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TITOLO DELLA TESI:

**AN ACTION-RESEARCH BASED TRAINING
FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERS TO IMPROVE PROBLEM-SOLVING
& COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES**

RELATORE

Chiar.mo Prof. ssa A.LESSANDRA FERMANI

DOTTORANDA

Dott. Ssa CLAUDETTE PORTELLI

COORDINATORE

Chiar.mo Prof. MICHELE CORSI

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 STATE OF THE ART

Educational leadership can be one of the most rewarding yet stressful jobs. Educational Leaders (ELs) that arrive poorly prepared to fulfil this very demanding multi-taking role, face potential problem. Levine (2005) sustains that the “quality of preparation of the nation’s school leaders ranges from ‘inadequate to appalling’. University-based programs designed to prepare the next generation of educational leaders are not up to task” (p.1) Levine’s strong affirmations has caused strong disputations which brought to re-evaluate the educational leadership training programs (Creighton, Harris & Coleman, 2005).

In 2008, OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) published an important study titled “*Improving School leadership*”, that highlight the importance of giving competences to school leaders, which allow them to adopt an expanded leadership to drive teachers, school operators, parents and students towards a collaborative climate. Goldring & Greenfield (2002) claim that today a “constructivist, transformational, facilitative, institutional, distributive, or moral” (p.1) leadership is needed in the schools. With this purpose in mind, school heads need to first and foremost acquire an operative awareness and instruments that improve their communicative-relational competencies. In addition, ELs should be able to ride the different waves that they are faced with in his/her daily venture. Just like a captain of a ship sailing the ocean, ELs need to be ready to face the tempestuous and unpredictable seas, find ways to ride the waves, while bringing gaining buy-in from the different stakeholders to pull on the same rope in the same direction at the same time.

Paletta and Baraldi (2009) refer that ELs needing to be well- prepared to induce a change in their own organizations; to have influence and persuade people to follow the organizational aims; communicate and show “competences” and “trust”. According to Balbi and Artini (2009), communication and problem solving skills are essential competencies that ELs’ need to acquire and master, in order to be able to successful fulfil their complex mission.

Thurston, Christie, Howe, Tolmie and Topping (2008) sustain that school staff should be offered training that enhance essential competences which should be effective and have an impact on practice immediately but also offer long-term empowerment to generate further learning experiences in the future. Stevens (2001) affirms that most ELs are dissatisfied with the traditional professional development they are given, which are basically workshops or lectures which bombarded them with information, but which do not bring along real and meaningful change in the schools. Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, Orr (2009) affirm that training should interweave theory and practice to hand over to ELs tools which can be adapted to the specific context. In fact, Lambert, Walker, Zimmerman, Cooper, Lambert, Gardner, Szabo (2002) affirm that action-research (A-R) should be a fundamental modality in educational leadership programs, simply because it combines the relational process of constructivist learning with administrative leadership. Robertson (2008) also believes that an A-R is an effective tool that ELs require to able to study their own practice and construct the new knowledge needed to answer their current questions and solve their own problems. A-R is a quest for knowledge about how to improve their skills, techniques and strategies necessary for professional development but also school improvement.

Dewey (1933), at the beginning of the twentieth century, induced teachers to take up a “reflective action” to transform themselves into inquiry-oriented practitioners. Various other authors followed, (Hart 1993, Osterman, 1991; Short & Rinehart, 1993) who specifically underlined the importance of

adopting reflection as an instructional methodology to be used in training to meet the changing social and political demands placed on schools. Carr & Kemmis (1986) sustain that action research approach to educational leadership has many benefits such as (1) knowledge is generated from research grounded in specific educational practice (2) they analyse their own problems (3) this induce informed action and thus change based on the acquired knowledge. These benefits arise because A-R based training does not limit itself to convey notions but contributes to create a “*formamentis*” which accompany the participant beyond the training experience (Nardone, Portelli, 2005). ELs need to acquire a method of inquiry and a repertoire of actions and strategies to help them through their very challenging profession.

1.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Thus purpose of the study is to utilise an A-R approach to train ELs improve two essential competencies necessary for good leadership: problem solving and communication.

This inquiry set out to explore:

- *Whether an A-R based training can help Educational Leaders improve their problem solving and communication competencies? and*
- *Which aspects of the A-R training are perceived by the participating ELs to have brought these improvements, if any, about?*

In addition, another concern of this study was to provide ELs a ‘learning by doing experience’, which offers various learning opportunities to help them study their own practice and construct the new knowledge needed to answer their current questions, solve their own problems and improve their communication-relational skills. Thus the purpose of the study was not only to carry out a research, but also to provide participants with a learning process that will deliver to them operative

tools to improve their problem-solving and communication competencies at the time of the research and beyond.

1.3 SUBJECTIVITY STATEMENT & UNDERLYING PREMISES

The research study described here, arose from my own professional commitment to supporting continuing professional development (CPD) in the Educational system. In a rapidly changing educational climate, there is a great need of effective training, or better CPD. With more than fifteen years experience as a trainer, I have trained and coached mostly teachers and psychologists working in schools, but these experiences led me to understand that I should also work with ELs. Head of schools are the backbone of the school and if change has to have a catastrophic effect on the educational system, it has to emanate from ELs.

All school staff require CPD, but ELs who engage in training actually set an example, by promoting a climate of renewal and improvement in the school system. ELs need to be trained themselves to be able to directly pass on to their staff useful knowledge and skills, or else be well-informed to guide them towards effective and relevant CPD. My school visits led me to understand that Educational Leadership is a mission, which requires passion but also knowledge to make it through. ELs are often dedicated teachers turned into heads who have not been adequately trained to take up this challenging role. CPD training can be a means to help ELs fulfil this mission. Yet for training to be effective it should be EL- centred, that is tailor made onto the specific needs of ELs and on-going accompanying them through the various phases of their profession. The Education system undergoes rapid changes, thus ELs are continuously faced by different challenges and innovations, which they need to be competent enough to manage effectively and efficiently. Thus, I believe that training is necessary for all ELs at all stages of their careers. Veteran head of schools often need to be able to manage innovations, put into question 'old' modalities, and embrace new areas of

development. For these ELs, training can be an opportunity to renew their educational leadership practice. On the other hand new young ELs need to be guided to acquire new competencies to manage their new role and related responsibilities. Training should help new heads to acquire competencies which they lack given the very little experience in the field, which would require them time to develop. Thus from my point of view, training should bring together experienced and new ELs so as to complement and enrich one another. Training should be an opportunity for EL to widen their horizons and come across different perceptions and actions to bring them out of their 'often' limiting boxes. All leaders have the responsibility to keep on learning throughout their career if they care to be effective leaders but also to inspire their students, staff and entire school system towards improvement.

Given their frenetic multi-tasking job, ELs often look for comforting off-the-shelf solutions or recipes, but which often lead to poor results. Both as a researcher and practitioner I hold a strong belief that the current paradigm of CPD for EL, have a "one-size fits all" approach. Training is often overly theoretical and normative, bringing EL to detest professional development efforts. CPD training should be practical, engaging, effective and sustainable and thus a pragmatic A-R approach to training can be useful. Training should ensure that ELs actively reflect on their practice and resolve their difficulties by seeking for '*reducers of complexities*' to design a hoc intervention specific to the context.

Given my training in the constructivist- strategic approach¹ and the tangible results witnessed in various fields where it has been employed, (Nardone, Watlawick, 2005; Balbi, Artini, 2009; Nardone, Milanese, Prato Previde, 2012; Bartoletti, 2013; Milanese, Mordazzi, 2014; Papantuono, Portelli, Gibson, 2014; Nardone, Balbi, 2015), I thought it would be appropriate to use this flexible

1

The Constructivist-Strategic theory formulated by the Mental Research Institute, Palo Alto, focuses on how communication builds, maintains and changes each individual's view of: himself, others and the world.

and adaptable approach to help ELs reflect and act on their problem solving and communication competencies.

Moreover, I believe that results can be multiplied if people get together, so I thought it useful to introduce learning communities, partnership coaching and the use of virtual platform as part of this learning process, where the constructivist-strategic approach served as a shared language in this international study. In fact my desire was to hold this research-training project both in Malta, my country of origin and in Italy, my adopted country. Fortunately my desire was granted and this training-research journey began.

1.4 THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT

This study was designed and drew on the premises of *constructivism*. Schwandt (2001) denotes that interpretation, knowledge, and understanding are not constructed in isolation but in relation to others. Charmaz (2006) suggests constructivist research is focused on “how—and sometimes why—participants construct meanings and actions in specific situations” (p. 130). The author adds that engaging in constructivist research aims to reveal: *“how, when, and to what extent the studied experience is embedded in larger and often, hidden positions, networks, situations, and relationships; differences between people become visible as well as hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity that maintain and perpetuate differences and distinction”*. (Charmaz, 2006, p. 130). In this way the richness of diversity can emerge.

In line with constructivist thinking, the training programme did not depart from any policy or institutional imperative imposed by the directorates of education or any other body. In line with an A-R approach, the learning objectives are continually evolving to meet the current challenges experienced by EL. The aim of the training is to support EL to acquire problem solving and communication competencies. Hence, following an A-R approach, the training was customised to the needs of each participant, who, together with a trainer, worked towards gaining the necessary

problem-solving and communication skills to adapt to present and future challenges. The quest towards customising the professional development experience contrasts sharply with what EL and other school staff are usually subjected to, in other training programmes carried out by the participating EL but also in general.

It is also imperative to affirm that the following study is not meant to serve as research for a singular truth or a rigid set of indications to be forced upon school training providers. Rather, it is my hope that the ideas presented will have the power to trigger interest and reflections on how we can provide opportunities for ELs to engage in meaningful PD, which improve essential competencies for effective Educational Leadership and thus, school improvement. I am aware that when carrying out research on training, it is often difficult to arrive at definitive answers, since many variables minimize effects and make results difficult to interpret. Furthermore, the amount of variance attributed to any one variable is usually small.

1.5 OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

There are a few terminologies that are relevant to this inquiry which need to be operationally defined for the purpose of this study. ‘Training’, and ‘professional development’ are often interchanged, since in this study they all referred to a learning process of improving and increasing professional knowledge, competence, skill and effectiveness through access to teaching and experience. ‘Educational Leadership’ refer specifically to ‘head of schools’, and not to any other figure, who holds the role of a leader within the Educational system.

In this study, an A-R approach refers to an active participation in a change situation, in line with Denscombe (2010, p. 6) definition which reads that “an action research strategy's purpose is to

solve a particular problem and to produce guidelines for best practice”. An A-R approach was carried out both by participating ELs and myself as trainer through the training-research experience.

1.6 PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The philosophical perspective underlying this research methodology is Phenomenology – “the study of human experience and the way in which things are perceived as they appear to consciousness” (Langdridge, 2007, p. 10). Narrative Constructivism is the foundation of the conceptual framework of this study as it views narrative as a form of social action and a relational phenomenon (Gergen, 1999).

From a narrative constructionist position, the stories collected through out the various meetings with the participants can be viewed as a personal representation of their’ realities as perceived by them. It is their own experience of the situations, which allowed them to create meaning. However the meaning that we acquire through our own stories can be re-framed and changed by experiencing a corrective emotional experience (Alexander & French, 1946), which in this case was the training-research experience.

1.7 INTERPRETIVE PARADIGM

This study was based on an interpretive paradigm with its focus on experience and interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In particular, this study was based on the understanding of participants’ experience and perceptions of action-research based training applied to everyday practice with a view to better their problem solving and communication competencies and identify effective aspects and strategies to improve professional development (PD) opportunities. In this investigation both the interpretive paradigm and, in particular, a constructive-interpretive paradigm (Denzin &

Lincoln, 2005) were used to identify the PD experience of training, whether training effectively improved their PR and C competencies and also identify what they considered to have brought this improvement so as to create guidelines for improving PD for EL.

1.8 LAYOUT OF THE STUDY

The next chapter aims to present a review of current literature in relation to educational leadership, required competencies, training and an action research approach to learning. Chapter 3 shall outline the methodology used to collect the data, which will explain the rationale for this choice. Chapter 4 shall present the data analysis process in depth. Chapter 5 will present and discuss the findings so as to avoid any unnecessary repetition. This chapter will begin by exploring the case studies used to present any significant improvements in PR and C perceived by the ELs. The second part will present the common themes emerging from the ELs narratives. In chapter 6 the conclusions and emerging recommendations, the limitations and strengths of this study along with some concluding thoughts will be presented.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. 21st CENTURY EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

In the document “*School leadership for learning*” issued by the EU in 2010², experts in various European countries state that after teacher quality, school leadership is the factor that most strongly affects student learning and school improvement. They affirm that effective EL can improve teaching and learning by defining organisational structures, school status and teacher practices. Yet the same document warns that the trends towards increasing school autonomy and decentralising decision-taking place increased responsibilities upon school staff in managing human and financial resources, which have rendered Educational Leadership complex and complicated.

Already 40 years ago, Apple (1986) have observed the drastic change in the role of the ELs. In our modern society, head of schools are stuck by staggering multiple demands pulling them in different directions. Demands that arise from different stakeholders such students, teachers, school staff, parents, education system, community, but also reforms, changes in national curricula, achievement benchmarks, policy directives, rapid development in technologies and so forth, which are often coupled with the numerous emergencies and unpredictable requirements (natural disasters, incidents, immigrations, strikes, conflicts etc.,) that surface on almost daily basis. Conditions that are rather complex and circular, and thus do not allow for simple inputs and outputs such as in production factories. A complex situation that, according to Leithwood & Riehl (2003), seems to intensify rather than diminish over time, making schooling more challenging and needy of effective leadership.

Yet Robertson (2008) notes that ELs often feel they are in a reactive mode, responding randomly and unsystematic within a context of ambiguity, paradox and change, with staggering demands characterised by brevity, complexity and fragmentation. Dana (2009) sustains that ELs have no

2 http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/policy/strategic-framework/doc/learning-leader_en.pdf

access to tools to help them untangle the complexity of their work as administrators, often bringing them to neglect their most important focus, their leadership in teaching and learning. (Wylie, 1997). This aspect is even more felt within self-managing institutions or what Codd (1990) refer to as ‘centrally imposed managerial ideology’, where administrative demands suffocate almost any exercise of leadership within learning. Yet the paradox is that even though ELs put in very long hours, even in their own time, to keep up with the centrally imposed policies, reforms and innovations, they do not feel part of the show (Robertson, 1995). In fact often head of schools are mere administrators who need to negotiate dilemmas and implement with faithfulness innovations framed by outside figures. Cochran-Smith & Lyte (2009) affirm that most of the decision regarding what happens in the school occurs outside its walls. While effective leaders, knowing so well the school and their community, should create their visions, be agents of change, and lead their system towards the desired goals (Balbi, Artini, 2009).

As Kotter (1989) sustains leading change may be the ultimate test of a leaders. He adds that no organisation survives over time if it does not undergo change, yet it is often than not, resisted by the people it most affects. Thus, leading change is both definitely indispensable yet incredibly challenging. Cochran-Smith & Lyte (1993) sustain that it is imperative for ELs to be activist in creating change in the education system. Yet to be effective protagonists in learning and reform, they should be equipped with essential competencies to carry out this mission.

ELs cannot just have knowledge, skills or strategies to carry out their leadership. They require competencies which they can master without great efforts and loss of time. Competencies, therefore, may incorporate strategies and skills, but are more, they include abilities and behaviours, as well as operative knowledge that is fundamental to put them into practice effectively. One might acquire a strategy or a skill but it needs to be turned into internalised competence. Competence is the proven use of skills, knowledge, and abilities to accomplish something.

Noel Burch³ speaks of progress from incompetence to competence in four stages; Unconscious incompetence, Conscious incompetence, Conscious competence and Unconscious competence level. A person can work more effectively if he/she reaches unconscious competence level, i.e. when the learnt skill comes automatically, it becomes second nature. Thus training should not limit itself to deliver notions and know-hows but also provide opportunities that elicit practice which as a consequence bring the competence to become internalised and automatic to the person. Thus effective training cannot be a one-shot intervention but needs to be on-going (Bezzina, 2002), to create and guide the person to arrive to this effective but also efficient, level of unconscious competence.

In addition, according to Costa and Garmston (2016), an effective learning experience should bring its participants to gather more consciousness, flexibility, self-efficacy, interdependence and craftsmanship. Once more these states of mind cannot be developed adequately if training is carried out in intensive in-service training (Bezzina, 2002; Shulman, 2004; Attard Tonna, 2008, Scheerens, 2010). Learning takes time, is gradual and progressive and thus training should be perceived as professional development, as a process not an event. Sweeney (2003) declares that one-shot in-services training do not provide with the necessary time to learn. Attard Tonna (2008) affirms that training should give the time, support and feedback learners need to internalise the needed competencies.

2.2 ESSENTIAL COMPETENCIES FOR EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

As mentioned earlier the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) started to show great concern regarding school leadership and its effects on school improvement. In the study "*Improving School leadership*" (2008), it highlights the impelling importance to provide

³ Initially described as "Four Stages for Learning Any New Skill", the theory was developed at Gordon Training International by its employee Noel Burch in the 1970s.[1]It has since been frequently attributed to Abraham Maslow, although the model does not appear in his major works. Cited in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_stages_of_competence

effective training for EL so as to help them develop the necessary competences and skills to help them practice strengthen their practice and indirectly induce overall school improvement.

Recent discussions at European level have emphasised the crucial role of investing in strengthening of leadership for education institutions to improve the efficiency of education and training systems.” (European Union 2009). European Ministers agree that great care and attention need to be devoted to ensure that ELs have or develop, the capacities and qualities needed to assume the increasing number of tasks with which they are confronted. Member States will also seek to ensure that school leaders are provided with advanced professional training to develop the necessary skills and competencies.

In statement 27, the same document tries to tentatively highlight the necessary core competencies required for effective school leadership:

- *Vision; the ability to inspire staff and pupils*
- *Strategic thinking, the ability to take a holistic view*
- *The capacity to improve the quality of students’ learning and their learning outcomes*
- *The ability to enhance learning environments and learning cultures*
- *The capacity to manage resources effectively*
- *A sound knowledge of the education system*
- *Strong communication skills, openness, and*
- *Problem solving skills*

George and McLean (2007) sustain that ELs are taught to believe that hard skills are more important , though soft skills have been recognized as fundamental especially in driving oneself and employees for organizational excellence (Siti Asiah, 2011). ELs need to complement both hard and soft skills in order to accomplish organizational goal. Wallapha, Saowanee & Tang Keow (2015) assert that

ELs should not only use their knowledge and time in the management process, but should also focus on communication skills to develop organizational awareness and continuous improvement.

They further agree that leadership soft skills are very beneficial for administering educational organization effectively and efficiently. They highlight the importance for ELs to improve their communication skills so as to establish healthy interpersonal relationship. Geddes (1995) affirms that communication is the key for school success and that communication studies should be integrated in the PD of all school staff. She adds that teachers and especial ELs need to be good communicators but to be so they should be able to choose their actions from a repertoire of behaviours. Moreover, effective communication is situational. A competent communicator sensitively assesses the situation and then determines the appropriate communication approach. Thus a good communicator needs to be able to evaluate the situation and choose the most adequate actions to intervene (Papantuono, et al. 2014).

Balbi and Artini (2009) believe that communication skills are essential for good school leadership, but sustain that this needs to be coupled with effective problem solving. ELs are frequently confronted with complex, ill-structured organizational problems and difficult decisions (Copland, 2003; Cuban, 2001; Gaynor, 1998; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995; Balbi, Artini, 2009). Glasman, (1995) reports that ELs spend a great deal of their their time solving problems that arise in the day to day running of the school, yet very little has been invested in knowing about the way principals think about and solve problems. Research on leadership has traditionally limited itself to studying how leaders work through problem solving and how their decision making influences their actions and behaviour (Green & Mitchell, 1979; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Pfeffer, 1977; Simon, 1976). Leithwood & Stager (1989) suggests that there are problem solving strategies that could be taught to ELs that will make them more effective leaders.

The skill of understanding and managing the problem solving process is central to all aspects of educational leadership (Balbi, Artini, 2009). A key activity of educational leadership is identifying, analysing and solving problems that occur in schools. Schon (1983) says that in real-life practice, problems are often are not wellstructured and thus practitioners need to make sense from a situation that initially makes no sense. Nardone (2009) sustains that a good problem- solver is that person who can define the problem and analyse it from different perspectives, considering the available resources and the limits.

Bridwell-Mitchell and Lant (2014) in their very interesting article published in *Organisational Science* denote the importance of integrating problem-solving with human capital. They affirm that good problem-solvers are those that manage to take in consideration the human context. By human context they intent both the cognitive and the social context. They affirm that problem-solving needs to be context-based. Solutions made in a certain school context might not be useful or sustainable in another, due to a different cognitive and social context. Nardone, Milanese & Prato Previde (2012) affirm that successful problem solvers see the “big picture” and ensure that they understand that others’ point of view, needs or interests in the process of problem-solving and/or goal achievement. It is important to begin by identifying the issues that need to be taken into account, and recognise that there are often tensions between the issues and the range of possible solutions. Nardone speaks of resistances (Nardone, Watzlawick, 2005, Nardone, Portelli, 2005, Nardone, Balbi 2015). People might hold different resistances to change, yet a good leader should not fear resistance but rather recognise and identify the type of resistance and manage them to bring all members on board. Papantuono et al., (2014) sustain that when attempting to solve problems it is important to involve others in a collaborative process to help reach a full understanding of the underlying issues. Nardone et el. (2012) refer that effective problem-solvers should ensure that all relevant considerations have been addressed in a balanced and thoughtful way.

2.3 ACTION-RESEARCH APPROACH TO TRAINING: EDUCATIONAL LEADERS AS ACTION- RESEARCHER

Various research (Huttner, et al., 2009; Loughran, 2009; Lunenberg and Korthagen, 2009, Lampert, 2010; Allen, 2015) denote that various ELs are not satisfied with the training offered to them. Gordon (2004) affirms that traditional training is constructed by educational experts far removed from the day-to-day challenges of today's classrooms. He calls for a need of change. Levine (2005) affirms that despite reformers have good intentions, traditional training programs continue to fail in preparing adequately ELs considering today's challenging school context. Various scholars (Cheney & Davis, 2011; Hess & Kelly, 2007; Levine, 2005) criticise traditional leadership training mostly because they are disconnected from the reality of practice; give priority to management over instructional leadership; offer limited opportunity for participants to practice and apply new learning; in addition the very little practice offered, lack rigour and focus. The great majority of existing training programs, meant to improve ELs competencies, are mostly based on (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002) one-size-fits-all set of solutions (Hofman & Dijkstra, 2010). Clarke & Hollingsworth (2002) affirm that teachers tend to dismiss training that is theoretical and prefer practical, hands on programmes. Opfer & Pedder, (2011) note that the available literature does not give significant understanding on how teachers learn from contextually situated professional learning..

Lunenberg and Korthagen, (2009) denote that learning is gained only from operating in the real world, considering one's own inner reality in relation to one's environment. Darling- Hammomd, Lapointe, Meyerson, & Orr (2009) affirm that leadership learning should make use of on-the-job observations connected to readings and discussions preferable in collegial learning networks, learning communities, and mentoring/peer coaching, that offer opportunities to practice problem-solving with others. According to Young, Crow, Ogawa & Murphy (2009) effective training

programs should include research-based content, curricular coherence, and problem-based learning strategies that bind theory and practice.

Cooper and McIntyre(1995) add that teachers require tangible operative knowledge that they can use in their daily practice. Hargreaves and Goodson (1996) affirm that the knowledge they acquire from their practice make up the substance of teachers' personal and professional development, that is knowing through action. They further state that craftsmanship is developed through the process of reflection and hands-on problem-solving.

In line with these findings, Lambert et al., (2002) affirm that Action-research A-R can be an effective approach in educational leadership programmes because it comprises the relational process of constructivist learning that is central to administrative leadership. They add that by implementing the A-R approach, learners can develop their competencies as they interact and engage with their context and learn from their experiences. Learners who engage themselves in A-R try to improve their own competencies as they reflect on their own practice.

A-R, also known as practitioner inquiry and teacher self-study, is the process by which practitioners systematically examine real problems of practice using the inquiry process of problem posing, data gathering, and data analysis to improve their practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008). A-R can be traced back to the sociological work of Kurt Lewin (1948). In A-R, the practitioner becomes a researcher, where he/she studies his /her practice for the purpose of improving it. Borko, Liston & Whitcomb (2007, p. 6) state "The researcher's professional context is the site for inquiry, and problems and issues within professional practice are the focus of investigation. Because the practitioner is a researcher and the professional context is the site for inquiry, the boundaries between research and practice often blur, creating unique opportunities for reflection on and improvement of the practice...".

As explained above, action research stems from the belief that teaching and leading are highly reflective practices (Dewey, 1933; Schon, 1983; 1987). Through sustained reflective thinking, one can examine and assess their practice so as to make informed changes. Dana (2009) sustains that an administrator inquiry is one tool that can be used by ELs to engage themselves in systematic, intentional study of their practice. Reflection is an integral part of the A-R cycle. ELs become inquiring professionals seeking out change and reflect on their practice by posing questions, collect data to gain awareness, analyse the data, make changes in practice based on the new understandings developed during inquiry and sharing findings with others. Osterman & Kottkamp (2004) sustain that training that involves reflective practice leads to self-awareness, growth and thus improvement. A-R is cyclic by its nature: first round of observations, reflection, planning and acting is followed by second round, third round etc. In contrast to traditional research where the researcher is solely responsible for determining research design, A-R approach invites practitioners into the research process (Heron & Reason, 2001). Participants are responsible and own the process and results of their research (McKernan, 1988).

A-R is a particularly powerful tool for professional development because their actions inform them on how to improve the conditions in which they are working. Kemmis (2010) emphasize that A-R stimulates transformative action. He affirms that the biggest challenge is to transform the deep experiences of A-R participants to relevant data for a scientific reflection..Speaking about the role of theory in A-R, the author emphasizes the attempts in A-R is not to bring practitioners' practices into conformity with some theories, but rather that theory should serve to give practitioners more confidence over their practice. Levin (2012) adds that the research questions for A-R must be based specifically from schools` environment.

A-R is our tool for assessing one's effectiveness to strive towards improvement. Quality leadership preparation should address real-life problems of practice (SREB, 2006), designed to facilitate reflective thinking (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). In these programs, assessment should be based on performance (Murphy & Orr, 2009), preferably offering self and peer-assessment (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009).

Elliott (1991) affirms that the research aspect of A-R renders the practitioner "capable of determining their own performance on the basis of self-reflection" (p.27). Winter (1989) declares this is the only way in increasing professionalism.

An A-R based training brings participants to work collaboratively with others and help build professional cultures (Louis et al., 2010; Portin, Schneider, DeArmond & Gundlach, 2003). An A-R based approach training can include peer learning (EC, 2013), partnership coaching (Robertson, 2002), communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) or professional learning communities (Grierson & Woloshyn, 2013). It creates opportunities to develop collective reflections, where the practitioner can reflect with others over his/her actions and effects. This allows to have other points of views and challenge his/her beliefs and rigid perceptions (Robertson, 2002). When designing a training programme, "The possibilities for critical self-reflection and critical collaboration should not be bypassed.... If those involved truly wish to initiate change and sustain improvement (Cardno, 2003, p.25). A-R based learning experience contributes to the development of a critical learning community by bringing people together to explore their understandings and to share their experiences (Robertson, 2000).

Carver & Klein (2016) sustain that designing an A-R based for ELs is quite a challenge cause it requests flexible training content, structures and processes, however, it can be a useful and manageable tool for supporting continuous program improvement since it builds onto the needs and availabilities of its participants. By bridging research and practice, A-R offers relevant instruments

adaptable to specific contexts. Even though various research (Reihl, Larson, Short & Reitzug, 2000; Stein & Spillane, 2005) demonstrate the potential of A-R based training, its study and use in leadership development is still very minimal (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). An A-R approach to training offers a new and promising methodological approach in the preparation of ELs.

2.4 CONSTRUCTIVISM AND LEARNING

In line with A-R, is the Constructivist theory of learning, that states that individuals create their own new understandings on the basis of their interaction between what they already know and believe, and the ideas and knowledge with which they come into contact (Resnick, 1989). It refers to the belief that knowledge is actually constructed in the mind of the learner. Constructivism states that learning is an active, contextualized process of constructing knowledge rather than acquiring it. Cooper (1993) sustains that knowledge is constructed on personal experiences where hypothesis are formed but which are continuously tested through social negotiation. Ertmer & Newby (1993) denote that each person has a different interpretation and construction of knowledge process, influenced by past experiences and cultural factors.

In his revolutionary work *La Construction du Réel Chez L'Enfant* (1937), Piaget proves that the child constructs his reality by exploratory actions rather than by just reacting as dictated by a static image of the world. Piaget shows that at the first stages of the development of objective concepts, *The child's universe is still only a totality of pictures emerging from nothingness* (Piaget, 1937 – p. 43) and that the idea of the world around him starts taking shape through his actions and consequent discoveries, a process which Piaget referred to as “the elaboration of the universe”. Thus different actions, different discoveries lead to constructions of different realities. *The assumption here is that meaning or knowledge is actively constructed in the human mind.*

Having different experiences due to diverse upbringing, cultures, and personalities, our perceptions of the world can vary greatly. Thus a constructivist theory therefore holds that knowledge should not be judged in terms of whether it is “true or false,” but in terms of whether it is functional or not it. The only thing that matters is whether the knowledge that is constructed functions properly in the context in which it arises (Nardone, Portelli, 2005). In other words, thus in the learning process we need to evaluate whether this new knowledge can be put to use or not in this specific situation. Is it practical or not in this specific context? Will it solve or change my current problem? It is a self-regulation process.

Thus from a Constructivist point of view, a learning process should consider ways to facilitate the learning, rather than direct it, because knowledge comes from within the individual. Thus a learning process should facilitate learning by posing questions that stimulate to build our /their own knowledge, through interaction with others. Just like in A-R, learning takes place through our actions, through our discoveries. Our actions create our knowledge. A constructivist approach to learning seeks understanding through a balance of asking questions, repeating ideas in different terms, and clarifying what has been said, so that the learner can seek out connection and meaning in various ideas. Thus in the learning process, it is almost impossible to create highly detailed lesson plans because so much variation is possible.

Thus, to sum up the premises of Constructivism are:

- *Effective learning is the active creation of knowledge from personal experience*
- *Knowledge is created from interpretations of personal experience and from interactions with others who have different point of views*
- *Self-regulation is a key to successful learning*
- *Solving real problems contributes to meaningful learning and transfer*

2.5 PROBLEM-SOLVING: A CONSTRUCTIVIST-STRATEGIC APPROACH

The Constructivist Strategic approach is the evolution of the Constructivism of the School of Palo Alto⁴ (Nardone, Watzlawick, 2005) and the problem-solving model is itself the result of an action-reflection process (Nardone, Portelli, 2005). Guided by mathematical logic, this process model can be continuously checked and verified, applied and adapted to different problem-solving situations (Balbi, Artini 2009; Papantuono et al. 2014).

The Constructivist Strategic Problem solving model is context-based, i.e. the problem-solver studies the problem in the here-and-now, to gather an operative awareness of how the problem works, which will led him/her to find how to make it work better (Bateson, 1980). Thus, the problem-solver focuses on the persistence of the problem, because he/she can only intervene on the present and future, not on its formation, which lies in the past. Moreover, by asking how a given situation “works”, we avoid setting out to look for “the guilty party”, which often becomes a never ending game and instead focus on what determines the persistence of a particular dysfunctional equilibrium, and how it can be interrupted and modified. The value of a theory depends on its ability to conceive a real intervention measured in terms of efficacy and effectiveness in solving problems.

The Strategic Problem-solving model puts forward a series of set of questions to help the problem-solver reflect on the present problem. Questions that bring the subject to step outside the logical schema that traps him/her inside of it, what Nardone & Watzlawick (2005) called perceptive-reactive systems⁵. Problem solvers need to think outside the box and pose “not the usual questions”.

Problem solving cannot be left to chance and carried out haphazardly. A problem solver needs to hold a method of inquiry which outlines guidelines or reducers of complexity that can help him see clearly and design a plan of action, tailor-made to the specific situation (Nardone, Portelli, 2005; Papantuono, et al, 2014).The constructivist-strategic problem-solving model offers operative tools that can help problem-

⁴ School of Palo Alto: a group of researchers engaged in study of human perceptions, communication and behaviour, at the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, California in the 50's and 60's, under the guidance of Don Jackson and Gregory Bateson.

⁵ Perceptive-reactive systems: a “circular causality” between perceptions and reactions which work in a cybernetic-constructivist way. These are feedback processes whereby reactions are the effect of perceptions which the former retroactively affect (and further confirm) the latter. This process forms rigid and dysfunctional perceptive-reactive systems, which if reiterated over time, can develop into specific invalidating psychotrap (Nardone, 2013).

solvers go beyond the usual common questions so as to have a better definition of the problem to find effective solutions.

The method presented here and used during the training has been developed by Giorgio Nardone and his collaborators (Nardone, Mariotti, Milanese, Fiorenza, 2000; Balbi, Artini, 2009; Nardone, 2009; Nardone, Milanese, Prato Previde, 2012; Papantuono, Portelli, Gibson, 2014) through twenty years of action research in clinical, organisational and educational fields. This model offers a new method of inquiry, a new way of looking at a problem, which leads to a new way of action. It helps the problem-solver look at the problem from “outside the box” to find solutions “outside the box”.

Based on the Problem-Oriented method⁶ studied at the School of Palo Alto and the Solution-Focused approach of the School of Milwaukee⁷, the Strategic Problem-Solving model helps the problem solver to see the problem from different angles and construct an action plan to reach the desired goal. This model takes up an operative perspective of the problem, allowing the problem-solver to identify concrete ways of solving it. From the given answers, the problem solver can create a problem solving plan, with clearly delineated steps to follow constructed *ad hoc* to the specific situation. The problem solver will create his action plan which is rigorous but which is also self-corrective, i.e., that can be modified and adjusted according to the situation.

The Constructivist-Strategic Problem-Solving Model represents a passage from a method of inquiry that purports to describe the reality of things (positivist and deterministic knowledge) to an operative awareness (constructivist knowledge) that enables the problem solver to create the desired change (Nardone, 2009). It is a model that can be applied in various spheres in solving challenging situations. It

⁶ The *problem-based approach* of brief therapy developed by Fisch, Weakland, Watzlawick, and colleagues in Palo Alto is based on identifying and interrupting ironic processes that occur when repeated attempts to solve a problem keep the problem going or make it worse. Formulations of ironic problem-solution loops provide a template for assessment and strategic intervention, indicating where to look to understand what keeps a problem going (look for “more of the same” solution) and what needs to happen for the complaint to be resolved (someone must apply “less of the same” solution). Supporting research is preliminary but suggests this approach may be well suited for change-resistant clients.

⁷ *Solution-focused brief* approach based on solution-building rather than problem-solving. It explores current resources and future hopes rather than present problems and past causes and typically involves only three to five sessions. It has great value as a preliminary and often sufficient intervention and can be used safely as an adjunct to other treatments. Developed at the Brief Family Therapy Centre, Milwaukee, it originated in an interest in the inconsistencies to be found in problem behaviour.

is a sort of *pass-par-tout* tool which teachers and ELs can use to find ways out in the seemingly no-way-out situations.

Table 2.1 outlines the Constructivist-Strategic model, with its 5 steps of question posing and a final step, creation of an action plan.

TABLE 1: PROBLEM SOLVING PROCESS.

<p><i>STEP 1: DEFINING THE PROBLEM BETTER</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What actually is the problem? • Who is involved? • When does it occur? • How it works/functions?
<p><i>STEP 2: DIFFERENT POINT OF VIEWS</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would it be perceived by... .? • What is the sensation it gives to... me and/or others.? • What is the reaction ... ?
<p><i>STEP 3: TRANSFORMING A PROBLEM INTO AN OBJECTIVE</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is the objective... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>S</u>pecific? <u>M</u>easurable? <u>A</u>chievable? <u>R</u>elevant? <u>T</u>ime-allocated?
<p><i>STEP 4: PROBLEM-ORIENTED INQUIRY</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has been done so far? • Which are the failed attempted solution? • How can the situation be worsened?
<p><i>STEP 5: SOLUTION-ORIENTED INQUIRY</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there exceptions? • What can be the Scenario beyond the problem?
<p><i>STEP 6: CREATING AN ACTION-PLAN</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which is the smallest possible step? And the next? (Step by step procedure). • Am I keeping to my main objective? (Top down process). • What is the effective of my action? Is it giving the desired results? Should I keep my action or change it? (Rigorous yet self-corrective process).

Thus following the Constructivist-strategic approach, the 1st step for a problem solver is to clearly define the actual problem. The problem-solver needs to allow him/ herself time to reflect on the problem and define it better. The following questions can guide in his/her reflective process: *What*

actually is the problem? Who is involved? When does it occur? How it works/functions?

The 2nd step is to look at the problem from different angles, so as not to miss out possible ways-out. It would be useful if he/she is able to manage to look at the problem from the point of view of other significant agents. *How is the problem perceived by the assistant head Maths, English teachers, parents, students, other school staff, etc.? And what is the basic sensation/emotion it triggers in myself and others (anger, fear, pain or pleasure)? What is my and their reaction to it?*

In Step 3, the problem-solver tries to translate the problem into a possible measurable objective. *What is the object I need to reach?* Eaton and Johnson's (2001) SMART process indicate that an objective needs to be:

- *Specific (everyone knows about the aim),*
- *Measurable (define standards to work towards),*
- *Achievable (the goal is realistic),*
- *Relevant (the goal is worthwhile),*
- and **Time-allocated** (agree on a time frame), in order to be reached effectively and efficiently.

Problem- solvers should reflect on the specific situation so as to have a clear understanding of the goal but also of the factors that might prevent or facilitate achievement (Landsberg, 2003).

STEP 4, brings the problem-solver to use problem-oriented questions. *What has been done so far? Which are the failed attempted solution?* From a constructivist point of view what does not solve a problem ends up worsening it. Thus it is important for a problem solver to question his/her attempted solutions so as to come to block them (Nardone, Watzlawick, 2005). Another problem-oriented question is: *How can the situation be worsened?* This is useful to identify possible actions that one can carry out but which can result to actually worsen the problem. This question, follows

an Ancient Chinese Stratagem that reads: “If I want to straighten something, first I have to learn how to bend it even more.”

STEP 5, leads the problem-solver to pose solution-oriented questions. *Are there exceptions?* Identifying and exploring already existing exceptions can be a very powerful tool, which increases the chances for successful change (De Shazer, 1988). Another solution-oriented question can be: *What can the Scenario be beyond the problem?* This technique is based on Vaihinger’s “As if.” philosophy⁸, which asserts that while sensations and feelings are real, the rest of human knowledge consists of “fictions” that can only be justified pragmatically. Vaihinger (1924) argued that human beings can never really know the underlying reality of the world, and that as a result we construct systems of thought and then assume that these match reality: we behave “as if” the world matches our models. In particular, he used examples from the physical sciences, such as, electrons, protons etc. None of these phenomena have been observed directly, but science pretends that they exist, and uses observations made on these assumptions to create new and better constructs. Thus following this philosophy, we invite the teacher *to ask herself <<how would I act differently if the situation was different>>*.

In Step 6 problem-solver is ready to create an action plan towards his/her objective. By posing these questions, the problem-solver arrives to “new answers”, new inputs to create an action plan. This operative knowledge of the problematic situation and its solution gives specific guidelines to help set minimal, concrete and possible steps towards the desired change (Nardone, Watzlawick, 2005; Nardone, Portelli, 2005). By keeping in mind our desired aim, we construct top-down our action plan, making use of the answers gathered from our questions. A mountain climbing approach is taken to reach the defined objective. The mountain climber mentally works his way down the mountain surveying obstacles, developing overall strategies, setting up alternative schedules, innovative

8 The Philosophy of 'As if': A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind is a 1911 book by the German philosopher Hans Vaihinger, based on his dissertation of 1877

tactics, to develop a first cut action plan. There are so many paths to the top of the mountain. There is no one right way. Even problem solvers need to find their way up the mountain. Each individual will need to understand which is the most minimal but tangible step he/she can do to start his mountain climb. Thus even though the action plan is constructed top-down, our actions have to be bottom-up. That is from the most minimal step, to the next, and then the next, etc until we metaphorically, get on the top of the mountain. Often the most minimal change is enough to trigger an unstoppable chain-reaction or what Thom (1989) called *The Butterfly effect*⁹. That is, small changes in certain parameters of a non linear system can cause equilibria to change, leading to large and sudden changes of the behaviour of the entire system. The action plan should be rigorous but not rigid, allowing the problem solver to correct and modify it along the way. By taking this “knowing through changing” process, the problem solver discovers how to proceed in increasing change. The effective solutions or improvements of the problem, will help the problem solver to get to know and thus better define the problem, which leads to a better discovery of a more fitting and effective action/solution.

In line with Lewin’s (1951) concepts of change and stasis, we come to understand how a process works by creating change and observing its variable effects and new dynamics. On this assumption, we get to know a reality by operating on it, while gradually adjusting our actions by adapting them to the new elements of knowledge that emerge (Nardone, Portelli, 2005).

2.6 PRAGMATICS OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION

According to Wittgenstein (1980), the language we use in turn uses us, in the sense that the language we employ to communicate our reality is the same as the one we use in the representation and elaboration of our own perceptions. This means that different languages lead to different representations of reality.

⁹ *The Butterfly effect or the Catastrophe theory*, originated with the work of the French mathematician Rene Thom in the 1960s, states that small changes can lead to large-scale unpredictable variation in the future state of the system.

The Constructivist-Strategic theory formulated by the Mental Research Institute, Palo Alto, focuses on how language builds, maintains and changes each individual's view of: himself, others and the world. Over time, redundant communicational messages develop into rigid patterns, making it difficult to elicit change in an interpersonal relationship. The interpersonal systems may be considered as feedback loops, since the behaviour of each person influences and is influenced by each other. Thus we are *active participants* in our communications and interpersonal relationships. Nearly half a century after their masterpiece study on the *The Pragmatics of Human Communication*, Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, (1967) is still a valid frame of reference to help develop and create an understanding of the complexities of communicational interactions. The axioms of communication help give insight into why certain interaction patterns develop and how it is so difficult to change those patterns.

TABLE 2 THE FIVE AXIOMS OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION

1st Axiom: *We cannot not communicate.*

2nd Axiom: *Each communication has two levels: the relationship and the content.*

3rd Axiom: *The nature of a relationship is contingent upon the punctuation of the communicational sequences between the communicants*

4th Axiom: *Human beings communicate both digitally and analogically*

5th Axiom: *All communicational interchanges are either symmetrical or complementary, depending on whether they are based on equality or difference*

First Axiom: *We cannot not communicate.* The first axiom presented by Watzlawick *et al.* (1967) explains the impossibility of not communicating. In this, the authors explore the inevitability of communication: they state that no matter how hard we try, we cannot not communicate. This axiom stems from the biological nature of behaviour. Behaviour has no opposite, and there is no such thing

as non-behaviour. Thus, we cannot not behave. This fact emanates from the belief that all behaviour in an interactional situation communicates “something”, it is assumed that all behaviour is a type of communication. So, just as one cannot *not* behave, one is also unable to *not* communicate. Non-verbal communication is often more powerful than the verbal. The lack of verbal communication is in essence a non-verbal way of information exchange. “To summarize, the first meta-communicational axiom of pragmatic communication can be postulated as: one cannot not communicate” (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967). Fraser (1978) criticised this axiom, affirming that not all behaviour can be considered communication. He considers communicative all that behaviour that holds an intention. So for the author, non-verbal communication can be viewed as informative rather than communicative. Yet Nardone and Balbi (2015) sustain that Watzlawick’s work shifts focus of attention from intent to the effects of behaviour as communication, and in real life, we endure the effects rather the intentions of communication.

Second Axiom: *Content and Relationship*. Each communication has two levels: the relationship and the content. Watzlawick *et al.* (1967), describe the value of understanding interactions or patterns of interactions, rather than singular messages. Birdwhistell(1959) affirms that communication is a system and cannot simply be understood on a simple model of action and reaction. Understanding the patterns of interactions in a relationship can help enable both positive and negative changes in the communicative relationship.

Moreover, communication goes beyond the content of the message, it involves the relationship between the speaker and listener. In fact, the second axiom of communication describes the two levels of communicative meaning: contextual and relational. The contextual meaning develops from the information that is conveyed by the communication. The relational meaning is developed by behaviour that the communication imposes or elicits (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967). There are many ways to say something i.e., the content of what is said, and these many different ways of saying

things contribute to the relational aspect of any communication, that is, the type of relationship this communication creates and maintains (Jackson, 1968). This relational aspect of communication runs parallel with the concept of meta-communication, that is the communication about a communication. Watzlawick *et al.* (1967), summarize the axiom by concluding, “Every communication has a content and a relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore a meta-communication”.

Third Axiom: *Punctuating a Sequence of Events.* The third axiom of communication states that the nature of a relationship is contingent upon the punctuation of the communicational sequences between the communicants (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967). Interpersonal communication is not linear but circular, meaning that in any relationship or interaction each person influences and is mutually influenced by the other person. When we attempt to analyse a communication after all the stimulus and response transactions have been set in motion, it would become very difficult to distinguish between the stimulus and the response, i.e., who is giving and who is receiving the stimuli. Humans tend to mentally impose a sequence to stimuli and responses as “punctuation” – as a way of creating order in any given set of events. A conversation is seen as a series of interchanges with a specific beginning and end, depending on our punctuation. Since we have different perceptions, we tend to give different punctuations to events.

It is difficult to understand and break free from one’s punctuation, because once a transaction is set in motion it is hard to tell when the interaction began. The rigid patterns that develop are hard to change because both the punctuation and meaning attribution can lead to a closed system of meaning or self-referential and invented reality. This can explain the divergent views that two individuals may have about a shared experience. According to the interactional view, problematic relationships are characterized by a constant struggle by humans to define the nature of their

relationship; this pushes to the background the content aspect of communication.

Fourth Axiom: *Digital and Analogical Communication.* Watzlawick et al., (1967) introduced the concepts of digital and analogical communication as the fourth axiom of communication. “If we remember that every communication has a content and a relationship aspect, we can expect to find that the two modes of communication not only exist side by side but complement each other in every message. We can further expect to find that the content aspect is likely to be conveyed digitally in the form of words, whereas the relationship aspect will be predominantly analogical in nature, tone of voice, posture etc.”.

Fifth Axiom: *Symmetrical and Complementary Relationships.* This axiom explains how we get caught in rigid non-productive communication patterns and how difficult it is to break free from them. The fifth axiom asserts that, *All communicational interchanges are either symmetrical or complementary, depending on whether they are based on equality or difference,* (Watzlawick et al., 1967). When two individuals engage in different behaviours, one complementing the other, like the two related pieces of jigsaw puzzle, a complementary relationship comes into being. Both parties exhibit different positions: one-up and the other one-down. This complementary nature of the relationship is enhanced by the interlocked nature by which, “dissimilar but fitted behaviours evoke each other” (Watzlawick et al., 1967). This does not necessarily mean a strong vs weak relationship, but rather a dyad that evokes intertwined behaviour.

The complementary style focuses on differences in the relationship. The interaction pattern is based on stimuli and response, one behaviour (stimulus) that evokes another (response). This interlocked nature of the stimuli and response correlates to the interlocked nature of a complementary relationship (Watzlawick et al., 1967). Just like one stimulus elicits a response, one behaviour elicits another and so on.

The second pattern that can result from communication is a pattern of symmetry. Unlike the complementary pattern, the symmetrical pattern emphasizes the minimization of differences. The partners in a communicative situation tend to mirror one another's behaviours, leading to an escalated competition, a sort of tug of war, where each side acts in a way to feel in a one-up position. These type of behaviours may escalate competitively because one mirrors one another, e.g. anger with anger, silence with silence, etc. In both complementary and the symmetrical communication patterns, the individual's positions are merely variables whose meanings are not concrete, but emerge only in relation to the other person (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967).

Neither symmetrical nor collaborative interactions are always productive or non-productive. Teachers should be able to interact according to the specific situation. There are situations that require a symmetrical intervention while others require complementary interventions. The problem arises when teachers are trapped in rigid interactional patterns with their students. Teachers might not be aware of this rigid interactional pattern or else find it difficult to do something different, either because they fear the reaction of others or they feel unable to do otherwise.

In "Keys to Communication: A Handbook for Success", Doreen S. Geddes (1995) parting from the five axioms of Human Communication, outlines some guidelines for **Effective Communication** (p. 2-5).

- *Effective Communication is situational- no single communication style is appropriate for all situations. A competent communicator sensitively evaluated the situation and then determines the appropriate communication strategy.*
- *Competence has a relationship dimension- we can only judge a person's communication*

competence by determining if the needs of others are met as well

- *Effective communicators are able to choose their actions from a repertoire of behaviours, the communication style of a leader should be flexible.*
- *Effective communicators have the best chance of successful communication when they understand the other person's perceptions.*
- *It is important to construct a variety of frameworks for viewing an issue.*
- *Self-monitoring allows to observe your own behaviour from a detached point of view.*
- *When people care about a relationship, they tend to communicate better than when they don't.*
- *To be competent, one must practice cultivating effective communication skills.*

The most advance study of communication based on the Pragmatics of Communication is the “Strategic Dialogue” (Nardone, Salvini, 2007). The authors affirm that effective communication takes place when it is guided towards a co-joint discoveries. In other words, an effective communication takes place when a win-win situation is reached, both parts are satisfied with the outcome (Papantuono, et. al 2014). The strategic dialogue is an intervening and discriminating instrument that orients the conversation towards change. Nardone and Salvini (2007) highlights certain communication strategies that can help establish win-win relationships. An effective communicator listens actively to verbal and non-verbal communication, his/her and others; turns affirmations into questions with alternative of illusions to bring interlocutor to consider different points of view; uses paraphrasing to confirm his/her understanding with the interlocutor to create small agreements through out the dialogue; uses analogies to evoke sensations that leave an impact in the interlocutor; recap so as to redefine to punctuate important information. As a result of all this, the end conclusion of the dialogue becomes a shared win-win discovery. The strategic dialogue is an example of what Watzlawick (1981) called ‘planned casual situation’.

An effective communicator is also that person that can manage to turn dissent into collaborations.

Watzlawick, Nardone (2004) note that resistance can take place because the interlocutor:

- *does not hold a clear understanding of what has been communicated;*
- *holds a strong belief that is challenging by the communication;*
- *is dominated by a dominant sensation which can be fear, anger or pain-based;*
- *has a hidden agenda or holds secondary gain from the present situation;*

Each of this type of resistance requires different tactics of communication and stratagems. Thus as indicated by Marshall and Reason (2007) even in communication and relationship building, seems useful to take a first person action research approach. The authors affirm that for learning and growth to take place, an action research approach should be in all aspects of life. It is a way to cultivate an approach of curiosity and inquiry to our thinking, feeling and doing.

I believe this chapter can be best brought to conclusion with Marshall's notion of "Living Life as Inquiry".

"I have an image of living continually in process, adjusting, seeing what emerges, bringing things into question. This involves, for example, attempting to open to continual question what I know, feel, do and want, and finding ways to engage actively in this questioning and process its stages. It involves seeking to monitor how what I do relates to what I espouse, and to review this explicitly, possibly in collaboration with others, if there seems to be a mismatch. It involves seeking to maintain curiosity... about what is happening and what part I am playing in creating and sustaining patterns of action, interaction and non-action... It also involves seeking to pay attention to the 'stories' I tell about myself and the world and recognising that these are all constructions, influenced

by my purposes and perspectives and by social discourses which shape meanings and values (Marshall, 1999, p.156/7).

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a description of the research methodology used in this study. The research attempts to capture the nature of the phenomena it will be investigating that is discovering whether training with action research approach can help Educational Leaders (EL) improve their problem solving and communication competencies and what they perceived to have helped them in this change. This study, attempted to understand and evaluate these concerns through the narratives of 11 Educational Leaders coming from two different EU countries (Malta and Italy) that were engaged in a one-year action-research based training.

An explanation for the rationale underlying my decisions developing from the main research question and emerging sub-questions will also follow. Specific consideration is given to the research instrument used as well as to the way the data have been analysed. Other aspects such as the researcher's reflective stance in preparing training and the semi-structured interviews, access to the population, sample selection, trustworthiness as well as ethical considerations have been given due importance.

3.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions guiding this study are:

Can an action-research (A-R) based training help Educational Leaders (EL) improve problem-solving and communication competencies?

According to ELs what brought about these improvements if any?

Are there common themes that emerge from their narratives?

It is imperative to state that when carrying out research on training, it is often difficult to arrive at definitive answers. Typically, many variables minimize effects and make results difficult to interpret. Furthermore, the amount of variance attributed to any one variable is usually small.

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

This research opted for a qualitative approach in line with Krathwohl (1998) who states that *“Qualitative research is especially helpful when it provides us with someone's perceptions of a*

situation that permits us to understand his or her behaviour” (p. 230). Following a constructivist approach, revealing perceptions and reactions of the participants was a key objective. The intent of this study was an attempt to present the voices of participants who seek to understand themselves and their lived world (Moustakes, 1994; Richard & Morse, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Langdrige, 2007; Silverman, 2000; Willig, 2008, Briggs et al., 2014).

During the process of deciding about the design that would best fit the research question/s, reflections about the following were made:

a) The type of data that needed to be generated, interest

b) In depth versus breadth and

c) The non-experimental nature of the study.

My main interest was in carrying out an A-R based training with ELs coming from different contexts, handing them operative tools, and then giving voice to their experience of the training to see whether they perceived change in their problem-solving and communication competencies and what they believed has brought their most significant improvements. This suggests that I was interested in depth and hence I opted for a small number of participants in order to collect detailed recollections that would allow me to go deeper into analysis. Wimmer and Dominick (1994) argue, “whereas quantitative researchers strive for breadth, qualitative researchers strive for depth” (p. 140).

The intent of this study was to understand the change in perceptions and actions of the participants to evaluate possible improvements in their Problem Solving and Communication competencies and also to identify common themes. Additionally the study that is being presented was not intended to test a phenomenon, thus making it non-experimental in nature and therefore this automatically ruled out the need for a rigid method of data collection. Hence the research design chosen is of a qualitative nature in the form of narrative inquiry, since at its core are the experiences as expressed in lived stories. In agreement with my supervisor, I excluded the use of questionnaires or check-lists in order to avoid leading, influencing or conditioning ELs responses. We wanted to capture genuine perceptions of the participating EL.

This qualitative study involved two learning communities, with 5 ELs held in Malta (initially they were 6 ELs but one had to drop out due to family health problems) and another of 6 ELs held in Macerata Italy, who underwent a one-year training course which had the same objective, that is, of improving problem-solving and communication competencies of its participants, that followed an

A-R approach. During the first six months, training was held every 15 days and then once a month in the remaining 6 months, which became more of a learning community where ELs discussed their cases, actions and results. Training sessions with Italian EL were held at the University of Macerata, while with Maltese ELs at NCC (National Conference Centre)¹⁰. Through out this one-year research-training experience, the two groups' members had the possibility to keep in touch with one another through a virtual platform.

A Facebook page was opened where ELs had exclusive access. The Facebook page was used to exchange information, material and experiences. 2 Webinar sessions were held to help connection between the two groups. The one-year training-research experience was brought to conclusion in Malta on March 3rd 2016, where all the ELs got together to carry out their final presentations but it was also an opportunity to meet one another and carry out school visits, so as to get to know new realities.

As trainer and researcher, I facilitated and evaluated the research-training process, which took an A-R approach in planning and implementing the two parallel courses. Over a period of a year (specifically from 23rd January 2015- 3rd March 2016) ELs were invited to take up an A-R approach to their practice, through self-reflection (structured prescribed task and voluntary log-book keeping) and group reflection carried out in scheduled learning communities and in unscheduled coaching partnerships sessions. As trainer, I used A-R approach in designing the training sessions, allowing each session to inform the next. There were some slight differences in the training programme and content of the two groups, but nothing significant. The case studies brought by the ELs directed the learning community sessions held during the last six months of the training-research experience. It was challenging to guide the learning sessions, trying to give space to every single EL while respecting the pace and the need to disclose and share of certain ELs. It was useful to have the constructivist-strategic model to guide our sessions and our analysis of the cases. This helped me keep the groups on track.

The research was designed as a conscious effort, not only to develop a better understanding of professional development for EL but also in doing so, to provide them operative tools that would help take up an A-R approach to help them improve their problem-solving and communication competencies at the time of the research. The underlying theoretical principle of praxis was embedded in and interwoven through the leaders' and trainers' methods: the developing findings

10 National Conference Centre: highly equipped venue dedicated to training by the Ministry of Education.

influenced reciprocally our practice at the time of the research and consequently how we worked with one another. The research-training experience was practical and based on the needs and difficulties of the EL involved. It was thus both a research and development process.

The study comprised 12 months of data gathering and employed oral and written reflections, interactive semi-structured interviewing, and observation. The findings were analysed using grounded theory techniques using an action research methodology. The process of A-R accordingly became the method for both collecting and analysing data, both for myself the trainer/researcher and the ELs who were jointly involved in this process acting as community of researchers (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). During the data collection and analysis, the ELs helped me understand and evaluate their improvements and difficulties in problem solving and communication.

Data Gathering:

Primary investigative tool: post-training interviews were carried out at the end of the training.

In order to prepare training and also give body to the findings, I made use also of the information or core data gathered from:

- *Pre-training interview, carried out before the start of the training and mid-term interview in carried out midway of the training-research experience (objectives of these interviews will be discussed later in this chapter)*
- *Oral reflections carried out during the training and learning community sessions, webinars, and final presentation held at the end of the training in the presence of all EL which were video-recorded and studied by the researcher.*
- *Examination of written reflections and tasks carried out thanks to the prescribed tasks given by the end of each training or learning community session but also of the log books, diaries or blogs kept by the EL (this was not compulsive and EL were free to share chosen pages of their dairies) regarding their practice, self-reflections, learning community and partnership coaching experiences.*

Multiple data sources were used to deepen the researcher's understanding of the issues and maximize the confidence in the findings of qualitative studies. This is in line with the concept of **triangulation**. Triangulation is a powerful technique that facilitates validation of data through cross verification from two or more sources. It assumes that a weakness in one data source will be compensated for by another, and helps to make sense out of a data by considering different accounts. According to Rothbauer (2008), "The concept of triangulation is borrowed from

navigational and land surveying techniques that determine a single point in space with the convergence of measurements taken from two other distinct points." The idea is that one can be more confident with a result if different sources lead to the same result. Bogdan & Biklen (2006) state that triangulation has become an alternative to traditional criteria like reliability and validity. Triangulation was not only applied in this study because it is a method-appropriate strategy of founding the credibility of qualitative analyses, but the use of multiple data sources ensured a rich, robust, comprehensive and well-developed account of the phenomenon under investigation. Triangulation helped me in a dual role. I felt it important, as a researcher, to have a robust amount of data from different sources to ensure that my observations would be as trustful and objective as possible. I thought this would also help me identify with more ease and precision, the common theme when carrying out the data analysis. Since I followed the group from beginning to end of this training-research experience as a trainer, I wanted to have a body of data to be able to cross check my observations through out the entire experience. This helped me in designing the training sessions.

