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## THE CAREER PATHS OF PRIMARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN CYPRUS AND MALTA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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### Abstract

The key purpose of this study is to offer a comparison of school principals' career development in two countries: Cyprus and Malta. The study aims to understand the biographical reasons for becoming a principal and the underlying issues of school leadership. This paper explores the career paths of ten primary school principals from randomly selected schools in Cyprus and Malta. A qualitative in-depth interviewing method was used for gathering the data in which the participants were asked nineteen questions that focus on the first two stages of their personal and professional lives – formation and accession. The results show that although the reasons for becoming a teacher are different; there are similar reasons for becoming a principal. The findings revealed that family influence played a significant role in influencing the principals' career choice. Most of them had no formal training for their role and the primary issue of contention was related to managerial tasks and bureaucracy. The study provides an in-depth analysis of primary school principals' professional self-actualization. The findings of this study correspond to the initial results of similar studies undertaken in Cyprus and Malta where principals experience similar challenges to those stated in earlier studies. The findings can be used by policy makers to design new policies and to improve the education of future principals.

*Keywords:* Principals, educational leadership, school leadership, career development

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## **1. Introduction**

In the late twentieth century, the term ‘school leadership’ came into currency and the concept of leadership was favored because it conveys dynamism and pro-activity. School leadership, in other words, educational leadership is a field of study and practice concerned with the operation of schools and other educational organizations (Bush, 2008). The principal is commonly thought to be the school leader. However, school leadership may include other people such as senior teachers, members of formal in-school teams and those who contribute to the aims of the school (Waters & Marzano, 2006). According to Rhodes and Brundrett (2009), an essential linkage between leadership and learning should be understood to involve incumbent senior leaders in schools, enabling teachers to improve their practice by fostering and supporting continued teacher professional development. Jones and Pound (2008) stated that the leaders and managers play a significant role in enabling other practitioners to develop the necessary capabilities in a climate of significant change and developments.

Educational leadership has progressed from being a new field, dependent upon ideas development, to other settings to become an established discipline with its own theories and significant empirical data testing their validity in education (Bush, 2011). Arguably, understanding school leadership requires new studies in the field of education. One of the leading studies about principals’ career development can be attributed to Peter Ribbins, who carried it out in the United Kingdom in 1997 and presented it at The National Conference of the British Educational Administration Society in the University of Oxford. Ribbins aimed to find out what the principals had done for the job as well as what the job had done for them. He used a qualitative interview method which included nineteen questions that focused on the idea that educational leaders, rather than systems are responsible for managing institutions. In-depth analyses showed that there was no strong parental effect on choosing teaching and principalship as a profession. However, parental effect was found to impact on some specific areas. In general, they had an uncertain start to their careers; they did not experience their career development as a planned process. Rather, it was simply a matter of being at the right place at the right time. Furthermore, all their decisions fell within a broad framework of educational values; knowing what they wanted to create and lead, and realizing that headship would allow them to achieve their goals. This study provided the catalyst for many other studies. One of them was carried out as a collective research project under the leadership of Gronn and Ribbins (2003) in four island states involving Singapore (Chew et al., 2003), Hong Kong (Wong & Ng, 2003), Cyprus (Pashiardis & Ribbins, 2003) and Malta (Bezzina & Cassar, 2003). Although different results were noted in those countries, some key similarities also emerged.

Since this study is concerned with principalship in Cyprus and Malta, it would be beneficial to know about recent related studies done in these islands. Various studies have been done in the Cypriot context in order to understand the characteristics of effective school principals (Pashiardis, 1995; 1998), professional development of school leaders (Thody et al., 2007; Michaelidou & Pashiardis, 2009) and successful school leadership (Pashiardis & Orphanou, 1999; Pashiardis, 2000; Pashiardis, 2001; Pashiardis et al., 2011). As a part of the collective study of Gronn and Ribbins (2003), Pashiardis and Ribbins (2003) interviewed eight school principals to explore their career path. The results indicated that the Cypriot principals are keen on learning; however, their educational development was stalled due to political issues on the island. The results also showed that their reasons for becoming a principal were to increase their income and to gain more respect. Since there are only short courses available for newly appointed principals in Cyprus, they faced difficulties in managing people, dealing with the highly centralized system, and the bureaucracy.

