

## Original Paper

# Experiencing Transformation of Professional Identity: From Teaching to Leadership in a Small Rural Primary School in Cyprus

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### Abstract

*The study used the Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) model on teacher professional growth to investigate the changes and the transition of professional identity when a deputy head teacher was appointed as an acting head teacher in a small rural primary school in Cyprus. The head teacher had no previous experience in headship, and did not receive any training or followed an induction course to the job. The goal of the study was to identify ways to support novice acting head teachers for effective leadership in the complexities of small primary schools.*

*Data was collected through diary notes and semi-structured interviews using thematic analysis of qualitative data.*

*The analysis revealed the importance of the interaction between the external stimuli and information through informal professional learning in the role set and the personal knowledge and previous experience. Feelings of isolation as the main outcome of this experience enabled changes in leadership practice through enactment and reflection. The teacher's suggestions for a professional learning program could be the contribution of her personal experience on the educational context.*

### Keywords

*leadership, small rural school, professional identity, school effectiveness*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Teacher Learning and Teacher Identity

Learning is a process of social participation referring to action and belonging, to being active in the

practices of social communities and to constructing identities in relation to these communities (Wenger, 1998). Research focusing on learning (rather than on development) emphasizes teachers themselves as agents of their learning (Stevenson et al., 2015). Teachers have an active role in developing their own professional learning as their knowledge is a result of active and meaningful change. Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) suggest that there are different pathways of change through four different domains, which encompass the teachers' world and play an important role in teacher learning: the Personal Domain, which refers to teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes; the External Domain, which refers to external sources of information or stimuli; the Domain of Practice which involves professional experimentation; and the Domain of Consequences which contains salient outcomes related to practice. Change in one of the domains is interpreted into a change in another domain through the mediating process of enactment, referring to what the teacher does as a result of knowledge, beliefs and experiences, and the mediating process of reflection, which refers to constructing and reconstructing experiences, actions, insights, problems and knowledge. Reflection refers to deliberate consideration of something previously encountered, while enactment is distinguished from mere "acting" in that it includes "the putting into action of a new idea or a new belief or a newly encountered practice" (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002, p. 953).

The interconnected, non-linear structure of the model enables the identification of change sequences and networks, giving recognition to the idiosyncratic and individual nature of teacher professional growth. A change in one domain leads to a change in another or to ongoing change in more than one domain, supported by enactive or reflective links. Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) admit that some pathways may be more prevalent than others but what is important is the dynamic character of the model: different types of teacher change take a cyclical path of consideration and refinement through formal and informal interactions. Teacher learning adapts with the setting, considering external influences to integrate them and facilitate a responsive approach to individual needs. Teachers value and consequently attend to different things within a professional learning experience and inferences depend upon the value and belief system of the teacher.

Opfer and Pedder (2011) emphasize the dynamic character of the model by pointing out that simple cause and effect relationships are inadequate to model the complex process of teacher professional growth and learning. More sophisticated conceptualisations are required in order to take into account the various dynamics and how they interact and combine in different ways, forming thus teachers' professional identity and growth. The social environment is a living entity and the teacher feels the need to act differently in changing situations in it. During the interaction with the environment the teacher as an individual seeks the definition of each situation with the aim of achieving control over it and to handle the impressions that others form. The social roles are interpreted through interaction and individual behaviour is approached as the performance of the role in relation to the rules that frame interaction and interpretation (Goffman, 1963/2001, 1961/1996).

In this study the teacher in focus was a deputy head teacher who adopted a new role as she was

appointed as acting head teacher in a small rural school. As a school leader she was both an agent of learning and an agent of leadership, who learned while leading (Swaffield & Macbeath, 2013). Professional learning, the sense of identity, participation and negotiations of meanings were inseparable, and investigating the way these different aspects of the professional life of the teacher interacted and formulated her professional identity and performance to the new role were the main challenges of the study.

### *1.2 Leadership in Small Rural Schools*

The main pillar related to the new role and the new identity was leadership in small rural schools. Every head teacher profile is extremely contextualized (Latham et al., 2014; OECD, 2008; Preston & Barnes, 2017) and leadership style consists of specific behaviours or practices (Pashiardis & Brauckmann, 2009). Through different leadership styles school leaders develop their palette of educational leadership from which they can choose in enacting leadership (Hardwick-Franco, 2018). They use their own expertise and influence the motivations, capacities and working conditions of teachers who in turn shape classroom practice and student learning (Deligiannidou et al., 2019; Newton & Wallin, 2013; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Stewart & Matthews, 2015). Bush and Glover (2013, 2014) define leadership through a range of leadership styles or models as a way of understanding and interpreting the actions of leaders and to guide leadership practice: The instructional style, focusing on teaching in order to enhance effectiveness, the managerial style, focusing on functions, tasks and behaviors which ensure completion of tasks, the transformational style, focusing on building commitment and capacity, raising members' values and beliefs. Besides, moral and authentic style focuses on integrity, values beliefs and ethics, and distributed style focuses on the way decisions are made, promoting a shared approach to leadership. Distributed leadership referring to forming alliances among different sub-groups within the school and creating a school community of shared responsibility is related to school as a learning organization and to the impact of school leaders on student learning, as it is generally mediated by other people, events and organisational factors (Hallinger & Heck, 1998).

Research in Cyprus (Pashiardis et al., 2011a, 2011b) has shown that developing relationships, being committed, being visionary and promoting a collaborative learning environment with passion lead to successful leadership in Cyprus. The two leadership styles that are related to successful Cypriot school leaders are the instructional and the entrepreneurial style (Pashiardis, 2009). The instructional style, represents leadership practices that enable achievement of instructional objectives (i.e. providing instructional resources, encouraging higher-order forms of teaching and learning, monitoring standards of teaching and learning, providing concrete feedback to staff, utilizing evaluation data) in order to improve personnel (Southworth, 2002). The entrepreneurial style, represents leadership practices that promote the involvement of external actors (i.e., encouraging relations between the school and the community and parents, promoting cooperation with other organisations).