3.4 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

This inquiry explores on how EL experienced the training, and so a flexible survey instrument has been used. Semi-structured interviews (Flick, 2008; 2009; Zucchermaglio et al., 2013) have been chosen. The post-training interview was the key tool for gathering information (APPENDIX 1 & 2). According to Kvale & Brinkmann (2008), an interview has the purpose of interchanging views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest. Cohen, Manion & Morrison sustain that (2007) interviews “enable participants- to be the interviewers or interviewees- to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situation from their own point of view”(p349). I believe semi-structured interviews were ideal in this training-research experience, since they served both to collect data but also to bring the ELs to reflect on their practice, difficulties, resources and even progress made. The ELs point of views, feedback and the possibility for them to put forward questions, guided me in designing the training sessions.

3.4.1 KEY FUNCTIONS OF THE RESEARCH INTERVIEW

1.As a principal means of gathering information which has direct bearing on the research objective;

2. *As a means to test hypothesis or suggest new ones; or as an explanatory device to help identify variables and relationships;*

3. *As a tool used together with other tools and methods for validating, to follow-up unexpected results and/or go deeper into the motivations of respondents and their reasons for responding as they do (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).*

The purpose of the interviews was to unearth the beliefs, perceptions and the feelings of the participants as they experienced the training-research process, the author opted for a semi-structured interview methodology so as to allow the feelings of individuals as they experienced the process emerge and guide the research but also training agenda. This type of semi-formal interview, allowed space for the interviewer to modify the sequence of questions, changing the wording, explain them if need be/or add more questions to clarify further issues being mentioned (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). This allowed for a conventional style that respects the interviewee's pace and need to reflect on his/her answers. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews manage to capture the main aims of the three different interviews carried out pre-training, mid-term and post-training.

3.4.2 KEY AIMS OF THE INTERVIEWS

Pre-training interviews served (APPENDIX 3 & 4):

1) *To allow the interviewer and ELs' to get to know one another and create a trusting relationship between the trainer/researcher and each EL, which is fundamental for the training experience.*

2) *To explore the perceptions of each EL regarding Educational Leadership and what they consider to be necessary competencies; their perceptions regarding their own leadership, their problem solving and communication competencies; and whether they had any training or they have specific models they refer to when faced by problems and resistances.*

3) *To gather information on the strengths and difficulties in problem-solving, and communication to inform and guide the design of the training content. The researcher was aware that the EL might not be aware of their competences and incompetences, and would come to discover them during the training.*

4) *To allow ELs to express questions and queries regarding the one-year training-research experience.*

5) *To better define and address the research questions.*

The Mid-term interviews served to (APPENDIX 5 & 6):

1) To allow ELs to reflect on the training-research experience; reflect on what they have improved; what they still find difficulty with; what they need to work on mostly in the coming months, both in communication and problem solving.

2) Gather information on what they believe they required most from the training in the coming months to inform and guide trainer-researcher in planning the training and learning communities in the coming months.

3) To define further and address the research questions.

The Post-training interviews served to (APPENDIX 1 & 2):

1) To gather data on whether they have seen improvement in the problem solving and communication competencies. Interviewees were asked for an analogical and a digital evaluation for each competency and what helped them specifically towards this improvement.

2) To see whether they are using an action-research approach to their practice

3) To encourage further reflection through a two-way communication. Those being interviewed were given the opportunity to ask questions to the interviewer on their still existing difficulties and the interviewer poses questions for the interviewee to find his/her answers. Semi-structured interviews can confirm what is already known but also provides the opportunity for learning. Often the information obtained will provide not just answers, but also the reasons for the answers (Cohen, 2006)

All three semi-structured interviews were designed after carefully reading of literature and extended discussions with tutor. A pilot study or trial run was carried out with an Educational Leader who did not participate in the training-research project. Minor amendments and changes were carried out to the original interviews.

The semi-structured interviews, carried out in three specific times (pre- training, mid-training, post-training) generated rich and deep descriptions of their experiences and raised tangible feedback for improving the action-research based training (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The data collected revealed significant improvements in problem solving and communication in each participating EL and also common themes and categories shared by the ELs.

It is imperative to state that interviews were carried out in Italian with Italian ELs and English with Maltese ELs, even though some Maltese ELs answered the asked questions in mixture of English and Maltese. This was allowed since it was important that ELs would express themselves in the way

they felt most comfortable. Each interview was then transcribed in full by the researcher and translated verbatim into English. For the purposes of analysis the researcher used the English translation of the interviews. Another colleague went through transcripts and translation to ensure a loyal translation of the interviews. Having to conduct bi-lingual groups and interviews, and then to transcribe and translate the collected material, was quite challenging and time-consuming.

In choosing this tool, the researcher was also aware of the limitations that this particular method of collecting data would pose. Robson (2004) highlights two major limitations. The first major concern that has to do with the lack of standardisation, thus raise concern about the reliability of the data collected, making it difficult to rule out biases. The second has to do with the management of the tool due to the fact that it is a very time-consuming methodology that requires hours of interviewing and preparation that needs to be done in making arrangements to visit, securing necessary permissions and rescheduling appointments. This method also offers particular challenges when the interviews are transcribed and subsequently analysed.

Whilst designing the research tool it is imperative to be aware that: “The construction of a research interview schedule will be influenced by the researcher’s ideas both about what is relevant to explore in a particular area and about what it is possible to elicit in an interview, as well as by the kind of analysis the researcher envisages using” (Burck, 2005, p. 241). Designing the interviews with different research-training objectives in mind was quite a challenge. I wanted to remain loyal both to the research but also training purposes and objectives.

Various research (Dallos & Vetere, 2005; Griffee, 2005) shows that piloting the interview schedules becomes an important step in order to anticipate any of these complexities. The interview was piloted with one participant, an EL who did not make part of the training. He was informed about the objectives of this interview before starting the process. The pilot study was videotaped and studied by myself together with my supervisor. The pilot study gave me a lot of insight and information that helped me amend my interview procedure but helped me also in testing my interviewing skills and thus learn how to do better. At the end of each interview, I asked the participant to give me feedback about the way she/he felt during the interview, the interview questions, the interview timing, and my style of probing. I have also reflected on the type of questions posed and whether these addressed the research question, my ability to keep to the time limit discussed prior to starting this process, as well as the participant’s safety. Their feedback was very positive, and my own reflections shared with my supervisor also showed that the research instrument was appropriate to address the research question leading this inquiry.

Regarding the setting, all the interviews were held at a time and place that was convenient and comfortable for each respective participant. All the interviews were video-recorded and consent for doing so was specifically sought from each participant; each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. Additionally information about the context of each story was collected prior to the first interview during the initial meeting with each participant.

3.5 COUNTERACTING THE LIMITATIONS AND RELIABILITY

Joppe (2000) explores validity and reliability in qualitative research. He notes that while in positivist quantitative methodologies the idea is that of ‘replicability’ or repeatability of results or observations, naturalistic approaches seek to understand context-specific phenomena and thus emphasis is placed on understanding the context and extrapolating the data to similar situations. Unlike in the quantitative research, immersion into the context of the data is essential in qualitative research. Golafshami (2003) affirms that the investigator should be allowed “to be present during the changes to record an even after, and before the changes occurs” (p. 600). The researcher is the instrument of the research. In my research this was even more present since the researcher was also the trainer and facilitator of the A-R based training process. Qualitative validity is found in the quality of the research, in its ability to explain and “generate understanding” (Stenbacka, 2001, p 551).

Cohen et al., (2007) suggest that the interview may be used as the principal means of gathering information having direct bearing on this research’s objectives, in my case, to have information both for my Ph.D research but also to hand on an inquiry-action approach to the ELs. In this study interviews were also undertaken as part of case study research, thus they were semi-structured so that the interviewee contributes to shaping the conversation and help researcher-trainer design training onto the needs of the ELs. As these authors affirm, it is difficult to ensure reliability using semi-structured interviews because of the intentional aim of treating each participant as a potentially unique respondent. In order to minimise the errors and bias in the study, I tried to document the procedures followed from the beginning till the end of this research-training experience. As Yin (1994) states “the general way of approaching the reliability problem is to conduct research as if someone were always looking over your shoulder” (p. 146). I reflected and documented on my actions and observations through out the training-research experience, continuously questioning my decisions and interventions.

3.6 SELF-REFLEXIVITY DURING THE RESEARCH AND ACTION RESEARCH-TRAINING PROCESS

Critical reflection was a key aspect of this entire study. This training provided a possibility of a three-way *critical reflection; self-reflection, learning community and partnership coaching reflections* supported and challenged by an outside facilitator, to successfully provide the essential problem solving and communication competencies necessary for effective leadership.

Beyond its research objectives, this training was also an intervention because it required its participant to stop and look critically at their practice, inviting them to put into action interventions, which bring along further reflection and understanding of their practice. In '*Research methods in Education*', Cohen and Manion (1980, p.174) affirm that the benefits of action research to training come from "a close examination of the effects of the intervention" of reflecting on the information emerging from the intervention and then determining how understandings elicited from the reflection can be used to advantage personal and professional development.

Documented self-reflexivity was carried out in preparation of the interviews, after the interviews but also in the on-going planning-designing of the training. As a trainer and facilitator, I also took up an A-R approach, which entailed a reflective study of each training session. I kept a self-reflective logbook to help me in my practice and inform my next action. Reflexivity in qualitative research is similar to personal therapy for therapists. It helps to open and reflective around one's own experience, and avoid an expert attitude. McLeod(2011) affirms the same principle applies to qualitative research.

Self-reflexivity was even more necessary in this study since I was both researcher and trainer. The researcher approaches a field of study and the inquiry itself with a set of preconceived ideas, values, beliefs, experiences and interests that will surely affect the inquiry and vice versa (Cohen et al., 2007). Researchers are therefore part and parcel of the social world they are researching and consequently they bring their own baggage to the inquiry. For this reason, throughout the process of this study, I repeatedly questioned my methods and myself in order to avoid bias as much as possible. Although challenging, retaining self-reflexivity throughout the whole process is indeed significant and vital (Langdrige, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2015). I was very much aware that it was imperative to challenge my assumptions while also be aware of their effect on the research process, particularly during the interviews with the participants but also through out the research - training experience.

Yet it is important to state that self-reflexivity does not only help in dealing with sources of subjective bias but it may become a very important part of the inquiry itself because it may also help to bridge the gap between research and practice (Etherington, 2004), especially in this case where I was conducting both the research and the training. Researcher reflexivity is “the capacity of the researcher to acknowledge how their own experiences and contexts (which might be fluid and changing) inform the process and outcomes of the inquiry” (Etherington, 2004, pp. 31-32). By using my own awareness of how my own ‘*baggage*’ and training has informed me, I tried to instil in them further reflections and a sense of power, engagement and agency (Charmaz & Mitchell, 1997).

Throughout the research process, I recorded my reflections and remarks (Bishop & Shepherd, 2011; Watt, 2007) that were in some way useful to design and helped me prepare the next training/learning community session. This often took place right after the interviews or training/learning community sessions or whilst watching and studying the video- recordings. This exercise helped me to reflect further on annotations, thoughts and feelings that were generated. Following an A-R approach to training, these reflections carried out at times together with my tutor, were of great value to tailor make the training sessions onto the specific needs of the participants and onto the difficulties and resources they presented in the sessions. For example, after a session where ELs brought forward their fear of dissent, we decided to introduce a session on identifying and managing resistances. An excerpt from the process notes written following this the training session can be found in **Appendix 7 & 8**. It is imperative to say that even though the training had specific research objectives, the training sessions were informed by what each group required.

In line with an A-R approach, all training sessions were recorded and studied soon after the session, so as to build upon and design the next training session. Tasks were given to ELs after each session to make them practice “on site” the acquired learning but also to evaluate their capabilities and difficulties, and direct and plan the follow session. Feedback was also gathered from the evaluation sheets provided to the EL which they filled-in after each session **Appendix 9 & 10**. This was not compulsory. A mid-term interview was carried out with the specific aim to give voice and have direct feedback from the participants. This helped to understand what needed to be done in the coming six months so as to help each EL improve their problem-solving and communication competencies. This was carried out to respect triangulation.

Even here, I thought it would be useful to use triangulation for training purposes, to be able to check and analyse my training design and content from different perspectives. Patton (2002) cautions that it is a common misconception that the goal of triangulation is to arrive at consistency across data sources or approaches; in fact, such inconsistencies may be likely given the relative strengths of different approaches. In Patton's view, these inconsistencies should not be seen as weakening the evidence, but rather an opportunity to uncover deeper meaning in the data. In fact the purpose of triangulation is not necessarily to cross-validate data but rather to capture different dimensions of the same phenomenon. I believe inconsistencies can be very enriching especially when conducting a research but also a training process.

The findings were analysed using grounded theory techniques within the methodology of action research. In line with Carr & Kemmis, (1986) the processes of action research accordingly, became a method for both collecting and analysing data, with both the ELs and myself jointly involved in this process as a community of researchers. During the data collection and analysis, the EL helped me tailor make the training to their needs and challenges of their specific leadership practice.

3.7 SAMPLE SELECTION.

Since the research subjects needed not only to participate in the research but also in training, volunteer sampling seemed the most reasonable and appropriate for this study. Whilst preparing the proposal for this research I had projected to work with maximum 12 EL participants, thus accessing different narratives aiming to strive for in-depth analysis. I wanted to have different voices from different school contexts, yet I was aware that the groups could not be large so as to be able to follow closely the participants in acquiring operative tools in this training.

In order to have a broader perspective, I decided to exploit the fact that I work both in Malta and Italy. For logistical and language reasons, we thought it appropriate to hold two distinct groups one in Malta and the other in Italy, however the groups could interact through a virtual platform created for this training. With this in mind it was decided to create a Facebook page that was accessible only by the participating ELs, myself, my tutor and two psychology students who helped me in running the Facebook page and in videotaping the sessions. ELs participated on a voluntary bases. Yet in order to attract participants and ensure their commitment to the training-research experience, it was decided to seek to have the training accredited through the National Committee for Further

and Higher Education, it was eventually accredited to an MQF Level 6. 12 ELs began training, 6 Maltese and 6 Italians, but after the second training session, a Maltese EL dropped out due to health problems in the family. Thus 11 cases studies will be analysed and discussed.

3.8 GAINING ACCESS

Permission to undertake this research study was primarily obtained from University of Macerata, for the Italian group, and the Ministry of Education for the Maltese. Participants adhered to the research-training process on voluntary bases. In Malta, a circular letter was sent by the DSQE (Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education) to all heads of schools, while an email was sent by the undersigned to all heads of schools (in Italian: dirigenti scolastici) in province of Ancona, Macerata, Ascoli Piceno and San Benedetto del Tronto. However it is imperative to say that in the Italian group, adhesion to the project followed mostly through word of mouth. Participants were chosen on first-come-first serve basis.

Since the research was based on the outcome of an action-based training, it was important that most participants (preferably all) would follow the training from beginning to end. To ensure a better adhesion and commitment to the project, we considered it appropriate to have the DQSE of Malta offer the training and design the training following the Bologna Process requirements so as to be able to ask for accreditation at a European level. The request was carried out to National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE), the qualification body in Malta . In fact on completion of the training, all participants, Maltese and Italians were awarded a MQF6 certificate.

Formal and detailed information letters (Appendix 11-12) were distributed by the DSQE as the training provider in Malta and by the undersigned to the Italian ELs. Moreover detailed information letters and consent forms in both Italian and English (Appendix 13-14) were prepared for the prospective participants. In these letters I clearly outlined the rights of the participants and asked their consent to videotape all three interviews but also the training and the leaning community sessions for research and training purposes. The participants were informed that following an A-R approach, the undersigned would review and study the training and learning community sessions to

prepare and design each session onto the needs of the specific participants. Each training session informed the next. This preparation aided for a smoother progression both in the research but also training process.

3.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical practise and ethical data collection were taken in consideration as it is imperative to keep in mind that carrying out research about others is not an absolute right of researchers (Oakes, 2002). In fact, great care was given to avoid creating undue pressure to the participants and adequate time has been given for them to consider their participation without withholding any information – ensuring informed consent. McLeod (2003) affirms the importance of considering competence, provision of adequate information and voluntariness so that the participant can make an informed and realistic decision regarding his/her participation. Moreover the participants were given the right to withdraw at any point in time during the training- research process. In fact a Maltese EL withdrew because of family health reasons.

Participants were asked to give their consent to video-record interviews but also training and learning community sessions. It was specified that the recorded material would serve for the training and research proposed and could be watched exclusively only by the participants and myself as requested. Participants' personal information was safeguarded as outlined in the Data Protection Act (2001). The initials of the participating ELs were used for data protection.

A non-judgemental respectful attitude was taken up through out the interviews and training so as to create an environment of trust. I was fully cognizant of conflicts of interest that might arise from the dual roles (Farnetti, 2007) in this research-training study.

As a researcher but also as trainer/coach, I was aware of my rights but also of my responsibilities and I invested time and effort in understanding how I could best manage any possible conflicts

should they arise. I think what was most useful, were the regular meetings I had with my tutor through out the preparation, conduction and data analysis phases of the research-training study. This ensured an adequate management of the minor conflicts, which emerged during sessions and interviews Self-reflectivity helped me handle the struggle between the research goal and the training- relationship process, which as Wittezaele (2004) notes are strong conflicts when you are in a dual inquiry-intervention situation.

Throughout the training research experience, I respected the explicit and implicit choices and decisions of the ELs, for example not to be paired up with a specific EL, and also not to make regular use of the virtual platform and partnership coaching even though this could have given richer findings to my research. I took great care to avoid disclosing or using in the training sessions, personal stories and information that I had gathered during interviews or the various contacts I had via telephone and e-mails with the ELs. Knowing that I am also a psychotherapist, a number of ELs shared with me even personal difficulties and problems, which I tried to support and help out but I was very conscious in not allowing this to condition our rapports and research project. I must confess this was quite a challenge but I believe (and this was also confirmed by the ELs declaration in the post-training interview) that the ELs could feel that my main concern was to help them undergo a professional and personal development.

A major ethical issue in research concerns reporting overstatements and alteration of findings. I tried to deal with this by making use of triangulation, having multiple analysts review the findings whilst using reflexivity during this exercise. Israel & Hay (2006) affirm that caring to be ethical, ensures the integrity of the research and does not permit any fabrication of data or acquiring access to information under false pretences. This concern guided my work through out the training-research study.

3.10 CONCLUSIONS

The methodology chapter aimed to provide a detailed account of the methodology used throughout this inquiry. I felt it important to elaborate on the *research questions*, *the research design*, the choice of the *semi-structured interview* and the key functions of the pre, mid, and post-training interviews and on how I tried to counteract the *limitations and reliability*, the effective use of *self-reflexivity during the Research and Action Research-training Process*, *sample selection*, the procedure I used in *Gaining Access* and finally the *Ethical Considerations* made, given my dual role in this study. The following chapter will present the Data Analysis Process.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS PROCESSING

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to present a concise description of the data analysis processing used in this inquiry, while the findings and discussion will be carried out in the next chapter. In other words in the chapter I will limit myself to describe the data analysis process I used together with a brief self-descriptions of the participating ELs, and the process I used to respect trustworthiness and rigour in data analysis, whilst findings and discussion will be presented in Chapter 5.

4.2 DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS

Data analysis is the process of making sense of the information gathered from the participants. It involved a process of open coding, axial coding, and thematic coding that was used to synthesize data into convergent and divergent themes to highlight commonalities, differences, patterns, and structures of meaning within the data. Creswell (2007), Maxwell (2005), and Merriam (2002) each suggest data analysis can be one of the most challenging aspects of the research process.

To better answer the research questions, it was considered appropriate to made use of:

1. *Case studies* to present the participants' narratives regarding what they perceived and consider to have been of significant improvement in their problem solving and communication competences. Excerpts from the post-training interview will be presented, while other available data gathered from pre-training interview, mid-term interview, training sessions, learning community session, final presentation, webinars and written material (tasks, log books, diaries, blogs) will be used when considered appropriate, to further confirm the findings.
2. *Thematic Analysis* to present overarching themes that emerged from their narratives of the EL regarding their general perceptions of this training- research experience. Excerpts from the post-

training interview will support the emergent themes whilst creating a discussion by making reference to literature, as well as comparing and contrasting themes.

4.3 TRUSTWORTHINESS AND RIGOUR

In order to address the trustworthiness of this study, I have carried out the following procedures. Firstly, I have transcribed the interviews myself; this helped me to connect with the data and start reflecting upon emerging themes straight away. Observing the video-recording helped me gather any significant changes in the participants' expressions and non-verbal language to have a better understanding of the participants' perceptions (Riessman, 2008). An 'audit trail' (McLeod, 2011) has been developed, recording all the research steps taken from the start to the end of this inquiry. To ensure the truthfulness of the data, I have made use of 'member-checking' "where together with the ELs we reviewed research texts so as to ensure that the participants' narrative authority is respected. In addition I had regular meetings with my supervisor so as to critically review my biases. This brought me to be more aware of the rational and emotional processes taking place during this research-training project.

4.4 NARRATIVES/ CASE SELF-DESCRIPTIONS

What follows is a brief introduction of the 11 participants. Each EL wrote his/her self-description. I cared to have each EL carry out his/her personal self-descriptions so as to give once more voice to their perceptions. Thus there are some self-descriptions which are rather long and elaborated, while others are short and to the point. Once more I cared to respect the ELs decisions in how to carry out their work. The case studies with the significant improvements shown by each ELs in problem solving and communication competencies will be discussed in detail in the next chapter "Findings and Discussion", where I will be making reference to the collected data as well as to the existing literature.

CASE 1 FS

Becoming a teacher was not my childhood dream. I graduated in Literature and French Civilization and I started my teaching career in 1990. Until 2005 I taught in primary school until 2005 mainly teaching Italian, History, Geography and Music, but for a few years also Mathematics and Science). In 2001 I taught French to middle and high school but I never asked to be transferred from the primary.

I followed many training courses mainly on methodologies, classroom management (Gordon method), the educational relationship (Emotional Intelligence, Goleman, Transactional Analysis), cooperative learning, use of ICT in teaching. In 2005 I left primary school, to take the role of the intern-ship tutor at the University of Macerata (UNIMC), with vocational training students in Primary Education Science. I enjoyed the role since I felt it very suitable to my experience and my aspirations. The university professor of the intern-ship assigned me as head coordinator of tutors, which even though it was a very demanding and delicate position, it was very gratified for me.

In 2006/2007 I attended a Master in E-Learning Designer and then, while continuing working at University, I served as an online tutor in various training courses for teachers. Then I carried out a master degree on teachers' professional development of teachers, a topic that fascinated me. I have been part of a research team led by prof. Rossi, focused on the Analysis of teachers' practices, coordinated by Prof. M. Altet Nantes. In 2010 I started my Ph. D degree in Technology of Education, aimed at understanding how online training can influence the professional development of teachers.

At the same time I joined two master courses for school leaders at a tutor, where I came in direct contact with leading national experts on various aspects of the Educational leadership (school management, relational aspects, safety, leadership).

When I was still teaching, I had no intention of becoming head of school, but the university program opened up many new perspectives. In 2011 I decided to sit for the national exam to become head of schools. It was very tough, but at the end it went well. In the examination I managed to put together the studies and the experiences made during these years. Even if my path had not been standard or linear, everything resulted valuable. In 2012, my the adventure as head of school started off at the Institute of C., which has 11 schools spread out in a mountainous territory. Right from the start it was clear that I would have little time for my personal life. Also because I still was carrying out my Ph.D which I brought to competition in 2013.

The complexity of the work increased also because of the constant demands from the Ministry and stakeholders, has further brought me to seek answers, methodologies, approaches adapted to the many problems which arose. That is what brought me to participated in many training initiatives. One of the most significant and challenging training courses was conducted by Prof. Barbara Pojaghi “Managing change in a team” held at UNIMC. That's where, in search for further professional growth, I met Claudette! The proposal for a training on the theme of Educational Leaders brought great enthusiasm in me. It was just what I needed in that moment. In fact I felt that I was dedicating, or maybe better wasting, too much energy in the work, inefficiently. I lacked a method to deal with all that complexity. Above all I was losing the serenity and felt distressed from what I could not manage to do. I could not manage my time efficiently.

This training gave me the opportunity to work closely with a group of dedicated colleagues. I have to say the training was very demanding, unfortunately I wish I dedicated myself even more, but even so, for me, it created a Copernican revolution in my approach in problem solving and communication, and in my perspectives of myself and others. I believe this training, which I hope we manage to continue in the coming months, was a truly transformative experience.

CASE 2: EF

I am 42 years old and I have been a teacher for twenty years. My experience was varied, I taught as a Primary School teacher, as a secondary teacher at Corradino Correctional Facilities (basically Maltese & English to inmates), and was also a teacher at the Eden Foundation with kids with special needs. In 2011 I was appointed head of school, but priorly I served as assistant head of school for four years. I was Head of School in two different State Primary Schools in S.J.'s and H.L., Malta. After my degree, I carried out a Post Graduate Diploma in Education Administration and Management (PGDEAM), Master in Interculture and Environmental Management of Schools, & various in-service courses, but practically they don't count cause they were all three day courses! Even though there is a lot of management involved in the job, I always considered myself to be a leader - to lead by example above anything else. I found fulfilment in the job when I felt that I inspired my colleagues - when I helped them to become aware that they can do better and to feel empowered. I believe that a wise leader is also humble (there is always so much to learn and to discover!) - it is the best way to win your colleagues' respect and trust.

CASE 3: ST

My name is S and I was born in Macerata on 11 March 1972. After finishing my studies, in 1997, I became a primary school teacher. In 1998 I graduated in Modern Literature and I became a Secondary school teacher. I taught literature from 2003-20013, but in 2005 I taught Italian and Latin at the High school in Macerata. In 2005 I graduated in Foreign Languages and Literatures. In 2013 I was appointed head of school, first at the Institute BF in Ancona and at present I am the head of the Institute EM of Macerata.

CASE 4: DG

In 1997 I graduate in B.Ed. (Hons.) Degree in Maltese & Early Middle Years (EMY) at University of Malta. Since I loved theatre and acting from 1997-2000 I followed a course in Theatre, Drama and Acting Technique. After completed the three-year extensive course at the Drama Centre of Malta and I gave service to the same Drama Centre as a tutor for Junior and Intermediate classes. From 1997-1999, I was a Primary School teacher at K. Primary school. From 1999 till 2008 I was a full time Peripatetic Drama Teacher in various primary and secondary schools in Malta. From 2008- 2013 I acted as assistant head. In 2010 I joined a project between the University of Malta and the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education, “Let Me Learn Professional Learning Process- Practitioner’s Certificate. In 2013 I graduated in Post graduate diploma in Educational Leadership. In 2014, when I was about to turn 40, I was appointed head of School.

Another part of my life is in theatre and music. I was appointed as part of the Eurosong Advisory Team responsible for Malta's participation at the Junior Eurovision Song Contest and the Eurovision Song Contest itself. I produced and hosted educational radio shows for children and adults. The show ‘K’ ghal Kottonera Kids’ aired on Community Radio Channel, Radju Kottoner 98FM was produced between December 2006 and July 2008. This show promoted literacy among children. Students from Sta. Margherita College were invited on a regular basis to promote the various literacy projects organised in their schools. Students were also given the opportunity to experience the world of the local media. I produce and host educational and entertainment television shows. These include the Award-winning quiz, ‘Hames Mija’. ‘Hames Mija’ covered various topics including History, Science, Sports, Arts, Maltese Language, Traditions, Religious Knowledge, Mythology and other topics related to the General Knowledge. ‘Hames Mija’ won the Malta Television Award as the ‘Best Local TV-Quiz’ in Summer 2006. I also produced and hosted ‘Celebrity Sundays’ in Summer 2009, 2010 and 2011. This TV production was nominated for ‘Best Entertainment’ at the Malta Television Awards 2010. I produced and hosted the ‘Summer Hit Song

Contest' in 2014 and am currently hosting and producing the Saturday night show 'The Celebrity Night'.

As part of my duties and responsibilities at the Drama Unit, I organised various drama events and educational theatrical productions throughout the scholastic years both in schools as well as at the drama unit theatre. These productions were mainly held in English so that children improve the command of the language through drama. I took part in the Malta Drama Fest 2004 as the director of 'Metamorfosi' – a physical theatre piece devised by the theatre group Cocoon.

CASE 5: MA

I taught for more than 20 years in a primary school, initially as an LSA and then as a Maths teacher.

I worked in various Institutes in the province of Macerata and then I moved to Lucatelli.

I was appointed head of school in September 2012, I previously had 2 years' experience as assistant head. For the first two years of principal-ship for 2 years I was in I had three schools: Sarnano, San Ginesio and Tolentino. It was a great experience, at first very tough but then it ended up being very stimulating and rewarding. A series of fortunate coincidences brought me to become head of the school where I was a teacher, with all the pros and cons that entails directing an Institute where many people know you very well and where you have friendly relations.

This experience of the training came along during my transition from one school to another which was quite a difficult period for me because I had many regrets and guilt towards my old school, where a lot of people felt that I had abandoned them in a time when I still had something to give. The training was very important, it taught me a lot and above all it helped me to reflect on how to address the various problems we have to face as head of school. I came to recognized my

difficulties and present limits but discovered also my potential. Now it is up to me to put into practice what I've learned.

I am 56 years old, will turn 57 in May, but I'm still excited about my work, I like the relationship with teachers and even more with my students, who I try to listen and support through difficult times. My school has more than 1,000 pupils aged 3 to 14 years. It is a complex school in which the diversity is very present. This can be an asset but sometimes it can become very challenging.

CASE 6: LS

I am 43 years young (old) and I am the Head of the Happy School! After thirteen years as a primary school teacher, I decided it was time for me to move on. So I submitted my application for assistant head of school. I had to undergo an interview. I had already completed a diploma in Educational Leadership and Management. When the results were out, I was placed at the G.C.R. Primary School. During the five years as assistant head, I tried to play an active role in the school community being part of a dynamic school management team. When applications for headship were issued, I was sure I could be an effective leader. My surprise was that when postings were out, I received a telephone call informing me that I would be the Head of R. Primary School. I just had to change office and role! This helped a lot. I was already familiar with the school dynamics, staff, parents and children. I could therefore focus on bringing change where I deemed necessary, making school a happy place for all, especially children.

CASE 7: MV

My name is M and I was born on May 20th 1972. I graduated in languages in 1996 at the University of Macerata and in 1998 I specialised in Classical Philology. I became officially a primary school teacher in 2001. In 2003 I was transferred to a Secondary School as a Latin and Italian teacher.

From 1997 till 2001 I worked in a museum; I received a grant from the province of Ascoli Piceno (1998); I was a partner and worker in a social cooperation (1998-2000); I also worked as support teacher with foreign students from 1996 to 1999. From 2008 to 2012, I acted as assistant head of the school where I teaching. In 2012 I became head of school, and I was first in the province of Macerata and now in Ascoli Piceno.

CASE 8: MVE

I am one of those practitioners who never wished to be a teacher but who loved it from day one. That happened in 1982 and I have never looked back. I began my career as a teacher of English at DS College (secondary school) and, over the years, I taught all the forms. I particularly enjoyed teaching essay writing and literature. I was then appointed Assistant Head and I began my training in administration and management which was a new area for me.

In 2006 I was appointed head of the junior section in the same college, and once again I saw the need to undergo further training. I read a Masters degree in Educational Leadership from the University of Malta. I am 58 years old and still firmly believe in the need to keep on training in order to be relevant and credible as a head of school.

CASE 9: SM

I began my career as a primary school teacher at the age of 18, where I immediately passed the national exam. I taught for 8 years and then in 1991 at the age of 26 years, I became a head of

school in the province of Macerata . Today I have 25 years of service. After so many years of experience gained as a head of a Primary school, I now direct a Scientific High School of about 1000 students. I have always been interested in education and at my age of 52, I am aware that my work has taken so much of my energies. It is a job of great isolation and little recognition.

On a personal level I'm married with a child psychiatrist and have a son, Matthew, who is in his 2nd year at University where he studies IT.

The training for EL was a valuable learning experience. It was an enriching experience, that gave me the opportunity to meet and share experiences and knowledge with my colleagues and our trainer.

CASE 10: MM

In June 2010, I was appointed the first Head of a newly founded Secondary School, St Ignatius College Girls' Secondary. I am one of the youngest heads in Malta. I am now 41 years old with six years experience in headmastership. I was appointed Head of School after serving four years as Acting Head at S. Primary School within St Benedict College. In my teaching repertoire, I had experience in primary, secondary and tertiary sector having taught in Ż. Primary School, S.B. College Boys' Secondary and GFA Junior College. Academically, I read my first degree in Education with the University of Malta, followed by a Post Graduate Diploma in School Administration and Management. Later I read a Masters degree in Philosophy of Education. I am currently reading a Ph.D on Feminist Leadership in School Networks.

Interested in the field, I published several papers including: "Providing a global dimension to Citizenship Education: A Collaborative Approach to Pupil Learning within *Connectando Mundos*" in M. Galiero, W. Grech and D. Kalweit (Eds), Global Citizenship Education (Malta: Outlook Coop, 2009: 84-90); "Feminist Leadership in Rhizomatic School Networks - A Contribution ?" in C.

Bezzina, Educational Leadership: Nurturing Meaning in a Context of Change, (Malta: Print It, 2009: 211-228); and with C. Calleja “Let Me Learn in-service training: A teacher’s experience” published in The Journal of Maltese Education and Research (Vol:4 No.2 2007: 54-66). I presented in various local and international conferences.

CASE 11: AD

I am 49 years. Becoming a headmistress was surely not part of my plans!

I taught German almost continuously from 1992 to 2011 in secondary schools in the province of Vibo Valentia (Calabria). Yet while a teacher I participated in various European projects (PON, Comenius, etc.), which I followed through in all their phases of realization. I worked abroad too. I was a lecturer of Italian, at the Faculty of Foreign Languages of Shkodra (Albania) from 2007 to 2009 and then in 2011/2012 in Split (Croatia). In 2011-2012 I followed the preparation course for the national exam for head teacher in the province of Ancona.

I chose the region Marche because it was easily accessible by ship from Split, where I lived at the time. It was just an attempt for me to come back to Italy. I knew it would have been difficult to continue teaching my subject, especially after the reform carried out in Italy regarding secondary schools. I had to make some important life choices for the future. In fact in 2009 I decided to take a Master course in School leadership. A premonition! The research topic I had chosen for my thesis back then, concerned the presence of non-Italian students in the Italian school, and in 2012, I found myself, accidentally, directing the Institute E. A. of Porto Recanati, where more than 30% of students are foreigners.

4.5 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic Analysis was used to find common themes from the EL narratives. “Thematic analysis

represents a straightforward approach to extracting meaning from transcript data” (McLeod, 2011, p. 147). The narratives from the interviews have been analysed through Thematic Analysis to identify and analyse patterns within the data (Clarke, Braun & Hayfield, 2015; Joffe, 2011; McLeod, 2011). Clarke et al. (2015) suggest that thematic analysis although often disregarded in literature, has specific steps that make up a process of data analysis.

Phase 1 Familiarization: involves listening and re-listening to the video recordings needed for transcription purposes. The transcripts need to be read for several times with the necessary curiosity and interest to start formulating the initial ideas.

Phase 2 Coding: whilst reading and re-reading the transcripts the initial codes are identified. The aim is to label interesting excerpts from the data that had possible relevance to the research question and sub-questions.

Phase 3 ‘Searching’ for Themes: involves the organisation of codes into potential themes and sub-themes; overarching themes became more evident.

Phase 4 Reviewing Themes: during this phase the initial thematic maps are formed and the themes and sub-themes have been reviewed once again with the coded data.

Phase 5 Defining and Naming Themes: during this phase working definitions for the different themes are formulated in order to help maintain the focus on the particular theme and sub-themes. At this stage the excerpts from the interviews are re-examined to ensure coherence.

Phase 6 Writing Up: the definite themes and sub-themes are outlined and discussed.

These phases and the research questions guided my data analysis. Post-training interview transcriptions were closely read to consider the multiple meanings that are inherent in the text. I read through interview transcripts to search for elements of particular interest and ideas related to the questions framing the study. All corpus data- pre- and mid- term training interviews, training sessions, learning community sessions, oral and written presentations- were viewed and coded as

additional information to reinforced the findings gathered through the post-training interview. These codes or “categories of information” (Corbin & Strauss, 2007), along with methodological notes explicating the codes were recorded by hand in the margins of the transcripts. As a way to reflect on and synthesize findings I wrote memos during the process of data collection and analysis to make conceptual connections to research questions and catch “thoughts, capture comparisons and connections....and crystallize questions and directions...to pursue” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 73).

This process of open coding helped me begin constructing themes that frame both the study findings and conclusions. After working through the transcript I reviewed the codes and methodological notes placed in the margins and grouped similar ideas together. This analytic strategy, which is often referred to as axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) or analytical coding (Merriam, 2002), allowed me to begin identifying more specific categories of meaning within the data. Thematic coding was used to synthesize data into overarching themes that illuminate commonalities, patterns, and structures of meaning within the data. The following analysis is organized by the research questions guiding the study. Diagrams and charts were used to focus on what was emerging. This thematic coding process helped me synthesize data to offer a framework to analyse findings within a theoretical context, and provide an organizational structure.

I continued revising and refining my categories. Within each category, I searched for subtopics, including contradictory points of view and new insights. I selected appropriate excerpts that convey the core theme or essence of a category. The categories were combined or linked under a superordinate category when the meanings were similar.

TABLE 3 : OVERARCHING THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

<p>THEME 1: PERSONAL & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT</p> <p>1.1 Self-Awareness 1.2 Action & Strategies 1.3 Continuous development</p>
<p>THEME 2: PRAXIS</p> <p>2.1 Contextual & Relevant 2.2 Active & Operative 2.3 Rigorous but not rigid 2.4 Adaptable & Transferable 2.5 Effective</p>
<p>THEME 3: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS</p> <p>3.1 Scheduled self- reflections 3.2 Unscheduled self-reflections 3.3 Scheduled collective reflections 3.4 Unscheduled collective reflections</p>
<p>THEME 4: INTERDEPENDENCE</p> <p>4.1 Supportive communities 4.2 Trusting relationships 4.3 Widened horizons 4.4 Vicarious learning 4.5 Sharing learnt knowledge</p>
<p>THEME 5: RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT</p> <p>5.1 Human aspect 5.2 Active listening 5.3 Communication strategies 5.4 Turning resistances into collaboration 5.5 Active positioning</p>
<p>THEME 6: EXERCISE OF CONTROL</p> <p>6.1 Ownership 6.2 Agency & self-efficacy 6.3 Empowerment 6.4 Mastery</p>

Six overarching themes were developed: *Professional & Personal development, Praxis, Critical Reflections, Interdependence, Relationship management and Exercise of Control*. In each theme other sub-themes were identified. Table 3 presents all the overarching themes and sub-themes, which will be elaborated and discussed in chapter “Findings & Discussion”.

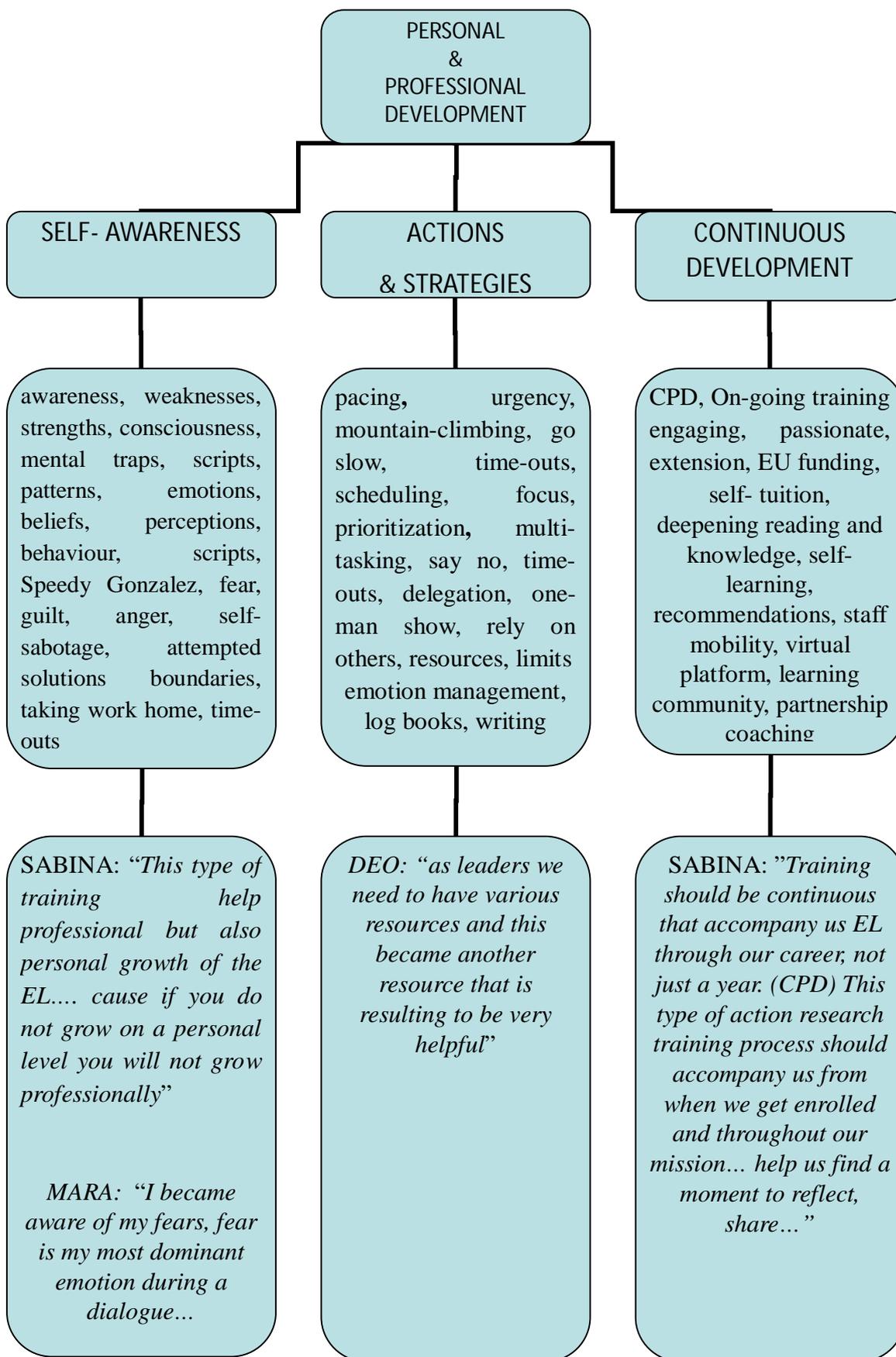


Figure 1. Thematic analysis map of the overarching theme 'Professional & Personal development'

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter explained the data analysis processed used in this study to address the research questions. As state earlier, case studies were used to understand whether the participating ELs perceived any significant improvement in their problem-solving and communication competencies, while a theme analysis was carried out to try to reveal and understand what are the common themes or aspects that ELs recognise to have been significant in this training-research experience.

5.2 CASE STUDIES

The aim of this section is to present the most significant improvements in problem solving and in communication reported by each Educational Leaders (EL). It is imperative to state that other improvements cannot be excluded, yet the study aims to bring to light what each EL perceives to have changed in his/her problem solving and communication competences.

The post-training interview was the primary inquiry tool of this elaboration, but additional data were gathered from observations of the training sessions, learning community sessions, webinars, final presentations, which were all video-recorded and reviewed by the researcher-trainer and also from excerpts from the written material (structured tasks, reflective logs, blogs, etc.) provided by the EL, to further completeness and confirmation of the findings gathered from the post/training interview (Yeasmin & Rahman, 2012). The use of other available data in this study is in line with Olsen's view of (2004) 'triangulation', that is, to increase the wider and deeper understanding of the

phenomenon studied. Available core data was used when considered appropriate, to give more body to the findings gathered from the post-training interview.

In line with a constructivist-strategic approach to change, during the post-training interview, participants were asked to give an analogical description of their perceived improvements both in problem solving and communication. Moreover, using the self-evaluation scale technique¹¹ (Nardone, Salvini 2011), ELs were asked to give a digital value to their improvements. They were asked the following question: “If you had to evaluate your improvement in (problem solving/communication) on a scale from 0-10, where 0 is the starting point, i.e. when you started the training and 10 the point of arrival, i.e. the final goal or complete competence acquisition, what is your evaluation today?” The scale technique allows the researcher to have a numerical evaluation of the change as perceived by the same EL who enrolled voluntarily to the learning process. This evaluation is obviously very subjective, yet it is in line with a constructivist-strategic approach to understanding the perception of change of each specific EL in both their problem solving and communication competences, i.e. their respective second order reality¹². Watzlawick (1981) denotes that a second order change takes place when there is a change in the individual’s understanding of the world, his/her perceptions, thoughts, feelings and actions.

Each case will be discussed presenting the most significant improvements in problem solving and communication as reported by the same EL. Following a constructivist-strategic approach, the discussion will highlight the significant improvements both at a perceptive and reactive level (Nardone, Watzlawick, 2005; Nardone, Balbi, 2015). Moreover, we will try to see whether the

11 Self-evaluation scale technique (Nardone, Salvini, 2011) used in brief strategic approach, which was inspired by the scale technique put together by Steve De Shazer and I.K. Berg. The self-evaluation scale technique is used to evaluate change but also serves as a guideline to proceed towards further improvement. Thus it is used to measure change but also to incentive further change.

12 Second order reality: that is the meaning we give to a specific first order reality in Nardone, Salvini (2011).

training-research experience has helped participants develop a state of consciousness, efficacy, craftsmanship, flexibility and interdependence which according to Costa and Garmston (2016) are fundamental outcomes of a learning process (see table below).

TABLE 4: COSTA AND GARMSTON'S 5 STATES OF MIND

<p>1. Consciousness: gained awareness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - from lack of awareness to awareness. - monitor and reflect on their own perceptions, emotions, beliefs, thoughts, behaviours generate - articulate well-defined value systems as well and apply internal criteria for decision they make. - practice mental rehearsal and edit mental pictures as they seek to improve strategies. - aware of the progress made, - aware of what is happening around them and in others. - live each experience at two levels, attention given to self and attention given to others. The executive capacity to do both simultaneously denotes a highly developed consciousness. <p>2. Efficacy- the belief in our own capabilities .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - move from an external locus of control to an internal locus of control. - from playing the victim to being the vanguard of changes within the system the person works in. - believe that all payoffs will give results and that one's efforts and actions make a difference. - persevere in the face of barriers and occasional failure - have sound self-knowledge and feel good about themselves. - gain proxy- efficacy, i.e. the ability to rely on others and delegate but still feel in control - collective efficacy- work together and build learning communities to achieve what may not able to achieve individually. <p>3. Craftsmanship- rigour and precision</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - move from vagueness and imprecision to specificity and elegance. - apply the acquired skills with precision and adapting it the specific experience. - ceaselessly learn and deepen their knowledge and skills through elaboration, clarity, refinement and self-correction to reach precision. - generate and hold clear visions and goals. Strive for exactness of critical thought processes and precise language for describing their work. - take pride in their work and consistently strive to improve their current performance. - hold an internal drive towards excellence, towards continuous improvement.

4. Flexibility-fluidity both at a perceptive and reactive level

- ability to move from a narrow, fixed or egocentric view to broader and alternative perspective
- takes into consideration bigger ideas and the opinions of others.
- ability to step beyond themselves and look at a situation from a different perspective.
- ability to take up behaviour in line with the specific situation.
- are risk takers and are not satisfied with the living in the middle; they are always pushing the frontier or present limits.
- look upon each experience as a 'learning by doing' opportunity.
- ability to see the problem from different point of view, explores possibilities and alternatives a touchstone of problem solving.

5. Interdependence-systems thinking and involvement

- moves from being isolated or separate to being part of a larger group or community.
- becomes a systems thinker
- share with others reflection, experience and knowledge
- consider one's role in the school system is a crucial part to becoming a professional educator.
- help others reflect upon and refine their practice.
- assist others to think more effectively about their thinking, help them make responsible choices, and then support them as they take action.
- are of service to their students, staff and/or school system.

Moreover, from the narratives I tried to understand at what competence level do EL perceive themselves to hold at the end of the action-research based training. According to Noel Burch¹³, there are four stages along the way to improvement in any specific skill, which denotes progress from incompetence to competence; Unconscious incompetence, Conscious incompetence, Conscious competence and Unconscious competence level.

¹³ Initially described as "Four Stages for Learning Any New Skill", the theory was developed at Gordon Training International by its employee Noel Burch in the 1970s.[1]It has since been frequently attributed to Abraham Maslow, although the model does not appear in his major works. Cited in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_stages_of_competence

TABLE 5: THE FOUR STAGES OF COMPETENCE:

Unconscious incompetence: unaware of what we do not know. In this stage, we are not aware that the condition could or should be better than it is. We do not understand or know how to do something and do not necessarily recognize the deficit. We may deny the usefulness of the skill. The individual must recognize their own incompetence, and the value of the new skill, before moving on to the next stage. The individual might remain in this stage if not stimulated to become aware of this incompetence.

Conscious incompetence: being aware of our gaps, of what we know and what we don't know. Though we do not understand or know how to do something, we do come to recognize the deficit, as well as the value of a new skill in addressing the deficit. The making of mistakes can be integral to the learning process at this stage.

Conscious competence: the new behaviour or practice is giving good results but it still requires paying careful attention to get it right. We now know how to do something, however, carrying out the skill or knowledge requires concentration. Executing the new skill is often broken down into steps and involves heavy conscious involvement.

Unconscious competence. The new behaviour is "second nature". It becomes how we perform- as if on "automatic pilot". We have had so much practice with a skill that it has become automatic and performed with ease. The skill can be utilized without it being consciously thought through: the individual is said to have then acquired unconscious competence. As a result, the skill can be performed while executing another task. Moreover, the skill is so well mastered that the individual may be able to teach it to others.

However I believe it is imperative to state that competences are not static states. Especially in the educational system, which is a dynamic environment, EL are continuously challenged by new changes which require them to ceaselessly go through the cycle of the four different stages.

5.2.1 CASE STUDY 1: FS

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN PROBLEM SOLVING

FS asserts that her problem solving competences have improved significantly. On the self-evaluation scale, she rates her improvement as being a 7. In the post-training interview, the first thing that FS affirms, was that she feels more confident in herself and in the decisions she is taking.

She experiences agency in her work because she has a model to follow. She feels secure and empowered to take even alternative actions. The following passage shows her acquired sense of *self-efficacy* in problem solving.

“Having a model to follow, gives me more security..., in certain areas I felt already competent.... in defining the problem but now I analyse the case better, I am able to define better the problem, I consider the failed attempted solutions, I consider the different points of view and the mountain climbing technique, it gave my problem solving a structure, a sort of scaffolding... thus knowing there are these certain steps to follow and these alternatives, how to tackle a problem, I know it is there.... it gives me a sense of security.(post-training interview Track 1 03.25).

FS seems to have developed a high level of *craftsmanship*. She seems to have moved from a sense of being lost and vagueness to a more specific, precise and elegant performance in her problem-solving skills. The training-research process seems to have helped FS to be able to apply the acquired skills to a task or experience with precision. The self-corrective aspect of the problem solving model made her embrace the idea that she does not need to reach the target immediately, that actions inform her what to do next, and this makes her act with more serenity. Even when her actions do not hit the target or do not give the expected results she does not live it as a defeat. She perseveres in the face of obstacles and failed attempts, which denotes an internal drive towards excellence and continuous improvement. Thus this further confirms a developed state of *self-efficacy*, *craftsmanship* and *flexibility* in her problem-solving ability.

“My action (regarding a decision she had to take regarding an after-school program) was not so adequate, my decision was not so inclusive....and that is why three parents did not come along, but I did not live these three as a defeat, and did not live this situation as a defeat” (post-training interview track 2 11.00)

In the post-training interview, FS verifies that she uses the problem-solving model even when she needs to discuss and analyse school problems together with other school staff. Having a common model facilitates collective problem posing and problem solving. She denotes a developed state of

systems thinking. She seems to strongly consider her role in the school system as playing a crucial part to becoming a professional educator. She already started helping others reflect upon and refine their practice, while supporting them as they take action. This denotes that she has reached a state of

Interdependence.

“With the teacher who was assisting me in this project, we said ok here, what is the problem?.... we analysed and considered the different points of view, some had a problem with the teacher, others because they had a bad experience at primary school, others were afraid of too much homework....we tried to consider all points of view to come up with a possible alternative that they all could go along with.... We narrowed down, in a funnel-like process and we discovered that there was a common denominator which could work out for all....I also asked her (referring to the teacher) what has been attempted so far to avoid it... and we came to a solution”. (Post-training interview Track 1 06.44)

She further affirms that she is trying to bring her staff to start using a constructivist-strategic approach to her practice.

“I believe in constructivism... I believe teachers should use it in class with students. I knew this approach but you exposed it well, now it clear to me and want to use it with my staff ... I liked constructivism combined with problem-solving it gave me clear practical guidelines to follow and to use with others. It gives you a method, guidelines but which are adaptable to the situation. Helps me put forward the right questions to analyse the specific situations... it is not a ready-made recipe... but it is a problem-posing method that leads you to problem solving in different contexts” (post training interview Track 2, 29:57)

FS asserts that this has become her way of reflecting and dealing with everyday problems, when she has to deal with problems on her own but even when she has to come to solutions together with others. This denotes that she can evaluate better the situation (*consciousness*), adapt her intervention to the situation (*flexibility*), and feel more secure in what she is doing (*self-efficacy*). This brings her to use method with rigour (*craftsmanship*) on her own but also with her staff (*Interdependence*).

From the presented excerpts, it is clear that FS has a highly developed *consciousness*. She is aware of both her abilities and present difficulties, but also the progress she underwent throughout this

learning process. She has become capable of monitoring and reflecting on her perceptions, emotions, beliefs, thoughts, and actions. She acquired awareness on a perceptive and reactive level. She is also aware of what is happening around her and in others. She is aware of her relationship with herself, others and the world. The executive capacity to live each experience in a 360°, denotes a highly developed consciousness. As we can see from the following excerpt, FS asserts that her problem solving competencies have reached a conscious level but she seemed very determined to proceed and work towards continuous improvement and excellence. She adds that she needs to put them into play even more so that they become unconscious competencies, i.e. second nature.

“Especially in front of something that frightens me, I still need to open the notes, I open the slides and I follow, and this gives me a sense of security... while I hopefully await that it becomes something automatic, which I don’t know whether it will ever become so... but I now I know I have it” (Post-training interview Track 1 04.13)

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN COMMUNICATION

In the pre-training interview, FS expressed that communication is her strengths. She affirmed that she had had various training experiences in the area of communication, yet in the post-training interview she reveals that this training made her become aware of her lacunas, her certain misconceptions (rigid perceptions) and ineffective behaviours (reactions). She valued her improvement in communication at a 7.

“ I believe a 7, yet if I practice more what we have learnt I would be on a higher level on the scale” (Post-training Interview Track 1 16.16)

Her has reached an improved state of *consciousness*. Many times in the training process, FS became aware that her espoused theories are not the same as her theories-in-action. She became more critically aware and informed of her action, through the use of self-reflection but also

feedback received by learning community that she has started to think more carefully about the effects and not just intention of the action.

“I thought I had to be empathetic always, with whomever, in whatever situation.... But this does not always work, there are situations where it back fires” (Post-training track 2. 01.54)

FS affirms she had always considered empathy and listening as a must. Training helped her dispel some myths regarding communication. She discovered that nothing works always or is functional in all situations. One needs to consider the specific situation and communicate accordingly. This denotes an acquired state of *consciousness* regarding her beliefs but also failed actions.

“Before people who said no or cut short, I regarded them a cynical, like my husband, as you told us, I learnt.... one should not be radical but be flexible... and exploit resistances shown by others, just like in martial arts” (post training interview track1 23.09)

FS confesses that the training made her question her beliefs regarding communication and change her rigid communication modality, i.e. her too much availability. The following excerpts, clearly demonstrate a significant developed state of *flexibility* at a perceptive level (beliefs, thoughts, emotions) but also at a reactive (behavioural) level.

“My new attitude... I adopted with a colleague who always played the role of the victim, followed the script of the victim....my old way, I would have been to listen...because empathy was absolute, I needed to be always empathic... it (referring to the new attitude) was effective and decisive to take up a linear attitude... no longer circular, as I was used to do, where I use to listen and repeat... in this situation I acted linear, rather abrupt, interrupting the usual circularity, it was decisive because this strategy which I have applied in February....usually I would listen to her lament, today (interview took place in April) I still live the benefits of this change, because they saw that I am not always so empathic, I listen and listen, and I have to say, that till the very day.... the problem did not present itself. I don't think she changed her victim attitude, but she changed her perception of me.... This had an effect both in her but also in the others, even others have understood that I no longer go along with the victimistic nagging attitude, where this person would take up always the same thing, always the same thing....even the climate has lightened up, as I said I don't think I have solved the person's nagging problem but I can work better, after two months I can say this, remember me telling you I don't know how much it is going to last, I don't know if I will be able to do it again, but there wasn't the need, because the message was passed on (post-training interview Track 2 02.26)

This excerpt denotes a high level of fluidity and *flexibility* both at a perceptive and reactive level. FS was able to move from a fixed to broader and alternative perspective. She was able to step beyond her rigid beliefs regarding empathy and embrace a different perspective. She was also capable of taking up behaviours in line with the specific situation. This denotes that she is a risk taker and is not satisfied with living in the middle, working to go beyond her present limits.