There are similar studies in the Maltese context that seek to explore principalship (Gatt, 2009; Grech, 2009); restructuring schools in Malta (Bezzina, 1997; 2006) and developing school leadership (Bezzina, 2000; Bezzina, 2001a; Bezzina, 2001b; Bezzina & Testa, 2005; Spiteri, 2009). Replicating Ribbins' original study in the field and as a part of the collective research of Gronn and Ribbins (2003), Bezzina and Cassar (2003) interviewed eight school principals to obtain an in-depth picture about their personal and professional lives. Similar to the research findings of the studies done in Cyprus, Maltese principals highlighted the influential role of their family members on their professional choices as well as how they optimized opportunities that arose and emphasized on having no say in the recruitment of their teaching staff, the ineffectiveness of the centralized education system, and bureaucracy.

This study was inspired by the initial studies of educational leadership by Peter Ribbins (1997) and it aims to replicate the initial studies that took place in Cyprus (Pashiardis & Ribbins, 2003) and Malta (Bezzina & Cassar) as a way to probe in order to better understand principals' career development in a comparative manner. This study investigates principals' career development under a number of key headings such as influences of environment on their career decisions, influences that shape their values, how they adapt to the role and how well prepared they find themselves in the face of the challenges that they meet, as well as their involvement in the daily issues of running their school.

## **2. Methodology**

The aim of this study is to explore school principals' career development through an in-depth qualitative analysis. As in Ribbins' (1997) original study, the same headings and same

interview questions were used to gather the data. Principals were asked a series of open-ended questions at their own schools during a work day. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Principals were asked their opinions about joining the profession, seeking promotion, dealing with responsibilities, having a vision for their schools, managing people and resources, and assessing their own leadership capabilities. They were fully aware that their participation was voluntary and confidential and they had the right to withdraw at any stage. Four female and six male principals, all from national primary schools, from Cyprus and Malta participated in this study. The average age of the group was 51.4 years (n=10) and they had, among them, an average of 20 years experience in teaching and 10.1 years experience in principalship. Table 1 shows the demographic features of the participants.

**Table 1.** Demographic features of the participants

| Participants | Age  | Gender | Teaching Career | Principalship Career |
|--------------|------|--------|-----------------|----------------------|
| Cyprus1      | 54   | Female | 25              | 8                    |
| Cyprus2      | 51   | Male   | 16              | 15                   |
| Cyprus3      | 51   | Male   | 25              | 6                    |
| Cyprus4      | 52   | Male   | 13              | 17                   |
| Cyprus5      | 53   | Male   | 18              | 15                   |
| Malta1       | 39   | Male   | 7               | 9                    |
| Malta2       | 57   | Female | 30              | 3                    |
| Malta3       | 54   | Female | 23              | 10                   |
| Malta4       | 48   | Male   | 21              | 6                    |
| Malta5       | 55   | Female | 22              | 12                   |
| Average      | 51.4 | -      | 20              | 10.1                 |

### *2.1. Research design*

The research approach remains loyal to the original studies of Peter Ribbins (1997). To gather the data, a similar range of questioning was followed and similar predetermined themes such as how and why of teaching, first years of teaching, preparation of principalship, achieving principalship, reviewing principalship, values, management, role on effective teaching and learning, leadership, curriculum, and reviewing principalship were employed in the content analysis.

## 2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher personally. In order to ensure the accuracy of content and familiarity with the themes of the dialogue, texts were re-read on several occasions along with the voice recordings. The data was organised and coded to identify commonalities and differences between the opinions of the participants. In line with the original studies, the data was categorised systematically. Finally, responses were coded thematically under specific content areas to extrapolate an analysis of the findings.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. 'How' and 'why' of teaching

Responses of questions about the influences regarding participants' initial choice of career reveal a variety of reasons for becoming a teacher. Maltese principals commonly stated that they were influenced by their own teachers and parents, while Cypriot principals said it was kind of an obligation for them to go into the teaching profession. The majority of the Cypriot principals wanted to study other programmes at the university. However, economic and political issues in Cyprus during those times forced them to go to enrol in the Teacher Training College. Previous studies of Pashiardis and Ribbins (2003) show that Cypriot principals do have other preferences for career planning; however, job security and most importantly, due to the political and economic issues, they opted for a teaching profession. Below is one response that summarises this sentiment;

