselves served as an example for all educators, including SLT members, of the importance of dedicating time to reflect on certain aspects of the process.

Table 23 - Importance of Monitoring and Evaluation as part of the process.



As can be seen from the responses (Table 24), all participants understand the importance of evaluation as part of the SSE process with the vast majority of the respondents (84%) asserting its importance and 16% saying that it is sometimes important. During interviews educators were also directly asked about the evaluation component and how often they would evaluate the action plans they were implementing throughout the year. The responses show that evaluation is not considered as a constant exercise by educators and many said that it rarely occurred, both as a year group and in the whole school context. Moreover, as also discussed in Theme 4, many seem to associate evaluation to a one-time activity. This also tends to indicate that the approach by the school towards development planning was one where ownership, the responsibility of evaluation as well as the whole process is placed mainly on the leadership team who are bound to organize those yearly sessions. The below section depicts some of the most relevant responses provided by interviewees during interviews and focus groups when

asked regarding the implementation and evaluation of action plans and which part of the process they believe is the most significant.

“Not much. Sometimes when we have these COPE⁸ sessions at the end of the year where we meet as staff but again, in my opinion, this is too late... sometimes you need to discuss as you go along and evaluate so you can discuss with other teachers in different grades and the SLT. I feel that that opportunity is not given to us. discussing at the end of the year is too late... the moment has passed... you need to tackle issues with action plans there and then...” **Teacher D SB**

“Not really, we discuss at the end of the year, and due to the Covid pandemic we have not met that often. I am not aware of what is going on. Everyone and everything went online.” **LSE B SA**

“I think the evaluation phase is the most important part of the process. At the beginning when there is something new everyone is excited, we are all involved, there is that hype, as happened with the literacy action plan. You are trained, however when you start implementing it you might come across aspects which are different in the current context. We have no opportunity to speak up about these issues.... if we evaluate, then we would have that opportunity and things might work better.” **Teacher C SA**

“I think evaluation is happening, even though it is not given that much importance. The focus is on the implementation, however there were cases where we understood that something needs to be reviewed because it is not working well.” **Teacher F SB Y**

“I believe we need to find time to evaluate more. I don’t think that it ever happened that we meet up as the same group who proposed the action plan and evaluate. The best part of the process is when action plans are developed as a group as everyone can express their opinion.” **LSE D SB**

The overarching feeling from educators is that they would appreciate more time to be able to evaluate the action plans which they would have developed and to a certain extent the implementation of these action plans in class. It was frequently mentioned that the one-time session organized at the end of the year is first and foremost not enough and secondly it is too late for a thorough evaluation to be undertaken. The focus seems to be on implementation. There exists a lack of understanding of the importance of evaluation as part of the process and how this can influence the outcomes. It was interesting to notice how the reflection exercise carried out with the researcher during the interview opened the eyes of educators to the importance of evaluation and how the limited time dedicated to it is ultimately impacting the whole process.

⁸ COPE sessions are professional development sessions for educators which form part of the agreement between the ministry of education and the Malta Union of teachers – find exactly definition

5.6.1.1 Educators' implementation and evaluation of action plans

In the quest to link evaluation and educator involvement to the notion of professional development and the development of reflective learning communities, educators were also asked to what extent they used the action plans devised during the process as part of their daily operation in classroom and how often they referred to the plans for improvement developed by the school. This aspect was tackled not only to assess how practical action plans are to teaching staff but also to understand to what extent they were evaluating action plans during their practice in class.

Table 24 - Reference to action plans during the Development Planning phase.

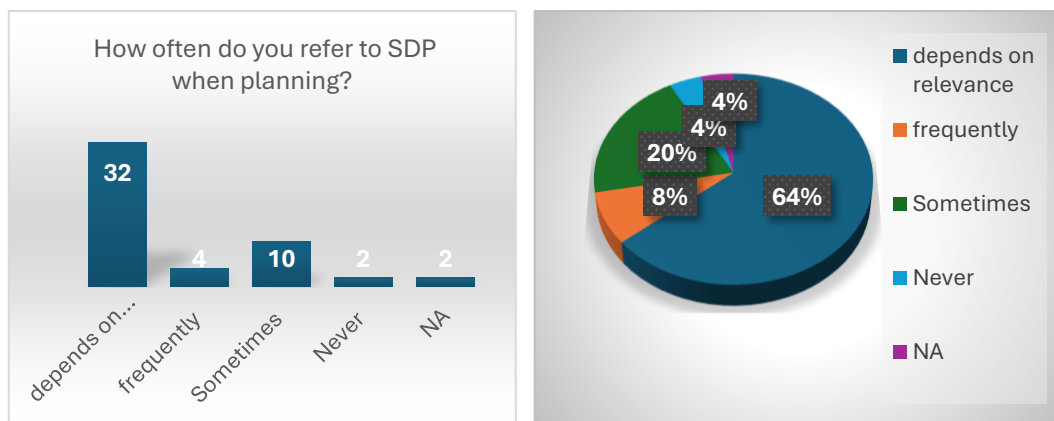


Table 25 above interestingly shows that 64% of participating educators refer to the development plans in their own lesson planning when they feel that they are relevant to their work. On the other hand, 20% stated that they sometimes refer to them, and 8% that they frequently refer to them. Only a small percentage of respondents, 4%, that is two respondents, stated that they never refer to them. This data shows that to a certain extent there is the understanding that action plans can be used while planning, however as can be seen the majority stated that they use them when these matter to them, meaning that they do not always feel that the school development planning process and action plans are relevant to their needs. This will obviously also reflect on the sense of ownership of the process.

5.6.2 Senior Leadership Teams' perception on monitoring and evaluation

The area of monitoring and evaluation was also discussed during focus groups with members of the SLT of both schools. Transcripts of both focus groups show that members of the SLT, similarly to educators, often discussed amongst themselves, without being prompted directly, the importance of evaluation. In the case of SLT members however, the notion of monitoring was also frequently mentioned. Another difference is that through the focus groups interaction, leadership teams understood to a certain extent their responsibility towards monitoring and evaluation as part of the process. It was also evident that they felt that they were not consistent in their commitment to the evaluative part of the process. As can be seen below, in many cases, their contributions were infused with reasons why they felt that evaluation was not being implemented. The feedback also emphasised on the importance of continuity and possible ideas of how this could be managed better.

I think one of the main issues which we have with the SDP process is when we come to the part of evaluation. It is a very important step as without evaluation the process is useless. In my opinion, we have to be very careful of how evaluation is developed because we have educators who have excuses, reasons for why they have not completed the action plan and you would find a number of them who cannot take feedback constructively and feel offended if they are scrutinized and asked why something did not work effectively and that would throw us as leadership and the effectiveness of the process even further back. The little experience I have gathered so far has taught me that you really need to be careful how to approach them in this regard.”

Assistant Head B SA

“Educators can also use evaluation to tell you... listen, we did not manage this.... this is not working so let's go back to the way we were before, this did not work the resistance to change.” **HOS SB**

“I believe that evaluation is to be continuous along the year so that this can be avoided. However, we have no time to carry this out as we should. Sometimes it is akin to madness.” **AH E SB**

“.... continuous with small positive messages, if something is wrong then encourage them, there will be those who abuse the situation, as always, but along the year if you build it up slowly and work with individual teachers it might be better. As SLT we must manage the situation carefully, otherwise it will backfire.” **AHF SB**

“This (evaluation) is one of our biggest challenges, one of the things we are constantly struggling with. I personally tried last year to introduce structured meetings which would help us evaluate however so many things happen during the day that we find it very difficult to manage.... at times I believe we need to break down into smaller groups if we want to evaluate and then get back to each other as a team on occasion. We manage in smaller groups but in my eyes, it is far from structured and far from ideal. In my opinion we are not tackling it well enough, and it is something which I need to work on as a head of school. **HOS SA**

“The evaluation and monitoring part needs improvement. Things are being carried out but so far this year I have not managed to discuss the SDP action plans with anyone because so many things are going on, especially during the first term, which is the most crucial, monitoring becomes very difficult. I know they are being implemented but to stop and check is difficult not only for us as SLT but even for teachers. “**AHB SA**

From the recordings of the focus group sessions and the excerpts above, the main feeling which was garnered from both SLT teams is that of frustration as they seem to understand that the process needs to be implemented but that there isn't a clear understanding and/or know how of how this can be managed or structured. Their perception of the limited time they have, during which, must handle all the daily pressure of running a school is also something which heavily impacts their ability to carefully wrap their head around the notion of monitoring and evaluation. Throughout the interview the challenge of having enough time to do anything effectively was felt very strongly.

5.6.3 Outcomes Theme 5: Monitoring and Evaluation

- Educators and Leadership teams in both School A and School B understand the importance of monitoring and evaluation.
- Both Leadership teams in School A and School B emphasised the importance of consistent monitoring and evaluation. However, the need for more pronounced monitoring and evaluation was felt more strongly in School A.
- Educators in both School A and School B often link the concept of evaluation to a one- time activity.
- There is a limited relationship between the action plans developed by the school and classroom planning, thus indicating limited culture of evaluation. This transpired clearly from data obtained from both School A and School B.

5.7 Theme 6: External evaluation, SSE and Development Planning

As discussed in the literature review chapter, external evaluation and monitoring through the DQSE⁹ is quite active in Maltese schools across the sectors. So, it was deemed important to also approach the perceived impact which external quality assurance might have on the development of internal review processes and action plans. During their interviews educators were asked if they felt that there is a link between the external quality assurance exercise and internal quality assurance which is carried out by the school. They were also asked to express their thoughts on the nature of this relationship and if they believed that external reviews impacted somehow, negatively or positively, the progress of SSE process and the school development plan. This question was also included to assess if in the perception of educators, there is any correlation between internal and external quality assurance and if this influences the veracity or effectiveness of the actions and process. The below data obtained from interviews and focus groups shows some responses provided by both educators and members of the SLT in relation to their perceived relation between internal and external quality assurance mechanisms.

“There is a link.... if the external review is carried out at school they will see if the internal review is being implemented, so I believe that it is important for someone from outside to come and see that what the school has planned is happening..... I believe that if something has to be done, then let’s do it, obviously if they review it well and good, but I do not work on it for the benefit of the review. You are working on it because you want improvement.” **Teacher B SA**

“The first year of teaching I was in contact with the external review – What I can say is that while working on the action plan on literacy as staff, the external review was not mentioned. We were doing it for ourselves; however, it may change along the way for one reason or another. However, when we were working on literacy it was genuinely for improvement and nothing else. I was the one responsible for it so I am sure of this.” **Teacher E SB**

“As a person, I do not do things to impress, I do them from a genuine point of view though I do believe that there are people who do things to impress. Personally though, when we worked together, and developed action plans, they are usually heartfelt and maybe at times too direct. Again, I am very open with the people I work with. We do not do things to impress we do them genuinely.” **Teacher F SB**

“I do not think it affects me as a connection.... I believe the SDP is more focused on how the school is going to carry out certain things for improvement.” **Teacher C SA**

“Yes, it would affect it. Unfortunately, if you know that you will be checked on it then you will work on it in a different way. It is already a lot sometimes when we have the Head and assistant head checking on us, these

⁹ Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) – Regulatory body for Compulsory education in Malta.

auditors will not come along every year... at the beginning of the year we are monitored by the assistant heads who come into class to check our files. We are always made accountable for our work and reminded to be accountable.” **Teacher F SB**

“Yes and no. The week of the external review don’t get me wrong, it is not a fake week but people tend to stage a bit. The review team will pinpoint the strengths and needs of the school; however, certain needs might remain hidden. Sometimes the pressure it brings along with it is too much to really work towards improvement. I think it is possible, that certain words are placed in the SDP to appease the external review team... it could be... especially if the SMT writes the action plans and they are not properly implemented. Then the evaluation is not carried out so that the review team does not see failure...” **LSE C SB**

“I think there is a link, it makes you look at the process in a professional way, how to plan it, the discussion. You know how we are when we meet up sometimes, we take a bit long to kickstart something. When you know something will be evaluated for its effectiveness and with the plan how you are performing keeps you on your toes. It obviously creates a certain level of pressure but even when we had external reviews, we try to keep in mind that they are there for our benefit.” **Teacher B SA**

“I think there is more effort in doing a good job in writing it. It helps as regards evaluation and monitoring. I think when we had an external review one of the things which really helped was that if you let go of something or you are not giving it much attention, then the external review will point towards that and help you get in line. I think both the internal and external QA should be held on a regular basis.” **LSE D SB**

“I think there is a link, an external eye should be mandatory, for accountability. Not everyone goes in for the job with the same motivations so the fact that you have a file with your student profiles and that it is reviewed is important. Even as reviewers they would know what is going on in the schools. Ultimately, we form a big part of the life of children so we should be accountable.” **Teacher F SB**

Most of the responses focused on internal quality assurance in its own right and focusing on its core objective which is improvement. However, some participants did admit that there is an inherent link between the two processes especially because the external evaluators consider the SDP as an integral part of the external review process. That aspect, in their view, would subconsciously influence how the development plan is drawn. An interesting aspect is also the link to monitoring and accountability especially in relation to their performance as educators and that of their colleagues. Their experience of the Maltese approach towards external quality assurance which is mainly a developmental approach leads to a reaction which is more leaning towards searching for guidance rather than fearing a punitive approach. The latter was especially evident in the way the leadership teams approached external quality assurance. This helps the development of a positive link and sustainable balance between the two processes in the eyes of educators and leaders.

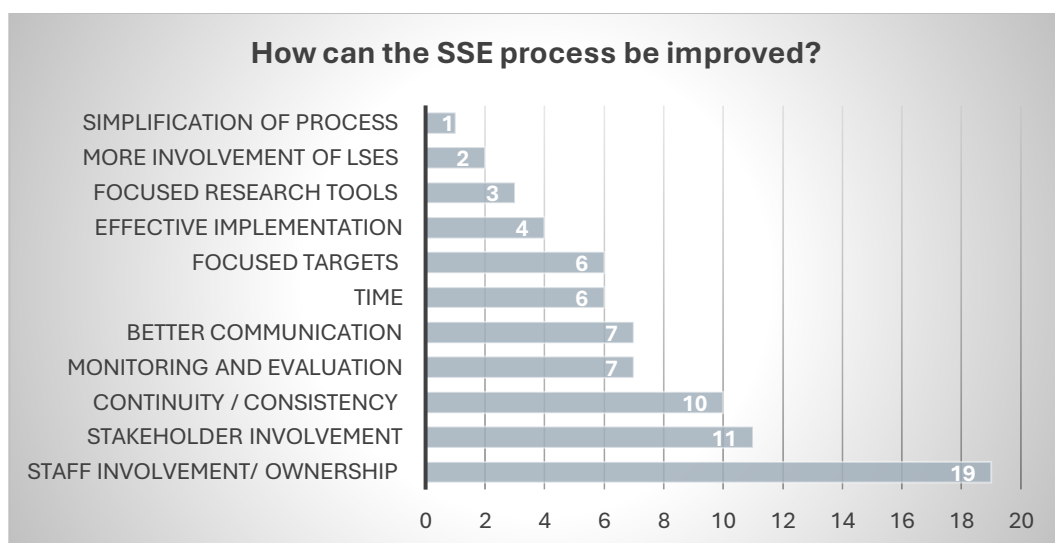
5.7.1 Outcomes Theme 6 - Impact of External evaluation mechanisms

- Educators in both School A and School B believe that internal and external quality assurance mechanisms within the local context are separate mechanisms.
- There is however a link between internal and external quality assurance as the evaluating body considers SSE and Development planning as part of its evaluation.
- Most Educators interviewed in both School A and School B consider the local approach to external quality assurance as developmental and aiming to guide rather than punish schools. This finding was more prominent in School A.

5.8 How can the SSE and development planning process improve? Year 1

As a concluding part of the questionnaire as well as a tie up of the reflective exercise which developed during interviews and focus groups, interviewees were asked how they believed the process could be improved. The same question was then asked at the end of the second year of the research following changes which had been implemented by the school to the process. The table and the excerpts below outline the most frequent responses.

Table 25 - How can the SSE process be improved? - Year 1



“By genuinely listening, understanding, and taking on board practical feedback from all stakeholders. It is useless having these processes if there is a goal which needs to be reached regardless of the feedback from staff, parents, students. This renders this feedback void and makes the process be seen as a burden.” Teacher
“By having all the staff on board and owning the plan and the SLT referring to in in order to keep the process alive and strong.” **Questionnaire open-ended SLT member**

“In my opinion, I would reinforce team building among all school staff. All staff should be on the same wavelength, if this is not in place, I cannot see how this process can be beneficial.” **Questionnaire open-ended LSE**

“Everyone needs to be involved and give his/her opinion as regards to planning. Then once implemented, it has to be reviewed to check if it is working.” **Questionnaire open-ended Teacher.**

Interestingly but not surprisingly the comment which topped Table 26 above was that related to staff involvement in the process to eventually lead to better ownership of the targets shown and the action plan developed. The second most common comment is related to better involvement of the different stakeholders, where parents were most often mentioned. However, it was also evident that interviewees hold educators as equally important stakeholders within the process thus strengthening the relevance of the most popular comment which is ‘staff involvement’. These were followed by consistency and continuity of the process as some might feel that the exercise stops at the drafting of the action plans. The need for more evaluation of the action plans also features in the responses followed by more communication from the SLT.

The time factor is also mentioned as an important aspect. When the same question was asked during the individual interviews, the feedback from respondents focused mainly on the need for evaluation. The discussion about the importance of evaluation might have triggered the realisation of the importance of evaluation and that this was not being given enough attention. The fact that this was also mentioned in the open-ended part of the questionnaire previously discussed however, gives it more strength as an aspect which teachers themselves feel is missing. The below outline some of the thoughts put forward by educators during interviews regarding the link they perceive between commitment to the process and its various aspects and especially the time factor.

“To be honest I believe that the process should be a whole school exercise. I understand that certain things might not be relevant to everyone, but I believe we can do them in a different way. I understand that there should be a focus on a particular issue, for instance, dyslexia identification, but as a school I believe we should have common priorities.”

“Unfortunately, the main problem is that there is no time because there is always something going on. Life is so fast that there is no time to reflect..... We are also a big school and there isn't that time for us to talk, even during year meetings, there are activities, there are exams coming up. There are so many things going on which take up your life without you even knowing it. Frequently the time we have is also taken up by external initiatives from the Ministry for Education and such...” **Teacher A SA**

“I would go again on the aspect of evaluation. As training I cannot complain as we always have good training and we always try to implement targets in the best way we can, however, these are rarely evaluated. I feel that evaluation needs more time during the year, and we need to give it more importance.” **Teacher D SB**

“I can definitely say the evaluation phase, because we do manage to get to the action plan and the implementation phase, then we forward them to administration, and we forget them till next year... we never evaluate the action plan to see how it is working. The last step is rarely done. The most is that we look again at it at the end of the year but so much time has passed since the development of the action plan that you forget what you have planned, and it is a pity because certain things would have been planned following a good discussion and involved a lot of expertise and experience and then it is forgotten. I believe that evaluation is one of our weakest points.” **Teacher E SB**

“Evaluation needs more attention to check if what we planned is being implemented as we meant it to be implemented and that there are no doubts in what we are doing. Moreover, you are going over it together and there is more ownership of what is going on. It would also make you realise that the action plan which was written in September needs to change and you can do so intermittently during the year. You never know how things can change and how, especially your cohort of students can influence those plans.”

“We need more time for us to work on it. As it's good for us to work together as a team, not on our own. Sharing of ideas is always important. More time dedicated to it but not on an individual basis and the need to evaluate the action plans.” **Teacher C SA**

“I think that every month or every two months it should be included in the curriculum time of every grade that the assistant head will meet the staff to discuss the SD action plan. What is happening and if there are any queries from teachers, how they are to be solved. It has to be scheduled in the calendar of events, so we avoid forgetting all about it.” **Teacher F SB**

“I think we need to improve on the evaluation part as I see that it is the fulcrum of the system. It is either going to work or not. If you know you need to evaluate it levels up the action plan. It is not something which was developed and that's it. We need to evaluate. It gives us the opportunity to step back and fix what needs to be fixed.” **LSE C SB**

“I believe we definitely need to find time to evaluate more. I don't think it ever happened that we meet up as the same group who proposed the action plan and evaluate. I think that the best part of the process is when action plans are developed as a group as everyone can express their opinion” **LSED SB**

The results to this question, following the individual interviews, might have been influenced by the reflective exercise which occurred during practically all the ten interviews with educators. In fact, a common response is linked to the importance of evaluation as this emerged as a determining aspect which educators did not

really have the time to explore before as well as the limited time which is usually dedicated to the process.

5.9 The second year of research – Context

As discussed in the first part of the chapter, the first year of research ended with both schools which formed part of the case study implementing significant changes mainly in the structure of their action plans and how these would henceforth be implemented by year group rather than as a whole school endeavour. Following the end of the scholastic year both schools passed on their action plans and were given feedback accordingly. This feedback was given in the light of my role as researcher as well as critical friend which was an essential part of the first leg of the research. This second year of the research was crucial as the main aim was to observe how both schools implemented not only the changes which they proposed but also how they looked at the process in light of these changes. The objective was to observe the approach they would take when looking into the process following the reflective exercise which they experienced during the first year of the research. The role of the researcher as critical friend during the second leg of the research was purposefully scaled down as it was crucial not to influence the flow of the process in any way. The objective was to observe how both schools, on their own, without any external support, decided to take on the SSE process and its various components. Ultimately it had to reflect the reality which these schools were living daily.

The active data gathering, in fact resumed at the end of the second term with a questionnaire given to all educators from both schools. There were 27 respondents to this questionnaire. The difference in respondents from the first questionnaire, which was that of 50 respondents may be attributed to the timing of the questionnaire. During the first year, this was sent at the beginning of the first term where educators were still starting their scholastic year and were possibly more enthusiastic. The second questionnaire during the end part of the research was sent at the end of the second term, where fatigue starts to kick in. It could also be that

lack of response was also due to their perceived limited participation within the process, or else a fear of putting the school or themselves as educators in bad light.

The objective of the questionnaire which was distributed to educators during the second year of the research focused on looking into the perception of involvement following the changes which were carried out during the first year. The questions were developed from the perception of increased involvement in the process, the feedback on action plans, and in the time which they were given to discuss the action plans. The questionnaire also asked specifically if the changes carried out helped them in understanding better the process and if they contributed towards influencing their perception of the process. For clearer understanding the term SDP was once again used here with educators to refer to the SSE and Development planning process. This was followed by interviews with the same interviewees who were interviewed during the first year of research. Whereas during the first year there were 10 interviews held, this had to be scaled down to 9 interviews during the second year as one of the interviewees did not respond to the request to hold the interview. Semi-structured individual interviews were held with the same interviewees who participated in the research during the first year. These interviews were intended as a continuation following the changes which were implemented during the first year, so similarly to the questionnaire given out to all educators discussed previously, the core parts of the interview focused on the awareness of these changes, if they felt that they had an impact on their perception of the process and the way they worked. The latter have been incorporated with the results obtained from the questionnaire. The research concluded with two focus groups held with the SLT from both schools. Similarly to the questionnaire and the interviews these focus groups focused on the impact of these changes and acted as an important exercise for both SLTs to reflect on what happened during this last year, their role as leaders and their take on the way forward in relation to the process and relevant outcomes.

The focus of the research during the second year concentrated on the outcomes of the changes which were planned during the first year and if interviewees felt that

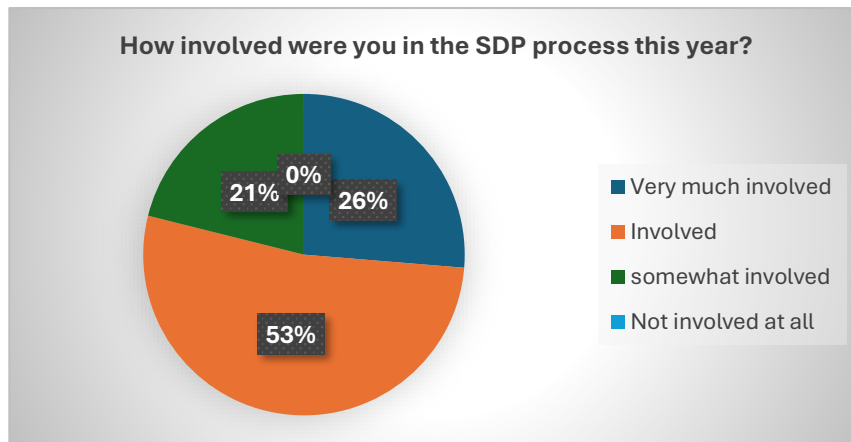
they were successful. It also focused on their involvement in the process as educators and if they felt that there was enough evaluation of the action plans to monitor progress. The final question mirrored the question they were asked during the first year which inquired what they would like to change in the process following the changes implemented. The following sections, follow the themes outlined during the first part of the chapter and detail the findings which emanated from the second year of research. For the sake of cohesiveness in discussion, the themes will not be addressed in numerical order.