FS became aware that her communication faulted when she got too emotionally involved. Training seems to have rendered her more aware of her emotions and how these condition her reaction to situations. She affirmed that she learned to manage her emotions better, by pouring them out in her writing. FS made use of a reflective log, where she would go and write down her thoughts, her worries and emotions. She seems to be able to look upon each experience as a ‘learning by doing’ opportunity.

In the interview she declares that she often felt worked out and emotionally stressed by events. She reveals that by keeping a log, she could take a distance and thus would intervene and communicate better. This instrument, suggested during training, helped her take an emotional distance from situations, that would otherwise overwhelm her. This denotes a better state of *consciousness* regarding her emotions but also craftsmanship, that is, she knows how to manage her emotions better. She is also aware of the progress made in these past months but also what needs to be done in the coming months.

“I need to continue writing, I don’t do it so regularly, I do it when I am in certain situations where I am confused, so I write to see things clearer... and do not allow myself to be overwhelmed by the emotional aspect, need to keep it on the rational level, because wanting that something improves, I

tend to act immediately in haze of the moment, but I have learnt to wait, to take distance from the situation” (post-training interview. Track 2. 24.56)

FS recognised that a crucial aspect present in the training-research experience which helped her improve her communication competencies, was to learn about the different resistances to change and also how to manage them. Training seems to have bettered her *consciousness* regarding the perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, emotions and behaviour of others. This improved also her state of *self-efficacy*. She came to believe in her own capabilities to organize courses of action that are required to produce attainment even in communication, which she previously thought would come naturally. FS’s words demonstrate that she moves from an external locus of control to an internal locus of control in communicating and relating with others. From playing the victim she has arrived at being the artefact of her communication. She is not afraid of failure and perseveres in the face of obstacles, resistances and failed attempts.

“Getting to know that there are different resistances, helped me stop reading their behaviour as a personal attack, this knowledge was very important to me... (post-training Interview Track 2 06.23)”

During the post-training interview, she narrated various episodes where she successfully managed different types of resistances. This further confirms a highly developed state of *craftsmanship*.

“Like with parents... I understand their perceptions and limits and avoid doing the tug of war with them..., they have their fears and concern....This knowledge has created more serenity in me.... I swear that a year ago... I would have wasted a lot of time and energy... I would not have been able to sleep at night,(post-training interview track 1. 28. 33”)

Training helped her learn not to fear or fight resistances but to use them and turn them into cooperation. This is another proof of an acquired state of *efficacy* and *craftsmanship*.

“I told them if you are not happy with the taken decision, please take it out on me and not on others, please take it out on me, this is the right opportunity to do so... they remained in silence” (post-training interview track 1 22: 55)

During the post-training interview, FS shared with me a specific situation where she made use of the learned communication strategies. FS managed to carry out a thorough analysis of a situation and how her first communicative attempt informed her next, confirming her reflective abilities and her command of communication strategies. In her analysis it is clear that she strove for exactness of critical thought processes and precise, technical language for describing her work. This denotes a high level of *craftsmanship*.

“Regarding my communication (referring to a speech she carried out during a meeting with parents), I understood that firstly, I should not have dismissed their point of view but rather included it, then I had to prescribe their attack on me because they were attacking me, I was not giving an answer to protect the children, I did not want to arrive to them, but they were attacking me and I should have prescribed it, then I should have anticipated the fact that I would probably have said something that might have offended some of them.... thus on these three things, I constructed my next speech, then another thing, the use of analogical language.... I started my speech with an analogy, also because the town mayor was involved in this situation, and when I was in Malta he sent me text telling me who won the great match, I understood that it was no longer an educational choice but a game support.... So I had replied to the mayor I believe Juve won! He understood what I meant and did not proceed on this any longerbut I started my speech, saying I have a feeling that this is becoming a sort of football support, but this game has to be won by all of us, and we can do so if we work to find a positive experience for your children, and this is what all of us want, I have no doubts about it, we are all in agreement on this, then we all have our different points of view, so I invite you to try and consider the different point of views, even my point of view as a head of an institution who has to take in consideration various aspects.....” (Post-training Track 1. 12.22)

FS reports that she started sharing the learned competencies even with her staff. FS is taking up an always more, systems thinking, taking up a more learning community approach with her staff. Her words reveal that she strongly considers her role in the school system as a crucial part in promoting learning at all school levels. The following excerpts, show how she assists her assistant head to think more effectively about perceptions and beliefs and supports him to try out a different action. This denotes a highly developed state of Interdependence. FS is definitely of service to her profession and the school system.

“I am passing on this to my staff.... I told my assistant head, the colleague who you think has it against you has actually her fears.... when we carried out the anthropologist analysis, that helped me a lot...” (post-training interview track 2)

In her post-training interview but also during the learning community session and in her final presentation FS expressed the benefits she gained in keeping a reflective log. She affirms that this instrument helped her improve both her problem-solving and communication competencies. By keeping a logbook, she could reflect on her rigid beliefs and actions, keep at bay her emotions, gain more clarity on facts and thus be more rational in her decision-making and in interacting with others. Moreover, the reflective log helped her keep track and see the progress she had made throughout these months of training. This boosted her sense of *self-efficacy* and *craftsmanship*, leading her to keep on practising and mastering the new acquired skills.

“I need to continue writing, because in my reflections I can find everything, there I reflect on what I did, on what is still missing” (post-training track 3. 05.04)

FS shared with me two pages from her reflective dairy. The first page was written during the first days of the training where she could not handle a particular member of the staff. Through the written words, it is clear that in those days, she was experiencing a sense of helplessness. The second page, was written at the end of the training where she had handled effectively and decisively the situation, putting together and into practice her problem solving and communication competences (Appendix 15). These written reflections further confirm that there has been a significant progress in her problem-solving and communication competencies.

In the post-training interview, FS confirms that she has acquired skills to better her problem-solving and communication competencies. She is now aware of her lacunas but now knows what she needs to do to further improve her practice.

“I’ve seen that if I put effort I manage but I need to study, it does not come always so naturally, when I know that I have a particular meeting, I open the books... not because I cannot do it but because I feel I need to refresh..... I need to practice them even more to render them mine” (post-training track 3 04.20)

FS affirms that she still has not mastered these competencies in the way she wishes to. She says that not all the acquired competencies have become unconscious or internalised. Yet she is aware that all she needs to do, is to continue practising them until they become second-nature.

5.2.2 CASE STUDY 2: EF

EF asserts that training helped her better her problem solving competencies in various ways. She rates her improvement in problem solving between 7 and 8.

EF seems to have gained more awareness. She reveals a change in her state of *consciousness*. Her vision of facts became wider. Through self- and group reflection she has become more aware of own perceptions, beliefs, values, thoughts, behaviours but also aware of what is happening around her.

“You start seeing things from 360° (with gesture she indicates a birds eye-view) . It is different from other traditional training, it helps you open your mind... you start seeing things from a different lens” (post-training track 1 02.30)

“In the group, you reflect, even when they say something you don’t agree with them, you explain why you don’t agree with this, wanting or not wanting you are made to reflect...” (post-training track 2 35.23)

The training seems to have helped her improve her feelings of *self-efficacy*, *flexibility* and *craftsmanship*. EF feels more confident and is becoming more rigorous and precise in her actions. Her words reveal a sound self-knowledge and the fact that she feels good about her practice. She seems to no longer be fearful of making mistakes as she now knows that every action can inform her next action and thus lead her closer to finding the most appropriate solution. She is practising

self-correction. She perseveres in the face of obstacles and failed solutions, keeping to the established goal. This is an essential aspect of problem-solving which follows an action-research attitude.

“ You can’t actually do big mistakes, your actions are not unresolvable... you can always correct it, adjust it... and this is the interesting part of it. Like when I was young I used to scribble something ugly, then I work on it turning it into something beautiful, and I see this in the same way” (post training interview track 1 14.34).

The analogy she presents really explicates her positive regard and *craftsmanship* in problem solving. EF has moved from vagueness and imprecision to rigorous elegance practice. She is taking up situations as learning opportunities. She seems to strive for exactness of critical thought processes. She takes pride in her work and consistently strives to improve her current performance.

This shows that EF holds an internal drive towards excellence, towards continuous improvement.

The following excerpts confirms this.

“The first time I tackled this case, I was too adventurous and I messed it out, and at that moment I had thought there is nothing to be done, a lost cause..... but then I said, I should use it as a lesson and go slow, do small steps in order, not jump from one thing to another” (post-training interview track1; 7.45).

EF used a reflective log to help her in the problem solving process. This further confirms her drive to better her practice.

“I write and things get clearer, especially when you are designing what you need to do, you work better ...you surely work better when you have things clear in your mind, rather when you leave all the clutter, all the disorder” (Post-training Track 1 23.44)

EF seems to have gained a personal, proxy and also collective sense of *self-efficacy*. She now feels confident to delegate tasks to other school staff, just as in the case of the LSA teacher and the mother of a child with obesity and challenging behaviour. She seems to have triggered a cascade effect, involving school staff and other stakeholders.

“They sent this LSA... she asked me for help and I helped her... It was easier now.... The things I have learnt, it was easier for me to pass on to her... at the beginning we worked together on this

case.... At first I followed her closely but then slowly slowly I did not look on what she was doing... at first, I used to go by her class to see what was happening... now I no longer need to do this... she comes to me and she is proceeding on her own” (post-training track 1; 11.53).

EF took up the same problem-solving approach with a mother, with whom she designed a nutrition plan for her child who had over-weight problems.

“We worked with the mother, because it was with her that we needed to work to help the child...we climbed the mountain with very small steps, we did it together, I gave her first steps then she continued, I told her you continue setting steps and you can change them, because you know him better than I do... it was incredible.... Even the way she behaves has changed... she had a difficult time because she had broken up with her partner after 8 years relationship... she continued on, knowing what to do, she proceeded climbing (the steps of the mountain)” (post-training interview Track 1 9.34).

EF reveals a significant improvement in the state of **Interdependence**. She regularly uses the learnt competences, with her staff and even parents, to discuss and act on the problems.

“Even though I try not to play “the-I-know-it-all”, especially with my staff, I am carefully giving them advice.... they (referring to problem-solving strategies) have become so simple that I easily tell them “ What have you tried so far? what do you think if you try this?...” (Post-training interview track 2 14.15)

“I suggested self-reflection log also for personal life, which ends up effecting our professional life and vice versa ...I suggested to a colleague who had an issue with her sister regarding her wedding... I told her ‘why don’t you take hold of pen and paper? And let it out, you have a volcano inside... she wrote and told me you know it is true...it works” (post-training track1 28.30)

EF asserts that the learnt problem-solving competencies are getting always more second-nature to her: **unconscious competencies**. She is finding herself using problem-solving strategies and modality on her own, with her staff but also at home.

“It has become quite automatic... yes I believe I am getting there... what helps me are the pictures and images you gave us.... Those images comes to mind ... like the martyr.... Now I cannot stay without this way of approaching my work (she smiles), comes to me naturally. An action-research approach is not only important for a head of school but also at home, when my daughter comes up with problems, the way I take up the problem and speak to her today is different to the way I used to do before” (post-training interview Track 1, 1:02)

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN COMMUNICATION

EF reports that she has observed great improvements in her communication competencies, especially regarding **public speaking** which she considered to be her greatest weakness. She valued her improvement a 8.

EF refers that this training brought her better *consciousness* of her communication and even of others' perceptions and emotions. She noted that they were things which she already did but now she knows why they work.

“Yes certain things.... Certain things I already did But now that I have thought them through..... I know why and when they work....and I try to do them better..... ” (Post-training interview Track1 8.09)

During the training, EF became more aware of her tangible difficulties in communication during public speaking.

“I didn't have problems with one-to-one communication but when I have to address an audience I don't find it easy, unlike others I don't feel important when I am under the lime light. I used to send forward my assistant head to represent the school and do speeches, in fact there are a lot of people who thought that I was not the head but that my assistant head was.... she is older than me so they believed she was the head... I don't dislike this.... to hide in the background.... Yet I know that in certain situations I need to do it.... speak in public. I do it but have to prepare myself having a PowerPoint to follow.” (Post-training interview Track 2 12.14)

It seems that training has also given her the competences to overcome her difficulties. She has learnt how to turn her difficulties in strengths. It seems that training helped EF acquire better states of *consciousness, craftsmanship* and *self-efficacy* in communication.

“Like when we have to do presentation, I studied what I needed to do, I planned to do something different something short but humorous.... at the same time practical... if somebody in five year's time will meet me, they will say she is the one of the cat, they will say she's the one of the professor Gatto (referring to puppet she used in her final presentation) I am not a good public speaker I need something that keeps me on track, my weakness is to speak in public especially when you have

an audience that all look at you, words do not come easily to me.... moreover I thought it was going to be a long day at the next time they will be tired especially myself..... so I decided to work between me and the cat so I didn't have to do the entire presentation I have to confess that I've overcome my difficult... and I feel my presentation left an impact". (post-training Interview Track 2 17.09)

EF asserts that now that she was aware of her difficulties, she made use of communication strategies to manage to overcome her stage-fright. She reports an improved state of *self-efficacy* and confidence. This helped her take up a more systems thinking, that is, while before she cared mostly to avoid public speaking, now she is becoming always more a systems thinker, seeing one's role in the school is a crucial part to becoming a professional educator. This denotes a state of *Interdependence*.

"Like prize-day, I did my duty, because I care do my duty... the duty to pass the message, I did it without a lot of fringes, but I went on the stage, I did not stay long but I got my message through" (post-training interview track1 23.43)

EF conveys that there is more rigour in her communication. She cares to continuing working to overcome her limits and better her communication competences. This denotes a developed state of *craftsmanship*. This implies moving from vagueness and imprecision to specificity and elegance. She affirms that she started to use various communication strategies to convey her message more effectively. She listens more and uses more analogical language to convey her understanding. She strives for exactness of critical thought processes and it is clear that she is trying to make use of precise language in her communications.

Referring to working with LSA, she affirms:

" After I listened to her I told her, you seem to be feeling like you are going onto the lion's den" (post-training Interview Track 1 23.03)

Even when she spoke to a young mother, she was capable to tune-in with her sense of failure. She feels confident in adopting and up down-positioning when needed.

“I told her the mistakes I did as a mother,... I took a one-down position since I confessed that sometimes I did mistakes, I mess-up, and I told her I am telling you so, so you avoid my same mistakes” (post-training interview: Track 1 23.23).

It seems that EF is now capable to adapt her positioning according to the situation and lead her discourse more effectively. This convey a state of *consciousness, flexibility*, but also *craftsmanship* in her communication.

Regarding communication competencies, EF asserts that she still has to practice more to make them automatic. She still needs to study and plan her discourse but she now knows what she needs to do. She seems to have reached a good *conscious competence* level but she is working moving a step forward in order to render them unconscious competencies. She seems to take pride in her work and is constantly taking experiences as learning opportunities to improve her current performance. Her words denote a strong drive towards excellence and continuous improvement.

“Even with communication I need to continue transforming my weaknesses into strengths. Need to do it more to become better and more natural to me, each time, you need to re-invent yourself, it is hard work yet I prefer this challenge then staying there bluttering and lamenting and getting nowhere”. (post-training interview, track 2 27.45)

It is important to add that after the post-training interview, I had invited all EL to carry out a short presentation during a webinar conference on *“Authority & Leadership”* where there was going to be an international audience. EF was the first one to answer back and take up the challenge (LACT webinar conference recording: Authority & Leadership). She has definitely become more of a risk taker and is no longer satisfied with living in the middle and content with what comes along ; She is always pushing the frontier and her present limits. She told me that only by doing more presentations, she will earn more trust in herself and better her public speaking. Yet she was taking up a go slow attitude to overcome her communication difficulties. The fact that it was a web-conference, there was a safe-distance which made her go for it.

5.2.3 CASE 3: ST

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT IN PROBLEM-SOLVING

ST affirms that even though, due to health problems, she missed some of the training activities, she feels that she has improved her problem solving competences. On the self-evaluation scale technique, she valued her improvement as being a 6.

In the post-training interview, ST refers that training has helped her improve her problem solving competences, especially in problems related to time management. She had mentioned this problem in the pre-training interview but also during the first learning community sessions, where she expressed great concern and a strong sense of helplessness.

“We have a very complex and demanding job, we are every day flooded with requests that need to be acted upon immediately... we are condemned to run after time” (pre-training interview, Track 114.11)

In the post-training interview, she affirms that even though she still considers her work as being very demanding, she is now aware that she has much more say in managing her time. She declares that the training helped her learn that there are certain things she could do to manage her time more effectively. This conveys Sabina has earned *personal sense of self-efficacy* in something in which at the beginning of the training, she felt she had no control or power over.

“It is very comforting to know that you can use certain strategies” (Post-training interview: Track 117.19).

In the post-training interview, ST asserts that even though she had missed some sessions due to her health conditions, she feels that this training has helped her become a better problem solver and time manager. She affirms that she learnt to slow down, and think things through. By stopping and reflecting over things, ST became more conscious of her actions. It seems that she has received a good level of *consciousness* that lead her to evaluate and avoid failed attempting solutions and also to consider alternatives; two fundamental strategies of an effective problem-solver. This denotes also a significant level of *flexibility*, since she was able to put question her rigid beliefs and over exigent sense of duty in order to try out alternative actions. Sabrina seems to have reach a

significant level of **craftsmanship**. She has moved from a vague to a more rigorous mode of problem solving.

“I became less instinctive and more ponderous, I pay more attention before I take decisions, I think about the different possible scenarios....I now wait before giving answers, before acting....the go slow strategy mentioned in the training remained impressed in my mind.... I have started to repeat it to myself and use in my daily routine”.(post-training interview Track 1 19.17)

ST asserts that she has learnt to prioritize and postpone. Even though it was not easy for her but she learned to manage her time and energy better. This denotes a significant level of **self-efficacy**. She has moved from playing the victim to being a better manager of her work and her free time.

ST: “I now evaluate... how urgent are things?... what needs to be handled now?.... I have learnt to postpone..... Now, I work on Saturday morning... but Sunday is my day off, I leave the work for Monday morning” (post-training interview 05:20)

From ST’s narratives, it seems that her **proxy self-efficacy** has improved. ST has started to learn to delegate to others. According to Bandura (2002) proxy self-efficacy is when an individual enlists someone else to take charge and to carry out tasks on his/her behalf. ST affirms that her experience of training gave her a developed self-efficacy to act with agency. She feels in control even when she has to rely on others, even though she needs to monitor and supervise closely. She seems to have moved from leading an isolated one-man show to a more community, involving participation. She moved from isolation to sharing, that denotes a state of **interdependence**.

“I learnt I needed to delegate... actually my health condition forced me to have to delegate.... In such conditions, I couldn’t do otherwise! But I have seen that my school still proceeded, nothing tragic happened... now I am doing so without having to have an excuse..... however, I confess that I still need to put great efforts to delegate... but I am learning to delegate, I assign small tasks and see how it goes... I delegate but need to keep a close-eye, supervise what they are doing... I used problem-solving strategies with myself, I delegated a small thing at a time” (Post-training interview 06:09)

ST seems to have reached also a significant level of **craftsmanship**, that is she is taking pride in the progress made and is proceeding one step at a time to overcome her fear of letting go of control and

slowly learning to rely on others. It is quite evident that ST holds a strong drive towards excellence, towards continuous improvement.

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN COMMUNICATION

Regarding communication, ST recognised that there was a significant improvement. She values this improvement a 7 and a half on the self-evaluation scale from 0-10. She affirms that before the training, she thought she had good communication skills but now she discovered that she communicated and related with her staff and other stakeholders in the same way. She became always more aware that a good leader should tune-in with his/her interlocutor. During the training she learnt to manage different resistances to change.

The following excerpt is very revealing and denotes a highly developed state of *consciousness*, *flexibility*, *efficacy*, *craftsmanship* and *interdependence*.

“I used to consider everyone as being able to understand, be motivated, capable... everyone was willing to work for the school’s well-being, I would insist on explaining and explaining to no avail. With certain persons it is important to propose the worst scenario to make them react.... I told them if we wanted to worsen the situation, we should continue in this way.... the school will close down. This left quite an impact, to propose the worse scenario, something I would have never done before, this is not my usual way of doing, I always try to reassure... but proposing the worse scenario... left a great impact” (Post-training interview track1 12.02)

Going in stages, it seems that Sabrina has earned better awareness regarding herself and others. She seems to have earned more *consciousness* regarding others’ perceptions, emotions, behaviours and resistances. Moreover she feels that the training has given her instruments to identify and manage these resistances. This denotes a significant level of *craftsmanship*. She cautiously moved from a vague to a more precise mode, fine tuning her communication onto others and in specific situations. Moreover, ST asserts that training helped her to identify and orchestrate the different resources and limits she has in her school staff. The Anthropologist exercise seems to have helped her feel in

control since she now feels she holds a tool to evaluate her staff's resources and limits and engineers them towards the desired goals. By attending to the verbal and non-verbal communication of the persons around her, she has come to discover the strengths and weaknesses of her staff and thus to orchestrate better her human resources. This seems to give ST a sense of *consciousness and self-efficacy*.

“I enjoyed carrying out the Anthropologist exercise, where I observed and watched my staff... I observed their behaviour, what they say and don't say, I enjoy doing this... in this way I discover what I can ask from them... I understood that my problem was that I always counted on the same persons, persons who I considered capable and competent, ending up to overloaded them with tasks which should be handled by others..... it is true that there are some who have true limits... while others, have come to surprise me” (post-training interview 14.08)

With rigour she is putting into practice the instruments learnt during the training to reach precision and further improvement. This denotes a developed state of *craftsmanship*.

Training seems to have brought ST to reach a good level of *flexibility*, both at the level of perception and that of reaction. She is now aware that others might have different perceptions, beliefs, needs and abilities and thus she has to interact differently with different persons. She affirms that she has learnt to position herself in a one-up and one-down position according to the situation.

“Good leaders need to be able to be flexible and take up different positioning... to be able to take one-down or/and one-up positions according to the situation.... Sometimes it is important to say no, to be respected. I was always very controlled, tried to be nice to keep peace... but there are times where it is important that you raise your voice..... Lately, there were times where I arrived to say... I have nothing left to say to you, there's the door, come back when you have calmed down.... I am learning to set some boundaries....One can't consent to everything... I told this also to my assistant head who is always so available and nice with everyone”. (post-training interview: track 1 32.12)

This excerpt shows also that ST is also passing on her acquired knowledge and the strategies she has learnt also to her staff. This shows that she has reached a significant level of *Interdependence*.

ST seems to have moved to a more systems thinking attitude where she helps even others reflect

upon and refine their practice. ST has come to be more *conscious* of her own emotions and needs which she feels she used to neglect.

“My health condition gave me the opportunity to reflect.... I realised an important thing, that I couldn’t push it any longer... I needed to take my time.... Go for a walk, take my tea, take care of myself.... I believe my body wanted to give me a strong sign,.... There were days where I did not allow myself to drink, or go to the toilet.... I worked all days of the week...now I no longer work on Sundays, before I used to check emails, take work home....now I switch off my mobile phone... I tell my husband let’s go out... I need to escape.... Sunday is my day off” (post-training interview Track 1 21.12).

ST started to value the importance of become more aware of her needs and of giving herself time-outs. She learned to monitor her physical and psychological needs so as to avoid stressing herself out.

“You don’t need to just listen to others but also to yourself, I learnt to listen to my needs and to keep at bay my strong my sense of duty..... which is necessary but when it is too much it is toxic.... I am very self-demanding..... I used to go to school even with a terrible headache or with a terrible flu, even when I did my first intervention, I felt obliged to fulfil my duties.... my colleagues (referring to the other EL of the learning community) told me you are craze....I felt very much supported by the group.....Because of the interventions I had to be away from school for a long time....the school is still standing, my husband used to tell me, you don’t need to hold the school walls on your shoulders...It is something I knew but had difficulty to do, now I don’t need to be sick to go home or to take a deserved break” (post-training interview track116.22)

It is imperative to say that these changes were declared by ST during the post-training interview but also observed during the learning community sessions where ST shared her small but significant successes in these regards. The key confirmation of this change was given by that fact that, even though in Macerata there has been a terrible earthquake which required ST to move school, she coordinated the move but when it was time to proceed with her plans to join the Maltese EL to further her training, she managed not to give in to her demanding sense of duty (See video-recorded final learning community session held in Malta on 20nd September. TIME:) She managed to delegate and assign to her staff the different tasks and to supervise their work from a distance; something she confesses, she wouldn’t have been able to do before participating in the training.

This seems to further confirm ST's proxy self-efficacy but also interdependence. She is sharing her tasks with others.

Even in communication she seems to have reach a significant state of *self-efficacy, consciousness, craftsmanship, flexibility* and *interdependence*.

At the beginning of the training ST was aware of her difficulties but she believed there was very little she could do about them, whilst. now she recognizes that she has acquired certain skills or competencies that can help her handle her practice better. She affirms that all this is still not second nature to her, she still has to stop, think and decide which is the best way to go. Sabrina hopes that by proceeding in this way , she can master the new skills always better. This denotes a huge leap from her initial attitude of helplessness.

"I have come to learn certain strategies, I have understood the theory, studied it, I am putting it into practice... now I need to make it mine...it still does not come natural to me but now I know what I need to do, I hope I'll keep it up... I need to proceed in this way" (Post-training Interview Track 2 26.02)

From her narratives and other testimonies, it seems that ST has reached a significant level of conscious competence, and her drive and calibrated efforts towards continuous improvement can lead her to reach a level of unconscious competence.

5.2.4 CASE 4: DG

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN PROBLEM SOLVING

DG affirms that training has helped him improve his problem-solving competencies. In fact he valued this improvement between 7-8.

In the post-training interview, DG affirms that training made him become aware why certain strategies he was already using, worked. By reflecting on his own, with his partner coach and in the

learning community, he has earned *consciousness* about his practice, which he now recognizes as being not due to chance or luck, but the result following a certain logic. This seems to have led him to acquire a better state of *self-efficacy*.

“I realized that I already did certain things that worked not because I am lucky (he gives a cheeky smile) but which I now know why they worked... so you consciously repeat them.... why change a winning strategy... so I already did certain things but now I put them in the perspective of the problem solving strategies, for example with parents, I used to exasperate giving them a worst scenario to start acting... I used to exaggerate....I used to ask them what would happen in ten years’ time if we continue in this way... I used to exaggerate I used to use itbut now I realized how come it worked” (Post-training interview track 1. 6.22)

In the post-training interview, DG asserts that he now deals with problems with more rigour by following a scheme. This seems to have helped him to gain a state of *craftsmanship* and also improved his *self-efficacy*.

“Rather than becoming a problem solver, it gave me new skills.... I am a very visual person, I need schemes, images, I bring to my mind the table with bullets, the mountain... it gives me a scheme to follow, I do this first, then this.... it gave me a scheme to follow... which can be corrected along the way The fact that I know it is there it helps me though,...as Leaders we need to have various resources and this became another resource that is resulting to be very helpful” (Post-training interview Track 1. 03.22)

“I realised why it works, because it’s part of a strategy and I start implementing various things that are giving me results.. obviously not 100% but this is no magic wand, it is a resource”. (post-training interview Track 1: 6.01)

DG refers that he became aware of his urge to rush into things and to bring others to rush too. He seems to have gain a better state of *consciousness* to help him better his problem solving.

“The idea of the mountain climbing helped me be more aware that I do not need to rush to the top of the mountain immediately... I used to rush even at school and made others rush to do things and I do it to perfection.... now I started looking at things step by step, easy steps smaller achievable steps.... we do not need to take 10 steps we can take twenty steps...” (Post-training interview track 1 05.02)

DG affirms that keeping a reflective log helped him keep his overwhelming emotions at bay, so as not to go astray in his action plan and in managing case conferences better.

“I believe this is why I was calmer at school this year.... I was keeping two journals...one with what I feel... I used to vent out my anger..... and another a logbook of the difficult cases, it was an advice given to me by my partner coach...where I wrote what we did, dates, facts which I used to take with me to case conference... where I used to sit in and discuss in a more confident way” (Post-training Interview Track1 28.02)

In the post-training interview DG states that he has started to use the problem-solving model with his staff to plan their actions. This shows that DG has gained a state of **flexibility** both on a perceptive and a reactive level. He seems to be capable of moving from a narrow, fixed or self-centred view to broader and alternative perspective that takes into consideration the point of view of others. From his narratives, he seems to be capable to take up alternative paths and actions. It seems that he has acquired even a state of **Interdependence**, which moved him from being isolated to being part of a larger group or community of problem solvers.

DG: *“Even the way I am dealing with problems with assistant heads, before I felt I was on one track and they were on another or they did not understanding me, now I understood that I used to go fast, now I go step by step and I explained everything.... We share the same language... I am not coaching them like we did in the training but when I speak to them I explained to them I tell them if we have to see it in from another point of view... I consider different point of views, for example when we discussed the action plan regarding maths we started discussing the sdp, what works and what did not work in the school and we built a plan for next year... to do so I asked them let's imagine the situation in five years time, the problem we are observing, would it be seen as a problem... leading them step by step... I told them we need to go slow to go fast... now they are repeating it back to me...we are using problem-solving also to plan the curriculum... I believe is our biggest role besides interpersonal skills and we use it in planning the curriculum and I believe it is working, it is giving more harmony to myself and my staff”* (post-training interview Track 2 12.16).

DG asserts that he feels that the problem-solving competencies he has learned during the training are becoming always more automatic. He feels that he is close to the higher level: **Unconscious competence**. His words convey pride in his work and a strong drive to further improve his current performance.

“I think I am at point 7-8 on the scale. I feel that I am mastering it and it is becoming second nature. I do it automatically when I am speaking with my staff. There are still certain things where I need to stop, reflect and refer to notes.. I need to practice and practice” (Post-training interview, Track 1 10.08)

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN COMMUNICATION

DG recognises that even though he always considered communication was his strong point since he is an ex- drama teacher and is presently also a TV presenter, he still believes that he underwent a significant improvement in his communication competencies. In fact on the scale 0-10, he valued this improvement an 8.

In the post-training interview, DG affirms that he perceives his major improvement to have taken place in his **non-verbal communication**. He asserts that he has become very much aware of his non-verbal communication and capable of attending even to others non-verbal ‘hidden’ messages. He affirms that this training improved his *consciousness* regarding his communication and even others.

“I had a few occasions like this where somebody put under the lens my communication, they say but you are a TV person you can watch yourself, all the drama classes I did, but they were enough to better my communication in this way” (Post-training interview Track 1 14.44)

“The body language.... I become aware that a person without speaking is revealing and saying a lot and a lot, I started to attend to these cues and use them as a weapon in my battle in an argument...When they get rigid or tense or they are not liking what I am saying.... I don't push more... I try to calm them down to bring them all on board before I ask more from them” (Post training-interview Track 1, 15.09)

DG affirms that he has fine-tuned his communication competencies by attending to non-verbal that reveal the emotional state of his interlocutors. He also feels he now knows how to act according to the specific situation. In describing a specific case where he had to ask parents to move the child to another school for his well-being, he used with great mastery various communication strategies that brought the parents to feel and understand that what he was proposing was the best possible choice for their child. The difficult decision became a sort of joint discovery. This shows that DG has acquired a state of *flexibility* but also of *craftsmanship* in his communication ability.

“I could feel and recognize the way they are feeling, I could read their pain, I tuned in with them, I took a one- down position I nearly went underneath, I told them ‘you are the parent you know better what is best for your kids I cannot act without your consent so that they did not perceive me as the arrogant head who knows it all.... I wanted to convey that I was not just the school head but also a person, and I think they appreciated this..... I used paraphrasing as we went along, I will say ‘just to be sure what we are saying and every time I will check whether they were with me” (Post-training interview, Track 1 23.44)

The above excerpts shows how DG is putting into practice the communication concepts and strategies acquired in the training. This denotes a highly developed state of **craftsmanship**. He is capable of applying the skills acquired with precision and adapting it the specific experience. It is clear that DG has moved from an imprecise to a more elegant way of managing dialogues.

DG affirms that he became aware of his own emotions, which often sabotaged his own communication. His non-verbal revealed his underlying emotions. He asserts that he is now using writing to manage his emotions. This seems to generate in him more confidence and a developed state of **efficacy**.

“I truly belief in the benefits of writing, you are using a part of the brain that is let’s say digital and rational and this helps put everything in perspective while helping you manage the emotional part, so writing helps me shift towards a balance (Post-training interview Track2 28.09”

This sense of **efficacy** and pride in his achievements is leading him to want to share the tools he has acquired during the training with his colleagues and friends.

“I suggested it (referring to writing) to colleagues and friends and it helped them through difficult times” (Post-training interview. Track 2 28.25).

To resume, it seems that even in the area of communication, DG has acquired a degree of **consciousness** (what is happening inside of him ad around him), **flexibility** (take one-down and one-up positions and uses communication strategies according to the situation), **craftsmanship** (he follows certain cues to proceed on in his communication with a certain rigour), **self-efficacy** (feels more in command in his discourse especially in critical situations such case conferences) and

interdependence (he adopted systems thinking and is passing on to others what is helping him communicate better).

It seems that DG has reached a level of *conscious competency* in the area of communication. He still has to reflect before he acts but it seems that he is driven to make it become second nature. From his narratives, it is clear that he feels an internal drive towards excellence and continuous improvement in his communication competences which seem to help him both at school and his personal life as TV presenter.

5.2.5 CASE STUDY 5: MA

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN PROBLEM SOLVING

MA affirms that training has helped her improve her problem-solving competencies. On the scale 0-10, she rated this improvement an 8.

MA affirms that the most significant improvement took place in gaining a better awareness of her perceptions, beliefs, emotions and behaviour. It seems that training has helped her reach a developed state of *consciousness*.

During the training sessions, MA recognised herself and her way of taking up her role as a head of school, in the Speedy Gonzalez script. Training helped her gain awareness and start slowing down her pace which often brought her to ignore important information. Her words reveal that she started to practice mental rehearsal and edit mental pictures as she seeks to improve strategies.

“I have surely bettered my problem-solving skills... I think things through, something I did not use to do before, now it does not come automatic but I have started to be more ponderous.... I started to control the speedy Gonzalez in me. Now I first ask myself when is the deadline? so I can leave it for today... I am slowing down, I am going slow... I became aware of this... but it is one thing to know

another to put into practice... training helped me risk... what could happen? Training made me think that it is better to calm down and think things through... to reflect on things and look deeper into issues, sometimes things were not as they seemed.... better take time and reflect (post-training interview Track 1 06.12)

“Through group and self-reflection, I became aware of my weak points and what I lack... and thus what I need to work on” (post-training interview Track 1 08.02)

“In the group we would reflect and discuss our problems, we discussed them, we considered different point of views” (post training interview Track 1 08.18)

“I became aware of my script... what renders you predictable” (post-training interview Track1 09.09)

MA affirms that training gave her instruments to evaluate problems more thoroughly. MA seems to have reached a significant state of *flexibility*, questioning her perceptions and immediate reactions to a situation. During the learning communities she was able to welcome new perspectives and alternatives to her own. She was able to move from having a narrow, fixed or egocentric view to adopting a broader and alternative perspective. She takes into consideration bigger ideas and the opinions of others and is striving to step beyond her beliefs and look at a situation from a different perspective.

“I learnt various different ways to evaluate a problem, take in consideration the context, the resources, the limits, what has been done, different alternatives... (post-training Interview Track1 12.34)”

MA seems to have acquired awareness of her weak points but also of what she needs to work on to further improve her problem solving competencies, even though she still finds it difficult. She recognising that writing down her reflections and emotions can help her slow down and keep the line, but she still has not yet made this a regular practice. This will help her acquire a better state of efficacy and craftsmanship which she still seems to lack.

“I still was not able to give a specific space to my reflection and know I should do it in writing... I still do it every now and then, not on a regular basis which could really help. I tried to start in January, I told myself you start when you are back to school... I kept it up for 10 days... it is difficult to keep it up with all the work load... even though I am aware that when I wrote.. it resulted to be very useful.... It is works, but I need to find a compromise... (what can you do?)...”

maybe everyday is not sustainable but once a week.. even here I need to go slow!... better on Saturdays when school is more tranquil.... (Post-training Interview Track2 22.25)”.

During the post-training interview, MA was brought to reflect on how to find a way to overcome her present limits. She is aware that she needs to be more reflective and that writing can help her do so, but she affirms that she has to go slow and start approaching writing one step at a time.

From her narratives, it is clear that MA has gained a state of consciousness about herself (perceptions, thoughts, emotions and behaviour) but not so much on others. In fact, in no part of the interview does she refer to involving others in her learning process or in sharing with others reflections, experiences and knowledges.

The acquired problem-solving competences seem to be an early *conscious competence stage*. MA still needs to practice the acquired instruments to hold a better self-efficacy and craftsmanship, yet it is clear that she is driven to work on further improving her problem solving competences.

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN COMMUNICATION

In the pre-training interview MA affirmed that she did various courses on communication and that she feels she always communicated effectively. Yet in the post-training interview, she asserts that training helped her understand what rendered her communication effective. In fact on the self-evaluation scale, she rates her improvement 8, because she affirms that training helped her gain a state of *consciousness*.

“Training helped me have an explanation of certain strategies or modalities which I already made use of, maybe also unconsciously. I gained more awareness of what I already practised... for example the use of analogies, or to put myself in another one’s shoes, to look at gestures and non-verbal to understand when one is feeling intimidated or is arrogant... now I know when I use them and why they work and when they work (Post-training Interview Track 1 27.12”

During the post-training interview, MA confides that training helped her get more in-tune with her emotions that often hindered her communication. The following excerpt confirms that MA has developed state of consciousness regarding her emotions and their effects on her practice.

“I became aware of my fears, fear is my most dominant emotion during a dialogue... I hardly ever feel anger.... While there are situations where I am taken by pleasure, ending to give more time that it actually deserves... in other situation I get too involved... I have to learn to take a distance, because I end up being overwhelmed... I need to manage better the emotional part of me” (post-training interview. Track1 09.09).

Training helped MA acquire awareness about the importance of emotional distancing. MA became aware that she needs to work harder on controlling her emotions and that writing can help her in this regard.

“Writing can help me take the right distance to avoid being overwhelmed by my emotions... I am often overwhelmed by my fears and guilt feelings “ (Post-training interview Track 2 23.44)

MA tends to be very empathic, but she has learnt that a good leader should be able to evaluate the situation and decide to say no if it he or she needs to. MA aims to be more flexible in her communication, and get out of her ‘yes sir’ script. Training is helping her gain a state of *flexibility* and *self-efficacy* even when she has to say no.

During the learning community, MA witnessed various situations where her other colleagues managed to say no, and to her surprise, they expressed that after doing so, they felt they were more respected by their staff. This was quite a discovery for MA, which helped her take the plunge and start saying her small no’s.

“I get so compassionate that I do not know how to say no, I fear to say no because I live it as a sort of disrespect towards others.... In our job there are situations where you need to say no... during the training I saw that my other colleagues managed to say no... I am learning to say no but it is not easy for me” (Post-training interview track 2 05.10).

During the training she became aware that her emotions often overwhelmed her and undermined her communication. In this regards, MA moved from an unconscious incompetence, to a conscious

incompetence to a conscious competence. Now she needs to practice it, in order to render it an unconscious competence.

5.2.6 CASE 6: LS

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN PROBLEM SOLVING

In the post-training interview, LS affirms that training helped him improve his problem solving competencies. His digital evaluation of his improvement is between 6-7. He affirms that training taught him to reflect and avoid rushing to decisions and conclusions, which often compounded difficult situations.

In various passages in the post-training interview LS affirmed that this training experience helped him learn to stop and reflect on his own but also with others. It is clear that LS has gained a state of *consciousness* regarding himself, others and situation around him. He recognises that training was a learning process which led him to stop and gain a better awareness. Through reflection he is becoming more aware of his own perceptions, mental traps, behaviours but also of what is happening around him. The executive capacity to be simultaneously aware about self and others denotes a highly developed level of consciousness.

“Training is definitely worth it, it was an opportunity to stop, reflect, think, act, see how it works out in this context, personally as a person this for me is a very important aspect, it helped me a lot, I am seeing more results now than while we were doing the course, I say I am getting better what we did in course is getting a life”. (Post training interview: Track 1 00.45)

LS affirms that his most significant overall improvement was to learn to *go slow*. Just as suggested by the problem-solving model, LS is carrying out his decision-making, taking a step at a time, allowing himself time to evaluate and study the situation better. He became very much aware that

his tendency to rush into things, just like Speedy Gonzalez, one of the perceptive-reactive scripts presented during the training, made him ignore a lot of useful data.

“I became more conscious.... you can continue to go gas-down because you end up worn out and even others...but things should be done slow... step by step.... even when I speak I do not need to say 10 words in a second but utter word by word... I am working on this....Even the way you speak brings you to slow down even when I speak with a person I usually want to know things in a second, while impatiently looking at my watch so that she leaves... that is not the right way....but I am getting there ! “ (post training interview track 1: 4.11)

“Regarding the Speedy Gonzales if I had to ask the people around me I don't know if they would say that they saw a difference but I personally feel I have slowed down a bit ... not just a bit I slowed down even though I am being perceived as doing just as before But I know I have slowed down my pace ”. (Post training interview track 1 5.45)

“At first it was difficult to hold back the Speedy Gonzales in me, even now in certain circumstances but then I remind myself that you need to go slow to go fast when you rush into things you don't consider a lot of things and this takes you nowhere thus when you calm down, when you go slow, you consider all options, pose questions that give you answers (Post training interview, Track 1 4.11)

LS affirms that writing helped him reflect better and slow down his pace. He is able to monitor and reflect better on his own perceptions, emotions, beliefs, thoughts, and hasty behaviour.

“I now reflect more deeply, it helps a lot because you cannot lead without reflecting on what you are doing, writing helped me do so, I write and say next time I will not do that because we suffered, next time we can do this, this calms me down” (post-training interview track 1 22.15)

During the post-training session, LS said that he is adopting, the ‘go slow’ attitude learnt in the problem-solving sessions, even in his communication. He learnt to listen to others to embrace other perceptions and alternative actions.

“Sessions help me stop and learn to listen to others” (post-training interview Track 1: 20.23)

“(Referring to the Audit experience)when at the end he told me take a seat so I can read you the report he told me if you can please refrain from giving comment I sat there for over an hour listening something I never did before” (post-training interview Track 1 22.02)

LS is not only aware of his difficulties but also of the progress he has made in these months. He is also aware of how to turn his present limits into resources. This reveals a high level of consciousness.

“I recognize that I have changed I am a person who continues on his way but this experience made me conscious of my way of doing things....but I became conscious also of the fact that I have grown ...that makes a lot of sense, it is very important to me, I feel it helped.” (Post-training Interview Track 1: 09.58)

From LS’s narratives, it clear that he has reached a significant state of *flexibility* because he is able to see the problem from different points of view and explore possibilities and alternatives. LS affirms that training, especially the learning community sessions, made him open up to other people’s point of view. He has acquired the ability to move from a narrow egocentric position to adopting broader views that take into consideration a wider perspective as well as the opinions of others. He has acquired the ability to step beyond himself and look at a situation from a different perspective.

“You need to sit down and look at your situation from a different point of view, ask yourself what did you do, what worked and what did not, what are the exceptions... when you consider all these factors you eventually understand the problem and arrive at a solution because eventually the situation needs a solution, I have come to believe that nothing is impossible if you go deeper, and that if you ask question you will get answers (Post-training- interview Track 1. 3.02)

“I am learning to master better all aspects of problem solving and to be able to apply them always more and adapt them to different situations, students, staff, parents...” (post-training interview Track 2. 12.13)

LS seems to be able to apply the acquired skills with precision to a task or a specific situation. He seems to have moved from a vague to a more rigorous way of problem-solving. He has grown in his state of *craftsmanship*, because he has increased his level of precision. His words convey, an inner drive towards excellence and a continuous striving e towards improvement.

“Having a model, a structure helps you, other training gives you information but often gathered from different context from ours, what you did with us, what you shared with us could be applied to

our specific situation, having a model, knowing what to do or not do, how to proceed was useful
“(Post-training Interview Track1 :27.40)

LS acquire a strong sense of agency or *self-efficacy*. He is now aware that the results he is achieving are not due to chance or luck but are the result of his hard work and efforts. He takes pride in his work and is acting like a pushing force in order to strive to further improve his current performance. This is giving him confidence and a sense of tranquillity.

“I feel better with myself and others....I never had a problem with my staff and others but this year we had a lot of changes which brought along certain opportunities that are giving courage.... I say to them come on I am not saying I'm lucky, I am no longer using it... this was a big change I now say I achieved it because I am capable, I work for it, when they say well done now I say thank you because I put effort, this is not to be presumptuous or arrogant” (post-training interview track 1 26.18)

“Yes I feel inside of me a sense of tranquillity, actually there are many problems around me yet again I feel tranquil this is quite unusual for me look.... I am the same person but the way I look at things is different now.... What we did in our sessions is giving results now....It seems to make more sense to me now that I am applying it more...” (post-training interview track 1 32.11)

He affirms that this sense of tranquillity helped him through difficult moments, like when he had an audit at school, which coincided with the final presentation of the training. LS asserts that he was also able to delegate and rely on his staff, which are now working more together to reach shared objectives. This shows a significant level of *proxy and collective self-efficacy*.

“I lived it with more tranquillity... because there is a team behind me even in the audit experience and our famous final presentation we had in Sliema, it was a blessing in disguise because what I had learnt and worked for with this training, I lived it in that particular week.....at the beginning there was tension and stress but at the end we worked it out brilliantly... each gave his share... I actually phoned the general director and the three persons who carried out the audit to thank them because it was such an enriching teaching and learning experienceMamma Mia.... I've learnt a lot.... it was a result of the sessions we had with you because I was not like this, I used to go into a big panic....before I was a panic station... everything worked out well, I was satisfied with the evaluation and feedback (post-training interview Track 1 12.09).

LS asserts that he has involved his staff in the problem-solving process. He shared with them the acquired knowledge and this gave him confidence to trust in them. The following extract reveals a significant level of proxy self-efficacy.

“I did not have the opportunity to do coaching.... but I did it with my staff, I think the most important aspect of coaching was to share, I did it with my assistant heads, I shared with them what we were doing, I involved them...now I delegate too, I now I do not need to ask them, to control them, I know what they are doing because we are in line, you do not need to tell me what you are doing, if it does not go well, we’ll take it up together, think it through and find a solution” (post-training Interview. Track1:23.45)

Since his partnership coach dropped out due to family health problems, LS did not have the opportunity to experience partnership. Yet he carried out the same experience with his assistant heads, who he informally appointed as his coaches. This training experience seems to have led LS to the achievement of a state of ***Interdependence***. It seems that he has moved from being an isolated problem solver to wanting to create a larger group or community of problem solvers. It is imperative to note that nobody indicated this to him, it was personal urge and interest that led him to do so.

“Even with my staff, I asked them to think what has worked, what did not work, what can we do, I now look for others’ opinion... before I would say okay it is done, this is the solution, now I look for suggestions and then proceed, on my part I take decisions but there's so much to learn from others ... I am open to learn and improve (Post-training interview Track 1 26.44)”

LS has started to help his staff to reflect upon and refine their practice. In line with effective leadership, he is assisting his staff to reflect more effectively, help them to evaluate possible choices, but also support them as they take action. This further confirms a highly developed state of ***interdependence***.

“I am taking up the go slow mode even with others.....everyone comes to me asking me why we do not know how to manage, can we do this.... it is as if they want a flick-your-finger solution, before they would say we tried everything it is impossible...now I tell them what has worked with the child, what did not work, we use the method, even though the case is tough we are arriving, by studying... when you have a problem there is always a solution.... you need to stop and think and do the process.... but I need to practice it even more to lead others”. (Post-training interview Track 1 5.01)

LS's awareness of his difficulties but also what he can do to turn his limits into resources, denotes that he has reached the third level of competencies: *Conscious Competence*. It seems that he still has to consciously bring himself to apply the learnt competencies, however it is clear that he is highly motivated in working on to make these competences second nature.

The following excerpts, demonstrate that LS is taking up every situation as a learning by doing experience and has an interior drive towards excellence.

“(Referring to problem-solving)..it is not easy neither difficult but I need to work more, in certain situations I still have to take out my notes because I printed them out, I have them handy... let me see, let me not go fast... even though I used to see it as time-consuming and time-wasting now I see it as useful I think the results will be better, I say to myself I would take less time later.... but for now I need time..... but I believe for now I need to take some time” (post-training interview Track 1 04.02).

“I feel training help me as individual I need to work more on it, I need to go deeper, I feel I have not dedicated enough time, I need to work more, more seriously, go deeper in questions (gesture of mountain climbing)” (post-training Interview Track 1: 02.34)

“I should have the patience to stop and evaluate, to put forward questions... do this more so I get used to them, they become part of me... I say we have a problem, let's look at it thoroughly, not we have a problem, then another and another... because our work is full of problems.... Now I call them challenges.... And this help me through” (Post-training Interview: Track 1 7.12)

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN COMMUNICATION

LS reports a significant improvement in his communication competencies. He values his improvement an 8 on the self-evaluation scale.

“A lot, I improved a lot here, I feel I have moved ahead, even simply the way you sit I should not be with my feet crossed, I should be with my feet on the ground, the way you maintain eye contact, the way you welcome people, the importance of listening, active listening even their non-verbals... rather than you bla, bla, I am using the various tips given the way we communicate, our own verbals and non-verbals... that helped me a lot.... I used to communicate well but I believe I started to communicate much better now” (Post-training interview Track1 16.02).

In his post-training interview, LS affirms that the training led him to become more aware of his own communication but also that of others. He now attends more actively to both the verbal and non-verbal messages conveyed by himself and others. In the interview, he underlines the importance of active listening and how enriching this new awareness was in his communication. As we can see from his narratives, he seems to live and regard situations at two levels, i.e., attention given to self and attention given to others. The executive capacity to do both simultaneously denotes a highly developed *consciousness*.

LS became also aware of what helped him and what can make him progress further in this learning process. He feels that analogical language helps him keep in mind what he needs to do. Moreover, as referred in the problem solving section, writing helps him keep his emotions at bay and to have a clearer picture of what he needs to say, by cutting off all the fringes and focus on the essential aspect of his speech. This denotes a state of *craftsmanship*. He moved from a vague to a more sophisticated and precise way of communicating.

“I believe the powerpoints you gave us with pictures, not too many words, not so much notes crammed with words, the images and characters like Speedy Gonzalez helped me a lot.... they come to my mind and they help me to keep me on track” (post-training interview Track 2 31.44)

LS has acquired a state of *craftsmanship* and *self-efficacy*. He reports that he is now capable of applying the given communication instruments in his daily practice but also in critical situations with positive outcomes. In the following extract taken from the post-training interview, it is clear that he was able to apply the acquired skills with precision, tailoring his interventions to the specific situation. He feels that in the area of communication he is increasing his level of precision and accuracy. This is giving him a sense of self-efficacy which is leading him to reach a state of tranquillity and agency. He affirms that previously his agitation would often guide his communication.

“At the moment the new school issue is still going on... we had important meeting with parents of our kindergarten.... We had to let them know that the kindergarten will be moved to another building until the new school is built.... We knew this would create an uproar... in fact, nobody from the department turned up.... even the principal asked me to speak first.... the climate was not one of the best.... Yet when I started speaking I noticed that I kept calm... I tried to highlight my strong points.... and I made a promise ‘You know that for me the kids come before anyone and anything so what we are doing is in line with this.... in their best interests... but please allow me to explain and share with you the present situation... and I gave them the entire picture, so I did not just give them information but I tried to convey to them, to reach out to them... and when they were becoming agitated or somebody had something to say, I stopped, I did not continue to talk, I listened then I would say, you are right but don’t you think that..... I managed to use these instruments in a critical situation... there were a lot of people, they could not fit in the small hall but I felt I was more tranquil, not so worried on what they will come up with... Inside of me... I felt a sense of tranquillity.. there are a lot of problems going around me but again I feel tranquil this is quite unusual for me....” (post-training interview Track 1 28.11)

LS seems to apply different communication strategies with great ability. He is managing to tune in with his interlocutors, take a one-down position to manage dissent and resistances, actively listening to others to be able to customise his communication to the specific audience and situation. In other words he is taking an action-research approach even in his communication.

LS seems to have acquired also a state of *flexibility*. He seems to have acquired a significant level of fluidity in his perceptions and adaptability in his reactions. He moved from a narrow egocentric to broader alternative perspective that takes into consideration a wider picture and the opinions of others. LS seems to have learnt to hold back from his urge to speak and attend to what others have and need to say.

“Sessions, (referring to learning communities) helped me learn to listen... for example listening to MVE speaking about a different context than mine, secondary school, a private church school, even though different there were common things which make you think and reflect” (post-training interview Track 2. 24.34)

LS affirms that the final presentation helped him to reflect more on his communication, so that he could convey his message more effectively in the 20 minutes he was given. He cared for both the verbal and non-verbal aspects of his speech. This denotes *craftsmanship*, that is, an urge towards rigour and precision. Moreover he shared the preparation of this presentation with his assistant

heads, and was open to feedback so that he could better his communication. This denotes a sense of *flexibility*, which is further confirmed by his new way of approaching things; he looks upon and take up each situation as an opportunity for learning.

“Preparing the final presentation helped me focus on my communication. It was very useful, I went through the material and put it all together....it helped me because even the fact that the assistant heads read it and listened to me, they helped me with the powerpoint, I rehearsed it with them and at home because I had to say everything in 20 minutes, I cut from here and there, took care of the pace and tone of my voice... I used the stopwatch, I rewrote it 3-4 times, I prepared my speech even though there I did not keep to the text 100%...” (Post-training interview, track 2 28.11)

This also denotes a state of *Interdependence*, since LS moved from working in isolation to involving his assistant heads in order to improve his communication. He shared his new knowledge with his assistant heads so as to help him prepare his presentation. Even the final presentation was taken as a learning opportunity for himself but also for the members of staff close to him.

“I shared my training experience and knowledge with my assistant heads.... everyone knew every little thing we were doing” (post-training interview, track 2 12.43).

It would seem that LS has reached a significant level of conscious competence in his communication. This is evident from his narratives and also from his final presentation (Final presentation recording). He is very close to rendering the acquired communication skills as being second nature to him and thus reaching a level of unconscious competence.

“In communication I need to do less, not that I have arrived at the top of the mountain.... but I am putting into practice the tools I was given... here I reflected more so I gained more...” (post-training interview Track 2 14.18)”.

It is evident that LS has an internal drive towards excellence and continuous improvement. This is also confirmed by his efforts to be present to every training and community session, even though he had to reach the training venue from our sister island of Gozo.

5.2.7 CASE 7: MV

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN PROBLEM SOLVING

MV affirms that training has improved her problem solving competences. Her evaluation, on the scale from 0-10, is 8.

In the post-training interview, MV reveals that training helped her acquire greater awareness of her practice as a problem-solver. The following excerpts demonstrate that this learning process led her to reflect more thoroughly on her practice and also to consider what she can do to further her progress. This denotes a developed state of *consciousness*.

“The training helped me become more aware of my strategies and manoeuvres.... Before I used to act on the problem even with success, by relying on instinct, using my sixth sense, led by my emotions and not by reason... I was less logical and rational.... Now I am more aware why certain things work or not”. (Post-training interview, Track 1 2.35)

“Self- reflection helped.... reflecting on past experiences made me acquire a new perspective of things, now that two- three years have gone by... I would have managed them differently” (post-training interview track 1 3.18)

This denotes a significant development of *flexibility*. MV affirms that she became aware that she is able to step beyond herself and look at a situation from a different perspective. Flexibility is a fundamental criterion for successful problem solving which leads the problem solver to consider different point of view and explore different possibilities and alternatives. This awareness gave MV a better state of *efficacy* and pride in her practice.

MV discovered that in some way she already put into practice the mountain-climbing technique.

She became aware that she tends to break down big problems or objectives into small steps.

“I understood that I like to break down problems into small elements, I like to decompose things, I don't see the situation in its entirety, the training was very much in line with this part of me...now I do so with more confidence” (Post-training interview Track1 25.44)

MV asserts that she now she regularly stops to reflect on her actions, but doing this in the learning community helped her acquire even more insight. Reflecting carried out during learning communities does not necessary bring EL to change their practice. In the case of MV, collective reflections confirmed her way of operating. Now she acts with more self-confidence.

“It was a wonderful immersion, a positive moment where sharing and confronting our different points of view and practices, helped me to grow on a professional and personal level....I became

more aware of myself, my character, my way of operating and also my capabilities” (post-training interview Track 1 1.05)

When she speaks about her capabilities she mostly refers to her ability to distance herself both physically and emotionally from school matters when necessary. She affirmed that she often questioned her way of managing to take a distance from emotionally overwhelming situations. During the training and learning communities sessions other EL confessed their difficulties in not letting their emotions condition their problem solving, while MV became aware that she manages to take the right amount of distance from overwhelming situations.

During the post-training interview, she shared with me an episode where she managed to handle a critical situation with great self-control. Her words convey a developed sense of *self-efficacy* and pride in her practice.

MV: “School time was over, a family came along... the father, the mother and their son ... the father was furious because his son returned home with a black-eye...in fact he had his face swollen, he had been hit in his face by another mate.... I did not let the commotion get to me, I invited them in my office, I asked for some ice because his face was very much swollen, the caretaker came along which immediately helped to reduce the swelling.... I made them speak, vent out... and at the end it resulted that it was the same kid (the son) who actually started off the fight, I took disciplinary measure with both students.... but everything in tranquillity, the relationships between and with both families, the day after, was cleared out. (question by interviewer: what helped to manage this situation?)... remaining calm, listen to them, before I would have got agitated, the more the other would be agitated the more I would get agitated myself, I felt calm, like a doctor who listens to his sick patient, I heard the student, then the day after even the teacher who was present to the fight... the problem was solved in great tranquillity.... without exasperating the agitation, it was important to calm down the rough seas... (Post training-interview Track 1 4.40)

Besides being aware of her emotions, MV refers that now she is also more aware and in-tune with the emotions of others. This shows that MV has acquired a well developed level of *consciousness*. She become more aware of her perceptions, emotions, behaviours and progress made, but also aware of what is happening around her, in others. The following extract confirms this. The narrated incident was experienced at two levels, attention given to herself and attention given to others. The executive capacity to do both simultaneously denotes a highly developed consciousness.