*Honestly I had never thought about being a teacher. Although I was qualified to study abroad, due to my parents' economic situation I was offered to go to the Teacher Training College. At that time I did not even know anything about this college. I passed the exams and qualified to enter that college. I was actually considering leaving after a while, but I started to like it then. On the other hand, I had two brothers who were studying too and it was impossible for my parents to pay my college fees if I went abroad. Moreover, this college was giving me a scholarship; therefore I never had economic problems while I was studying and so I decided to stay there.*

### 3.2. First years in teaching

Cypriot and Maltese principals stated that their college education was adequate and helpful in the first years of their professional life, which corresponds to the earlier studies in Malta (Bezzina & Cassar, 2003). In spite of this result, Bezzina (2006) stresses the necessities of the teacher training programmes for improvements.

*The B.Ed programme needs to be reviewed, so that various courses are carried out within school environments, so that particular pedagogy and subject courses are tackled within a real context. Furthermore, upon graduation, beginning teachers should be provided with professional support at the school site. (p. 465)*

On a separate note, Pashiardis and Ribbins (2003) point out that Cypriot teachers can be made to wait several years to be appointed which causes difficulties in their first years of teaching as they lose the freshness of what they were taught in the college. Moreover, while some of their coursemates had already been appointed as principals, others, who had to wait several years for different reasons, are at the beginning of their principalship career, at a later stage in their professional life. This can be seen as a demotivating factor at the beginning of their career as a principal. This may also explain the reason for the hostility toward newly appointed principals who are younger.

### 3.3. *'How' and 'why' of promotion*

The common response among Cypriot and Maltese principals about becoming a principal was to have more authority at school as they believed in their managerial abilities to manage the school better than others. However, none of them had planned for this until the opportunity arose.

*I believed I could be a good manager. I worked at different associations such as teacher's union and teacher's bank as a manager. I worked at the union for fifteen years and I worked at the bank for ten years. Then I started to believe that I could do principalship as well.*

Similarly, previous studies in Cyprus (Pashiardis & Ribbins, 2003) and Malta (Bezzina & Cassar, 2003) showed that among the reasons Cypriot and Maltese principals wanted to become a principal were to have more authority, more prestige and increase their income.

### 3.4. *Preparation for principalship*

In the Cypriot promotional system, experience in years and attendance at in-service trainings, seminars and conferences benefit the teachers in points before they can apply to become a principal. Michaelidou and Pashiardis (2009) stated that Cypriot principals seem to participate in those activities largely for promotional purposes. On the other hand, in the Maltese system, becoming a principal requires a minimum four years of experience in assistant headship as well as a Masters degree in educational management and leadership, which shows that the system in Malta educationally prepares them for the role.

*I studied diploma in education and administration, and those studies helped me with my preparations to become a principal. I had preparation for administration and dealing with different situations and taking care of the financial aspects of school.*

Responses of Cypriot principals in previous studies show that the first years of principalship was a matter of sink or swim as there was no formal preparation for the principals (Pashiardis & Ribbins, 2003), apart from more than ten years of teaching experience for appointments to headship (Mertkan, 2011). There are now short courses for the newly appointed principals. As a part of their professional development, newly appointed principals attend in-service training programmes to enhance their abilities (Michaelidou & Pashiardis, 2009). However most of the time, they require specific trainings in the areas related to the leadership post, curriculum management, in-service development of teaching personnel, school climate and issues on dealing with teacher evaluation (Pashiardis, 1995). To prevent difficulties in the first years of principalship, Farrel (2002, p.8) suggests giving "a minimum one year notice of the position of principal becoming available, structured pre-service training of at least six months and in-service training including management and leadership". However, although principals receive nine months training for their new role, they still experience difficulties in the first years of principalship as was the case in Chew et al.'s (2003) study conducted in Singapore.

### *3.5. Achieving principalship*

Although there is no formal training for principalship and they enter principalship directly from classroom teaching, Cypriot principals appear to have no difficulty in their first years and did not find the role challenging as they all believed they had good managerial skills; as almost everybody is rated as an excellent teacher in Cyprus (Pashiardis & Ribbins, 2003). In fact, only one of them stated that she had difficulties as her colleagues did not welcome her appointment, as they had expected another colleague to be appointed as the principal. On the other hand, all Maltese principals were significantly better prepared as they had all worked as assistant head for a minimum of four years and they all had diplomas in educational administration and management. However, surprisingly, although they had initial preparation, some Maltese principals still found the role difficult and challenging. This result should trigger policy makers in Malta to reconsider the effectiveness of the preparation and diploma courses for principalship.