Three leadership dimensions are the main pillars on which dealing with the leaders' decisions and actions should be based and leadership style is "interpreted": *Influence – power – authority, Values,*

*Vision* (Bush, 2012). Focusing on building vision and setting directions, understanding and developing people, redesigning the organisation, and managing learning for both teachers and students through the day-to-day working out of power relations, enables negotiation of worlds and identities, collaborative, trustful and supportive relations and consequently success (Bennett, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2006).

While aiming at successful and effective leadership (Steward, 2013), head teachers are hardly concerned with their own needs. However, it is important to remember that they do not exist in isolation, but they affect and are affected by the system in which they work. The ability to make choices and stay true to one's self, being emotional resilience and sustain activity involving emotional connection without being overwhelmed (Clarke & Stevens, 2009), depend also upon interrelated experience, reflection and learning.

### *1.3 Novice Head teachers in Rural Schools*

Beginning a school headship for the first time can indeed be overwhelming as it can both be an exciting and difficult experience. Research has shown (Weindling & Dimmock, 2006) that teachers' concerns about the various issues in the school can be sources of stress and challenge their resilience. As a result, they may feel increasingly isolated and ineffective and this can lead to loss of resilience with negative consequences for the working and learning environment. In the same context, head teachers can be also vulnerable, because of their very complex role in their working environment. The main problems experienced by new head teachers as the feelings of professional isolation and loneliness, dealing with the legacy, practice and style of the previous head teacher, dealing with multiple tasks, managing time and priorities, managing the school budget, dealing with ineffective staff, implementing new government initiatives, problems with school buildings and site management (Hobson, 2003). At the same time, research shows that collaboration with the community, people-focused relationships and instructional leadership are characteristics of successful rural head teachers (Preston & Barnes, 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

In rural schools, in particular, the chances novice head teachers have to initiate, implement and sustain school improvement, are strongly influenced by the distinctive circumstances applying to the small rural schools and the limited opportunities to exchange views and practices (Clarke & Steven, 2009; Klocko & Justin, 2019; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Stewart & Matthews, 2017). The challenges and opportunities are different than those of urban school head teachers (Hill, 2014; Johnson et al., 2014). The fact that there is not much staff within the school restricts collegial ways of operating and the community's particular understandings of behavioral appropriateness and cultural expectations can debilitate sustainable leadership (Smit, 2017), while at the same time common issues can also be identified between urban and rural head teachers. For instance, in PISA 2015 results only in very few countries were head teachers in rural areas more concerned about quality and quantity of staff (OECD, 2019) New head teachers often encounter existing ways of doing things in the school shaped by tacit rules, expectations and activities, which evolve into a culture of solidarity and comfortable co-existence (Clarke & Steven, 2009; Parson & Hunter, 2019). Research on rural school head teachers (Klocko &

Justin, 2019; Steward, 2013) showed that their work influenced their quality of life which reflected a level of anxiety, detracted work satisfaction, and created chronic fatigue and feelings of guilt when not attending to school matters. Holding dual roles, divergent responsibilities, pressures of work and expectations were perceived as a source of professional strain and personal dissatisfaction with professional self, having a negative impact on personal life emphasizing the difficulty of realizing a suitable work life balance (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Parson & Hunter, 2019).

Working in small schools in Cyprus was found to have both benefits and difficulties for teachers as smallness created opportunities as well as problems and thus, management needed improvement (Tsiakkios & Pashiardis, 2002). Successful leaders combined instructional and entrepreneurial aspects of leadership in their effort to build capacity for student learning in rural primary schools in Cyprus (Pashiardis & Savvides, 2011). They were found to act in a systemic manner, take into account all the forces that impact student learning both within the school itself as well as through the utilization of its wider environment. Successful leadership was characterised by people-centred leadership, clearly communicated values and visions, a strong emphasis on the promotion of learning, the use of networked leadership as well as the creative management of competing values are all vital constituents of a successful leadership (Pashiardis et al., 2011b).

Rural communities are influenced by particular societal and cultural values, some of which may appear unusual from the urban perspective that many principals will have acquired before (Clarke & Stevens, 2009). School leaders, as an integral part of the rural communities which often work as “fish bowls” (Hardwick-Franco, 2018), need to be able to read the complexities of the contexts of small rural communities (Parson & Hunter, 2019). The power framework in a school setting is not necessarily tied to the formal leadership structure (Morag Catterson, 2017) but to the people a head teacher engages with. Successful rural head teachers promote people-centered leadership and use *power with* rather than *power over* (Preston & Barnes, 2017) by creating high levels of participation and trust in a school where people are empowered, motivated and engaged in a shared vision.

#### 1.4 Professional Learning

Since school leaders are both agents of learning and agents of leadership (Swaffield & Macbeath, 2013) the second pillar related to the new role and the new identity of headship in a small rural school, is professional learning both at an individual as well as at a collaborative level. Teachers need time to develop, discuss and practice through learning activities that are systematic, sustained and intensive (Garet et al., 2001) and which empowers them to enact their best work (Harwick-Franco, 2018). Teachers’ professional learning is related to teacher’s professional autonomy and is both an individual endeavour, related to teachers’ active role, and a collaborative endeavour, that supports transformative practice and relates to teachers as a professional group (Αυγητίδου, 2014, 2015; Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Kennedy, 2014; Sachs, 2001).