“...being aware that there was an agitated person in front of me... and that if I became agitated myself, it would have amplified the situation, but the fact that he was speaking furiously and I answered back in placidly, it waned down, surely it was something serious but talking it through, you control and guided the dialogue..” (post training interview Track 1 6.02)

This shows that MV has also acquired **self-efficacy**. In this narration, it is clear that she feels in control even in challenging situations. She retains herself to be the main actor and artificer of the tranquillity created during the dialogue with the parents. In a humble way she recognises that her efforts and actions did make a difference in the outcome of this situation.

MV asserts that emotional distancing came quite natural to her in that event and even in other similar situations, but she affirms that she needs to do better by practising this always more so as to acquire more confidence and mastery.

“I am aware that there are situations that still touch me emotionally.... and there, I still have difficulties, For example during a recent teacher’s meeting I reacted to an opposition made by a teacher....at first I replied with a tone, it was more a visceral instinctive reaction, I did not shout but I reacted with a tone.... then I mellowed it down.” (post-training interview track 1: 7.01)

This shows not only an adequate level of consciousness but also an equally adequate and appropriate reaction to the specific situation. This also shows an adequate level of **flexibility** and **craftsmanship**. MV was able to self-correct her behaviour and take up a down position so as to manage the opposition better. It seems that this is becoming always more part of her, second nature. It seems that she is close to an **Unconscious Competence** level.

MV affirms that now she has a better time management where she can take time for herself and delegate. MV asserts that this new school she is in, has helped her take the right distance from things and manage her time better.

“The change of school, change my existence.... for me at the beginning it was quite a shock, in this new school, they are not used to work on Saturdays.... When I got to know this I said it is impossible not to work on Saturdays... but now I see that nothing tragic happens” (Post-training session Track 127.45).

During various learning community sessions, MV affirms that she was fortunate to have lived this *corrective emotional experience*, but now she is aware why, how it worked and how come she managed to keep it up. MV is also aware that sharing her anecdotes and experiences helped others in the group to reflect and also to consider taking ‘risks’ (such as take time-outs, delegate, post-pone decisions) is something possible and often it gives better results. She gave a testimony of this various times during the training and learning community sessions.

“I remember I shocked the group when I said that I don’t go to school on Saturdays and that I don’t check my e-mails on Sundays...” (post-training interview Track 1 18.09)

The other ELs confirm this during their interviews and even in the learning community sessions. This shows that MV has acquired also a high level of *interdependence*. MV helped others reflect upon and refine their practice. By sharing her experience, she assisted the other ELs to think more effectively about their beliefs, thinking, emotions and actions, and the real life anecdotes she presented during the learning community were of support to help them do the leap forward, and act responsibly but differently from usual.

MV now manages to take a distance without too much guilt feelings, emotions which used to take over and condition her decisions. Now, she no longer feel guilty and allows herself her time-outs which make her operate better as a head of school but also in her personal life.

“Having more control over my emotions, make me take a distance and see things in a different light and thus I can manage things better” (Post-training interview Track 1 22.14)

“Even in the training, I believe that even the convivial aspect helped us EL (referring to the lunches, tea-time, celebration aspect of the final presentation) it was our sort of deserved recreational time” (Post-training interview. Track 1 28.20)

“This training helped appreciate things I would have ignored a year ago, even coming here to Ancona to do this interview, I appreciated the drive, I looked at the panorama, enjoyed the sun... the training helped me to slow down and appreciate what I have around me, now I have to avoid losing all this along the way.... Need to manage to maintain this equilibrium... it is a very demanding work, it absorbs you, surely it is like that, but one needs to cut out these spaces and

enjoy them fully, so if it is holiday you take a holiday and enjoy it, and don't be swallowed by the work (Post-training Interview Track 1 30.01)

MV feels that the entire training experience, even having to drive to the distant training venue, helped her acquire a better time management, and cut out valuable time for professional development but also for her personal interest. She is capable to postpone and take time to take her decisions and also to delegate to others when she is away from the school. This notes an acquired proxy efficacy, i.e. the ability and confidence to rely on others and delegate but still feel in control.

It seems that MV had already reached an Unconscious competence level in problem-solving but the gained awareness boosted her self-efficacy and drive to further improve her problem solving competencies.

"I would like that this training continuous on... because I started to appreciate the value of the training as time passed by" (post- training interview track 1 1.06)

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN COMMUNICATION

MV confesses that to her surprise the training triggered a significant improvement to her communication. On the self-evaluation scale, she rates this improvement an 8.

In the post-training interview, MV discloses that the training helped her change perception and reaction towards communication and dialogue. The first thing that she became aware about was that that she did not give importance to her communication.

"It made me see communication under a different light... that is I understood that I should give more importance to communication.... I had a some sort of prejudice towards those who worked on bettering their communication... I perceived these persons as some sort of vendors, or show off (gestures of exaggeration) while I discovered how important it is to give space and work on the dialogue... it helped me give it right value to communication.... Maybe it is the most important aspect" (post training interview Track 1 9.20)

MV asserts that they were the learning community sessions that mostly helped her gain this awareness and the importance of communication has in her work as a head of school. The following excerpts shows a developed state of *consciousness*.

“The various experiences brought by others in the group... how they interacted and behaved... it was interesting to see how they structured their communication... has helped me a lot... I noticed that the others gave much more importance to communication, to dialogue, than myself... while instinctively, I would have easily reacted by saying do this and do that” (post-training interview Track 1 10.55)

The training helped MV value the importance of the dialogue in her work, even of small talk that created warmer and closer relationships. It seems that MV now lives each school experience at two levels, giving attention to self and also to others. The executive capacity to do both simultaneously denotes a highly developed consciousness.

“Even at school, it is important to find time to speak with the staff, even just a couple of minutes to exchange some words, even on vain things... it has its importance” (Post training interview Track 1 :10.20)

The following excerpts denotes MV’s ability to position herself in line with the specific situation.

This denotes a significant *flexibility* on perceptive and reactive level.

“Often there are situations where there could be misunderstandings, words that are interpreted in a different way from the original intention.... Before I would..... how can I say this... I would have held a standoffish, withdrawn attitude, well... I would have surely avoided the person... while it happened to me, some days ago, that there has been a misunderstanding, regarding a message, unlike other times I went to directly speak to the person, letting him know that I was hurt by his reaction, explaining why I was hurt, explaining also what I meant, and how he could have acted differently from how he did, and I noticed that he remained disarmed (interviewer “he did not expect this from you?”) No, no,... (Post-training interview Track 1: 11.55)

MV reveals to be a risk taker, pushing herself beyond her present limits. She confesses that she often preferred avoiding confrontations, this made her feel uneasy, yet she understood that without dialogue, issues will just escalate and aggravate further. Knowing what to do, made her gain

confidence and face up challenging situations. This denoted a high level of *self-efficacy* even in communication.

“I understood that acting as if a problem is not there, avoiding it... it is counterproductive, which give way to useless mental elaborations that often are far different from facts and reality, things blow up (Post-training interview Track 1 14.46)

“You don’t need to necessarily take it up immediately, there and then, because it depends on the person, but surely it is important to clear things out” (post-training interview 15.00)

MV is now more open to dialogue to take up issues which she would have preciously avoided. Moreover she was able to take up, a one-down position, approaching the person herself to clear out the misunderstanding. This denotes a high level of *consciousness* about herself and others and significant level of *flexibility*. MV was able to step beyond herself and resentment, and open up to listen to the other person’s perspective and find a solution.

“I told him (referring to the same teacher) that if in the future he had problems he should come to me and avoid saying things to others... I believe it is normal that in a school context with all the things going on there could be misunderstanding, but if these are tackled in a tranquil way” (post-training interview Track 1 14.14)

This denotes an adequate level of *Interdependence*. She is sharing the new acquire consciousness regarding the importance of the dialogue to her staff. In this situation MV brought the teacher to reflect upon and refine his way of approaching problems. She conveyed to him her understanding and openness to dialogue.

MV asserts that now she is even more aware of the value and usefulness of the training and hopes that this training continuous on. This reveals an internal drive towards excellence, towards continuous improvement, denoting a significant level of *craftsmanship*.

“At first it was another activity on my agenda, I had joined the group because I knew most of the other EL, I start to gather awareness and appreciation of the experience after, that it why I believe me need to continue on....” (post-training interview Track 1: 2.14)

It seems that even in communication MV is getting closer to the highest level of competence, that is an *unconscious competence*. Even though she still has to stop and think, she is gradually, giving space to dialogue and interaction with her staff. This is become part of her practice.

5.2.8 CASE 8: MVE

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN PROBLEM SOLVING

MVE recognises that she has improved her problem-solving competences quite significantly. On the scale from 0-10, she rates her improvement as being between 7 and 8.

“Definitely but I feel I still need to work on things... I am not as effective as I would like to be but I feel empowered so I see myself between 7 and 8 , I am working to do better, I feel more empowered but I haven’t finished... the process does not stop... you have given me a momentum that helps which I need to keep up but I realise there are areas I need to work on...” (Post-training Interview Track 02.02)

MVE affirms that the training gave her a sense of empowerment and *self-efficacy*. The fact she now knows how to deal with a problem, makes her feel more in control. It is clear that she has increased her belief in her own capabilities and her ability to organize courses of action that are required to produce effective outcomes. Throughout the post-training interview MVE often refers to the mountain-climbing process presented during the training. It seems that she now, when faced with hurdles, she proceeds by creating small steps that guide her way to reach the solution.

“Yes, yes,... First because you break it up and you feel you can deal with it” (post-training Interview Track 1 12.08).

“If we had to take the analogy of the mountain, I see myself, climbing and climbing, proceeding but might not plant the flag on the top, I might not give the coup de grace....kill you at the end.... But I know where I need to go and I know what I need to do.... (Post-training Interview Track 113.07)”

These excerpts reveal a high level of *self-efficacy*. The way she describes her problem-solving operations demonstrate that she feels an agent of change within the system she works in, and that she believes, that all her efforts in some way or another, will give results and that her actions do

make a difference. MVE affirms that self-reflection and the reflection carried out together with the group during the learning communities, have helped her to increased her awareness and ability to evaluate a problem from different perspectives. She recognises that the learning communities have helped her acquiring a better state of *flexibility*.

“The fact that you gave us the opportunity to reflect on our real life problems, we managed to go through them and we shared perceptions, solutions.... You come to realise that you can deal with them (Post-training Interview Track 1 17.09).”

MVE affirms that the training was a learning process which led her to gain better awareness about herself, her thoughts, perceptions and reactions. Through group reflection MVE become more aware of own values, thoughts, behaviours and progress made, but also of those of the other members of the community. This took place even in the partnership coaching sessions. Even though she would have like to have carried out more coaching sessions with her partner, she reveals that this helped her increase her awareness about herself and also helped her partner acquire more awareness. Her partner coach (see Case MM) confirms this too. Her partner coach MM, praises MVE’s coaching and mentoring abilities. It seems that she has lived both the learning community but also the partnership coaching experiences at two levels, attention given to self and attention given to others. The executive capacity to do both simultaneously denotes a highly developed level of *consciousness*.

“(Referring to the learning community) I think this was the nicest part of the training... I have come to learn that the more I grow the more I love learning from others, when I was young I was not interested but now I love sharing from peers who come from the same reality but who have different ways from mine. I have learnt a lot about myself.... and I feel that even as a group we evolved... at first we were wary of one another, I am not a person to have façades but people need to have façades, (but I feel that we were honest enough and trusted one another to open up... we were honest and that was good” (post-training interview Track 1 29.09).

MVE shared a case with me. Actually it was the case she had set as an objective during the first problem-solving exercise. She had a difficult time with the transport coordinator who was very antagonistic and oppositional towards her and anything she proposed to better the transport system at their school. The progress of this problem-solving process was often discussed during the learning community sessions and this case study was presented by MVE during the LACT webinar on Resistance to change (Webinar recording). In the post-training interview MVE expresses her satisfaction and sense of ownership of the positive outcome.

“The problem I had with transport, even though it is not 100% , it has improved remarkably even visibly now there are zebra crossings, fencing... that is things I have dreamt of came true... I still dream of a big screen with buses’ schedule popping up! But we will arrive there, we have improved.... I don’t feel any longer tense, I feel I managed to get people on board, with the idea, this is a tangible prove of resolution of such a big problem and it is visible (post-training Interview Track 1 14.03)”

The above excerpt demonstrates a tangible result of her improved problem-solving competences. It shows how she managed to bring her dream alive and also her confidence in continuing to improve the situation. During the MVE’s webinar testimony, she confirms that at the beginning of the scholastic year, she did not know how to handle the problem, it seemed impossible to solve but now she is aware of the progress made and what to do to proceed towards excellence. This denotes also a high level of **craftsmanship**, which implies moving from vagueness and imprecision to specificity and elegance. This denotes also an internal drive towards continuous improvement.

MVE shows great confidence in the acquired competences. She is so confident that she is capable of leaving her comfort zone and taking a risk, in order to further better her skills. Once more this denotes a highly developed state of **craftsmanship**. MVE reveals to be a risk taker, surely dissatisfied with the living in the middle. She is continuously pushing herself and others beyond the present limits.

“(referring to the final presentation)... I did what I did because I wanted to show myself and others what I had actually learnt. The proof of the pudding is in the eating! That fact that I had instruments made me risk... I wanted to record myself and see myself in action... and also have feedback from the teacher who recorded the dialogues but also from the group... that is why I started my presentation asking for feedback from the audience” (post-training Interview Track 2 02.02)

This shows a high level of *flexibility* both on a perceptive and reactive level. MVE is open to new perspectives and feedback from others. Flexibility is a fluidity in thinking and acting. MVE shows a willingness and ability to move from a narrow to a broader and alternative perspective that takes into consideration bigger ideas and the opinions of others. She seems to hold the ability to step beyond herself and appreciate different perspectives. She is also open to testing out new actions and strategies, confident that every action will inform and better her next action. An aspect of MVE highly appreciated by all the group, is her ability to look upon each experience as a learning opportunity. The following excerpts further confirm this.

“One thing about being a teacher is that you learn your subject when you teach it” (Post-training Interview Track 2 14,14).

MVE affirms that learning helps her teaching, but teaching helps her learning. During the last part of the training she started to pass on the learnt instruments to her staff. She understood that by doing so she would create a ripple effect in her system, share with her staff a common language to use when they got together to find solutions to their problems, but it is was also a way for her to internalise better the learnt instruments.

“I was so enjoying the training that I thought my assistant heads will gain from the training... I did not start with your things but I began with very basic things, but I wanted to give them some things that I learnt from you...we did the resistance to change for example, and when I was there preparing... we teachers prepare and while selecting material, you are reinforcing, then actually deliver it and then you have to actually react to their action or clear out things, what they have not understood and this deepens your own knowledge and I like that a lot because your training keeps alive... by training others you keep your training alive especially if you have a team, like ours since we are working together it is good that we have the same language and I believe a head of school should share his/ her knowledge and training with the people they are working with, in my case the

assistant heads... I saw it was appropriate with the assistant heads, the teachers at this stage... you can't be a leader on your own you have the multiple ripple effect, you taught me, I taught the group I am not eternal, maybe after.... Somebody will proceed on my work”“ (Post-training Interview: Track 2 13.16)

“I've been acting as a head now for 6 years, more than 6 years but it never occurred to me to actually train others, my assistant heads... the trend was to encourage them and send them to do training and courses because there are many courses... but that the head actually trains her own assistant heads... was quite an eye-opener to me (post-training Interview Track 2 14.05)”

“once a month, we are taking 1 and half, two hours we go away from the elementary school we go to the secondary school so they will not find me, we are there we are not disturbed (post- training Interview Track 2 14.36)”

The above excerpts reveal that MVE has acquired a state of ***Interdependence***, that is, she managed to move from being isolated to being part of a larger group or community. Like most EL she was open to the learning community created in the training, but she also decided to replicate this activity even in her school system. It is evident that she is taking up systems thinking in her leadership. She seems to have become even more aware of her crucial role as a professional educator in the school. MVE started working to help her assistant heads reflect upon actions and so as to take up an action research approach to problem-solving, which bring them to further refine their practice. She scheduled learning community sessions with her assistant heads where she assisted them in learning how to reflect more effectively about their perceptions and reactions, and supporting them in taking up informed actions.

“I already started practising what I have learnt, I already started trying out, in my daily practice but even in my presentation that's what I did (she carried out a problem-solving dialogue with a teacher, a parent and the child See Final presentation).... This will help me internalise it more.” (post-training Interview Track 2 15.22)

“I believed I moved on, I knew a bit on action-research but.... now I'm doing it....always more... I haven't yet become automatic but I moved ahead, definitely action research has been helpful in my problem solving....”(post-training Interview. Track 2 16.04)

MVE is aware that she has moved forward in acquiring operative instruments that help her problem-solving competencies. She recognising that by putting them into practice and sharing them with others, she is mastering them always more. She affirms that through further practice, she is confident that she will manage to render her new problem-solving skills second nature: Unconscious competences.

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN COMMUNICATION

“I have improved more,....close to 8.5-9 because I have tried more, maybe because it interested me a lot” (post-training Interview Track 1 12.23)

MVE reveals that she attended this training because she cared about improving her communication skills, but later in the post-training interview, she confesses that now she became aware that problem-solving and communication as two intertwining complementary competencies, both fundamental for effective leadership.

“I find it difficult to separate problem-solving and communication. They are so much tied together to say the truth when I first saw the course title, I said what have these two have to do with one another- east and west-... while now I am finding difficult to set them apart” (post-training Interview Track1 10.12)

This is further confirmed by her final presentation where she managed to carry out three problem-solving dialogues with a teacher, a parent and a child (see final presentation) putting into practice both problem solving and communication strategies. This denotes a high level of *craftsmanship*.

During the training MVE discovered that even in communication, one can plan and use communication strategies to improve one’s dialogue or speech.

“Something very basic I discovered.. is to have a strategy... very basic, you might take it for-granted, I didn’t use to plan a strategy before, for example... I am meeting a parent, I actually plan how to tackle it, what I need to say and how... and that is really helpful (Post-training Interview Track1 11.16)”

Having a plan and a strategy in communication seems to have helped MVE gain more confidence when she needs to communicate with others. The acquired communication strategies seems to have improved her *self-efficacy* making her feel more in control of her dialogues.

“I learnt something about myself, that I actually don’t look as much at people as I should, I am also understood why.....because when you told us to attend to non-verbal it helped me become aware of this.... Now I can work on it.... Because I am a listener, I listen, I am not visual, even the way I learn things, even in mass, I listen so I concentrate on listening, I listen to the voice, intonation, that is where I get my cues from.... But I was missing out on the visuals... that was a revelation to me... I still love listening but I am getting better in attending to visuals... I would like to continue climbing the mountain” (post-training Interview Track112.45)

Training made her become aware that she often did not attend to visual cues which she recognises as being essential cues to help her better her communication and manage resistances. It seems that training was a learning process which led MVE to acquire a better awareness about her communication but also that of others. During her dialogues, attention and care was given to her verbal and non-verbal, but also to others’. The ability to do both simultaneously denotes a highly developed *consciousness*.

Referring to the final presentation, MVE confirms that she used communication strategies both in preparing the video-taped dialogues which she presented during the presentation, but also in delivering the presentation herself.

“As I said I had a strategy, as I told you I had gone through the steps, which I wouldn’t have done before the course, I tried it out... which means that I am on my way to internalising it” (Post-training interview Track 1 13.56)

MVE shows a significant level of *flexibility*. She is capable of stepping beyond her usual way of listening and communicating. She took the final presentation as a learning opportunity, where she putting into practice the communication and problem-solving strategies she has learnt in the training. But she confirms that even though this took her out of her comfort zone, she wanted to learn from this experience. She shared that she observed herself in the video, asked feedback from

her staff and even during the presentation she invited the other ELs to give her feedback. She employed a triangulation study or reflection of her work, to discover that she needs to look up and attend more to non-verbal cues given by her interlocutors.

“I know I need to focus on the non-verbals because I do miss out on the visuals cues... still love to listen but I need to come out of my comfort zone” (post-training interview Track 1 14.34).

Moreover, it is imperative to say that the way MVE prepared and conducted her final presentation, showed a significant level of **Interdependence**, where she engaged others in the project. She involved another teacher, where together they reflected on the dialogues. MVE asked feedback also from the other Maltese and Italian ELs during the actual presentation (Final presentation recording). She opened up a sort of reflective discussion which helped her gain feedback from the others while also bringing others to reflect and study thoroughly a specific dialogue process. She did not care about showing her flaws or imprecisions. In fact other ELs affirm that MVE’s well-conducted and courageous presentation made them reflect and even witness with their own eyes the strategies they have learned during training, put into practice by one of them. Her intervention was of service also to the other ELs.

“It was spontaneous, we did not rehearse, I wanted also to look at myself, even the teacher who videotaped, she also gave me feedback, which I really appreciated... like she told me, ‘cut this out’, I said no I want to leave it because this is what I did now, maybe next time I will do better... I wanted to have feedback from my other colleagues, so we did not edit” (post-training Interview Track 1 16.16)

The above excerpts, denote also a high level of **craftsmanship**. MVE shows an internal drive towards excellence, towards continuous improvement. She cares about applying the acquired skills with always more precision and quality in her practice.

“I tried it out (in the presentation)... which means that I am on my way to internalising it” (post-training interview Track 1 18.12)

It is evident that even in communication, MVE has acquired competencies that she is consciously putting them into practice on her own but also with others, and which are slowly becoming always more second nature to her. She affirms that practising the acquired communication strategies will help her master them to become always more spontaneous and automatic in her every day practice. She seems very driven to reach the highest level of *unconscious competence*.

5.2.9 CASE 9: SM

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN PROBLEM SOLVING

SM affirms that training has helped her improve her problem solving competencies. She affirms that now she became more aware of what and why certain things bring certain results. Before she used to do them instinctively, now she does them more consciously and confidently. This denotes a developed state of *consciousness* and *self-efficacy*.

“Yes, even though there is plenty to do. I am still learning however it has helped me get a better awareness on certain techniques, which during my work, I probably already put into practice without knowing, in an instinctive way or better I used to carry out instinctively but now I know.... It seems as if I have given a meaning, a structure to my actions (post-training interview Track103.12)

“I have acquired better awareness and I got to know new techniques which I can apply, if practised further, they will surely help my better my competencies.... but there is still a long way to go”

SM asserts that the training has given her new insights and new instruments, but she still has to practice further to gain a better sense of craftsmanship. Yet, even though SM has more than twenty five years' experience in headmastership, it is evident that there is a strong propulsion towards continuous improvement. It is imperative to state that SM had to drive over an hour to reach the training venue. SM asserts that the most significant improvement in problem-solving was the application of the go-slow philosophy to her everyday practice. She believes that this is helping her

to better manage school issues. She is also helping her staff to take up the same go-slow attitude. She is conveying this valuable learning to others. She is taking up a system thinking, which denotes a state of *Interdependence*.

“In specifically the step-by-step approach.... I use it with myself and even with others, with my collaborators..... the words of Confucius ,“ A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step” which you often repeated in the training...now I repeat it to myself and others because I am a person that needs immediate results.... from myself and others ... I don’t give myself long spans of time to decide.... So this helped me become more patient... and go slow... it is part of my character which I am aware of... while the go slow.... step by step.... it follows the wisdom of keeping calm....the fact that I repeat this to myself and to others is already a good start... it helps us work better”

SM affirms that the go-slow philosophy has also helped her become more aware that she needs to give herself time-outs and avoid taking work home. Yet she confesses that she has difficulties in distancing herself from school issues even when she is at home.

“I trying to give myself time and space... for me and my personal things.... Even though I know that I need to do better in certain things.... Like I still cannot manage to stop and give myself some time write, I cannot get off... I rationally know I should... yesterday afternoon I returned home with a concern I had about school, about something I had to do this morning.... Now I know I should have not invested so much time and should have gone to the beach, I really felt like going to the beach, but on the other hand, knowing that I had these the worries, that I haven’t put into focus the issue would have ruined my afternoon at the beach, so I decided not to go to the beach... in the evening I said Claudette would have told me, you should separate your working time from your pleasure time, from the time you should dedicate to yourself... I still have difficulties here...” (post-training interview 07.51)

SM confesses that the training has given more awareness of her lacunas, have handed her over instruments to manage them better, but she has difficulties to put them into practice. She affirms that it is difficult for her to step away from her automatism and take up a different attitude. SM seems to have reached the early stage of the conscious competence level.

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN COMMUNICATION.

SM affirms that she did various training and courses in communication but this training helped her refine her communication further.

“Yes, Yes... I improved my communication competencies, even though I knew certain communication skills on a theoretical level, now I am applying them in my practice....they come to me more easily, I have learned how to listen actively, to use paraphrasing, which I am using always more, it is becoming part of me.... and other fine communication techniques, I have applied them and they are becoming part of my way of communicating” (post-training Interview Track 1: 22.45)

Throughout the training sessions, SM has shared with the group her difficulties in handling a specific staff member. In the post-training interview she shared with me how she has changed her communication and actions towards this person and disclosed the latest outcome of this relational problem.

“The case I have always spoken about.... In these last months I tried to handle it differently.... I tried to relate to her differently, avoiding to take up a direct approach but use a one-down position, doing so, I have gain a better serenity... I feel I can manage her better.... Now in the morning I go to school knowing that I can manage her better and this gives me a positive sensation..... while before I felt as if I had to load my guns before going to school, ready for the match, ready for the kill... it was tough... because dealing with a person like her every day, a person with a particular personality, there was a great loss of energy, it is still high... one cannot lower his guard with her but now I am more serene (post training interview Track 1 06.27)

This shows that SM has acquire a better sense of *self-efficacy* in communicating and relating with difficult members of her staff. She believes that she has acquired better skills to organize her courses of action, which is giving her more effective results and thus more serenity. During the training she often expressed a sense of helplessness and hopelessness in dealing with this person. But from this excerpt, it seems that she has gained more control and confidence in ‘taking the bull by the horns’.

SM asserts that she became more flexible in her way of dealing with people in general. She has come to learn how to interact differently with different people and situations. She is managing to position herself always more successfully, one-up or one down according to the situation. She became aware that she often created dysfunctional symmetrical or complementary relationships.

The following excerpts demonstrate how SM is managing an oppositional staff member, with whom she had established a symmetrical relationship ending up in regular ‘head-on- collisions’.

“I told her there are some delicate issues which I need to go through with you.... But after the holidays, it will be bad to make you start a task before you go on holiday....when I include her and make her feel important... we work better.... previously I would have corrected her, I would have acted like a dart,and we (clashing her hands), we would have clashed (post-training interview, track1 11.23)

“I noticed that in these last days, she was the one coming to look for me, come to my office, she comes and tells me ‘Head, what do you think?’ Finally!” (post-training Interview track1 18.08)

While the following except, demonstrate SM’s ability to break free from dysfunctional complementary relationship. She affirms that she became aware that often she had difficulties in say no, ending up becoming too soft and too available, leading people to take advantage of her.

“I supported one of my administration assistants in an issue where she was in the minority.... But then it was as if she wanted more from me, every time she asked something more from me, she wanted more from me, things that I was not in a position to give her.... I had told her what to do, what to use but she did not apply it....so I told her sorry now I cannot help you... I felt that she felt betrayed by me... but I feel serene, my mistake was that I had allowed her too much space, let her come in.... too much in my life, we used to text one another every day, there was a sort of complicity between us, but now I am aware that I acted wrongly and I stopped this (post-training interview track1 24.23)”

This denotes an adequate level of **flexibility**, moving herself into different positions, adapting her communication and interactions according to the situation. SM affirms that training helped her became more aware of her over-sensitive character which often sabotages her communication. She is capable of attending to both her and others’ perceptions, thoughts, emotions and actions. The executive capacity to do both simultaneously denotes also a highly developed **consciousness**.

SM affirms that she is learning to distance herself from work and issues which often overwhelm her and make her suffer and rush into impulsive actions. She is aware that her acquired **consciousness**

has helped her progress in this regard but she also knows that she is still reluctant to apply certain instruments acquired in the training which she is aware that can truly help her keep an adequate emotional distance from situations and persons. She shows an internal drive towards excellence and continuous improvement.

“I need to learn to put on a shield, not just with her (referring to the difficult staff member) but also with others, I need put on an armour so I do not remain too sensitive (Post-training Interview Track 1: 16.39)

“I need to take distance and to do so I know writing down my emotions can help. On a rational level I know that it is a brilliant instrument, for various reasons, look at FS, she used it and see the results.. but it does not come natural to me in fact, it is true that it is difficult for us to find time but this can become an alibi... (Post-training Interview Track 1 25.05)”

SM affirms that the learning community sessions were enriching learning opportunities. She felt she could disclose her most troubling difficulties but also listened and learn from others. It is imperative to state that even though SM has over twenty five years' experience in headmastership, she shared and welcomed openly the other EL's perspectives and suggestions. Most EL declare that they really appreciated this sense of openness and honesty SM generated in the group. For example in her post training interview FS affirms this.

“We learnt from one another, for example SM who has so much experience, shared her difficulties and emotions in the group... I would not have expected me to give suggestions to her ... she was so humble to put herself at our same level” (Post-training interview FS Track 2)

It seems that SM was an asset in creating a sense of community and trust in the group. By disclosing her most troublesome situations, she brought others to share and create a sense of community. SM have been of service to other EL, who truly appreciated her presence and interventions in the group sessions. This notes a significant sense of ***Interdependence***.

Additionally, it seems that the learning communities were a corrective emotional experience even for SM, where she witnessed that when she took a distance from things she could find better

solutions. Reflecting through the problem with group helped her keep at bay her emotions and see possible solutions.

“When you are too involved you ignore certain things... in the group, when I needed to explain things to others, I manage to put things more in focus... and things which I did not see before came to light” (Post-training interview Track1 32.17)

“I promised myself that once back to school, I will go earlier to school to dedicate a space of time, to do my plan but also to vent out my emotions... and even if they knock on my door, I would say sorry I am busy and do not put others’ needs before my own... I need to learn not to feel guilt, even when I need to leave the office, like C does, at 13.45 sharp she says bye I am leaving....and she does right, while I seem to have difficulties to leave when I see that there are still others working” (Post-training Interview Track 2 14.54)

It seems that SM has gathered a better awareness and she has surely gained a high level of *conscious competencies* in communication, yet she affirms that she needs to practice the acquired skills and make use of the given instruments to keep at bay those motions which seem to hinder her further progress in communication competencies.

5.2.10 CASE 10: MM

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN PROBLEM SOLVING

MM affirms that training has improved her problem solving competence. Her digital evaluation of this improvement was between 7 to 8.

MM very emotionally affirms that training helped her through problem solving both in her professional and personal life. It is imperative to say that during this academic year MM went through two major operations and had been reported to the DG by her assistant head with whom she was in continuous conflict. At the beginning of the year, the situation had arrived to such critical levels that she had asked the Director General (DG) to have the assistant head moved to another school because she could no longer work with him, but this request was not granted.

“Since I was going through a difficult time at work which was influencing also my personal life, I started to look for something more practical and I thought this course, psychology will give me more solutions... so when I applied to the course I was looking for this aspect, solutions..... where I was given solutions but they were not just solutions on paper but to my surprise the solutions went beyond my expectations because they affected me on a personal level (she declared this in tears)”. (post training interview Track 1 1.03)

MM affirms that even though at first the action-research approach to problem solving has created her a sense of confusion, then she started to appreciate its effectiveness in her practice. She recognises that she has acquired a state of *craftsmanship* and *self-efficacy*.

“At first it confused me because I am a very sequential person, a person who loves academia, theory so I arrived to this training with this concept, that I will be listening to lectures, take notes, will buy books to read, that I will build my library... to be honest there were moments where I was going through a sense of great disappointment, I looked up notes after sessions... because I thought that during the training I will get recipes, if this happens you do this, if this happens you do that....” (post-training interview track1 33.42)

MM affirms that even though she looked for a more practical, context-based training, at first it was very difficult for her to follow it because it went against her ideas and thoughts regarding good school management. But then throughout the training, she became aware that her leadership style missed the human aspect. This awareness was quite shocking and catastrophic, effecting MM both on a professional and personal level.

“I felt that what we were given in this course was a big paradox to the leadership theory, which is “my forte” and management theory, and, sometimes still living this paradox... before I used to approach problems through managerial strategies which were leaving out completely the human aspect.... I was following the management theory, that you take the decision, you take into consideration and think about the contingency plan, you try it out,if it does not work you change, you have plan A and Plan B, then check, then analyse, then question.... But in all this the human aspect was never considered... in these problem solving techniques, the human aspect was very present, more understanding and this was a shock for me and there I felt that when you consider the human aspect... you can arrive... but the managerial view of a leader, was turned upside down.... I am no longer the manager.... I am rather the servant” (Post training Interview Track 1 11.10)

MM affirms that she is now aware that problem-solving requires also human management. As we will see in the section related to communication, she became aware that her problem-solving

process cannot work unless she considers the human-relational aspect. Maria is becoming a systems thinker and seeing one's role in the school is a crucial part to lead her school towards change. It seems that the training helped Maria acquire a sense of *Interdependence*, helping her move from being an isolated problem-solver to being part of a larger group or community which needs to be engaged so as to reach the desired planned objectives.

MM regards this training as a learning process that brought her to a significant level of *consciousness*. Maria became more aware of her own values, thoughts, beliefs, behaviours, and difficulties, but also aware of what is happening around her, i.e., the human-relational aspect of her work. Training challenged her perceptions about herself, others and the school system. She started to live each experience, giving attention to self and to others. Her executive capacity to carry out both these aspects simultaneously confirms a highly developed consciousness.

The following excerpts further confirm that MM has reached a significant state of *flexibility*. She acquired a more fluid way of thinking, denoted by the move from a narrow, fixed or egocentric view to broader and alternative perspectives that take into consideration wider horizons. Even though at first it was difficult, MM was able to step beyond herself and welcome different perspectives which challenged her own perceptions and reactions. In fact it is imperative to say that MM not only questioned her perceptions but also changed her attitude and actions.

“It helped me a lot, it was something I was looking for, I am a sequential and precise person... who leaves it to my creativity will lose me... if not guided I feel lost and leadership management made me become more like this.... I need to organise myself....., but this same organization closes me up further so I end up looking for models, templates so I felt that this model (referring to the constructivist-strategic approach) was the closest thing to the words of management... there were moments where I felt frustrated because I was used to management, if you do this, this will happen, if you do that, that will happen, if you don't do that this will happen, I was not finding this but this helped me because I became aware that I was closing down myself in this managerial line, of input

promises output, and it helped me realise that in a job like ours where we have people management, we cannot be process input- out.... we are dealing with people....(post-training interview Track 2 08.20)

“Usually when I have a difficulty, I look up in the text book, like I have in management, I have a book called management fundamentals and every time I have a difficulty I go and open it, and say here, it is full of flow charts, diagrams, it gives me what I have to do, the recipe but often the recipes do not work in my context” (Post-training interview Track 2 00.22)

MM is managing to put together her Ph.D studies in philosophy together with the problem-solving process acquired in this training. From her passionate words both in the post-training interview but also during her final presentation (Final presentation recording), it is evident that she is highly motivated and dedicated in reaching a further level of *flexibility* to become what Hannah Arendt called a mental gymnast.

“Now I use self-reflection, but I treat it with philosophy, I would go back to my field and I would look up as I showed in my presentation, do like philosophy thinkers, who themselves use reflection as a tool to understand what is happening around them... I am training myself in this type of exercise, following Hannah Arendt’s notion of mental gymnastics, I am reflecting on everyday practice and I was taking up skills, act and then reflecting... I tried to use philosophy to dwell... into deeper questioning and that was very enriching and innovate too (Post-training Interview Track 2 03.14)

From her narratives, it seems evident that training has given MM a stronger state of *self-efficacy*. Even though she recognises that it is not easy to handle ‘the waves of difficulties’ she has to face on a daily basis, she feels she is more in control. It is clear that from perceiving herself as being a victim of situations, she now feels more a key protagonist. She has come to acquire the awareness that she has more say and power in her problem solving and in human management that she actually thought. She has acquired the new (tested out) belief that all efforts eventually pay off, and that her actions do make a difference. So MM is very slowly starting to believe in her capabilities to employ courses of action that are required to produce effective results. In other words, she moved from an external locus of control to an internal locus of control.

“I believe that if it wasn’t for this course I wouldn’t have held my role of head of school or I would have asked for clerical work for now, for the problem I had with my assistant head, they were the skills that you have given me that put me back in a position that we can continue working together... but it is a wave, it is like a roller-coaster, yes and it hurts... I am all the time giving, I am trying to solve problems, try to understand the other but I feel that he, from his side is not understanding me, he is interpreting this personal aspect, empathetic thinking like a weakness, so he has more hold on me, at least that is what I was feeling, but at the very moment that I do not understand, and I don’t approach on a human level, we don’t work” (Post-training Interview Track 1 07.23)

MM confesses that sometimes she still has her doubts, that she is sometimes sceptical whether the new way of problem posing and problem solving will give the desired final end results. She still struggles to toe the line and not allow her old beliefs to block the way towards a second order change in her perceptions and reactions. However it is clear that MM is acquiring a significant degree of *craftsmanship* in problem solving, moving from vagueness and imprecision to specificity and elegance.

“I feel I have improved a lot, I feel I found keys, a method that works and that can leave an impact but I am still struggling with myself to accept that this is the case (she smiles!) and to craftily do it better”. (Post-training Interview Track1 16.16)

“I need to consolidate these skills and continue to unlearn what I have learnt!” (Post-training interview track2: 31.00)

MM’s affirmations show an internal drive towards excellence, towards continuous improvement to reach a level of **unconscious competence** of effective problem solving.

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN COMMUNICATION

MM asserts that training helped her also improve significantly her communication competencies.

She valued this improvement, a 8.

“It helped me a lot, especially on the one-to-one level, even in a big school like mine, you end up caught in one-to-one situations even with staff, memos, having to communicate with the staff.... it helped me a lot” (post-training interview track 1 26.10)

MM became aware of her communication but she became also always more aware and in-tune with her staff's communication. She became aware that often with all the good intentions she was conveying inadequate messages which were creating her dysfunctional relationships. She has acquired a significant state of *consciousness*, bringing her to attend both to her own communication and even to that of others. By attending to her own non-verbal communication and even that of others, she is now capable to gather important cues to improve further her communication.

"I now feel that when I relate to others I am not just a head but also human.... my attitude changed, yes the questioning even the attention given to the non-verbal..... even with the teacher, I sat next to her did not speak to her standing.." (post-training interview track 1 32.24)

In this regards, MM shared with me a specific episode that took place the day before our post-training interview, which demonstrate a significant change in her communication-relational attitude.

"Like yesterday a teacher came along and she was not ready to open up to me, we have school development day, it is an important day for us, and on that day time-off is not given, but she asked me for time-off on that day ...if it wasn't for the course I would have told her immediately "No" you know through SDP (school development planning) that time-off is not given. While I tried to go deeper and I asked her "Miss is it essential, you can't do otherwise?" She answered 'no can't do otherwise!'... I tried to probe further, 'Is it something medical, a bank contract?', 'No, no, not medical neither.... I just need a day time-off on that day' stop! if it wasn't for the course I would have out rightly said 'A time-off on that day will not be granted, don't waste more of my time (points to the door) please!' This was Monday morning, don't know how many people wanted to speak to me, how many e-mails and staff I had to handle but I told her, 'now we have to end this conversation here, but I strongly believe that since you have put forward such a request it is not for a small thing, I told I don't know what it is, but sure we will need to talk again, right?' She said yes and left. After one and a half hour she came back, she told me 'sorry I don't know why I was reacting with you in this way,.... you instead of reacting (severe expression) as I thought you would, tough, you were human, I felt... I will have my wedding day the day after and the wedding will be on early Saturday morning'. So I told her' why didn't you tell me so? ' She replied because I was so sure you were going to say no as you said in the SDP she added 'I did not want to share with you something so intimate'.... my god, my god..... then she wrote to me even in the evening, to thank me, she told me that her wedding day created her a lot of trouble and worries, I believe she went through so much troubles to organise it that the wedding day that she believed this would be another and her final trouble. She told me 'when I saw it in the school calender I thought this is another mountain, the head will not give me time-off'..... she told me 'On that day amongst all people I would like you to be next to me'..... if it wasn't for this training the story would have been totally different and on that day she wouldn't want to see me I would have been her final drop" (post-training Interview Track 1 26.26)

MM affirms that she became more flexible in her way of relating to others. It seems that MM has acquired a significant level of *flexibility* in her communication-relational competences. From her narration, it is evident that she has acquired the capability to take different positioning when relating with different people and in different situations. In the previous excerpts, MM manages to take a one-down position, making the teacher feel comfortable to disclose her concerns and worries.

Moreover, MM discovered that by taking a one-down position, she can manage more effectively the oppositional conflictual attitude of her assistant head. She understood that by showing an open and collaborative attitude with the assistant head, she is managing his antagonistic behaviour, avoiding creating a symmetrical relationship that was hindering their inevitable need to work together.

“On monday, at first it was difficult to do as if nothing happened, have to confess that I still have to hold back from not reacting when I see him, do as if nothing happened but then I managed to go beyond and proceed” (Post training Interview 25.10)

MM has acquired also a significant state of *self-efficacy* also in her communication competencies.

Even though she knows well that she has to keep herself on guard, now she is aware what she needs to do this even when she is faced with challenging situations. The following excerpts demonstrate her acquired state of agency and control, which was perceived and noted by the college principal.

“Regarding the specific case (referring to assistant head), I am trying to convince my superiors to leave him with me even next year, because I know how to handle him now... they remained like this (astonished expression)I have arrived to a level that I told them leave him here with me, I know how to handle him, I have strategies...” (post-training interview Track 2 15.00)

“I have trust in what we did in the training, I tested it and it worked! It worked so much that ... the college principal told me that she had a meeting with the DG and he asked her how is the situation in X school going? How is the head? She told him it seems that they have solved it, I heard nothing on the issue, and every time I went to the school I saw them working together, it seemed solved, this meeting was 2 days before the outburst the DG will not believe me I just told him two days ago, that this situation is under control and all is working very well and I am seeing with my own eyes not only tried and tested but also witnessed by the principal” (post-training interview Track 1 21.07).

MM became also aware of her emotions and difficulties in trusting others. In various occasions throughout the training, she confessed that the various misadventures and mishaps she has encountered in these years of headmastership, have toughened her up in such away as to bring her to be always on guard and mistrustful towards others. MM confessed that this was an important discovery. She became aware that an effective communicator needs to be in touch with his emotional aspect, so as not to allow it to overwhelm and sabotage her communication and relationships.

“The learning community was a gift, the best discovery... I appreciated a lot the community of learners cause usually I work on my own, I do not feel comfortable working in groups, I’m a person who is very cautious, I am very careful what to share, I fear to trust but training helped me have trust in the other learners.... I really appreciate their sharing their problems, I learnt to respect them, look up at them, I really admire their work, thus I felt comfortable to disclose and I felt I was getting a lot from them...” (Post-training Interview Track 2 02.00)

These words denote a state of ***Interdependence***, demonstrating that MM has moved from a position of isolation to a community state of mind. It seemed that the learning community sessions have developed an ethos of trust in the group, which led MM to feel comfortable to disclose her perceptions, emotions and difficulties. It seems that the learning community sessions were lived by MM as corrective emotional experiences, which challenged her overly cautious and detached attitude to bring her to act differently in the EL group and also outside the group.

“I am so grateful for these experience... thank god I had this experience... it came natural and I enjoyed it, because I say it is an opportunity to try out what I have learnt, because I had this curiosity to try out and taking every situation as an opportunity!” (post-training interview, track 1 31,05)

MM has moved from a sceptic rigid position towards action-research approach to training, which she confessed went against her traditional ways of learning, to embrace every experience as a learning opportunity to put into practice the learning skills and strategies to further better her

communication competencies. There is a strong urge to continue practising her new acquired skills both in communication and problem solving which can lead her towards excellence, towards continuous improvement in her leadership. MM has acquired a high *conscious competence* level but she shows a strong drive to reach an *unconscious competence* level.

5.2.11 CASE 11: AD

AD asserts that she feels that the training has improved her problem solving competence. On a scale from 0-10 she values her improvement as 7.

AD seems to have gained a significant level of *consciousness*, regarding her practice and also the progress made throughout the training.

“Working on the final presentation, I had to put together the contents and I became aware that what I thought remained on a superficial level, was not so, it went deeper than I thought...maybe I did not gather everything that was given to us but certain basic concepts I have them, and I was not aware of this.... Preparing the final presentation I became aware that it did not remain on a superficial level..... “ (Post-training track 1, 1.23)

AD is now aware why certain things give effective results and also how to replicate them in similar situations. This denotes also a significant level *self-efficacy*. She believes that her efforts do make a difference.

“I now know how I need to operate, I am not sure whether I can do it, in the sense that I have gathered all the notes in a nice folder, all that you have given us and all the things related to this work, all the material I consider valid, I am putting together in this folder.... On a technical level, I know what I need to do, how to operate.. but on a mental level, in the sense that I do things already in my mind which I do not externalise or say, just like my Gozitan colleague I know it is not due to luck... can't be lucky every time, right? I do thinks unconsciously, that is I do not write down the steps but I do the steps on a mental level, I don't write them down, I surely construct my course of action, I do work with phases but I do not put down in writing”(post-training Interview Track1 5.11- 7.17)

AD shows a significant level of *craftsmanship* in her problem solving, that is she seems to take pride of her work and consistently strive to improve her current performance. She is inclined to

learn and deepen her knowledge and skills through further reading and practice. Her words denotes an aroused drive towards excellence, towards continuous improvement.

“Now I am aware I didn’t dedicate myself enough to the given tasks but I was left with the urge to know more, to go deeper into things... in fact I bought from Amazon a number of books, one on the pragmatics of communication which take up the same concepts I had studied back then at University in linguistics Other two books written by Nardone, I also asked my cousin who is a psychologist about the school of Nardone.... I wanted to know more” Post-training interview Track2 03.36”

The following excerpts shows AD’s acquire state of **flexibility**. She is more capable of stepping beyond herself and opening up to different perceptions.

“ Something that really helped me was something I knew but never really considered... to look at things from different point of views. One just goes straight holding his position.... While I became aware I did that myself too... trying to bring a person to consider a different point of view is not easy, there are so many resistances... to walk in somebody else’s shoes... when I tried to bring others to consider other person’s point of view, they tell me you are too kind” (post-training interview, Track 1 11.49)

AD is also a risk taker, not satisfied with living in the middle. She seems dedicated to push her and others’ frontiers and present limits. This further denotes a higher level of **flexibility**.

“My interest is to bring forward this school, my objective is to bring improvement in the school for my students, the rest is not important... because I did not choose to do this job out of ambition or to have a social consensus, I want to be of service to the school, because I truly believe in the school and education, I prefer to invest my energy in this, even in training or reading that can help me both on a professional but also on a personal level, to boost my spirit...” (post-training interview Track 1: 22.54)

This denotes also a significant state of **Interdependence**. Taking a systems thinking attitude, she manages to go beyond her personal ambitions to direct her efforts towards school improvement. It is clear that she feels the need be of service to her students and her profession.

“Another thing that helped me was to the ‘how to worsen’ exercise, to think the very opposite....and the miracle... because to consider how to worsen and how to better... brings you to focus and concentrate more on the issue... I tend to think things through, I say that I after school I don’t work, actually that is not true, that’s my wish, in reality no, I think a lot on what has happened, I do reflect a lot, since I am alone here (her family is in Calabria) I have time to do that (she gives a sarcastic smile)... sometimes I talk to myself, I reason things with myself, I do it quite often during

the day, I elaborate all that happens around me, I think on what happens at school because I don't look at school as a nuisance,... it was always like this I don't speak about school matters at home but this does not mean that I close the door over these school matters, I am thinking about them even though I do not speak them out" (post-training interview Track1 21.05)

AD feels that the new acquired instruments are helping her to evaluate and manage better her problems, thus rendering her a more effective and efficient problem solver. The following excerpts denotes a significant level of *self-efficacy* and *craftsmanship*. She feels more in control and rigorous in her work. It seems that she is moving from vagueness and imprecision to specificity and elegance in both her reflections and performance. The learning process seems to have brought AD to become aware that she needs to apply the acquired the problem solving strategies with more precision and rigour to a task or specific experience. She affirms that this is something that does not come naturally to her but she is working on it. AD is surely a risk taker who cannot live in the middle, who takes up challenges and strives to go beyond her present limits.

"I have to learn to be more structured, this is something that requires rigour and precision, and this is something which is not mine.... But which I need to acquire in some way or another, I am a person that starts off from great chaos, but then the end results are quite precise... this is what happened when I had to put together the new POF (students' teaching program), I had to dismantle it, break it down and reconstruct it, it took me a lot of time... but then I decided to share with others to have feedback and ask them whether they can understand what I mean... from their feedback I understood that the final result was very precise and rigorous.... but I was not sure because in my head I have a lot of stuff, great chaos and I am afraid of not being able to convey it in a clear way, and this is extremely tiring, a great fatigue... the same applies when I write down projects, then when I read them I say it is not possible that I wrote this myself, it is clear... I am aware that by writing I put order in the disorder, studying German helped me a lot in this, because in the German language everything has its place... and even the training, the problem-solving model, this rigours well-structured model gives me order, these stages were very important for me to put order..." (post-training interview Track 1 28. 05)

Once more, it seems evident that AD holds a propulsion towards excellence and continuous improvement and this can help her move from her present stage of conscious competence to an unconscious competence level into problem solving.

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN COMMUNICATION

AD affirms that she feels that her communication was quite effective yet she declares that the training gave her instruments which helped her refine it even more. On the scale from 0-10, she gave her improvement a 8 plus.

“My communication was fine, it came to me spontaneously but now ok there are situations where it should remain spontaneous but now I know that there are certain situations especially at the workplace, where you need to plan ahead what is the objective that needs to be reached, where you need to get with your interlocutor”. (Post training interview: Track 1 33.02)

“I enjoyed the funnel-like questions with the illusion of alternative... to nail down people (gives an ironical smile!), when I have people in front of me, when I am calm, I tell myself now I use this (smiles again!) (post- training interview track 1 28.43)

AD affirms that training has helped her achieve more awareness on non-verbal communication; both hers and that of others. She asserts that this was something that she already did, but now she is aware why it has helped her in communicating effectively with different persons. Each experience is lived at two levels, attention given to self and attention given to others. AS's executive capacity to do both simultaneously denotes a highly developed *consciousness*.

“ I was always conscious about how important it is to consider the type of person I had in front of me but now I became even more conscious of my own non-verbals, my facial expressions but also to calibrate what I say, I always did that, but now I do so consciously because I know it is useful, I am aware that you cannot communicate in the same way with all the people, this I believe came along with my diverse life experiences, I travelled a lot ... and I had to grin and bear it, make the best out of it, I had to become that way, if I had to follow my nature I would be very easy, relaxed, but you cannot always be in that way, I learnt this along the way...” (post-training interview Track1 33.34)

AD became aware also of her abilities to tune-in with others perceptions and emotions and then communicate and react accordingly. She holds a state of *flexibility* both at the perception and reaction level. She able to step beyond herself and tune-in with different perspectives and behaviours. She affirms that now she is aware that she can take up, what we technically call a one-down and/or one-up position in respect to the specific situation or person.

“I discovered that it is easy for me to act as necessary, what is needed out of me... the one-down position but also one-up when needed (23.29)... I might do it with a smile but in this way I am saying ‘Remember who I am!’ sometimes I do it so well (smiles!) With my smile, I am telling them remember that after all I am the head of this school, you can do what you like but eventually I am the head... I feel this responsibility” (post-training interview Track 1 23.29)

AD has a systems thinking approach to communication. She is aware that communication determines symmetrical or complementary relationships, which foster resistance or collaboration. She is aware that only if she manages to engage others and bring them on board she can actually bring school improvement. This denotes a state of **Interdependence**. AD feels responsible of the impact her words and actions can have on others yet she feels in control of her communication. She believes that her efforts in bettering her communication do make a difference in rendering her communication and dialogue with others more effective. This denotes a state of **self- efficacy**. She has a sound self-knowledge and feels good about herself and her abilities.

“I observed that my behaviour disarms a lot of people... in the sense that that I come from a different cultural context, my behaviour holds an element of surprise, here, they tend to hold the grudge, keep a long face, while I proceed... I continue to talk to people, I smile.... Just as you said, I act as if nothing has happened, and when I smile I do so genuinely, I not do so out of irony but it comes to me spontaneously, I do not fall into the trap of acting like they do, they want to bring you to having a nervous breakdown, bring you to exasperation, bring you to say I can’t help it any longer, but they are not managing this... I don’t want to waste my energy on this, there other things more important for me where I can invest my energy.... (post-training interview Track 1 21.58)

AD is gathering a significant state of **craftsmanship**, even in communication. She is aware what communication strategies to use, takes prides of her results and has an urge towards continuous improvement. She has ably combined the problem-solving technique of the mountain-climber with dialogue strategies to instil further progress in her communication competences. She is moving from coarse and imprecise communication to a specific and more elegant form of conversation. She is breaking down her ‘learning by doing’ practice in communication in small steps so as not to be

overwhelmed by the size of final goal, i.e. the ability to conduct an aesthetic and effective strategic dialogue.

“I am exercising myself in this for now (referring to questions with illusion of alternatives).... I am focusing on this aspect because I remember in the training when I ask you... but how can I do the strategic dialogue, it is so complex?... I remember well, you said, don’t take it up all together but break it down in elements, small things, thus I focused on the smallest possible actions.... I have to confess I would not have never come to this solution.... because when you think I have to do all this, this creates anxiety, all this! and it is very discouraging, I will never be able to do it, but by breaking it down to small steps, it is possible! (post- training interview track 1 28.53)

AD affirms that she is ceaselessly striving to deepen her knowledge and skills through reading, elaboration, clarity, refinement and self-correction to reach a better sense of rigour and precision in her practice.

“I would like to further my knowledge in communication and psychology” (post-training interview Track 1 32.44)

During the post-training interview, she elegantly and tactfully created an analogy between this learning process and her swimming lessons. AD seems to practice mental rehearsal and edit mental pictures as she seeks to improve strategies.

“I see this very similar to the efforts I that I have to do when I go to the pool, in swimming.... to learn free-style swimming, to learn how to breath... it is not easy for me, you need to keep a certain rhythm in your breathing, when you can breathe well you do not going a panic state and this is what you need to avoid, I know that I am doing well in free-style when I am capable to synchronise to coordinate breathing with movement, the same applies to emotions, this is what I need to do, control and coordinate my emotions with my movements” (post-training interview Track 1 33.51)

AD holds a strong drive towards improving her communication competences but she is aware that it is her overwhelming emotions that often sabotage her effective communication and further progress. AD is also aware that writing can be a useful instrument to help her keep at bay her emotions but she confesses that, due to previous personal experiences, she is very resistant to putting it into practice.

“I need to apply more rigorously the techniques acquired, I started to apply them in certain moments when I am calm and relaxed, It is more difficult in moments were I feel anxious, that is in situations where I feel more emotional, like it can be fear., there I is still find it difficult, thus I understood that I need to control better my emotions, so that I can apply the techniques... but if I work on this I know I can manage! (post-training interview Track1 34.23)

“I know writing can help to manage my emotions better.... But I am emotionally blocked... I need to work on this, free myself so I can go back to writing.... until 10 years ago I used to write regularly... I kept a diary to help me through hard times.... then I burnt them all... they were related to my personal life... so there was a sort of closing in, at 360° I have barricaded myself because of a personal suffering... I burnt everything and I turned over a new leaf.... Now I started to dream of writing again... that beautiful things will come out in my writing ... so I say I have to write but then I wake up in the morning and I remember my dream but I do nothing, I feel it is good to keep a log book, also because my memory is terrible, write down what happened, what are my thoughts and feelings... I need to start off with a small thing, something that is not of great fatigue, keep a sort of log book of my journey, just how I did when I was young, I used to collect and put together aphorisms, I use to scribble and draw things, it was beautiful...” (post-training interview track 2 05.12)

During the post-training interview, AD was guided to reflect on how she can overcome her explicit resistance which can become an obstacle in her progress in communication. Once more she wisely referred to the mountain-climbing technique, that is to use the learnt step-by-step procedure to reach her desired goal even in communication. AD is confident that if she takes up this path, she can further master the learnt skills and thus bring her communication competences to an unconscious automatic level.

This concludes the discussion of the 11 case studies. The internet of this section was to elaborate the ELs perceptions regarding their improvement in problem-solving and communication. The findings are based on a subjective evaluation given by the same ELs. As the reader can see, all EL affirm that there was a significant improvement in both problem-solving and communication. Moreover their narratives demonstrate that this training-learning experience was a learning experience which have helped ELs acquire also a developed consciousness, self-efficacy, flexibility, craftsmanship and interdependence. I am aware that this states of mind at some degree present in the participating ELs but their affirmations denote that the training-research experience induced a developed state. These findings and interpretations will be further highlighted in the following section which presents the common themes present in the ELs narratives.

5.3 COMMON THEMES

Through the narrative approach, the study created the space for the voices of participating ELs to be heard and to dictate the themes that they deemed important in this research-training journey. Through this approach, this study tried to reveal and understand what aspects of this A-R based training was perceived by the ELs to have induced the mentioned improvements in their problem-solving and communication competencies. In fact, the common themes highlight the aspects of the training which were addressed as more significant by the ELs in their post-training interviews. These findings will be elaborated in themes and sub-themes with the attempt of integrating literature in the discussion. Through an integrative discussion the identified aspects could be analysed within a wider context, thus offering a wider perspective to the learning experience.

5.3.1 THEME 1: PROFESSIONAL & PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

TABLE 6: THEME 1 PROFESSIONAL & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Theme	Sub-themes	Key words/codes	Most Significant Extracts
PROFESSIONAL & PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT	SELF-AWARENESS	Awareness, consciousness, mental traps, scripts, patterns, emotions, rigid beliefs, perceptions, mental traps, scripts, speedy Gonzalez, Achilles, fear, guilt, anger, self-sabotage, attempted solutions boundaries, taking work home work, time-outs	ST: <i>“This type of training helps professional but also the personal growth of the EL.... cause if you do not grow on a personal level you will not grow professionally”</i> MA: <i>“I became aware of my fears, fear is my most dominant emotion during a dialogue...”</i>
	ACTIONS & ACQUIRED STRATEGIES	Pacing, urgency, mountain-climbing, go slow, time-outs, scheduling, focus oriented, prioritization, multi-tasking, priorities, saying no, time-outs delegation, one-man show to rely on emotional distancing, log books, writing	DG: <i>“as leaders we need to have various resources and this became another resource that is resulting to be very helpful”</i>
	CONTINUOUS DEVELOPMENT	CPD, On-going training engaging, passionate, extension, EU funding, self-tuition, deepening reading and knowledge	ST: <i>“Training should be continuous and accompany us EL through our career, not just a year. (CPD) This type of action research training process should accompany us from when we get enrolled and through out our mission... help us find a moment to reflect, share...”</i>

A recurring overarching theme in most interviews was *Personal & Professional Development*. Most ELs affirm that this research-training induced both professional and personal growth. Hargreaves and Fullan (1992, p7) emphasise that “Teacher development... involves changing the person the teacher is... Acknowledging that teacher development is also a process of personal development marks an important step forward in our improvement efforts”. Bailyn (1993) denotes that personal development and professional development reinforce one another, one aspect being integral to the other.