5.10 Theme 2: Involvement in the process

An increased sense of ownership and understanding of the process

The first question interviewees were asked focused on their perceived increased involvement in the SSE and development planning process. The feedback obtained during the first year of the research indicated that in a number of cases, the priority development targets and sometimes even the action plans were dictated by the leadership team and therefore they had little say at the planning stage. The main changes during the first year of the research included a more pronounced involvement of educators in the process especially in the writing of action plans. To this effect, dedicated sessions on developing action plans were held in both schools. This was especially important considering that both schools decided that, as a major change to the process, they would ask the different year groups to develop an action plan linked to learning and teaching. Table 27 below outlines the responses obtained regarding increased involvement in the process.

Table 26 - Involvement in SSE process and Development Planning following changes.

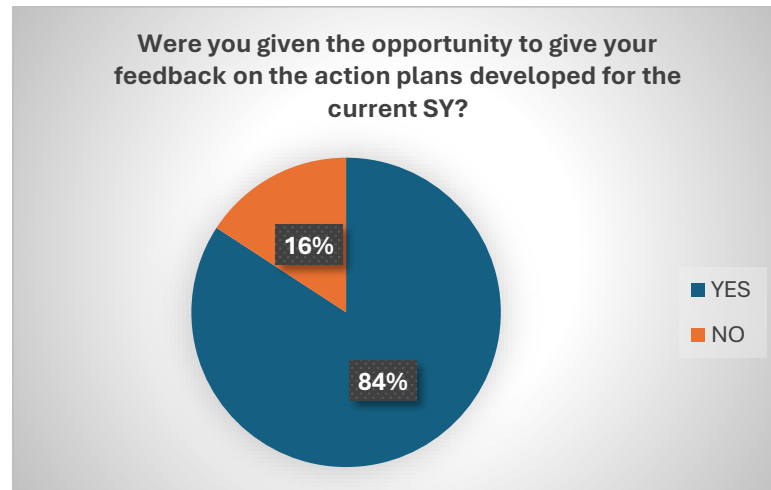


The perception when it comes to involvement can be seen to be quite high where 26% of the respondents felt that they were ‘very much involved’ and 53% felt that they were ‘involved,’ while the remaining 21% stated that they felt ‘somewhat involved’. Respondents were given two higher scale options: ‘very much involved’ and ‘involved’ to create a distinction between their level of commitment to the action plan. The highest value ‘very much involved’ indicates a stronger factor of ownership and belonging where the educator considers the input given as determining to the development of the action plan and its subsequent implementation. The value ‘involved’ on the other hand revolves more around the notion that previously they were not involved but now, through the changes in approach implemented by the school, they feel that they are involved in the process. This can be considered as a start towards shifting the perception towards SSE and development planning and the involvement of the educator.

Another question linked to involvement concerned feedback. Respondents were asked if they believe that they were given the opportunity to voice their opinion and give their feedback on the action plans. The results (see Table 28) show approximately the same results as the involvement section where 84% felt that they were given the opportunity to give their feedback. Detailed feedback obtained from interviews show that this feedback wasn’t just a matter of giving them an action plan to write but leadership teams also sought educator feedback following the

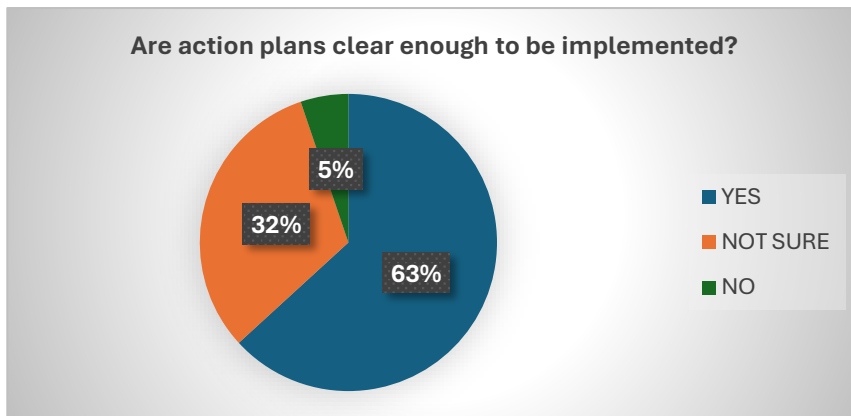
initial evaluation of action plans and before they were finalised. This was carried out to increase ownership of the process and the action plans which educators would ideally implement in the classroom.

Table 27 - Feedback on action plans following changes.



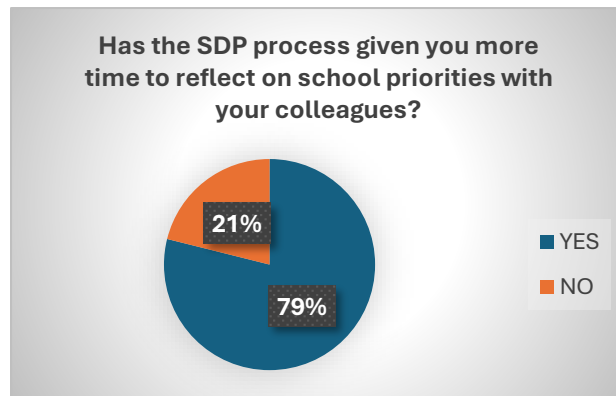
When the subsequent question asked about the clarity of the action plans with regard to implementation, there was less certainty where 32% felt that they were not sure about the clarity. Interestingly, this is in contrast with the previous finding where 79% of the respondents felt involved in the writing of action plans. This indicates that the familiarity with these action plans might have been somewhat limited and that they might not have referred to them often enough during the year to be able to assess if they could easily implement them. Another possibility which was then explored in more depth in the individual interviews is that of action plans not being evaluated on a regular basis so familiarity with the contents was limited. It is also possible that as discussed previously, the topic or area in some action plans were not perceived as being relevant to them and therefore they would not feel the need for clarity.

Table 28 - Clarity of action plans following changes.



Another question focused on evaluation and asked educators if the changes implemented gave them opportunity to reflect on the school priorities and action plans with their colleagues. The responses reflected in Table 30 below, was also very high in favour of improved interaction among educators regarding the action plans. Of course, this interaction depends on the understanding and background of the individual interviewee. When this was expanded upon during interviews it transpired that this can be attributed to different factors. First among which is that for many this was the first time they developed action plans together which focused on their particular year group so even the minimal level of involvement was a welcome improvement. From documentary analysis it was evident that the school had in prior years developed whole school action plans. These usually concerned aspects or initiatives which they needed to focus on as part of national implementation such as the Learning Outcomes Framework or else a school-based endeavour such as the literacy or numeracy programme. Priorities concerning learning and teaching had never stemmed from the educators themselves.

Table 29 - Time to reflect on process with colleagues.



Moreover, during interviews it transpired that, to educators, their perception of reflection is having been given the opportunity to sit down and discuss the action plan and set out the various actions and steps to be taken with their colleagues. It does not automatically translate into an understanding of what effective evaluation means as is reflected in finding in Table 29 where 63% felt that the action plans were not clear enough notwithstanding the fact that they had worked on them together.

The fact that these projects or endeavours were put on paper in an action plan spurred more discussion among members of the staff mainly because they had been allowed the time during a Professional Development session on School Development Planning. This was also tackled in more depth during the one-to-one interviews. When asked if they found the time to discuss the action plans and implementation the main feedback was that it was difficult to find the time:

“It was difficult to meet up... we tried.... we are trying to have meetings where we can meet up and discuss but its never easy. There are SLT meetings, so the Assistant Head is not always available, and the problem is that when there are a lot of sick teachers we have to replace.” **Teacher B SA**

Once again, the limited time factor seems to permeate throughout all the areas addressed in relation to the process with both educators and members of the leadership teams. However, as the research progressed, especially in the second year with leadership, it became evident that it is not solely a question of time management but also how that time is strategically managed. The below are some

contributions from different interviewees regarding the structure of the SDP document as well as their relationship with the process.

“The difference I see is that now the SDP is quite detailed as a document so if I want to refer to it, it is quite straightforward especially as it is now sectioned by year group. From that aspect I believe that this is a good opportunity not only for my year group but also with bridging with other year groups.” **LSE B SA**

The above statement shows that there has been a shift when it comes to awareness especially in relation to the whole school concept and the importance of understanding what the other year groups are working on. The schools seem to have worked on the concept of including a lot of detail in the action plans, which is not necessarily ideal but is a natural part of the process especially when one is starting to become familiar with it. Constancy with the process will influence consistency in the long run.

“When looking at the SDP prior to the interview I was impressed at how much information was included in the action plans compared to the previous SDP which was just four pages long. Now there is much more detail and one thing which I really liked about it is that there are clear targets, these are what we are planning to do, these are the people in charge, this is the timescale and I feel that the latter also helps a lot. **Teacher E SB**

Although the above quote substantiates the increase in awareness of the process and how an action plan should be structured, what also catches one’s attention is the first part of the contribution “When looking at the SDP prior to the interview”, which indicates that although there was quite a lot of work dedicated to the structuring of the action plan by year group, the monitoring of implementation as well as the evaluation phase might not have been given its due attention. When this aspect was probed further by the interviewer during interviews and focus groups, it transpired that the action plans were sent to the staff for final feedback in October, therefore at the start of the second year of the research, however, they were never given the final version of the action plan or the development plan following that feedback. When asked if the document was readily available as a working tool, several teachers stated that it was not and that they had to ask for it before the interview. This happened in both schools.

“I had to ask for it myself... there is a TEAMS group, and I had asked for it to be placed there.” **Teacher B SA**

The fact that the document was not readily available automatically, from the very beginning, halts the flow of implementation and subsequently the monitoring and evaluation phase. Any evaluation which was happening was being done on the initiative of the individual teacher or the year group they were linked to and was thus fragmented and not monitored at a school level. One interviewee stated:

“In a way I think there has been more discussion than there was before, however, I believe there could be more. We did talk about the plans informally during summer, we did talk about it briefly when we came back... changes were implemented. However, I believe it would be beneficial to refer to the document even more, when we are in meetings or during year group meetings. It is not just a document in an office, or just placed there, it needs to be kept alive.” **Teacher D SB**

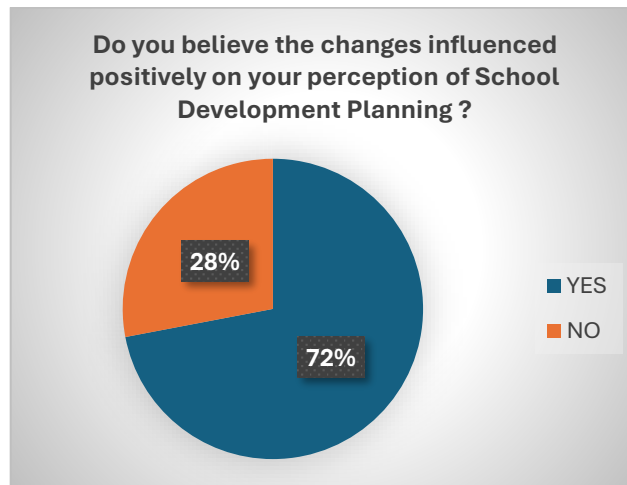
The general feel from all interviewed educators is that the development plan, once all the work has been done by all the staff, needs to be ‘promoted’ more by the SLT and made available for all staff so that there can be an understanding of why we are doing all this work, that this is a quest for improvement. The fact that the action plans weren’t made readily and easily available or that it was not promoted, monitored or evaluated during the implementation phase tends to propagate the idea that this document is merely there for show and defeats the good work done in the development of the relevant action plans. This aspect is further discussed in the leadership section.

5.11 Theme 1: Perceptions, attitude and mindset towards SSE and DP

Increased involvement, improved perception

Respondents to the questionnaire were also asked if they felt that the changes affected in the process actively influenced their perception of the SSE process and School Development Planning.

Table 30 - Change and influence on perception.



Most respondents feel that the changes have left a positive impact on their perception of the process. This question was also posed as an open-ended question where respondents could leave comments as well as provide their response to the question by just answering yes or no. The most relevant comments brought forward by educators regarding their perceived change in the process are presented below

“Yes, it helped me be more structured.” **Questionnaire Y2**

“This year I felt more ownership over the action plan since it involves my subject, so I was very much involved in the planning and in the review. The topic makes the difference.” **Questionnaire Y2**

“It helped me become more aware of the process. It helped me to understand more how to make the SDP my own not just the school’s.” **Questionnaire Y2**

“They make us understand, think deeper and discuss our ideas more profoundly.” **Questionnaire Y2**

“Yes, this year it was more fruitful.” **Questionnaire Y2**

When one interviewee was asked if colleagues looked at the SDP in a different way, following changes, the response focused on how the person personally views the process not on how the school tackles it.

“it depends on how that person approaches the SDP process. If I take an interest, it is different from someone who barely knows that the SDP exists.... there are those who do not care that the school has an SDP.” **LSED SB**

Following analysis, the above is an indication that the SSE process and Development Planning still need some work when it comes to ownership. If, as an educator you really believe in the development plan and its intended outcome, then

your approach will be a positive one where you want to see it flourish. Ideally, if the process is working effectively there should be a very limited number of educators who ‘do not care’ that the school has a development plan. The concept of relevance also comes into play here. If what is being pushed forward in the action plans is not relevant or of interest to educators, the possibility for implementation will subsequently become limited. Naturally, as a ripple effect this will also influence the perception and understanding of the process. This determining aspect can be addressed only if there is a thorough understanding of the process and its final objectives. Practicing with the process will enable leadership teams to understand through experience what works and what does not. This includes relevance and how educators can be led towards understanding the process better and thus owning their own plans for improvement.

5.12 Theme 5: The importance of Evaluation: perspectives following changes

Evaluation as an integral and determining part of the process

During their interviews interviewees were specifically asked if they were given time to evaluate the action plans and their implementation process. The main feedback when it comes to evaluation was that the exercise was close to non-existent. As evidenced in previous sections, educators were enthusiastic about the new structure and that they had been involved in the process of writing the action plans. However, the process plummeted due to the lack of monitoring and evaluation. This was also admitted by leadership teams during their focus group sessions. The quotation below in fact shows that as a community they started to understand that SSE and Development Planning are tools which need to be sustained at intervals especially in relation to the evaluative aspect.

“At least it needs to be referred to every now and then, even the SLT who are leading the school, they can remind us about it and follow up on the action plans, especially in reminding us about the different tasks which need to be done.”

“I liked the way it was structured.... everyone knew what his or her job was... but it was not followed up as it should have been.” **Teacher D SB**

“The next step is more emphasis on the evaluative aspect... in my case... and I believe many others; I did not look at it from November till March. I only looked at it now because of the interview. I also forgot when we touched upon it.”

“.....we did meet on aspects which were included in the SDP but not purposely for that reason. To be honest, I don't recall having specific meetings. I find that evaluation is important if we want the smooth running from one year to the next.” **Teacher A SA**

This means that the effort to involve the staff in the development of action plans, by year group, to increase ownership was slowed down by the halting of the process at the evaluation phase. When asked if the action plans, they had developed were being implemented in the classroom, interviewees were genuinely surprised when they discovered that they were actually implementing the action plan without even knowing it.

“Yes, they are but it is not evaluated... so we are doing it without being conscious about it.” **Teacher A SA**

From the analysis of feedback obtained implementation is happening, however it is being done unconsciously, irregularly and haphazardly by educators without following the plan of action which they themselves had developed. Evaluation is also not carried out regularly and it is carried out when educators feel the need to meet up and discuss any implementation plan which they would be working on with their own year group:

“We spent a lot of time preparing it (Action plan). I know there are weekly meetings where SLT should discuss the progress, we had meetings with the literacy support teacher.... and with the assistant head. We should also be meeting during curriculum time, but we rarely manage.” **Teacher C SA**

Their understanding of the evaluation process is vague, not only for educators but also in certain instances for the two leadership teams. The role of leadership especially at this juncture of the process is vital as role model towards sustaining the understanding of the process and promoting its validity. If educators observe the SLT meet and evaluate regularly, then the perception of the process will gradually be influenced towards a more positive one which promotes each step of the process towards implementation. An attitude where leaders do not value the importance of the strategic work which they have themselves carried out with

educators through regular evaluation is counteractive both to the ownership and the success of the process.

5.13 Theme 3: Leadership and the SSE process

The need for better strategic leadership and process management

The focus groups with leadership teams during the second year of the research focused on how the changes implemented influenced, firstly their role as leadership in relation to the process and the changes which were implemented. The discussion also led to the identification of what they believe are the pitfalls of the process and how in their opinion it could be improved. Both sessions also led SLT teams to reflect, sometimes consciously but also at times subconsciously on the process, especially in relation to the role of evaluation, and monitoring and how this part of the process influenced the whole mechanism but also them personally as leaders.

During the first year of the research and therefore the first focus group with members of the SLT, the structure focused on the asking of questions and members responding according to their own initial reactions. There was an element of reflection, but the focus group was more guided towards gathering their perception of their role as leaders within the process, how they believed it could be improved and how they could implement the changes they were envisioning. During the focus group carried out during the second year, the reflective stance took over during both sessions with SLTs with both schools. As will be seen later on in this section, the main permeating feeling was that they felt they did not manage to evaluate effectively. Consequently, the focus group session acted as a post-mortem of why this happened.

Focus group members gave similar reasons on why they did not manage to carry out an effective monitoring and evaluation exercise throughout the year, but the approach towards improvement although similar in some instances was also somewhat different. In the case of one school, the attitude of the leadership was one which was solution oriented and transmitted a positive approach and more of

a growth mindset towards the system. On the other hand, the second school, although also solution oriented, was always fearful of how this would impact the morale of educators and if this would exponentially increase their workload, thus more oriented towards maintaining a fixed mindset.

SLT teams reiterated the limited time factor problem. The issue was already mentioned by both teams in the first focus group where they fundamentally stated that time is limited in itself, however, even when you try to plan for evaluation, both for educators and for them as a leadership team it becomes problematic because of the daily struggles which characterize the running of a school. Moreover, the diverse external initiatives imposed on schools were also mentioned by both teams. These included nationally driven initiatives, but also other initiatives brought forward by the college management. As a researcher it was interesting to see how both sessions also acted as a reflective exercise for leadership teams. It also turned into a teaching moment, where it was evident that if some planning and commitment is put into it even a simple focus group can turn into a professional learning experience. One of the most highlighted changes which emanate from the interview and focus groups findings is the shift from 'before to now'. Although both schools ultimately did not manage to complete the cycle effectively due to monitoring and evaluation, there was still present a feeling of change and learning.

"... What I think is that what happened last year is that before we amended the process we spoke a lot with them and got their feedback and they were on board... we used to carry out training for different initiatives, as well as the SDP during curriculum time so they started implementing but we didn't go back to monitor if they were implementing it and to evaluate. I believe we worked so much on it that it became part of our system. We did not go to the actual document to see that we were doing this and that... I think we were doing so in our mind... if you know what I mean. But I agree that we need to find more time to structure it and carry out formal evaluation."

"... As an SLT I believe that all of us, we didn't go back to it and refer to it all the time as we needed to..."

AHA SA

"... one of our actions we had planned for this year focused on being inclusive and we started working towards becoming a dyslexia friendly school. The amount of work which that entailed took up a lot of our time... such as CT time etc... there was a lot of effort put in this. We did not mention that this was part of the SDP we just worked on it... so because we did not evaluate .. there was this impression that we are doing it haphazardly. We had no planned approach towards evaluation. We were aware what we had to do but we did not market it as part of our SDP."

"This year, for example, a main difficulty was the 'other SDP' on Ethos which is set by the school board. I appreciate the need for this, but it took up too much of our time. The dyslexia as I mentioned before was one

of them, we also had friendship cards, one which could easily be transferred to the ethos section and amalgamated with the SDP we usually carry out. The demands on us were quite hefty in fact....”

“We did carry out most of the actions, but we didn’t sit down to take stock of what we did and that throws you off balance somehow.... We didn’t celebrate what we achieved, and these actions were developed by them so this is really a missing link where we failed to enhance that sense of belonging and ownership to celebrate that we carried out what we had planned to do successfully. I did plan in the last two days before we break for summer, a session where we could discuss what we did and achieved but I think it is a bit too late in the day. This should be carried out more regularly.” **HOS SB**

“From my experience this year I believe that from the leadership perspective, timeframes must be revisited quite frequently... there is a lot of shifting going on. I believe that if it is plotted it might resemble a gaant chart. So, the evaluation can be clearer, and the shifting can also be carried out in a more linear way.” **HOS SA**

Apart from the reasons given for not following through effectively with the process, another important aspect could be observed from the pattern of responses and the approach of the two schools. As can be seen from the evidence above, but also from the full transcript of the focus groups, the leadership team of School A were leading the conversation and they were coming up with the solutions themselves, whereas School B, was asking the researcher as ‘critical friend’ how to go about certain aspects which they found difficulty with. Upon reflection, one can also understand that there is no right or wrong approach as both leadership teams were at different stages of their journey in understanding the SSE process and how to effectively implement it. During the focus groups both teams were given the time to reflect on the process and understand the importance of evaluation. What was evident in both schools is that their experience during the last year, where they were made to consciously reflect about the process because of the research, led towards the understanding of the importance of monitoring and evaluation. In both cases it shows how necessary this exercise is for leadership teams and how time management in its different forms is impinging on the success of the process.

“Another factor which influenced us was that we were tied by constraints, and most aspects must happen during school hours. There is CT time but, in many cases, especially during winter these educators must replace their colleagues in class, because of illness etc and this means that their availability to be one whole group to evaluate is depleted. So, time to meet is limited, so meeting and evaluating happens haphazardly in the corridor for example. When this happens, they are only communicating with one person, not the whole year group or team and that defeats the whole purpose of reflection and creating a learning community. Even with us as SLT it is usually very difficult to meet up and discuss.” **HOS SB**

“... the positives that I felt was that educators were finally part of the process and that was a great improvement. I really felt it. It was also felt during curriculum time where in certain instances we were discussing the action plans. That was very important. But these instances were not very regular... I also must keep reminding myself that this is a living document, because I am always fearful that we get carried away along with what happens on a daily basis. It must be a living document ... understood and appreciated by staff. I cannot file it and that’s it.” **AH F SB**

“... From my end I think this is what happened... it was compiled, filed and that’s it. The things we included in them were definitely carried out but we did not go back to it to evaluate what was happening and that is why we missed at points that the targets were varying as we went along because we did not consult well on our original plan.” **HOS SA**

Another aspect which arises from the research is the preparedness of SLT teams to carry out this exercise effectively. A question which often came to mind during the research when reflecting on the role of the leader is if passion about and commitment towards improvement were enough when it comes to effective strategic management? There was a lot of uncertainty from the SLT members themselves on how the exercise should be carried out and if they carried it out in the right way. During frequent instances the focus group turned into a discussion on how the SLT can deal with one aspect or another of the process and the teams were very receptive of this feedback. An instance of this is the need shown from both schools to find ways of monitoring the action plans due to their lack of available time as leaders. Both schools discussed the idea of empowering educators to be coordinators of action plans and take ownership.

“I started thinking... who is going to monitor that this is being implemented? Without realising or maybe forgetting that a large chunk of the SDP is not just the planning and implementation but also the monitoring and evaluation part. Who will evaluate that this is really working? As SLT, with the day to day running, time evaporates. Maybe we could empower teachers further when it comes to evaluation.” **AHA SA**

“Yes... possibly Curriculum Time time could be structured better from our end. For example, the last Friday of the term all Curriculum Time must be dedicated to evaluation of action plans, and this can be managed by the educators. Even for us, if it is there written and planned, we know we must follow it. We also must learn how to be strict about this. If we don’t do that, so many things will accumulate that we will end up putting it on the backburner.” **HoS SB**

“It needs to be included in their duties as coordinators to keep tabs on the progress of the SDP action plans. Even if we haven’t managed to get to where we want, the coordinator advises the SLT, and we work from there.” **AHE SB**

“From my end if I learnt nothing these past two years as HoS and AH for nearly ten years is that I have been given the opportunity to take leadership roles and to take decisions and that is when I learnt... because ultimately it came from me. If we want ownership, we need to empower them.” **AHF SB**

School B discussed how to kickstart work as part of development planning linked to the behaviour policy and how to involve parents considering that the school does

not have a Parents and Teachers Association. Although this was not necessarily associated with what was being discussed they felt the 'need' to discuss this. This not only shows the thirst which these teams have to sit together to evaluate and discuss with purpose but also that the need for support is important and at times felt to be necessary to be able to trash out ideas, offer support and give an outsider's perspective.

"It is not an update of my plans that is needed but a full-blown evaluation. When I start looking around to see what our plans were etc... there are things which we might have been more enthusiastic about or worked better on them. Things need to be a bit more organized especially the evaluation part.... systematic and structured is the word."