The new policy on teacher professional learning in Cyprus follows this paradigm (ΥΠΠΙ, 2015). There has been a shift from *teacher training* and *professional development*, which are usually designed and

implemented hierarchically, to *professional learning*, which focuses on active learning and transformative practice (Easton, 2008). As a matter of fact, in a reform phase of Cyprus educational system, a new framework (YIIMI, 2015) for teachers' continuous professional learning was introduced in September 2015, providing opportunities for teachers' professional learning in a systematic way and on a needs assessment basis, while addressing the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute as the institution officially responsible for the implementation of this policy. Every year a limited number of schools can have a close cooperation and collaboration with a critical friend from the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute in implementing their teacher professional learning action plan.

Teachers are acknowledged as reflective practitioners who are active in the learning process rather than being passive recipients of the theories and the policies that they should implement. They learn effectively when learning activities are school-based are integrated into daily work, promoted through collective participation, take place within a positive school culture with a good atmosphere and understanding of teachers' learning, and co-operation with external resource persons (Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Postholm, 2012).

In the case of newly appointed school head teachers in Cyprus an annual program is organised every year by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute according to legislation (MOEC, 2018). The Program covers through a series of weekly seminar current trends and policies on thematic units such as Legislation and Policy, School Development, Planning and Organizational Management of the School Unit, School Culture and Climate, Human Resource Management, Promoting Teaching and Learning. Priority is given to combine theory and practice and, thus, expert practitioners are invited to present examples of practice and discuss them with novice head teachers. In addition, mentor head teachers provide the novices with guidance and support. However, research has shown that programs for newly promoted head teachers do not satisfy participants. They do not succeed in developing specific competences and skills although there has been an effort to overcome paradoxes (programs offered after appointment, no assessment or continuity after induction, etc.) through mentoring, examples of good practice and an effort to combine theory and practice. Participants state that the programs do not follow a holistic approach which takes advantage of both informal and formal learning and community of practice elements (Nicolaidou & Petridou, 2011a, 2011b, Sophocleous, 2015). There is no in-service training program for acting head teachers or deputy head teachers for primary schools. A program similar to the one developed for newly promoted head teacher is also available for deputy head teacher in secondary schools (MOEC, 2018).

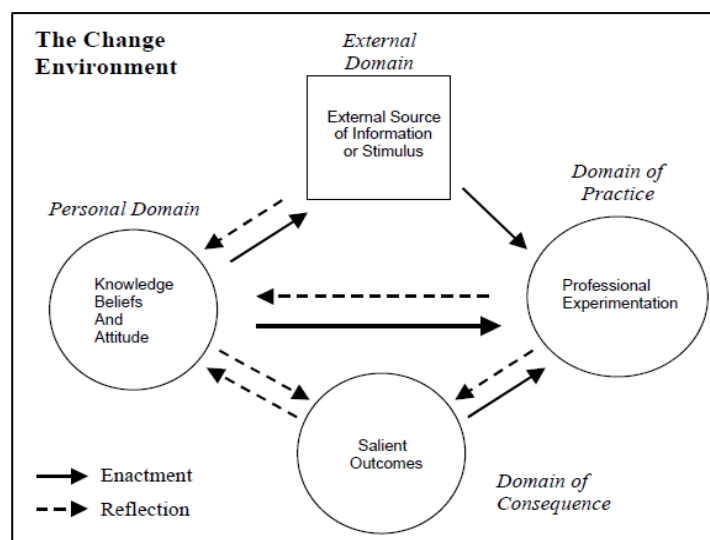
## 2. Method

The case study presented in this article had as subject of analysis the newly appointed acting head teacher's journey in professional learning for school leadership. It explored the challenges she faced in a small rural primary school throughout the transition of her professional identity from teacher/deputy head to a head teacher during the first year of her service as acting head teacher.

The research questions around which the study evolved are:

1. How did the acting head teacher deal with the different domains of her professional life during the first year of her service as acting head teacher, in order to promote her vision for the school?
2. How could a professional learning setting be implemented to empower the acting head teacher in her first year?

The teacher change model suggested by Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) (Figure 1) was used as the frame of reference to capture different aspects of the experience at the small rural school and explain the route followed and the change achieved and to analyse teachers' professional life. This professional experience of the acting head teacher offered the field for a descriptive qualitative single case study research, providing an opportunity to advance new understanding. The head teacher participated in a semi-structured interview reflecting on her biography and her leadership experience on the first year of work in this type of school following a list developed by the external co-researcher and framed around the two aforementioned research questions (Genor & Goodwin, 2005; Τσιώλης, 2006).



**Figure 1. The Interconnected Model of Teacher Professional Growth by Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) used as the Frame of Reference in the Study**

The interview was transcribed, and the transcription was sorted into different aspects and themes related to different issues of leadership. The study aimed to be descriptive and interpretive. The interview was analyzed by coding, initial themes were identified and connected to the research questions, using memos between the researchers (Kvale, 2007, Kuckartz, 2014). In particular, open coding using a constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was used to analyse the data. The interview was read through carefully and analysed in relation to the interconnected model, deciding whether a certain instance qualified as change or not and which domain the change concerned. Codes were grouped to form categories that were aligned to the domains in the model. Relevant codes were categorised as being

aligned to beliefs about different issues related to leadership, to form the basis for conclusions about the teachers' Personal Domain (PD). Some categories derived from the analysis of the interview were used to identify teachers' reflections on the External Domain (ED) and interactions with all significant Others in the school role-set. Analysis, involving memoing and coding of events identified in the interview and the co-researchers' notes, were used to map teachers' Domain of Practice (DP) as well as to identify reflection on actions and salient outcomes observed related to actions or practices, to form the basis for the Domain of Consequence (DC). Analysis enabled limited identification of causal connections between domains where change in one domain led to change in another domain. These "change sequences" are illustrated by the arrows in Figure 1 through the mediating processes of reflection (dotted lines) and enactment (solid lines) between the four different domains. The setting representing the change environment, is the context in which the novice acting head teacher came to work and influenced her professional growth through different aspects, i.e., level of access to professional learning, restricting or supporting different types of participation, encouragement or discouragement of experimentation, and provision or otherwise of administrative support to enable application of new ideas because it supports the anticipation and the encouragement of multiple avenues for change which seem to mirror realistically the possible mechanisms by which professional learning and change might occur. To sum up, the use of the model allowed the analysis to focus on the teachers' individual development of knowledge, interactions with others for learning, and perceived changes in practice.