In fact from the following excerpts, it is clear that ELs perceive an interweaving growth in both spheres, one helping the other. The training seemed to have given ELs awareness but have also handed over to them operative instruments to further both professional and personal growth. Training seems to have triggered professional and personal growth both on a perceptive (AWARENESS) and reactive (ACTIONS & STRATEGIES) level.

ST: *“This type of training helps professional but also personal growth of the EL.... cause if you do not grow on a personal level you will not grow professionally”* (Post-training Interview Track 2 14.23)

DG: *“It was a journey which took place in various levels: personal level.... where I discovered my ways of acting and how I can act better.... and professional level even thanks to the group we formed, the learning community”* (post-training interview Track 1 1.40)

MV: *“It helped me grown on a professional and personal level...”* (post-training interview Track 1 1.05)

MM *“It is difficult for me to give it a value, cause it was a personal experience, not like other courses... the personal came in the picture”* (post-training interview Track 1 04.34)

EF: *“I suggest this training also for personal life, which ends up effecting our professional life and vice versa ”* (post-training track1 28.30)

MV: *“Now I am starting to appreciate what I have learnt and acquired from the training.... It is a personal and professional journey that grows on you....”* (post-training interview Track 1 1.16)

MM *“Since I was going through a difficult time at work which was influencing also my personal life..... so when I applied to the course I was looking for this aspect, solutions..... where I was given solutions but they were not just solutions on paper but to my surprise the solutions went beyond my expectations cause they effected me on a personal level (she declared this in tears)”*. (post training interview Track 1 1.03)

LS: *“I recognize that I have changed I am a person who continues on his way but this experience has rendered me conscious of my way of doing....but I became conscious also of the fact that I have grown ...that makes a lot of sense, it is very important to me, I feel it helped.”* (Post-training interview Track 1, 09.58)

Bailyn (1993) denotes that a sense of success or failure at home and/or at work can reinforce each other. Yet when school agendas clash with personal agendas, people assume that their personal needs must give in. They spend less time with their families, giving up personal care and even cut back on sleep and free time. Leaders often get caught up in this addictive self-perpetuating vicious circle. The more productive the workplace becomes, the more time and energy is required from the leader than they can actually provide. While acting as a head or leader, the person has his personal life to attend to, which often is pressured by the professional life, and the professional life is complicated by the pressures from private life.

Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, Roth and Smith (1999) declare that until people are not given the opportunity to disclose openly about their difficulties and helped to redesign the professional-personal structures, they will feel stressed out. They will feel pressured by home and school conflicts which will lead to an inevitable poor performance and consequent sense of low self-efficacy in the both spheres.

5.3.1.1 SELF-AWARENESS

Professional and personal development seems to have taken place for most EL through **SELF-AWARENESS**. It is imperative to state that a developed awareness also entails the ability to attend to what is happening around us, especially in significant others (Costa and Garmston, 2016). This important aspect will be elaborated further in the theme RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT.

The various reflective opportunities offered by this training-research experience seem to have brought EL to achieve a better awareness of their perceptions, beliefs, mental traps, behaviours but also emotions which often sabotaged their professional and personal life.

FS, ST, MM, MA and DS became aware that they hold *beliefs* that conditioned their way of perceiving and reacting to things. FS overvalued empathy and availability. ST discovered that she is very self-demanding. MM became aware that she followed too much to the letter the learnt management theories. MA had difficulty to say no cause she believed that this is an expression of disrespect. DS discovered that she, like most people, believed that her perceptions hold the only truth.

FS: *“I thought I had to be empathetic always, with whomever, in whatever situation.... But this does not always work, there are situations where it backfires”* (Post-training track 2. 01.54)

ST: *“I learnt to listen to my needs and to keep at bay my strong my sense of duty..... which is necessary but when it is too much it is toxic.... I am very self-demanding..... I used to go to school even with a terrible headache or with a terrible flu, even when I did my first intervention, I felt obliged to fulfil my duties.... my colleagues (referring to the other EL of the learning community) told me you are crazy....I felt very much supported by the group...”* (post-training interview 16.22)

MM *“I need to consolidate these skills and continue to unlearn what I have previously learnt (referring to management theories)!”* (Post-training interview track 2: 31.00)

MA: *“Through group and self-reflection, I became aware of my weak points and what I lack... and thus what I need to work on”* (post-training interview Track 1 08.02)

MA: “I get so compassionate that I do not know how to say no, I fear to say no cause I live it as a sort of disrespect towards others.... In our job there are situations where you need to say no... during the training I saw that my other colleagues managed to say no... I am learning to say no but it is not easy for me” (Post-training interview track 2 05.10).

DS: “Something that really helped me was the fact that I never consider the fact.... To look at things from different points of view.... One just goes straight holding his position.... While I became aware I did that myself too... trying to bring a person to consider a different point of view is not easy, there are so many resistances... to walk in somebody else’s shoes... when I tried to bring others to consider another person’s point of view, they tell me you are too kind” (post-training interview, Track 1 11.49)

Most ELs became aware that their *overwhelming emotions* sabotage their problem solving ability and even their communication. This is in line with various research (Senge et al., 1999; Balbi, Artini, 2009; Milanese, Mordazzi, 2014; Papantuono et al., 2014) that demonstrate that emotions overshadow our rational abilities, ending up by dictating our (re)actions.

MA: “I became aware of my fears, fear is my most dominant emotion during a dialogue... I hardly ever feel anger.... While there are situations where I am taken by pleasure, ending to give more time that it actually deserves... in other situation I get too involved... I have to learn to take a distance, because I end up being overwhelmed... I need to manage better the emotional part of me. ... I am often overwhelmed by my fears and guilt feelings “ (Post-training interview Track 2 23.44)

SM: “I need to learn to put on a shield, not just with her (referring to the difficult staff member) but also with others, I need put on an armour so I do not remain over- sensitive (Post-training Interview Track 1: 16.39)

ST: “Need to be less rational and take care of my emotional part... which I often neglect... I need to work on myself...” (post- Training interview Track 1 14.07)

LS: “at the beginning there was tension and stress but at the end we worked it out brilliantly...Mamma Mia.... I’ve learnt a lot.... it was a result of the sessions we had with you cause I was not like this I was not like this, I used to go into a big panic....before I was a panic station... everything worked out well, I was satisfied with the evaluation and feedback” (Post-training interview; Track 1 27.02).

FS: “and need not to allow myself to be overwhelmed by the emotional aspect, need to keep it on the rational level, if I want things to improve...., ” (post-training interview. Track 2. 24.56)

MV:”.... *remaining calm, listen to them, before I would have got agitated, the more the other would be agitated the more I would get agitated myself, I felt calm, like a doctor who listens to his sick patient, I heard the student, then the day after even the teacher who was present at the fight... the problem was solved in great tranquillity.... without exasperating the agitation, it was important to calm down the rough seas...*” (Post training-interview Track 1 4.40)

SM: “..... *I need to learn not to feel guilt, even when I need to leave the office, like C does, at 13.45 sharp she says bye I am leaving....and she does right, while I seem to have difficulties to leave when I see that there are still others working*” (post training interview Track1 33.03)

FS, MV, MA, LS, SM became aware of their ***automatic behaviours or scripts***. LS and MA became aware that they rush into things just like Speedy Gonzalez.

LS: *At first it was difficult to hold back the Speedy Gonzales in me, even now in certain circumstances but then I remind myself that you need to go slow to go fast when you rush into things you don't consider a lot of things and this takes you nowhere thus when you calm down, when you go slow, you consider all options, pose questions that give you answers* (Post training interview, Track 1 4.11)

MA: “*I became aware of my script... what renders you predictable*” (post-training interview Track2 21.56)

MA: “*I think things through, something I did not use to do before,...I started to control the Speedy Gonzalez in me.* (post-training interview Track 1 06.12)

FS: “*I tend to act immediately in the heat of the moment, but I have learnt to wait, to take distance from the situation*” (post-training interview. Track 2. 25.05)

ST “*I learnt I needed to delegate... actually my health condition forced me to have to delegate.... In such conditions, I couldn't do otherwise!*” (Post-training interview 06:09)

MV confesses that the training brought her to a better awareness of herself, of both her strengths and weaknesses in both her personal and professional life. She became also of her past behaviours, or what Nardone, Watzlwaick (2005) called the failed attempted solutions.

MV: “*helped me grow on a professional and personal level....I became more aware of myself, my character, my way of operating and also my capabilities*” (post-training interview Track 1 1.05)

MV: *“Self- reflection helped.... reflecting on past experiences made me gather a new perspective on things, now that two- three years have gone by... I would have managed them differently”* (post-training interview track 1 3.18)

Self-awareness is surely an important step towards self-correction and eventually improvement. Yet it is important that, besides awareness, the individual is given operative information on how to break free from his habits or scripts to take up more effective actions (Nardone, Watzlawick, 2005, Milanese, Mordazzi 2014, Nardone, Portelli, 2005, Balbi, Artini, 2009, Papantuono, et al. 2014, Nardone, Balbi, 2015). In fact the following theme is Action and Strategies, i.e. the new actions and strategies EL are using to take up the challenge and work to improve their problem solving and communication competencies and consequently their Educational leadership. This training-research experience seems to have brought the EL to become aware of their existing perceptions, thoughts and ideas in a way that heightens their openness to new ways of knowing and acting.

5.3.1.2 ACTIONS & STRATEGIES

Another common theme is *Action & Strategies*. This training-research experience seems to have challenged the way EL usually manage their practice and led them to employ new skills and strategies to improve their leadership. Most participants talk of new operative knowledge and strategies they picked up from the training-research experience, which has helped them improve their communication and problem solving competences and as a consequence their performance both on a professional and personal level.

SM: *“I have acquired better awareness and I got to know new techniques which I can apply, if practised further, they will surely help me better my competencies.... but there is still a long way to go”* (Post Training Interview Track1 04.02)

DG: *“as leaders we need to have various resources and this became another resource that is resulting to be very helpful”* (Post-training interview Track 1. 03.22)

MA: *“I became aware of my fears, fear is my most dominant emotion during a dialogue...”* (Post-training interview Track 1 05.33)

During the post-training interviews ELs disclosed how they are using the new acquired operative instruments in their daily practice. The following excerpts reveal how they are able employing both problem solving and communication strategies for a more effective leadership. FS affirms that now she manages to analyse the problem better by following the strategic problem solving approach.

FS: "I define better the problem, I consider the failed attempted solutions, I consider the different points of view and the mountain climbing technique, it gave my problem solving a structure, a sort of scaffolding... thus knowing there are these certain steps to follow and these alternatives, how to attack a problem, I know it is there.... it gives me a sense of security".(post-training interview Track 1 03.25)

EF affirms that she is using an action-research approach even when she needs to discuss and analyse problems with her daughter.

EF: "An action-research approach is not only important for a head of school but also at home, when my daughter comes up with problems, the way I take up the problem and speak to her today is different to the way I used to do it before" (post-training interview Track 1, 1:02)

DS is using both problem-oriented and solution-oriented techniques to analyse the problem at 360° but also to help her keep her focus.

DS: "Another thing that helped me was to the 'how to worsen' exercise, to think the very opposite....and the miracle... because to consider how to worsen and how to better... leads you to focus and concentrate more on the issue"

ST and DG are using successfully the problem-oriented technique of the "worst scenario" to trigger others to react and move towards the desired goal.

ST: "With certain persons it is important to propose the worst scenario to make them react.... I told them if we wanted to worsen the situation, we should continue in this way.... the school will close down. This left quite an impact, to propose the worst scenario, something I would have never done before, this is not my usual way of doing things, I always try to reassure... but proposing the worst scenario... left a great impact" (Post-training interview Track 1 12.02)

DG: "so I already did certain things but now I put them in the perspective of the problem solving strategies for example with parents, I used to exasperate giving them the worst scenario to start acting... I used to exaggerate....I used to ask them what would happen in ten years' time if we continue in this way... I used to exaggerate I used to use itbut now I realized how come it worked, it helps to work towards our objective" (Post-training interview track 1. 6.22)

FS manages to combine problem-solving and communication strategies when analysing and discussing problematic issues with others.

FS: *“With the teacher who was assisting me in this project , we said ok here, what is the problem?... we analysed and considered the different points of view, some had a problem with the teacher, others because they had a bad experience at primary school, others were afraid of too much homework....we tried to consider all points of view to come up with a possible alternative that they all could go along with.... We narrowed down, in a funnel-like process and we discovered that there was a common denominator which could work out for all....I also asked her (referring to the teacher) what has been attempted so far to avoid it... and we came to a solution”.* (Post-training interview Track 1 06.44)

EF used the acquired communication strategies to design and carry out a spectacular and engaging final presentation, which helped her overcome her fear of public speaking.

EF: *“Like when we have to do a presentation, I studied what I needed to do, I planned to do something different something short but humorous.... at the same time practical... I am not a good public speaker I need something that keeps me on track, my weakness is to speak in public especially when you have an audience that all look at you, words do not come easily to me.... I have to confess that I've overcome my difficulty... and I feel my presentation left an impact”.* (post-training Interview Track 2 17.09)

ST found utilizing the anthropologist strategy useful and enjoyable to identify the strengths and weaknesses of her staff, so just like a maestro she could lead her orchestra better.

ST: *“I enjoyed carrying out the Anthropologist exercise, where I observed and watched my staff... I observed their behaviour, what they say and don't say, I enjoy doing this... in this way I discover what I can ask from them... I understood that my problem was that I always counted on the same persons, persons who I considered capable and competent, ending up by overloading them with tasks which should have been handled by others..... it is true that there are some who have true limits... while others, have come to surprise me”* (post-training interview track 114.08)

FS, EF, DG and MVE employed *the mountain-climbing technique* when dealing with difficulties, turning them into actual step-by-step action plans. They affirm that the mountain-climbing technique with its' step-by-step approach is guiding their present practice.

FS: *“... the mountain climbing technique, it gave my problem solving a structure, a sort of scaffolding... thus knowing there are these certain steps to follow and these alternatives, how to*

tackle a problem, I know it is there.... it gives me a sense of security”.(post-training interview Track 1 03.25).

EF“...we did the mountain climbing technique with very small steps, we did it together, I gave her the first steps then she continued, I told her you continue setting steps and you can change them,... she continued, knowing what to do, she proceeded climbing (the steps of the mountain)” (post-training interview Track 1 9.34).

DG: “The idea of the mountain climbing helped me now I started looking at things step by step, easy steps, smaller achievable steps.... we do not need to take 10 steps, we can take twenty steps...” (Post-training interview track 1 05.02)

MVE: “If we had to take the analogy of the mountain, I see myself, climbing and climbing, proceeding, I might not plant the flag on the top, I might not give the coup de grace But I know where I need to go and I know what I need to do....”(Post-training Interview Track 113.07)

DS is using the mountain-climbing technique to break down her learning process in the strategic dialogue.

DS: “I am exercising myself in this for now (referring to questions with illusion of alternatives)... I am focusing on this aspect cause I remember in the training when I ask you... but how can I do the strategic dialogue, it is so complex?... I remember well, you said, don't take it up all together but break it down in elements, small things, thus I focused on the smallest possible actions.... I have to confess I would not have never come to this solution.... cause when you think I have to do all this, this creates anxiety, all this! and it is very discouraging, I will never be able to do it, but by breaking it down to small steps, it is possible! (post-training interview track 1 28.53)

A common acquired awareness and strategy mentioned by the majority of the ELs, is the **go-slow philosophy**. Most ELs affirm that before they would rush into decisions but often this would complicate their work. The go-slow approach together with the mountain climbing technique seem to be help the ELs plan and pace their work more effectively and efficiently. In line with Napoleon's precious words “Since I am in a rush, I need to go slow” they are taking time so as not to lose time.

LS: “I became more conscious.... you can't continue to go gas-down because you end up worn out and even others...but things should be done slowly... step by step.... even when I speak I do not need to say 10 words in a second but say word by word... “ (post training interview track 1: 4.11)

EF: “The first time I tackled this case, I was too adventurous and I messed it up..... but then I said, I should use it as a lesson and go slow, do small steps in order, not jump from one thing to another” (post-training interview track1; 7.45).

MA: *“I think things through, something I did not use to do before, now it does not come automatic but I have started to be more ponderous.... I started to control the speedy Gonzalez in me. Now I first ask myself when is the deadline? so I can leave it for today... I am slowing down, I am going slow... I became aware of this..... Training made me think that it is better to calm down and think things through... to reflect on things and look deeper into issues, sometimes things were not as they seemed.... Better to take time and reflect (post-training interview Track 1 06.12)*

LS: *“Regarding the Speedy Gonzales if I had to ask the people around me I don't know but they would say that they saw a difference but I personally feel I have slowed down a bit ... not just a bit I slowed down even though I am being perceived as doing just as before, I know I have slowed down”.* (Post training interview track 1 5.45)

SM: *“specifically In the step-by-step approach.... I use it with myself and even with others, with my collaborators..... the words of Confucius , “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step” which you often repeated in the training...now I repeat it to myself and others cause I am a person that needs immediate results.... from myself and others ... I don't give long spans of time.... So this helped me become more patient... and to go slow... it is a part of my character which I am aware of... while the go slow technique.... step by step.... it follows the wisdom of keeping calm....the fact that I repeat this to myself and to others is already a good start... it helps us work better”* (post- training interview Track1 5.56)

ST: *“I became less instinctive and more ponderous, I pay more attention before I take decisions, I think about the different possible scenarios....I now wait before giving answers, before acting....the go slow strategy mentioned in the training remained impressed in my mind.... I have started to repeat it to myself and to use in my daily routine”.*(post-training interview Track1 7.04)

So most ELs affirm that they are seeing results by taking up a slow-down attitude. This is quite paradoxical considering that a complaint of most Educational Leaders is “lack of time”. ST and MV expressed this explicitly in their interviews.

ST: *“We have a very complex and demanding job, we are everyday flooded with requests that need to be acted upon immediately... we are condemned to run after time”* (pre-training interview, 14.11)

MV: *it is a very demanding work, it absorbs you, surely it is like that, but one needs to find some time and enjoy them fully, so if it is holiday you take a holiday and enjoy it, and don't be swallowed by the work* (Post-training Interview Track 1 30.01)

In the chapter entitled *“The Hare & the Tortoise”*, Fullan (2001) speaks about ‘slow knowing’. He presents various scientific evidence that shows that the a ponderous, less attitude is a winning strategy when faced with complex, ill-defined situations. Effective leaders go slow and listen attentively, while ineffective leaders listen less and make up their minds prematurely.

Paradoxically, slow knowing doesn't have to take a long time. He affirms that it is more of a disposition that can be "acquired and practised." Effective leaders take time to evaluate their situation cause they are aware that by taking time to consider- as much as possible- the whole picture, things will eventually fall into place.

Moreover, by taking up a go-slow attitude, leaders can come to evaluate and manage their time and their resources better. Metaphorically speaking, we can say that driving on the slow lane can help EL observe and appreciate the scenery better. In fact Bailyn (1993) challenges the assumption of "not enough time", declaring that actually people today have more time than they did in the 1960's, but hold stereotyped, habitual organizational or even personal expectations.

The paradox is that the more people are now trying to create their own own lives, their aspirations and expectations of themselves are higher, and this is making them feel as if they are not doing enough. In fact most ELs affirm that they are very self- demanding and pressure themselves into doing more. Most ELs affirm this but ST states this explicitly in her interview saying that she is aware that she is very self-demanding

ST: "I am very self-demanding..... I used to go to school even with a terrible headache or with a terrible flu, even when I did my first intervention, I felt obliged to fulfil my duties.... my colleagues (referring to the other EL of the learning community) told me you are crazy....I felt very much supported by the group..." (post-training interview 16.22)

Senge et al (1999) assert that people can work better or more efficiently for limited periods of time but not for long hours, otherwise fatigue, low attention span and anxiety and stress will take over. They add that persons should rethink their support structures.

ST learnt the importance of prioritizing and postponing issues she previously considered as being urgent. Not all things are as important and as urgent as one might think at first glance. Nardone

(2009) affirms that by using the mountain-climbing technique, leaders can start to prioritise activities and create a sustainable action plan.

ST: "I now evaluate... how urgent are things?... what needs to be handled now?... I have learnt to postpone..... Now, I work on Saturday morning... but Sunday is my day off, I leave the work for Monday morning" (post-training interview 05:20)

MV declares that she others made her discover that she can actually postpone certain work and avoid going to school on Saturdays. She further discloses that when she shared this with the group there was an uproar.

MV: "The change of school, changed my existence.... for me at the beginning it was quite a shock, in this new school, they are not used to working on Saturdays.... When I got to know this I said it is impossible not to work on Saturdays... but now I see that nothing tragic happens" (Post-training session Track 127.45).

MV: "I remember I shocked the group when I said that I don't go to school on Saturdays and that I don't check my e-mails on Sundays... but throughout the training I noticed that each started taking up this in new attitude (with a smile)" (post-training interview Track 1 18.09)

ST, SM and MV realised how important it is to take **time-outs** from work so as to regenerate themselves and thus work better. As we often mentioned in the training, "Even God rested on the seventh day!"

ST: "I realised an important thing, that I couldn't push myself any further... I needed to take my time.... Go for a walk, take my tea, take care of myself.... I believe my body wanted to give my a strong sign,.... There were days where I did not allow myself to drink, or to go to the toilet.... I worked all the days of the week...now I no longer work on Sundays, before I used to check emails, take work home....now I switch off my mobile phone... I tell my husband let's go out... I need to escape.... Sunday is my day off".(Post-Training Interview Track 19.00)

SM: "I'm trying to give myself time and space... for me and my personal things..." (post-training interview 07.51)

MV: "Even in the training, I believe that even the convivial aspect helped us EL (referring to the lunches, tea-time, celebration aspect of the final presentation) it was our sort of deserved recreational time" (Post-training interview. Track 1 28.20)

MM says that she used to take school work and school problems home, involving and worrying uselessly her entire family.

MM “I believe that if it wasn’t for this course I wouldn’t have held my role of head of school or I would have asked for clerical work by now.... I used to take work home, speak about the problems, now I am not doing that any longer” Post-training Interview Track 1 07.23)

ST understood that she needed to manage her time but also her human resources better. By using the anthropologist strategy she identified the resources and limits of her staff and this helped her to start relying and **delegating** tasks to others.

ST: “I learnt I needed to delegate... actually my health condition forced me to have to delegate.... In such conditions, I couldn’t do otherwise! But I have seen that my school still proceeded, nothing tragic happened... now I am doing so without having to have an excuse..... however, I confess that I still need to put great efforts to delegate... but I am learning to delegate, I assign small tasks and see how it goes... I delegate but need to keep a close-eye, supervise what they are doing... I used problem-solving strategies with myself, I delegated a small thing at a time” (Post-training interview 06:09)

DG, LS and EF recognised that they often took up all the workload upon themselves and that they needed to start delegating if they they wanted to manage the numerous school demands.

DG: “It was a one-man show, now I learnt to delegate and rely on others...” (Post- training interview Track 2 12.12)

LS: “They noticed the change in me... I now ask and am learning to delegate” (Post training Interview Track 122.43)

EF: “At first I followed her closely but then slowly slowly I did not check on what she was doing... at first, I used to go by her class to see what was happening... now I no longer need to do this... she comes to me and she is proceeding on her own” (post-training track 1; 11.53).

Most ELs affirm that training helped them even in their personal development. They became aware of their needs and emotions which often complicates their profession. Training helped them to work on themselves which triggered personal growth which is indirectly helping them better their practice.

Most ELs affirm that they are using **writing** to keep the focus and/or keep at bay their emotions or overloading thoughts which often hinder their problem solving and communication.

FS: *“I need to continue writing, I don’t do it so regularly, I do it when I am in certain situations where I am confused, so I write to see things clearer...”* (post-training interview. Track 2. 24.56)

EF: *“I write and things get clearer, especially when you are designing what you need to do, you work better ...you surely work better when you have things clear in your mind, rather than when you leave all the clutter, all the disorder”* (Post-training Track 1 23.44)

DG: *“I believe this is why I was calmer at school this year.... I was keeping two journals...one with what I feel... I used to vent out my anger.....”* (Post-training interview; Track 1 28.02)

MA: *“I need to manage better the emotional part of me. Writing can help me take the right distance to avoid being overwhelmed by my emotions... I am often overwhelmed by my fears and guilt feelings “* (Post-training interview Track 2 23.44)

SM *“I need to take distance and in order to be able to do so I know writing down my emotions can help. On a rational level I know that it is a brilliant instrument, for various reasons, look at F, she used it and see the results.. but it does not come natural to meas a matter of fact, it is true that it difficult for us to find time but this can become an alibi...”* (post-training Interview Track 1 17-02)

By writing, EL seem to have acquired better awareness, they are able to see things more clearly, learn to prioritize and thus are able to cut out the useless frills, but also manage to contain and work on their emotions which often leads them to lose their focus and self-control, to react impulsively and to eventually sabotage their action plans but also their relationships.

5.3.1.3 CONTINUOUS DEVELOPMENT

Another common theme is **continuous development**. Most ELs expressed the need and desire to proceed with this type of training so as to progress further in their personal and professional development. They affirmed that training should accompany them throughout their profession.

MV: *“I believe this way of training is flexible and adaptable to our specific needs , training should be continuous. We were thinking of asking you to continue doing it at our own expense with monthly meetings”* (post-training interview Track 1 25.01)

FS: *“this type of training should be continuous cause we need to reflect and act everyday, cause we have problems or difficulties on an everyday basis. Having a scheduled moment to reflect and act with others makes you do it otherwise it is easy to get carried away with the rest (CPD). As part of*

the training we can be helped to be able to pass this on to our staff” (Post-training Interview Track 2 22.14)

ST:”Training should be continuous and accompany us EL throughout our career, not just a year. (CPD) This type of action research training process should accompany us from when we get enrolled and throughout our mission... help us find a moment to reflect, share...”(Post-training Interview Track 2 22.04)

MV: “I am happy that I did this training, I ended up in this group by chance, first I was a bit sceptic...these experiences make you reflect and act more... It was a professional and personal human experience that helped me to grow’.(post-training interview Track 1 2.13)

AD: It has been a professional and personal journey and it should not stop here. We should work to have EU funding to proceed with the training experience. The Italian system does not recognise this, but the experience was so worth it to overcome all this (CPD). I would enjoy more staff mobility experiences. (Post-training Interview Track 2 21.21)

EF: “I believe we should continue with training, make it a continuous professional development training and include in staff mobility. Test out your skills during presentations to the learning community but also to your staff... create more learning by doing opportunities. Scheduled partnership coaching sessions cause they are really useful, I am sorry for those that missed out on this enriching experience”

MV: “At first it was another activity on my agenda, I had joined the group because I knew most of the other EL, I start to gather awareness and appreciation of the experience after, that it why I believe we need to continue further....” (post-training interview Track 1: 2.14)

MVE: “I have learnt a lot about myself...but it is work in progress, training should accompany us along the way”

LS: “I feel training helped me as individual I need to work more on it, even though it takes work and effort, hope this training continues” (Post-training Interview Track 1 02.34)

Anna-Maria affirms that training intrigued her, lead her to want to learn and read more especially on communication and human behaviour.

DS: “I was left with the urge to know more, to go deeper into things... in fact I bought from Amazon a number of books, one on the pragmatics of communication which take up the same concepts I had studied back then at University in linguistics Other two books written by Nardone, I also asked my cousin who is a psychologist about the school of Nardone.... I wanted to know more” (Post-training interview Track2 03.36”)

Most ELs recognise that they need to practice the acquired problem-solving and communication skills in order to master them and to render them second nature; to turn them into unconscious competencies.

FS: *“I’ve seen that if I put effort I manage but I need to study, it does not come always so naturally..... I need to practice them even more to make them mine”* (post-training track 3 04.20)

EF: *“....I need to continue transforming my weaknesses into strengths. I need to do it more to become better and more natural to me, each time, you need to re-invent yourself, it is hard work yet I prefer this challenge”*. (post-training interview, track 2 27.45)

ST: *“I have come to learn certain strategies, I have understood the theory, studied it, I am putting it into practice... now I need to make it mine...it still does not come naturally to me but now I know what I need to do, I hope I’ll keep it up... I need to proceed in this way”*. (Post-training Interview Track 2 26.02)

DG: *“I feel that I am mastering it and it is becoming second nature. I do it automatically when I am speaking with my staff. There are still certain things where I need to stop, reflect and refer to notes.. I need to practice and practice”* (Post-training interview, Track 1 10.08)

LS: *“I should have the patience to stop and evaluate, to put forward questions... to do this more so I get used to them, they become part of me...”*(post-training interview Track 1 7.12)

MVE: *“I feel more empowered but I haven’t finished... the process does not stop... you have given me a momentum that helps which I need to keep up but I realised there are areas I need to work on...”* (Post-training Interview Track 1

SM: *“I need to take distance and to do so I know writing down my emotions can help. On a rational level I know that it is a brilliant instrument, for various reasons, look at F, she used it and see the results.. but it does not come natural to me as a matter of fact, it is true that it difficult for us to find time but this can also become an alibi...”* (Post-training Interview

MM *“I feel I have improved a lot, I feel I have found keys, a method that works and that can leave an impact but I am still struggling with myself to accept that this is the case (she smiles!) and to craftily do it better”*. (Post-training Interview Track1 16.16)

DS: *“I see this as being very similar to the efforts I that I have to do when I go to the pool, in swimming.... to learn free-style swimming, to learn how to breathe... it is not easy for me, you need to keep a certain rhythm in your breathing...”* (post-training interview Track 1 33.51)

During the post-training interview, ELs were also asked if they had any recommendations to further improve this type of training-research experience. SM, EF, DG and MVE underline the importance

of scheduling even partnership coaching because they all agree that if left optional, the risk is that due to their busy schedule they will not be carried out with the required commitment.

SM: *“Scheduled partnership coaching.. cause if you leave it up to us, with all the things we have to do, we don’t give it priority so we end up not doing them, even though they are really useful. When activities are scheduled we tend to respect, even though there were logistic problems (distance) we made it to most sessions... we hardly ever missed a meeting”*. (Post-training session Track 2 16.01)

EF: *“Scheduled partnership coaching sessions cause they are really useful, I am sorry for those that I missed on this enriching experience”* (Post training session Track 2 16.01)

DG: *“I believe partnership sessions should be scheduled and logged...”*. (Post-training session Track 2 17.09)

MVE: *“....scheduled partnership coaching sessions even via skype in between sessions”*. (Post-training session Track 2 18.09)

MVE adds that besides scheduling the partnership coaching sessions, something that can help is to give partners specific tasks or games, which could be initiated or discussed during the learning community sessions.

MVE: *“Create games, I love games to increase bonding between partners and use part of the learning community session to discuss the shared tasks. Just as in school, I would start the task in the group and then continue it as homework at home....”* (Post-training interview Track 2 21.19)

It is interesting to note that EF, who feared public speaking, suggests more presentations to be carried out through out the training sessions or/and with one’s school staff. DG shares the same idea but he actually suggests to video-tape their actions and then discuss them with the other EL during the learning community sessions.

EF: *“Test out your skills during presentations to the learning community but also to your staff... create more learning by doing opportunities”*. (Post- Training Interview Track 2: 24.04)

DG: *“I would insert presentations along the way... this would require more work but it helps you stop and put together what you have learnt. When you need to do , you do it! Like tasks, if they have to be presented in the community you would dedicate more time to them and take them more seriously, and you eventually learn more. Learning through practice by exercising in the learning community but also video-recording your work as MVE did and discuss it in the group.”* (Post-training Interview Track 2 21.21)

ST suggests to add more presentations but to use them also as a sort of evaluation of their progress.

ST: "I would do a presentation also at the beginning too, in Italian Schools, following the EU guidelines, we are using this with newly enrolled teachers, we ask new teachers to do a sort of evaluation of their skills and then at the end of the training.... I believe it can be useful even here, maybe a test or better a presentation, not with too many check-lists cause it would become tedious and lose the human aspect" (Post-training Interview Track 2 23.00)

MA, LS and MVE gave input regarding content and available material. MA affirms that recorded training sessions should have an easy access so that EL can go through significant learning moments. LS appreciated that they were not given tons of reading material but the bare essential which made use of analogical language.

MA: "I would like it if we had access to the video-recorded sessions so as to be able to go back and watch useful moments of the training and learning community sessions, preferably accessible from home- like having a dropbox account accessible only by group members" (Post-training Interview Track 2 21.55)

LS: "Presenting training material with images helps, like the image of the mountain climbing, Speedy Gonzalez, then having tasks or homework to try out your learnt skills, not a text book... to read... on my God!" (Post-training interview Track 2 21.21)

MM suggests that a more ample explanation on the 'experimental' aspect of action research should be given to EL at the beginning of the training.

MM: "I believe that the Action research approach should be better explained at the beginning of the training, we are teachers and are used to clear plans, objectives and outcomes. I suffered at first, I felt quite lost but then I started to appreciate it, now I am practising it too" (Post-training Interview Track 2 23.13)

MVE gave feedback on the setting of the training.

MVE: "It is important that training venue is central, easily reached, as it actually was.... while sessions should be every fortnight, maybe training sessions should be every fortnight during the first part, as we did.... Then during the second part monthly training sessions but scheduled partnership coaching sessions even via skype in between sessions". (Post-training Interview Track 2 24.11)

LS suggests that this training should be carried out by all EL but underlines the need for this to be carried out in small groups.

LS: *“I believe this training should open to more heads but not all heads are ready to put themselves and their methods into question. And they certainly needs to put in effort cause it is a long and active training... it takes work but it is rewarding...yet it has to be in small groups maximum 8 persons so that people feel they can open up and share with others even their difficulties and failures”*. (Post- training Interview Track 2 18.01)

Regarding the virtual platform both ST and FS suggest the use of another medium instead of Facebook. But FS adds, that probably meeting the Maltese group at the beginning of the training might have made Facebook work too.

ST: *“maybe we need another medium not Facebook... skype even whatsapp... something more immediate and intuitive, skype with scheduled encounters....”* (Post-training Interview Track 2 14.04)

FS: *“I believe it failed for the instrument used... Facebook.... It should have a more professional outfit and needs to be structured and immediate like nudol.... “* (Post-training Interview Track 2 19.01)

FS: *“It is important to get to know members of the community beforehand... if I knew them probably even Facebook might have worked”* (Post- Training interview Track 2 20.20)

MVE and FS suggest that training should take place, during which EL should be trained to train their staff.

MVE: *“As part of our next training, we can train others so as to learn from our experiences but also to create a ripple effect”*. (Post training Interview Track 2 22.11)

FS: *“As part of our continuous training we can be helped to be able to pass this on to our staff”* (Post-training Interview Track 2 22.14)

ST, DS and EF suggested the inclusion of other ELs from other EU countries in the learning community and increasing school visits and staff mobility.

ST: *“We could extend our community even with other EL from other countries using EU funding”*. (Post-training Interview Track 2 08.18)

DS: *“School visits were very enriching, want to do more and bring Maltese heads to visit and see our realities too.* (Post training Interview Track 2 22.22)

EF: *“I believe we should proceed with training, render it a continuous professional development training and include in staff mobility”* (Post-training Interview Track 2 04.49)

The above excerpts denote the ELs' great motivation, passion and dedication in proceeding in their professional and personal development. Moswela (2006) affirms that commitment and motivation are fundamental aspects for effective personal development, while training should be designed to maintain or better increase these aspects. Bezzina (2002) sustains that development need to be "ongoing", on a "continuous basis" on a "regular basis, not haphazard" in order to be effective, as the ELs suggest. Their recommendations reveal a thorough evaluation analysis of this training-research experience but also of their needs. These recommendations will surely be taken up in designing a similar training-research experience even though an effective training should follow an action-research approach which evaluates and acts on the needs of the specific group. In fact Lee (2005) sustains that successful professional development should be sustained over a period of time, should be needs-based, embedded in daily practice, and tailored to meet the specific circumstances or contexts of the participants

5.3.2 THEME 2: PRAXIS

TABLE 7: PRAXIS

Theme	Sub-Themes	Codes/ key words	Most significant Excerpts
PRAXIS	Contextual & Relevant	Relevant, Site-based, not theory	MVE: <i>“Very useful to our practice because it’s contextual. I knew action-research but now I am using it in my practice...”</i>
	Active & Operative	Knowing through changing, experimental, learning by doing, tangible, in-action	SM: <i>“...we were all active subjects. It leads you to experiment in person, to be the protagonist of the process and not a spectator or a container to be filled with information...we were all active subjects”</i>
	Rigorous but not rigid	Constructivist-strategic approach, Rigour, credible, guidelines, measurable, no one-way solutions no	FS: <i>“...it was a compromise between flexibility and rigour”.</i>
	Adaptable & Transferable	Flexible, no-one-fits all solutions, no rigid receipts, ad hoc, tailor made onto the different situations, Instruments passed on to others, used with others, staff, friends even home	LS: <i>“What you did with us, shared with us is a model which can be applied to our specific and particular situation “</i> DG: <i>Even in the action-plans we are working and implementing at school, we need to break them down into small steps... I am passing on this method to my staff...even in planning our school curriculum...”</i>
	Effective	Observed tangible results, changes, credible, positive effects	FS <i>“In these months I witnessed with my own eyes that what I’ve learnt during the training works!”</i>

5.3.2.1 CONTEXTUAL & RELEVANT

Most ELs regard this training-research experience as being *contextual and relevant*. Robertson (2002) asserts that training is regarded relevant and thus useful by leaders if they are context-based.

MVE: “...very useful to our practice because it’s contextual. I knew action-research but now I am using it in my practice...” (Post-training Interview Track 1 23.44)

EF: “It was the thing that helped me most... the most effective because it was context-based... if training was just theory, we would not have stick to it... after a full-day’s work, we would have all fallen asleep” (Post-training Track 1 25.35)

Most ELs agreed that this training-research experience was relevant because it did not remain on a theoretical level, but it was a full immersion pragmatic experience. ST affirms that other courses she had carried out, were far removed from the reality of their work.

ST: “I loved it because unlike other courses it is not theoretical... not in the air but very much integrated in our work.....we worked in the field, where we brought our own problems and difficulties... it is an extraordinary methodology which I love... it works because it is not abstract or it takes up Utopic cases, but it helps you handle everyday problems, how to manage emergencies which in our work take place on a daily basis” (Post-training Interview Track 123.33)

MV: “The approach that we need to use in our work cannot be theoretical or abstract... it should fit into our practice and experiences... it was practical because it was based on reflection and action and not on abstract theory”. (Post-training Interview Track 1 21.00)

SM: “It is an approach that does not remain on a theoretical level but has a pragmatic aspect.... It is very powerful for our type of work...” (Post-training Interview Track1 24.01)

MM: “Practical living skills to use in various contexts. A necessary approach for everyday life” (Post-training Interview Track 1 22.02)

MA: “It gave positive effects, it helps you slow down and reflect better on your actions, reflect on the context, situation and persons you have around you” (Post-training Track 1 21.21)

For FS this training-research experience was relevant because it was contextual but also guided.

FS : “It helps you read and guides you in that specific situation...” (Post-training-interview Track 2; 15.11)

LS considers this training-research experience as a learning by doing experience.

LS: *“Focused on our needs. Sharing our cases helped me see that there can be a solution... now when I see something as impossible, I say maybe I did not consider all the options.... it was a learning by doing experience”*(Post training Interview Track1 19.11)

These findings are in line with various research (Huttner, et al., 2009; Loughran, 2009; Lunenberg and Korthagen, 2009; Lampert, 2009; Allen, 2015) that claim that teachers tend to dismiss the ‘theoretical’ training and prefer programmes which are ‘practical’ or ‘hands-on’. In line with the ELs’ affirmations, Lunenberg and Korthagen, (2009) denote that learning is gained from operating in the real world. Robertson (2002) affirms that ELs need to be working with the people, contents and difficulties they encounter everyday if they are to recognise professional development as useful and relevant.

Cooper and McIntyre¹ (1995) declare that teachers require tangible operative knowledge that they can use in their daily practice. Hargreaves and Goodson (1996) affirm that the knowledge they acquire from their practice gives substance to teachers’ personal and professional development, that is knowing through action.

5.2.2.2 ACTIVE & OPERATIVE: INFORMED ACTION

Another common theme that emerged from the post-training interviews is that training is *active & operative*. ELs affirm that they felt *active* figures both in the training and research aspect of this project.

ST: *“...you are an active actor... I like this methodology in training”*(Post training Interview Track1 20.31)

SM: *“....we were all active subjects. It leads you to experiment in person, to be protagonist of the process and not a spectator or a container to be filled with information...we were all active subjects”* (Post- training Interview Track1 23.11)

MV: *“....we tested out given instruments on real cases in our practice but also cases brought by us.... to the session”*. (Post-training Interview Track 1 22.56)

FS *“I liked it.... we used what we brought to the sessions... we often had urgent problems and we took them up and reflected upon them in the group... “.* (Post-training Interview Track 1. 27.32)

Schon (1983) declares that most professional development training relies almost solely on information drawn from a formal knowledge base, while ignoring experiential knowledge. Robertson (2002) affirms that most available professional development courses fail to provide the opportunity to discuss educational leadership with others or observe others in practice, thus leaders often do not feel so committed and engaged by the training.

While, most ELs participating to this training-research experience affirm that it gave them the opportunity to present and work on their cases, reflect and question their communication and problem solving abilities, and discuss possible alternative solutions or ideas. The A-R approach used both in guiding their practice and in designing the training, made the ELs feel that they were the main protagonist. Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) underline the fact that in reflective practices, the learner should be active, given the possibility to establish the agenda and to guide the search for solutions.

LS, FS, MV and AD emphasize the *operative* aspect of this training-research experience. These ELs affirm that they have acquired operative tools which they can use in autonomy to guide their practice. Robertson (2002) reminds us that learning out from experience, not only assists the learning process, but it also enhances intellectual independence and reinforces self-directed professional development. Caffarella (1993) sustains that all training that aims at handing over ideas, skills and attitudes, should lead to self-directed learning, where the learner has primary responsibility for planning, carrying out and evaluating their own learning experiences.

LS: *“It is definitely effective in our work. Now I stop and ask myself what worked and what made it work... What did not work? What can make it better? What would others think or do?”* (Post training Interview: Track 1 24.15)

FS “*I liked constructivism combined with problem-solving it gave me clear practical guidelines to follow*” (Post- training Interview Track 1 23.12)

MV:”*I now enjoy exploring problems and breaking them them down into small components.... I don't see the problem in its complexity*”. (Post training Interview Track1 23.11)

AD: “*It is a model that takes into consideration many things put together... it gives you instruments on how to reflect to arrive to guide you to a more specific focal point, in my opinion, it is complete....*” (Post training Interview Track1 23.41)

Most ELs appreciated the fact that the training gave them operative knowledge and instruments, which they could actively practise during the training and learning community sessions. This gave them the impetus to actively apply them in their practice when back on site. In other words, it sees that the ELs felt that this training-research experience made them feel active but also guided. This is in line with Robertson (2002) who affirms that ELs are required to act intentionally. Duignan (1988, p.5) affirms that practice should be “conscious, reflective, intentional action.... [which] is the bridge between theory and praxis- between reflection, analysis and action”.

5.3.2.3 RIGOROUS BUT NOT RIGID

Another common theme is *rigorous but not rigid*. Most ELs expressed the utility of having a rigorous but not rigid model to help them better both with their problem solving and their communication competencies. The constructivist-strategic model, which also follows an action-research methodology offered a systematic yet flexible inquiry method to practice.

FS “.....*it was a compromise between flexibility and rigour*”.(Post training Interview Track1 21.11)

ST: “*It was the stronghold of this training, unlike other courses I've been to, which are too structured with fixed calender, programme, themes which are based on a hypothetical quid (something), while here we listened and worked on experiences, needs... discussed in a small group where everyone was involved.... you are not a number but you are an active actor... I like this methodology in training*”(Post training Interview Track1 18.11)

SM:” *It was a form of negotiation. I like the fact that we found a compromise between what was planned and what was needed on the day. This is what rendered this training useful and real*.”(Post training Interview Track1 20.11)

MVE: “*It was the proper way to go about it, it had structure but which is adaptable to context* ” ((Post training Interview Track1 28.41)

DG: “*It helped me to have a specific model to follow, something structured I can refer to but not rigid. I love to be structured, but at the same time, I try to get out of my box, but I need structure, guidelines to follow.... To help me when I feel lost, because sometimes I leave at a tangent and to go back on track I need a structure*”(Post training Interview Track1 27.17)

Nardone & Portelli (2005) sustain that it is the link between theory and practice that renders the learning process rigorous but not rigid. This fits well in the complex, constantly mutating educational context in which ELs need to practice. It also aligns well with the process of development in action research, which endeavours to bridge the gap between espoused theories and theories-in-action, or as Schon (1983) explains it, “transform... the situation from what is, to something... better” (p147)

ST affirms that training gave meaning and rigour to what she was doing spontaneously. As we it will be elaborated in Theme 6: Exercise of Control, this combination of awareness and rigour helps in developing a state of agency.

ST: “*It was useful because even those things that I used to do unconsciously or instinctively without reflecting, now I know they have a logic*”.

AD, MVE and MM underline the experimentation aspect of this action-research based training. AD loved the feeling the unknown generated by action-research, while MM and MVE started appreciating it after an initial phase of confusion. Schon (1983) confirms this by saying “It is the whole process of reflection-in-action which is central to the ‘art’ by which practitioners sometimes deal with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflicts” (p.50)

AD: “*I like it because it was not a rigid approach, I like the unknown, the not-defined situations.... Where you are continuously testing yourself. I do it with myself and others. I am self-critical because I want to learn from my experiences*”(Post training Interview Track1 20.11)

MM: *“At first I was confused because I am a very sequential person, who loves academia, theory so I arrived to training with this concept.... That I would have notes, books with ready made recipes.... If this happens you do this, if this happens you do that... at first, I was going through moments of discomfort and disappointment... but then I understood that learning was through direct experience... through reflection and sharing with others in our learning community”.*(Post training Interview Track1 19.11)

MVE: *“At first, I felt confused..... not having a precise structured plan as in other courses, but I am not a sequential person so I went on along... we are teachers and we ‘brought up’ this way, we need structure, maybe you needed to emphasise more this initial feeling of confusion of loss...one feels when taking up an action research approach, but then I enjoyed it and came easy to me”.*(Post training Interview Track1 20.11)

5.3.2.4 ADAPTABLE & TRANSFERABLE

ANOTHER EMERGING THEME IS **ADAPTABLE AND TRANSFERABLE**. MOST ELS APPRECIATE THAT THE GIVEN OPERATIVE TOOLS CAN BE USED AND ADAPTED ON DIFFERENT SITUATIONS AND CONTEXTS.

LS: *“What you did with us, shared with us is a model which can be applied to our specific and particular situation “(Post training Interview Track1 19.19)*

ST: *“.... now I know it has a logic, a strategy that can be used in a certain way, in a certain situation... that they work for a certain reason... which now I am aware of”.*(Post training Interview Track1 23.11)

DG: *Even in the action-plans we are working and implementing at school, we needed to break them down into small steps... I am passing on this method to my staff...even in planning our school curriculum...”*(Post training Interview Track1 24.11)

LS: *“I apply them to different contexts, adapt them to situations with teachers, students and with my superiors, to be able to modify it accordingly...”*(Post training Interview Track1 20.11)

EF: *“I suggest the use of a self-reflection log also for personal life, which ends up effecting our professional life and vice versa ...”*(Post training Interview Track1 23.21)

Moreover, most ELs recognise that the given operative knowledge and instruments that can be passed on to others to help them improve their problem-solving and communication competencies. This aspect is further discussed in Theme 4 Interdependence in the sub-theme- shared learning: cascade effect.

MVE: “I am sharing with my staff, I have carried out small training sessions on resistance to change... in this way I can hand over to them the acquired instruments.... Since we are a team it is good that we share the same language ... heads should share their knowledge with staff I thought it was more appropriate to start with assistant heads, then with teachers”.(Post training Interview Track 2 13.11)

DG: “I am not coaching them like we did in the training but when I speak to them I explain to them, I tell them if we have to see it in from another point of view...”(Post training Interview Track 2 13.41)

EF: “I suggested the use of a self-reflection log also for personal life, which ends up effecting our professional life and vice versa... I suggested to a colleague..... she wrote and told me you know it is true...it works” (post-training track1 28.30)

FS “I am passing this on to my staff.... I told my assistant head, the colleague who you think has it against you has actually her fears.... when we carried out the anthropologist analysis, that helped me a lot...” (post-training interview track 2 14.34)

MVE: “As part of our next level of training (referring to the proposed continuation and advanced level of this course), we can train others so as to learn from our experiences but also to create a ripple effect. (Post training Interview Track2 26.31)

EF: “The things I have learnt, it was easier for me to pass on to her... at the beginning we worked together on this case.... At first I followed her closely but then slowly slowly I did not look at what she was doing... at first, I used to go by her class to see what was happening... now I no longer need to do this... she comes to me and she is proceeding on her own” (post-training track 1; 11.53).

5.3.2.5 EFFECTIVE

Another emerging theme is effectiveness. The proof of the pudding is in the eating! Most ELs affirm that over this year of training-research experience they have witnessed significant improvements in their problem solving and communication competencies and as a consequence in their leadership.

FS “In these months I witnessed with my own eyes that what I’ve learnt during the training works!”

MV: “Now I am starting to appreciate the results of what I have learnt and acquired from the training...”(Post training Interview Track1 24.11)

EF: “I need to continue transforming my weaknesses into strengths, doing it more makes you feel better about it, you reinvent yourself every time. It is hard work but I prefer this challenge because it works.”(Post training Interview Track2 23.11)

DG: “I need to continue practising the mountain-climbing approach to things, that is break down my objectives in small possible steps... this is giving me results ... because I used to see big, many people tell me so!”(Post training Interview Track2 19.11)

MA: “It was my first time to take up such a long and intense course but which put together theory and praxis which gave me direct proof of my new learnt knowledge”. (Post-training Interview Track2 23.31)

LS: “I believe this training should be open to more heads but not all heads are ready to put themselves and their methods into question. And it surely need to put effort because it is a long and active training... it takes work but it is rewarding”.(Post-training Interview Track2 23.41)

MM: “where I was given solutions but they were not just solutions on paper but to my surprise the solutions went beyond my expectations because they effected me also on a personal level (she declared this in tears)”. (post-training interview Track 1 1.03)

Effectiveness is further elaborated in the Case Study section, where significant improvements in problem solving and communication for each ELs is presented.

5.3.3 THEME 3: CRITICAL REFLECTION

TABLE 8: THEME 3 CRITICAL REFLECTION

Theme	Sub-themes	Key words/codes	Most significant Excerpt
<p style="text-align: center;">CRITICAL REFLECTION</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">SELF STRUCTURED- SCHEDULED SELF- REFLECTIONS HOMEWORK FINAL PRESENTATIONS</p>	<p>Reflection, stop, think, Personal development, Professional development, diaries, logs, emotions, time-outs, progress, compulsory, flexible</p>	<p><i>MVE: “I liked structured tasks and found them very useful...it is important that you gave us tasks even to evaluate certain things.... can’t be left out in such type of training. We are busy people and we need (gesture to write) mandatory homework (smiled)!”</i></p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">NON- SCHEDULED SELF- REFLECTIONS</p>	<p>Log books, diaries, emotions, fears, distancing, resistances, intimate, time consuming, optional</p>	<p><i>EF: “I use self- reflection and writing even for personal matters, when I needed to take massive decisions... I wrote before deciding.... Even before speaking with a parent ...</i></p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">COLLECTIVE REFLECTIONS SCHEDULED: Learning communities</p>	<p>Widened horizons, sharing, challenging, innovations, learning experience, trust, support, guided, facilitator,</p>	<p><i>SM: “I prefer to do it (reflecting) in the group, where I often shared my cases, and analyse with others, have feedback.... Reflect after something takes place when you are not so emotionally involved... it helps you put things into focus and see things which you would otherwise, for some reason or the other, you don’t see”</i></p>

Theme	Sub-themes	Key words/codes	Most significant Excerpt
CRITICAL REFLECTION	<p style="text-align: center;">NON-SCHEDULED Partnership coaching, virtual platform</p>	Non-scheduled, partnership coaching, virtual platform , trust, support, IT illeterate, mandatory, partnership caching, virtual platform, facebook, social networks	<i>FS: "I believe it failed due to the instrument used... Facebook.... It should have a more professional outfit and needs to be structured and immediate like Nudol..... It is important to get to know members of the community before hand... if I knew them probably even facebook might have worked".</i>

A common theme is **Critical Reflection**. Most EL came to recognise that critical reflection is a powerful tool to enhance the quality of leadership actions in their work. Osterman & Kottkamp (2004) declare that a systematic inquiry and analysis, fosters personal learning, behavioural change and improved performance, which leads to enduring change. Robertson (2004) affirms that an action-research approach training builds capable leaders by enabling them to bring critical reflection to their leadership practice. Through involvement in training, leaders gain practical experience of and skills in utilising reflection in, on and for practice.

This training-research experience offered various opportunities for ELs to undergo critical self and collective reflections, some where scheduled, others were not, they were left up to the ELs. It was considered important that ELs learn to reflect critically on their work on their own but also be open to do so with a partnership coach and in the learning community. This because we are aware that there are certain situations where ELs can reflect with others, where there are situations where they have to take responsibility and think things through on their own.

5.3.3.1 SCHEDULED SELF-REFLECTIONS

The aim of the scheduled reflective task was to generate and improve *critical self-reflection*. EL should be capable of reflecting through their actions so as to be able to inform their next actions. Blaise Pascal¹⁴ affirmed “We are generally better persuaded by the reasons we discover ourselves than by those given to us by others.” ELs were given a reflective task or homework after each training session, to help them put into practice the acquired knowledge and instruments. At the end of the training, the ELs were asked to carry out a presentation of this training-research experience which brought to reflect more deeply on what they experienced, learnt and actually mastered along the way.

LS, ST and MV, recognised the importance of stopping from their administrative work and reflecting on what one is actually doing and happening around them for better leadership.

LS: *“They help cause you test by trying them out, otherwise it would remain theory... in fact the task helped us apply it to your situation, to your practice... and see that you can use them in different situations” (Post-training Interview Track 2 4.46)*

ST: *“Tasks were useful cause they make you go deeper into things we did together. It obliges you to stop and think and go through what we did” (Post-training Interview Track 2 12.00)*

MV: *“Tasks help you to stop and put your thoughts together” (Post-training Interview Track 1 24.46)*

The structured reflective tasks were a way to bring ELs to evaluate step by step their research-training experience. This is in the line with teaching given during the training. Nardone and Salvini (2010) affirm that commitment and improvement can take place only if the individual is lead step by step to undergo small discoveries (reframing paraphrasing) that build up to hyper-discovery (resume to redefine). Each task was a way to bring the ELs to self-evaluate and verify the acquired

14 Pensees originally published in 1669.

knowledge and skills but also upon their difficulties, on which to build the learning process. Once more this followed an action-research methodology.

In fact most ELs affirm that being it mandatory, they felt obliged to find time in their busy schedules. They affirm that if it was optional probably they would have not carried it out so rigorously.

MVE: *“I liked structured tasks and found them very useful...it is important that you gave us tasks even to evaluate certain things.... can’t be left out in such type of training. We are busy people and we need (gesture to write) mandatory homework (smiled)!” (Post-training Interview Track 2 14.33)*

FS: *“I found the given task useful cause when there is a deadline I tend to respect and keep it... I feel obliged so I do it... even though I know that in reality it helps me... in our work having a task to hand in, makes you find time to do it, otherwise you will be carried away by all the other stuff. We are just like our students!” (Post-training Interview Track 2 14.46)*

MA: *“I feel it is necessary cause when you feel obliged to do it, you do stop and reflect... I must confess that I did not always dedicate enough time... could have done better”. (Post-training Interview Track 2 5.46)*

AS:” *Useful but difficult to keep up... also because tasks made me work on myself” Post-training Interview Track 2 4.48)*

SM. *“We don’t have a lot of free time since our work is very demanding but it was a must-do for me so in a way or another I found time to fulfil my duties... but by doing so it helped put things more into perspective, where you think things through.... That resulted to be very useful”. Post-training Interview Track 2 4.26*

EF and DG affirm that structured task are important but they also aware that they often they did not dedicate the necessary time to elaborate them properly.

EF: *“It surely helped but unfortunately with our work load I did not dedicate enough time... even though they truly helped cause i have seen results.. i am appreciating them even more now, that I have more time to think, but it helps to have tasks... cause if you are not obliged to do them, probably you don’t do them, we don’t give ourselves and our needs priority...” Post-training Interview Track 2 7.46)*

DG: *“Now, I wish I dedicated more time and did them as soon as you gave them to us.... I often carried out my tasks with my partner coach.... And this is what we use to say if we only had dedicated more time..... they help you think, point by point, I built my final presentation on them.” Post-training Interview Track 2 4.26)*

MM underlines the fact that even though they were mandatory, the given tasks did not require so much time to complete and thus it could be inserted in their busy schedules.

MM: *“They were of help cause you gave us a bit of flexibility in them... did not need to write 3,000 words, I often wrote in point form, that helped me! Stop points are important!”* (Post-training Interview Track 1 11.46)

Thus it seems clear that ELs recognise the usefulness and relevancy of scheduled reflective task, and emphasis the importance of prescribing the actual self- reflection which bring them to take time out from their busy schedules.

ELs were asked to carry out a final presentation so as to bring them to reflect on the entire training- research experience. Most ELs affirmed that even though it required more work, they were glad to carry out and also pleased with the outcome. The following excerpts will demonstrate how the final presentation has brought them do to an overall resume which helped them define – and redefine- the lived experience (Nardone & Salvini 2010).