### 3.6. Reviewing principalship

Principals were asked to review principalship in terms of their vision, values, managerial skills, role on effective teaching and curriculum areas. This section will highlight similarities/differences of Cypriot and Maltese principals as well as compare the results of the current with those of previous studies in Cyprus and Malta.

#### 3.6.1. Vision

Maltese principals stated that their vision for the school is to create the best possible learning environment for the children. As one respondent stated;

*I work in one of the most disadvantaged schools in Malta in terms of socio-economic background. I deal with problems like prostitution, drug abuse, domestic violence etc. I can say 80% of the children in the school come from families who have at least one of these backgrounds. My vision for this particular school is re-structuring the environment; creating an alternative view about reality. So your vision has to be directed to the children you are dealing with and your vision must be related with the children and their needs.*

Cypriot principals, on the other hand, said their vision is to prepare children for life. There might be cultural differences here as well as differences in the educational system in these countries. While Maltese principals aim to provide the best learning environment for the children by providing them with the required resources, Cypriot principals stated they aim to prepare children for life and make them learn from life experiences since resources are limited in Cyprus. This approach could also be related to the economic and political situations in Cyprus (North) as there are embargoes and the people's vision is formed by their immediate needs and the appropriateness of the environment to meet these needs. Cypriot principals seem to face a lot of obstacles, as due to political favouritism and interference in Northern Cyprus, some principals had to wait for a long time to become a principal because of their political stand. This could explain why these principals have a vision to prepare children to face (the harshness of) "life".

#### 3.6.2. Values

The main educational and managerial values of the interviewees are collegiality, transparency, openness, respect, fairness, democracy, honesty, team work and delegation. Cypriot principals, particularly put a lot of emphasis on fairness and democracy which could be reflective of the favouritism and unfair circumstances prevalent in Cyprus pointing to the

lack of democracy in appointments as was reported. Previous studies in Cyprus (Pashiardis, 1995) also show that Cypriot principals “attach importance to human relations among school personnel as shown by the statements concerning (1) the strengthening of collegiality and the feeling of being a team, (2) the creation of a positive, human school climate, and (3) the cooperation among staff for the creation of a common vision for school improvement.” (p.6)

The values that these principals held to coincide with the features of effective leaders as suggested by Sergiovanni (2001). According to Sergiovanni (2001), effective leaders are able to get people connected to each other, to their work and to their responsibilities, and engage with the surrounding community.

When the principals were asked how successful they are in putting these values into practice, some Maltese principals said that they are successful, whereas some admitted they are not. This might be because they stated that they spend more time on administrative duties rather than on educational work. On the other hand, all Cypriot principals in this study, see themselves as successful as they claimed they get positive feedback from their staff.

### 3.7. Management

In terms of managing people, Maltese principals said they have different approaches when dealing with different people. They said they are supportive, open minded, firm, clear and respectful. On the other hand, Cypriot principals emphasised delegation, democracy, fairness, equality, role modeling and having good communication skills. As a matter of fact, according to the Cyprus Turkish Education System (2005) a school administrator must be *‘democratic in his relations, constantly improves himself and his staff, needs to be motivating and encouraging, needs to have problem solving and decision making skills as well as writing, speaking, reporting skills and able to transfer his authority when necessary but keep his sense of responsibility’*. As seen in the definition, school leaders are perceived as school administrators in the Cypriot system, which could lead educational authorities viewing the role of principals as mainly concerned with administrative work. Having said that, the definition also suggests that school administrators need to have managerial abilities but little is mentioned with regard to education.

In Cyprus and Malta, there is no option for principals to choose who they want to work with. Recruitment is carried out by the ministry and one of the challenges for the Cypriot and Maltese heads is that they have no say in the recruitment of their teaching staff as it is done centrally; therefore, they must get on well with the staff as best as they can. Pashiardis (2004)

stated that this is an indicator of a lack of democracy in the education system as practised in these two countries.