### **3. Data Analysis and Findings**

#### *3.1 The Setting*

At the macro-level of the system, Cyprus education is centralized. All policies derive from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth (e.g., allocation of the school budget, curriculum design and books, implementation of educational programs) (MOEC, 2018). In each level of education there is a body of Inspectorate who supervise the function of the schools, the curriculum implementation, and evaluate the teaching personnel. At the same time, they act as counselors and give guidance to teachers in improving their performance and to head teachers in implementing educational policies. An independent body, the Education Service Committee, is responsible for appointments and placements of the teaching staff. At the meso-level of the school, the head teacher has limited autonomy as regards evaluation of the teaching staff, use the school budget etc. The community and the parents' associations support financially the schools by organizing various events.

The primary school in the study was situated in a small village not far from the city. The school was defined as small because of the number of students forming three different mixed levels. It was a school with a population ranging between 20 and 29 pupils every year. The student population was regarded as homogeneous in terms of socioeconomic status, coming mainly from low and average backgrounds.

In the case of small primary schools with less than thirty students, a deputy head teacher is appointed as acting head teacher. He or she has the same responsibilities as a head teacher and at the same time is



responsible for a class with only two periods free for the head teacher's duties. Apart from the deputy head teacher, the staff consisted of two permanent teachers, who had already been working in the school for some years, and three visiting teachers who came twice a week. A secretary and a care keeper had also a permanent job in the school.

The president of the local community in rural areas in Cyprus becomes automatically the president of the school board. The school budget is allocated to the community by the Ministry of Education. The school head teacher can use a particular amount of the budget to cover different needs at school, mainly in terms of educational material, but without having direct access to the budget.

Due to the composition of the school population in small schools, co-teaching of different classes is a necessity. In that case, the timetable is adapted accordingly with the approval of the Inspectorate. The timetable of each school type and the teaching approaches adopted (individualised work, silent work, group work, etc.) offer pupils equal opportunities in acquiring new knowledge, forming attitudes and skills and achieving the Curriculum indicators.

### 3.2 Findings

As regards the first research question on how the acting head teacher dealt with different aspects of the new experience and her professional life, in order to promote her vision for the school, findings on the four domains of her professional life and role are presented.

### 3.3 The Personal Domain: Knowledge, Beliefs, Attitudes

The newly appointed acting head teacher was a high-qualified, Ph.D. holder female in her forties. Ann (pseudonym), had for many years worked as a primary school teacher and as a researcher in the field of education during and after her postgraduate studies. She had also worked as a teacher trainer in the in-service teacher training department at the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute. When Ann was promoted to a deputy head teacher, she worked for three years in urban schools. At the beginning of the fourth year of service as deputy head, she was appointed in a small rural primary school in Nicosia district.

This transfer to the rural school seemed to be traumatic from the very beginning, as Ann had no other leadership duties but organizing professional learning activities in the urban schools she had previously worked. Ann came to the school with no experience on the whole spectrum of school management issues, or on the peculiarities of a small rural school. Her theoretical background and experience worked up to a point as a back-up for confronting new issues.

*I was given the duties and responsibilities of a head teacher. In addition, I was responsible for the sixth grade. The other schools I worked consisted of a hundred students and more than ten teachers. There, I was responsible for the training of the teaching staff, different projects in the school, I participated in weekly meetings with the head teacher. I was in charge of educational activities and I never had to engage in the financial domain or in the official correspondence. I was never formally or directly engaged in the assessment of teachers, in issues related to the secretary, the care keeper, the community, the parents or other stakeholders.*

This previous experience, although obviously different, seemed to give a basis for a positive stance

against the new job and the framework. It enabled identifying the orientation of her vision focusing on the students' success and the adoption of an instructional leadership style.

*I was enthusiastic and very positive at the beginning. I also felt overwhelmed with all the responsibilities. The various training programs are not designed for head teachers in this kind of school. I always had self-confidence and felt competent. I was considered a professional and everyone seemed to admit that I was a talented teacher. I had a positive self-image about my professional profile. Every time I had to change post, I felt sad because I had made new friends.*

Studying the duties and the regulations before the promotion to a deputy head teacher were found to be useful but not adequate. Neither were the experiences she had as deputy head in the urban schools with a staff of more than ten teachers. She suddenly faced the burden of leadership duties together with teaching duties. The different aspects of school management and everyday life schedule of a small rural school came up.

*As a head teacher, I had to deal with all the management and administration and meet all engaged stakeholders. My teaching schedule was almost the same as in the big urban schools. While teaching in the classroom, I had to take the right decision about hundreds of things happening in the school.*

### 3.4 The External Domain

The main sources of stimuli and information were informal and, at least, at the beginning of the first year closely connected to the previous head teacher and the school teaching staff. Provision of information, stimulus, and support as seminars, advocated practices, suggested professional reading, mentoring and discussion of the relevant content and context to reflect and collaborate as part of a professional development program were absent. Ann admitted that the former head teacher was supportive but only in an informative way. She was willing to explain how things work in order to become an integral part of the established situation.

*She said that she had an excellent cooperation with everyone, the school ran very effectively, they would all help me, and, in a few words, I was very lucky to 'inherit' the school. She was honest and passionate. She had worked hard to improve the school and she was sad to leave. I watched the graduation ceremony of that year. During her speech she hoped that the new head would continue the good work.*

Reflecting on that, Ann realized that the previous head teacher was still present at the school, always around.