FS: *“A final presentation is needed to put all pieces together.... Preparing my presentation was very helpful to me. I first jotted down some points here on my log-book (showing it), then I took hold of the material you gave us to be able to express what this experience was for me. Preparing this to share with others helped me understand things better and what this experience meant to me. I might have liked to have had some guidelines to follow, like when you do a thesis, yet it is true that leaving it up to us each gave it his touch”*

MA: *“It was a sort of resume of the training. It helped me reflect on the entire training journey”*

SM: *“Preparing my presentation made me do a resume of what we did and learnt... and a final self-assessment.... a chance to draw a balance of my learning and competencies.*

AD affirms that while preparing the final presentation she had an overwhelming discovery, i.e. that she had already stated to internalise the acquired learning.

AS: *“While preparing my presentation I became aware that the learnt concepts did not remain on a superficial level... they went deeper.. it triggered in me a desire to proceed ... a sort of works in progress mechanism.. it lead me to want to know more. I got hold of some books to go even deeper.... I would have like other similar moments to be present in our learning and experience”*(Post-training track 1, 1.23

EF confesses that the final presentation made her reflect further on her progress and on her weaknesses, which led her to use the acquired strategies to help her go beyond her present difficulties: public speaking.

EF: *“I was no good in public speaking.... So I had to use strategies to help me out, I used communication strategies (with a smile) to manage to convey my message to my colleagues..... I think, doing more frequent presentations, you create an opportunity to do a balance on what you have learned and put into play your competencies.”*

While LS used the final presentation to reflect and work on becoming more concise and focused.

LS: *“Personally, preparing my presentation helped me read through material and put it all together, then work to make it mine, apply it all to my specific situation and experience. While preparing it I shared it with my assistant heads, this helped me have feedback from them regarding the presentation but also to share with them what I have been doing and learning”. I rehearsed it also alone at home to manage to do it in 20 minutes.... I tend to be very lengthy in my talks... I rewrote it 3-4 times... I prepared my speech using the communication skills acquired during training.... In the write up and ppt but also in the actual presentation.... I took up a go slow pace (smiled).... I prepared a script but then I improvised too”. (Post-training Interview Track 2 28.11)*

DG took up a reflective process so as to be able to render his presentation more analogical and evocative, by following the communication strategies gathered from the training.

DG: *“... I wanted to do a summary of my journey. I wrote it and changed it so many times.. at first it was a replica of your training presentations but then slowly slowly I made it mine... I looked up for pictures, I love pictures... I changed it till the very eve of the presentation day, I replaced words with images to capture the public, I used what I have learnt”. (Post-training Interview Track 1 4.46)*

It seems that the final presentation was a deep self-reflection opportunity for MM. She says that she took it up as an opportunity to reflect both on the training-learning experience but also to integrate it and interweave it with her philosophy studies on Hannah Arendt’s ‘mental gymnastics’.

MM: *“I thank you for letting us present in our own style, by not giving us a title, you allowed us to take up our own method... this allowed me to appreciate the utility of the training and combine it with my other Ph. D studies.... You allowed me to join the two pieces together... I presented myself!” (Post-training Interview Track 2 4.46)*

MVE declares that she used the final presentation to carry out both a final self-reflection and test the acquired skills, but also to generate a collective reflection with the other ELs on the day of the final presentations.

MVE: *“Final presentations are necessary so that the experience does not fizzle out. It is important that each one had a project and not remain passive to the training. I appreciated that you allowed us to do what we liked. I need that creative space... I did what I did cause I wanted to show myself and others what I had actually learnt. The proof of the pudding is in the eating! The fact that I had instruments made me risk... I wanted to record myself and see myself in action... and also have feedback from the teacher who recorded the dialogues but also from the group... that is why I started my presentation asking for feedback from the audience” (post-training Interview Track 2 02.02)*

5.3.3.2 UNSCHEDULED REFLECTIONS

During the training sessions, ELs were invited to keep a reflective log book so as to be able to reflect deeper and more rigorously on what happens around them but also inside of them. Yet this activity was neither scheduled nor forced onto the ELs.

Most ELs did attempt to keep a reflective log book. LS affirms that by writing down his thoughts he was able to keep the focus and thus lead others better towards the desired objectives.

LS: *“I used to write before but now I write down my reflections more regularly and I go deeper... It helps a lot cause you cannot lead without reflecting on what you have done.... It helps you learn more... I write and say to myself next time I will not do this or I need to do this”.*

FS kept a sort of diary which helped her to reflect but also to keep track of the progress made. In fact in the appendix one can find two pages from her dairy which clearly demonstrate FS’s progress in relationship management. She recognises the benefits of keep a reflective log book and cares to keep it up even after the end of this training-research experience.

FS: *“Writing, keeping a dairy helps... I do it when I can... in the morning, at night... But I should dedicate a space of time everyday... that would give me top results... cause even though i did not do it regularly, I do it at the last minute.. it still gave me enormous benefits, imagine if I had to do it regularly...”*

Both EF and DG keep reflective log books which they recognised have helped both in their professional and personal development.

EF: *“I use self- reflection and writing even for personal matters, when I needed to take massive decisions... I wrote before deciding.... Even before speaking with a parent ... It helps cause ideas are clearer, you eliminate the clutter... you vent your emotions, instead of just being controlled by your heart you are guided by your brain.... By writing you don’t let your emotions overwhelm you, you can think through before... I had this discovery and I suggested to my partner coach and other colleagues even regarding personal issues”*

DG: *“For my self-reflections, I kept more than one journal. At first I doubted whether I could find time.... But when I started I felt I was capable of discarding useless thoughts... I had no longer that feeling of being over-loaded... and I believe this is why I was calmer at school, I had more than one journal.... one professional. I would vent my anger in my writing and not keep it inside. On a school level, I had 2 journals, in one I used to note what was happening, in point form, what my feelings were after writing I felt relieved. Another was a sort of logbook of difficult cases. It contained the advice given to me by my partner coach.... Very useful especially during case conferences. It made me feel more secure... facts not talk... and during conferences you win their respect.... I will continue to do both and I suggested to other colleagues and friend”*

MM kept a reflective log books because she was aware that this could help her dwell deeper into issues and develop a more elastic mind.

MM: *“ I used to do it but every time I would tweet it with philosophy.... I would go back to my field.... As I did also in my presentation. Philosophical thinkers use reflection as a tool... I used to do this exercise to become a mental gymnast as Hannah Arendt used to say... I was practising it but not everyday.... I tried to use philosophy to dwell into deeper questions and that was very enriching and innovative too”.*

MVE: *“I haven’t written down my reflections as much as I should... I used to write in particular instances to help me through (gesture to focus), like for instance now I have an audit coming up, I know i will have an interview and I have a lot to tell them, so I said MVE write them down... I just did it this morning and i felt better if i had to go back i would have done it more... but I appreciate you did not impose it on us...”*

MA attempted to keep a reflective log book. She obliged herself to do it everyday but she could not keep the pace. Now she is aware that she should take the go slow technique even in approaching this reflective instrument.

MA: *“I improved my self-reflection abilities.... But I still cannot give them a specific space of time, be regular.... In January I promised myself to do it everyday, I started but after 10 days I stopped, it was too much a fatigue.... Even though when I wrote things work out better, I see much*

clearer....maybe I don't need to do it everyday, because will not be able to keep it up but at least once a week, on Saturdays I need to do a small step, right?! Moreover, when you write you can also check... otherwise you forget!"

Both ST and AD recognise the utility of keeping a reflective logbook but they both confess that they have been resistant to it, fearing the intimate aspect of the task.

ST: *"It is useful but I confess I still find it difficult to write... I write down my appointments and activities but I have difficulties to go deeper... the emotional part.... I do reflect, especially difficult moments I had.... But for me to write.... is to see myself naked... or others might read my most intimate thoughts. It is a good methodology but it is difficult for me, If I could burn them.... (you actually can) This is what I am going to do!"*

AS: *"I know writing can help to manage my emotions better.... But I am emotionally blocked... I need to work on this, free myself so I can go back to writing.... until 10 years ago I used to write regularly... I kept a diary to help me through hard times.... then I burnt them all... they were related to my personal life... so there was a sort of closing in, at 360° I have barricaded myself because of a personal suffering... I burnt everything and I turned over a new leaf.... Now I started to dream of writing again... that beautiful things will come out in my writing ... so I say I have to write but then I wake up in the morning and I remember my dream but I do nothing, I feel it is good to keep a log book, also because my memory is terrible, write down what happened, what are my thoughts and feelings... I need to start off with a small thing, something that is not of great fatigue, keep a sort of log book of my journey in the same way I did when I was young, I used to collect and put together aphorisms, I use to scribble and draw things, it was beautiful..."* (post-training interview track 2 05.12)

MV affirms that she does not feel the need to write down her thoughts and reflections. She feels she is managing to reflect and self-correct her actions without the need to capture this on paper.

MV: *"Self-reflection is important, I did not use to write out my thoughts, I reflect also during training, observing others, I do think and reflect on my failed attempted solutions and try to self-correct my actions. I prefer reflecting on the coach or while speaking with somebody rather than taking out the dairy and writing"(post-training Interview Track 1 27.09)*

The ELs' affirmations are very much in line with Dana's findings regarding (2009) the use of reflective journals, diaries and even weblogs in practitioner-inquiry. She sustains that these provide educational leaders with a tool for reflecting on their own thought processes. Even though capturing "thinking" is a challenge for any researcher, this tool seems to help to record events so as to *identify redundancies and patterns, useful to maintain focus, evaluate actions to inform the next (self-*

correction) and *help* explore and elaborate *emotional aspects* that often impede rational functional action, making your inquiry tangible so that it can be “*revisited*” and *shared with others*. “Verba volant, scripta manent” and *charter progress*, which leads to a sense of *empowerment*.

5.3.3.3 SCHEDULED COLLECTIVE CRITICAL REFLECTION

The training provided also collective critical reflections, some where scheduled and mandatory, such as the learning community sessions, while others such as partnership coaching and the use of the virtual platform were reflective opportunities which ELs could take up at their own time, pace and pleasure.

All ELs recognise the utility of carrying out collective reflections during the learning community.

MA, EF, MV and ST emphasis the fact that collective reflections add on self-reflections since others add on new perspectives and insights.

MA: “*You can gather others’ points of view... in such situations you reveal your patterns, our mental categories, your scripts, your beliefs....*”

EF: “*they helped me see things differently and act differently. Maybe without their help I would have taken longer to see a solution or would not even have seen it at all...*” (post-training interview Track 2 14.18)

ST: “*I like it a lot, this direct exchange and sharing... is what we EL miss out on, we are very alone, thus to speak, share and reflect is useful....*”(post training interview Track 1 02.02)

MA: “*Through group...., I became aware of my weak points and what I lack... and thus what I need to work on*” (post-training interview Track 1 08.02)

MV: “*I reflect also during training, observing others, I do think and reflect on my failed attempted and try to self-correct my actions*” (post-training Interview Track 1 27.09)

EF and SM affirm that by carrying out your reflections with others help, they were capable to keep at bay their emotions which helped analyse the problem in a more rational and rigorous way.

SM: “*I prefer to do it (reflecting) in the group, where I often shared my cases, and analyse with others, have feedback.... Reflect after something takes place when you are not so emotionally*

involved... it helps you put things into focus and see things which you would otherwise, for some reason or the other, you don't see" (post-training interview Track 2 15.05)

EF: *"So useful to have guinea pigs to test the acquired instruments (said it with a smile and irony) useful to exercise yourself on problems brought to the session by others and yourself... you are more rational there..."*. (post-training interview Track 2 17.09)

FS asserted that reflecting and explaining her problem to the group, helped her understand herself more. Collective critical reflection enhanced self-awareness.

FS: *"By explaining things to the group, I managed to reveal and understand my pattern and work on it....."* (post-training group Track 2 13.13)

MVE recognises that critical reflections carried out in the learning community, enhanced both personal and collective-group growth.

MVE: *"It was an enriching learning experience, best part of the training, I love learning and sharing from others, from my peers who come from same yet different realities.... I believe even as a group we grew and evolved."* (post training interview Track 2 16.01)

MA takes up a systems thinking approach to collective critical thinking. She recognises the utility of learning communities to create a professional ethos.

MA: *"I believe all school staff should have learning communities sessions to exchange ideas, material... if we want to better our education system.... no work should be carried out in isolation"*.

The EL affirmations are very much in line with Dana (2009) findings. In her work *"Leading with Passion and Knowledge: The Principal as Action Researcher"*, she notes that collective critical reflections open up the practitioner's reflection cause the learning community becomes a sort of think-tank, widens horizons since it allows the sharing of perceptions, experiences and information, while it creates a professional ethos towards innovations in education in general.

5.3.3.4 UNSCHEDULED COLLECTIVE REFLECTIONS

Most ELs affirmed that collective reflections carried out with partnership coach can be very enriching, yet they confess that since it was aspect of the training-research experience that did not develop appropriately.

DG and EF are the only ELs who carried out partnership coaching on a regular basis. They used to meet regularly at their schools, home but also made use of technology to meet up and reflect on their practice. By meeting on a regular basis and investing time they managed to develop a trusting relationship.

EF: "I was lucky to be with DG... we had good feeling... we were very open and relaxed with one another... if we had to meet at home, we had no problems... it was ok...when we could not meet in person we used Facebook... private chat... we chatted till late... it was good. I found partnership coaching very enriching, to share with another head... it is a lonely job, you need to take final decisions, but when you share your experiences with another 'similar' you start seeing your problems as being less enormous"(Post-training interview Track 2 11.21)

DG: "This helps us emerge out of our isolation. It helped me a lot even the fact that you share with somebody...different but who shares a similar situation. I believed it worked also because it was she EF, how she is.... We work well together... I don't know if it would have worked as well with some other.... We still keep in contact speak also on personal issues.... I believe this is fundamental for EL but should be part of training for all school staff..."(Post-training interview Track 2 18.21)

While LS lost his partnership coach at an early stage of this training-research experience, but he decided to take up the same concept and carry our collective reflections with his assistant heads. He affirms that he found this very useful and effective.

LS: "Unfortunately I did not have the opportunity but I did coaching with my assistant heads... I would share what we were doing.... I involved them, asked them for advice, I now ask.... They noticed the change in me... I know ask and am learning to delegate. Other EL did offer to do coaching but I did not feel the need.... It did not matter so much!"(Post training Interview Track 122.43)

Most ELs affirm that building a trustful relationships is fundamental to make the partnership coaching grow, but for this to take place requires time. They confess that due to their busy schedule and logistic reasons, they did not invest so much time in this aspect of training.

MV: *“We meet very little because of lack of time. Unlike others we did not know each other so well so it became more spontaneous to contact via whataspp the others with whom I had already a close rapport... I needed time to get to know SM... we did not have this time”*

MA: *“Did not find it useful... but probably it was our fault, we just met once, went to one another’s school, but when we had to do the task you gave us, but we never did coaching to one-another, I believe because I did not know AD and we have different characters.... Moreover I didn’t feel the need to discuss with her since the group reflections were enough...”*

AD: *“We practised it very little. It could have worked if we weren’t so distant, we could have meet more often; in this way we could have created a rapport, a feeling, unlike others we did not know one another before the training... and I am not so good in one-to-one.... I needed help here!”*

SM: *“The idea and the instrument are good, I believe it depends a lot on the alchemy of a relationship. I believe it should be scheduled like our group encounters... even held before our meeting at university, better to do it in person but we could have used technology but I am quite technophobic”.*

MM: *“I had an exceptional partner, whom I look up to but we had few meetings, one because with our work-load we had no time, we could have used technology but I am IT illiterate, she did send me a skype invite but i never took it up; I believe if it was structured and scheduled with a specific task to go together we might have meet more regularly..... I am sorry we didn’t cause I am aware that the few times we did it, it was really useful...”*

MVE: *“I wish it was better, the problem was that people do not skype, we met 3 times but it was tough to organise ourselves and meet face-to-face... she did not take up my skype invite.... I believe it would work better for us EL if we could meet on skype.... Even exchange a couple of words... in this way relationship will grow, we create a bonding. I believe it should be mandatory and scheduled even with telephone, skype, obviously better face to face”. (Post-training interview Track 2 21.19)*

While most ELs affirm that collective reflections did not develop further with partnership coach because they did not know the partner so well, yet FS affirms that being friends with ST inhibited their partnership from developing further; turning it from friendship into actually coaching. FS affirmation is very much in line with Robertson (2002) reflections on partnership coaching. She sustains that without a degree of formality or stringency, leaders tend to lapse into general conversations that, while possibly providing each with support, is likely to offer very little in the way of challenge.

FS: *“It worked less than I thought... not only because of ST’s health conditions... but because of our friendship... we were already in touch, listened to one another but nothing more was added to our partnership or relationship... we did not go beyond. Maybe if it was structured we would have taken it up differently... taken our friendship relationship to a higher level”.*

In fact most ELs affirm that a trustful relationship can grow if meetings are structured and scheduled.

SM: *“Scheduled partnership coaching cause if you leave it up to us, with all the things we have, we don’t give it priority so miss out on doing it, even though they are really useful. When activities are scheduled we tend to respect them, even though there were logistic problems (distance) we made it to most sessions... we hardly ever missed a meeting”.* (Post-training interview Track 2 21.21)

EF: *“Scheduled partnership coaching sessions cause they are really useful, I am sorry for those that missed out on this enriching experience”*(Post-training interview Track 2 18.21)

DG: *“While I believe partnership sessions should be scheduled and logged”.* (Post-training interview Track 2 20.21)

MVE: *“Create shared tasks or games, I love games to increase bonding between partners and use part of learning community session to develop partnership coaching and discuss shared tasks. Just as in school, I would start task in the group and then continue it as homework at home with your mate...”*(Post-training interview Track 2 21.41)

DG: *“I would insert presentations along the way... this would require more work but it helps you stop and put together what you have learnt. When you need to do it, you do it! Like tasks, if they have to be presented in the community you would dedicate more time to it and take it more seriously, and you eventually learn more”.*(Post-training interview Track 2 20.28)

All ELs affirm that the collective reflection and sharing did not develop adequately via the virtual platform. MV affirms that very little time and commitment were invested to make it work. Just like MA, EF and SM, she accuses this due to a lack of direct human contact.

MV: *“That was the part of the training where we invested the least... it was interesting when we met the Maltese heads and visited their schools... so enriching. I believe it did not work so well because for the trust issue, in the first phase, learning community should be vis-a-vis.... Italian EL and then in a second stage it can open via virtual platform to other EL.... Maltese and other”* (Post-training interview Track 1 36.21)

MA: *“It missed the human aspect.... I believe the virtual platform did not work because we used Facebook..we needed something more immediate, an instrument such as Skype with scheduled meetings. Facebook is not so professional, it is more personal ”*(Post-training interview Track 2 18.21)

SM: *“moreover I need to meet people face to face... I would have made the meeting before so as to get to know them, cause I believe a widened learning community can be highly useful on a professional but also human level.... In this way the virtual platform could have worked”* (Post-training interview Track 2 21.21)

EF: *“I did not use it... maybe cause I did not know the Italians, if I had met them before and had frequent meetings...better face-to-face, probably it would have worked for me. Maybe we were very comfortable and satisfied with what we had here... we did not need more. Maybe if we had to do it.... by force.... But I don't think so, I had another course and we had to do it and log it but it was so cold”* (post-training Interview Track 2 30.03)

DG, LS, SM, AD and MVE affirm that the virtual platform did not develop adequately because most EL are IT illiterate or technophobic!

DG: *“I see facebook as a way to promote my tv programme, my music... not for school purposes I tried once to upload a clip but only once.... I think it is still not our medium, I see young kids even Francesco the student, he would upload stuff, he used it more, I believe it's not in the way of our doing, of our generation, we still need face-to-face contacts”* (Post-training interview Track 2 24.54)

LS: *“During the training I did not use it but after the Italians' visit we did exchange photos and other material..... facebook did not work because most of the EL are not social media friendly... if there was somebody to facilitate and push... there was not enough know-how and familiarity with the use of social media for school purposes... while I use it regularly to communicate with staff, parents and community (village)”*(Post-training interview Track 2 24.44)

SM: *“I used very little the virtual platform but this is my limit. I am technophobic, moreover I am not so good in English so all this surely was a deterrent”*(Post-training interview Track 2 21.24)

AD: *“I am not good in this, just see my facebook page... I don't like social media, they are too invasive... I use more willingly whatsapp. Don't see Facebook as very Professional... and this blocks me... but don't know what to suggest.....I am not good with virtual digital platforms”*.(Post-training Interview Track 2 22.22)

FS and ST affirm that the type of medium used, i.e. facebook, did not help into establishing professional trusting relationships.

FS: *“I believe it failed for the instrument used... Facebook.... It should have a more professional outfit and needs to be structured and immediate like nudol.....It is important to get to know members of the community before hand... if I knew them probably even facebook might have worked”*. (Post-training Interview Track 2 19.01)

ST: *“This is what I liked less... maybe we needed another medium not Facebook... skype even whatsapp... something more immediate and intuitive, skype with scheduled encounters....”*. (Post-training Interview Track 2 14.04)

MVE: *“We should have skyped or communicated more before to make the platform work. I am not a facebook fan... non of us seem to be! We might have needed another medium”*. (Post-training Interview Track 2 24.01)

MVE further adds that scheduling even virtual meetings and give a task to share on the virtual platform, might help EL be more committed to use it.

MVE:” *Also having common tasks to share during scheduled meetings, would have created a bond”*(Post-training interview Track 2 21.19)

To sum up, it seems that most ELs recognise that collective critical reflections are useful for their practice yet they believe there are things that can help bring out it’s full potential. They put forward numerous recommendations. Firstly, it seems that ELs can benefit further from collective critical reflections if they they are scheduled and mandatory. Even though leaders have very little time available, it is seems useful to schedule specific collective reflections time in their busy schedules. Secondly, ELs affirm that they need to agree in advance to conduct their meetings with one another with a certain stringency. They also need to agree in advance to bring a formal, structured approach to each meeting and to log them in. Moreover, collective critical reflections need to be guided so that they will not remain just supportive friendly conversations. Even creating a shared task -which can either be initiated in the scheduled training sessions or made to work on and then present to them in the scheduled learning community sessions- can help give structure and focus to the partnership coaching and also to the interactions via the virtual platform. Shared tasks, vis-a-vis meetings can create a trusting-sharing relationship, which can help increase commitment and interest in employing the virtual platforms. In addition, the virtual platform needs to have a professional formal format. ELs suggest that training should also help them become more familiar with technology and social networks.

5.3.4 THEME 4: INTERDEPENDENCE

TABLE 9: THEME 4 INTERDEPENDENCE

Overarching Theme	Sub-Theme	Key words/codes	Most Significant Excerpt
INTERDEPENDENCE	Supportive Communities	Isolation acknowledgement validation, same boat, solidarity, collegiality	SM: <i>"...especially in our profession where we are very isolated... the group contains us... it is a moment that gave me great strength and support to face my school problems"</i> .
	Trusting relationships	Disclosure, sharing, challenging, confidentiality, without judgement, impression management, Learning community vis-a-vis, Partnership coaching, Virtual Platforms, Trainer	AD: <i>"What I liked best was that we shared openly and sincerely without hesitation or fear of judgement... this trust was felt in all the group"</i>
	Widened horizons	Different point of views and ideas: Learning Community Partnership coaching Staff mobility, school visits	MA: <i>"I enjoyed meeting the Maltese EL in person and see another reality... the fact that we did school visits one could see the good and bad of that reality... what you can take up and use in your school... but also meeting them and get to know them was important for me"</i>
	Vicarious learning	Learning from others & observations, partnership coaching, learning community, final presentations	MA: <i>"...during the training I saw that my other colleagues managed to say no... I am learning to say no but it is not easy for me"</i>
	Sharing Learnt knowledge	Ripple effect, coaching others, pass on instruments, transferability	MVE: <i>"I am sharing with my staff, I carried out small training sessions on resistance to change... in this way I can hand over them the acquired instruments...."</i>

5.3.4.1 SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

Most EL affirm that this training-research experience offered various opportunities to move from isolation to a sense of supportive community. Various literature (Flinders, 1988; Lieberman & Miller, 1992; Lortie, 1975; Smith & Scott, 1990) discuss about teacher isolation, depicting it as a lonely profession. This seems to be even more true in the case of principals. Even though a head of school might have assistant heads or a strong collaborative team or staff, he/she is the person within the school building who carries the ultimate responsibility for all members of the school.

SM: *“...especially in our profession where we are very isolated... the group contains us... it is a moment that gave me great strength and support to face my school problems”*. (post-training Interview, Track 1 04.12)

MM: *“This was a difficult year for me but the support I felt in the group helped me through”* (post-training interview: Track 1 03.45)

ST: *“I liked it a lot, this direct exchange and sharing... is what we EL miss out on, we are very alone, thus to speak, share and reflect is useful..... even though we are busy we need them”* (post training interview Track 1 02.02)

MA: *“Fundamental, I believe all school staff should have learning communities to exchange ideas, material... no work should be carried out in isolation”* (post training interview Track 1 03.04)

EF: *“when you share your experiences with another ‘similar’ but who sees it in a different light....you start seeing your problems as being less enormous”*(Post-training interview Track 2 11.21)

DG, LS, MVE and AD declare that the training helped them understand that they are not alone, that other ELs face the same difficulties and uncertainties. They are in similar situations

DG: *“Even listening is enough... we had similar situations, we were in the same boat...”* (post-training interview track 2 12.16)

LS: *“...we gathered that we are in the same boat even though we have different school contexts”* (post-training interview track 2 07.11)

MVE: *“It was a supportive learning experience, the best part of the training.... We have similar situations even though we have different ways of going about them..... ”*. (post-training interview track 2 11.11)

AD: *“I found something of me in every presentation” (post-training interview Track 2 17.01)*

ST affirms that the learning community and the partnership coaching helped her through the difficult moment she was passing due to her critical health conditions.

ST: *“It helps a lot to have somebody with whom to talk, share and reflect... because of my health problems.... for me it helped especially since I was passing through difficult moments (useful as part of this type of training..)” (post-training Interview Track 2 16.45)*

MM shares that the group supported her in this difficult academic year, which was inflicted by both professional and personal problems.

MM: *“I believe that if it wasn't for this course I wouldn't have held my role of head of school or I would have asked for clerical work for now, for the problem I had with my assistant head, they were the skills that you have given me that put me back in a position that we can continue working together.....but it is a wave, it is like a roller-coaster, yes it hurts... but the continuous support given by the group helped me through...” (Post-training Interview Track 1 07.23)*

MA, ET and FS affirm that the support felt in the group helped them disclose and work in the group on certain difficult aspects of their leadership.

MA: *“... in such safe environment you reveal your patterns, your mental categories, your scripts, your beliefs....” (post-training interview, track 2 12.13)*

EF: *“... they helped me see things differently and act differently. Maybe without their help I would have taken longer to see the solution or would not even have seen it at all...” (post-training interview Track 2 14.18)*

FS: *“ I managed to disclose things which I was ashamed of.... Things I kept away even from myself...” (Post- training Interview Track 3 12.03)*

In today's ever-changing educational climate, which continuously bombards EL with numerous precarious and dichotomous situations, often leaving them feeling isolated and uncertain. The resultant loss of confidence lessens their ability to carry out their role effectively. Support helps you get out of your comfort zone and try alternative actions. Robertson (2008) affirms that unless

leaders feel supported in coping effectively with their continuously mutating educational system, they are likely to adopt more tentative and ineffectual styles of leadership.

Even in situations where head of schools are brought together, the periods of time set aside for head of schools to come together on a regular basis are jam packed with new information coming from the central office. Heads sit and listen. Thus getting together is not enough, trustful relationships need to be established so as to help ELs to feel confident to let themselves go and exploit the group as a true learning process that triggers professional and personal development.

DG: “ *We have college meetings but they are nothing like this*” (post-training interview track 2 19.56)

EF: “*College meetings are packed with useful information but we have no time to share and learn from one another*” (post-training interview track 2 20.31)

5.3.4.2 TRUSTFUL RELATIONSHIPS

Trustful relationships is a common theme mentioned by most ELs. A sense of trust seems to have been built along the training-research experience with the other members of the learning community and even with the trainer/facilitator. Robertson (2008) affirms that a climate of trust and professionalism is essential for the creation of learning communities and eventually a genuine learning process.

AD: “*What I liked best was that we shared openly and sincerely without hesitation or fear of judgement... this trust was felt in all the group*” (Post training interview Track 2 21.24)

MM: “*The learning community was a gift, the best discovery... I appreciated a lot the community of learners because usually I work on my own, I do not feel comfortable working in groups, I’m a person who is very cautious, I am very careful what to share, I fear to trust but training helped me have trust in the other learners.... I really appreciated their sharing their problems, I learnt to respect them, look up to them, I really admire their work, thus I felt comfortable to disclose and I felt I was getting a lot from them...*” (Post-training Interview Track 2 02.00)

DG: *“I felt comfortable to share even my mistakes I was hesitant during the first meetings but then I opened up... it was easier when we were 2-3 persons...”*(post-training interview Track 1 21.09)

MVE: *“I believe even as a group we grew and evolved. At first we were wary of one another... at first we had our facades... then we put down our barriers... I felt that we trusted one another and this helped us to open up and be honest with one another”*(post-training interview Track 1 29.09)

AD: *“I did not have difficulties to declare that I did wrong, that I could have done better... even in front of the others”* (post-training interview Track 1 28.01)

These extracts show that most EL did feel that a trustful climate had been established during the training and learning community sessions, bringing them to feel more at ease to let go and share their difficulties. Roberston (2004) claims that leaders tend to employ a facade and impression management when working with their colleagues. Leaders strive to show that everything is under control, that all is going well around here. This attitude isolates leaders in their work and keeping up the facade creates stress, since they believe that problems are only theirs. ELs often feel very vulnerable under the watchful eye of a whole community of stakeholders. This brings them to raise walls and build up boundaries not letting anybody in. This blocks personal and professional growth. Roberston (2008) affirms that trust takes time to develop, and this time must be allowed and aided along the learning process. She affirms that the presence of *facilitators* in the learning process is not only accepted by participants but is often recognised as an important factor in creating a trustful climate.

ST, SM and MM, felt it important to underline the essential role of the facilitator/trainer in creating a trustful climate. They affirm that a trustful relationship needs to be established first of all with the facilitator, so that training can allow professional and personal development.

SM: *“The trainer is important... to have the right person who is an expert in the field but who also understands your needs... I believe training works if there are number of elements and surely to have the right trainer to lead it... is imperative... the trainer should be able to give it the right stimulus, know when it is time to let us speak but also when to stop and proceed, this is an implicit thing, which is often not said or written but which is important to create trustful relationship in the group, create a collaborate and trustful climate”* (post-training interview Track 2 36.02)

SM: “ *The sensibility of the trainer and ability to create the right grounds..... The role of the trainer was fundamental... as an expert who knew how to lead, when to give space and when to proceed. The trainer or coach, was for us a privileged listener, sensitive to our needs we could risk and take up difficulties knowing we were in good hands. Because in a training course like this, you need to feel that the trainer is empathic and in-tune with all the members, making you feel you can open up and disclose your difficulties*”. (post-training interview Track 2 14.01)

MM: “*What helped was that we have built trust in you (referring to the trainer) both on a professional and a personal level... I felt how professional you are and that you had a lot of experience in creating a trustful climate it helped me trust the group.... the relationship that was built in the community of learners... you were not only the lecturer and full stop, you were a lecturer with a relationship.... I never had such an experience... my character makes me look for relationships, but in this experience this happened without the need for me to look for it, I felt it*” (post-training relationship Track 1: 02.56)

On the other hand, FS, MV and SM affirmed that partnership coaching and the virtual platform did not develop further, probably because close trustful relationships were not established.

FS: “*It is important to get to know members of the community beforehand... if I knew them probably even facebook might have worked*”. (Post-training interview Track 24.21)

SM: “*I need to meet people face to face... I would have held the meeting before so as to get to know them, cause I believe a widened learning community can be highly useful on a professional but also human level.... In this way the virtual platform could have worked*”.(Post-training interview Track 2 21.21)

MV: “(Referring to the virtual platform) *I believe (for the trust issue), in the first phase, learning community should be vis-a-vis.... Italian EL and then in a second stage it can open via virtual platform to other EL.... Maltese and other*” (Post-training interview Track 1 36.21)

EF and DG managed to invest time and effort to create a trustful relationship to make the partnership coaching develop further.

EF: “*I was lucky to be with DG... we had a good feeling... we were very open and relaxed with one another... if we had to meet at home, we had no problems... it was ok...when we could not meet in person we used Facebook... private chat... we chatted till late... it was good. I found partnership coaching very enriching, to share with another head... it is a lonely job, you need to take final decisions, but when you share your experiences with another ‘similar’ you start seeing your problems as being less enormous*”(Post-training interview Track 2 11.21)

DG: “ *This helped us out of our isolation.....we tried our best to meet up....I made it a point to meet because it helped me a lot.... even the fact that you share with somebody...different but who (cares a similar situation). I believed it worked also because it was her, EF, how she is.... We work well together... I don’t know if it would have worked as well with some other.... We still keep in contact..we speak also about personal issues.... I believe this is fundamental for EL but should be part of training for all school staff..*”(Post-training interview Track 2 19.13)

While SM, MVE and MM recognise that a trustful relationship did not develop in the partnership coaching because they did not invest an adequate amount of time to make it grow. This is in line with Robertson (2008), who affirms that at first, the partners will be tentative, testing the extent to which they can trust one another, but with time they will become more and more open with each other in direct relationship to the degree of trust engendered.

SM: “*The idea and the instrument are good, I believe it depends a lot on the alchemy of a relationship. I believe it should be scheduled like our group encounters... even held before our meeting at university, better to do it in person but we could have used technology but I am quite technophobic*”(Post-training interview Track 2 24.21)

MM: “*Actually, I had an exceptional partner, whom I look up to but we had few meetings, one because with our workload we had no time, we could have used technology but I am IT illiterate, she did send me a skype invite but I never took it up; I believe if it was structured and (scheduled with a specific task to go together) we might have met more regularly..... I am sorry we didn’t because I am aware that the few times we did it, it was really useful...*” (Post-training interview Track 2 18.21)

MVE: “*I wish it was better, the problem is that people do not skype, we met 3 times but it was tough to organise ourselves and meet face-to-face... she did not take up my skype invite.... I believe it would work better for us EL if we could meet on skype.... Even exchange a couple of words... in this way the relationship will grow, we create a bond. I believe it should be mandatory and scheduled even with telephone, skype, obviously better face to face*”. (Post-training interview Track 2 21.19)

5.3.4.3 WIDENED HORIZONS

Another common theme is *widened horizons*. Most ELs affirm that this training-research experience has helped them to go beyond their ‘playing field’. Robertson (2008) affirms that the

collaborative aspect present in the training challenges the educational leaders' existing thoughts and ideas in a way that heightens their openness to new ways of knowing and acting.

Most ELs affirm that the *training and learning community sessions* made them adopt a different perspective and challenged their rigid perceptions. Weber & Robertson (1998) affirm that effective learning experiences presents diverse perspectives, to challenge EL to move beyond the self to a wider, more critical perspective of their own practice but also on educational leadership in general.

EF: "You start seeing things from 360° (with a gesture she shows a top birds-eye-view) . It is different from other more traditional training, it helps you to open your mind... you start seeing things from a different lens" (post-training track 1 02.30)

MV: "I am happy that I did this training, I ended up in this group by chance, first I was a bit sceptical... now I recognise that it gave me a lot of input.... when I got back from Malta I was even happier that I carried out this training as it has widened my vision and perspectives" (post-training interview Track 1 2.13)

MA: "Fundamental, I believe all school staff should have learning communities to exchange ideas, material... no work should be carried out in isolation. You can (gather) other points of view... in such situations you reveal your patterns, your mental categories, your scripts, your beliefs which often trap you..."(post training interview Track 1 03.04)

EF: "... they helped me see things differently and act differently. Maybe without their help I would have taken longer to see a solution or I would not even have seen it at all..." (post-training interview Track 2 14.18)

Elbaz-Luwisch (2001) affirms that ELs should embrace encounters with others who define themselves differently, which allows them to participate in dialogues with many voices, a dialogue in which the self can engage in ongoing definition and redefinition.

This training- research experience offered other interactive activities which helped ELs open up their perceptions. ELs affirm that *the final presentation* of their works carried out in the presence of all ELs (except ST who could not attend for to health reasons), made them understand that even though all of them went through the same training-research experience, each one focused his/her

attention on certain aspects. They came across (different punctuations). They affirm that all this was very enriching.

DG: “Everyone described the same voyage in his/her different way. At first I thought you should have given us guidelines but in this way, each one of us was free to take it up as he/she pleased. It was amazing how each perceived the same experience differently. MM took it from a philosophical aspect, EF brought out her creative ability with Prof. Gatto, Lelio’s voyage, like his voyage to/from Gozo-Malta, MVE... the dialogues, amazing” (post training interview Track 2 20.01)

FS: “Moreover it was interesting to see how others perceived and experienced the training... each gave a personal expression of the same training .. this I really liked” (post training Interview Track 3 11.01)

MV: “A very positive experience because you see how the training was experienced by others... it was interesting to see how each one of us presented to the group in his/her way, giving importance to certain things and not to others” (Post training interview Track 1 45.01)

SM: “I enjoyed the presentations of the others, each with a different modality. I was curious to learn how they lived the same experience” (post training interview Track 2 32.02)

MM: “I enjoyed meeting, presenting in front of our Italian colleagues and hearing their side of the story, I wish to have more of this, because it widens our way of thinking and betters our human contact” (post training session Track 2 29.09)

MVE: “I enjoyed the different ways each one took it up... each presentation gave a different punctuation... each reflected the character of the presenter” (post training session Track 2 27.07)

Most ELs affirm that the final presentation was a learning opportunity which presented different perspectives and punctuations of the same training-research experience. Watzlawick et al., (1974) affirms that it is difficult to understand and break free from one’s punctuation of facts. Both the punctuation and meaning attribution can lead to a closed system of meaning or self-referential and invented realities which tend to resist challenging perceptions. Thus effective training should offer opportunities which challenge perceptions and introduce new points of view, while providing a climate that helps participants embrace them more easily.

This training-research experience entailed also *staff mobility and school visits*. ELs had the opportunity to visit other EL schools to enter into these different realities.

SM: “...I believe a widened learning community can be highly useful on a professional but also human level.... I enjoyed meeting the Maltese EL and also the school visits were very enriching... in my twenty years of headship this was my first experience” (Post-training interview Track 2 21.21)

MV: “I enjoyed the school visits where I learnt a lot, it was a direct confrontation of another system and reality... these experiences make you reflect and (act more)... It was a professional and personal human experience that helped me grow” (Post-training interview Track 1 21.21)

MA: “I enjoyed meeting the Maltese EL in person and seeing another reality... the fact that we did school visits one could see the good and bad of that reality... what you can take up and use in your school... but also meeting them and getting to know them was important for me” (post training interview Track 2 21.45)

MVE: “I enjoyed getting to know the Italians and finally putting a face to a name and getting to know their realities” (post training interview Track 2 19.56)

MV: “it was interesting when we met the Maltese heads and visited their schools... so enriching to see a different school context... I picked up a lot of ideas”. (Post-training interview Track 1 36.21)

MVE:” I loved meeting the Italians and showed them around my school... I care to go meet them and visit their schools “. (post-training Interview Track 2 27.07)

AD: “School visits widen your perspectives, want to do more and bring Maltese heads to visit and see our realities too”. (Post training Interview Track 2 22.22)

LS:” I enjoyed meeting the Italians and I was proud to take them around my school and around Gozo..... I think it was a shared feeling....I think these experiences widen our horizons” (post training Interview Track 2 25.09)

Various research shows that the professional and personal development that leaders experience through confrontation, often involve changes of approach brought about by observing alternative ways of acting. Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1997) believe that leaders should talk of new skills and ideas they pick up from visiting one another’s institutes, of innovations they can immediately implement in their own institution. When leaders embrace new perceptions and ideas gathered from other ELs, their actions become more informed and committed. ST emphasises this in her post-training interview.

ST: “I would recommend increasing staff mobility with other EU countries... to widen and innovate our practices and our educational system in general”. (post training interview Track 2 29.23)

Staff mobility and other experiences in different educational contexts is fundamental so as to widen horizons. Giroux (1992) calls thus crossing over ‘border pedagogy’. Training should establish opportunities for leaders to cross borders in order to understand otherness, different ways of being, knowing and acting. For Robertson and Webber (2000, 2002), border pedagogy is an essential component of effective leadership-learning methodology, because it creates the conditions of what they coined as ‘boundary-breaking leadership development’. Bell and Gilbert (1996) affirm that if we believe that knowledge is constructed and reconstructed by people at both personal and group levels, thus through training, people can get together to contribute to the construction of socially agreed knowledge and thus can transform the culture of the workplace. They add that this process involves what they termed “human agency”, that is, the ability of individuals to feel that they can make a difference. This is another common theme which emerged from this study and which will be discussed in the overarching theme 6: Sense of Control.

5.3.4.4 VICARIOUS LEARNING

Another emerging common theme is that of *Vicarious Learning*. Most ELs affirm that the training-research experience gave them opportunities to learn from one another. Participants asserted that this training-research experience involved reciprocal processes, where each leader seems to have gained benefits from reflecting not only on his/her own practice but also on the other ELs’ actions during the various collective experiences shared.

MV: “The various experiences brought by others in the group... how they interacted and behaved... it was interesting to see how they structured their communication... it has helped me a lot... I noticed that the others gave much more importance to communication, to dialogue, than myself...”

while instinctively, I would have easily reacted by saying do this and do that” (post-training interview Track 1 10.55)

It was interesting to see that there was reciprocal learning. For example LS and DG referred that they have learnt a lot from MVE who has a lot of experience in the various aspects of education, but at the same time MVE confessed that she has learnt a lot from her younger, less experienced colleagues.

LS: “... *listening to Mariella speaking about a different context than mine, secondary school, a private church school, even though different there were common things which make me think and reflect” (post-training interview Track 2. 24.34)*

DG: “*MVE... the dialogues, amazing... the fact that I saw her doing it... it was much more than just listening to or knowing what to do... that clip was so useful”(post training interview Track 2 20.01)*

MVE: “*I think this was the nicest part of the training... a learning opportunity.. I have come to learn that the more I grow the more I love learning from others, when I was young I was not interested but now I love sharing with peers who come from the same reality but who have different ways from mine. I have learnt a lot from my colleagues... ”. (post-training interview Track 1 29.09)*

A very similar situation happened in the Italian group, where FS affirms that she learnt a lot from the highly experienced EL SM, while the latter sustains that the former’s interventions were valuable for her to put into practice using writing in order to manage her emotions.

SM: “*Now I know it works (referring to writing down one’s reflections and emotions), I saw FS and others... it is a useful instrument but it does not come to me naturally to do so...”(Post-training Interview Track 2 26.02)*

FS: “*We learnt from one another, for example SM who has so much experience, shared her difficulties and emotions in the group... I would not have expected me to give suggestions to her... she was so humble to put herself at our same level” (Post-training interview Track 2)*

MV recognising that her interventions often challenged the beliefs of the other participants. MA affirms that seeing that MV can say ‘no’ without catastrophic repercussions, led her to risk and start saying ‘no’ too.

MV: “I remember I shocked the group when I said that I don’t go to school on Saturdays and that I don’t check my e-mails on Sundays... but throughout the training I noticed that each started taking up this in new attitude (with a smile!)” (post-training interview Track 1 18.09)

MA: “ ...during the training I saw that my other colleagues managed to say no... I am learning to say no but it is not easy for me” (Post-training interview track 2 05.10).

ELs seem to value the vicarious learning aspect of the training-research experience, with most saying they had seldom, if ever, watched another EL, in a similar position to their own, share their work and/or difficulties. The training-research had various vicarious learning opportunities but the apex was reached with MVE’s final presentation.

MVE: “(Referring to the final presentation)... I did what I did because I wanted to show myself and others what I had actually learnt. The proof of the pudding is in the eating! The fact that I had instruments made me risk... I wanted to record myself and see myself in action... and also have feedback from the teacher who recorded the dialogues but also from the group... that is why I started my presentation asking for feedback from the audience” (post-training Interview Track 2 02.02)

DG affirms that from his partnership coach EF, he picked up a strategy that helped him through case conferences, i.e., keeping a log book with factual data of daily school happenings.

DG: “another logbook of the difficult cases, it was a piece of advice given to me by my partner coach...where I wrote what we did, dates, facts which I used to take with me to case conferences... where I used to sit in and discuss in a more confident way” (Post-training interview; Track 1 28.02)

Robertson (2002) asserts that effective learning experiences should help close the gap between espoused theories and theories in action, and training where vicarious learning prevails seem to reach this goal more effectively and efficiently. Argyris (1999) affirms that effective professional development should create the essential conditions for “double-loop learning”. This takes place when other people observe and evaluate their behaviour. In this way providing the catalyst that allows the learners to confront their views and perceptions, which seem to be influencing their behaviour and actions. This is why collective reflections should be at the core of the leadership learning process.

5.3.4.5 SHARED LEARNT KNOWLEDGE: CASCADE EFFECTIVE

Another common theme is *shared learnt knowledge*. Most ELs affirm that they have already started sharing their operative knowledge with others. Robertson (2002) affirms that once leaders have learnt new skills, they often feel the urge to teach and/or coach other colleagues, triggering a sort of cascade effect.

LS: *“I did not have the opportunity to do coaching.... but I did it with my staff, I think the most important aspect of coaching was to share, I did it with my assistant heads, I shared with them what we were doing, I involved them...”* (post-training interview Track 2, 23.45)

EF, LS and DG reveal that they are already sharing the problem-solving process with the staff .

EF: *“Even though I try to not play “the-I-know-it-all”, especially with my staff, I am carefully give them advice.... they (referring to problem-solving strategies) have become so simple that I easily tell them What have you tried so far? what do you think if you try this?...”*(Post-training interview track 2 14.15)

LS: *“Even with my staff, I asked them to think what has worked, what did not work, what can we do.....”* (Post-training interview Track 1 5.01)

DG: *“I am not coaching them like we did in the training but when I speak to them I explained to them I tell them if we have to see it in from another point of view... I consider different points of*

view, for example when we discussed the action plan regarding maths we started discussing the sdp, what works and what did not work in the school and we formulated a plan for next year... to do so I asked them let's imagine the situation in five years' time, the problem we are observing, would it be seen as a problem?... leading them step by step... I told them we need to go slow to go fast... now they are repeating it back to me...we are using problem-solving also to plan the curriculum... I believe is our biggest role besides interpersonal skills and we use it in planning the curriculum and I believe it is working, it is giving more harmony to myself and my staff".

LS, SM and DG are professing and spreading the *go slow technique* amongst their staff.

LS: "I am taking up the *go slow mode* even with others.....everyone comes to me asking me why we do not know how to manage..... can we do this?.... it is as if they want a flick-your-finger solution, before they would say we tried everything it is impossible...now I tell them what has work with the child, what did not work, we use the method, even though the case is tough we are getting there, by studying... when you have a problem there is always a solution.... you need to stop, think and do the process.... but I need to practice it even more to be able to lead others". (Post-training interview Track 1 5.01)

SM: "specifically in the *step-by-step approach*.... I use it with myself and even with others, with my collaborators..... the words of Confucius A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, which you often repeated in the training...now I repeat it to myself and othersthe fact that I repeat this to myself and to others is already a good start... it helps us work better" (post-training interview Track1 5.56)

DG: "Even in the *action-plans* we are working and implementing at school, we need to break them down into small steps... I am passing on this method to my staff"

EF and DG felt to share the benefits of *log keeping* with colleagues but also with friends.

EF: "I suggested using a *self-reflection log* also for personal life, which ends up affecting our professional life and vice versa ...I suggested to a colleague who had an issue with her sister regarding her wedding... I told her 'why don't you take hold of pen and paper? And let it out, you have a volcano inside... she wrote and told me you know it is true...it works" (post-training track1 28.30)

DG: *“I suggested it (referring to writing) to colleagues and friends and it helped them through difficult times”* (Post-training interview. Track 2 28.25)

FS and ST are sharing their acquired knowledge and operative instruments regarding relationship management with their assistant heads.

FS: *“I am passing on this to my staff.... I told my assistant head, the colleague who you think holds a grudge against you actually has her own fears.... when we carried out the anthropologist analysis, that helped me a lot...”* (post-training interview track 2 14.34)

ST: *“One can’t consent to everything... I told this also to my assistant head who is always so available and nice with everyone”.* (post-training interview, Track1)

MVE decided to carry out training sessions to her assistant heads, so as to share with them the learnt operative knowledge but in this way they can have a shared language to use when they need to work on school problems.

MVE: *“I am sharing with my staff, I carried out small training sessions on resistance to change... in this way I can hand over to them the acquired instruments.... Since we are a team it is good that we share the same language ... heads should share their knowledge with staff I thought it was more appropriate to start with assistant heads, then with teachers. You cannot be a leader on your own. You need to create a ripple-effect.... This was quite an eye-opener to train my staff myself.... I am planning to do a small training session during our monthly meeting...”.*

In addition, FS asks whether it is possible to be given further instruments and learning opportunities to learn how to pass on the learnt knowledge to her staff. This is a clear example of a developed systems thinking and a sense of service to her school system.

FS: *“As part of our continuous training we can be helped to be able to pass this on our staff”*(Post-training Interview Track 2 22.14)

It seems that this training-research experience has induced most EL to move from being isolated or separate to being part of a larger group or community, where they feel they can share with others

their reflections, experience and knowledge. Most EL expressed the urge to share the learnt knowledge with their colleagues, which seem to have triggered a cascade effect in their system. All this is very much in line with Costa and Garmston’s (2016) description of a state of Interdependence.

5.3.5 THEME 5: RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

TABLE 9: THEME 4 RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

Theme	Sub-Theme	Key words/ codes	Most significant excerpt
RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT	Human Aspect	Not just an administrator, relationship, leader vs manager, educators, care for our students needs, no time,	ST: <i>“Our work is multi-tasking... We have to manage so much administrative work that we lose the human aspect.... others and ourselves</i>
	Active listening	Redundant words, Non-verbal, observation anthropologist, body language, hidden cues, our own on non verbals, emotions,	LS: <i>“... the importance of listening, active listening even their non-verbal... rather than you blutter and blutter, various tips are given, the way we communicate, our own verbal and non-verbal... that helped me a lot....”</i>
	Communication strategies	Persuasion, tag along others, engaging others, planned, use strategies, paraphrasing, questions with illusion of alternative, analogies, joint discovery	MV: <i>“It made me see communication under a different light... I had a sort of prejudice towards whose who worked on bettering their communication... ...while I discovered how important it is to give space and work on the dialogue... it helped me give the right value to communication.... Maybe it is the most important aspect”</i>

Theme	Sub-Theme	Key words/ codes	Most significant excerpt
RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT	Turn Resistances into collaborations	Fear resistances, dissent, resistances, oppositional, anthropologist exercise, marital arts, strength,	MM“ <i>I believe that if it wasn't for this course I wouldn't have held my role of head of school or I would have asked for clerical work for now, for the problem I had with my assistant head, they were the skills that you have given me that put me back in a position that we can continue working together...</i>
	Active Positioning	Flexibility, symmetrical and complementary, one-down, up-down, say no, too much empathy	ST: “ <i>Good leaders need to be able to be flexible and take up different positioning... be able to take one-down or/and one-up positions according to the situation....</i>

5.3.5.1 HUMAN ASPECT

A common emerging theme is the *human aspect* in leadership. Kouzes and Posner (1998) affirm that what separates effective from ineffective leaders is how much they really care about the people they lead. Most ELs recognise this and complain that they have become more of administrators, where they have come to lose the learning and human aspect of a being a school headmaster/mistress. ELs affirmed that they spend a lot of time in striving to solve problems related to the administrative aspect of their role. This is in line with Robertson (1999) who in her various research with ELs, has observed that nowadays head of schools have become managers. This is specifically felt by the Italian ELs who lead “self-managing schools”. MA and ST confess that they were investing a great deal of their time in project writing, budgeting and other administrative tasks even though they affirm that it was learning that had drawn them towards this profession and what

they consider to be the most important focus of their work. This is especially felt by MA who is an ex LSA¹⁵.

MA: *“We are so much taken by our administrative work that we end up having no time to care for our students”* (Post-training interview Track 2 13.00).

ST: *“Our work is multi-tasking... We have to manage so much administrative work that we lose the human aspect.... others and ourselves* (Post-training interview Track 2 17.02).

AD: *“My interest is to bring forward this school, my objective is to bring improvement in the school for my students, the rest is not important... we have become bureaucrats... I did not chose to this job out of ambition or to have a social consensus, I want to be of service to the school, because I truly believe in the school and education, I prefer to invest my energy in this, even in training or readings that can help me both on a professional but also on a personal level, to boost my spirit...”* (post-training interview Track 1 21.58)

This is in line with Goodlad’s (1978) words who over 30 years ago wrote that the educational process was corrupted through over-cultivation of the system. He affirms that leaders must be encouraged to focus their efforts on educational leadership rather than management. The management model must be eliminated since it treats school as a factory. Instead school as healthy organism, that necessitates a leadership role for the head of school. ELs lament the same thing twenty five years after. Most ELs affirm that they spend most of their time in fiscal and administrative management, collective bargaining, marketing their school and attending to political processes.

MM: *“...before I used to approach problems through managerial strategies which were leaving out completely the human aspect...”* (post-training interview track 1 33.04).

MM: *“I now feel that when I relate to others I am not just a head but also human.... my attitude changed...”* (post-training interview track 1 32.24)

MM affirmed that most of her training was on managerial leadership which allowed no space for human and relationship management. MM declares that being an inexperienced young educational

15 LSA Learning School Assistant. In Italy these teachers who are specialised in special needs education are called Insegnanti di sostegno.

leader, she followed management theory handed on to her by her previous training experiences, to guide her leadership.

MM: "I felt that what we were given in this course was a big paradox to the leadership theory, which is "my forte" and management theory, and, sometimes I am still living this paradox... before I used to approach problems through managerial strategies which were leaving out completely the human aspect.... I was following the management theory, that you take the decision, you take into consideration and think about the contingency plan, you try it out,if it does not work you change, you have plan A and Plan B, then check, then analyse, then question.... But in all this the human aspect was never considered... in these problem solving techniques, the human aspect was very present, more understanding and this was a shock for me and there I felt that when you consider the human aspect... you can arrive... but the managerial view of a leader, turned upside down.... I am no longer the manager.... I am rather the servant" (Post training Interview Track 1 11.10)

AD recognising that as a school leader, she needs to invest in learning more on human behaviour and psychology, while MV learnt that it is imperative to invest in human interaction.

AD: "To better my practice, I would like to further my knowledge in communication and psychology" (post-training interview Track 1 32.44)

MV: "Even at school, it is important to find time to speak with the staff, even just a couple of minutes to exchange some words, even on vain things... it has its importance" (Post training interview Track 1 :10.20)

DG and EF recognise that by investing in the human aspect, they are managing to get better results with their different stakeholders.

DG: "(referring to a meeting with parents).... I wanted to convey that I was not just the school head but also a person, and I think they appreciated this.....(Post-training interview, Track 1 23.44)

EF: "(during a meeting with a mother) I told her the mistakes I made as a mother.... I confessed that sometimes I made mistakes, I messed-up, and I told her I am telling you so, so you avoid my same mistakes" (post-training interview Track 2, 05.07).

Most ELs affirm that they have to put in very long hours, even in their own time, scarifying their weekends, to deal with administrative problems, leaving them very little time to care for the human aspect. Goodlad (1984) affirm that very few ELs are trained in interweaving these two aspects of leadership, even though they made to take responsibility and manage successful both of them. He adds that training should give ELs to be able to handle administrative tasks better to give way time

for human aspect. In fact MVE affirms that after the training she understood that problem-solving and relational management go hand in hand.

MVE: *“I find it difficult to separate problem-solving and communication. They are so much tied together to say the truth when I first saw the course title, I said what have these two have to do with one another- east and west-... while now I am finding it difficult to set them apart (post-training interview Track 1, 11.13)”*

Senge et al., (1999) affirm that by not nurturing the human aspect, other problems will crop up. In fact ELs sustain that most of their energies are spent in dealing with misunderstandings, conflicts, tug-of-wars and lack of collaboration amongst the school staff, students, parents and community. Bishop (2000) sustain that twenty-first century leaders must move from a product-first to a relationship-first formula. While Michael Fullan in his masterpiece work *“Leading in a culture of change”* (2001), affirms that what because success in all winning enterprises is establishing collaborative relationships.

5.3.5.2 ACTIVE LISTENING

Another common theme is *Active Listening*. After the training, most ELs affirm that they became aware that effective relationships can only be built on active listening. Covey (1989) affirms that leaders need to listen first, in order to learn how to relate and act effectively with others. Following the training sessions, most ELs became aware of how important it is to attend to both verbal, i.e. the redundant use of certain words but also the non-verbal communication to be able to tune in with the interlocutor and be able to get through to him/her. This is in line with the first axiom of communication *“We cannot not communicate”* (Watzlawick et al., 1967). ELs recognise that by attending even to non-verbal cues they can gather useful information that can inform their actions and thus their interactions.

LS: “... the importance of listening, active listening even their non-verbal... rather than you blutter and blutter, various tips given, the way we communicate, our own verbal and non-verbal... that helped me a lot.... I used to communicate well but I believe I started to communicate much better now” (Post-training interview Track1 16.02).