In terms of managing resources, all principals said that they get support from the parents' association. However, sometimes this alone is not enough and they organize fund raising events like coffee days and so on. Furthermore, most of the time, they have to prioritize the expenditure as they cannot spend money without planning. In Cyprus, since there is a highly centralized system, Cypriot researchers Karagiorgi and Nicolaidou (2010) suggest that policy makers should devote more resources, time and funding to develop structures for practicing and aspiring leaders.

Regarding external relationships, the principals said they institute an open door policy in their schools; they focus on nurturing a good relationship with the parents and management as well as the community. Recent studies in Cyprus (Pashiardis et al, 2011; Brauckmann & Pashiardis, 2012) also show that principals pay particular attention to building a strong relationship between the school and the parents, local communities and other organizations that actively take part in school events. Since Cyprus and Malta are small islands, sustaining a good relationship with the community and other organizations is essential.

The highly centralised education system in Cyprus and Malta encourages the hierarchical practise of managerial relations. Cypriot principals are accountable to the division manager, counsellor and the minister, whereas in Malta, there is some attempt to decentralize which allows for college principals to act between the school heads and the authorities. Maltese heads of schools are accountable to college principals, and directors of educational divisions such as the director of resources, the director of finance and the director of teaching.

### *3.8. Role in effective teaching and learning*

When asked about their role in enabling more effective teaching and learning, they all said they have regular staff meetings where they discuss problems and support the staff in solving the problems. While Maltese principals said they have formal and informal classroom visits, Cypriot principals stated they encourage their staff to take courses and training for their personal development. They also stated that they would like to have the opportunity to share classrooms and institute a collaborative work approach.

Not surprisingly, principals from both Cyprus and Malta concurred that administrative duties do not allow them to spend more time on educational development, which is why they do not believe they are effective in leading teaching and learning. These findings confirm previous studies in the field (O'Mahony & Cottrell, 2004; Bezzina, 2006). It also shows that some school leaders in Malta feel that they spend too much time on administration, budgeting

or school site problems. However, Bezzina (1997) suggests "*whether you are a head or leader of a smaller school team, you have a part to play in the planned operation and achievements of the school.*" (p. 198)

Sugrue (2003) refers to changes in principals' roles according to a chronological order and labeled principalship as phase one which is predominantly administrative (pre-1971); phase two which is predominantly managerial (1971-1989) and phase three (1990s - to date) which has a growing emphasis on leadership in addition to the tasks of administration and management. Bush (2010), meanwhile, states that;

*Leadership development is usually targeted at current or aspiring principals and the journey from classroom teacher to school principal (from teacher to middle leader to assistant principal to principal) usually involves the gradual accumulation of leadership responsibilities, linked to a reduction in the teacher role.* (p. 114)

With regard to the perception of the difficulty involved in the role, in contrast to Maltese principals, Cypriot principals said it depends on principals' work load and abilities.

### 3.9. Leadership

All the principals were asked to self-evaluate themselves in terms of their leadership styles. In general, they said that they see themselves as helpful and supportive principals. While Cypriot principals emphasised being a good role model, democratic and innovative, Maltese principals said they do not ask their staff to do anything that they are not prepared to do. They also said they delegate responsibilities and are respectful. One of the principals said;

*I always encourage teachers to take initiatives. When they make mistakes, I do not fight with them, I try to help them to correct it. I try to give them more self-confidence, saying 'you can do it'. I give them responsibility and let them to take initiatives. You have to trust people and make them part of the process.*

A previous study in Cyprus also shows that principals who were classified as effective leaders are experimental and innovative (Pashiardis, 1998). According to Sparks (2009), leaders should learn skills that would help them lead others including role modeling, team building, empathy and decision making. This supports, to a large extent, the principals' responses in this research. Also, since the principals stated that they delegate responsibilities, this aligns with Harris (2004) who stated that the heads who delegate leadership responsibilities to the staff are more likely to build capacity to improve the schools.

When they were asked what kind of support they give others to lead within the school, their answers corresponded to their leadership styles. Maltese principals said they encourage their staff and give them opportunities to lead. Bezzina (2000) suggests that

*Leadership cannot remain the prerogative of one single person. It has to become team based, collegial. Leaders of the future need to be trained to master the art of forming teams, to collaborate through teams rather than directing through edicts. Shared leadership encourages a horizontal extension of power. The future calls for an extension of that power vertically downwards to involve all members of staff.* (p.305)

Similarly, Cypriot principals stated they delegate duties and support their staff in these duties. However, they also said that not everyone is ready to accept advice as everyone is an expert in their field.