*Whenever I asked who was responsible for this, who prepared that, the answer was always her name. The very first day I found difficulties with the planning of the schedule because we decided to make new classroom combinations. One colleague was repeatedly saying: where are you X? If you were just here X..., meaning the previous head teacher.*

The teaching staff were a crucial part of her role-set at school too, but in conflict with her personal expectations and school vision: established relations, created feelings of isolation and frustration as if

Ann, having a different perception of duties, responsibilities and boundaries of roles, could not be an integral part of the school role-set. Everybody was interpreting the work according to their own view and interest in contrast to her own vision. Her instructional style for leadership that focused on students' achievement in learning and behavior was regarded as a disadvantage or even as an inadequacy.

*I asked for the inspection schedule during breaks. They told me that they had always been altogether responsible. I had never seen a schedule like that at any other school. The safety of the children had always been the most important issue in our work. I agreed to implement their model just to realise that no one was really responsible. One was in the toilet or in the kitchen, the other was still in the classroom and the school yard was uninspected...*

Furthermore, issues of imbalanced power, awkward relations, diverse perceptions and definitions came up regarding other roles and areas of concern and responsibility. The secretary, the parents, the parents' association, the president of the community created a negative source of stimuli in conflict with her personal domain. Ann tried unsuccessfully to change commitment and participation in forming the school climate which seemed to be warm and friendly for all the others but her.

*While I was teaching, colleagues sat at my desk in the office, drinking coffee, cutting sheets over official folders and chatting with the secretary. When I made it nicely cleared, that this was the head teacher's desk, she was insulted. Soon everyone said around that I wanted to be the chief. When I did not allow pupils to stay in the classroom watching short films during breaks, the colleague claimed that she observed them through the window. They made me feel that I was the odd one. When I warned them about safety issues, they commented that I always thought of bad things that could happen, and they would, because I thought of them. So, prevention meant that I spread negative energy in the school.*

In trying to define the situation Ann reflected and admitted that the previous head teacher managed a lot with the help of the secretary, as they used to share the same office, working desk and even computer. The secretary took a lot of responsibilities of the school staff and participated in the discussions of the teachers. However, Ann wanted to shift away from that model.

*Every morning she came ten minutes late although she lived next door. After passing the school gate, she dialed her husband and talked while walking and entering the office. She said 'good morning' without interrupting her phone talk. She was the established one, I was the newcomer. She was closer to the teachers than I was. According to the previous culture she used to go around the classes to deliver announcements or information.*

Issues of power and authority were stressful regarding the secretary and, although Ann appreciated that she cared, she was frustrated by the fact that the boundaries and limits of her duties and responsibilities went beyond secretarial issues. Ann felt invisible in school with her responsibilities being taken over.

*Parents used to call the secretary or the teachers on their mobile when they wanted to report an issue. This information was never shared with me. The breaks were often extended, and parents brought birthday cakes. When I refused, I was the bad one. I had new experiences but no right to*

*react I had to accept. And when something went wrong, I was responsible.*

The school role-set also included the president of the community, who was characterised by Ann as ‘a very experienced social and clever man’. He dealt with business and worked a lot for the growth and welfare of his community. He supported Ann and tried to create a climate of trust and collaboration. He had power in the community, and everybody seemed to respect him.

On the contrary the field of relations with parents was assessed by Ann as the greatest failure, from the very beginning of her presence in the school. At the same time, she connected that to her relations with the secretary.

*I felt a suspicious climate, a lack of communication. No one wanted to be a member of the parents’ association board and even the previous members did not do anything in terms of welcoming or informing the new head teacher.*

Frustration and feelings of isolation were quickly intensified. Ann soon found out that parents received a lot of “inner” information about the school. What she mentioned as even more frustrating was that everyone was eager to express feelings, personal views, or complains. One month after she had come to school, she found out that the members of the former parents’ association board had decided to ask for her replacement.

The school inspector, as the representative of the Ministry and part of Ann’s role-set and her external domain of influence gave information on new duties and sources of information. Nevertheless, she did not refer to the sociological or emotional issues that were related to decisions of the school leader. She supported, but through comparisons to previous years.

*She was always by my side in an active way. Whenever I turned for help, the inspector was warm and encouraging. She made it clear that she was there to support me. But on the critical moments of feeling isolated, her suggestion was that I should ask for a replacement. “Can you stand this fight?”, she asked.*

The information and stimuli coming from the external domain created a nest of negative experience and information and anti-stimuli to work as leader in the school. Ann felt that instead of being at the top of the organisation she “was sent to the bottom”. However, two other sources of information and stimuli seemed to reframe the external domain. An appointment at the Educational Service Committee to discuss her possible transfer created doubts on thoughts of leaving the school. The officer did not accept as a reason for change of post the parents’ opinion about the head teacher.

*“If I were you I should stay and prove my work”, he argued. “They should be grateful. Otherwise they should enroll their children to another school”. After this meeting, I felt strong again. The system was protecting me. Regulations and procedures, social and professional codes created a secure frame again.*

At the same time a visiting teacher at her school enabled contact with the head teacher of another small rural school who was willing to help and support. She quickly became Ann’s informal mentor. They met and discussed on the (micro-)politics of small rural societies. She advised and even warned about various,

issues presenting personal experiences as case studies, discussing possible reactions and their consequences.

*She said “you represent the school, you are the mirror of everything that happens in the school, you must gain the respect”.*

### 3.5 Domain of Practice: Professional Experimentation

Although Ann started off with a very optimistic perspective on implementing an instructional style of leadership which would focus above all on the students’ achievement all the expected issues that concern a novice head teacher came up. However, enactment seemed to create professional experimentation that promoted instructional leadership, despite negative experiences.