"..... I put a lot of pressure on myself and that is counterproductive. This is not an excuse because if you stop for a minute to reflect you will realise how many good things have been done and how much we have carried out of our plans and beyond and all this happened during one year. Evaluation is so important.... now that I am thinking about it I can see it." **HOS SA**

When the researcher acted as a critical friend in the first year, progress was made especially in the development of action plans. When this support was removed during the second year, it was visibly felt by both schools. Hence the frequent queries posed to the researcher during the second set of focus group interviews.

"We had passed the action plans to you (researcher as critical friend) and to my surprise a particular grade needed to carry out several changes. Obviously from their end. It is very easy for me to sit down and amend according to how I see fit. However, it will not help as they are the ones who are going to implement this. When you asked for the interview with educators, one participant asked me if I had the updated version, I told her that she should have the updated version... you were responsible to meet up and discuss changes proposed and amend accordingly, clarifying the targets and being more specific according to your feedback. So, I don't know if there was any update to this effect."

".... one of the things which I now know is that I need to monitor that these changes are being carried out by everyone and that action plans are finalized."

"My problem is that they're always telling me that nothing is ever done.... you will understand what I mean, if the actions all concern the SLT and Head of School, it is easy for them to complain and say that nothing is happening and that is why I want ownership from their end. What are we all doing to bring this policy to fruition and make it effective? **HOS SA**

5.14 How can the process improve? –Comparison Year 1 - Year 2.

The last question posed to interviewees at the end of the second year echoed that posed at the end of the first year. This focused on the next step as regards further improvement to the system. However, in the second questionnaire this feedback followed training in the process and how to write action plans as well as important changes which were carried out by the school.

Table 31 - Comparison between first and second year of research.

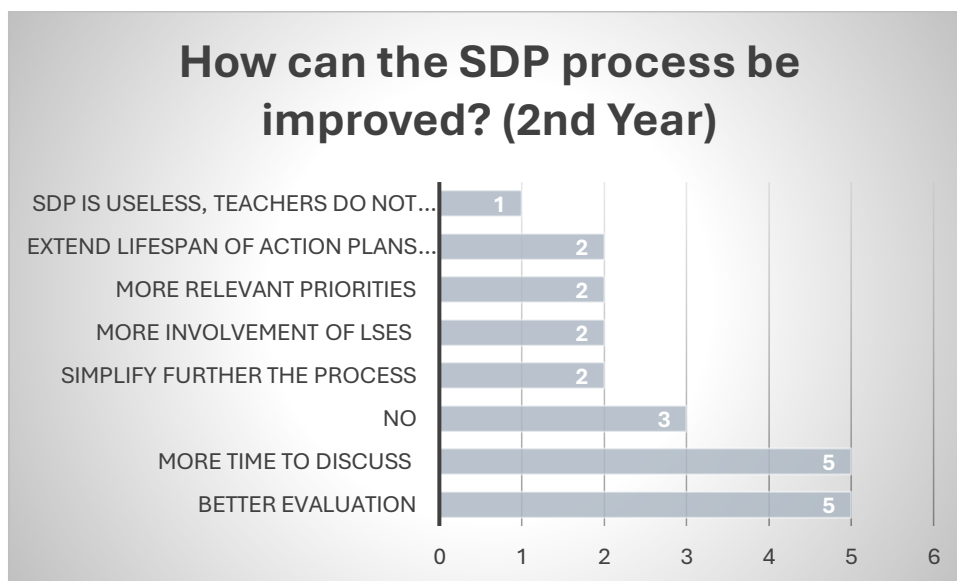
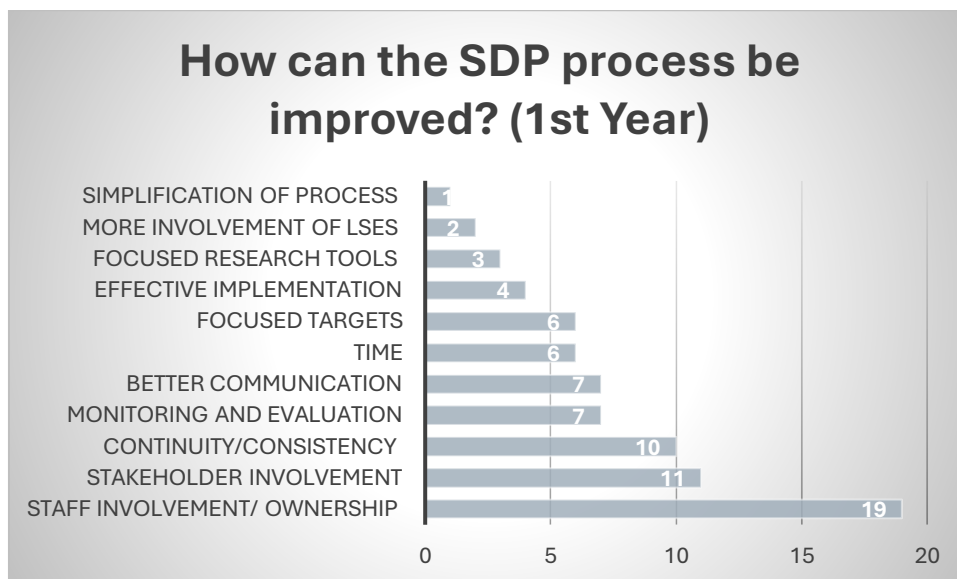


Table 32 above shows a comparison of results from the questionnaire handed out to respondents during the first year of research and the results from the questionnaire distributed during the last term of the second year of research. Whereas in the first year’s questionnaire, staff involvement ranked as the highest improvement mentioned by educators, it is well down the line after the changes were implemented, which signifies that the involvement in the writing of action plans during the first year of the research has increased the sense of involvement

of staff within the process and therefore their perceived sense of ownership. There is still, however, the perception that LSEs need to be more involved in the process, probably in their eyes the difference has been heightened by the increased involvement of educators.

The need for better evaluation and time to discuss are the highest markers in the latest questionnaire and that can also be understood to be linked to the heightened involvement of educators within the process. Though they were mentioned in the first questionnaire handed out, they were not the top priorities mentioned by respondents. This indicates that during the second year there was a higher frequency of awareness and interaction with the process. Interestingly in the second-year questionnaire respondents also mentioned the need to extend the life span of priorities or action plans which is linked to a certain level of evaluation, not only as a group but also as personal reflection. The latter can also be linked to the need expressed to simplify further the process. This was also mentioned during the first year of the study.

“Simplify the process... shorter questions... less questions... more focused questions” Questionnaire Y2
(probably referring to the questionnaire given to staff as part of the internal review process)

“I suggest simplifying the process with direct instructions and plan as opposed to complex planning with more paperwork. I also suggest more openness from the SLT, desire to improve current structures that are in place and the desire to discuss and really evaluate the content of the SDP.” **Questionnaire Y2**

“Regular meetings with SLT members on a grade level to identify how we are achieving the goals. At least schedule a yearly meeting with the whole staff to discuss how to improve the SDP process”
(Evaluation) **Questionnaire Y2**

“Further improvement might be more time to discuss as a grade. “**Questionnaire Y2**

“Can it be done over at least two years and not over a year? Some of the aims which are not fully reached would be further enhanced. “**Questionnaire Y2**

“I think most of this exercise is futile because teachers have enough on their plates as it is without additional administrative work.” **Questionnaire Y2**

“Topics like the ones chosen this year were extremely helpful. Staff should contribute by giving suggestions about speakers, topics etc.” **Questionnaire Y2**

This question was also asked during the in-depth interviews with educators as well as during the focus groups with SLT. In both cases, due to the direction of the conversation, the majority of responses from educators focused on the need for better evaluation of action plans and to be given the necessary time to do so. There

was also mention of better coordination of the process by the SLT. As regards the focus group with leadership, as can be seen in the previous sections the main focus was also on the importance of monitoring and evaluation and to effectively find the time to carry them out. The conversation with leadership teams also led towards the need for more focused strategic leadership linked to the system as well as specific and focused support given by a potential critical friend.

5.15 Conclusion

This chapter aimed at gathering an important and detailed snapshot of how two local Maltese Primary schools, within their contexts, view the SSE process, how they consequently work with it through this view and how this is impacting its success. As outlined at the beginning of the chapter, the aim of the study was to focus on the three research questions focusing on specific areas which emanated from literature in the field of SSE and development planning as well as through the experience of the researcher as a professional in the field of quality assurance at national level for several years. As indicated by the findings, the three areas tackled as part of the research questions are indeed relevant towards the process. Moreover, throughout the chapter it is clearly seen that these areas are closely intertwined in the influence which they have on the development of the process and the schools' plans for improvement. The mindset, approach and perception of educators transpired as strong factors that can influence the process, however, interestingly, the role of leadership was a predominant aspect throughout the research which impacted discourse throughout the research with all participants.

The second research question focusing on the importance of monitoring and evaluation was also tackled in the findings. Analysis shows that although recognised as an important part of the process, both schools could not handle this specific part of the process on their own and clearly asked for help and support in how to manage this part of the process. Interestingly, the impact of external quality assurance mechanisms did not seem to have a determining adverse influence on the process. However, interviewees frequently mentioned the impact which

governing structures and initiatives hailing from outside the school had on the time available to them to reflect and work on the process. This was seen to influence their ownership of the process as they believed that their autonomy was being compromised. The table below gives a summary of the main outcomes in relation to the theme and research question following the second year of the research.

Table 32 - Research questions and outcomes following the second year of the research.

Research question	Themes	Outcomes following findings during the 2nd year of Research
Area 1 How do leaders and educators perceive the SSE and Development Planning process and to what extent does this influence mindset?	Theme 1: Perceptions, attitude and mindset towards SSE and Development Planning. Theme 2: Involvement (Educators, stakeholders) in the process	Increased involvement translates into an improvement perception of the process. When educators were involved in the writing of action plans and asked to reflect on the process, they felt a stronger understanding of the process and its potential for improvement.
	Theme 3: Leadership and the SSE Process.	The need for better strategic leadership and management of the process emanated from the analysis of findings and focus groups with leadership teams.
Area 2 What is the importance given to the process especially the monitoring and evaluation part of the process by both leadership and educators and how does this impact the success of the SSE process?	Theme 4: Implementing the process. Theme 5: Evaluation and Monitoring.	The analysis of findings following the second year of the research corroborate the importance of the monitoring and evaluation phase of the process. The limited interaction with monitoring and evaluation phase with both schools halted the advancement of the process, thus, hindering the potential for improvement.
Area 3 What is the impact of external factors such as external quality assurance and governance on the process?	<i>Theme 6: The impact of external bodies such as external quality assurance and governing structures on the process.</i>	<i>There were no findings from the second year of the research indicating that external factors impacted on the implementation of the process.</i>

The role of the next part of the research, the discussion chapter, is to investigate these findings in relation to the research questions and discuss how they can come together to effectively create more awareness of the process and how this awareness can help in addressing areas for improvement.

Chapter 6

Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will look at the research questions and foci areas which were developed from the literature review and position them against the findings from the research carried out in two Maltese primary schools. The main research question focused on the impact which school self-evaluation and development planning has on improvement in compulsory education, focusing particularly on the Maltese context. This main research question subsequently led to several sub questions which in their turn were inherently linked to each other. As seen in the findings chapter, the data collected from the research was sectioned into different themes which will be discussed in this chapter. These included the importance of the approach and mindset towards the process of both educators and leadership and how this is impacted by background and school culture. The latter of which, as we will see, proved to be a determining factor in the success of the process. Another sub-question addressed the importance of monitoring and evaluation as part of the process and how this is viewed and approached by the schools who formed part of the research. The last aspect of the research question concerns the importance attributed to external factors as well as the impact which governing structures and policy makers have on the process.

In the sections that follow I aim at reflecting on these findings and raising awareness about aspects linked to the research questions which I believe have not been discussed enough in literature and how these reflections can help develop further the understanding of School Self-Evaluation (SSE) and Development Planning as a process which can be adopted by schools to strategically plan for

improvement. One of the main developments that this study undertakes and explores in the area is that it delves into the different segments of the process. The approach towards research was essentially that of breaking down the process to analyse the different components to finally bring them back together as a complete mechanism once again. This allowed me, as a researcher, to obtain a certain depth of insight of how the different cogs within the process can then function effectively together towards the success of the internal review process in its entirety. It also brought about other important realisations, especially linked to the role of the leadership within the process which is not relegated to leading and managing the different parts of the process but goes deeper and is a more complex and determining position than initially expected. The research carried out also allowed me to look into the different mechanisms which can contribute towards a sustainable SSE process and address the gap in literature which exists on accountability and improvement within SSE and Development Planning (Tali-Aderet, 2021).

The case study carried out in the two schools aimed at observing the SSE and Development Planning process and subsequently elaborate on the particular issues which are possibly hindering its effectiveness. The predominantly qualitative nature of the study allowed these observations to happen during conversations with leadership teams and educators who work with the process regularly. It gave the researcher and the schools the opportunity to reflect on their practice in relation to the process and how their perceptions, attitudes, approaches as well as the school's culture can have a ripple effect in determining the level of development and improvement within their context. The role of leadership within the process was always planned to be an important aspect of the research, however, findings as well as observations during the length of the study showed that the importance of leadership on progress and improvement is considered by educators as determining. Notwithstanding the original importance given to leadership in the research questions, the development of this particular aspect during the research warranted a more in depth analysis of the findings and a deeper discussion on the role of leadership within the process.

A main outcome which emanated in both schools following the research carried out is that they re-discovered or in some cases discovered the power of reflection and evaluation. The situation at the beginning of the study was one where both schools were familiar with a school culture which was predominantly top-down. This kind of setting is not uncommon in Maltese schools especially in settings where often leadership teams answer to a board of governors who is responsible to some extent for the decision making at school. The school culture present at the start of the research veered towards one where educators were not often asked to share their opinion especially in relation to Development Planning. However, this kind of attitude was not necessarily due to the need for control, but rather because it was the way they used to do things. The specific school culture present at the time of the research had been shaped in that way through the years (Bezzina at al., 2002). As a consequence, the approach towards the process was observed to be rather mechanical and was linked to the priorities they were asked to implement in a manner which can be linked to what McNamara and O'Hara term as 'forced compliance' (2008 p.126). It was evident in the findings that this type of approach and culture where compliance was expected were, in the long term, adversely shaping their perception towards the process and as well as their mindset.

A main research focus concerned the importance of the attitude and approach which educators have towards the process. To this effect, the case study approach also allowed for the voices of educators to be heard in depth when speaking about SSE and Development Planning. This is where educators and leadership teams who were interviewed and who interacted with the researcher during two scholastic years were given the time to reflect on the process as well as conceptualize the way they viewed it from their own perspective and background. The study and the conversations held with me as a researcher as well as critical friend, sparked an interest in the educators as well as the leadership teams about how the process worked. The way the research unfolded, through methods such as interviews and focus groups allowed for changes to be discussed and implemented in real time. This, as Barbour (2007) discusses, allows participants, in this case educators, the

opportunity to express their opinion regarding these changes as they were unfolding.

The first part of the chapter will investigate the first research question, that is, the understanding of the process and how this understanding influences the perception and mindset and therefore the way the process is adopted towards improvement. The discussion engages with both years of the research study and the changes which were implemented from the first year to the second and the impact which these changes had on educators and leaders especially in relation to their increased involvement in the process. This will lead to the second and third research questions which aim at investigating the involvement and the influence of external quality assurance mechanisms as well as the monitoring and evaluation stage and its significance to the process. The final part of the first section of the chapter will discuss the outcomes of the research in relation to the process itself especially focusing on the importance of consistency in maintaining the process.

The second part of the chapter will address the research questions by leaning into the management of the process and the crucial role of the leader and leadership team ‘leading’ and ‘managing’ the process which are different aspects entirely but need to converge if the process is to be implemented effectively. This aspect forms part of the first research question related to approach and perception, however, its evolution throughout the research warranted deeper insight. This part of the chapter will go into the importance of the actual approach towards leadership and the importance of building a school culture where professional learning communities which can sustain implementation and in due course build that ownership of the process which is so necessary (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000; Bush, 2014; Dimmock, 2020). This section will also focus on the importance of support needed in implementing the process as well as and the role of the ‘critical friend’ which came up strongly both in the literature review as well as in the findings section.

6.2 Limited understanding and practice with the process

An important aspect which formed part of the research questions focused on understanding how educators perceived the process and how they believed it currently worked within their context and how, upon reflection, they believed that it should work. The current national and idiosyncratic culture influences the attitude and perception which educators have towards ownership, control and responsibility of the process (Glazer et al., 2019; Pajares, 2016). The relevance of this perception was corroborated during the research especially through the change which started to emerge when educators were asked about the process both before and after changes in approach were implemented. It was evident that the current school culture and the way teacher agency was considered did not present opportunities where they could pause and think about their environment and how they would like to see the school flourish. The increased reflection and practice with the process, was found to initiate an important move in the way they perceived the process.

At the start of the research, educators were generally aware of the process in its entirety, as commonly referred to as School Development Planning (SDP). Most answered that they considered the (SDP) as important for the school especially in determining the way forward. However, when asked to break down the process into different parts and identify which of these parts they feel could be most problematic, most respondents including leadership teams floundered in their responses. The most common response was they had never thought about it and that the SDP was considered as a standard exercise within the school calendar which had to be carried out. My initial assessment as a researcher, following evidence obtained from the initial questionnaire and interviews was that there was limited understanding of the concept of self-evaluation and development planning seen as strategic management tools for improvement. It was clear that educators mainly viewed the process as another task, a perfunctory exercise which they were 'told' was important to the school. Ironically, leadership, who was essentially doing the telling, also had limited understanding of the process, albeit slightly better than educators. Consequently, the strength of that belief was rather weak,

changeable and not strong enough to inspire and drive staff towards understanding and believing in the process. The findings from this research corroborate the literature on the area of SSE and Development Planning on the importance and impact of the role of leadership and agency on educators' mindset and approach to learning (Bezzina, 2001, 2004, 2024; Macbeath, 2008; Kaser & Halbert, 2009; Clayton et al., 2020; Bezzina & Paletta, 2022; Hadijah, 2024).

The limited reflective stance could be easily spotted during the research when it was evident that educators rarely reflected on school improvement on a level beyond that of the classroom and their own needs. In many cases, interviewees steered the conversation back to what they were specifically working on with their particular year group. At points in time during the initial set of interviews, interviewees reported that to be able to answer my questions they had felt the need to carry out some prior research about the process in fear of being unable to speak about development planning with confidence. As mentioned earlier, this was indicative of an ingrained school culture where active participation and understanding of the process were limited. Although educators could identify some changes attributed to development planning, none could transmit either a thorough understanding of the *raison d'être* of the process or its different components. When asked about an eventual follow up of identified priorities, a positive response was rarely put forward.

Upon researching both schools' past documentation related to development planning such as questionnaire responses and action plans it became clear why this kind of perception pervaded. During past years priorities had mostly originated from the SLT and they were often unclear regarding the final objectives, the implementation was fragmented and often unstructured and monitoring and evaluation of the process was sporadic at best. This approach unfortunately prevails in several local schools due to a predominant top-down approach and culture towards strategic planning (Bezzina, 1997, 2006). The sense of ownership was debilitated due to the limited, often just a once-a-year interaction with, at most, two parts of the process; data collection as respondents to the yearly questionnaire sent

by the SLT to stakeholders and occasionally, action plan writing. As regards reflection on the process, this only happened sporadically during SDP sessions which occurred once a term where priorities were briefly discussed with staff and usually set by the leadership team. During interviews, educators also often referred to priorities coming from the head of school or from the proverbial 'above'. The limited involvement in the process which educators had prior to the research naturally influences the ownership, and the sense of belonging which are usually associated to a sense of accomplishment and success. One here can tie the concept of the 'culture of compliance' as discussed by McNamara and O'Hara (2008) to the research carried out by Brown et al., (2020) who argue that when the application of the process is inconsistent and perceived as something which educators have to do notwithstanding their beliefs and understanding, then ownership of the process will be very limited and difficult to develop.

The national, cultural and sectoral background of both schools can be said to be one of the possible hurdles which leaders face in relation strategic management (Janssens & van Amelsvoort, 2008). It is that inherent need to maintain authority and the fear of losing control of the 'helm' of the school. In fact, interviews with educators and leadership teams clearly indicate that although there was a certain level of communication, there still prevailed a culture which in certain aspects promoted an 'us and them' mentality. Educators were still 'told' what to focus on, thus impacting the level of reciprocal trust which could and should be developed amongst professionals within the same community irrelevant of hierarchy. This can be inherently linked to Murphy and Dweck's (2016) theory which connects the impact of culture and environment to approach and mindset. As a researcher I was very much aware of this aspect during the first part of the research. It was evident that educators were sceptical of the system and how it could work as they often viewed it as another imposition on them which would ultimately translate in further work which they would need to be accountable for (McNamara et al., 2022). In reality, they lacked trust in the system because they were not used to working with it or be reflective practitioners especially in relation to the different parts of the process. Literature in the field of SSE in fact often focuses on the direct impact

which the process has on actual learning when educators are given the opportunity to interact with the process and voice their own areas for improvement (Hecht et al., 2023). Some of these studies, such as the one carried by Brady (2016), reported important improvement not only tangibly through results but also in the development of professional learning environments where all educators participate in the decision-making process of the school.

6.2.1 Increasing Educator involvement and professional development

A determining finding emanating from the research which also corroborated literature in the field is that educator involvement with the process is a key element towards not only the success of the process but also the so much needed change in culture, perspective and mindset (MacBeath, 1999, 2004, 2008; MacBeath & Mortimore, 2000; Murphy & Dweck, 2016; Dweck, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2020). We are here looking at involvement which goes beyond classroom practice, beyond that of merely showing up and delivering the set curriculum. It touches upon the need for educators to be involved at strategic planning level so that a culture of collaboration can be initiated. The need for both teacher and leadership agency is especially poignant at this juncture. Development in professional practice towards improvement in recent years promotes the influence of teachers beyond the classroom (Chien, 2020; Boylan, 2018; Szeto, 2020; Torrance & Humes, 2015; Wan et al., 2020; Wang & Wong, 2021; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Research shows that teacher leadership is steadily becoming increasingly important as part of the strategic management system within schools; educators are a determining factor in bringing about school improvement (Muijs & Harris, 2007; York-Barr and Duke, 2004; Bush, 2015).

This will allow not only for professional development but also help in reshaping that perception and sense of belonging they have towards the process and the school's plan for improvement (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). This involvement, if consistent, will slowly start developing a different kind of culture which favours a growth mindset towards the process and strategic management (Ball, 2003a;

Bendsten et al., 2021). The research with both schools clearly indicates that the conflict which exists is the perception of SSE and development planning is that it is seen as an exercise that increases responsibility and accountability rather than one which focuses on improvement. Findings associated to mindset and approach also resonate with outcomes outlined in a study by Skerritt et al., (2021) which addresses a similar situation in Irish schools whose culture and background in SSE can be compared to the local Maltese context. The shift from a fixed to growth mindset which focuses on consistency and professional learning communities needs to occur if the SSE process is to flourish. An important aspect to investigate at this juncture is where teachers view themselves in relation to agency and teacher leadership; their perception and role identity is determining at this point to understand the propensity of leadership potential and more importantly their propensity towards change (Hindin, 2007; Lai & Cheung, 2015). The relationship between teachers and their perception of their role and how they see themselves as leaders is determining when speaking about mindset, the vision and the perceived impact which they believe they can have on the schools' improvement plan (Tubin, 2017; Notman, 2017; Cruz- Gonzalez et al., 2021).

The research offered participants the opportunity to reflect on the process and collectively write an action plan for their own year group. This was a significant step for both educators and leaders as it allowed educators to take agency of the improvement planning of their own year group. It also allowed leaders to interact with educators and envisage a scenario where transferring agency and steering the school team collectively towards improvement could actually work (Belibas et al., 2020; Dagdeverin et al., 2025). It was especially evident at the end of the research where, as a researcher I noticed a marked difference in the responses given by the interviewees especially in the way they interacted with the process. Whereas, in the first interview they were hesitant in suggesting improvement and usually echoed what was prompted by the researcher, during the second set of interviews it was evident that they had been triggered to think about the process and could offer more structured and relevant feedback. This could have been something which came through the school in relation to the changes which were planned at

the end of the first year and implemented during the second year. However, as a researcher, I strongly believe that it is also partly due to the opportunity to reflect on their practice which was given to educators throughout the research; an aspect which was mainly missing at the beginning.

An important aspect which was mentioned by educators during interviews was the need for professional development. An aspect which also featured regularly in literature when relating educators to the SSE process (Bezzina, 2006; Bendsten et al., 2021; Beltramo, 2018). Providing development sessions to educators during the research process, which included the writing of action plans for implementation proved to be beneficial both to the staff and myself as a researcher as I was able to go through the exercise as a reflective process with them. However, significant as it may have been to the scope of the research, this professional development consisted of a mere two sessions throughout the span of the research with each school. The consistency of any training provided was also further remarked on by participants who stated that professional development given to them in several areas including development planning was often a one-time occurrence which had no follow up and was sparsely organized. They also assumed that the development I had given as part of the research would also not be continued though they expressed the need for it. This disillusionment and lack of consistency in professional development is unfortunately a common occurrence which is not only felt within the research and this particular context (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2020; Dogan & Kirkgoz, 2022). However, it contributed in shaping the mindset which educators manifested during the first part of the research. Professional development linked to strategic planning requires a certain level of consistency. It also necessitates a strong practical element where regularly, over a span of time educators can see the difference which the process is bringing especially towards improvement.