The principals' self-perception indicates that they could be categorized as collegial leaders, as the majority of them stated that they delegate responsibilities, which falls under distributed leadership, and decisions are consensual which falls under participative leadership. On the other hand, others emphasise encouraging teachers to attend seminars that recall features of instructional leadership and some others stated that their approach to different situations varies as is reminiscent of situational leadership. Interestingly, all the principals talked about the problems they faced; however, no one suggested a solution to overcome the problems and neither did anyone offer to change the existing situations. It can be deduced then, that these principals do not practice transformational leadership. On the other hand, this conclusion cannot be taken as totally objective, as the statements of the principals interviewed in this study are their personal perceptions and beliefs, which are subjective.

### 3.10. Curriculum

When they were asked how they are affected by curriculum changes, Maltese principals said they work as a group and try to carry out the implementation together. As Cujatar (2007) stated, in Malta, the school administrative personnel and the teaching members of staff have to contribute to curriculum development and implementation is conducted in conjunction with the educational division. Cypriot principals, on the other hand, said they found it difficult to find appropriate books for the new curriculum as educational books are sourced from Turkey and are considered inappropriate for the Cypriot culture. However, some Cypriot principals believe they are not affected by the changes as they are not dealing directly with classroom issues.

In terms of support after the changes, Cypriot and Maltese principals mentioned in-service training as well. Taking a different stance from the others, one Maltese principal emphasized that they need some time after the changes are implemented to allow the system to settle in before attempting to evaluate the system.

### *3.11. Reviewing principalship*

All the interviewees said that they experienced difficulties with administrative and bureaucratic duties as these tasks take up much time from educational duties. According to Pashiardis and Ribbins (2003), principals struggle for various reasons such as money as resources are limited; personnel management as they have no say in choosing the staff; curriculum as they have limited say; authority due to the vertical bureaucracy currently in place. Even after a decade, these results still coincide with the current problems the principals are facing. According to Sergiovanni's (2001) high performance theory, decentralization is the key which allows workers to become empowered to make their own decisions about how to do things. The theory suggests de-emphasizing both top-down hierarchies and detailed scripts that tell people what to do. Similarly, Pashiardis (2004) evaluates the education system as nondemocratic due to its highly-centralized nature creating a scenario where principals have almost no say in anything, including the expenses, appointment of personnel, the selection of textbooks and the development of their own curriculum. This is the case in Cyprus, whereas in Malta, there has been an attempt to decentralize the system to enable a more effective educational system. In this respect, principals are appointed to manage school heads and support them in administrative duties. Bezzina and Cassar (2003) stated that school heads are no longer entrenched in administrative roles. However previous research findings (Cutajar, 2007) and the findings of this study do not support this view for Malta, where school heads report that they are still not pleased to spend their time on administrative work rather than educational duties.

Maltese principals also stated that they dislike dealing with people's expectations which is similar to the findings of previous studies (Pashiardis, 1998) in Cyprus. As one principal said;

*Dealing with the people who do not fulfil their responsibilities to school is also very difficult and something that I really dislike. You try to discuss with them or find the middle way, but they still do not understand. Still keep making problems and do not do their job properly. This becomes really difficult. So I have to find a way to communicate with this person and try to change him/her, which is really hard. These things really frustrate me.*

On the other hand, Cypriot principals claimed it is hard to deal with the irregularity of the system and favoritism as they are facing issues because of the Cyprus political conflict. Another concern is that usually in order to be promoted you have to belong to the right political party (Pashiardis, 2004). However, when they were asked if they still enjoy being a principal, all Maltese principals said they do. One Cypriot principal said he partially does and another one said he does not enjoy it as much as he used to do.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, Maltese principals reported that they wanted to become teachers because they were influenced by their teachers or family members. On the other hand, the reasons given by Cypriot principals are different. They claim to have chosen the teaching profession because there was no other career alternative. Economic situations after the eleven years of inter-communal violence in Cyprus may have affected their decision. However, reasons for becoming a principal are similar. They made use of opportunities as they arose to manage the schools in their own way, to have more authority, because they believed that they had managerial abilities and could manage the school better than the previous principals. This is despite their earlier assertion that they had no definite career plans.