As regards her *vision* she focused on instructional leadership. She gave priority in forming a school program that would offer the children the skills she considered crucial. Principles that functioned as a cornerstone in this route were active learning, respect, framing and specifying duties and roles. She focused on self-control for all staff members and students in the school.

*My goals were simple and clear. They derived from my reflection, trying to socially enhance children in order to change the existing climate and culture. I would be able to enact and put my knowledge, attitudes and beliefs into action so that the children can profit.*

Her first challenge in the new school was to understand how the curriculum was delivered in the complex classes. She had to deal with a new time schedule, which she was responsible to prepare and share with the other teachers. She studied the main guidelines and teaching hours on the webpage of the Ministry and dealt with multiple facets of leadership tasks as well as with teaching tasks, implementing an instructional style, with leadership practices that would enable achievement of instructional objectives in order to improve personnel.

*I set my personal learning tasks. I wanted to achieve balance between leadership and management. To create a positive climate among all members of the school, a dynamic team by enhancing the interests and talents of the teaching staff.*

As regards *power and authority* emphasis was given on time and priority management in the school in a combination with the influence on the culture and how the various roles interact. Through her own reflection she chose to create firm boundaries through an establishment of daily routines and life skills. At the same time these experimentations in the school seemed to gradually reinforce the building and sustaining of her emotional resilience.

### 3.6 Domain of Consequences

Feelings of professional isolation and loneliness were the main consequences of the interaction of the personal domain and the external stimuli:

*Although the other colleagues were familiar with the school environment, they did not offer helpful information. They used to call each other in the afternoon, or call parents and discuss about things that had happened at school.*

Changing established habits, routines and ritualities was challenging, especially, in combination with

the lack of trust and communication with the parents and their interference to school life.

*When children did not bring their equipment, they went directly to the secretary to supply them.*

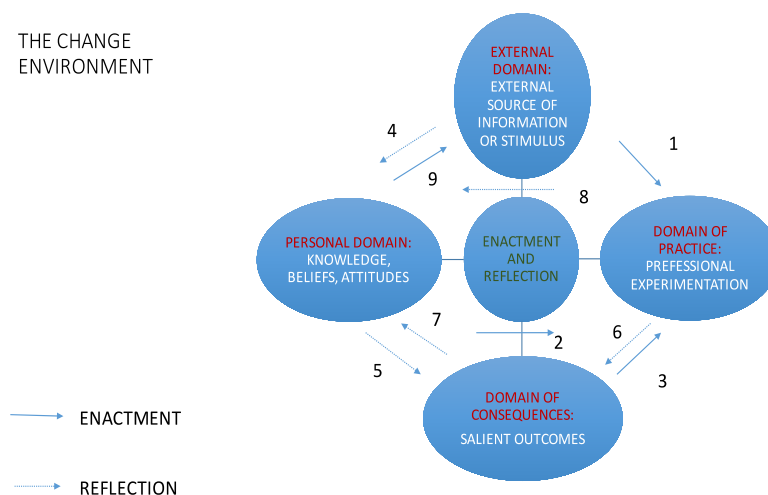
*When parents came to ask for their children's progress, I had to stand outside and talk to them in the corridor while the secretary was in my office.*

Disappointment, stress, tension and suspect led to a confusion in the definition of roles and responsibilities, complicated and secret relations and undefined tasks. Ann tried to reflect on the legacy practice and the style of the previous head teacher. Dealing with the school budget was also relevant to the existing situation and the power issues established in the school during the previous headship management of finances also seemed to be a source of anxiety and frustration. The lack of knowledge, difficulties and suspicion in contacts with the president of the community and the parents' association required the reorganization of the school in relation to the role of the secretariat and cooperation with the Ministry. This was initiated through her reflection on her role in the school.

*I was given the responsibility for the school. If anything went wrong, I would be the one who had to explain, testify, apologize or excuse. And all others went on doing whatever they thought, taking serious decisions and continually ignoring me...I had to negotiate about everything that was taken for granted in other schools. Even my office and parking place...*

### 3.7 Change, Reflection and Enactment

The External Domain provided the external source of information or stimulus for change from the significant others in Ann's role set; the Personal Domain provided teacher knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes she brought along from her studies and previous experience as deputy head teacher in big urban schools; the Domain of Practice is the professional experimentation that took place in shaping her leadership style and the Domain of Consequence covered what Ann recognised as salient outcomes inferred to be the result of her interaction and action in the school.



**Figure 2. Clarke and Hollingsworth's (2002) Model of Teacher Professional Growth in the Study**

The activation and interconnection of the Personal Domain was achieved through reflection in the process of exploratory examination of the choices and actions but also during the interaction with the co-researcher. More specifically, as shown in Figure 2, Ann's action and change in school was established through three different ways: direct application of what was learned through external interactions with other roles or professional learning activities, which mainly referred to what was in accordance with her beliefs. (1), planning and application in practice based on her knowledge and beliefs expressing her professional identity focusing on learning and thus on an instructional leadership style (2) or through outcomes which at the beginning were mainly feelings of frustration and loneliness (3). Reflection on the main outcome, these feelings of frustration and loneliness seemed to make her restructure her Practice domain and at the same time to reflect on her beliefs. Her professional identity was (trans-)formed through three ways of reflection: on the interaction of significant Others (4), on outcomes (7) and on practical experimentation in school leadership (8). Outcomes were influenced by Ann's professional identity and her resilience (5) and practical experimentation (6) which became her personal "cocktail-mix" of instructional, entrepreneurial and distributed leadership style. Lastly the established professional identity contributed to the formation of the external domain (9) by focusing on those significant Others that were positively "significant" and by suggesting a new approach to the headteacher role through suggestions for a professional learning program for acting head teachers in small rural schools. In dealing with leadership she focused on commitment and instructional issues and was annoyed by issues of power and authority.