Upon reflection and analysis, as a researcher, I am not sure if I would provide those sessions in the same way I did. Although the intention was to clarify certain aspects about the process for the scope of the research, it might have also served as fuel to

the perception that these were one off sessions, ultimately partly defeating their purpose. At this stage, when it comes to the professional development of their staff, leadership teams need to look into training which does not only concern development planning as a whole but it should be broken down into smaller components such as that of data management and clear action plan writing to be able to sustain the process with educators on a continuous basis.

On a national level, another aspect which came up during interviews is the lack of time available to work with the process, the intrusion of mandated training and the necessity of using time allotted to strategic planning on what they perceived to be the 'forced' implementation of national policies or strategies. The *Learning Outcomes Framework* and the *Emergent Curriculum*, were often mentioned during interviews as hindering the autonomy of both schools in implementing what they believed they needed to work on as main priorities. Although the *National Curriculum Framework* (2012) advocates autonomy for non-state schools in implementing national policy, a certain level of central control is still present because non-state schools, especially the church sector, is still to a certain extent subsidised by the state. When these initiatives are being forced on school development planning, it is subsequently impinging on the sense of belonging towards the process and the perception that SSE and Development Planning are merely other ways in which as educators they can be controlled as well as ignoring the context of the school. Thus, this is also an aspect which is perceived as contributing towards limited engagement and inconsistency in implementation as will be seen later, monitoring and evaluation. This notion ties with a study carried out by O'Brien et al., (2019) where findings show that although leadership agreed with the usefulness of the process they were frustrated by the myriads of issues when it came to consistency in implementation.

6.2.2 Extending the process beyond the classroom

One of the aspects which emerged from the research, which also ties closely to the research foci is the attention which was attributed to the learning and teaching component at the expense of other aspects which would involve the extended school community. Both schools decided to focus on different programmes and initiatives they were working on or wanted to work on in relation to the pedagogy and the learning which was going on in the classroom. To this effect, both schools decided to let the different year groups develop their own action plan to be implemented in the classroom. Other priorities which would concern the wider community were not considered or they believed that they were second to the learning and teaching component at that point in time. One might delve into different reasons why this was done. One reason could be the apprehension towards involving the wider community such as parents in what was often referred to during the interviews as ‘school business’. Close to the end of the research, during one of the focus group sessions with leadership carried out with School B, the subject of behaviour management was brought up and the team was discussing ways of how to involve parents but in the ‘least intrusive’ way possible. This is indicative to a certain extent of a type of culture where communication with parents as main stakeholders is limited to organisation of school events rather than effective involvement in improvement planning (Bezzina & Deguara, 2013; Abela, 2019). Although School B was more adamant in their apprehension of parental involvement, both schools seemed to shun away from the concept of having Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) because they felt that these would prove troublesome to manage. School A also described having a bitter experience in the past with these associations and was very reluctant in promoting the formation of one. One of the main objectives of the SSE and development planning process is that of bringing the community together, including parents as determining stakeholders. A change in culture and mindset towards greater ownership also needs to consider the way the involvement of parents is viewed not only within the process but also generally in the life of the school. When discussing the local approach towards

quality assurance, the fear of being judged and evaluated by parents also plays an important part as well as the perceived responsibility of having to be accountable for decisions or priorities which were not fulfilled.

As also discussed in the literature review section, the current approach promoted internationally is that of further including parents and the wider community as part of their SSE and development planning process (OECD, 2013; EC, 2018, 2020). This does not only promote a wider understanding of leadership but also increases the expanse of ownership towards the process as well as the level of accountability and commitment to see that things are implemented, monitored and evaluated. This involvement is obviously conditioned or determined by contextual variables such as the school's own history, its geographic location and background as well as the area's socio-economic background. However, these are not valid enough reasons to exclude the participation of parents in their child's life at school, on the contrary they should be the reasons to fuel further their involvement (EC, 2018).

6.2.3 The effect of external QA in the SSE process

The third research question focused on the impact of external quality assurance mechanisms on school development. The Maltese approach to external quality assurance as outlined in the documentary review of the literature is quite structured, follows established standards and encompasses three important pillars: Leadership and Management, Learning and Teaching and School Ethos (*National Quality Standards in Education (3-16)*, 2023). The approach taken towards external quality assurance for compulsory education is one which is developmental and seeks constant dialogue with the different stakeholders which form part of the school community. When interviewed, participants in the research did not feel threatened by the external review concept and the correlation was at most one which is positive and at worst a situation where they felt that external QA did not affect them neither in their everyday work with students and consequently nor in their involvement with the process. Their feedback mainly consisted of their understanding that the SSE process is fundamentally carried out for the good of the

school and not because it is being imposed by others, including the external evaluation body. In fact, findings show that they feel more pressure from external governing bodies who they perceive as ‘imposing’ reforms on schools. Although not directly related to SSE and development planning this aspect was an important part of the study as it helped me as a researcher assess the way the process is viewed in relation to the school’s improvement goals independently from external quality assurance.

The view of the external review is seen as a whole experience and from findings it was clear that although it does have some negative impact on the school such as added stress, preparation, fear of being evaluated, however, the influence on the SSE and development planning does not seem to feature among these fears (Brady, 2016; Ozga, 2009). In many settings, the effect of external monitoring is usually felt quite strongly by the school as imposing on operation and development planning (Vanhoof et al., 2009). The lack of meticulousness in following the process, as will be discussed later in the chapter, although not favourable to the outcomes of the process itself, however, indicates that there isn’t that overwhelming ‘fear’ of the SSE process being evaluated and found lacking by external QA mechanisms.

As also argued in the methodology chapter, there was the concern that my role outside the context of the research, as lead inspector for the Maltese Directorate for Quality and Standards might possibly impinge on their responses. To mitigate this effect the one-to-one interviews were supported by the questionnaires at the beginning of the study which also included a question on the role of external quality assurance, which brought about a correlation in responses. During the focus group with the leadership in School B, however, the emphasis on the notion that a well-developed and functioning Development Plan could help limit the need of external evaluation was discussed in more depth and with more emphasis. Any internal evaluation held by the school would essentially focus on an improvement plan linked to the context of the school. This is the kind of approach and thought process which would instigate that important change in mindset which we have been

discussing so far. Viewing the SSE process as the core driving strategic management tool of the school is what can lead to the development of a sustainable system of quality assurance (Ministry for Education, 2023). This kind of approach is also being promoted at European level as can be seen through the clear discussion on the role of external quality assurance and governing structures in relation to internal quality assurance as presented in the Report supporting SSE published by the European Commission in 2018.

On the other hand, this type of reflection can trigger several interesting debates, especially linked to the notions of autonomy, responsibility and accountability and to what extent schools' internal review processes are and should be monitored. The impact of external quality assurance on internal practices is also put into question especially when discussing the perception and ownership of the process by educators (Oktarina et al., 2023). To what extent does the fact that you are to submit your work to external bodies influence the way you approach the process and your perception and ownership of it? If, as mentioned previously there is the influence of governing structures and external monitoring and evaluation, influencing the process in different ways, can there be ownership and drive in carrying out the process effectively? As discussed earlier the Maltese context presents an external review system which is developmental in nature, but which ultimately aims at focusing on the strength of the schools' internal review processes (DQSE, 2023). Considering the mainly centralised governing system nationally, but also within this context, at college level, how realistic is the development of an evaluative culture which focuses on enhancing the synergy between internal and external quality assurance mechanisms? It is easy to discuss this shift in words but achieving it would need substantial change not only within the school culture and the mindset of educators but also within the existing culture within governing structures who need to really believe in the importance of autonomy and trusting that schools understand their own needs and can effectively develop plans to address them (Hybersten & Stensaker, 2024).

6.3 Engaging with the SSE process

The process itself can present stumbling blocks at different stages; however, findings indicate that both schools managed to get through the first phases. This would involve the gathering of feedback from different stakeholders, the analysis of this feedback and the identification of the priorities which would be then developed into possible action plans for implementation. Guidance was provided into how to analyse the data, however, both schools were not given any additional support in the actual analysis of the data. When evaluating and discussing this section of the process, further insight could have gone into the effectiveness of the way feedback was gathered, the analysis of this data, if the priorities identified for development are manageable in the long-run or if the actions developed are practical and can be monitored. Most schools, including the ones who took part in this research usually manage to get to the action plan writing stage.

From the interaction I had with both schools throughout the research, I believe that they both managed to hone in on the areas which needed development. I still believe, however, that more pronounced data analysis skills would have helped in stages which followed, especially in the writing of action plans. Notwithstanding, halfway through the research period, both schools had a pretty clear idea where they wanted to go and through training of educators, dedicated sessions with the leadership teams and feedback from myself in the role of critical friend, there was a strong premise of having workable and viable action plans which could be implemented by educators within the classroom. This was ultimately the objective of the first year of the research and the scenario which schools had in hand at that point in time. The second year looked at the implementation, monitoring and evaluation stages of the process.

6.3.1 The Monitoring and Evaluation stage: the main ‘pitfall’ of the process

There exists limited research and literature on the monitoring and evaluation part of the SSE process. This is primarily why my second research question delves specifically into the importance which is attributed by the schools to monitoring

and evaluation. From experience with schools as well as through the research, it is a very common area of concern which is not usually given its due attention. The general argument when discussing the area centres around the negative connotations, resistance, stress and fear often associated with evaluation (Conley & Glasman 2008; Elisner, 2003; Vanhoof et al., 2009). Findings from the research clearly show that both schools did not have a culture of reflection and evaluation and approach the process in a rather fragmented manner. Interaction with both schools also indicate that there doesn't seem to be the awareness necessary to understand how detrimental this fragmented approach can be to the system as a whole.

During the first part of the research, interviewees were asked about the SSE process and which part they believed was problematic. Few were able to identify the different parts of the process and there were varied and different ideas of what the whole exercise consisted of. However, during interviews, following the introduction, a certain level of focused reflection on the process, the situation shifted, and the part identified as being problematic was the 'monitoring and evaluation' stage which essentially requires those who are implementing the process to look consistently and objectively at what is being implemented and evaluate if this has been successful or otherwise. This part of the process is crucial in determining what the next step is in the specific area being monitored and if this can be considered as achieved and if, therefore, the school can move to the next step or otherwise. However, there seemed to be little understanding, especially when it comes to the evaluative aspect of how and when this should be implemented nor was there any reference to the need to plan this beforehand. Most educators, including the leadership teams also seemed to be lost as to how monitoring and evaluation could take place in practical terms. The main problem seemed to be that evaluation was being generally perceived by both educators and leadership as an abstract concept rather than a practical exercise which would bring about real and tangible results in the form of data which could be used to inform improvement. It was evident at this stage that a change in understanding and conceptualisation towards monitoring and evaluation still needed to occur both

with educators as well the leadership teams who should ultimately be its driving force.

One can start to analyse the situation by looking at the other aspects of the process, such as data collected which is usually carried out through research tools such as questionnaires and interviews. Similarly, when one looks at planning for priorities to be implemented, there are action plan templates which one may choose to follow and clear techniques such as SMART when developing actions and the steps towards their implementation. However, when it comes to monitoring and evaluation, it is up to the school to develop a cohesive and comprehensive system which can be sustained. If this is missing, the evaluation phase is at best ignored, subconsciously or consciously, and at worst feared because it will highlight issues which might not have been tackled effectively. This was in fact discussed with the Head of School of School A during the last focused interview. During the interview it transpired that there was an awareness of the importance behind the exercise. However, as Head of School, he was fearful as there were parts of the implementation plan which he felt he did not act upon or were not carried out effectively. There was a combination of shame and fear symptomatic of a possibly limited or skewed understanding of leadership agency shaped by school culture and the long years of viewing the process in a particular way (Bezzina, 2006; Bezzina & Cutajar, 2017). This unfortunately defeats the purpose of SSE in general as a tool for support especially in relation to monitoring and evaluation which is a core part of the process.

Although findings showed that there isn't a tangible 'fear' of the external QA mechanisms and the Maltese regulatory body, there seems to still be a fear of being judged by others and a level of perceived embarrassment at possible failure which comes along with it. This kind of approach towards evaluation can easily be connected to the type of governing structures which are currently in force within the specific context as well as the cultural and historical background not only of the school but also as a country (Baldacchino, 2012; Bezzina, 2006; Calleja, 1994). This cultural and governance impact is where once again the need for a nationwide

shift in approach and mindset from one of forced accountability to one of improvement which is decentralised and specific to the school becomes determining (Bezzina, 2019, 2024; Chircop, 2020). It was evident, that both leaders and educators missed the understanding of professional agency, a core aspect in the development of professional learning communities. As discussed by Dweck in 2017 and Beltramo in 2018, an environment which promotes a growth mindset, one where the school community is responsible and accountable for the different parts of the process would diminish the stress brought about by prospective failures and allow for a more serene and logical approach towards the process.

When discussing the limited monitoring and evaluation stance taken, both schools once again blamed the limited time which is available to them to carry out the exercise, factors such as frequent impositions from above and outside of their own context were mentioned in addition to the daily chaos which schools consistently go through. This resonates with the findings of some of the international studies reviewed as part of this research which emphasise the aspect of time as determining for schools especially in relation to strategic planning (Copland, 2003; Schildkamp et al., 2016; Wohlstetter et al., 2008). Educators and leadership teams both frequently argued that these factors take away from strategic management including time to frequent classrooms and meet with teaching staff to evaluate implementation. However, there were also instances during the research where leadership teams seemed to lack the internal professional understanding of how monitoring and evaluation should be part of their daily routine as leaders. Understanding the crucial importance of this step, is, I believe, fundamental, especially prior to implementation of any priority targets. During the final focus group sessions, both leadership teams reflected on this aspect. The Head of School A finally concluded that it was not a matter of limited time but rather one of leader agency that is having to strategically and intelligently manage the time available to be able to plan for monitoring and evaluation and then effectively maintain it. This led to deeper reflection on educator agency, on how educators can be better involved in the process and that a level of commitment and consistency need to be ensured. Both schools realised that it does not matter if action plans have been

implemented or otherwise, if there is no evaluation of the exercise and therefore no tangible record of progress, it would amount to unfortunately a near futile and possibly counterproductive exercise. As Suarez and Montes (2020) discuss, understanding the process and its relevance to school improvement is the first step towards feeling the need to set up organizational routines and systems which can help schools, especially leadership teams evaluate and cater for unplanned occurrences within that setting. Ultimately this will help create a balance between structure, context and school culture.

When interviewed, most participants in the research initially connected the aspect of evaluation to one particular whole school activity; the traditional ‘School Development Day’ at the end of the scholastic year. Through discussion and reflection as well as through experience following the first year, both SLT teams as well as educators concluded that evaluating at the end of the scholastic year is not effective as precious time and resources might have been wasted in the process. During the meetings with educators and leadership teams, where the process was discussed, it was clear that there was the need of a stronger element of ownership and healthy accountability towards the process not only on the part of the leadership but also from the side of educators. Both schools essentially felt that the whole process needed more structure and that monitoring and evaluation needed to happen regularly throughout the year if issues had to be ironed out and progress was to be effectively analysed. As a researcher I believe that this was a very important part of the research as educators started really coming to terms with what the process is about and its importance. The seeds of change had been sown.

During the second year of the research it was often surprising to the interviewees and participants, how the process was halted and how, although in most cases they had implemented what they had planned at the end of the previous year, this was not evaluated and they had no conscious knowledge, if they had achieved the targets they had planned or otherwise and what the next step in what they were implementing was. Holding regular meetings where educators can meet and discuss their own practice in the classroom under the umbrella of evaluation for

SSE purposes is an optimal opportunity not only for the improvement plans per se but also for the reflection process and the development of professional learning communities which should form part and parcel of the life of educators at school. This time to discuss and evaluate plans for development is a crucial element which is unfortunately missing and which SSE can provide for, if it is strategically implemented.

6.4 The role of leadership and agency in SSE and development planning

Another important aspect which formed part of the research questions, but which was extended exponentially as the research progressed is the role of leadership within the process. The complex relationship between leadership and school improvement has always been a well discussed and researched area in literature (Liethwood et al., 2020). During the interviews and focus groups, the role of the leader was also frequently brought up by educators relating to different aspects of the SSE process. As discussed often in literature, such as Louis et al., (2010) as well as Bezzina (2024), educational leaders hold a strategic position as agents for change and improvement especially considering the multi-faceted education environment of today. One of the most frequent comments was connected to the role of leadership in relation to spurring change and improvement. However, leadership agency was also significantly discussed in the light of not only of being given the opportunity of bringing the school community together but also in possessing the professional ability and the drive to do so. (Debono, 2015; Polidano, 2021).

At the initial stages of the research the data obtained from interviewees in relation to leadership was one which took on a relatively conservative stance. It primarily focused on the importance of having someone to give direction and be accountable or responsible for any change which was being implemented within the school. In hindsight, following my experience as a researcher and temporarily as critical friend with both the leadership teams and educators, this kind of feedback was not surprising considering that the school community was used to an approach which

was predominantly top-down and centralised. An aspect which echoes, once again, the Maltese context which is usually characterised by strong hierarchical structures and a relatively narrow understanding of the role of the leader (Bezzina, 2006; Polidano, 2022). As the research progressed and educators started understanding better SSE as a tool for reflection, they also started to realise that for the process to work it cannot depend solely on the head of school and possibly the leadership team. The findings from the research clearly echoed literature in the field of leadership and change spanning over several years (MacBeath, 2008; Bush, 2006, 2007, 2011, 2020; Bezzina, 2001, 2006, 2024; Fullan, 2010; Leithwood, 2012; Day et al., 2020). Before any improvement plan is developed change needed to happen fundamentally through a concerted effort towards developing a greater sense of trust to be able to bring the school together as a professional learning community. The professional relationship based on trust which gradually developed throughout the research between the researcher as critical friend and the leadership teams was a very determining part of the research especially during the focus group sessions which served as important reflection stops where leaders felt free to discuss any issues they wanted to. During these sessions they not only externalised their position in relation to the process but also what they felt was hindering them from achieving their set goals. This was especially catalytic during the second and final focus group at the end of the research where reflection brought about a number of realisations.

Understanding the role of leader agency has always been an important part of my research and through my experience a determining aspect which emerged quite strongly during these conversations is the preparedness of school leaders to lead and not only manage a school, including its different ever-changing contexts and scenarios. This lack of preparedness includes the ability to understand their role as leaders in relation to agency as well as the management of change processes (Acton, 2021; Fullan, 2016; Richard, 1996). Evidence from interviews and focus groups shows that the two heads of school and their leadership teams were very much aware of the current school context and culture as well as the different variables which at that point in time were influencing the school's improvement

path such as the Covid pandemic and its aftermath, constant pressure from parents and what they perceived as imposed initiatives from outside. It was evident, at the beginning of the research that they had been trying to tackle these variables as problem areas or opportunities in silos without clearly understanding what the real barriers towards school improvement were within their context. A case in point is the consistent reference by both leaders and educators to the introduction and implementation of the *Learning Outcomes Framework* (LOF), a reform which has been the national chimera for the past ten years. During the research as well as through the documentary analysis, it was clear that the approach taken on so far was mainly focused on the imposition of certain changes on teachers especially in their teaching and assessment approach. Findings indicate that these initiatives were in some cases being implemented but were nearly never being monitored or evaluated; this shows not only limited belief in the system but also a general lack of agency by educators and leaders. At this stage, apart from a general attitude towards the perceived imposition from above, the limitation also concerned a lack of insight from the leader's part, that the next step should not have been that of imposing a change in approach, but addressing the mindsets of educators and their preparedness for such a change. I chose to portray this example because apart from influencing the improvement strategy of the school, this situation also brings to light other aspects regarding the preparedness of leaders in schools towards management and change. As also outlined by Haber (2011) in his work, these typical situations also question the type of professional development, if any, leaders embark on during their journey as heads of school.

One important influence this research had on both leadership teams, especially during the last evaluative part, was that both heads of school realised that important variables present within the school cannot and should not be considered separately when planning for school improvement. Educators will not implement a strategy or programme effectively if it is solely imposed from above and if there is no ownership whatsoever of its implementation. A synergy needs to be developed across the different variables towards a strategic and concrete plan for improvement which is at the same time fluid and can allow for reasonable change.

This is where I believe SSE and development planning process within the context of both schools started gathering more significance as an effective and tangible tool for improvement, already available to school leaders and which could lead into this synergy.

As Bush (2012) and Armstrong (2014) discuss in their research, heads of school learn and develop more thoroughly if professional development is linked to their work on the ground in schools. In fact, in instances during the research where different aspects, including their approach towards the LOF, were discussed, both heads of school felt that they had learnt not only about the SSE process but also about themselves as professionals and their role as leaders. They started questioning certain practices which had been carried out repeatedly for years and started to reflect aloud on alternatives to how they could work better. Moreover, the fact that both heads appreciated and felt the need for the role of the critical friend is also indicative that both leaders feel isolated and at times lost in how to move forward especially in delicate and complex areas such as change management and assuring improvement. The research strengthened the need for Heads of School as well as leadership to engage in continuous professional learning (CPL) not only to allow for a more thorough understanding of what changes are going on at that point in time but also how to be effective agents of change who can not only manage these changes but shape them towards bringing about tangible improvement (Coenen et al., 2021).

6.4.1 SSE and leadership approach

As mentioned previously, it was very interesting to observe that the central improvement plan determined by both schools focused mainly on learning and teaching and the different reforms and initiatives which both schools were working on at that point in time. While discussing the implementation and the monitoring and evaluation phases with senior leadership teams it was also clear that to handle these types of priorities which focused mainly on content and pedagogy, the predominant leadership approach adopted by both heads of school was clearly an

instructional one. Findings indicate that this approach worked relatively well during the initial phase especially in the development of structured action plans and identification of professional development for educators. The instructional approach was beneficial as it essentially helped leaders guide educators in focusing on the specific objectives and vision for their particular year group. It was also encouraging for educators to know that their leaders were actively involved in their plans and had a clear understanding of what was happening in class. Similarly to what was discussed by DuFour and DuFour (2009) and Bezzina and Paletta (2022) this involvement also helped in developing professional learning communities among educators as well as members of the leadership team towards a common goal. On the other hand, the limited understanding of surrounding factors, such as the need for consistency in monitoring the process and the importance of bringing staff together as a school rather than solely as separate groups shows that heads did not cognitively reflect on the possible need to diversify their leadership stance to address other aspects which might impact the success of the process. This could be one of the reasons why both schools found the importance of monitoring and evaluation, difficult to understand.

While as discussed by Bush (2020), instructional leadership can give leaders a good grasp on the learning and teaching which goes on in the classroom and allow for an important level of bonding with educators on a pedagogical level, findings from this research show that at a certain stage it needed to be complemented by other approaches, such as transformational and distributive leadership. These would facilitate aspects such as monitoring and evaluation. As often remarked in literature and research in the field of educational leadership and management, it is very difficult to thrive if only one approach is advocated, especially in today's educational landscape which presents leaders with a myriad of different scenarios and challenges (Aydin, 2012; King & Vaiman, 2019). Research as well as active practice has been advocating the convergence of different styles of leadership which advocate collaboration among members of the school community in the quest towards success in developing a healthy environment for the different stakeholders who form part of the school community. An environment which is, as

Day et al., (2020) argue in their research not only conducive to improvement in the classroom but also towards development at a school as well at a personal and professional level for educators. Findings from the research, however, show that this is not always easy to achieve especially if there is a predominant hierarchical structure which inhibits the level of autonomy needed to be able to implement change and bring the school together. It was evident that heads of school were not only contending with the multi-faceted needs of the school but also with the needs of those who were above them in rank, be it the college's own governing structures as well as national ones.

As can be seen from the outcomes of the focus groups which were held with SLT members it offered an opportunity not only to reflect on the improvement plan for the school but also instigated dialogue and thoughts on the concept of leadership and the approach which they can adopt within their particular school context (Day et al., 2020). As discussed in studies such as those carried out by Printy et al., (2009) and Leithwood (2019), continuous reflection for leaders is key if they are to sustain and reach their goals and objectives. The fact that both schools essentially did not manage to sustain the process through consistent and effective monitoring and evaluation indicates that both leaders need to reflect first and foremost on their role as leaders.