Both Maltese and Cypriot principals claimed to have a vision for their school which is to create the best learning environment for the children and to prepare them for life. Their vision merges with their educational values which are collegiality, respect, democracy and fairness through which they demonstrate that they know what kind of school they wanted to create and lead. They seemed to realize that headship would give them the possibilities to achieve this. Cypriot principals put a lot of emphasis on being fair and democratic which could be related to their socio-political background and experiences. In Cyprus, there is strong favouritism and partisanship and some principals have been penalised due to their political leanings. Life was not fair to them at all times as some of them had to wait many years to be promoted as a principal.

Participants of this study indicated that they are also aware that teamwork can reflect their educational values which, in turn, affects their managerial outlook as they attempt to manage people with support, fairness, respect, democracy and equality. However, most of the time, bureaucracy and administrative duties affecting their focus on educational duties. Although principals are aware of the situation, this is a foregone conclusion in the highly-centralized education systems practiced in Malta and Cyprus. In terms of leadership, principals self-evaluated themselves as approachable, supportive, delegate, innovative, a role model and democratic which also correspond to their values. They are all aware of the power they have,

but the highly-centralized educational structure does not allow them to do much. Their interaction with curriculum changes is limited. After the changes are implemented, they claim that they work with teachers and are aware that teachers may need their support to some extent.

With regards to principals' leadership styles, it emerged that they show features of participative and distributed leadership styles which fall under collegial models of leadership. On the other hand, the interview feedback also reveals features of instructional leadership. As Bush (2010) argues, leadership makes a significant difference to school and student outcomes and there is increasing recognition that schools require effective leaders and managers. It was interesting to note that no one suggested solutions to overcome the problems which is indicative of a lack of transformational leadership. However, since this is a qualitative study whose outcomes are premised on the interviewees' self-perceptions and beliefs, the data is subjective in nature and cannot be taken as empirical evidence. Therefore, it is best to consider the evidence regarding the principals' leadership features as a perception study.

In the end, they all stated they struggle with the obstacles caused by bureaucracy and administrative work as well as dealing with (difficult) people. From the government's perspective however, both vertical and horizontal bureaucracy is unavoidable. As a result, education systems are highly or partially centralized as there should always be a control mechanism. Having said that, adoption of extreme measures could damage the system. Taking all these issues into consideration, principals could be given independence with boundaries.

In conclusion, this study has provided an in-depth, albeit perception-based analysis of primary school principals' career path and their professional actualization. Additionally, the outcomes of this study have updated previous studies which were carried out in Cyprus (Pashiardis & Ribbins, 2003) and Malta (Bezzina & Cassar, 2003) in a comparative manner. The findings of this study correspond to initial results obtained the earlier studies conducted in Cyprus and Malta, and Peter Ribbins' study in 1997. However, some differences were spotted. For the Cypriot sample, both this study and the previous Cyprus research of Ribbins and Pashiardis (2003) were carried out with the principals who were affected from the inter-communal violence in the island. However, the Cypriot participants of this study experienced the post-war economic problems that directly affected their job preference. Furthermore, because these principals are living in an internationally unrecognized country, they also experience the negative repercussions of the socio-political outcomes of the situation. The accumulation of these serious issues in the country has led to people trying to solve their problems by using the party in power or powerful people they know, leading to favouritism and partisanship in the country. It may be surmised that the existing situation may cause principals to have the intention of solving the problems they are facing which may have

motivated them to become a principal. However, it may also be that political favouritism may result in principals taking no action on the issues as they may think nothing will change in such an atmosphere which might explain why no one suggested how the issues could be solved.

As stated above there are similarities between the results of this study and the previous studies conducted in Cyprus and Malta, especially about the hierarchical system in education and bureaucracy which still is a significant burden for the principals to deal with. This situation has remained the same for the last ten years and it is evident that previous studies have not been effective on nor taken seriously by the policy makers.

In both this research and previous studies, principals talked about ineffectiveness of the in-service trainings and preparatory courses. Even in Malta, although the diploma courses are mandatory, the principals have admitted experiencing difficulties in the first years of headship. This outcome should alert policy makers on the ineffectiveness of the in service trainings and re-evaluate the quality of these trainings. Also, authorities should be more careful in the selection process for principals as those who demonstrate dominant leadership features would have the advantage in discharging their responsibilities more effectively.

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