In reflecting on loneliness and resilience and the way a head teacher can contextualize the school and apply the best combination of leadership practices certain reactions were important. She had realised that as a school leader she received no support through the external domain and that she should enrich her external domain. The first step was made by raising awareness of being different as regards the previous head teacher, but also by raising awareness of the absence, lack of external support, and the inadequacy of the external domain, in the provision of professional learning opportunities for the teacher in the new role of a leader. Ann started becoming stronger. She spent the Summer on reflecting and re-planning. In September changes in teacher personnel and students and consequently new parents' association reinforced a communicative and supporting role-set.

Reflection through discussion with the co-researcher on different perspectives strengthened Ann's professional identity and repositioned her within the school leadership role, leading to actions that were incorporated into the school context. The redefinition of social circumstance, the issues of the exercise of power and objectives at both individual and collective level, i.e. at school level, leads to joint action. The issue of integration in an existing definition of situation was not needed anymore. On the contrary shifting to a distributed leadership, focusing on the way decisions were made, promoted a shared approach to leadership.

*We decided to change the culture of the school and the pupils' attitudes. We showed to everyone at school and especially pupils that we are a strong 'sequent corpus'. We defined clearly the role of*

*the head teacher, the role of the class teacher and the role of the visiting teacher, the role of the secretary and of the care keeper. Every role was important for the school unit, and all roles were interacting with each other.*

This shift enabled other decisions too, which set a new balance of power and authority in school. At the same time changes in the way the social context, the role and the head teacher herself perceived self and the other enabled changes in the definition of the situation and actions:

*The president of the community contributed to the positive change. He had talked to all and made clear statements regarding behavior. Either they should be polite, collaborative, and flexible caring for the school welfare, or they should leave. He had also a meeting with the new parents' association asking all parents to take responsibility. If there was a problem this should be reported to the teacher and not to the community. The new parents' association supported us in all ways and organised many activities. In a few words, I had a good team, I had the autonomy I needed and at the same time all the support. The secretary was moved in another room.*

In the search for learning and practice networks the external domain through information and stimuli from the significant Others played an important role. A head teacher who worked in another small school, the communication with the inspector, the meeting with an officer of the Educational Service, and the co-researcher from the Pedagogical Institute led to the formation of Ann's personal leadership style, focusing on instruction, but also adopting elements of distributed leadership. The new framework of communication and action was reinforced by new events that change "internally" the external domain stimuli and interactions:

*A colleague informed me about various 'internal' issues of the community in order to interpret various behaviors. Many people started confessing events and regretting for old behaviors. I felt that time would reveal more answers.*

As regards the second research question and the search for a specific action in the educational policy in Cyprus that could strengthen the teacher when joining the role of (acting) head teacher, Ann's case highlighted the absence of an official training that could support her by building on existing formal learning structures, such as the series of training seminars. Above all it created the rationale for taking advantage of the new policy where teacher learning takes place within a professional community.

It emerged that Ann needed that professional community. She looked for it in the school, in the school role-set, in the network of headteachers organized by the inspector, in her predecessor in the role, in another head teacher. But these movements were informal, fragmentary and individual without forming a broader solid background. Ann learned that the implementation of a dynamic approach that encompassed external and internal factors helped her manage culture, relationships and cooperation. This contributed to the implementation of specific structures, knowledge, attitudes and to the establishment of actions that would reshape her own professional identity as well as that of her partners.

She realized that seminars may not give answers to all the issues, and that the daily routine of working



helped learning by doing and formulate mechanisms for improvement. She expected support that would combine information in specific themes and interaction in the working environment. The external environment could create motivation and structures to operate in a new framework that would activate and create learning and reflection opportunities.

The crucial question was whether that support, autonomy and teamwork could exist from the very first moment Ann had found herself in the new school. In reflecting on the first years' experience at the school, the significant Others and the critical incidents could be identified. The idea of building up a professional learning model for the newly appointed acting headteachers could aim at networking between small rural schools which would have a common goal and design similar practices and activities to work out issues that come up in everyday life. This could be Ann's impact on change in the educational context.

#### 4. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to provide an understanding of the leadership experience of a novice acting head teacher during her first year of headship in a small rural school. The study aimed to describe the complexity of the leadership experience in a small rural school and make connections between different aspects that influenced the novice head teacher's professional learning. This was based on Clarke and Hollingsworth's (2002) framework suggesting that different teachers may interpret an experience in different ways but it is an individual teacher's *interpreted* change, rather than only observable change, that is crucial to subsequent change in knowledge, beliefs and practice.

Findings from the study revealed the importance of the interaction between the external stimuli and information through informal professional learning experiences in the head teacher's role-set and her knowledge and previous experience in the profession. Enactment and reflection on these aspects as well as on consequences and practices through interaction with members of the role-set and the co-researcher enabled change and professional growth. The study revealed the importance of the external domain for the novice head teacher as regards establishing conditions for positive relationships and teamwork in this type of schools and as regards supporting the implementation of certain structures and behaviors to improve organizational goals and school effectiveness within small schools in rural communities.

The main outcome of the head teacher's new experience was the feeling of isolation which enabled changes in leadership practice through enactment and reflection. When the stress and the unknown of being a new leader met the realities of rural schools, the consequences can be thorny (Ashton & Duncan, 2012) since divergent responsibilities and the dual role of teacher and leader were obstacles of instructional leadership (Parson & Hunter, 2019). These elements initially created hopelessness and thoughts of resignation/transfer to another school (Smit, 2017), but commitment and care in interaction overcame challenges through reflection on definitions of situation. The head teacher had never worked before neither as a head teacher nor in a rural area or in a small school and being an excellent teacher did not ensure effective leadership at the beginning (Hardwick-Franco, 2018; Parson & Hunter, 2019).