6.4.2 The impact of perception on the role of the leader

When looking at the limited understanding of the real impact of the process and the lack of consistency in implementation, the natural question to pose is if this attributed importance was primarily due to a cultural mindset which tends, as Jeng (2024) points out, to shift responsibility and accountability for Development Planning on the leadership team. Considering previously analysed data related to approach, this could very well be the case with several respondents. Dispelling such a cultural phenomenon which has been developing over time is not an easy feat especially as it requires a lot of hard work and a complete shift in mindset. This can only be brought about through an important and informed discussion on

how both leaders and educators view their agency within the process and in relation to school improvement (Hilal et al., 2022; Lin, 2022).

The conversations with educators and leadership teams offered an important opportunity to reflect on important aspects in this regard. Interviews and focus groups led to different perspectives, attitudes and opinions on the role and perceived agency of the leader, most of which might have primarily stemmed from the extent of the individual educator's previous professional experience with different leadership approaches towards the process. The general feel garnered from the findings is that the 'leader' should be both the 'facilitator' and the 'manager' of the process. The main take from educators was that leaders should provide them with the opportunities and time to be able to engage with the process. At the same time leadership teams should also listen, communicate and create a sense of ownership which most of the educators felt was a crucial aspect in the process. Essentially, the leader is seen as catalyst as well as the pivot of the whole process. However, this view of leadership agency tends to lead towards a stance of relative complacency, where educators position themselves primarily as followers. It is undeniable that participants view the role of leader as one which plays a determining part in spearheading such processes, but it was also evident during interviews and conversations that the understanding of leadership is one which is still embedded in traditional and stereotypical perceptions, where the leader decides and leads his/her school to success or otherwise. This perception not only influences the way educators view the role but also the leadership approach taken on by Heads of school and Leadership teams (Bezzina, 2024). The strong underlying perception is that responsibility and accountability of success or failure lies solely on the leader and leadership team. Although the history and context of the school do play an important part in shaping the perception and approach towards leadership agency, however, this kind of attitude could also be linked to a residual colonial mentality of a small island which, during most of its history, was told to follow and obey different forms of 'leadership' (Baldacchino, 2012). This kind of view of leadership cannot work anymore in organisations today where

the role of the leader and the demands which it entails have also changed exponentially (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Fundamentally, in depth interviews indicated that the top-down approach practiced by both schools is taken as normal by educators. This is also a perception which transpired from the focus groups which were held with both SLTs. Even though the SLT of school B seemed to be more open to change than the SLT of school A, there still was a relative predominance of an 'us and them' approach. To this effect, lack of ownership and teacher agency from the part of educators was in fact identified as one of the main problems which needed to be addressed. When leaders were asked why they believed there was this lack of ownership, the responses focused on not having enough time and the overwhelming work schedule which educators have, aspects which have often featured in literature through several studies, such as the ones carried out by DuFour and DuFour (2009), Croft et al., (2010) and Huffman et al., (2014).

During the final focus group sessions with leadership teams, it took quite some time to move from a 'blame game' attitude as to why monitoring and evaluation was not being carried out to one of reflection where leaders self-evaluated and came up with possible solutions to rectify this omission. It also took quite some effort to move further than immediate solutions such as for instance, better scheduling and distribution of tasks and providing more opportunities to individual educators to the need to enhance the school as a professional learning community. However, the importance of allowing educators their own space to lead initiatives and work towards school improvement as a community did not come up spontaneously. Giving more importance to teacher agency was never actively discussed as a solution to fundamental flaws in the process such as the lack of monitoring and evaluation. This is a clear indication, that there needs to be a shift in culture and the understanding of teacher agency (Dagdeviren et al., 2025; Emans et al., 2025). This type of change needs to happen gradually, through incremental change and the acknowledgement of small, consistent pockets of success brought

about by opportunities for teacher leadership (Wagner et al., 2019; Priestley et al., 2015).

An interesting aspect which I believe to be an important turning point in the research was the view which leaders themselves had of their own role and agency. In both cases they initially viewed the role of the leader as central and pivotal not merely in leading and decision making but also in the sense that they frequently took on themselves full responsibility and accountability of any success or failure. Apart from being counterproductive, this type of approach also impacts their professional well-being as leaders and in the long run can be the reason for stress (Coenen, Schelfhout & Hondenghem, 2021). This could be seen during the research where the Head of School of School A admitted during an interview that he kept on procrastinating in carrying out his own self-evaluation on the process because he feared that not reaching certain targets might influence the school and ultimately the progress of students themselves.

The study served as a catalyst towards deeper reflection on the agency of the leader not only within the process but also as part of the school community. The evidence brought about and discussed with leadership teams regarding their role and its sustainability was a very important part of the exercise, especially towards the end of the research. They started to realise that the top-down approach they were taking on as a given was not sustainable in the long run and was ultimately contributing to their current predicament of having too much pressure placed on them as leaders. This also opened the door to further reflection not only towards the need of a cultural shift in changing the mentality of educators but also their own as leaders. It also shows that leaders need support first and foremost in understanding what their vision and agency is as school leaders and how they want to position themselves with staff in that role.

I believe this aspect provided a level of tension within the findings which naturally opens doors to important further research in the area. The research led both heads of school to reflect on their current process and understand that there is a need for

change. However, will this be followed up after the research ends? Is there enough understanding, belief and resilience to follow up on this realisation tangibly? More importantly, do they have the support from direct and broad governing structures to implement this change effectively within their contexts? Unfortunately, considering the scenario depicted earlier in this research I do not believe that this understanding alone is strong enough for consistent change to be implemented. A broader understanding and drive towards collective change needs to be present before an effective shift can happen within the Maltese education system.

6.5 Changing the mindset – Nurturing professional learning communities

SSE and development planning processes are tangible tools which can be used to nurture such a change in culture towards building and sustaining a growth mindset. As Bezzina and Paletta (2022) and Brazer et al., (2019) explore in their studies, cultivating a school-wide approach to improvement is determining if the SSE and development planning process are to become successful tools for improvement. Findings from both schools which form part of the case study demonstrate that educators believe that the process can bring about change, however, maintaining the process still needs serious work in both school contexts.

At the end of the research, both senior leadership schools started understanding that the SSE process wasn't just a set of steps to implement. Its real success is in what is underlying the system, that is, a collaborative ethos where the school is a strong professional learning community who collectively work towards the success of the process (Coenen et al., 2021). In fact, both educators and leadership teams frequently mentioned the need for ownership and accountability of the system. The reflection process they embarked on during the study led both leadership teams and educators to shift towards a more informed understanding of each other's agency within the process. There was an initial move from the belief that only the 'other side' needed to be accountable to one which identified the need for shared accountability and the ownership of the process as a school community. They also

understood that before the process is implemented successfully, there is the need for internal professional learning that honestly addresses the type of mindset which exists within their particular setting (Nace, 2015).

This understanding will hopefully be nurtured as the first step towards developing a professional learning community which doesn't only concern the nucleus of the school, but which extends to parents, institutions, members of the community which can contribute to widen the horizons and better shape the school's plans for improvement (Dufour, 2004; Hargreaves, 2003; Fluckiger et al., 2017). An aspect which transpired from the research, and which could be felt from the feedback obtained from both schools is the need for schools to become learning organisations that have a common vision and are ready to embrace and implement change before any form of school improvement is addressed in specific terms through any strategic management process (Prenger et al., 2017). As Bezzina (2024) argues, becoming a learning organisation is a journey a school or any institution undertakes while implementing changes to address school improvement. Both heads of school started realising, especially after the final evaluative focus group session, that there was the need for change but also that to actually change the mindset and effectively change they had to start by changing the current school culture and bring educators together as a reflective learning community. The outcomes of the research also brought about the understanding that reflection, evaluation and development within these learning communities needs commitment, drive and purpose. This message needs to be especially instilled in educators and embedded in professional development. As Nace (2015) argues, the sooner educators internalize this concept, the more likely they will readily adapt to changes.

A clear example of how educator involvement within the process could start to influence the approach and attitude towards their view of SSE and development planning happened during the second year of the research, following the changes implemented during the first year, where educators were more engaged in the internal review process leading to the selection of priorities and the writing of

action plans. They had been led to reflect on the process and could actively link the process of the action plan and therefore the priority to improvement. Although, there were issues as regards the evaluative part of the process, educators could feel that this system could be beneficial if it was consistently adopted. To this effect, the most common recommendation they gave when it came to improving the system was that of better monitoring and evaluation as well as training in how to implement the process. It is important to note that these aspects were not only mentioned by educators but also by the leadership teams.

As the research findings show, before attempting the implementation of any process for improvement, the mindset of those who implement the process needs to be open to this improvement and open to the notion of change. Training educators on a new literacy scheme will automatically fail if they are not ready to embrace this change towards improvement. There needs to be a strong element of reflection and systemic thinking where all parts of the process are understood and the role towards improvement is internalised by everyone. Professional development in any area needs to be structured on systemic thinking where educators are gradually led to emerge from their comfort zones and approach any change they are faced with in a structured and tangible way with clear plans for action (Barber, 1997; Ball, 2003; Bendsten et al., 2021). The most important lesson that educators can internalize is that change in any system is constant and a system is only as strong as the forces that propel it.

The outcomes of this process allowed the schools, both at teaching and leadership level, to understand that firstly, they needed to come together as a learning community to bring about improvement. Through failure in understanding the importance of monitoring and evaluation, educators and leaders started to understand that the mindset and approach towards the SSE process and development planning can be changed if there is consistency in its application. Although the monitoring and evaluation part was not implemented effectively, educators could still feel that the process had changed for the better and could feel more involved in the development process because their input was requested and

more importantly considered. Ultimately, the trigger to that change in mindset was that they could see their own input in their plans for improvement.

The professional development sessions held with staff during the first year, the focus groups which formed part of the research as well as the writing of action plans by the educators served as an example of how the process can help in building and strengthening communities of professional practice. The effective development of professional learning communities is an important aspect of the process as it is an exercise which is carried out collectively. Professional learning communities, however, have needs which are in parallel to the SSE process in that they require nurturing and careful strategic understanding to be maintained and to ensure that they are effective and relevant. This takes us back once again to the need for consistency and regularity in monitoring and evaluation.

6.6 The need for support: the critical friend

The notion of ‘support’ or as often referred to in literature as ‘the critical friend’ featured regularly in the feedback provided by educators as well as members of the SLT both during the first and second part of the research. During the first part it transpired mainly because of the lack of knowledge and understanding following questions posed about the process where many realised that their understanding of SSE and Development Planning focused almost always on the action plan and sometimes on the responses given to questionnaires distributed by the SLT. They were never led or as some termed it ‘trained’ to reflect on the different aspects which formed part of the process and how these together would make a whole system. It was evident during the interviews and the focus groups that they had rarely been given the opportunity to ‘reflect’ in the real sense of the word about the validity of the process especially because the evaluative part of the process, which primarily gives you that opportunity to reflect was missing. Through the research and my active continuous involvement as a researcher, educators were becoming aware that there is more depth to SSE and development planning than they believed

and that as a process it could help them with their everyday life at school. The fact that this lack of reflection was also brought up by the SLT not only when asked specifically but also along different points of the research, shows that albeit this being a process which each school carries out regularly on a yearly basis, there is still limited understanding of how it works and how it could bring about improvement if managed effectively. As a result of this, ownership of the process at all levels also suffers.

As mentioned earlier, the role of the researcher as critical friend during the first part of the study also triggered the awareness that support in understanding and implementing the process. It also fuelled the conviction that this support needs to come from outside the school context and process and that can provide, in any form, an objective view of the systems, strategies and initiatives which the school is adopting or embarking on. One aspect which struck me while I provided the training sessions to both schools during the first year of the research, was that there was a thirst and interest in understanding the process and how it could work for their benefit as educators also within the classroom. However, it was also evident that while educators believed that the SLT should take a more active role in the process, they also understood that the time factor as well as the everyday management of the school were a major hindrance for leadership and started forming the idea that a critical friend could help the school in maintaining the momentum of the process, which, as they were realising through the process of the research, was not as straightforward and easy as they initially might have believed it was.

When the support of the researcher as ‘critical friend’ was significantly scaled down during the second year of the research it was surprisingly felt by all, notwithstanding the fact that this support had been given to the school only for a short time. Educators expressed this feeling not only by emphasising the need of an external form of support but also by frequently mentioning that this support should be continuous and not a one-off session. One might debate that a school should be able to manage the process without external support because it knows its

own context best and what plan of action is needed towards improvement. However, schools are especially characterised by so many variables influencing daily operation, as could also be seen during visits carried out at the school as part of the research, that following a set plan without fail becomes many a time impossible. There needs to be a mind shift regarding approach and commitment towards the process but there also needs to be some form of peer support for schools, especially when it comes to leadership teams who might be overwhelmed by the different aspects of the process, especially when they start understanding what improvement planning means and the kind of commitment it entails. This is, in fact, what happened to SLTs of both schools during the scope of the research.

Previously, the SSE process was generally considered as a perfunctory exercise which needed to be carried out and that is it. There was limited self-reflection and questioning, both at leadership level as well as staff level, as to why the process was being carried out and the tangible improvement which it would ultimately bring forth for the school. Hence, the need for support in the process was not really felt. Through the research carried out regarding the process, they started to understand the complexity of the exercise and how, if planned well, this could ultimately benefit not only students but also educators and themselves as professionals. This was especially felt when they started working on action plans by year group as a smaller team rather than vaguely on a general scale at school level. This triggered the need for help and support in the development part of the process. However, following the second year of the research, when it transpired that monitoring and evaluation was a weak link in the process, it was clear that support was needed during that important part of the process.

If one looks closely at the transcript data of both focus groups with heads of school, a striking aspect is the number of questions outside the main scope of the research which are asked by both leadership teams. These questions range from questions about the structure of the process to requests and opinions from an outsider's point of view about the different aspects belonging to the school and how these could be tackled. However, this evident need for support and the role of the critical friend

raises other queries especially ones concerning the way this critical friend is viewed and if schools, especially members of the SLT might become dependent on the role. I believe this situation is especially prone to happen at the beginning of the relationship with a critical friend especially if the school is still not too confident about the process. To an extent, this is what happened during the second leg of the research where I had to consciously go back to my role as researcher. This was done primarily with the intention of observing if the school's approach and perception of the process was strong enough for them to keep going without any external support. As can be seen in the findings and earlier in this chapter, this was not the case, especially when considering the evaluation and monitoring phase which was limited in both schools. This indicated that a good part of the push which the schools had during the first year was because there was a 'critical friend' who was providing training and was pushing them to carry out parts of the process. Moreover, once the support I was offering was taken away, the leadership teams did not feel the urge to replace it. This does not mean that the role of the critical friend should not be one which periodically reminds schools about the steps in the process, but it should be mainly linked to support rather than implementation. The latter is essentially the core business of the school and should not be delegated to the critical friend. If for some reason or other this support is removed, the process should not be halted because there is no constant reminder to continue working on it. The push to work on the cycle needs to be intrinsic to the school.

Once again, I believe that the local perception and approach to doing things plays a part. This is an aspect which I could personally observe during the span of the research. As Bezzina (2024) argues, unfortunately, there isn't a culture where peer collaboration exists, where schools come together to develop knowledge, share experiences and move forward together, what Hargreaves and O'Connor (2019) define as 'collaborative professionalism.' Schools in Malta, even at State level, tend to work in isolation (Bezzina, 2019). When it comes to church schools, they might work with a sister school within the same college but there isn't a culture of peer support. A case in point is the two schools which formed part of this research. Although they formed part of the same college, there wasn't a culture of peer

support, or sharing of practice among the teaching staff. When the need for support was discussed, it was on an individual basis. This type of approach is what is keeping peer training and peer support suppressed. The opportunities are there. However, because of a fixed mindset, cultural and societal background, schools and governing structures rarely consider peer support as an option. For the concept of the critical friend to work, I believe that all the different aspects which have emerged from the research, and which have been mentioned throughout this chapter such as the perception, mindset and leadership approach need to be internalised. This would be the premise for a healthy relationship with the critical friend as it would not be a relationship based on the critical friend as a reminder or a nagging presence but someone who can take the discussion and professional conversations to higher levels and thus improve the quality of implementation.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter focused on bringing together the main research questions and the findings which subsequently emanated from the research which ultimately links them together. As the research tools were all connected to the foci of the study, this allowed for a holistic portrayal of the concepts which underpinned the research, and which also emanated from the literature review. During the research, the active role of the researcher was an important step in creating, developing and nurturing a dialogue with both educators and leadership teams. Although, the importance of the role was envisioned during the planning phase, it gradually took on more of a significant stance as the research progressed especially during the first phase where I was still building trust with schools while carrying out the dual role of researcher and critical friend. This was especially true when considering the first research question, which asked about the existing culture which exists in relation to approach and perception towards the process. I was also conscious that my role within the Ministry of Education might hinder the building of that trust. However, as can be seen from the findings, it did not have any altering effect as both the senior leadership teams and the cohort of educators interviewed felt at ease and were very honest in their views and interactions throughout all the phases of the

research. The leadership teams also felt very comfortable in sharing their views and, as the research progressed, towards gradually realising the need for change in mindset and practice to be able to move forward towards effective school improvement. I believe that this was a crucial aspect of the study as it was this trust which helped in triggering that journey of reflection, one which would in turn help in recognising the need for a change in mindset and approach.

The professional development sessions which I delivered as a critical friend to the school, served to ignite in educators and leadership teams the interest in the area of strategic management as well as in their role and agency within the process. This emanated during the sessions themselves especially through the questions which were asked, gradually indicating that they could start visualising the importance of the SSE process. During the follow up sessions and interviews, educators stated that they appreciated these sessions because they led them to reflect more on the connection between their practice in the classroom and SSE and Development Planning. Previously, they did somehow reflect on these aspects, but this exercise was carried out individually or in year group silos. This isolated approach did not offer the opportunity to develop that connection with the process and reduced their opportunity to work within professional learning communities and grow as a group. The research allowed them a taste of how enriching it can be to work within a professional learning community and to share ideas with peers. During the follow up phase they also frequently emphasised how it was important for this support to be more continuous and to have more opportunities where they could work together. This was a first and important step for both educators and leadership teams in understanding the need to work together towards a common goal and that SSE could offer such an opportunity if used effectively.

As a researcher I could tangibly feel that my active role on the ground was already creating an impact on the perception which these educators had of the process, especially the leadership team. Time was dedicated to leadership, especially the heads of school who were open enough to the research to give me deep insight into the way they work and why they at times felt vulnerable in their role. This need for

support was a clear indication of how important continuous professional development for leaders is especially in relation to their role within the process. It also triggered important questions, shared by the leadership teams themselves, on the kind of professional development needed to effectively lead a school towards improvement and how this can be sustained in the long run. A clear example of this is the concept of time management, which is a frequent topic of conversation in literature, and which featured as a regular comment by both heads of school and educators especially in relation to the monitoring and evaluation phase (Umit et al., 2020). This could very well be attributed to the need for a different approach by leadership and a more strategic, distributive nature to leadership. However, it could also be associated to the way the monitoring and evaluation phase is viewed as part of the process. The study shows that unfortunately evaluation is often still viewed as a form of judgement and not as Hopkins & West (2002) importantly define as ‘evaluation for school improvement’ and ‘evaluation as school improvement’. The mind shift when it comes to evaluation has to happen in this direction where evaluation is seen as part of the improvement plan and not as a test on leadership on how much they have ticked off their plans.

As happened during the reflective exercise with the two heads of school, many leaders will unfortunately realise that most of the tasks which they finally carry out during their work day are crisis management and administrative tasks. Houston (2004) interestingly argues this point by discussing that the perception and mindset linked to educational school leadership should inherently shift from the concept of ‘Head of School’ to ‘Head of Learning’. However, he adds that this shift would require a complete revolution of the structure and approach towards leadership. This change should see leadership change from management, where the concept of owning space and place becomes sometimes overwhelming to one which is focused on creating connections, communication, collaboration and finally and most importantly trust (Collarbone, 2008). This kind of leadership predisposition is necessary if the SSE process is to be implemented effectively as it necessitates collaboration and professional learning environment to be able to develop towards fruition.

The third research question investigated the influence of external quality assurance on schools' perception and ultimately on the process itself. The fact that the case study was carried out in a local context also allowed for a closer look at the approach taken within Maltese schools. Even though external quality assurance was not considered as a major influence on the SSE and Development Planning process, other aspects related to governance were mentioned frequently during the study. This happened especially in relation to the perceived imposition hailing from governing structures, policy development and the autonomy given to schools. The examples from the research showing lack of confidence in leading a school and the way support was continuously being mentioned shows that heads of school are not used to the accountability brought about by full autonomy. This stance heavily impacts the development of internal quality assurance within a system which is fundamentally based on the school's autonomy in choosing and implementing its own path for improvement.

The research questions which formed part of this research were aimed at discussing through literature and findings emanating from the study what could be tangibly hindering the success of the process. The concluding chapter will further reflect on the possible approaches and changes which could make the SSE process and Development Planning more effective. Understanding the 'why' is the first step towards consciously and strategically looking into ways to address these issues. Just identifying issues without strategically reflecting on a possible way forward would render the research carried out during these years incomplete. All the areas discussed are inherently linked and can work towards the development of a sustainable strategy for improvement with SSE and development planning at its core. The concluding chapter will aim at igniting prospects towards improvement in the shape of a possible framework for internal quality assurance which keeps in mind the different findings which emerged from this study.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter aims at bringing together the outcomes to the research questions posed at the beginning of the study. Among many other aspects, this study gave me the opportunity of going through a complex but highly fulfilling journey into the SSE process not only through a thorough understanding of the literature in the field but also through the way the process is viewed in two Maltese schools which are ultimately the reflection of a multifaceted, culture, society and history.

As discussed in previous chapters, research on SSE and Development Planning tends to look at the process on an abstract level. Following my professional experience in schools, I believed that this was a very important factor which was impacting the success of the process. These reflections finally led to the development of my research questions and subsequently the research methodology. Existing literature in most cases discussed specific areas in isolation, such as, most commonly, data collection and analysis and possibly implementation (Bernhart, 2017; Schildkamp et al., 2016). These, however, were only sporadically discussed in relation to the other aspects of the process such as the identification of priorities or the monitoring and evaluation phase. This was also an aspect which transpired during the research where both leadership teams and educators found it difficult to identify the different components of the process and how these components could influence each other and ultimately the whole process. I believe that one important success achieved by the study is that it allowed a community of educators to reflect on the process as a learning experience especially when they

worked together and took on agency while writing their own year group action plans. The research evaluation carried out during the second year allowed them to discuss further the process, where they started to independently make connections between the different parts and realise that one aspect inherently influences the other. The limited monitoring and evaluation of the actions, for instance, influenced the success of the process and the endeavours which they had embarked on as part of their plans.

7.1.1 Looking back at the Research Questions

Table 34 takes us back to the research questions and allows us to track our journey so far looking at how these have been researched and how the main research question has been answered through a thorough analysis of the sub-questions. Recommendations for the different stakeholders will also be put forward as part of this concluding chapter.

Table 33 - Revisiting the Research Questions.

<p>Main Research Question:</p> <p>What are the main factors which impact the success of school self-evaluation and development planning in Maltese Compulsory education?</p>
<p>Sub Question 1</p> <p>How do leaders and educators perceive the SSE and Development Planning process and to what extent does this influence mindset?</p>
<p>Sub Question 2</p> <p>What is the importance given to the process especially the monitoring and evaluation part of the process by both leadership and educators and how does this impact the success of the SSE process?</p>
<p>Sub Question 3</p> <p>What is the impact of external factors such as external quality assurance and governance on the process?</p>

The following sections will look at the different areas which were researched to respond to the research questions above. These will be structured separately; however, the final objective will be to bring them back together at the end of the chapter to demonstrate that these sections have to come back together to understand how they impact the process and how these can be addressed to improve SSE and Development planning.

7.2 Research Question 1: Moving towards a growth mindset

The aim of the first research question was that of looking into the way SSE process and development planning are viewed and perceived, what triggers that perception and what the final impact is on the culture of improvement of the school. The research carried out in schools focused quite strongly on this area as it was deemed through the analysis of literature and through the research itself with educators as an important factor (Chapman & Sammons, 2022; MacBeath, 2005; Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005).

As indicated in the research methodology chapter, a determining aspect of the SSE process is its versatility and the way it is perceived in diverse ways by schools depending on the cultural context of the school and their view of school development as professionals. This diversity, however, can also hinder its successful implementation as this process requires strong belief in its potential for success and that it will tangibly and significantly bring improvement to the school. This is in fact part of what transpires in the analysis of the findings, where both schools' perception, approach and cultural context influenced greatly the monitoring and evaluation component. As previously discussed, an important aspect characterizing this research is that it is not solely based on literature or documentary analysis but goes into what practitioners and those who carry out the process daily feel and think about it. The fact that the research took two years and changes were implemented within that time span also indicates that if the process is approached in a strategic and structured way, change can happen and there will be a shift in perception with regards to the process. However, the research also shows us the other side of the coin, that if this momentum is not maintained, then this will eventually be detrimental to the process, its success as well as ownership towards it. This engagement with the research also helps one appreciate the link between research and practice as an ongoing endeavour, rather than a purely academic exercise that is undertaken, as in this case, for fulfilling doctoral studies. The way that I, as a researcher, related with the participants allowed for a more

genuine engagement as we lived together through the process of transformation and growth.