MVE: “Moreover, I learnt something about myself, that I actually don't look so much at people as I should, I am also understood why.....because when you told us to attend to non-verbal it helped me become aware of this.... Now I can work on it.... because I am am listener, I listen , I am not visual, even the way I learn things, even in mass, I listen so I concentrate on listening, I listen to the voice, intonation, that is where I get my cues from.... But I was missing out on the visuals... that was a revelation to me... I still love listening but I am getting better in attending to visuals... I would like to continue on the momentum (post-training interview Track 1 15.18)”

DG: “The body language.... I become aware that a person without speaking is revealing and saying a lot and a lot, I started to attend to these cues and using them as a weapon in my battle in an argument...When they get fridity or tense or they are not liking what I am saying.... I don't push more... I try to calm them down to bring them all on board before I ask more from them” (Post training-interview Track 1, 15.09)

FS: “Like with parents... I understand their perceptions and limits and avoid entering a tug of war with them..., they have their own fears and concern...” (Post-training interview track 1. 28. 33”)

EF: “After I listened to her I told her, you seem to be feeling like you are going into the lion's den... she felt understood” (post-training interview Track 1 19.09)

DG: “I could feel and recognize the way they are feeling, I could read their pain, I tuned in with them” (Post-training interview, Track 1 23.44)

MA: “...to look at gestures and non verbal to understand when one is feeling intimidated or is arrogant...” (post training interview Track 1 12.56)

MV: “ I listened to them, before I would have got agitated, the more the other would be agitated the more I would get agitated myself, I felt calm, like a doctor who listens to his sick patient, I heard the student, then the day after even the teacher who was present to the fight... the problem was solved in great tranquillity.... without exasperating the agitation, it was important to calm down the rough seas... “(Post training-interview Track 1 4.40)

AD: “I was always conscious of whom I have in front of me, but now I know it is something helpful, I was always very conscious also of my own non-verbal, my facial expressions but also to calibrate what I say, I always did that, but now I do so consciously because I know it is useful, I am aware that you cannot communicate in the same way with all the people, this I believe came along with my diverse life experiences, I travelled a lot ... and I had to grin and bear it, make the best out of it, I had to become that way, if I had to follow my nature I would be very easy, relaxed, but you can not always be in that way, I learnt this along the way...” (post-training interview Track1 33.34)

From these excerpts, it seems evident that most ELs recognise that the training has handed them over operative tools to actively attend to verbal and non-verbal cues that reveal the underlying emotions and perceptions of their interlocutors which often acts as a barrier in establishing collaborative relationships.

ST affirms that the given instruments, especially the Anthropologist exercise¹⁶, have helped her attend and recognise weaknesses and resources in her staff, which helped her coordinate her staff better.

ST: *“I enjoyed carrying out the Anthropologist exercise, where I observed and watched my staff... I observed their behaviour, what they say and don’t say, I enjoy doing this... in this way I discover what I can ask from them... I understood that my problem was that I always counted on the same persons, persons who I considered capable and competent, ending up to overloaded them with tasks which should be handled by others..... it is true that there are some who have true limits... while others, have come to surprise me”* (post-training interview track 114.08)

While DG and LS affirm that training brought them to recognise that they should also attend to their own non-verbal communication which often sabotaged their overall communication.

DG: *“I had a few occasions like this where somebody put under the lens my communication, they say but you are a TV person you can watch yourself, all the drama classes I did, but they were enough to better my communication in this way”* (Post-training interview Track 1 14.44)

LS: *“A lot, I improved a lot here, I feel I have moved ahead, even simply the way you sit I should not be with feet crossed, I should be with my feet on the ground, the way you keep eye contact, the way you welcome people, the importance of listening, active listening even their non-verbal... rather than you blutter and blutter, various tips given, the way we communicate, our own verbals and non-verbal... that helped me a lot.... I used to communicate well but I believe I started to communicate much better now”* (Post-training interview Track1 16.02).

5.3.5.3 COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Most ELs refer that they considered their communication competence as adequate and that it came natural to them, yet they added that during the training they gathered communication strategies that further bettered their communication, relationships and persuasive abilities.

16 Anthropologist Exercise: Asks the person to observe the persons around him/her and identify certain characteristics for example non-verbal, or dominant emotions, type of resistances

MV asserted that she always thought that communication should come natural to you and confessed that she regarded those working on bettering their communication as impostors or manipulators. She affirms that training put into question this belief to bring her to appreciate the need to work on ones communication if one cares to create collaborative relationships. Communication is a learnt competency that can be mastered. While EF has learned that she can go beyond her present weaknesses and what she considered as her limitations, if she applies specific communication strategies.

MV: *“It made me see communication under a different light... that is I understood that I should give more importance to communication.... I had a some sort of prejudice towards those who worked on bettering their communication... I perceived these persons as some sort of vendors, or show offs (gestures of exaggeration) while I discovered how important it is to give space and work on the dialogue... it helped me give the right value to communication.... Maybe it is the most important aspect”* (post training interview Track 1 :9.20)

EF: *“Even with communication I need to continue transforming my weaknesses into strengths. Need to do it more to become better and more natural to me, each time, you need to re-invent yourself, it is hard work yet I prefer this challenge then staying there bluttering and lamenting and getting nowhere”*. (post-training interview, track 2 27.45)

Most ELs came to recognise that effective communication skills are not innate but they can be acquired and mastered through informed practice. MVE, AD, MM and LS affirm that they became aware that even communication could be guided to reach the desired collaborations.

MVE: *“Something very basic I discovered.. is to have a strategy... very basic, you might take it for granted, I didn’t use to plan a strategy before, for example... I am meeting a parent, I actually plan how to tackle it, what I need to say and how... and that is really helpful”* (post-training interview track 1 23.23)

AD: *“ (referring to communication)...especially at the workplace, where you need to plan ahead what is the objective that needs to be reached, where you need to get with your interlocutor”*. (Post training interview: Track 1 33.02)

MM: *“my attitude changed, yes the questioning even the attention given to the non-verbal..... even with the teacher, I sat next to her did not speak to her standing..”* (post-training interview track 1 32.24)

LS: *“.... I managed to use these instruments in a critical situation (referring to the meeting with infuriated parents) (post-training interview 23.01)”*

EF used the learnt communication strategies to overcome her fear of public speaking. She used the different communication strategies learnt during the training to prepare her engaging final presentation.

EF: *“Like when we have to do presentation, I studied what I needed to do, I planned to do something different something short but humorous.... at the same time practical... if somebody in five year’s time will meet me, they will say she is the one of the cat they will say she’s the one of the professor Gatto..... so I decided to work between me and the cat so I didn’t have to do the entire presentation I have to confess that I’ve overcome my difficulty... and I feel my presentation left an impact”* (Post-training interview Track 2 12.00).

In their narratives, the ELs convey they they have acquired communication strategies to render their communication more effective and persuasive. Geddess (1995) affirms that effective leaders are not only those who hold a vision but also those who possess an array of communication skills to bring others along towards this vision. She adds that influence is what leadership is all about. i.e., using one’s position and energy to support a collective capacity that allows for a shared vision. A good leader should lead his/her institution in a journey from the present reality to a future that is desired and shared by everyone associated with it.

FS made use of *analogical language* to create evoking sensations in her speech with parents and with the mayor of her village.

FS: *“I started my speech with an analogy, also because the town mayor was involved in this situation, and when I was in Malta he sent me a text telling me who won the great match, I understood that it was no longer an educational choice but a game support.... So I had replied to the mayor I believe Juve won! He understood what I meant and he did not interfere any longer....but I started my speech, saying I have a sensation that this is becoming a sort of football support, but this game has to be won by all of us, and we can do so if we work to find a positive experience for your children, and this is what all of us want, I have no doubts about it, we are all in agreement on this, then we all have our different points of view, so I invite you to try and consider the different point of views, even my point of view as a head of an institution who has to take in consideration various aspects.....”* (Post-training Track 1. 12.22)

The following extracts show how DG and, SM shows are using *paraphrasing* to create small accords through out their dialogues.

DG: *“I used paraphrasing as we went along, I will say ‘just to be sure what we are saying and every time I will check whether they were with me’”(Post-training interview, Track 1 24.04)*

SM: *“I have learned how to listen actively, to use paraphrasing, which I am using always more, it is becoming part of me.... and other fine communication techniques, I have applied them and they are becoming part of my way of communicating” (Post-training interview Track 1 23.33)*

AD has turned her affirmations into **questions with the illusion of alternatives** which is helping her in guiding her dialogues even with resistant parties.

AD: *“I enjoyed the funnel-like question with the illusion of alternative... to nail down people (gives an ironical smile!), when I have people in front of me, when I am calm, I tell myself now I use this (smiles again!) (post- training interview track 1 28.43)*

In the post-training interviews, ELs often refers to the communication strategies acquired during the training. Here we presented significant extracts. They affirm that they are using them to guide their communication with different stakeholders, which are leading them to effective results even in difficult situations. Nardone & Salvini (2007) affirm that communication strategies, such as the use of questions with alternative questioning, re-framing paraphrasing and the use of analogies can render the one-to-one dialogue but also collective communication, a sort of co-joint discovery process, which harnesses collaboration.

5.3.5.4 TURN RESISTANCES INTO COLLABORATIONS

Another common theme is turning resistances into collaborations. Most EL affirm that often their work is sabotaged by explicit and inexplicit opposition expressed by the different stakeholders. They affirm that often they find it difficult to tug on others in their projects.

In the post-training interviews most ELs affirm that training has given them operative tools to be able to identify the different type of resistances to change and help them turn them in collaboration.

MM outright declares that if it wasn't for the course she would have not be able to handle her

assistant head who was continuously opposing her decisions and leadership. SM had a similar situation with one of her administration staff, who giving her hard time.

MM: *“I believe that if it wasn’t for this course I wouldn’t have held my role of head of school or I would have asked for clerical work for now, for the problem I had with my assistant head, they were the skills that you have given me that put me back in a position that we can continue working together...”* (Post-training Interview Track 1 07.23)

SM: *“The case I have always spoken about.... In these last months I tried to handle it differently.... I tried to relate to her differently, avoiding taking up a direct approach but using a one-down position, doing so, I have gained a better serenity... I feel I can manage her better....* (post training interview Track 1 06.27)

While FS confessed that often she would not accept oppositions and take them personally.

FS: *“Getting to know that there are different resistances, helped me stop reading their behaviour as a personal attack, this knowledge was very important to me...”* (Post-training interview track 1. 27. 30”)

In fact various literature demonstrate that one of the biggest obstacles to addressing organisational success in schools is the resistances frequently displayed by its various stakeholders; teachers, students, parents, and community (Fullan, 2001; Balbi, Artini, 2009, Papantuono, Portelli, Gibson, 2014). Often leaders spend a lot of time and energy fighting these explicit or inexplicit forms of dissent. Yet as Pojaghi, & Nicolini (2003) affirm, that it is natural for individuals or groups within organisations to dissent and resist change, and schools are no exception. As in the case of FS, principals who accept dissent as a natural, psychological phenomenon and as an obvious expression of change, can more easily understand it and manage it better, leading them to be more successful at facilitating a school culture where change is not only accepted but also an expected and necessary component of the school improvement process (Burns & Wagner, 2013). Thus, it is vital that principals and head of schools accept dissent and view it as an opportunity for constructive feedback that can help them reflect better on their practice and decisions making.

AD discovered that she manages resistances because she is capable of making it bounce back to the sender. Just like in martial arts she uses the strength of the other against him/her self, bringing it to its self-annulment (Nardone, Balbi, 2015).

AD: “I observed that my behaviour disarms a lot of people... in the sense that that I come from a different cultural context, my behaviour holds an element of surprise, here, they tend to hold the grudge, keep a long face, while I proceed... I continue to talk to people, I smile.... Just as you said, I act as if nothing happens, and when I smile I do it genuinely, I not do so out of irony but it comes to me spontaneously, I do not fall in the trap of acting like they do, they want to bring you to a nervous breakdown, bring you to exasperation, bring you to say I can't help it any longer, but they are not managing this... I don't want to waste my energy on this (referring to fighting resistances or dissent), there other things more important for me where I can invest my energy.... (post-training interview 21.58)

Dissent can give valuable information to help school leaders adjust their action plans in line with the specific physio-socio-emotional context, avoiding any wasted time and useless energy. While failure to recognise dissent or regarding it as a useless annoyance along the way, may mean that the ELs deprive themselves and the school system, of useful information on what should be done or not done to effectively and efficiently reach the desired goal. Moreover, if dissent is neglected or undervalued, this can easily trigger a negative attitude in those staff that may feel ignored. This leads to diminished motivation, increased disengagement and other unhelpful dispositions that deter efforts to accomplish school goals, objectives, and eventually, general school success (Burns & Wagner, 2013, Papantuono, Portelli, Gibson, 2014; Moscovici, Doise; 1992).

The following excerpts show how the ELs used the operative tools given during the training to manage and turn resistances into collaborations, even in highly oppositional situations.

SM: “....when I include her and make her feel important... we work better.... previously I would have corrected her, I would have acted like a dart and we (clashing her hands), we would have clashed” (post-training interview, track1 11.23)

LS: “We knew this would create an uproar... in fact nobody from the department turned up.... even the principal asked me to speak first.... the climate was not one of the best.... Yet when I started speaking I noticed that I kept calm... I tried to highlight the my strong points.... and I made a premise ‘You know that for me the kids come before anyone and anything so what we are doing is

in line with this.... for their benefit... but please allow me to explain and share with you the present situation... and I gave them the entire picture, so I did not just give them information but I tried to get through to them, reach out to them... “(post-training interview Track 1 28.11)

MM: *“Regarding the specific case (referring to assistant head), I am trying to convince my superiors to leave him with me even next year, because I know how to handle him now... they remained like this (astonished expression)I have arrived to a level that I told them leave him here with me, I know how to handle him, I have strategies...”* (post-training interview Track 2 15.00)

MVE: *“The problem I had with the transport coordinator, even though it is not 100% , it has improved remarkably I don’t feel tense any longer, I feel I managed to get people on board, with the idea, this is tangible proof of resolution of such a big problem and it is visible”. post-training Interview Track 1 14.03)”*

These findings are in line with various literature, which show that collaborative relationships between the ELs and the different stakeholders become extremely important for a successful shared outcome (Fullan, 2001; Senge et al., 1999; Balbi, Artini, 2009; Papantuono et al., 2014). A win-win attitude¹⁷ is the first step to allow change in seemingly impossible situations. Even though MM is facing a very challenging situation, she is taking up a win-win attitude by avoiding to enter into a tug of war with her assistant head.

MM : *“On Monday, at first it was difficult to act as if nothing had happened,I have to confess that I still have to hold back from not reacting when I see him, act as if nothing happened but then I managed to go beyond and proceed”* (Post training Interview 25.10)

Most ELs have come to recognise this and are avoiding the blaming games but rather try to manage resistances. Each member rowing in the same direction seems to be the key element in creating collaborations. Yet in a school environment where we have different visions of reality, it is not easy to bring all stakeholders to pull the rope in our direction. Often ELs feel helpless and react ineffectively to these resistances (Balbi, Artini, 2009).

¹⁷ A *win-win attitude* in a social interaction/game implies that all participants can profit in one way or the other. A win-win strategy is a conflict resolution process that aims to accommodate all disputants. In the context of group-dynamic games, win-win games are also called “cooperative games”, “new games” or “games without losers”. Mathematical game theory also refers to win-win games as non-zero-sum games. The founder of modern *game theory* is considered to be *John Von Neumann* who, as early as 1928, published an article *Towards a structure of strategic games*.

From the narratives gathered in post-training interviews but also in various other training activities, it seems clear that by identifying the different types of resistances and using the given strategies the participating ELs seem now to be able to exploit the shown resistance and turn it into collaborative relationships which is fundamental for effective leadership and school success.

5.3.5.5 ACTIVE POSITIONING

Another common theme is *Active Positioning*. Training seems to have brought ELs to understand the importance of actively positioning themselves according to the given situation. In line with the Fifth Axiom of the Pragmatics of Human communication: Symmetrical and Complementary Relationships, most ELs recognised that often they were caught in rigid symmetrical or complementary non-productive communication patterns. Most ELs became aware that neither symmetrical nor collaborative interactions are always productive. They should be able to interact according to the specific situation. There are situations that require a symmetrical intervention while others require complementary interventions. The problem arises when ELs are trapped in rigid interactional patterns with their stakeholders.

ST: *“Good leaders need to be able to be flexible and take up different positioning... be able to take one-down or/and one-up positions according to the situation....”* (post-training interview: track 1 32.12)

AD: *“I discovered that now it is easy for me to act as necessary, what is needed out of me... the one-down position but also one-up when needed... I might do it with a smile but in this way I am saying ‘Remember who I am!’ sometimes I do it so well (smiles!) With my smile, I am telling them remember that after all I am the head of this school, you can do what you like but eventually I am the head... I feel this responsibility”* (post-training interview Track 1 23.29)

FS sustains that training challenged her rigid belief that to establish an effective collaborative relationship one must take up a *one-down positioning*, showing empathy and unconditioned availability.

FS: “...because empathy was absolute, I needed to be always empathic... it (referring to the new attitude) was effective and decisive to take up a linear attitude... no longer circular, as I used to do, where I use to listen and repeat... in this situation I acted linear, rather abrupt, interrupting the usual circularity, (Post-training interview Track 2 02.26)

Even ST, MA and SM affirm that they found it difficult to take up a **one-up position**. Yet after the training they became aware that an effective leader should be able to take up even a one-up position and even say ‘no’ when necessary.

ST: “Sometimes it is important to say no, to be respected. I was always very controlled, tried to be nice to keep peace...”. (post-training interview: track 1 32.12)

MA: “I get so compassionate that I do not know how to say no, I fear to say no because I live it as a sort of disrespect towards others.... In our job there are situations where you need to say no... during the training I saw that my other colleagues managed to say no... I am learning to say no but it is not easy for me” (Post-training interview track 2 05.10).

SM: “so I told her sorry now I cannot help you... I felt that she felt betrayed by me... but I feel serene, my mistake was that I had allowed her too much space, let her come into much.... in my life, we used to text one another everyday, there was a sort of complicity between us, but now I am aware that I acted wrongly and I stopped this (Post-training interview track1)”

The following extracts testifies the effectiveness of taking a **one-down position**. It is true that heads of schools are the leaders of their institution, but taking a one-down position brings out the human aspect which often bring stakeholders to become more collaborative. Geddes (1995) affirms that to empower others and create a team environment, it becomes fundamental that one should be aware and monitor the type of relational messages one is communicating through his/her positioning. A rigid one-up position bring stakeholders to feel that the controlling person engineering the decision making and /or conversation, this tends to create dissent or resistances. It seems that training has generated this awareness and the participating ELs are now taking up a one-down position in different situations and with different stakeholders, when necessary, to create win-win situations.

DG: “I could feel and recognize the way they are feeling, I could read their pain, I tuned in with them, I took a one- down position I nearly went underneath, I told them ‘you are the parent you know better what is best for your kids I cannot act without your consent so that they did not perceive me as the arrogant head who knows it all.... I wanted to convey that I was not just the

school head but also a person, and I think they appreciated this..... (Post-training interview, Track 1 23.44)

MM: “Like yesterday a teacher came along and she was not ready to open-up to me, we have school development day, it is an important day for us, and on that day time-off is not given, but she asked me time-off on that day ...if it wasn’t for the course I would have told her immediately ”No” you know through sdp that time-off is not given. While I tried to go deeper and I asked her “Miss is it essential, you can’t do otherwise?” She answered ‘no can’t do otherwise!’... I tried to probe further, ‘Is it something medical, a bank contract?’, ‘No, no, not medical neither.... I just need a day time-off on that day’ stop! if it wasn’t for the course I would have out rightly said ‘A time-off on that day will not be granted, don’t waste more of my time (points to the door) please!’ This was Monday morning, don’t know how many people wanted to speak to me, how many e-mails and staff to handle but I told her, ‘now we have to end this conversation here, but I strongly belief that since you have put forward such a request it is not for a small thing, I told I don’t know what it is, but sure we will need to talk again, right?’ (post-training Interview Track 1 26.26)

EF: “ (during a meeting with a mother) I told her the mistakes I made as a mother,... I took a one-down position since I confessed that sometimes I made mistakes, I messed-up, and I told her I am telling you so, so that you avoid my same mistakes”. ((post-training interview Track 2, 05.07).

MV: “some days ago, that there has been a misunderstanding, regarding a message, unlike other times I went to directly speak to the person, letting him know that I was hurt by his reaction, explaining why I was hurt, explaining also what I meant, and how he could have acted differently from how he did, and I noticed that he remained disarmed (interviewer “he did not expect this from you?”) No, no,... (Post-training interview Track 1: 11.55)

MM: “On monday, at first it was difficult to act as if nothing had happened, I have to confess that I still have to hold back from not reacting when I see him, act as if nothing happened but then I managed to go beyond and to proceed” (Post training Interview 25.10)

Effective leaders need to be able to handle their relationship interactions in a fluid way depending on the situation. Geddes (1995) affirms that effective communication and thus consequent successful leadership entails a developed flexibility, that is the ability to calibrate and balance one’s power according to the specific situation. In their international work, “*The Strategic dialogue*”, Nardone and Salvini (2009) affirm that an effective communicator capable of creating collaborative climates, is that person who can actively dance along in a conversation, able to take up a one-down or one up position, by tuning in with the reaction of his/her interlocutor. In another text “*Knowing*

through changing” Nardone affirms that an effective dialogue should be an on-going action research process (Nardone, Portelli, 2005).

5.3.6 THEME 6: EXERCISE OF CONTROL

TABLE 6: THEME 6 EXERCISE OF CONTROL

Overarching Theme	Theme	Keywords	Excerpt
EXERCISE OF CONTROL	Ownership	helplessness, not luck but own merit, charisma to competence, casually planned situations,	AD: “... I know what I need to do, how to operate...., just like my Gozitan colleague I know it is not due to luck... can’t be lucky every time, right?”
	Agency & Self-efficacy	From victim to agent of school change, control, strategies, results, operative tools, acknowledge progress,	MM: “this situation is under control and all is working very well and I am seeing with my own eyes not only tried and tested.... but also witnessed by the principle”
	Empowerment	Confidence, in control, risk-taking, creating momentum,	MVE: “ I feel more empowered ... you have given me a momentum that helped .”
	Mastery	Craftsmanship, precision, elegance, self-correction, Unconscious competence, second nature	EF: “Even with communication I need to continue transforming my weaknesses into strengths”.

5.3.6.1 OWNERSHIP

A common theme that has emerged from the ELs' narratives is an acquired *sense of ownership* over their practice and results. LS, AD and DG became aware that the reached results are not due to chance or luck but it is a product of their informed actions. They became aware that they are actually their actions that bring along what seem casual consequences. Watzlawick (1981) spoke of a casually planned situation¹⁸. They became aware that they have more say than they thought on what happens to them and what happens around them. This brought ELs to have a shift both on a perceptive and reactive level from begin passive victims to active agents of change.

LS: *"I am not saying I'm lucky, I am no longer using it... this was a big change I now say I achieved it cause I am capable, I work for it, when they say well done now I say thank you cause I put effort this is not to be presumptuous or arrogant"* (post-training interview track 1 26.18)

AD: *"... I know what I need to do, how to operate...., just like my Gozitan colleague I know it is not due to luck... can't be lucky every time, right?"*(post-training Interview Track1 5.11- 7.17)

DG: *"I realized that I already did certain things that worked not because I am lucky (he gives a cheeky smile) but which I now know why they worked... so now I consciously repeat them...."*(Post-training interview track 1. 6.22)

DG: *"... this is no magic wand, it is a resource"*. (post-training interview Track 1: 6.01)

FS and MM recognise the progress they have made in these months and take ownership of the reached results.

FS: *"My new attitude... it was effective and decisive to take up a linear attitude... no longer circular, as I was used to do, where I used to listen and repeat... in this situation I acted linear, rather abrupt, interrupting the usual circularity, it was decisive cause this strategy which I have applied in February.... the problem did not present itself again"*(post-training 2 02.26)

MVE: *"The problem I had with the transport coordinator, even though it is not 100% , it has improved remarkably even visibly I feel I managed to get people on board, with the idea, this is a tangible prove of resolution of such a big problem and it is visible"*post-training Interview Track 1 14.03)

18 Casually planned situation or event in Watzlawick 1981: when a situation seems casual but in reality it is the result of small planned actions.

MM: *“this situation is under control and all is working very well and I am seeing with my own eyes not only tried and tested.... but also witnessed by the principle”* (post-training interview Track 1 21.07).

Robertson (2002) states that in taking **ownership** for their self-development, participants acquire greater intellectual independence and agency. They move from being reactive and isolated to being proactive and empowered, which gives them the confidence to improve learning opportunities in their institutions.

5.3.6.2 AGENCY & SELF-EFFICACY

Another common theme is **Agency and Self-efficacy**. Most ELs assert that they feel that they now own strategies that guide their practice, which helps them feel more in control of their actions and thus what is or can happen around them. They hold operative guidelines to lead their practice towards the desired goals.

FS: *“Having a model to follow, gives me more security..., thus knowing there are these certain steps to follow and these alternatives, how to attack a problem, I know it is there.... it gives me a sense of security”*(post-training interview Track 1 03.25).

LS: *“cause our work is full of problem but now I see them as manageable challenges.... and this helps us through”*(post-training interview Track 1 7.12)

DG: *“I started to implement various things that are giving me results.. obviously not 100% but this is no magic wand, it is a resource”*. (post-training interview Track 1: 6.01)

FS: *“...I can work better, after two months I can say this, remember me telling you I don’t know how much it is going to last, I don’t know if I will be able to do it again, but there wasn’t the need, cause the message was passed through* (post-training 2 02.26)

MVE: *“when I am meeting a parent, I actually plan how to tackle it, what I need to say and how... and that is really helpful”*(Post-training Interview Track1 11.16)”

AD: *“... by breaking it down to small steps, it has become possible! (post- training interview track 1 28.53)*

MV: “I understood that I like to break down problems into small elements, I like to decompose things, I don’t see the situation in its wholeness, the training was very much in line with this part of me...now I do so with more confidence” (Post-training interview Track1 25.44)

LS: “I managed to use these instruments in a critical situation... I felt I was more tranquil, not so worried on what they will come up with... Inside of me... I felt a sense of tranquillity.. ” (post-training interview Track 1 28.11)

MV: “Having more control over my emotions, make me take a distance and see things in a different light and thus I can manage things better” (Post-training interview Track 1 22.14)

As presented in the case studies, most ELs report to have gained a developed self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, the belief that one has the personal capabilities and resources to meet the demands of a specific task, was first introduced by Bandura (1977). While in his book, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*, Bandura (1997) presents various studies examining the role of self-efficacy perceptions in various performance spheres. In his article “*Extending Self-Efficacy Theory to Leadership: A Review and Empirical Test*“, Michael J. McCormick denotes the importance of boosting self-efficacy in Educational leadership. Gibbs (2002) suggests that self-efficacy should be enhanced during professional development training.

Yet self-efficacy is not developed immediately in the initial phases of training. Robertson (2002) sustains that initially leaders challenged by a new environment and learning modality, experience a sense of loss and lack of confidence. She adds that this is especially true, in a learning processes that follow an action research methodology. They might even feel less able. Fullan (2001) calls this implementation dip. However, he affirms that the implementation dip or loss of confidence felt by the learners, acts a catalyst for change because it pushing them out of their comfort zones, challenging them to question their perceptions and practices. Berger and Luckmann (1966) affirm that since knowledge is socially constructed, change relies on creating dissonance within these

constructions, to bring about de-constructing which takes place through critical reflection and analysis. Freire (1985) sustains that this deconstruction is necessary because it develops new awareness of beliefs and ways of operating, which lead to empowerment. Giddens (1993) refers to these feelings as agency, i.e. the notion that it is possible to act differently to how one has acted before. This is what happened to MM.

MM: *“At first it confused me cause I am a very sequential person, a person who loves academia, theory so I arrived to this training with this concept, that I will be listening to lectures, take notes, will buy books to read, that I will build my library... to be honest there were moments were I was going through a sense of great disappointment, I looked up notes after sessions... cause I thought that during the training I will get receipts, if this happens you do this, if this happens you do that....”* (post-training interview track1 33.42)

MM: *“there were moments where I felt frustrated cause I was used to management, if you do this, this will happen, if you do that, that will happen, if you don’t do that this will happen, I was not finding this but this training helped me cause I became aware that I was closing down myself in this managerial line, of input promises output, and it helped me realise that in a job like ours where we have people management, we cannot be process input- out.... we are dealing with people....*(post-training interview Track 2 08.20)

Robertson (2002) sustains that eventually leaders regain confidence when new practices are tried and tested to be truly effective in their practice. The learning by doing experiences show them that this process and the acquired skills equip them to work more effectively within the constant changing education system. Metaphorically speaking, they feel they can ride the waves. They become aware that they can act with agency, that they can actually improve their own leadership practice and bring innovations in the working institutions. This developed state of self-efficacy gives them the confidence to take risks. They feel empowered to overcome other hurdles. Acting with agency inevitably involves testing new ideas and practices, some of which will be successful while others will be failed attempts, but leaders with a developed self-efficacy will not give up and

keep the line. Just like Sir Edison, they should regard this as attempts that bring them closer to the solution. Following an action research approach to their practice, leaders should be able to acknowledge and make use of both successes and failures as learning opportunities, to acquire personal mastery (Senge 1990).

5.3.6.3 EMPOWERMENT

In fact another common theme is *empowerment*. Most ELs report that an increased ownership of responsibility for the reached results brought them to feel more confident in their competences and in their leadership. Even though they still have to face even the same difficulties as before, they feel they are 'armed' to be able to manage them better. ELs recognised that it is important to value their efforts and results cause this brings them to move from sense of helplessness to a state of empowerment.

MVE: *"I feel empowered so I see myself between 7 and 8, I am working to do better, I feel more empowered ... you have given me a momentum that helped ."*(Post-training Interview Track 1 02.02)

LS: *"...I have come to believe that nothing is impossible if you go deeper and you ask question you get answers (Post-training- interview Track 1. 3.02)*

MM: *"I have arrived to a level that I told them leave him here with me, I know how to handle him, I have strategies..."* (post-training interview Track 2 15.00)

ST: *"It is very comforting to know that you can use certain strategies"* (Post-training interview: Track 1 17.19) .)

SM: *I feel I can manage her better.... Now in the morning I go to school knowing that I can manage her better and this gives me a positive sensation....."* (post training interview Track 1 06.27)

When leaders realise that they are main protagonists and/or agents of change, they feel sufficiently freed and empowered to take risks and try alternative actions (Robertson, 2004). In the

following excepts, EF and FS clearly declare their change in attitude towards emerging problems and their management. Their words reveal they they no longer fear problems or changes and they feel empowered in facing them as possible challenges with possible winning outcomes. Moreover, they do not consider their unfitting actions as errors to avoid but ways to get better and closer to more adequate solutions. This seems to have generated a sense of tranquillity and serenity.

EF: *“You can’t actually do big mistakes, your actions are not unresolvable... you can always correct it, adjust it... and this is the interesting part of it. Like when I was young I used to scribble something ugly, then I work on it turning it into something beautiful, and I see this in the same way”* (post training interview track 1 14.34).

FS: *“My action (regarding a decision she had to take regarding an after-school program) was not so adequate, my decision was not so inclusive....and that is why three parents did not come along, but..... I did not live this situation as a defeat”* (post- training interview track 2 11.00)

LS and SM affirm that sense of empowerment brought along a tranquillity and hopefulness, even when facing challenging and intimidating situations. It lowers the level of stress and tension, leading to better results.

LS: *“Yes I feel inside of me a sense of tranquillity, actually there are a many problems around of me yet again I feel tranquil this is quite unusual for me What we did in our sessions is giving results now....”* (post-training interview track 1 32.11)

SM: *“Now in the morning I go to school knowing that I can manage her better and this gives me a positive sensation..... while before I felt as if I had to load my guns before going to school, ready for the match, ready for the kill... it was tough... cause dealing with a person like her everyday, a person with a particular personality, ... one can not lower his guard with her but now I am more serene* (post training interview Track 1 06.27)

5.3.6.4 MASTERY

Another common theme present in the EL narratives, is an urge towards *mastery*. Most EL even though they acknowledge their improvements, they strive to proceed on in their progress. Senge (1990) sustains that the way to begin developing a sense of personal mastery is to approach it with discipline. A series of practices and principles should be practised constantly and rigorously to be always more effective and eventually be internalised by the learner.

LS: *“I am learning to master better all aspects of problem solving and be able always more to apply them and adapt them to different situation, students, staff, parents...”* (post-training interview Track 2. 12.13)

MVE: *“As I said I had a strategy, as I told you I had gone through the steps, which I wouldn’t have done before the course, I tried it out... which means that I am on my way to internalising it”* (Post-training interview Track 1 13.56)

During the post- training interviews, most EL presented a clear ability to evaluation their actions and have acquired a *self-corrective attitude* both to problem solving and communication.

MV: *“ during a recent teacher’s meeting I reacted to an opposition made my a teacher....at first I replied with a tone, it was more a visceral instinctive reaction, I did not shout but I reacted with a tone.... then I mellowed it down.”* (post-training interview track 1: 7.01)

FS: *“Regarding my communication (referring to a speech she carried out during a meeting with parents), I understood that firstly, I should have not dismissed their point of view but rather included it, then I had to prescribe their attack on me cause they were attacking me, I was not giving an answer to protect the children, I did not want to arrive to them, but they were attacking me and I should have prescribed it, then I should have anticipated the fact that I would probable have said something that might have offended some of them.... thus on these three things, I constructed my next speech, then another thing, the use of analogical language...”*.(Post-training Track 1. 12.22)

EF: *“The first time I tackled this case, I was too adventurous and I messed it out, and at that moment I had thought there is nothing to be done, a lost case..... but then I said, I should use it as a lesson and go slow, do small steps in order, not jump from one thing to another”* (post-training interview track1; 7.45).

MM: *“I am so grateful for these experience... thank god I had this experience... it came natural and I enjoyed it, cause I say it is an opportunity to try out what I have learnt, cause I had this*

curiosity to try out and taking every situation as an opportunity! (post-training interview, track 1 31,05)

As presented in the case studies, most ELs care to learn from their current performance to further improve their competencies and practice. They seem to apply the acquired strategies, while critically reflect upon them to further improve their skills and competences. From the presented excerpts, it is clear that EL care to deepen their knowledge through elaboration, refinement and self-correction to reach precision and elegance in their work. This is in line with Costa and Garmston's (2016) state of craftsman that denotes that an effective learning process should generate an internal ***drive towards excellence and continuous improvement***.

EF: *“Even with communication I need to continue transforming my weaknesses into strengths”*. (post-training interview, track 2 27.45)

MM: *“I feel I have improved a lot, I feel I found keys, a method that works and that can leave an impact but I am still struggling with myself to accept that this is the case (she smiles!) and to craftily do it better”*. (Post-training Interview Track1 16.16)

ST: *“I have come to learn certain strategies, I have understood the theory, studied it, I am putting it into practice... now I need to make it mine...it still does not come natural to me but now I know what I need to do, I hope I'll keep it up... I need to proceed in this way”*. (Post-training Interview Track 2 26.02)

DG: *“I think I am at point 7-8 on the scale. I feel that I am mastering it and it is becoming second nature. I do it automatically when I am speaking with my staff. There are still certain things where I need to stop, reflect and refer to notes.. I need to practice and practice”* (Post-training interview, Track 1 10.08)

Most ELs refer that they need to continue practising the acquired strategies and skills to master them better and bring their problem solving and communication competencies to an unconscious automatic level.

LS: *“.... I need to work more, in certain situations I still have to take out my notes cause I printed them out, I have them handy... let me see, let me not go fast... even though I used to see it as time-consuming and time-wasting now I see it as useful I think the results will be better, I say to myself I*

would take less time later.... but for now I need time..... but I believe for now I need to take some time”(post-training interview Track 1 04.02).

MVE: “I already started practising what I have learnt, I already started trying out, in my daily practice but even in my presentation that’s what I did This will help me internalise it more.”(post-training Interview Track 2 15.22)

EF: “It has become quite automatic... yes I believe I am getting there...” (post-training interview Track 1, 1:02)

FS: “I’ve seen that if I put effort I manage but I need to study, it does not come always so naturally, when I know that I have a particular meeting, I open the books... not because I cannot do it but because I feel I need to refresh..... I need to practice them even more to render them mine” (post-training track 3 04.20)

Senge (1990) affirms that people with a developed level of mastery, live in a continual learning mode, as if their learning is never enough. Yet paradoxically they are deeply self-confident and in control in what they are doing, in what they can actually reaching and conscious of how to get there.

The aim of this discussion was not to generalise or come to up with some universal training or professional development strategy but to explore in detail the experience of 11 ELs coming from two different countries Malta and Italy, each coming from a different life experience and realities. Following a constructivist conceptualisation, the study was interested to understand the meanings the EL gave to this training-research experience. While the following chapter will elaborate the possible recommendations suggested by the same ELs,

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This concluding chapter aims to present a concise summary of what emerged from the analysis of the collected data. General conclusions from case studies will be presented to further address the research questions. Recommendations emerging from the common themes will be elaborated to instil reflections on training for ELs. In addition, limitations and strengths of the study will be discussed followed by some concluding thoughts.

This research is limited in scope. It set out to explore whether an A-R approach to training can effectively help ELs improve problem solving and communication competences. In addition, this study aimed to understand which aspects of the training, the participating ELs perceive to have helped them in this training-research journey.

The participants' narratives gathered during the post-training interviews have been thoroughly explored in an attempt to answer the central research questions, while other data gathered throughout the research was used to give substantial body to the findings.

6.2 SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN PROBLEM SOLVING & COMMUNICATION: GENERAL CONCLUSIONS FROM THE CASE STUDIES

The aim of this section is to address and elaborate general conclusions related to the first research question, that is:

Can an A-R based training help improve problem-solving and communication competences in the participating ELs?

From the 11 cases studies presented, it seems clear that the participating ELs report a significant improvement in their problem-solving and communication competencies. This was evident both in the digital (numerical) and analogical (descriptive) evaluations given by the same ELs during the post-training interview. Yet, as one can see in the case studies, various additional data gathered from observations of training sessions, logbooks, final presentations etc., further confirm this conclusion. This training research experience seems to have brought change both on a perceptive level i.e., it challenged rigid beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, feelings and emotions, but also a change on the reactive levels. i.e. behaviour and actions of the participating ELs.

Firstly, the training research experience brought the ELs to a better consciousness of what already worked in the problem-solving and communication practice, but also to discover new knowledge and strategies that they can put into action to further improve their competencies. In the former case, ELs affirm that discovering that there is a logic to what brings them to have effective results, helps them feel more in control of their actions but also of what happens around them. ELs report that this awareness gave them a sense of ownership and agency but also a better operative knowledge of what, when and with whom they can use certain actions (or avoid certain actions) so as to create what Watzlawick called 'casual planned events' (cited in Nardone, Salvini, 2005). They feel agents of change (Nardone, Balbi, 2014). They discovered that effective results are hardly ever given by sheer luck or chance, but are an effect of progressive small informed actions and efforts (Nardone, Portelli, 2005).

It is also evident that the training-research experience has also handed over to them additional new operative tools which have further boosted their abilities in problem-solving and communication (Balbi, Artini, 2009). The ELs report that these transversal competencies assist them in handling specific difficulties and demands which they initially felt helpless and hopeless about, such as time

management, resistances, conflicts, setting boundaries, delegation, fragmented actions, etc. which induced a sense of empowerment. The ELs assert that the A-R process combined with the constructivist-strategic approach gave them rigorous guidelines and strategies which they feel confident to adapt to different situations within their specific context.

The self-corrective aspect of the A-R process used both in problem solving and communication (Papantuono, 2014), brought ELs to take risk and learn from their failed attempted solutions. They were freed from the fear to do mistakes. They now perceive each action as an instrument to inform their next more fitting action, in line with an A-R approach to practice.

The narratives of the ELs show that this A-R based training seems to have been an effective learning process, which helped them developed a sense of *consciousness*, *efficacy*, *flexibility*, *craftsmanship* and *interdependence*, which according to Costa and Garmston (2016) are essential state of minds for learners and learning organizations. Besides improving the problem-solving and communication competencies, this A-R training seems to have triggered also a transversal effect on the ELs to better their learning but also their general leadership attitude.

The various reflective opportunities offered by the A-R based training, seem to have helped ELs not only acquire consciousness of their already effective competencies in PS and C but brought them to understand why they are effective, and how to use them more effectively. This training also offered opportunities for collective reflections. This participatory aspect of the A-R based training brought ELs to think out-of-the-box and consider other perceptions and necessary competencies which could improve their practice, that they may have otherwise ignored. In other words, they became conscious of the gaps, between what they are doing and what they should be doing, even by observing other realities. They moved from an *unconscious incompetence* to a *conscious incompetence* level.

The combination between the A-R process with constructivist-strategic content handed over to the ELs operative knowledge and tools to improve their problem-solving and communication competencies, reaching a *conscious competence* level. ELs affirm that now they know what they need to do, what actions they can take up or avoid (failed attempted) to go beyond their present limits. They gained knowledge on the process (A-R cycle) and content (operative knowledge and flexible strategies). Techniques like the mountain climbing and the anthropologist were amongst the most useful and effective strategies for the participating ELs. Operative knowledge such as the reflective go-slow philosophy, active listening and other communication strategies resulted very useful in this learning process.

The supportive yet challenging opportunities offered by this training-research experience brought the ELs to experiment new alternative ways of acting and witness effective and often surprising discoveries or what Frank Alexander called “*corrective emotional experiences*” (Alexander, French 1946). This training-research experience brought ELs to undergo a perceptive-reactive saltus (Sirigatti, Stefanile, Nardone 2008) triggered either by direct experience of tangible changes in their own practice and/or by indirect observations of changes shared by the other ELs during the learning community sessions. Both direct and/or indirect experiences seem to have brought them to challenge and break free from their perceptive and reactive systems, which often dictated their perpetuating failing actions (Nardone, Watzlawick, 2005; Nardone, Portelli, 2005; Papantuono et al., 2014, Nardone, Balbi, 2015). The ELs recognise that the new actions or practice are giving them effective results both in problem solving and communication. Most ELs assert even though their competencies have improved, that they still require careful attention, reflection and planning to act adequately and effectively. Some ELs disclose that there were instances, even critical situations where they witnessed that their competences have become unconscious that is, they come to them

naturally, automatically. Most ELs express that they are aware that they can master and reach an *unconscious competence* through further practice and practice. From the ELs narratives it is clear, that the self-corrective aspect of the A-R approach is bringing them not only to ‘risk out’ the new behaviour but also to want to better themselves further by applying the acquired skills with more precision and elegance. It seems that this A-R based training created a momentum, which induced a developed sense of control on one’s actions and consequent reactions, and an urge towards excellence and improved performance. Also because in a changing educational environment, being unconsciously competent is a very short stage. The ELs should be ready to ride the new waves. Yet a sense of empowerment, generated by the acquisition of the necessary transversal competencies, is the way forward.

6.3 COMMON THEMES & EMERGING RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this section is to address the research question: “*Which are the common themes or specific aspects of the training, the participating ELs perceive to have helped them in these improvements?*” and elaborate on emerging recommendations in designing effective training for ELs. It is imperative to state that this research does not hold the ambitious objective of defining what makes training effective but aims in bringing to light some aspects to reflect on.

6.3.1 ADDRESS PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

A primary factor recognised by the ELs to have triggered these improvements was that this training-research experience generated both a *professional and personal development*. The ELs appreciated the fact that the training offered reflective and ‘learning by doing’ opportunities that could be used

both in the professional and personal sphere. Hargreaves and Fullan (1992, p7) emphasise that “Teacher development... involves changing the person the teacher is... Acknowledging that teacher development is also a process of personal development marks an important step forward in our improvement efforts”. Baily (1993) denotes that personal development and professional development reinforces one another. It seems that this training has triggered a virtual circular causality where professional growth instilled personal development, while personal development reinforced professional growth . The A-R based training seems to have led growth both on a perceptive level, what ELs referred to as *Self-awareness* as well as on a reactive level, that is the acquisition of *Actions and Strategies*. This is in line with Elliott’s (1988) description of action research; a continual set of spirals consisting of reflection and action. According to Watzlawick (1990), a radical second-order change takes place only when the individual’s alters his/her understanding of the world, perceptions, thoughts, feelings but also of his actions.

This training-research experience seems to have instigated a really felt and shared interest in *continuous development*. Even though they assert that their profession takes a lot of their time, they are now aware of the need to invest time in the CPD. The Maltese ELs have asked the training-provider whether they could proceed with the training, which was granted. In fact this training will proceed for another year for the Maltese group from February 2017 while the Italian ELs are sourcing EU funds so as to prolong this training-research experience. Commitment and motivation are fundamental aspects for effective continuous personal development, and training should be designed to elicit (Moswelsa, 2006) and keep alive these aspects. Bezzina (2002) affirms that CPD can only be effective if it is ongoing to support EL through the rapidly changing Educational system.

6.3.2 BRIDGING THEORY TO PRACTICE

ELs affirm they committed themselves to this one-year long training because it was *relevant and contextual*, put them as *active and operative* protagonists of the learning process, held a *rigorous but not a rigid process* which was *adaptable and transferable* to various situations and obviously because it gave tangible *effective* results. This is in line with Lee (2005) who sustains that successful professional develop should be sustained over a period of time, should be needs-based, embedded in daily practice, and tailored to meet the specific circumstances or contexts of the participants. These are all aspects experienced by the ELs during this training-research experience induced by the combination of the flexible constructivist-strategic approach to A-R process used both in training and in their practice. Robertson (2004) affirms that only when practice moves to praxis, does a learning process provide real opportunities for improvement and, in turn, enhance professionalism.

6.3.3 SCHEDULED CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

Another factor that seems to have helped ELs improve their problem-solving and communication competence is *critical reflection*. This is a key aspect of A-R. Webster-Wright (2009) suggests a focus on learning with a shift of emphasis from passive development to active learning. The training-research experience provided various opportunities to bring ELs to undertake self and collective reflection. The training offered opportunities to bring the ELs to become practitioner researchers (Dana, 2009), where they would actively and systematic look and reflect on what is going on in their practice. The training provided both scheduled (prescribed tasks, home work and final presentation) and unscheduled opportunities (log books, diaries) to aid the EL self -reflect on their practice. ELs declare that they recognise the potential of self-reflection in improving both their

problem-solving and communication competencies yet they only carried it out when it was scheduled and guided. Training provided even opportunities for collective reflections which were scheduled (learning community sessions) and unscheduled (partnership coaching and virtual platform). Once more, even though ELs recognise the potential of collective reflections carried out during partnership coaching sessions or via the virtual platform, they failed to commit themselves to these suggested practices. ELs put forward numerous recommendations which they believe can aid partnership coaching and virtual platform developed just like the learning community sessions. Firstly, it seems that ELs can benefit further from collective critical reflections if they are scheduled and mandatory. Even though leaders have very little time available, it seems fundamental for them to schedule specific collective reflections time in their busy schedules. Secondly, ELs affirm that they need to agree in advance to conduct their meetings with one another with a certain stringency. They also need to agree in advance to bring a formal, structured approach to each meeting and to log them in. Moreover, collective critical reflections need to be guided so that they will not remain just supportive friendly conversations. Even creating shared task -which can either be initiated in the scheduled training sessions or made to work on and then present them in the scheduled learning community sessions- can help give structure and focus to partnership coaching and also to the interactions via the virtual platform. This is in line with Robertson (2004) who states that to bring leaders to insert reflective activities in their daily practice is not automatic, they require support structures, timing and expectation of involvement, commonly associated with professional development initiatives. Shared tasks, vis-a-vis meetings can create a trusting-sharing relationship, which can help increase commitment and interest in employing the virtual platforms. In addition, the virtual platform needs to have a professional formal attire. ELs suggest that training should also

assist them to get more familiar with technology and social networks, which is the way forward in creating wider learning communities in our digital era (Dana, 2009).

6.3.4 GENERATE INTERDEPENDENT EXPERIENCES

This research has shown that participating ELs perceive *interdependence* as a key factor of this training-research experience. This training offered various opportunities to move from isolation to a sense of *supportive community*. This is in line with various research, which emphasis the need for CPD to include learning communities (Flinders, 1988; Lieberman & Miller, 1992; Lortie, 1975; Smith & Scott, 1990; Dana 2009). A sense of trust seemed to have been built along the training-research experience with the other members of the learning community and even with the trainer/facilitator. Robertson (2008) affirms that a climate of trust and professionalism is essential to create learning communities and eventually a genuine learning process. Establishing *trustful relationships* seems to be an asset to bring the ELs to disclosure and share their works and difficulties. ELs affirm that learning communities developed because a trustful relationship was built along the way with the other participants but also with the trainer-facilitator. While partnership coaching and virtual platforms did not develop adequately because very little time and efforts were invested to allow a trustful relationships to flourish. Roberston (2008) affirms with time participants will become more open with each other in direct relationship to the degree of trust engendered but trainers/coaches should not stand still, but help facilitate and stimulate this essential aspect. As suggested in the previous section 5.3.3.

This training-research experience helped ELs *widen their horizons*. Argyris (1999) believes that effective professional development should create the essential conditions ‘a sine qua non’ for “double-loop learning” which take place when learners invite other people to observe or reflect on

their actions so providing the catalyst that allows the learners to confront the views and perceptions that seem to be influencing their (re)actions. This is why collective reflections and thus outside perspectives are necessarily at the core of the leadership learning process. Weber & Robertson (1998) affirm that effective learning experiences should open up the ELs to diverse perspectives to move them beyond the self to a bigger, more critical perspective of their own practice but also on the educational leadership in general. Staff mobility and other experiences in different educational context is fundamental to widen horizons. Giroux (1992) calls this crossing over 'border pedagogy'.

Another factor that ELs recognise to have brought improvement both in their problem solving and communication competencies was *vicarious learning*. Robertson (2002) affirms that effective learning experiences should help close the gap between espoused theories and theories in action, and training which prevail vicarious learning seem to reach this goal more effectively and efficiently.

Another common theme is *shared learnt knowledge*. Most ELs affirm that they have already started sharing their operative knowledge with others. Robertson (2002) affirms that once leaders have learnt new skills, they often feel the urge to teach and/or coach other colleagues, triggering a sort of cascade effect.

Training seems to benefit if it incorporates interdependent experiences through the inclusion of learning communities, partnership coaching, virtual platforms and staff mobility opportunities to help the same participants gain benefits from widening their horizons but also to instil an interdependence feeling which EL can then divulge in their school system.

6.3.5 INCLUDE RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

An overarching theme is *relationship management*. This research shows that CPD should help ELs integrate the human aspect in their administrative practice. Goodlad (1978) declares that very little training is tailored to help ELs interweave these two aspects of leadership- administrative and the human aspect, even though they are made to take responsibility and manage both of them successfully. Often ELs follow managerial theories, focus on the content (message, project, idea, input-output) and not on the relationships, and this often sabotages both their problem-solving and communication. Besides having a vision, leaders have to be able to hold persuasive skills to tag along others in collaborating towards the desired goal (Balbi, Artini, 2009).

This training-research experience gave the participating ELs operative tools to better their *active listening*, by attending to verbal and non- verbal cues and other *communication strategies* which turn their dialogues into co-joint, win-win discoveries (Nardone, Salvini, 2007). Even in communication, an A-R approach helps in learning how to correct and guide our communicative interventions to arrive to establish collaborative relationships (Papantuono et al., 2014). Another important aspect that helped ELs improve their problem solving and communication competences seem to be the operative knowledge and instruments acquired so as to *turn resistances into collaborations*. Often ELs fear resistances and dissent, but getting to know the different resistances to change, helped them manage them better. Effective leaders need to be able to handle their relationship interactions in a fluid way depending on the situation. Geddes (1995) affirms that effective communication and thus consequent successful leadership entails a developed flexibility or *active positioning*, i.e., the ability to calibrate and balance one's power according to the specific situation. An effective leader should be capable to take up a one-down or one-up position and

establish complimentary or symmetrical relationship according to the specific situation. Thus the awareness gathered from the training regarding the Pragmatics of Human Communication (Watzlawick et al, 1967 , Balbi, Artini, 2009; Papantuono et al., 2014) combined to an A-R approach even to communication, seem to have helped the participating ELs improve their communication competences but in directly even their leadership, in general.

6.3.6 EXERCISING A SENSE OF CONTROL

This training-research experience seems to have generated in the participating ELs a generalised sense of control. The active aspect of the A-R process employed both in their problem-solving and communication, seems to have induced a significant sense of *ownership*, *agency* and *self-efficacy*. Costa & Garmston (2016) affirm that a state of self-efficacy brings learners to feel confident to take risks. They feel *empowered* to try out alternative actions and venture out of their comfort zones. Having a rigorous but not rigid process to follow seems to create confidence in their practice. The action research process generated in the ELs a self-corrected attitude, which seems to have led them towards craftsmanship and *mastery* both in problem solving and communication.

It is important to state that training should anticipate and be able to guide ELs through the initial phase of the A-R process, where participants feel very much disoriented and confused. Robertson (2002) sustains that sometimes leaders situated within a challenging environment, initially experience a sense of loss and lack of confidence, especially in learning processes that follow an action research methodology. Fullan (2001) calls this implementation dip. Taking in account this, training should guide its participants through hazy moments to lead them out. If participants manage to go passed this implementation dip, it can act a catalyst leading the leaders out of their comfort zones. This can help them challenge their actions, try out new small actions and reflect on their

effects, so as to inform their next action, and then the next. Each small discovery leads to another discovery and then to the next, towards the desired change. However it is important to state that sometimes introducing a small change in the system, triggers a butterfly effect¹⁹. A chain reaction of changes take place spontaneously. The empowering sensation gathered during the training seems to have triggered this in our ELs.

Paradoxically ELs often feel followers rather than leaders. Because of the demanding nature of their job, they feel more as if they are reacting to rather than acting on their system. An A-R research approach to training and practice brings the ELs to feel agents of change, yet requires time and commitment. That is why training that prevails an A-R cannot be carried out in short seminars or in three-days In-service training (Bezzina, 2002) should be an on-going learning experience that accompanies the ELs in their missions, even if it limits itself to monthly meetings.

An A-R approach to training is quite challenging but rewarding. As Dana (2009) states, taking up an A-R approach training is at first like entering an uncharted territory, which can be quite disarming at the beginning of the journey. ELs might feel disoriented since they are unfamiliar with both the terrain and the final destination. An A-R approach to training helps the EL to chart his/her own territory. Exploring the unknown land and defining landmarks can be intriguing, experimental, exciting and overtime rewarding. Yet A-R approach is not something that EL can read or acquire from books, but it is a process that needs to be guided, supported and reinforced, even by the presence of others (other ELs, trainer, facilitator, partnership coach, staff, etc.,) in whom ELs hold

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¹ Butterfly effect or Thom's catasphrophe theory (1990) which states that a small change sets off a chain of greater changes that eventually lead to the catasphrophic event.

trust, respect and even admiration. It is a journey that an EL can take off on his/her own but which can be more enriching if he/she takes on board other companions.

6.4 LIMITATIONS

The presented findings are based on the narratives of eleven participants, who notwithstanding their different characters, school situation, experience, social context, training etc., report to have undergone significant improvements in their problem-solving and communication competencies. However, this does not mean that all participants enrolling in this type of A-R based training will turn out to have the same outcome; the findings are therefore not generalizable for ELs. In addition, following an action research process, no other research-training experience can be identical. Another group even if following the same objectives, might necessitate possible changes in the training programme and material, will focus on different aspects, reflect on different cases and difficulties, so different experiences and themes might emerge. The aim of such research is to produce rich data that would not make much sense outside its context; therefore it does not go by the concept of 'representativeness' (Crossley, 2008) but rather it is interested in depth.

The findings and analysis of data were mainly presented through the narratives analysed using thematic analysis and adopting a constructivist epistemological approach. We (referring to myself and tutor) opted for this approach since our main attempt for this choice was to allow the voices of the participants to determine the description of the themes and to come to their subjective perceptions and meanings. I am aware that this approach yielded a wordy study, sometimes running the risk of being repetitive. On the other hand, these repeated occurrences serve to reinforce those key themes that were at heart for the participating ELs.

The aim of the study was not to measure the effectiveness of the constructivist-strategic approach to problem-solving and communication, it was used in a way to share a common language to be exercised during the learning community sessions when reflecting on the ELs practice and to give ELs coherent and systematic guidelines to follow in their practice. But this does not exclude that the choice of this approach have influenced the outcome of this study and the punctuation given by the trainer and the ELs. A different theoretical construct would have produced different findings and led to different interpretations.

Another limitation that needs to be considered is that this research-training experience mainly focused on the role and the different faces of an A-R based training in inducing problem-solving and communication competences, yet during collection and analysis of data, a more complex picture emerged. The training had various aspects and was subject to various controllable and uncontrollable variables. Quoting the famous phrase of the psychologist Kurt Koffka (1935) "The whole is greater than the sum of the parts". Thus the A-R process was one albeit important factor that contributed to such change.

In addition, even though the ELs relate their improvements in problem solving and communication to this research-training experience, one cannot out-rightly exclude the fact that other life variables might have helped and triggered the change.

The selection of the participants has been on a voluntary basis, meaning that both Italian and Maltese participating ELs were motivated and committed to the training and personally interested in improving his/her problem-solving and communication competencies. One cannot exclude the fact that this same training would have been not so well-received and followed if this training-research experience had to be imposed on ELs.

The findings and analysis of the data were mainly presented through the narratives gathered from the post-training interview. Additional data was used to give body to these findings, while a more in-depth study could have been carried out analysing other video-taped and writing material collected along the one-year training-research experience, if the research project had more time and was followed by a team of researchers.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that qualitative data analysis is never free from the researcher's biases and interpretation. Although I have tried to apply reflexivity throughout the process, with great attention given to the re-storying phase of the narratives, where fact and fiction get very close to each other (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), the chance of having interpretation lasts.

6.5 STRENGTHS

Even though an A-R based training is very challenging, it seems to have given immediate tangible results. Besides the reported and documented effectiveness and efficacy (i.e. reaching a determined objective) the training-research project resulted to be even efficient (i.e. reaching a determined objective in a significant short time). The immediate tangible results witnessed and reported by the ELs throughout the training-research experience, brought the Department for Education of Malta to want to replicate this experience and propose this A-R based training to another group of EL, which shall start shortly, as soon I hand in my thesis in January 2017.

I believe another strength of this study was that besides fulling the aims of my PH. D research, it managed to fulfil another great concern of mine, i.e. to convey to participating ELs operative tool to help them effectively and efficiently better the practice and the overall improvement. After the end of the training, in August 2016 the Italian ELs had to face a very difficult moment which require a

truly effective leadership. Their territory was devastated by a natural disaster, a series of daily earthquakes, which brought most of the Italian ELs to see their own school buildings in rubble. It is comforting to hear them say, that they are happy to have carried out this training, because it helped them shoulder these critical moments with the acquired tools, strength but also with great humanity, as they came to discover during the training.

On a personal level, I believe that although during the training-research experience and even interview, my main role was that of a researcher, trainer and facilitator, there were specific situations where the participants experienced emotional difficulties, where my psychotherapeutic skills and training helped me support them through troubled waters. This makes me feel I have been of service to the EL who helped me bring this project through.