The school context was unique, or even peculiar, and she was not prepared to face or deal with established “ritualities”. Although she had studied about her new duties on her own, this was not adequate for surviving, managing impressions (Goffman, 1963/2001) and enhance her working environment. While defining the new situation to take control over it, she failed, at the beginning, to handle the impressions others formed (Goffman, 1963/2001). Her role vision as an instructional leader was, at the beginning, obstructed as it did not seem to align with the new reality (Parson & Hunter, 2019; Newton & Wallin, 2013). The difficulties she faced and her experience, feelings and worries were in accordance with previous studies on novice head teachers and headship in small rural schools both in Cyprus and in other contexts (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Clarke & Stevens 2009; Klocko & Justin, 2015; Morag Catterson, 2017; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Pashiardis et al., 2011b; Pashiardis & Savvides 2011; Preston & Barnes 2017; Robinson 2011; Tsiakkiros & Pashiardis, 2002; Wiczorek & Manard, 2018). These referred to issues of professional identity and resilience, school culture, dealing with formal and informal organizational structure, emphases on instructional leadership, breaking the routines and previously formed habits of the staff.

The “special culture” of the school makes new head teachers believe that isolation is associated with headship and they contextualise school leadership policies (Hardwick-Franco, 2018; Pashiardis & Brauckman, 2009; Pashiardis & Savvides, 2011; Tsiakkiros & Pashiardis, 2002). Contextual factors are located at the system level (e.g., regulations of the rural school timetable that the headteacher in the study faced), or at the school level (e.g., interaction with the parents and the secretarial staff). These factors influence, as it was shown in the study, the action “radius”, the prioritising of tasks, their weight, pace and criticalness depending on how the head teacher deals with her role in the school organization and role-set (Smit, 2017). The head teacher in the study showed once again (Pashiardis & Brauckman, 2009; LISA, 2009) that there is no single model of leadership that could be easily transferred across different schools –but that specific contexts in which schools operate may limit the head teacher’s room for maneuvering or provide opportunities for a palette of leadership (Hardwick-Franco, 2018). Depending on the school contexts in which they work, school leaders face very different sets of challenges and thus, approaches to school leadership policy need to be based on careful considerations of the context in which schools operate (OECD, 2008). However, insisting on instructional leadership and mutualistic relationships through distributed leadership confirmed previous findings on being characteristics of an effective leader (Conway & Andrews, 2016; Newton & Wallin, 2013).

The school head teacher was finally responsive to the context in which she operated but she did not depend on it; She adapted to the context of her school, sometimes irrespective of the system, confirming that success in her role were not diminished by rurality (Parson & Hunter, 2019). This leads to the conclusion that strong instructional leadership (for which she aimed from the beginning of her new placement) and forms of distributed leadership can help to establish conditions for collaboration (Newton & Wallin, 2013; Preston & Barnes, 2017). The interaction of shared vision, organizational structures, and social networking in the development of collaborative environment is essential and

could only become reality through professional development structures (Duncan, 2013; Stewart & Matthews, 2019) which enable the novice head teacher reflect, enact and become an agent of her professional learning (Stevenson et al., 2015). The suggestions of the teacher in the development of a professional learning program could be the contribution of her personal experience on the educational context and could offer the head teacher multiple pathways for professional growth. The case study presented here enhances suggestions from previous research (Parson & Hunter, 2019) for working on identifying specific differences and challenges for rural head teachers and develop professional learning settings accordingly. The novice head teacher experience supports the notion that effective collaboration based on the tenets of a professional learning community can contribute to improving the head teacher and her school. There is indeed a need to form a community of practice that focuses on interaction relationships with the aim of improving every member of the school unit rather than functioning on power relationships (Bennett, 2003) which will compensate limited time or lack of proximity to other schools and head teachers (Stewart & Matthews, 2019). A new view of school networks with common issues and interaction between experienced and new leaders could create the basis for interconnections of knowledge (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2011) through which novice head teachers will work best, enhance instructional leadership and inform content and procedures through peer-reviewed and evidence-based interaction (Hardwick-Franco, 2018). The policy on teacher professional learning in the Cypriot education system (Αυγητίδου, 2015; ΥΠΠΠ, 2015) built on the rationale of research-action can be used as the framework. It could include a process of exploring the perspectives of teacher professionals and those of the significant Others in their role-set, learning, training, analyzing data, consciously activating the other areas (personal, practical, results). Learning communities can be structured between the new leaders and the teachers of their school, and can work through planning, implementation and reflection, so that collaborative learning experiences can facilitate and scaffold resilience and effective leadership (Rorrer et al., 2019). They can process new information, remaining focused on the common goal, and communicate regularly in order to increase their own learning and have an extension to the students' learning (Lieberman & Miller, 2008, 2011). They can share common values and beliefs and learn from each other both individually and as a group. This could also include a formal "handover" period or the appointment of an experienced head teacher or the school inspector as a "regional principal consultant" (Lock et al., 2012). Since novice rural head teachers arrive from diverse contexts, it is crucial to create opportunities for extended field experience covering aspects of successful leadership through enactment and reflection and are based on mutual relationships (Conway & Andrews, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2008; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Thus, school leaders will be able to engage in information exchange, share problems, solutions and learning events that gradually become experiences of collective learning and shared interpretation of specific knowledge with a view to strategic decision-making for their small schools (Crawford & Cowie, 2011). The frustration and the disappointment of the head teacher could be confronted or even avoided or eliminated in building

professional learning activities which would be school- and inquiry-based. Training that supports and enhances resilience competence of head teacher is important, too. There is a need for a change towards a more dynamic approach towards internal and external factors of school function with leaders of change at all levels of the educational system, since only when head teachers are supported can they “get the 3Rs right: Relationships, Responsibilities and resourcing” (Hardwick-Franco, 2018, p. 27).

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