Apart from the individual components, the research also focused on variables which also inherently influence the success or otherwise of the process. Following the analysis of the findings and the literature on the area, there is a clear indication that for the process to be effective several other factors need to be in place (Evans et al., 2012). If these aspects are not addressed, then it will be very difficult for the process to function and come to fruition. First among the changes which needs to occur is the cognisance of schools and educational organisations of the importance which their school/organisational culture has played in shaping how they operate and perceive the process today. As happened during the research with both schools, this understanding can then lead to reflection on the need for a shift in mindset and culture. If this willingness to change is not present, then it will be very difficult to develop the process into a clear strategic plan and consequently implement changes into the system. However, leadership teams need to be aware that this type of mindset is to be shared by the different stakeholders. Moreover, it needs to be nurtured to grow and maintain in a continuous and consistent manner. Findings from the research show that when educators were involved in the writing of action plans, they started shifting their mindset towards one which is forward looking because they were given the agency and the autonomy to decide their own path for improvement. However, this was halted when the process was not maintained through the implementation of effective monitoring and evaluation. This also helps to highlight the fragility of the whole process. It is not purely a mechanical exercise, as it is often viewed in the local context, but requires to be a genuine dynamic engagement between members of the school as they seek to address particular goals. As mentioned earlier, leadership and teacher agency play an important part at this juncture. It is the actions taken by educators and leadership teams and the reflections that they engage in that can become the determining factors that ultimately bring about change in the mindset and, as a result, a change in the school culture.

7.2.1 Effective Leadership: change and professional learning communities

Unfortunately, we live in a transient world where any change is temporary. Moreover, when one understands how to effectively handle that change it is time for yet another one. This is the context that shapes a school's culture, and which educators and school leaders have to face on a daily basis. This renders the importance of consistency even more important but also more complex and demanding (Evers & Lakomski, 2022). Any change in approach or mindset cannot be temporary or cosmetic. It necessitates a shift in the structure of leadership and management and the core understanding of what it means to strategically lead a school which lives and has to thrive in a constant flux (Love, 2021; Niesche et al., 2023). It also means that the process itself might need to adapt to the changes which are constantly happening around it. In many cases, this need for change is not immediately identified, if it is identified at all. In other instances, as with the schools who formed part of the research, there is an initial recognition that there might be a need for change, however, there is no clear understanding on how to go about it. This is due to aspects which have been identified previously such as the need for more focused and consistent professional development and external support. This lack of understanding is one of the main aspects which I believe is hindering the process and is creating a negative cycle of ineffectiveness in strategic management at school level.

The study has clearly shown that if leadership does not perceive the process as important and determining to the improvement of the school, then it will not be adopted. Leaders within their particular context are key towards the process as they are the first who have to make the shift from looking at SSE as another chore to add to the ones they already have to viewing the process as support to their vision and plan for improvement. The style of leadership adopted in the research also mirrors, to a certain extent, the mainly centralised national approach. Throughout the research, it was evident that there permeated a traditional understanding of leadership where the school board, the head of school and leadership team decide what is to be done. This approach, as discussed, does not only limit the scope for

improvement but also shifts all the accountability and responsibility on the leadership team. Once again this impacts the concept of ownership, not only towards the process and improvement plan but also towards the sense of belonging which should be an intrinsic part of the school's ethos.

It was interesting to see the way leadership agency in relation to the process was perceived by educators but also by the leadership teams themselves as well as how this was translated on a practical level. A determining finding was the level of dependence which educators had on the role of the leader in relation to the management of the process and simultaneously the way leadership teams viewed their role themselves which was very similar. Both felt that the process depended mainly on the skills of the leader to manage, facilitate and bring it to fruition. Although at different stages of the study educators asked for more organisational skills from their leaders and leaders asked for more ownership from educators, there still existed that pervading perception or belief that the leadership team was responsible for the process. As a researcher whose role was fundamentally to observe and subsequently analyse the process adopted by the school, in the long run, I felt that this was essentially one of the main issues which transpired throughout the research; the perception of professional agency held by both educators and leaders. The often-limited understanding of what their effective role within the process is, influenced the success of the process and their ownership towards it. When educators were given the opportunity for agency during the development of individual action plans, they started to naturally reflect on the process and to develop the first strands of awareness that this is an exercise which concerns them as educators as part of the school community, as a team. They started to realise that they are leaders within their year group and that it is up to them as a team to develop this plan of action towards improvement. It started to also become evident that they could not work on the improvement plan in a vacuum and that the input from students as prime stakeholders and their parents was also important. These had so far been factored in only minimally, at least not at decision making stage. However, the realisation by educators that they can handle leadership roles is not enough. This realisation has also to come from the part of

leadership who have to learn to trust educators and shift from an us and them to solely an 'us' frame of mind. This mindshift is not an easy one and once this shift is made it will not mean that leadership teams will have less work to do. On the contrary, leadership will have to hone in on different strategies, especially on how to create a symbiotic relationship between leadership and the school community. Finally, as often discussed also in literature, the particular school system which is a result of culture and background affects leadership as much as leadership affects the system.

Building a reflective and collaborative learning community landscape is fundamental for effective leadership agency (Day et al., 2020). It is also a determining factor in SSE and Development Planning. One of the key aspects which emerged from the research is the need to develop an approach which can be built upon as a system which is sustainable and can be continuously monitored and evaluated by the school community and not necessarily solely by the members of the SLT. Both schools participating in the research found their stumbling block in the monitoring and evaluation phase. However, they still managed to reflect on the process and start shaping a scenario which is, at this stage, more determining than bringing action plans into fruition. Through their failure, leaders started understanding that they cannot do it all, and educators also realised that it is necessary and beneficial to work together as a learning community. Collective strategic foresight is more effective and sustainable than relying on the potential, strong as it may be, of one head of school or a small group of people who hold the role of leadership team.

The development of a sustainable system which involves consistently and responsibly the different members of the school community is the only way in which the SSE and development planning will be given the opportunity to function effectively as a process towards improvement. If these elements are maintained, even issues such as ownership and mindset can be gradually and strategically addressed. Clear evidence that the process is being monitored and evaluated and is bringing about tangible improvement will gradually shift the school ecosystem

towards a growth mindset which is motivated by the understanding that improvement is possible if there is tangible collective dedication to achieve goals set by the whole school community. The process will also facilitate the development of professional learning communities as a way of being for the school.

7.3 Research Question 2: SSE: A journey from short to long term goals

We have determined through the literature and research that approach and mindset are important factors towards the process. Findings indicate, that following the first phase of the study the perception of educators towards the process changed slightly through the few professional development sessions provided and because they were given more opportunities to become part of the process. This helped them experience, to a certain extent, the aspects which come along with such an exercise such as reflection and basic strategic planning. This could be felt throughout the second year of the research where they started to appreciate how the SSE process could be of benefit to the school if it was adopted appropriately. In fact, they frequently expressed the need for further continuous training in the area and support and most identified the need to evaluate the implementation of action plans as the next step towards the success of the process. This slight glimpse into how the process can be tangible brought about a small but important shift in mindset. Unfortunately, this was not taken full advantage of since the monitoring and evaluation phase wasn't carried out effectively, which served as a major stumbling block in the development of the process. When educators were interviewed close to the completion of the research, they were very satisfied with the process they went through when writing the action plans for their year group as they felt that the exercise was very relevant to that context. However, the anti-climax came about when they could not, in many instances, identify if these plans had worked or otherwise. This is also valid for SLTs who although understanding of the importance of the process did not feel engaged enough to ensure that the monitoring and evaluation phase is given its due importance.

Following this study, it is evident that a change in mindset requires a consistent and continuous commitment to the process otherwise it will remain a perfunctory exercise which is carried out just for appearances sake but its effectiveness will be limited at best. This shift calls primarily the leadership role in strategizing the process. If the mindset is to be shifted in a gradual way from a fixed one to one focusing on growth and improvement it would be better to adopt an improvement plan which is initially focused on short term goals, where action plans are compact and produce quick returns. As the shift occurs, goals can be broadened and include pit stops of evaluation over shorter periods of time. However, to reach the latter, there needs to be a strong monitoring and evaluation strategy which is defined and followed by the school's community. Educators need to be allowed the time to evaluate their actions and enjoy their success before embarking on the next step (Elliot & Thrash, 2002; Lindvall & Ryve, 2019) This would allow for a more thorough understanding of how the process works and that results can be tangibly obtained if the main targets of the process are considered.

This approach would also be beneficial for the leadership team especially if they are still trying to develop a strategic system to implement the whole process effectively. If, at first, goals are short and focused they can effectively adopt a system of monitoring and evaluation which is structured and which they can find the time to manage. It would also allow for a less daunting view of the process and limit the sense of judgement which many educators, especially leadership teams feel towards SSE and development planning. This would also allow leadership teams to gather confidence in the process. In the long run both educators and the leadership team will automatically aim towards maintaining that consistency as they would have evidence that when the process is followed, results can be obtained.

This would also provide an opportunity for those who work with it primarily, before any attempt towards applying it to lofty goals, to understand how other parts of the process work and how even on a small scale the different components such

as the collection of data and analysis, the development of action plans and subsequent implementation as well as the phase of monitoring and evaluation are essential towards the success of the process. Starting off on a small scale would also give educators the indication that this does not have to be solely a school wide activity but also something which can be done on a personal level, thus promoting the idea that this type of approach can permeate to the classroom and personal strategic management and planning. The approach of working at micro level, on action plans dedicated to their own year group, helped educators understand that this is not a process which belongs solely to the SLT and that it can be done on a smaller scale. Following the research, it was clear that the fact that they were working on something which was relevant and tangible not only increased their sense of ownership but also helped render the process less abstract and daunting.

7.3.1 The monitoring and evaluation phase

Inevitably, any lack of commitment towards the process will influence its consistency, especially when dealing with its more complex parts. The leadership teams who participated in the research found it relatively easy and had no major issues in addressing the part of the process concerning data collection except for the tweaking of some questions. Albeit not always effective, they did manage to collect data from different stakeholders such as educators and parents. To a certain extent they also managed to analyse the data and share it with their staff in preparation for the writing of the action plans which were also accomplished, in the case of both schools. Although there might be the need for some training on data collection and analysis to better structure the research tools, as a researcher I felt that it was not a main area of concern and that the research could have progressed with what the school had gathered.

The aspect which the research zoomed in on was in fact the next step of the process, planning the monitoring and evaluation phase which was left for the schools to manage in its entirety. Due to a variety of reasons explained by participants in the research this proved difficult to manage and implement. Even though it did not

completely halt the process, it however, significantly undermined its effectiveness. It was clear during the interviews carried out following the writing of the action plans that participants had no clear idea if they were implementing their plan effectively or if they had changed something along the way which might affect the end objectives. The end objectives also became blurred as there wasn't a constant commitment towards monitoring and evaluating the work done. The SLT, similarly to educators, stopped working on the actual process following the development of the action plans which happened at the end of the first year of the research. This lack of commitment towards the monitoring and evaluation phase clearly indicates that both schools still needed to find ways of developing ownership, understanding and commitment before the whole process could be embarked on successfully.

This factor also continued to strengthen the idea that each of the research questions which formed part of the research were inherently connected. The need for ongoing commitment to monitoring and evaluation which we have been discussing is closely tied to a general commitment towards the process which can only be achieved if those who implement it truly believe in its importance and own it strongly enough to be ready to strategically plan for its implementation and the monitoring and honest evaluation of that implementation process. As discussed earlier, this is where the need for support was felt both by the leadership teams as well as by educators. However, before that support is given in any form or manner there needs to be a change in understanding of the process and approach. This need for change was acknowledged by both schools who participated in the case study. Change, however, is to be deep rooted and cannot be artificially implemented for the sake of appearances. Moreover, the responsibility for this change cannot be attributed to external bodies, such as the critical friend or any external support which might come towards the school. The limited strength in the effectiveness of the process is what I believe is what is the main hindrance. It is not just the belief in the need for change but also the commitment to understand and manage all that comes along with that belief. Even though there were marked changes which were implemented and recognised as having improved the process, I believe, that in both

schools, the impact of the changes needed to be sustained in a consistent and continuous manner so that the process can be implemented to its full potential.

This is where I believe the role of the critical friend comes in. At the initial stages of understanding of the process, this critical friend is to be external to the specific environment of the school. For significant change to happen, there needs to be a solid and substantial investment in professional development and strategic management expertise. The critical friend does not need to be a curricular expert, that is ultimately the job of the school's leadership and professional learning communities. The school, especially school leadership needs support which can help the school find its own way in a consistent manner, allow for mistakes and find its own path towards improvement. Once the school has built that ownership, this can then be transformed into peer support where different schools through their contexts and experiences support each other. This is where the area of networked learning would come in.

7.4 Research Question 3: Managing mindset and approach

The local situation in relation SSE and Development Planning transpired quite frequently during the study especially in relation to governing structures and the culture which exists towards SSE and Development Planning. The process is still being implemented in schools, however, through documentary research, observation and conversations with educators and leadership it is evident that historically the process was not considered as a determining one by the various governing structures which come in contact with schools in one way or another. Evidence to this is the fact that since 2004 the policy on SSE and development planning has not been upgraded. This was an opportunity to develop a strong evaluative culture within compulsory educational contexts which unfortunately was not taken up. In 2023, the DQSE has given internal quality assurance a boost through the publication of two documents; *A Quality Assurance Framework for Education in Malta (0-16)* and the *National Quality Standards in Education (3-16)* where SSE and Development Planning are given central roles towards developing

a sustainable system for quality assurance which, to a certain extent, tries to move away from a centralised way of assuring quality that impose change processes on schools to one which aims at giving schools more autonomy in developing their plans for improvement.

Although the Maltese education system has been trying to move away from a centralised system since the mid-90s and later through the establishment of Colleges for State schools, the major approach has still been one which is only partially decentralised (Bezzina, 2006; Polidano, 2022). The same can be attributed to schools falling under the Church School sector, who, although do not fall under the state system, still operate centrally through either the church order they form part of or a governing body who usually dictates the way forward. The schools which formed part of the research, as church schools, in fact were characterised by a top-down approach towards development planning. This was a frequently mentioned factor throughout the research which indicates that ultimately it was directly impacting the perception, ownership and approach which educators had towards SSE and development planning and therefore also towards improvement (Mizzi, 2018; Caruana & Borg, 2020).

The launch of the *National Educational Strategy (2024-2030)* in May of 2024 seems to be a significant push in the right direction and is adopting a leading by example approach. Apart from going through a significant exercise of pre-consultation and consultation, the national strategy will undergo serious strategic planning where all the stakeholders will be involved in its implementation and key stakeholders will be accountable for its monitoring and evaluation. As SSE and Development Planning are the main tools used in schools these actions will naturally be linked to the process. However, a pitfall is that such a transformation is still being implemented within a system which is mainly centralised and dependent (Bezzina, 2000, 2018, 2024; Farrugia, 2021). Unless this is addressed, schools will still have limited autonomy to develop their own plans for improvement. Moreover, the autonomy in managing their own schools, given to the non-state sector, especially church schools, will consequently further

strengthen the status quo and the power which the order or the board might have on the improvement plans of the school. Change within the approach of governing structures needs to happen in all sectors and at all levels. Furthermore, the imposition in the implementation of measures irrelevant of school context will be counterproductive especially in relation to ownership of the improvement plan and eventual implementation and evaluation. The SSE and development planning process should not be used as a system for governing structures to impose specific practices on schools. Naturally, national direction should be followed, but schools should be allowed enough trust and autonomy to set, implement, monitor and evaluate their own improvement plans.

At the beginning of the research, I was warned by the schools about the union directive which was in force, and which could halt the process at any time. A factor which as a researcher, I was very much aware of as it had determined to a certain extent the structure of my research. However, during the research, the directive did not actively feature in the findings. This directive has been in force since the beginning of 2020 and ran throughout the two years of the research process. Both schools which formed part of the research continued working on their development planning. It could, however, be felt that there was the underlying ‘fear’ or ‘threat’ of having the process stopped because of union interference as the directives were still in place. Even though it was rarely mentioned specifically by leadership teams, there was always a certain level of hesitation present when it came to approaching teachers to contribute to the process, especially in their need to increase involvement and ownership. Although the schools somehow dealt with these directives, their effect could still be felt and is a determining factor in restraining the potential of such a process within schools.

The fact that this limitation has been present for four years is extremely worrying as it clearly shows, on the part of the union representing educators, the lack of understanding of how important development planning and strategic management is to any school and the negative effects it has had and will eventually have on schools in the long run. It was clear throughout the study that there was a sense of

frustration which was being felt by leadership teams who want to work on improvement planning but ultimately cannot because of a union directive. Educators also felt that effective development planning is missing and that they lacked direction. The fact that leadership teams within the research held that constant fear of breaking union directives on aspects which they felt were necessary for the development of the school, also unfortunately contributed to the stress brought about by other variables, which, unlike a highly debatable union directive, they had no control over. This of course also influenced the level of ownership and trust which staff could have towards the process and improvement plan as they felt they could not essentially bring the staff together to discuss these aspects and plan for their implementation accordingly.

7.5 Summary of outcomes linked to Research Questions

Before embarking on the recommendations linked to the findings and discussion developed in these last chapters, I would like to summarize the outcomes to the research questions in the below table. This will allow for an easier understanding of the connection between the research questions and how these outcomes can be translated into tangible recommendations.

Table 34 - Summary of outcomes linked to Research Questions.

Main Research Question:	
What are the main factors which impact the success of school self-evaluation and development planning in Maltese Compulsory education?	
Sub Question 1	
How do leaders and educators perceive the SSE and Development Planning process and to what extent does this influence mindset?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct involvement of leadership and educators through research can help improve their perception of the effectiveness of the process. • Effective leadership needs to work towards positive change and the Development of a culture of professional learning communities to align with SSE and Development Planning. • The development of a growth mindset is determining for educators. The School community, especially leadership is to work towards a growth

	mindset before embarking effectively on the SSE process.
<p>Sub Question 2</p> <p>What is the importance given to the process especially the monitoring and evaluation part of the process by both leadership and educators and how does this impact the success of the SSE process?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When attempting to understand the SSE process and change the perception of educators towards it, it is important to move from short term goals to long term goals. • The monitoring and evaluation phase is an important and delicate phase within the SSE process. • Schools need to embark on clear strategic planning before working on SSE and Development Planning. • Schools need support, especially when mastering the process and how the different parts work together towards the whole process.
<p>Sub Question 3</p> <p>What is the impact of external factors such as external quality assurance and governance on the process?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External Quality Assurance locally promotes a Developmental system of QA where schools are given a certain level of autonomy to develop their improvement plans. • For SSE and Development Planning to work in the local context, the local Education system which is still predominantly centralised and dependent needs to change. • The policy and framework on SSE for Maltese compulsory schooling is outdated and does not reflect the needs of the school. • The impact of the Maltese Union of Teachers, especially in relation to SSE and Development Planning has been detrimental over the last few years.

7.6 Recommendations

This section aims at linking the outcomes of the research and the research questions to targeted recommendations. The recommendations below are developed in two different sections; the macro level which includes recommendations for policy

makers and governing structures and the micro level which is specifically linked to the schools. However, all recommendations aim at creating a certain level of awareness about not only the complexity of the process but also on how this complexity can be addressed at different levels of the educational environment with special focus on the local scene. It also helps to show how the macro and micro levels need to come together to create a culture focused on mutual accountability and improvement.

7.6.1 Research Question 3 - Recommendations at Macro level

Policy makers, governing structures and legislators – Trusting schools with their own Development Plan.

Having been active in the national educational context in the field of quality assurance for some years now, I strongly believe that any changes to an aspect of school life and culture as important as SSE and Development Planning needs to happen on a wider scale than just a change in legislation. This has also been clearly shown in the research, where educators and leadership often mentioned imposition from above and a lack of understanding in relation to SSE and Development Planning by governing bodies and policy makers.

Firstly, the structure of the change and especially the nature of the wording used needs to be such as to allow for the possibility for policy and structure to be developed. Including SSE and development planning as the ‘main policy and implementation tool’ (Education Act, Cap 605 Art. 17) for schools placing the onus on the Head of School is not enough to support local governance structures such as colleges to take the lead in school development planning. Clear strategic foresight would have delivered a legislation which pushes for revision of policy on school development so it can provide a scenario which works hand in hand with national strategy for school improvement rather than imposing it on schools through the SSE and development planning processes. There needs to be a nationwide implementation in schools so that there is awareness of the changes implemented within legislation and what they mean for schools. As discussed

throughout the study, the importance of nurturing a culture of ownership towards the process is a vital aspect if SSE and Development Planning are to have any opportunity to flourish effectively in schools. However, this ownership does not only concern schools but also the different stakeholders who come in contact with the process both directly as well as indirectly (Gallagher, 2021).

An important finding which indirectly emanated from the research is the importance of embedding internal quality assurance as research into the professional practice of educators (Dogan & Kirkgoz, 2022). As seen during the research carried out, when educators were led to carry out research relevant to their practice, they reflected on both the process and their area of interest and naturally felt the need to work together as professional learning communities to develop a way forward for their students as well as the school. This approach however is unfortunately not an integral approach within the Maltese educational system and these practices often become a one-time occurrence. This research clearly shows that a change in approach and a belief in the process needs to happen at different levels if it is to arrive to the schools. Developing and promoting a system where the importance of research is embedded nationally and is promoted at every level would facilitate the process of reflection and take development planning to another important level.

A common aspect which was also frequently mentioned by educators throughout the research is the gap which exists between the way they would like to work on the ground in schools and the way policy and strategy is presented to them by policy makers and strategy developers who are often deemed and accused as being very distant from the reality of schools (Raza & Chua, 2022). This gap is often transformed in resistance when the strategy or policy reaches the schools as it goes entirely against the notion of SSE and Development Planning which aim at placing trust and confidence in the school's ability to bring the school forward towards improvement. The promotion of focused research through SSE and development planning in schools by those who design and develop policy would not only allow for more accountability on the part of the schools but also develop a certain level

of trust because there is evidence that schools are working towards improvement. External Quality assurance in different forms would then serve to bridge any gaps which exist within the vision, always maintaining that responsibility and autonomy for the schools to reach their own goals.

The shift in mindset cannot only happen in schools, it needs to also happen within local governing structures, national policy makers as well as with those who are tasked to represent and guard the interest of educators. As seen during the research, governance adopted a top-down approach where, leadership awaited for direction to carry out improvements to the school. Although a big part of this approach concerns management of funds and resources, it still shows a lack of trust in the school's (leaders and educators) ability to take decisions which would lead the school towards improvement. Promoting and sustaining a system of strategic management which is clear and transparent, and which is based on evidence and research will also support governing and leadership structures in trusting schools more. As evidenced by this study itself, schools need time to understand and assimilate the process and realise where it can work and where it needs to improve. Governing structures both those directly linked to the school as well as those which are state mandated are strongly encouraged to take on a developmental approach which allows schools the opportunity and the support to experiment with the system, make mistakes and learn from them.

The Malta Union for Teachers whose job, as per their statute, is to represent educators and promote their professional development need to be aware that by halting SSE and Development Planning they are severely debilitating educators' professional development and opportunity to reflect as professionals. There needs to be a concerted effort to build trust between governing structures and schools. This can be done if clear parameters of responsibility and accountability are discussed and set. This is how mutual trust can be slowly built. And, in the long run, the impact will also be on enhanced student learning.

7.6.1.1 Developing and sustaining support: A professional and trained workforce

The need for more effective professional development permeated throughout the research both from educators and leadership teams (Sultana et al., 2019; Tonna, 2019). This transpired not only in relation to the process but also when it comes to its management and certain necessary skills, such as the discerning of leadership approach which is so crucial in relation to the success of the SSE process but also fundamental to school leadership in general. As also mentioned in the discussion chapter, as a researcher I was taken by surprise at the extreme need for support, permeated throughout the research. The constant need for confirmation and validation exhibited by leadership teams during the study brings us back to the dependency culture which due to our background, we still struggle with in different ways. This kind of culture and limited leadership agency can also be linked to the way how both schools experienced a top-down approach to leadership, awaiting to be given instruction to carry out important actions concerning the school. A top-down approach to leadership clearly cannot function with the fundamental tenets of professional learning which is brought about by strategic management tools such as SSE and Development Planning.

This dependence culture, among other aspects also influences the way we approach the development of training courses for educators and leadership. How are these courses looking at strategic management in schools? How are they approaching and exploring notions such as leadership agency and governance? Although the essential tenets of leadership and professional learning communities need to start being embedded in the curriculum from early on, there also needs to be a concerted effort to offer courses and degrees in the field of education which promote the concept of strategic management through SSE and Development Planning as integral to leadership, management as well as pedagogy planning. It was clear from the research that educators are looking for support in the area because they were only sporadically and inconsistently provided with the opportunity to recognise the importance of development planning and were given, throughout their career a misinformed perception of the process, one which is top down and which, in most

cases, is solely owned by the leadership team. This kind of support, as educators expressed frequently during the research is to be relevant, consistent and continuous.