6.6 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In brief, the findings gathered from the narratives of the participants led to these core reflections on training or professional development for ELs. Professional training should definitely address and bring forth also personal development: Moreover it should be on-going, accompanying the ELs in all phases of their profession. Training should bridge theory and practice, using a pragmatic method. This can be favoured by an A-R approach and constructivist learning. Training should induce self and collective reflections but these learning opportunities need to be scheduled and guided by the training to exploit their full potential. Training should offer opportunities that generate mutual interdependent experiences, integrating aspects such learning communities, partnership/peer coaching and staff mobility. But these can work only if training helps generate trustful relationships among their participants. Training should give operative instruments for relationship management, especially on how to turn resistances into collaborations, which is a major

concern and difficulty of ELs. And finally, effective training should generate an overall sense of control, agency and empowerment in their leadership and practice.

Before concluding this work, I believe it is imperative to reiterate the very specific context of the study. This research does not hold the ambitious objective of defining what makes training effective but aims to highlight and underline some ideas to reflect upon when designing development training programs so as to help ELs exercise their leadership effectively, which is essential for school improvement. The purpose of this research was to listen and learn from the voices of the ELs to understand how training have brought a change in their perceptions, beliefs, assumptions, beliefs and actions as a result of a complex interaction of factors experienced during this A-R based training experience. I believe the effectiveness and efficacy of this training was the result of the synergy generated by the interactions of different realities, passions and hard work brought to the project by myself as trainer, facilitator and researcher but also by a group of passionate ELs who believed in a vision and faithfully committed themselves to implement changes in their practice.

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APPENDIX 1: POST-TRAINING INTERVIEW GUIDELINES (IN ITALIAN)

Linee Guida: Intervista post-training

Adesso che siamo giunti al termine del nostro training, come descriveresti questa esperienza di ricerca-formazione? Che valutazione daresti da 0-10.

Pensi che ti ha aiutato a migliorare le tue *competenze di problem-solving*. Se sì come? Nello specifico cosa ti ha aiutato? Potresti condividere con me un caso specifico che dimostrare questo cambiamento. Da una scala 0-10, dove 0 è il punto di partenza e il 10 è il punto da raggiungere, come valuti questo cambiamento.

Pensi che ti ha aiutato a migliorare le tue *competenze comunicative*. Se sì come? Nello specifico cosa ti ha aiutato? Potresti condividere con me un caso specifico che dimostrare questo cambiamento. Da una scala 0-10, dove 0 è il punto di partenza e il 10 è il punto da raggiungere, come valuti questo cambiamento.

Come descriveresti e valuteresti (dove possibile dare un valutazione da 0-10) questi aspetti del training :

- l'approccio di action research (ricerca-intervento) nel affrontare il tuo lavoro
- l'approccio di action research nel attuare il training stesso (ti sentivi perso o ti piaceva)
- l'auto-riflessione (utilizzando diari, appunti, blogs, ecc)
- i compiti a casa (riflessione strutturate)
- partnership coaching
- learning community (vis-a-vis, virtual platform)
- il modello costruttivista-strategico
- la presentazione final (prepara la tua presentazione e la giornata stessa)
- altro

Cosa ti risulta ancora difficile? Su che cosa dovresti lavorare nei prossimi mesi?

Che suggerimenti ti senti di dare, per migliorare il training?

APPENDIX 2: POST-TRAINING INTERVIEW GUIDELINES (IN ENGLISH)

GUIDELINES: Post-training interview

Now that we have come to completion, how would you describe the entire training-research experience ?
From 0-10

Did it help you improve your *problem solving competencies*? If so how? What helped you do so? Can you please share a situation that proves this change. On scale from 0-10 where 0 is when we started, how would you value the change.

Did it help you improve your *communication competencies*? If so how? What helped you do so? Can you please share a situation that proves this change. On scale from 0-10 where 0 is when we started, how would you value the change.

How would you describe and evaluate (from 0-10) these aspects of the training.

- *Action research approach to your practice*
- *Action research approach to training*
- *Self-reflection (diary, blogs, etc)*
- *structured reflective tasks,*
- *partnership coaching*
- *learning communities (vis-a-vis, virtual platform)*
- *the constructivist- strategic model*
- *the final presentation (preparing the presentation and the actual presentation day)*
- *other aspects*

What still results difficult for you? Where should you work mostly in the coming months?

What are recommendations to better this training?

APPENDIX 3: PRE-TRAINING INTERVIEW GUIDELINES

Can you please tell me something about yourself?

Your school experience?

Your present situation?

Your leadership?

Common difficulties?

How do you consider yourself as a:

Problem solver

What are your difficulties/?

What are your strengths?

Communication

What are your difficulties/weaknesses?

What are your strengths?

Have you carried out training before, on...?

Leadership?

Problem solving?

Communication?

If so, how was training? (duration, modality, etc)

Do you know what is Action-Research?

Have you ever been part of a learning community?

Have you used partnership/peer coaching? Collaborated directly with another EL

Are you part of a professional virtual platform?

Do you have questions?

APPENIX 4: PRE-TRAINING INTERVIEW GUIDELINES (IN ITALIAN)

LINEE GUIDA INTERVISTA PRE-TRAINING

Puoi dirmi qualcosa su di te?

La tua esperienza nella scuola?

La tua situazione attuale?

Il tuo leadership?

Difficoltà scontrati?

Come ti consideri come:

Problem-Solver

Quali sono le tue difficoltà / punti deboli?

Quali sono i tuoi punti di forza?

Comunicatore

Quali sono le tue difficoltà/ punti deboli?

Quali sono i tuoi punti di forza?

Hai mai frequentato la formazione?

Leadership?

Problem solving?

Comunicazione?

Se sì, come si svolgeva? (Durata, modalità, ecc)

Conosci l'action research/ ricerca-intervento?

Hai mai fatto parte di una comunità di apprendimento (learning community?)

Hai utilizzato partnership/peer coaching? (collaborato con un'altro EL)

Hai fatto mai parte di una piattaforma virtuale professionale?

Hai delle domande?

APPENDIX 5: MID-TERM INTERVIEW GUIDELINES (IN ENGLISH)

Mid-term interview questions

General questions

How would you describe this training-action research experience?

What is helping you mostly? What are you finding easy? What results difficult?

Implementing an action-research approach

Are you implementing an action research approach to your practice? If so, how? What are you finding easy?

What results difficult?

Problem solving competencies

How do you feel now regarding your problem solving competencies? What is helping you mostly? What results easy? What results difficulty?

Communication competencies

Even though we have just started our communication sessions,

How do you feel now regarding your communication competencies? What is helping you mostly? What results easy? What results difficulty?

What can help better your competencies?

Partnership coaching

Have you used partnership coaching sessions? How many encounters? If so, how was this experience? What stopped you from meeting your partner?

Learning community

Are you using learning community (virtual platform) to exchange material and experiences with other EL (Maltese and Italians)? Elaborate further.

Feedback question

Where would you place yourself on the 4 level competence scale?

As an action researcher, problem solver, effective communicator

What do you think can help you better your competencies?

APPENDIX 6: MID-TERM INTERVIEW GUIDELINES (IN ITALIAN)

Questionario sulla Formazione

Informazioni Generali

Come descriveresti questa esperienza di formazione attiva?

Cosa ti aiutato maggiormente? Cosa hai trovato facile? Cosa hai trovato difficile?

Implementazione un approccio A-R

Stai implementando l'approccio di A-R nel tuo lavoro? Se sì, come? Cosa hai trovato facile? Cosa hai trovato difficile?

Competenze di Problem Solving

Attualmente come le percepisci le tue competenze di problem solving? Cosa ti ha aiutato maggiormente?

Cosa hai trovato facile? Cosa hai trovato difficile?

Competenze comunicative

Anche se hai appena iniziato la sessione di comunicazione:

Come percepisci le tue competenze comunicative? Cosa ti ha aiutato maggiormente? Cosa hai trovato facile?

Cosa hai trovato difficile?

Cosa potrebbe facilitare un miglioramento delle tue competenze?

Partnership coaching

Hai usato le sessioni di partnership coaching? Quanti incontri hai fatto? Se sì, come è stata questa esperienza? Cosa ti ha ostacolato nell'incontro del partner?

Learning community

Fai uso della learning community (piattaforma virtuale) per scambiare materiale ed esperienze con gli altri dirigenti scolastici (Maltesi e Italiani)? Elabora la domanda.

Domanda di Feedback

Cosa dovresti fare per posizionarti al livello 4 della scala delle competenze?

Come:

action researcher,

problem solver, e

comunicatore efficace,

cosa pensi che ti potrebbe facilitare un miglioramento delle tue competenze?

APPENDIX 7: SPECIMEN OF MY REFLECTIVE NOTES

First training day in Macerata

- Presentation & Introduction by Prof. Pojaghi (the students Francesco & Laura were present)
- One of the EL was absent SM (health problems), we video recorded session.
- Why we are here? To make them own this decision and share their expectations. EL were interactive immediately exchanging experiences; thus it was thought adequate give them space to narrate their stories and difficulties
- MV shared a corrective emotional experience regarding time management (most felt topic by participants). FS, MA and ST seem to have difficulties in separating work from personal life. AD did not express herself. Unlike the others, she kept a bit aside. MA had just received a bad news from school so was a bit in the clouds. FS is very self-critical (open to learn and better herself).
- Difficulty to delegate and rely on others who are regarded as incapable (not up to standard)
- EL were giving the task to keep log book, coat of arms and start to insert structured reflection and journalling
- EL were invited to join Learning community facebook page (al had a facebook page, later discovered only SM didn't was reluctant to have her personal facebook page but my own experience helped her change her mind and join in the venture using a nickname Stella Marina)
- Did not manage to cover all A-R thus it was thought to do part II in two weeks time
- Handed in evaluation form. Most EL gave 10 to all items, only ST evaluation ranged from 8-10.
- Could not assign coaching partnerships since ST was absent.
- Decided to start 9am and finish by 12.30
- Room was very cold.

Second day in Macerata

- Started at 9am most EL were punctual (Francesco & Laura were present)
- All participants were present.
- Carried a brief sum up of 1st day of training since SM did not have access of the recorded video of the 1st day. Yet she downloaded ppt and carried out both task.
- Importance of 3-D reflection, importance to do so on their own, with coaching partner and during learning community.
- Emphasis on Self-reflection- Why writing helps?

AD seemed most resistance she says she refuse to write since this was her old way of doing. Others tried but just once, FS confessed she found it difficult cause there were no indications given so she felt lost, same MA. Sabina put down in point form but recognise she needs to express her emotions. Spoke about managing one's emotions: analogy of fireplace not too far, nor too near. Emotions present in us, especially in females.

- Structured reflection given a specific time: Observe when it results better: even this is an action research.
- Log books note redundancies, to be shared and reflected upon with coach.
- Resistances to change: mentioned superficially, promised to take them up more thoroughly later on during the training.
- Partnership coaches assigned: Left it up to them: AD e MA; SM e MV; FS e ST

Specified that their coaching meetings should be planned and structured. Given a specific space not whenever.

Since room was cold we changed room.

Shared with group one's Coat of Arms, yet they were invited to reflect upon more deeply with partnership coach. How it felt doing it? What resulted easier and harder to do?

Last part: Data collection, data analysis, data reporting/sharing (rushed through using analogy with jigsaw puzzle enthusiast)

Managing emotions: they sustained male colleagues do it better. Mara affirmed that women in high position need to prove themselves more than males, creating on them more expectations, more stress. Burn out and inability to say no and manage emotions. Stefania said that after over 25 years of

Not an appropriate conclusion. Do better next time using analogical language.

Francesco changed format of Evaluation form and without asking uploaded it on facebook.

1 st Training Day with Maltese EL

Presentation and introduction by Prof.ssa Pojaghi

All participants present even though MM was not feeling well. She underlined the fact that she cared to be there even though she feels terribly sick.

Why we are here? To make them own this decision and share their expectations. Participants interacted actively, sharing experiences and cautiously giving feedback to one another.

Interesting shared experience by DG regarding his difficulty to delegate or better to trust and rely on his assistance. Learning to trust. Avoiding giving double messages. Difficult to allow small disorders (spelling mistakes by his assistant), By doing everything in prima persona, he is creating others comfort zone. EF came up with how she solved the problem. Make her assistant sign care of. DG was surprised that it was so easy! LS shared his creative activities: Pyjama day and Geography lesson on a charter flight!

Assigned partnerships: MM refused the given partnership option (pair up with DG saying that she knows him, has worked with him, she was a secondary school, etc), wanted to couple up with either MVE or SM (private & church school) EF was ok in pairing up with DG even though they have worked together. MM at first show a resistant attitude but then easily joins. All participants feel this and are managing it well. Ok Maria since you have this need, you choose!! EF is very supportive and easy going. MVE is the wise element of the group, she shares her experiences openly and group listen willingly. LS is the creative one. DG shows more difficulties in trusting. MM tends to be antagonistic/critical element but is easily convinced so far. Sue seems to be the contemplating part, she declared she is not totally convinced.

So partnership coaches were decided accordingly: MM and MVE; LS and SM; EF and DG.

- Participants were thrilled to have homework: log book and coat of arms
- Participants invited to open a Facebook page to be able to access to Learning community page: MM refused by own experience and refusal to Facebook got her round.
-

2nd day Malta

- SM was sick so was absent. Decided to exploit coaching partners when one of members is missing. (A-R changes) Coach will brief the training day to the missing partner.
- Structured reflection: Why writing helps? Maria once more resistant but together with group managed to walk her through. She accepts what group members tell her, especially from MVE, who she confessed she admired as head
- Log book: DG sustained that often he reacts best when he is angry he becomes demanding/authoritarian and others follow. Thus we defined critical moments as not necessary as those moments they feel they have handled wrongly but also effectively to learn from both experiences. Log book can help recognise what does not work but also what works.
- Shared Coat of Arms- group eager to share their work. Asked what resulted easier, what resulted harder? MVE prepared a video, which all wishes to see. She also prepared a sheet to describe her choices. EF thought she would put together the Coat of Arms immediately but she ending reasoning too much. DG carried out immediately after 1st day of training, it came natural to him. Same applies to LS.

- Invited participants to start their partnership coaching experience by reflecting on Coat of arms and log book.
- Had to practice Time-keeping. (Declaring that I have to give example!)
- Data Collection & Analysis: Used the story of head that made teachers go through a Corrective Emotional Experience: Jigsaw Puzzle enthusiastic: You have just carried out action research? Persuasive Communication: create appeal not aversion.
- Carried a better evocative conclusion with chosen aphorisms. “Your journey starts here”

APPENDIX 8: PERSONAL NOTES AFTER INTERVIEWS

Highly committed and dedicated ELs. Even MV and SM who joined group at the very last moment, revealed to be intrigued and committed to this project. A warm relaxed climate was created in all interviews. The approx one-hour interview with EL turned out to be an interactive very enriching dialogue. Seems to have reached the intent of the pre-training interview:

- getting to know the EL and they get to know me and rough outline of this one-year research-training experience, and my constructivist-strategic approach to training
- establish a collaborative relationship, fundamental aspect since I would be their trainer, facilitator and coach when necessary. Participants were glad to hear that I am psychologist besides a trainer.
- and get to know their school realities but common difficulties
- understand their perceptions regarding their competencies in problem solving and communication and leadership in general.
- understand their attitude towards these competencies: are they innate or acquired? Mixed feelings.
- understand what they consider their strongholds and difficulties in their problem solving and communication competencies, even though aware that there can be unconscious incompetencies.
- tried to evaluate what each EL can get and give to the group.
- understand whether they have carried out prior training and in which form;
- understand how they proceed in their practice: if they take up problem solving and communication following certain guidelines or a model or if they do in a random unsystematic way. Have they used an action-research approach to their practice? Are they acquainted with professional learning communities? Only DG. Do they collaborate or work with other EL? If so do they use technology?

BASIC FINDINGS FROM PRE-TRAINING INTERVIEW

Most common difficulties faced by participating ELs:

- managing their multitasking job with limited time and resources (common complaints: no time, no help and support
- focus on administrative demands (budgets, lack of spaces in schools, incapable staff, attending to new reforms: they have lost the role of headmaster/mistress
- sense of urgency: they feel they need to be ready to solve the different problems they have to face on a daily basis, always in alert, ready with the solution (diversity of problems with staff, students, parents, superiors, community, etc.,)
- sense of insecurity in managing change brought about by school reforms but also by the always changing needs required by students, teachers, school staff, parents and community.
- great waste of time and energy due to dissent and resistances from others- difficulty to engage others to go along with the decisions made and bring them to collaborate to reach the decided goals.
- sense of isolation-nobody with whom to confront oneself, often overwhelmed by doubts and guilt feelings, feel helpless and hopeless. Italian group have an informal whatsapp group where they mostly share information, updates and general laments. While Maltese EL have monthly college meetings where they are mostly given updates by and deal with general administrative problems with the college principal.
- take work school problems home, no free time, no personal life, complains from home, feel stressed out.

Info on prior training:

- no specific training related to problem solving and communication specific to their educational leadership

- Italian EL had training on communication, while some of Maltese EL had training in management but mostly was theoretical and they were one-shot seminars or conferences and not on-going training; they were rather passive participants in the training.
- non of their prior training used an action research approach or was a learning by doing context-based experience.
- never been followed closely by a trainer /or coach.
- never been given space for their specific needs, beliefs and emotions
- never been trained to hold a specific modality to handle either problem posing and solving (except MM Management theories), or communication-relational difficulties (Italians had various training in communication but mostly theoretical). They respond to the demands and problems in a random and unsystematic way. They depend mostly on their experience, on their 'innate character' propensities and luck or god's blessing.
- No experience of a formal professional learning community, partnership coaching or virtual platforms (except EF had a short experience of e-learning)

MID-TERM INTERVIEW

The aims of the interview is to bring EL:

- give me feedback on the training and its various reflective opportunities. MM said that at first she was quite confused due to the flexible action-research approach but not she is getting it. Trust and sharing seems to be exponentially growing in both groups and respect members. MM affirms seems to have a bit of difficulties in disclosing. DG confirms and complains about this. Told him even though I understand his point of view, we need to respect the pace of each EL. All EL show difficulties to exploit the virtual platform. Interactions seems to remain on an superficial level. Partnership coaching present mostly amongst Maltese ELs. DG and EF taking it up seriously, MM and MVE tentatively, FS and ST have friendly chats, mostly centred on Sabina's health conditions. Leo remained without partner since Suer dropped out of the training. Other EL offered partnership coaching but he says he does not feel the need since he is quite satisfied with training/learning community sessions.
- to reflect on the past six months of training- research experience; help them identify what results easy but results difficulties, help them assess and self-evaluate the progress made. MV and AD seem not to perceive significant changes. MM and FS report changes but are sceptic on how long these changes will last. SM and MA affirm they have to work on the emotional aspect. DG affirms he needs to go small to reach his often ambitious objectives. LS and MA affirm they need to work on their Speedy Gonzalez rush-rush attitude. EF and MVE are using learnt competencies regularly in their practice and are tentatively passing them on to their staff. MVE carried out a training session to her assistant heads. EF is doing more one-to-one interventions with specific teachers and a mother.

APPENDIX 9: TRAINING EVALUATION SHEET IN ITALIAN

Gentile Partecipante, per aiutarci a migliorare il nostro training-ricerca La preghiamo di voler compilare il seguente questionario

TITOLO DELLA GIORNATA DI TRAINING:	
NOME PARTECIPANTE	
DATA :	TRAINER/S:

LEGENDA

Ottimo: 10	Distinto: 9	Buono: 8	Discreto: 7	Sufficiente: 6	Insufficiente: 5
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PER OGNI CAPACITÀ PUÒ INDICARE UN PUNTEGGIO DA 5 (SCARSA CAPACITÀ) A 10 (ELEVATA CAPACITÀ)

Didattica (docenti)

Capacità di:	giudizio
Definire l'obiettivo che si intende raggiungere con la presentazione	
Sviluppare un'apertura di sessione in grado di interessare i partecipanti	
Stabilire dei punti di verifica della comprensione durante l'esposizione	
Creare coinvolgimento e mantenere attiva la partecipazione dell'uditorio	
Capacità di risposta agli interventi e gestione produttiva delle obiezioni	
Tenere le redini della discussione evitando di andare fuori tema	
Stabilire un contatto visivo con tutti i partecipanti	
Utilizzare toni di voce e gestualità capaci di rafforzare il messaggio verbale	
Ricorrere a supporti visivi per potenziare la comunicazione (es. video, lucidi o lavagna)	
Ricorrere a esercitazione	
Stile personale (carisma, entusiasmo, humour)	
Dimostrare competenza specifica e significativa nella materia trattata	

Come giudica l'Organizzazione

	giudizio	osservazioni
DISPONIBILITA' PRIMA DELLA GIORNATA		
LOGISTICA (Aule e attrezzature)		
ASSISTENZA Didattico in loco		
DISPONIBILITÀ Didattico in loco		
RISPETTO DEI TEMPI		

La ringrazio sinceramente per la gentile collaborazione,

Claudette Portelli

Trainer e Dottoranda presso Università di Macerata TUTELA DELLA PRIVACY: le informazioni raccolte saranno inserite e conservate nella nostra banca dati e utilizzate per la ricerca e per il miglioramento del training-ricerca. Il Titolare del trattamento dati è Claudette Portelli, che procede al trattamento nel rispetto della normativa in materia.

APPENDIX 10: TRAINING EVALUATION SHEET IN ENGLISH

Dear Participant,
we would appreciate if you could take some time to fill in this evaluation sheet so as to help us better our training-research project.

TOPIC:	
PARTECIPANT'S NAME	
DATE :	TRAINER/S:

Excellent: 10	V. Good: 9	Good : 8	Discrete: 7	Sufficient: 6	Insufficient: 5
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Training

Managed to :	Evaluation
Reach the defined objectives/topics	
Keep the training interesting and engaging	
Maintain continuous verification and comprehension	
Create active participation	
Give thorough answers to the questions put forward by the participants	
Keep discussions on track	
Keep adequate eye contact with all participants	
Use adequate tone of voice, gestures, and other non-verbals to reinforce the verbal aspects	
Use adequate visuals to enhance communication (videos, boards, posters, etc)	
Use of adequate exercises to create a learning by doing experience	
Personal style (carisma, enthusiasm, humour)	
Show specific competencies in training and exposed topic	

Organization

	evaluation	suggestions
Assistance prior to training		
Logistics (Venue and equipment)		
Assistance during training		
TIME-KEEPING		

WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR COLLABORATION,

Claudette Portelli & DQSE

PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY: This information will be used only and exclusively to improve the training-research project.

APPENDIX 11: INFORMATION LETTER FOR ITALIAN ELS

Formazione e Coaching per gli 'Educational Leaders' per migliorare le competenze di comunicazione e di Problem Solving attraverso l'approccio di Action-Research .

Stato dell'Arte: Oggi, in un mondo frenetico in continuo mutazione, ai presidi e ai dirigenti scolastici è richiesto di affrontare molte sfide di crescente complessità. I presidi sono Educational Leaders che devono lavorare in settori differenti, trattare problemi eterogenei e coordinare una moltitudine di persone con punti di vista divergenti (insegnanti, studenti, staff scolastico, genitori, psicologi scolastici, etc), e tutto ciò deve convergere unitamente per raggiungere gli obiettivi designati.

Così ai dirigenti scolastici e ai presidi è richiesto di essere dei manager eccellenti che devono orchestrare tutte le componenti delle scuole attraverso un'innovazione ed una crescita continua, senza però allontanarsi dal loro delicato ruolo di guida e di sostegno agli studenti nella loro crescita accademica e psicosociale.

L'Educational Leader può essere sia un lavoro particolarmente gratificante ma anche particolarmente frustrante qualora manchino quelle competenze essenziali per gestire e portare avanti i cambiamenti necessari al complesso sistema scolastico. Kotter (1989) sosteneva, *“la prova ultima per un leader è guidare il cambiamento – nessuna organizzazione funziona e perdura se non può reinventare se stessa. Ma in definitiva questa è la natura umana, laddove il cambiamento è più richiesto, maggiori sono le potenziali resistenze giocate dalle persone. Così, condurre il cambiamento è sia essenziale ma anche incredibilmente difficile”*.

Quindi agli Educational Leaders è richiesto sia l'acquisizione di competenze tecniche ed amministrative, ma anche di padroneggiare competenze psicologiche e relazionali. Secondo Paletta & Baraldi (2008), la funzione principale dei presidi è di mettere lo staff scolastico nelle condizioni migliori per promuovere una performance sinergica, una professionalità interattiva, una visione comune e strategie efficaci per il cambiamento.

Nel 2009, l'OCSE (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) ha pubblicato un importante studio, intitolato *“Improving School Leadership”*, che ha evidenziato l'importanza di fornire quelle competenze ai Presidi, che gli permettano di adottare una leadership estesa nella guida degli insegnanti, degli operatori scolastici, degli alunni e dei genitori per la creazione di un clima collaborativo. Per raggiungere questo scopo, innanzitutto, i dirigenti scolastici e i presidi hanno bisogno di acquisire una consapevolezza operativa delle proprie competenze relazionali-comunicative che gli dia la possibilità di auto-migliorarsi. Inoltre, hanno bisogno di essere capaci di cavalcare le onde che gli permettano di affrontare le loro avventure giornaliere. Proprio come i capitani di una nave che attraversano l'oceano, così i presidi devono essere in grado di affrontare mari tempestosi ed imprevedibili; pronti a sorpassare qualsiasi ostacolo e difficoltà che gli si pari davanti per raggiungere gli obiettivi desiderati, attraverso la relazione con gli studenti, lo staff e il sistema scolastico in generale.

Nel loro lavoro, *“Curare la scuola”*, Balbi e Artini (2009) hanno messo in luce come le competenze comunicative e di Problem Solving siano dei *must* che un Educational Leader deve acquisire e padroneggiare per eseguire con successo la propria missione.

Secondo Paletta e Baraldi (2008) la formazione dei presidi dovrebbe ottimizzare le loro competenze al meglio, per:

- Indurre un cambiamento nelle loro organizzazioni;
- Influenzare e persuadere le persone a seguire gli obiettivi organizzativi;
- Comunicare e mostrare le loro competenze.

Tale percorso formativo dovrebbe non solo dare nozioni ma anche creare una *“forma mentis”* che vada aldilà dell'esperienza formativa stessa, che i partecipanti possano applicare nel proprio quotidiano. Inoltre, la

formazione dovrebbe fornire strumenti operativi tangibili da impiegare e da replicare in diversi contesti, qualcosa di simile a un passpartout capace di aprire tutte le porte chiuse. La formazione dovrebbe dare delle competenze che non siano lasciate al caso o acquisite solo attraverso le esperienze di vita.

L'OBIETTIVO GENERALE:

Questa ricerca di dottorato si prefigge di trasmettere agli Educational Leaders competenze comunicative e di problem-solving efficaci per la gestione delle complesse dinamiche nella loro vita quotidiana. Il progetto, di durata biennale, si atterrà ai principi dell'approccio dell'Action-Research, grazie al quale i partecipanti acquisiranno conoscenze operative sulla comunicazione e di problem solving all'interno del contesto scolastico. Inoltre, darebbe loro la possibilità di riflettere sul proprio lavoro e sulla loro leadership attraverso esperienze pratiche e di apprendimento continuo.

Inoltre l'obiettivo generale di questa ricerca consiste nel' identificare quei fattori essenziali che rendono un PROGRAMMA FORMATIVO&TRAINING effettivo ed efficace. per gli Educational Leaders finalizzato a far evolvere le proprie skills comunicative e di problem solving e/o a crearne di nuove, nonché un modello di training da implementare nei contesti scolastici di altri paesi Europei.

PARTECIPANTI: due gruppi di Educational Leaders di due paesi Europei: Malta e Italia

OBIETTIVI SPECIFICI

COMPETENZE COMUNICATIVE: gran parte delle attività svolte dagli Educational Leaders riguardano la comunicazione e la persuasione.

Oggi, per i presidi sembra essere un imperativo l'acquisizione di competenze comunicative efficaci, in grado di creare relazioni collaborative con studenti, insegnanti, genitori, staff scolastico, ministero dell'educazione, per arrivare a lavorare insieme per gli obiettivi desiderati.

Questa formazione guiderà i partecipanti ad imparare come riflettere e lavorare efficacemente sulla comunicazione e a creare rapporti collaborativi.

Questa ricerca che si basa sullo studio della Pragmatica della Comunicazione Umana (Watzlawick et al., 1974) della Scuola di Palo Alto (USA), guiderà i partecipanti al miglioramento delle loro competenze comunicative attraverso l'approccio dell'Action Research, il quale consentirà di:

- acquisire conoscenze operative sulla pragmatica della comunicazione umana (gli effetti della comunicazione) e l'arte della persuasione;
- osservare e migliorare le proprie competenze attraverso l'auto-osservazione e l'autovalutazione;
- migliorare le proprie competenze attraverso un lavoro di coaching da effettuare in coppia;
- scambiare esperienze e informazioni nelle comunità di apprendimento tramite la guida di un facilitatore.

COMPETENZE DI PROBLEM SOLVING:

- riflettere e valutare le proprie competenze di leadership e di problem-solving
- valutare ed utilizzare le tentate soluzioni (TS) come linee guida per raggiungere i propri obiettivi ed acquisire una migliore consapevolezza operativa;
- immaginare e pensare fuori dagli schemi (out of the box);
- sviluppare un sistema di risorse personale e scolastico (insegnanti, studenti ed altri operatori);
- costruire un rigoroso ed auto-correttivo piano d'azione;
- segmentare i macro obiettivi in micro-obiettivi: creando un piano d'azione step-by-step;

- utilizzare strategie e stratagemmi in grado di superare resistenze ed ostacoli;
- rendere gli obiettivi prefissati una scoperta partecipata, condivisa ed agita da tutti i membri del gruppo.

IL MODELLO:

L'Approccio Breve Strategico è il modello di riferimento usato. È stato sviluppato nel Centro di Terapia Strategica di Arezzo (Nardone, Mariotti, Milanese, Fiorenza, 2009; Balbi, Artini 2009; Nardone, 2012) attraverso un' Action-Research (Ricerca-Intervento) pluri-ventennale nei campi clinici ed organizzativi. Il modello affonda le sue radici nel lavoro della pragmatica della comunicazione e di Problem-oriented sviluppato dalla Scuola di Palo Alto e nell'approccio Solution-oriented della Scuola di Milwaukee. Il training sarà arricchito anche con altri studi essenziali sulla comunicazione, la formazione e la ricerca intervento effettuati dal Dipartimento di Scienze politiche, della comunicazione e delle relazioni internazionali presso Università degli Studi di Macerata e studi internazionali come "Le armi della persuasione" di Cialdini ed altro.

LO SVOLGIMENTO DELLA FORMAZIONE

Parte Introduttiva: creazione le fondamenta per la formazione (basic grounds)

Argomenti trattati:

- l'importanza del Training per gli Educational Leaders l'auto-riflessione e l'autovalutazione, la partnership di coaching, l'apprendimento nelle comunità per lo sviluppo professionale e la riduzione dello stress e del burnout
- l'approccio dell'Action Research per la gestione e miglioramento delle carriere dirigenziale
- gli strumenti operativi del Problem-solving
- gli strumenti operativi della comunicazione

Parte I: L'autoriflessione e l'informazione agita (informed action).

Imparare facendo → i partecipanti apprenderanno ad auto-valutarsi e a migliorare le proprie Competenze di Problem-Solving: definizione del problema, valutazione delle tentate soluzioni e delle risorse, immaginario dello scenario futuro e del *come se*, costruire un piano d'azione, seguire l'approccio dell'Action Research per la pianificazione delle azioni e l'autocorrezione.

Valutare e migliorare le proprie Competenze Comunicative → gli effetti della comunicazione, il coaching e le capacità persuasive.

Imparare ad impiegare strumenti operativi come → autovalutazioni, reflective log-book e video registrazioni.

Parte II: Partnership-coaching (in coppia)

Seguendo il modello di Jan Robertson (2008) sul Coaching Educational Leadership, i partecipanti saranno guidati alla costruzione di competenze comunicative e di problem solving attraverso una partnership di coaching.

Si terranno degli incontri strutturati tra due Educazionali Leaders, nei quali ogni leader farà un coaching all'altro riflettendo e lavorando sul miglioramento delle rispettive capacità comunicative e di problem solving.

- Riflessione ed ascolto attivo;
- Dialogo (intervista riflessiva)
- Presentazione di altre prospettive
- Osservazione sul campo

Parte III: Comunità di Apprendimento (Learning communities):

Mensilmente un trainer/facilitatore terrà degli incontri nel grande gruppo degli Educational Leaders (massimo 10 partecipanti per gruppo), nei quali saranno possibili riflessioni collettive, discussione su argomenti prestabiliti, scambi di informazioni e di esperienze, feedback sul proprio operato o cambiamenti, etc. L'argomento di discussione tenuto all'interno delle comunità di apprendimento sarà scelto prima di ogni incontro dagli stessi partecipanti, in accordo con i principi della ricerca azione.

Alcuni esempi di argomenti di discussione possono essere:

- La resistenza al cambiamento;
- L'intelligenza emotiva
- La gestione dei conflitti
- Il dialogo: la comunicazione persuasiva.

Trainer/Ricercatrice:

La formazione sarà tenuta e facilitata dalla Dott.ssa Claudette Portelli, formata nell'Approccio Breve Strategico, che da oltre 10 anni impiega questo modello nell'area clinica, organizzativa e scolastica.

Il ruolo del Trainer:

Attenendosi all'approccio Breve Strategico ma anche altre ricerche internazionali, il trainer/facilitatore impartirà conoscenze operative e strumenti riguardanti:

- La comunicazione
- Il problem-solving
- L'approccio della ricerca azione nell'apprendimento
- Il partnership coaching

Il trainer come tutor e facilitatore:

- Assisterà le autoriflessione ed autovalutazione individuali degli Educational Leaders
- Assisterà al processo di partnership-coaching
- Assisterà il processo nella comunità di apprendimento

Il trainer come ricercatore:

recupererà ed analizzerà tutti i dati raccolti dai partecipanti Maltesi e Italiani, per formulare un **PROGRAMMA FORMATIVO** per gli Educational Leader **NEL MIGLIORAMENTO DELLE COMPETENZE COMUNICATIVE & DI PROBLEM SOLVING** e da implementare nei contesti scolastici dei diversi paesi Europei
compilerà un pratico tool-kit che sarà usato nel programma formativo.

La Formazione e la Ricerca sarà supervisionata dalla Prof.ssa Barbara Pojaghi (Università di Macerata, Italia) e dal Prof. Carmel Cefai (Università di Malta).

APPENDIX 12: DETAILED INFORMATION LETTER FOR MALTESE ELS

CPD Award: Educational Leaders as Action Researchers: Improving Problem Solving and Communication Competences through self-reflection, partnership coaching and learning communities. (MQF level 6)

The one-year course is a training-research experience with a major objective, i.e. that to bring Educational leaders to acquire and employ an action-research approach to their everyday practice, through self-reflection, partnership coaching and learning community sessions. By the end of the learning-by-doing course participants will have acquired, practised and have come to skilfully implement an effective inquiry tool to handle more effectively the array of educational difficulties encountered on their working place, and implement efficiently, innovations and change in their school context. This learning by doing training will help participants become agents of change since it will hand over and help them practice specific operative tools specifically designed to help them improve their problem solving and communication skills which, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2009), are the most essential competencies for School leadership.

Entry requirement: Head of schools from Primary and Secondary Public, Church or Private Schools. Two training-research groups of Educational Leaders will be formed, one in Malta, and other in Italy, which will interact through a virtual platform. Each group will consist of 6-8 participants so as to guarantee individual attention to each and every participants through out the training-research experience.

Participants are required to send an e-mail with attached C.V. to the course trainer/facilitator at this e-mail address: claudetteportelli@gmail.com by not later than **13th November 2014**. A interview will be carried out, if considered necessary.

Training sessions will be held every forthright. Participants are required to participate to a total of 12 training sessions, while the rest of the learning-by-doing course will be self-managed (self-reflection, self-study and reflective-coaching) and on-line (virtual platform, voice over internet protocol e.g. skype).

Training and learning community sessions will be held every forth night on thursdays from 15.30-19.30 at National Curriculum Centre (NCC) Hamrun.

22nd Jan, 5th Feb, 26th Feb, 12th March , 26th March EASTER BREAK, 16th April, 30th April, 14th May, 28th May, 11th June SUMMER BREAK 15th October, 12th November

N.B. These dates might undergo changes but new dates will be discussed and decided with the group members.

Following an action research methodology, learners will be introduced to an array of methods to monitor, reflect, evaluate and self-correct their practice from where to choose from. The choice of method depends on the chosen objective, resources available and personal inclinations. Participants will be introduced to the benefits and challenges of each specific method and guided to select the most suitable method of inquiry in respect to the resources and challenges of their specific school context.

Course modules and Learning Modalities

- **Action Research (AR): The Educational Leader as Action Researcher**
- **Problem Solving: Creating a Systemic rigorous Action Plan**
- **Effective Communication For School Success:**
- **Partnership Coaching: A joint reflection towards desired change**
- **Learning communities and the use of virtual platforms to widen horizons**

The training-research unit will have four parallel learning modalities:

Introductory training sessions: (12 meetings) the trainer will hand over basic operative knowledge on Action Research, Problem Solving, Communication, Coaching, Learning Community and the use of social networks and virtual platforms in enhancing Educational Leadership. 4 hours per training session.

Training will be carried out by a key trainer but experts in the field will be invited to enrich training with hands-on experiences. Moreover, each participants will have a maximum of 2 contact hours with trainer/facilitator to discuss personal difficulties related to this research-training.

Practitioner inquiry: (Self-reflection and informed action carried out on the field). Participants will be able to apply the given instruments to reflect and evaluate their practice and actions. By applying an action research approach to their work, they will be able to look at what they do and learn from their actions, so as to try to make them better. Each individual will be requested to keep track of his/her observations, reflections, actions and results following a check-list/guidelines given during the training. A minimum of 10 hours per month. Participants will given on-going coaching/mentoring support by the trainer/facilitator through out their action-research inquiry.

Partnership Coaching. (structured reflective meetings) Partnership coaching is a reciprocal learning relationship between two headmasters who work together as professionals, equally committed to facilitate each others' learning and professional development. Dialogue is the essence of coaching and the concurrent improvement of practice. Partnership coaching provides a constant source of outside perspective and support. By questioning, coaches encourage partners to critically reflect on their practice and explore their knowledge, skills, experience, attitudes, beliefs and values, but leaving ownership of the reflection to the person. Coaches help to keep their partners focused and moving systematically ahead to achieve goals. This experience can help them acquire skills and practice them with their coaching partner, so that they can themselves coach their own school staff towards the desired change. A minimum of 4 hours per month. Coaching partners will be given on-going support by the trainer/facilitator through out their coaching experience.

Learning community (meetings and regular on-line interactions) serve to connect and network headmasters to learn from their own and others' practice. Head of schools collaborate and engage in face-to-face and on-line dialogues (social network, blogs, skype, etc.) with other headmasters from the Maltese and Italian group to widen their reflections and inquires, while share knowledge and experiences. A blog will be created so that participants could share the action research project and progress, as well as learn from reading others' blogs on action research, problem solving, communication and more. Participants will be able to upload articles, reflections and findings on the blog to share with other members of the blog. A minimum of 4 hours per month. Learning communities will be coordinated and facilitated by the trainer/ facilitator. Moreover, experts in the field will be invited during the learning communities to share their expertise and hands-on experiences in person or using visual skype conference connections.

50 Contact hours: This includes training and coaching/mentoring carried out directly with trainer and invited experts in the field.

70 Self-Study hours: This includes time allotted to reading of suggested material, self-observation, self-reflections, reporting (keeping logbook, reflective book or e-portofolio) and the use of social networks to share experiences and exchange information with other participants.

60 Hands-on hours: This includes observations, reflections, and informed actions carried out individually, with partner coach and in learning community sessions. Suggested reading and case studies will be discussed during face-to-face learning communities sessions which will be facilitated by the trainer. Role-plays will be used during partnership coaching and learning community to practice learned tools and skills.

20 Assessment hours: Following an action research approach, participants will be invited to carry out an *on-going assessment* of their work, which will be shared and discussed with trainer, coaching partner and learning community during the monthly community learning meetings and also on the virtual platform. *Guidelines* will be provided by the trainer to facilitate self-assessment. Following the same check-list, coaching partners will also be able to give an-ongoing evaluation of the change process observed in their respective partner, which will be continuously shared and discussed during the coaching sessions and reported in their log-books.

Three *interviews* will be carried out by the trainer at the beginning, during and end of the training-research experience to each participant, so as to be able to evaluate the change process in the Educational Leaders practice. This will be shared with participants so as to guide them about their strongholds and shortfalls. The change process will be evaluated through a discourse analysis carried out by the trainer on the content of the these three interviews but also of the logbooks of each participant and respective coaches.

Participants are requested to carry out a *30 minute final presentation of their action research* during the final learning communities sessions. This is also an opportunity to expose their communication/public speaking skills and use technological auxiliaries to present their work. Feedback will be given by learning community members and a final assessment will be given by trainer.

APPENDIX 13: CONSENT FOR VIDEOTAPING IN ENGLISH

The undersigned _____, Head of _____ with ID card number _____ agrees to be videotaped during interviews and training/learning community sessions for the purpose of data collection and analysis for the training-research study “*Educational Leaders as Action Researchers: Improving Communication and problem solving competencies*” provided by the DQSE and conducted by Dott.ssa Claudette Potelli.

This will permit the trainer and researcher to tailor-make, as much as possible, the training onto the specific needs, resources and difficulties of each participant, and to carry out a “*discourse analysis*” to evaluate the change process from the beginning till the end of the training-research experience of each participant.

I am aware that I may withdraw this consent at any time without penalty, at which point, the videotape will be erased.

I was informed that if I have any comments or concerns resulting from my participation in this study, I may contact the Dott.ssa Claudette Portelli at claudetteportelli@gmail.com

Signature of Researcher/Trainer

Signature of Participant

Date

APPENDIX 14: CONSENT FOR VIDEOTAPING IN ITALIAN

LIBERATORIA PER LA PUBBLICAZIONE DELLE PROPRIE IMMAGINI

.....
(Località, data)

La sottoscritta / Il sottoscritto(nome e cognome del
soggetto)

via..... Città Prov.

nata / nato a il

..... Codice Fiscale / Partita IVA

..... con la presente AUTORIZZA la pubblicazione delle

proprie immagini riprese dal Sig.(nome società o nome

fotografo / video operatore), il giorno/...../..... dalle ore : alle ore

: nella località di per uso di (concorsi,

pubblicazione su, pubblicità su, Internet, ecc.).

Ne vieta altresì l'uso in contesti che ne pregiudichino la dignità personale ed il decoro.

La posa e l'utilizzo delle immagini sono da considerarsi effettuate in forma gratuita.

(Oppure: per la posa e l'utilizzo delle immagini si è stabilito il pagamento al termine delle riprese di Euro

.....IVA esclusa/inclusa)

Il soggetto ripreso (firma leggibile)

.....

La società/ il ricercatore / il fotografo / il video operatore (firma leggibile)

.....

INFORMATIVA SULLA PRIVACY

Ai sensi dell'art. 13 del D.Lgs 196/2003, i dati personali che la riguardano saranno trattati da..... (nome società' o nome fotografo/video operatore) per lo svolgimento del contratto e non saranno comunicati a terzi. I dati potranno essere utilizzati per informare sulle attività' di..... (nome società' o nome fotografo/video operatore).

In relazione ai dati conferiti Lei potrà esercitare i diritti di cui all'art. 7 del D.Lgs. 196/2003: conferma dell'esistenza dei dati, origine, finalità, aggiornamento, cancellazione, diritto di opposizione. Per esercitare tali diritti dovrà rivolgersi al Responsabile del trattamento dei Dati personali, presso.....

..... (nome società' o nome fotografo/video operatore), via.....,

CAP..... Città'.....

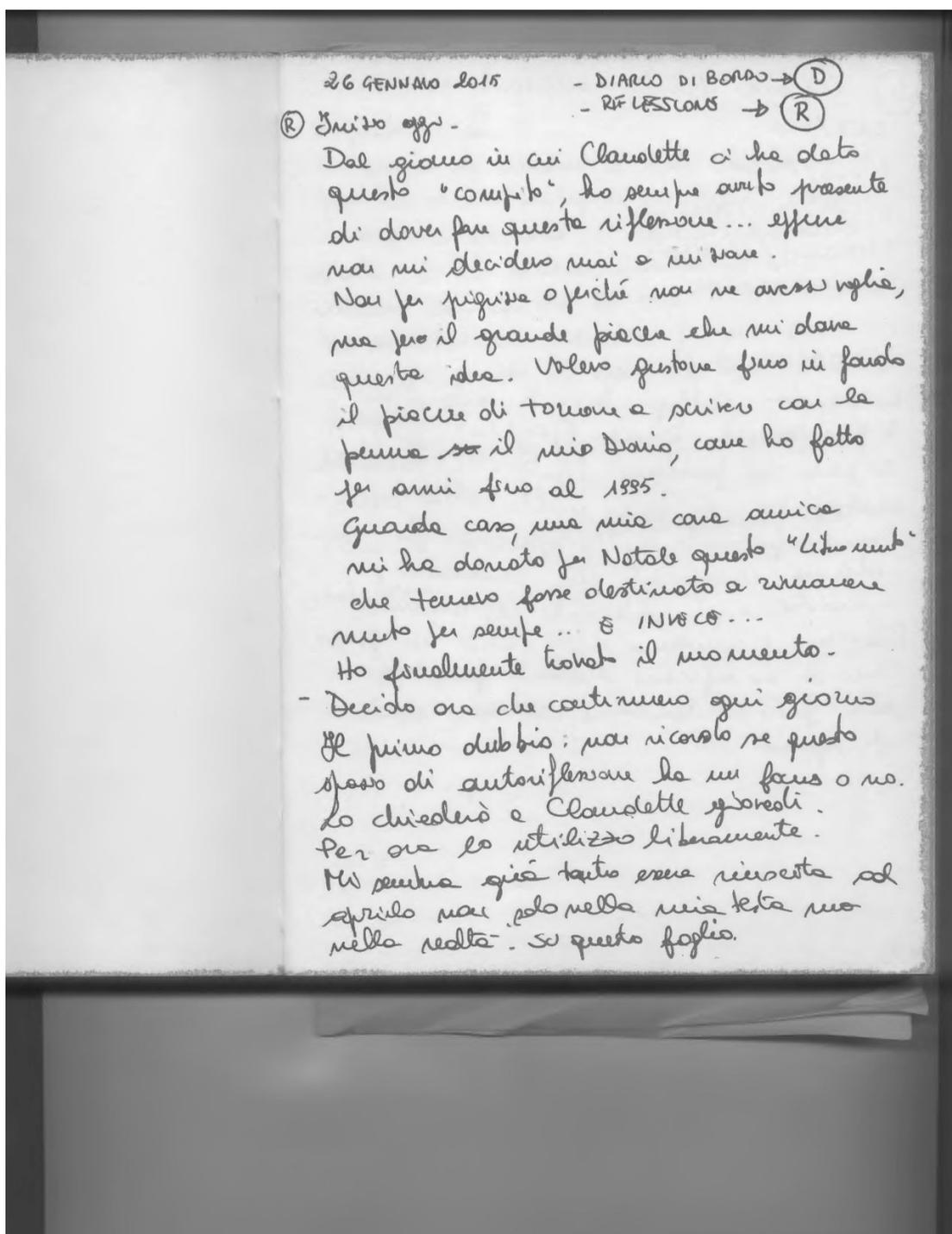
Il titolare del trattamento dei Dati è, via.....,

CAP..... Città'.....

Il soggetto ripreso (firma leggibile)

.....

APPENDIX 15: PAGES FROM FS' REFLECTIVE DIARY



26 GENNAIO 2015

- DIARIO DI BORDO -> (D)

- REFLECTIONS -> (R)

(R) Inizio oggi -

Dal giorno in cui Claudette ci ha dato questo "complotto", ho sempre avuto presente di dover fare questa riflessione... eppure non mi decido mai e mi pare.

Non per pigrizia o perché non ne avessi voglia, ma per il grande piacere che mi dare queste idee. Volevo gestirne fino in fondo il piacere di tornare a scrivere con la penna su il mio diario, come ho fatto per anni fino al 1995.

Quando caso, una mia cara amica mi ha donato per Natale questo "Libro-memo" che tenuto forse destinato a rimanere vuoto per sempre... E INFINITO...

Ho finalmente trovato il momento.

- Decido ora che continuerò ogni giorno il primo dubbio: non ricorro se questo spazio di autoriflessione lo mi fa o no. Lo chiederò a Claudette giovedì. Per ora lo utilizzo liberamente.

Ma sembra già tutto essere riversato ed aprirlo non solo nella mia testa ma nella realtà. Su questo foglio.

APPENDIX 16: EXTRACT FROM FS' POST-TRAINING INTERVIEW

F. posso aggiungere che mi è mancato, nel senso che il training ha, secondo me, degli effetti abbastanza risolutivi rispetto a problematiche macroscopiche, oppure rispetto a qualcosa che non conoscevo. Ora le so e le saprò per sempre. Credo! Però necessita anche di un esercizio e di un accompagnamento da parte del trainer, per cui credo che mi avrebbe aiutato poter continuare un po', quindi, questo posso aggiungere. Che però gli effetti siano definitivi questo lo posso confermare, anche alla soluzione che avevo adottato rispetto alla problematica scritta anche nel diario, con una mia dipendente che rispondeva al copione della vittima, rispetto alla mia assolutizzazione dell'empatia, dell'essere empatica sempre e comunque, è stato risolutivo. Non so se l'avevo detto nella precedente registrazione ma io lo ripeto.

C. Sì sì!

F. Il fatto di aver assunto un atteggiamento, in un'occasione particolare, insomma, di aver affrontato un problema con un atteggiamento comunicativo lineare, non più circolare come io facevo sempre e comunque in qualsiasi situazione assolutizzando questa necessità di circolarità, di empatia, eccetera. Una volta avendo agito in maniera lineare e abbastanza brusca, comunque di interruzione di un circolo vizioso, è stato risolutivo. Io questa cosa l'ho adottata a febbraio forse, gennaio febbraio.

C. Sì, ero a Bucarest, ricordo, devo guardare nel diario.

F. Era inverno

C. Era inverno o prima, non è che era dopo Natale? Perché io sono andata due volte.

F. Dopo Natale sicuramente, il 3 febbraio

C. te lo dico, era o il 5 o il 6 febbraio perché io ero a Bucarest

F. il problema si era presentato prima di Natale quando un dipendente era mancato dall'ufficio, e poi pur mancando ha continuato ad affiancarci scatenando la gelosia di un'altra, vittima, la quale, insomma, mi accusava di non aver saputo gestire. Ma questa mancata buona gestione era perché io non ascoltavo le sue lamentele, a quel punto mi sono posta in maniera lineare e ancora oggi ho i benefici di questo cambiamento, perché si è visto che io non sono sempre empatica, non sempre assecondo, eccetera, eccetera. E ancora oggi, devo dire, non si è ripetuta una situazione simile. Sicuramente, non sarà cambiato il copione, non sarà cambiata la percezione, però, è cambiata la percezione di me

C. esatto! La percezione di te ma anche l'interazione, perché adesso ha capito che da buon leader sai essere empatica, circolare, ma quando necessita, sai essere lineare e stoppare un comportamento che non...

F. E questo ha avuto un effetto sia rispetto a questa persona ma anche alle altre, perché anche gli altri hanno visto che io non vado ad assecondare atteggiamenti vittimistici o comunque anche petulante, di ritornare sempre sempre sulle stesse cose e quindi si è alleggerito un po' il clima. Ripeto, non credo di aver risolto il problema della persona, perché quello se la deve vedere lei

C. è suo!

F. Però il clima È molto più alleggerito e..

C. si lavora meglio

F. ...si lavora mente

C. perciò c'è stato

F. Più subito ti ricordi dissi <<non so quanto durerà, non so la prossima occasione>> ma non c'è stato bisogno perché ho lasciato un messaggio netto è chiaro. È molto migliorato il clima. Sicuramente! Questo, però aver bisogno di un rinfrescare, anche il gruppo, noi ci sentiamo sempre su WhatsApp con le altre, però, mi manca anche un po' il gruppo.

C. Perché c'è un momento di condivisione, di incontro, dove si ferma tutto e ci si concentra nell'applicare quello, insieme poi

F. ti nominiamo spesso quando qualcuna di noi cade, soprattutto con S. che è la mia partner, nell'ansia, allora, c'è M. che <<ricorda quello che diceva C.>>, insomma... Poi l'altro punto è quello della scrittura: ho abbandonato!

C. Ok, come mai?

F. Guarda c'è stato un periodo per noi dirigenti della scuola italiana. Siamo sotto pressione, tu senti anche colleghi di tutta Italia. Ecco! E niente, ha prevalso il fare sul riflettere.

C. Ok, ma questo che significa, che in un certo senso riesci a gestire senza il bisogno di scrivere o pensi che se scrivevi potevi gestire un po' meglio?

F. Meglio sì! Sicuramente

C. ok ok

F. penso, un fatto di volontà

C. ok ok perciò diciamo...

F. perché c'è sempre qualcosa che è più urgente: non far mancare la posta, non ho risposto a quello, non ho visto quel messaggio, non ho..., perché in effetti le cose..., ci sono stati gli esami di mezzo, la faccenda del bonus, ho avuto quel problema con quei due genitori, ricordi?

C. ricordamelo

F. che avevo organizzato un album con i genitori, in cui...

C. quelli della Juventus

F. esatto. poi quella storia ha avuto una conclusione

C. come è andata?

F. io ho avuto la classe tempo prolungato

C. Bravissima!

F. tre di loro però si sono trasferiti un'altra scuola.

C. ok ok

F. me ne sono fatta una ragione

C. ok

F. avremo una classe meno numerosa, più tranquilla. Quelli che l'avevano vissuta proprio come una gara quando hanno avuto la certezza di averla persa. Cioè loro l'hanno vissuta come una sconfitta, se ne sono andati.

C. Era tipo un non accettare la sconfitta perciò....

F. sono tornati da me ma questa volta sono tornati in quattro, non tutta la classe. Ah, Nel frattempo ci sono pure i volti ad un avvocato. Non so se era già successo?

C. No no

F. questo avvocato mi ha telefonato per sapere se ancora... gli ho detto << scusi ma io per telefono non so neanche lei chi sia, se è un avvocato...>>

C. Si presenta

F. <<...sa che io certe informazioni non le posso ...“no ma sa, proprio per evitare di scrivere...”, mi scriva, non si preoccupi, mi scriva>>. Mi è arrivato la lettera, praticamente due genitori stranieri, quelli che più avevano bisogno del tempo prolungato si sono visti recapitare una cosa, gli hanno detto <<firma qua>>, loro hanno firmato senza sapere quello che c'era scritto. Ho la certezza di questo. Quindi sono stati gli altri che hanno utilizzato..,

C. questi due

F. ... loro. Quindi ho risposto dicendo: prendo atto ma non è che io alla fine di maggio posso (Questo è successo alla fine di maggio) cambiare le scelte fatte. E poi ho avuto l'appoggio incondizionato dell'Ufficio Scolastico Provinciale, il quale mi ha detto: <<scelga lei, che cosa vuoi fare?>>...

C. Ottimo, ottimo

APPENDIX 17: SPECIMEN REFLECTIVE TASK

MVE on RESISTANCES TO CHANGE

Where appropriate, give an analogical answer (brief description) and a digital answer (from 0-10, 0 being the least, while 10 is the most) to the question

How did you feel carrying out the exercise of the anthropologist?

It is a most useful exercise and one which as educational leader I must find the time to do. The awareness of how other people react (and perhaps why) is necessary if the leader wants to bring others on board. I noticed that even very familiar people need to be observed and that assumptions made especially on the spur of the moment because of the hectic day at school can be very misleading.

RATING: 8

How difficult was it to identify the type of resistance in the different stakeholders?

I needed to carefully read and understand the differences first: this was more difficult than actually identifying them in the people I work with. On the whole, I think I do know the people around me, as I do make it a priority to try to understand others. This helped me to identify resistance better. Furthermore, I have been around at the school for a very long time now, and past experiences also help. There always will be a few surprises however, as at times, people can be unpredictable and react in ways you do not expect them to.

RATING: 8

How did you regard resistances before the training?

I never gave them much thought, to be honest. Being a leader in a primary school is very different to being one in a secondary school: the students and staff are not usually as hostile and resistances are not a major issue, really. (Even parents tend to be cooperative in the main.) Furthermore, because I am involved in the hiring and firing of staff and in their induction and mentoring programme, there is a certain bond and loyalty.

RATING: 5

How do you regard resistances now?

I certainly appreciate the training, as I think I can see things more clearly now. I learnt a lot about myself too, that I am not particularly preoccupied about having people resisting what I say or do. This, please note, is not necessarily a good thing. Rather, it can be very dangerous if there is an important issue at hand, or a crisis. I never consciously developed my skills at persuasion and this perhaps has left me somewhat 'puerile' and not forceful enough. I think it has much to do with the fact that Brother Director is a very strong and dominant personality and many of the decisions are his not mine. But times are changing and I am very conscious of the skills I need when facing resistance, which is, ultimately, an integral part of leadership.

RATING: 9

Do you think you can identify them better now?

Yes. The value of this training is that it is skill-based, and before you know it, you would be looking out for traits and characteristics in all the situations you find yourself in. The way of identifying characteristics also becomes quite automatic.

RATING: 8

And do you think you manage them better now?

This is somewhat trickier and I think it needs more time and practice. However, even knowing there is a way to handle particular resistances is useful as it automatically makes me perceive the situation as manageable.

RATING: 6

Taking the 4 levels of competencies where would place yourself:

Before the training?

Before the training I can't say I made mess of things, but I usually dealt with resistance instinctively (or rather in a way I chose which was not too bad but I never knew why I did it). This caused unnecessary stress and it was not very scientific so it had a miss-or-hit angle that was rather amateurish. I picked up a lot of skills both consciously and unconsciously along the years: now the training is rationalizing most of it as well as deepening my knowledge, and explain WHY things work and other don't.

RATING: Somewhere between 2nd and 3rd stage.

Now?

RATING: Somewhere between the 3rd and the 4th stage

From 0-10 how much have these helped you better your competencies regarding resistances:

-training session *RATING: 8*

-reading material *RATING: 8*

-partnership coaching *RATING: 7*

-learning community (group discussion) *RATING: 10*

-applying them to your practice (learning by doing) *RATING: 8*