Previously, we mentioned the importance of having governing structures who are ready to recognise the importance of autonomy within schools. However, the research has also indicated through the various interactions with educators especially leaders that autonomy can exist only if you have professionals who know what they are doing and can handle it. Several questions came to mind during this research held within schools. Fundamentally, are leaders geared towards managing autonomy and a self-evaluation process? Is the current way we are training our educators impacting the level of effective autonomy? Do schools as professional educational organisations have the confidence to manage the autonomy which is given through SSE and Development Planning? Do we want our schools to function as professional learning communities?

The constant mention throughout the research of the need of support through a critical friend is indicative that schools, especially leadership teams, need to be better equipped in understanding how to lead a school within its context and within a society which is constantly in flux and most of the time not in a favourable way (Kyriakades & Campbell, 2004). The fact that schools and leaders tend to work in isolation and do not seek each other out for peer collaboration and support is also another aspect which is inherently brought about by a culture which tends to work in a vacuum which progressively shrouds their objective view of development and limits their scope to expand further and seek improvement. SSE and development planning can also be significantly important tools in facilitating this collaboration as well as targeted professional development as the nature of the process is inherently one which promotes the development of a culture and community of professional learning. Figure 10 below proposes a professional development model for educational leaders. The conceptualisation of this model is closely linked to my experience both as researcher as well as critical friend throughout the research. The different areas approached as part of the research, spurred, in the

leadership teams, reflection on the process. The role of the critical friend is to sustain the development of those reflections through the understanding of the SSE process and how this can work within the school’s context. The understanding of the process will spur further reflection which is then translated into tangible action developed within SSE and Development planning.



Figure 10- Leadership and Support cycle for Senior Leadership.

7.6.2 Research Questions 1 and 2: Recommendations at micro level

A fundamental aspect which was addressed to a certain extent in the literature but was strongly affirmed in the results of the research analysis is the need for schools to have a sense of awareness and understanding of a number of factors when effectively embarking on the process. The word ‘effectively’ here is crucial. Both the literature and the research are clearly showing that schools generally embark on the SSE and development planning process without understanding what it really entails, thus through several factors substantially reducing the effectiveness of the process.

Another important aspect which strongly featured during the research is the importance of moving from a process which is usually considered as mainly perceived as abstract and a ‘chore’ which has to be done, to a process which is more tangible and relatable to the real needs not only for the school but also towards educators themselves. School leadership teams can avail themselves of a number of tools during the process such as data analysis tools and action plan models. However, there isn’t anything tangible which can help schools understand if they are prepared to embark on the process. One also needs to consider that as process is not always understood by those who implement it, as little time is dedicated to opportunities to carry out research and reflect as a professional learning community. At certain points during the research the frustration of both schools, especially within leadership teams, could be felt because they did not have the time to delve into, research and understand the different components which make up the process. This could be linked to their lack of experience with the process and the limited regularity with which it is adopted. The research undertaken as part of this study has shown that not being ready for the process can be counterproductive on a number of levels, from further limiting the ownership towards improvement planning to the development of priorities which might not be relevant to the school and therefore are not monitored or evaluated. This may serve to further fuel the negative perception which the process might have as a waste of time because its impact is not finally measured or evaluated.

Following the outcomes of my research as well and the insights gathered from my continuous interaction with the two schools who participated in the research, I strongly believe that integrating the outcomes from the three main research questions into a self-reflection tool to understand how prepared the school is to embark on SSE and development planning would be highly beneficial. During this preliminary stage, schools, facilitated by the leadership teams can carry out this exercise which will allow them to reflect on their level of preparedness for internal quality assurance while at the same time familiarising themselves with the tenets of the process. To amplify, table 32 below depicts a set of questions for reflection

which have been identified through the research as fundamental aspects to be considered before embarking on the SSE process.

These questions, first and foremost, look at the approach and perception of the school community towards SSE and improvement planning, moving on to the way leadership looks at the process. The leadership section also spurs reflection on the approach towards the type of leadership which best fits the needs of the school and its context. The different challenges which external factors present schools daily, and which takes up their time for planning were also a determining factor which I believe need to be specifically discussed and reflected on. The last section focuses on the understanding of the process. The objective of this exercise is to take the leadership team on a journey of reflection and understanding, similar to the journey which the heads of school who participated in the study and myself as researcher went through as we progressed throughout the research. The research has shown that all the factors which are included in the self-reflection are inherently interlinked and need to be considered and ideally addressed before one embarks on the process. These aspects do not only pertain the development of the process but also help towards building a healthy school environment characterised by continuous research and professional learning.

Table 35 - Self-assessment tool for school leadership teams.

Area	Feedback
<p>RQ1 - Approach and Perception</p> <p>What is your view as educational leader of SSE and Development Planning?</p> <p>Does your leadership team share these views?</p> <p>Do educators at your school share your views?</p> <p>How, in your opinion, can a school work towards improvement?</p>	<p>The aim of this section is to allow leaders to reflect on the approach towards SSE and development planning and their perception vis a vis the usefulness of the process.</p> <p>The objective is to spur on reflection not only about themselves as leaders but also in relation to their leadership team and the educators who ultimately must work together towards the fruition of the process.</p>

	<p>As happened during the research, the outcomes of this section might instigate further reflection towards the need for a shift in mindset.</p>
<p>RQ 1 - Leadership</p> <p>Are you aware of the areas for improvement of the school?</p> <p>Do you have a clear vision for improvement?</p> <p>Is this vision shared with leadership team and staff?</p> <p>Can you define the leadership approach you adopt at school?</p> <p>Is this approach geared towards improvement?</p> <p>Is this approach shared by your team?</p> <p>Are you leading a professional learning community?</p>	<p>This section of the self-assessment tool asks for reflection about the role of leadership vis a vis vision, improvement plan, approach towards leadership and its effectiveness. It also asks a very difficult and important question on the school's status as a professional learning community.</p>
<p>RQ 3 - External challenges</p> <p>What external factors do you believe as a leader are threatening the school's potential towards improvement?</p> <p>Do you believe the perceived threats you identified are shared by your staff?</p> <p>Can the school community work together to mitigate these threats.</p>	<p>The aim of this section is to lead into a reflective stance on what external challenges influence the school and if these reflections are shared with staff. This will trigger further thoughts on the synergy which exists within the school community. An understanding of the challenges which are faced by the school will also allow for a better understanding of the improvement plan which the school needs within its particular context at that point in time. It will also help understand if the perceived challenges are real or if they are perceived 'reasons' to justify limited improvement.</p>
<p>RQ 2 - Understanding the SSE Process</p> <p>Do you feel you understand the SSE and development planning process well as a leader?</p> <p>Do you feel that you have a clear structure for implementation, monitoring and evaluation in mind?</p>	<p>The research shows that understanding the research process was key to its success, especially with reference to the monitoring and evaluation stage. Understanding the process before embarking on it is essential if a certain level of</p>

<p>Do you believe you need support in implementing the process?</p> <p>If so, what kind of support are you looking for?</p>	<p>strategic foresight is to be developed. It will also help minimise issues in the future.</p>
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However, the exercise cannot stop at the self-reflection phase. The next step is possibly the most difficult part as it requires tangible commitment, responsibility and accountability. As depicted the self-reflection section is followed up by research into how the outcomes of the reflection carried out in the first section can be developed into tangible outcomes. Moreover, there needs to be clarity and honesty on the impact on the school and the potential for improvement. The section will then be linked to the third part of the self-assessment tool which is the actioning part. In this section, shown below, reflection is taken to the next stage, the action plan, where leaders are encouraged to develop actions which will help them prepare for SSE and Development Planning

Outcomes

The aim of this section is to include the analysis of the feedback obtained following the self-assessment questions. This may include feedback from staff and critical friends/peer support.

Outcomes	Impact	Next steps
What is the outcome of the self-assessment exercise?	How do outcomes impact the readiness of the school to carry out SSE and development planning?	What are the next steps to be taken to prepare the school for SSE and development planning?

Future Goals - Action Plan

Following the clear analysis of outcomes, an action plan can be developed towards ensuring the preparedness of the school for SSE and development planning.

The role of school leaderships has been frequently outlined during the research as determining in structuring and managing the process. This self-reflection exercise, in fact, is mainly aimed as a tool for school leadership teams, as they will eventually have to reflect on the process before this is passed on to educators. However, this can potentially also be an exercise which can also be carried out in collaboration with a critical friend to develop thoughts for discussion and plan a way forward linked to the support which can be given to the school to prepare for SSE and Development Planning. This tool can also be eventually used as a catalyst for discussion with and amongst educators within the school as well as peer discussion with different leadership teams and schools. The final goal is that of spurring on reflection, discussion and a school culture which has research and collaborative development at its core.

7.7 A framework for School Self-Evaluation and Development Planning

Case studies carried out in the field of SSE and Development Planning have always looked at the success or otherwise of the process as a final result. They have mainly speculated but rarely delved in tangibly on why the process did not succeed or why it succeeded so that this can be replicated notwithstanding who is leading it. The quest in answering the research questions posed at the beginning of the research helped me as a researcher, to make more tangible aspects such as approach and mindset, the role of leadership within the process and the ability of schools in handling such a complex system in addition to shaping the holistic wellbeing of thousands of students placed under their care.

I hope that through this research and the framework depicted in Figure 11 below, I can somehow help in making the system more realistic and tangible, not only for schools and their communities but also for different stakeholders such as governing structures both at school and national level and policy makers. As seen through the literature review, the local scene is also limited in relation to SSE and development planning and the result of this research strongly recommends a serious

consideration for a new strategy and outreach with schools on SSE and Development Planning. The outcomes of this study which have been amply discussed are depicted in the framework below as a guideline for the different stakeholders towards understanding what determines strategic management and Development Planning in today's educational context.

All the components are depicted separately within the framework because they are important to the process within their own context. However, they are all inherently linked as the outcomes of the research clearly show that the process cannot work effectively if one is not in place. The research conducted has shown that this domino effect is what makes the process a complex one. As also discussed, the main mistake which schools make is in underestimating this complexity because, as discussed, they do not always understand the process in its entirety or have the time to implement it effectively.



Figure 11- A School Self-Evaluation and Development Planning Framework.

A determining part of the research, especially during the case study conducted in the two primary schools focused on promoting reflection and dialogue through professional learning communities. This framework proposes to work on the same

premise of reflection and dialogue, however, on a wider scale, by developing an informed awareness and understanding of the process for the different stakeholders. If there is the right mindset and approach, these tools can be designed to effectively prepare schools to embark on School Self-Evaluation and Development Planning. This framework can also help policy makers to develop policies which reflect the realities faced by the school. The aim is to promote a culture which will help schools reflect on determining aspects which impact the success of the process before embarking on it, thus reducing the possibility of failure. The factors included in the framework can also help the whole ecosystem of the school, including governing structures to work towards a better educational environment which focuses on the well-being of the school community and works continuously, in a structured and strategic way towards, improvement.

7.8 Significance of the study

7.8.1 Theoretical significance

From its inception this study was targeted towards making a significant contribution to understanding how SSE and Development Planning operate not just as technical procedures but as socially constructed practices embedded within Maltese schools' cultures, governance and quality assurance frameworks. Through the adoption of a social constructionist longitudinal case-study design, this research shows how educators and leadership teams co-construct the meaning, value and use of SSE and Development Planning over a span of time. The structure of this study, which was the first of its kind locally, extends existing theoretical work on internal evaluation, professional learning communities and school improvement in small, semi- centralised systems.

The study also aimed at advancing international debates on SSE and Development Planning by unpacking the process into its different phases; diagnosis, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, showing how each phase is differently understood, owned and enacted by practitioners. The identification of the

monitoring and evaluation phase as the ‘weakest link’ in the cycle and the detailed analysis of how this undermines both impact and perception add nuance to models that tend to treat SSE as a single, undifferentiated activity. This granular view supports more refined conceptualisations of SSE as a dynamic iterative learning process rather than a one-off compliance task and it foregrounds the temporal dimension of school improvement by tracing shifts in mindset and practice along the two scholastic years.

The study also contributes theoretically by situating Maltese SSE practice within wider macro-level paradigms of neoliberalism, new managerialism and audit culture, and then showing how these ideologies are mediated at school level through leadership, culture and educator perception. In doing so, it bridges macro-micro analyses: it explains how centrally designed frameworks are re-interpreted in daily routines and how tensions between autonomy and accountability are negotiated in a semi-centralised, small sized context. The work further enriches theoretical understandings of leadership and professional agency by evidencing how SLTs efficacy is contingent to school culture, external expectations and the availability of support thereby contributing to models of distributed and developmental leadership in quality assurance.

The research offers an original framework for SSE and Development Planning tailored to Maltese compulsory sector, synthesising empirical findings and international literature into a coherent model that emphasises professional learning communities and the centrality of monitoring and evaluation. This framework provides a theoretically informed reference point for future comparative work on internal quality assurance in small systems, and it supports analytic generalisation by articulating concepts, such as ownership, perception and the interplay between internal and external quality assurance, which are relevant beyond Malta.

7.8.2 Practical significance within the Maltese Context

In practical terms, the study generates detailed, context-sensitive evidence on how SSE and Development Planning are lived in two Maltese primary schools at a time when the national legislation and strategy are formally positioning these processes as the ‘main educational policy and implementation tool’ (Education Act, Cap. 605). It shows that while educators broadly recognise the potential of SSE to drive meaningful change, implementation is often fragmented, heavily shaped by outdated policy instruments and constrained by top-down expectations and limited autonomy.

For school-level practice, the study provides actionable insight into factors that enhance or hinder the effectiveness of SSE, including the importance of clear strategic planning, time for collaborative reflection, structured involvement of different stakeholders and explicit attention to monitoring and evaluation. By looking into the SSE cycle, the research demonstrates how practitioners can move from abstract compliance to concrete inquiry into student learning, thereby strengthening professional ownership and the development of learning communities. The findings also highlight the need for targeted professional development on data use, action planning and evaluation, suggesting that sustained capacity building is essential if schools are to use SSE as more than a paperwork exercise.

At system level, the study offers timely evidence that Maltese policy makers, regulators and unions on the unintended consequences of current frameworks and decisions. These include the misalignment between the 2004 Knowing our school policy and more strategic orientations and the impact of halting SSE and Development Planning on educators’ professional growth. It argues on empirical grounds, that legislative shifts on their own are insufficient: trust, clarity of roles and coherent updated guidance are required if schools are to experience SSE as an empowering tool rather than as an additional layer of surveillance. The recommendations aimed at macro- and micro levels such as revising national

policy, embedding supportive external QA, promoting and providing structured support for SLTs, offer a concrete agenda for aligning Maltese quality assurance more closely with its stated developmental aims.

The study gains its significance as it illuminates how SSE and Development planning, as a nationally mandated process functions within Maltese schools, theorises the human and the structural factors that shape its impact and offers evidence-based pathways for making internal quality assurance a more authentic, learning-centred and sustainable driver of school improvement in Malta and similar contexts.

7.9 Limitations to the study

As can be gleaned from previous chapters, literature related to the Maltese approach to SSE and Development planning within compulsory schooling is limited. Moreover, a longitudinal case study approach in this kind of setting is not quite common in studies carried out in the area mainly due to the significant span of time which such a study entails. In fact, this is the first of its kind locally within the Maltese education system as well as within the national church school sector. This meant that as a researcher there were not similar studies which could guide me towards any possible issues which might have transpired during the research.

The dis-levelled playing field nationally, due to several factors such as the Covid 19 pandemic and the Malta Union of Teachers directive, the latter of which spanned over the entirety of the research, also presented certain limitations to the freedom with which respondents could adopt certain changes and involve educators. Although, both schools participated fully and willingly and precautions were taken from the part of the researcher, the fear of breaching union directives was unfortunately present and might have possibly, to a limited extent, influenced the study.

During the span of the research, both schools were trying to cope with the aftermath of the pandemic and were therefore also preoccupied with new aspects which they did not always know how to tackle. This might have distracted them from following up on the action plans which they had developed as part of the SSE and Development Planning process. These are the important and relevant realities which characterise not only my constructivist stance to research but also the daily settings of schools. One of the most common comments by schools is that things are always changing. This means that schools will always have to face particular situations and a variety of problems. SSE and Development Planning can be essential tools in coping with these different scenarios.

Both primary schools which participated in the research were from the church sector and within the same college. Although this was planned this way to ensure that there was a setting which would allow for the longitudinal study to take place, it can still present its limitations. First and foremost, the governing structure of church schools which is usually led by a board of trustees, or members of the religious order which that school forms part of. As seen in the findings and discussion, this can limit the level of autonomy the schools have when working with SSE and Development Planning. This setting can be compared to other non-state sectors such as the independent school sector, however, the state sector works differently. Although still only partly decentralised, state schools are allowed a more autonomous stance when working on the development planning process. This difference will to a certain extent influence the way governing structures are perceived especially by leadership teams.

Notwithstanding the above factors, I believe that when one looks at the existing literature, in depth findings are found to be common to most educators and most schools. The *raison d'être* of SSE and Development Planning is finally to capture the nature and diverse context of each and every school and use that context to bring about school improvement.

7.10 Future Research

The main research question asked about the factors which are impacting the success of the SSE and Development Planning process. As outlined in the findings and discussion chapter, a main issue found during the study is the limited structured monitoring and evaluation which is embarked on by schools. To this effect, as a researcher I felt that I needed to zoom into that particular aspect as findings proved that the absence of monitoring and evaluation component strongly debilitated the process and its outcomes. However, it is important not to forget that there are other aspects of the research which are equally important, and which can also have an impact on the process. Research in schools, including data collection and analysis, which is part of the process is not given enough relevance and importance within the compulsory education system locally as it should. I believe further research into the area and targeted action would greatly enhance the effectiveness of the process. Research which focuses on observing the reflection and thought processes which educators go through when planning for improvement would provide important insight on the paths taken by educators when carrying out research within their field. Given its due importance, this area could serve to amplify the vision at national level through policy development which is based on evidence-based data collected and researched by practitioners in schools.

The need for a critical friend and peer support for leadership teams are also areas within strategic management in education which can be taken further as an area of focus. This need transpired throughout the study, and it was clearly expressed that schools crave guidance and support in certain areas of school development. It was also clear that the notion of professional learning communities within the SSE and development planning context was still at the awareness stage. Research on the area of support given to schools, especially leadership teams may possibly help in identifying the type of guidance which schools need to thrive in the area of strategic management. This study also sparked my interest in research related to teacher agency and leadership and how the role of educators within our schools is perceived in relation to a leading stance towards school improvement. Considering our context and history as an ex-colonial island, I believe that further delving into

the area of teacher leadership and role theory might be very fruitful to local compulsory education and improvement.

If schools are given freedom to work on the processes within their own contexts, a more level playing field in SSE and Development planning may present itself for future research. A comparison between the perceptions and approaches from the different sectors may be the basis of research which is not limited to the schools and their own contexts but would inform policy and governance at national level.

7.11 Final Reflection

As a final thought before concluding my research I would like to write a few words on the beautiful but challenging journey which this research has taken me on during these last six years. My research speaks often about reflection and evaluation. I believe that both strongly impacted me personally and professionally during these years.

As mentioned previously in my work, I hold a role of responsibility within the sphere of quality assurance for compulsory schooling on a national level. I do not mention responsibility lightly as it is a role which I must admit, does keep me up at night on several occasions. The area I embarked on as part of my research albeit not specifically tied to my role does play an important part in my daily life and so on several levels. As a policy maker in the field of quality assurance I feel that the extensive reading on the area of SSE and Development planning and the journey which ensued in the development of the research questions provided me with an extensive wealth of knowledge, which I feel I translate every single day in my work. However, I believe that the research within the two schools, the time spent on the field discussing my area with leaders and educators was the most fulfilling part of the research. The reflection which ensued my sessions with the schools helped a lot in looking forward to shape policy and strategy which are grounded and which can be useful to schools. Possibly, one of my most significant moments during my first term as Director within the Directorate for Quality and Standards

in Education is my development and publishing of the first *National Framework for Quality Assurance (0-16)* and the first *National Standards for Quality Assurance (3-16)*. The literature review and the research which characterized my studies were crucial in the development of these two important milestones within Maltese Education. Although a taxing journey on different levels, I believe that the benefits of this reflective journey far outweigh its trials and tribulations.

On a personal level I believe that this was also a journey of discovery. I honed in on skills, such as deep reflection and evaluation which I believe I had not developed well previously. The engagement both with the literature and the varied commitments as the research unfolded helped me to develop new perspectives, share new approaches and challenge and be challenged by others. I have gained confidence.

Along this beautiful journey I lost my dearest father. I believe that finding the drive to keep the momentum and persevere in pushing forward notwithstanding what was happening around me was a life changing experience. I believe that I have grown during this journey. It has given me the tools and experience to keep on growing. This I will be forever thankful for.

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Annexes

Annex 1 – Questionnaires (Year 1 and Year 2)

School self-evaluation and Development Planning - Year 1

This questionnaire aims at gaining a view of the understanding and perceptions which exist in schools linked to school self-evaluation and development planning which is carried out regularly in schools.

Question 1

What is your role at school?

Mark: Senior Leadership Team/ Teacher/ Learning support educator.

Question 2

To what extent do you feel that school self-evaluation and the School Development plan are important tools for school improvement?

Mark: extremely important/somewhat important/ important at times/ not important at all.

Question 3

Do you believe that the School Development Plan can bring significant change within a school? *

Mark: Yes/ somewhat/ no.

Question 4

How often do you refer to the actions/action plans included in the School Development Plan when planning your lessons?

Mark: frequently/ sometimes/ never

Question 5

Do you believe that educators should be directly involved in the School Development process

Mark: Yes / sometimes / no

Question 6

To what extent do you believe that it is important to collect feedback from the different stakeholders before identifying school priorities? *

Mark: very important / sometimes / not important

Question 7

Do you feel confident in writing action plans? *

Mark: Very confident / not always confident/ not confident at all

Question 8

Do you believe that evaluating actions/action plans is an important aspect of the school development plan process? *

Mark: Yes/ sometimes / no

Question 9

Can you associate an aspect of improvement in your school which is directly linked to the School Development Plan?

Mark: Yes / sometimes / no

Question 10

If you answered Yes to question 9 can you please explain what this improvement was. (open ended)

Question 11

How can the school self-evaluation and school development process be improved at your school? * (open ended)

Questionnaire Year 2

School Self-Evaluation and Development Planning Y2

Dear Educators,

I would like to thank you for your collaboration and for taking the time to respond to this short questionnaire. The objective of this questionnaire is to act as a follow-up of the questionnaire distributed during SY 2021-2022. The questions focus on the evaluation of the changes implemented by the School in the SDP process and action plans for this scholastic year. The questionnaire is anonymous and the feedback given will be considered collectively as part of the research. No information will be disclosed separately in any way. The aim of this study is to keep on working towards improving the SDP process and therefore school improvement.

Question 1

Do you feel that as an educator you are more involved in the SDP process this year?

Mark: very much involved / involved / somewhat involved / not involved at all

Question 2

Were you given the opportunity to give your feedback on the action plans developed for the current Scholastic Year?

Mark: Yes / No

Question 3

Do you feel that the SDP process this year is giving you more time to reflect about school priorities and action plans with your colleagues?

Mark: Yes / No

Question 4

Do you feel that the action plans developed are clear and structured enough for implementation?

Mark: Yes / not sure / no

Question 5

Did the changes in the SDP process change in any way your perception of School Development Planning? (open ended)

Question 6

Can you suggest further improvements to the SDP process? (open ended)

Annexe 2 - Questions Interviews with Educators Year 1 and Year 2

Questions used with teaching staff during interviews.

Interview questions set 1 – to be carried out during year 1 of study – (2021-2022)

1. What is your role at school and how long have you been working as a teacher/LSE at this particular school?
2. When I mention the term school self-evaluation and development planning, what comes to mind?
 - a. Do you think its an effective process?
 - b. What do you believe has shaped this opinion?
3. During the years you have been teaching/in class do you think that the role of school self-evaluation and development planning has changed?
 - a. If so, for the better? Worse? in what ways?
4. As a teacher/LSE do you feel involved in the process? How?
5. When you are planning your scheme of work and lesson plans do you refer to action plans set in the SSE?
6. Do you often discuss action plans with your colleagues?
7. The SDP process has several parts (internal review, writing of action plans and evaluation) Which part of the process do you believe is more relevant to the process and to you as a teacher?
8. How do you evaluate action plans?
9. Do you feel that as a school you need external support in developing the school self-evaluation? If yes why? If no also ask why? What kind of support would you suggest?
10. Do you think there is a link between the School Development plan and the external review visits carried out by the Quality Assurance Department?
 - a. If so, how do you feel about this connection?

11. How do you believe the system can be improved/changed to better cater for the needs of the school and you as an educator?

Y2 T2 – Interview Educators following changes in school development processes

Last May the school carried out some changes to the SDP process. During this interview I would like to discuss the below questions to evaluate the impact of these changes on your role and perception of the process.

1. Do you believe that the changes which were carried out to the process can be tangibly felt?
2. What in your opinion were the main changes carried out?
3. Why do you believe has the school chosen to adapt the process in this way?
4. Do you feel more aware of the improvement plan which the school has embarked on this year?
5. Which do you feel is the most important priority you are working on this year?
6. Do you feel that this changed structure can benefit the school – as educators as well as students in class?
7. Do you think your understanding/perception of the process has changed following these changes?
8. What is the next step according to your professional opinion? How can the process be improved further?

Annexe 3 – Questions Focus Groups with SLT– Year 1 and 2.

Focus Group SMT

Relevance of tool:

1. In the new legislation the SDP is described as the main tool which schools are to use to bring about improvement.
 - Do you believe that the SDP process is bringing about improvement at school? If so, how?
 - Is this improvement effective? (Does it happen for a short time and then forgotten or abandoned? – Maintenance of actions influence the effectiveness.
 - What are the main hindrances which influence its effectiveness?

Mindset/role of SLT :

2. Do you believe that the mindset of a school towards improvement and the process is important when implementing the SDP process?
3. As part of the leadership team do you approach the SDP process optimistically or does it sometimes feel like a burden?
4. How important do you think your role as SLT is in the SDP process? Can it move without the input of the leadership team?
5. Is there a way how the educator’s mindset can be improved when it comes to SDP? (Do you feel they are involved enough in the process? How would you involve them further?)
6. Do you carry out an evaluative exercise as an SLT on the success of the process for that current year?
7. Do you feel that you are free to implement the process as you want or do outside interferences influence the process? (importance to SDP attributed by external QA mechanisms and influence from outside such as the implementation of reform).

Process:

8. As SLT which part of the process do you find most problematic and why?
9. As an SLT which part of the process do you find most useful and why?
10. As SLT which are of the process do you feel you need to improve and how?

Last May the school carried out some changes to the SDP process. During this interview I would like to discuss the below questions to evaluate the impact of these changes on your role and perception of the process.

1. Do you believe that the changes which were carried out to the process can be tangibly felt?
2. What in your opinion were the main changes carried out?
3. Why do you believe has the school chosen to adapt the process in this way?
4. Do you feel more aware of the improvement plan which the school has embarked on this year?
5. Which do you feel is the most important priority you are working on this year?
6. Do you feel that this changed structure can benefit the school – as educators as well as students in class?
7. Do you think your understanding/perception of the process has changed following these changes?
8. What is the next step according to your professional opinion? How can the process be improved further?

Annexe 4 – Permission letters

Request for permission to conduct case study research in the Primary Sector

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Denise Gatt and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Ph.D in Education. I am presently conducting a research study for my thesis titled *School Self Evaluation and Development planning in the Maltese Context: the impact on school improvement*. The aim of my study focuses on internal quality assurance in schools. The research looks into the self-evaluation processes and development planning which carried out by schools on a regular basis and aims at understanding how this internal quality assurance tool is used by schools to bring about improvement. This project is being conducted under the supervision of Professor Christopher Bezzina.

I am hereby seeking your permission to carry out case study research with **School A** and **School B**. My research will span over two scholastic years and data collection methods will involve observation of SDP meetings carried out at school, distribution of intermittent questionnaires, interviews with members of staff and focus groups. The research will also include regular meetings with the Head of School and Senior Management Team.

Participation will be entirely voluntary, and participants will be free to withdraw at any point, without any repercussions. Data collected will be pseudonymised to ensure that none of the participants will be identified. Only my supervisor and I will have access to this data.

Should you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor; both our contact details are provided below.

Thank you for your kind consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Denise Gatt
Bezzina

Professor Christopher

Information letter – Schools and Educators

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Denise Gatt and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Ph.D in Education. I am presently conducting a research study for my thesis titled *School Self Evaluation and Development planning in the Maltese Context: the impact on school improvement*; this is being supervised by Professor Christopher Bezzina. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study focuses on internal quality assurance in schools. The research looks into the self-evaluation processes and development planning which carried out by schools on a regular basis and aims at understanding how this internal quality assurance tool is used by schools to bring about improvement. Your participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of the process of school self-evaluation and development planning and which areas are crucial to the effectiveness of the system vis a vis improvement within a school. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to respond to three questionnaires which will be shared intermittently during the study which will span over two scholastic years. As Head of School you will also be requested to participate in individual interviews and Senior Management Team focus groups during the course of the study. The research will also include the observation of formal School Development Meetings and other meeting where the action plans and self-evaluation exercise are discussed.

Data collected will be treated with strictest confidentiality and all participants will be pseudonymized to ensure that no one is identified. Information emerging from the data collected will be accessed only by the researcher and supervisor.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be stored anonymously.

If you choose to participate, you will be offered the opportunity to understand better school self-evaluation and development planning as an important tool towards school improvement and how this can be used effectively in everyday practice as an educator. This study can also serve as a reflective exercise which can help you develop further professionally. Your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.

Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where

applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased. All data collected will be stored safely during the research and will be destroyed following the completion of the study.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail denise.gatt.99@um.edu.mt; you can also contact my supervisor over the phone: 2340 2039 or via email: christopher.bezzina@um.edu.mt;

Sincerely,

Denise Gatt
Bezzina

Professor Christopher

Participant's Consent Form

School Self Evaluation and Development planning in the Maltese Context: the impact on school improvement

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Ms. Denise Gatt. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be stored anonymously.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in anonymous questionnaires, individual interviews and focus groups which will enable the researcher to explore better the different facets of the SDP process and zoom in on specific areas which impact the effectiveness of this tool on school improvement. I am aware that the questionnaires, interviews and focus groups will be carried out over a span of two scholastic years. Questionnaires will take approximately 30 minutes to complete and interviews and focus groups will last one hour each. There will be three questionnaires throughout the study and two sets of interviews and focus groups. I understand that the interviews and focus groups are to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.
4. I understand that my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.
5. I understand that the study will provide me with the opportunity to understand better school self-evaluation and development planning as an important tool towards school improvement and how this can be used effectively in everyday practice as an educator. This study can also serve as a reflective exercise which can help me develop further professionally. I also understand that this research may benefit schools in carrying out their school self-evaluation and development planning.

6. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
7. I understand that all data collected will be stored in an anonymised form and destroyed following the completion of the thesis.
8. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.
9. I am aware that, if I give my consent, interviews and focus groups will be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed).
10. I am aware that my data will be pseudonymised; i.e., my identity will not be noted on transcripts or notes from my interview, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes that link my data to my identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer, and only the researcher will have access to this information. Any material that identifies me as a participant in this study will be stored securely and destroyed following the publication of the thesis.
11. I am aware that, if I give my consent, extracts from my interview may be reproduced in these outputs, either in an anonymous form, or using a pseudonym [a made-up name or code – e.g. respondent A].
12. I am aware that focus group discussions should be considered confidential and that I should not disclose details of those participating and/or of the nature of discussions to others.
13. I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.
14. I am aware that I may ask to be given the opportunity to review relevant extracts of the transcript of my interview, before the results of the study are published. I am also aware that I may ask for changes to be made, if I consider this to be necessary.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Annexe 5 – UREC forms and FREC permission letter

UNIQUE FORM ID: 9164_03092021_Denise Gatt

Ticked one or more self-assessment issues. Submitting to FREC for review.



ETHICS & DATA PROTECTION

PART 1: APPLICANT AND PROJECT DETAILS



9. Title of research project: School Self-Evaluation and Development Planning in the Maltese context: the impact on school improvement.

10. Research question/statement & method: Research Statement:

The research aims at looking at the way school self-evaluation and development planning impact the improvement strategies adopted by a school in its continuous quest towards improvement. There are several factors which influence the effectiveness of this internal evaluation tool and this research will aim at looking into the various facets of the process as well as the effects which it can have on schools vis a vis tangible improvement. It will also look into the extent to which the management of a school can use school self-evaluation and development planning to facilitate the development of effective professional learning communities in schools through the adoption of a growth mentality and how successful development planning can enhance the integration of this mentality in the everyday life of educators within a school.

Research Questions:

1. How does school self-evaluation and development planning impact on the approach towards improvement taken on by a school?
2. To what extent does a growth mentality among the leadership team and educators impact the effectiveness of the process and therefore improvement?
3. How can school self-evaluation and development planning work towards the building of professional learning communities in schools?
4. Which aspects of the school self-evaluation and development planning process determine its success/failure?

Research methods:

The current COVID-19 situation has presented schools with a number of issues which need to be



University of Malta staff, students, or anyone else planning to carry out research under the auspices of the University, must complete this form. The UM may also consider requests for ethics and data protection review by External Applicants. Ahead of completing this online form, please read carefully the University of Malta Research Code of Practice and the University of Malta Research Ethics Review Procedures. Any breach of the Research Code of Practice or untruthful replies in this form will be considered a serious disciplinary matter. It is advisable to download a full digital version of the form to familiarise yourself with its contents (<https://www.um.edu.mt/urec/onlineforms>). You are also advised to refer to the FAQs (<https://www.um.edu.mt/urec/faq>).
14 JANUARY 2021 **required*

Part 1: Applicant and project details

<p>Project details</p> <p>*9. Title of research project School Self-Evaluation and Development planning in the Maltese context: the impact on school improvement.</p> <p>*10. Research question/statement & method, in brief</p> <p>Research Statement: The research aims at looking at the way school self-evaluation and development planning impact the improvement strategies adopted by a school in its continuous quest towards improvement. There are several factors which influence the effectiveness of this tool and this research will look into the various facets of the process as well as the effects which it can have on schools vis a vis tangible improvement. It will also look into the extent to which the management of a school can use school self-evaluation and development planning to facilitate the development of effective professional learning communities in schools through the adoption of a growth mentality and how successful development planning can enhance the integration of this mentality in the everyday life of educators within a school.</p> <p>Research Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How does school self-evaluation and development planning impact on the approach towards improvement taken on by a school?2. To what extent does a growth mentality among the leadership team and educators impact the effectiveness of the process and therefore improvement?3. How can school self-evaluation and development planning work towards the building of professional learning communities in schools?	

4. Which aspects of the school self-evaluation and development planning process determine its success/failure?

Research methods:

The current COVID-19 situation has presented schools with a number of issues which need to be addressed, first and foremost among these is the learning loss which was experienced by learners due to school closure and the adhoc shift to online teaching. As regards school self-evaluation and development planning, the different approaches adopted in both state and non-state schools has disrupted the level playing field in the area. On the other hand it has developed a scenario which can be researched through case study research.

In a scenario where schools, during these months, have experienced considerable learning loss at different levels, a case study approach can glean interesting and important findings which can be utilised in relation to the role and effectiveness of school self-evaluation and development planning when schools have to plan on how to emerge from a difficult situation such as what has been brought about by COVID-19.

The objective of this case study research, which will be carried out with two primary schools, is that of focusing on how the schools are planning on using school-self evaluation and development as a strategic planning tool during two consecutive scholastic years (2021-2022 and 2022 -2023). The research will look at the whole process but will also focus on specific segments of the process linked to the research questions and which aim to address the gap in literature which exists in the area. It will also aim at observing and evaluating how the process is tangibly influencing the ability of the schools to cater for the specific identified targets.

A case study methodology has been chosen as the main research approach as it can provide a unique example of how educators within a school tackle a real situation, in this case, moving on from COVID-19, thus shifting from the abstract of theories to the real experience in schools (Yin 2018). This type of approach is characterised by detail and narrow focus and will allow the researcher to look at a particular phenomenon and highlight significant features. As a case study approach includes more variables operating in a single case, to catch the implications of these variables usually requires more than one tool for data collection and many sources of evidence (Cohen, Manion and Morrisson 2018; Robson 2002). To increase reliability and validity this research will adopt a mixed-method approach towards collecting data. These methods include observations of meetings of Senior Leadership Team in relation to school self-evaluation, observation of development sessions organised by the school, interviews and focus groups with staff and intermittent questionnaires over the two scholastic years to assess development. The research would also include continuous documentary analysis of plans produced by the school throughout the two years. The evaluation carried out at the end of scholastic year 2020-2021 will also be reviewed as it is the main tool used to develop the 2021-2022 development plan. The choice of school will be based on their willingness to use school self-evaluation and development planning as a tool towards improvement. The context of the school and the choice will therefore be specifically detailed and explained in the methodology chapter of the study.

*11. Will project involve collection of primary data from human participants? No (Proceed to Part 2. Self-Assessment) or Yes/Unsure (Please answer next question).

YES

12. If applicable: Explain primary data collection from human participants. Please explain a. salient characteristics (min-max participants, age, sex, other); b. how they will be recruited; c. what they will be required to do; d. duration; e. if inducements/rewards/compensation are offered; f. how participants may benefit.

A. Salient Characteristics

The participants in the research will include the staff of two primary schools;

- 1.Senior Management Team (10 approx),
- 2.Teachers (40 approx) and
- 3.Learning Support Educators (30 approx).
- 4.The maximum participants possible in the study considering the 2 case studies would be around 80-90.
- 5.Participants will be of mixed ages and sex.

B. Recruitment of Schools.

The study will be carried out within two Maltese Primary schools which out of their own free will choose to use school self-evaluation and development planning as a tool towards bringing about improvement. As the method of research adopted for this study is case study research, the two schools participating in the research will be selected depending on their adaptability with the context which is most favourable for the study to glean meaningful and reliable results. In this case the schools need to offer the full opportunity to observe the school self-evaluation process and its impact on improvement. It is also important for the schools chosen to have the potential for replicability which is necessary when carrying out research through a case study approach. Keeping in mind that the scenario regarding school self-evaluation is currently a varied one where not all schools will be using School self-evaluation and development planning process during the coming scholastic year, the participating schools will be sought out by the researcher following a clear demonstration of willingness on their part to participate in the research project using these strategies as part of their school improvement programme.

A set of schools will be short-listed by the researcher based on their commitment towards school-evaluation during recent years. These schools will also need to show that they have evaluation procedures in place which can be observed during the research. From this list, the researcher will omit those schools which might pose a conflict of interest considering especially in relation to the dual role of the researcher in the area of quality assurance. The remaining schools will be sent an invitation to participate in an introductory meeting and the schools that respond positively will be approached. Two schools will be chosen. Following identification based on the above-mentioned criteria, the schools will then be sent a research information letter (Appendix A) which will be distributed to all participants. Following the information letter, the schools will then receive a consent form (Appendix B) which is to be signed by all participants in the study.

[Denise, how will this 'willingness' be determined? Can you argue that schools were short-listed from those who have expressed strong SDP over the past 4-5 years and have evaluation procedures in place that are effecting their development/improvement plans? Then you could state that from this short list you will avoid schools with whom you may have a conflict of interest (since you are an external evaluator). The remaining schools were sent an invitation to participate in an introductory meeting and the schools that responded positively were approached. From the ones that showed an interest to participate two schools were chosen]

C. Participation Requirements

Participants in the study will be required to answer intermittent anonymous questionnaires (3 to 4) on the progress they feel they are achieving through the self-evaluation process as part of their plan towards improvement. There will be sets of interviews and focus groups with the different participants throughout the study (2/3 sets of interviews and focus groups with different groups of educators). The researcher will also observe School Development sessions held at school and keep observation notes and journals on what is discussed. The documentation produced by the school staff during the whole process of the research will also be analyzed.

D. Duration of study

The study will take 2 scholastic years – (September 2021 – June 2023).

E. There will be no inducement, reward or compensation offered to the participants.

F. Benefit to Participants:

The participants will benefit from a better understanding of the internal review process and how this mechanism works in schools. It will also help them develop professionally as educators.

Self-assessment outcome: Please examine your self-assessment checklist above. Option 1: If you marked NONE of the questions, then you may proceed to data collection without FREC permission. You must nonetheless submit the form to FREC for records and audit purposes. Option 2: If you marked ANY of the issues, then you will be asked to elaborate on (only) these issues in the next section, for FREC's review. You may NOT start your data collection until you receive FREC approval. Please take note of the numbers you marked before proceeding to detailed review.

No self-assessment issues ticked. Submitting to FREC for records. **SKIP PART 3, GO TO SUBMISSION**

Ticked one or more self-assessment issues. Submitting to FREC for review. **PROCEED TO PART 3, DETAILED EVALUATION**

Part 3: Detailed evaluation (ONLY PROJECTS WITH POTENTIAL ISSUES)

If you answered "Yes/Unsure", to any of the potential issues flagged in the self-assessment checklist, please elaborate on these issues for FREC's evaluation. Please SKIP all other sections.

4. Identifiable participants

The interviews and focus group sessions carried out with the participants will be audio recorded following their consent and will be transcribed verbatim. The identity of the schools will be anonymous as will be the identity of the participants in the documentation obtained from the audio recordings. Participants will be given pseudonyms and codes will be used to catalogue, organize and analyse data. Only the researcher will have access to the data which will be stored safely during the research and destroyed following completion of the study. While the majority of the participants will be educators (teachers and LSEs), an important aspect of the research will also involve the leadership team. While Assistant heads can be kept as unidentifiable due to the fact that they are a team in each school, the role of the head of school will be identified. The identity of the participants, including the head of school will be kept anonymous throughout the study.

10. Incidental Findings

The nature of case study research over a span of time requires in depth observation of processes and the development of plans for improvement. While carrying out the research, the researcher may come across findings which may be important to the school.

17. Permission from cooperating institution:

Permissions will need to be sought from governing bodies/cooperating institutions of schools selected.

21C Dual Role

The researcher currently holds a leadership position (Assistant Director Quality Assurance) within the Ministry for Education. Albeit not directly, the position is linked to the area of research, hence the researcher is to carefully consider this role during the selection of schools as well as during the research. To balance out this situation the researcher will be adopting the following:

1. The researcher will look into working with non-state schools which have their own management and leadership systems which are separate from those of the Ministry for Education. This will help in mitigating the way participants will look at the researcher's role outside of the study. Moreover, the research questions focus mainly on processes and the research methodology adopted for this study does not necessitate a selection of participants from all sectors.
2. The case study approach to be adopted will use mixed methods which will include anonymous questionnaires with staff where they will be able to express their opinion freely without running the risk of being identified. This will counterbalance the face-to-face method to be used during interviews and focus groups. The researcher will not observe individual lessons but will observe group meetings directly related to school self-evaluation.
3. The role of the researcher was also considered in the choice of methodology for this particular study. A case study approach over two scholastic using a mixed method approach will allow the researcher to build a researcher-participant stance, one based on trust which will help in making participants more comfortable during the research and therefore will enhance the authenticity of the findings.
3. The researcher will make the scope of the study and the role of the researcher clear to participants.

For projects that involve primary data collection from human participants (or their tissue/samples)

1. Risk of harm to participants: Please explain: i. whether and how participants risk any harm (physical, psychological, legal economic or social) by participating in the research; ii. why such risks are unavoidable; iii. what safeguards you have taken to minimise the risk.
2. Physical intervention on participants: Please provide a brief risk assessment of each technique used and a brief overall risk assessment.
3. Vulnerable participants: Please explain: i. the nature of the vulnerability; ii. what safeguards will be taken to protect vulnerable participants (e.g. by not stigmatising participants, not putting undue pressure, implementing safeguards while processing consent, providing contact details for professional help should this be required, safeguarding privacy, providing compensation, etc. If participants are unable to give consent, please explain how you intend to obtain their assent; if this is not possible,- please explain why.
4. Identifiable participants: Please elaborate on: i. the nature of the records, their storage, security, traceability, identifiability of participants and access to research records; ii. how participants will be protected when disseminating results (e.g. pseudonyms, coding, making data attributable with consent); iii. plans for retention and destruction of the records.
5. Special Categories of Personal Data (sensitive personal data): Which of the following data categories are collected, if any? i. race and ethnic origin; ii. political opinions; iii. religious and philosophical beliefs; iv. trade union memberships; v. health status; vi. sex life or sexual orientation; vii. genetic information; viii. biometric data that may uniquely identify a natural person. Please describe.
6. Collection of human tissue/samples: Please elaborate on: i. the nature of materials and/or biological tissue/samples, their storage, security, traceability, identifiability, and who has access to them; ii. plans for retention and destruction.
7. Withholding information at consent/assent: Please explain: i. the nature of the information withheld; ii. why withholding information is necessary; iii. whether and how participants may be given the information at any point during the research.
8. Opt-out consent/assent: Please explain: i. the nature of the consent; ii. why opt-out is necessary; iii. how you will ensure that participants are able to make an informed choice concerning whether to participate or opt out.
9. Deception in data generation: Please explain: i. the nature of the deception; ii. why this is unavoidable and why you have rejected alternative methods of conducting research; iii. whether the information is likely to be significant to subjects; iv. what explanation for deception and debriefing you give to participants following their participation.
10. Incidental findings: Please elaborate on: i. the nature of potential incidental findings; ii. how such findings will be managed (participant consent to be informed, communication of information, etc.)

For projects that involve use of unpublished secondary data

11. Unpublished secondary data collected from human participants: Please indicate the nature of the data collected. In the case of data that has not been anonymised/coded and that could lead to the identification of persons, provide evidence that the research project from which the data has been generated was covered by data protection and ethics review (including participant consent for secondary use), or (if administrative data) evidence that the data controller had permission from subjects for secondary use of data and conformed to the requirements of the Data Protection Act and GDPR.
12. Unpublished secondary data collected from animals: Please indicate the nature of the data collected. If the source was a research project, provide evidence that the project was covered by ethics review
13. Unpublished secondary data (no written permission from data controller): Please elaborate.

For projects that involve primary data collection from animals (non-human vertebrates and cephalopods) or their tissue/samples

14. Lasting harm to animals out of natural habitat: Please inform the Joint FREC Animal Research Sectoral Subcommittee and provide further information based on their guidance.
15. Risk of harm to live animals: Please inform the Joint FREC Animal Research Sectoral Subcommittee and provide further information based on their guidance.
16. Use of non legal animals/tissue: Please inform the Joint FREC Animal Research Sectoral Subcommittee and provide further information based on their guidance.

General Considerations

- 17. Permission from cooperating institution: Please explain: i. how the cooperating institution will be contacted; ii. whether the approval of another Research Ethics Committee or Data Protection Office is required.
- 18. Risk to researcher/team: Please elaborate on: i. the nature of the risk; ii. why it is unavoidable; iii. the mitigating and/or compensating measures you plan to implement.
- 19. Risk of harm to environment: Please elaborate on: i. the nature of the risk of harm to the environment; ii. why it is unavoidable; iii. the mitigating and/or compensating measures you plan to implement.
- 20. Commercial sensitivity: Please elaborate on: i. the nature of the data; ii. how you plan to safeguard sensitive data.

Other Risks

- 21a. Dual use and/or misuse: Please elaborate on: i. the nature of the risk of dual and/or misuse; ii. why this is unavoidable; iii. the mitigating and/or compensating measures you plan to implement.
- 21b. Conflict of Interest: Please elaborate on: i. the nature of the conflict of interest; ii. how you plan to guarantee the impartiality of the research process given such conflict.
- 21c. Dual role: Please elaborate on: i. the nature of the dual role; ii. how you plan to address issues that may arise, such as power imbalance, unwarranted surveillance, coercion of participants, exclusion of participants from other services, etc.
- 21d. Permission/license to use research tools: Please explain: i. how you satisfy such criteria; ii. how you will obtain permissions/licenses when required.
- 21e. Collaboration/data/material collection in low/lower-middle income country: Please elaborate on: i. the countries (of the researcher/s and the institution/s involved) and partners involved; ii. the resources, participants and materials involved; iii. whether and how you plan to implement capacity building measures, and if not, why not; iv. whether and how you plan to implement benefit sharing measures, and if not, why not.
- 21f. Import/export of records/data/materials/specimens: Please provide details on: i. the nature of the records, data and/or materials involved; ii. the countries involved; iii. legal and regulatory considerations; iv. licenses, permissions and/or safeguards necessary.
- 21g. Harvest of data from social media: Please provide details.
- 21e. Other considerations: Please provide details.

Part 4: Submission

You are now ready to submit your form to FREC.

- *1. Which FREC are you submitting to?



Faculty of Education

University of Malta
Msida MSD 2080, Malta

Tel: +356 2340 3058/2932
educ@um.edu.mt

www.um.edu.mt/educ

15th June 2023

RE: Application for Research Ethics Clearance 9164_03092021_Denise Gatt

Dear Denise Gatt,

With reference to your application 9164_03092021_Denise Gatt for Research Ethics clearance, I am pleased to inform you that **FREC finds no ethical or data protection issues in terms of content and procedure.**

You may therefore proceed to approach potential informants to collect data using the tools/documents outlined in this application.

You are reminded that it is your responsibility - under the guidance of your supervisor - to distribute Information Letters and Consent/Assent Forms that are written in appropriate and correct English and Maltese.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J Gravina".

Dr Joseph Gravina
Chairperson Faculty Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Education

