School–based self-evaluation: an introductory study in a Maltese Church School

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Abstract:

Educational systems are constantly subjected to changes on many fronts. School self-evaluation has become recognized as a way of improving the quality of educational provision and simultaneously making schools responsible and accountable to various stakeholders. This paper seeks to present and analyse the implementation of a school self-evaluation process and its effect on the performance of a Maltese Church school. A case study approach supported by questionnaire surveys and a review of school documents were undertaken to establish whether school self-evaluation brought about the desired improvement and initiated a change process within the school. The main results show that whilst the students are performing well academically the school building and timetable constraints are affecting curriculum implementation and students' potential to achieve more. Whilst there is a committed teaching staff, collaborative initiatives are still in their initial phase. Communication with parents needs to be improved and the area of differentiation and addressing the individual needs of students is also identified as an area needing immediate attention.

Overall, this case study has gone a long way to show the educators at the school site the internal potential of a self-evaluation process as it helps them to appreciate their own strengths and weaknesses and providing feedback from varied stakeholders about how they perceive things and what can be done to bring about improvements.

Introduction

In recent years educational systems throughout Europe and in other parts of the world have seen great changes on many fronts. Among the most significant is the process of decentralisation. In this context a self-evaluation culture in which only the best will do has never been greater in schools until now. This has been putting pressure on educational organizations to improve and develop, identify good practices, turn problems into opportunities and leaves an impact on what goes on in schools, in particular raise students' achievements. Both globally and locally there is recognition that both self-evaluation and external evaluation have complementary roles to play in improving the quality of students' learning (Eurydice, 2004).

Research Rationale and Aims

This case study at St. Madeleine School [1] has a practical purpose: that of enquiring into the performance of the school by adopting a broad view of six of the seven key areas that constitute the organization of a school (cf. *Knowing Our Schools*, Department of Operations, 2004) through a self-evaluating process involving the school's stakeholders (i.e. teaching staff, students and parents). Data from various sources such as school leavers Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) results and tracer reports were also consulted. Through this approach it was hoped to gain

detailed information that would help in the formulation of the school development plan and preparation for an external audit.

The Research Questions

The following questions were central to this study:

1. What are the perceived benefits accruing from school self-evaluation (SSE) at St.Madeleine School?
2. Will SSE initiate organizational changes at St.Madeleine School?
3. To what extent will SSE encourage more participation between all stakeholders to promote school improvement?
4. In what ways can SSE provide the platform for the students' voice to be heard?
5. To what extent will SSE have an impact on the quality of learning and teaching and the achievement of students?
6. Will SSE enhance the level of commitment to teacher development and professional growth to meet the school's specific needs?

7. Can SSE be potentially threatening to the teaching staff?
8. Will SSE be perceived as an added burden on school life?

Fullan (1991) stresses that school improvement and development work best when there is the optimum blend of the following three factors:

- o Support and pressure
- o Bottom-up and top-down change
- o Internal and external evaluation

Blending the above three factors determines whether schools will grow and flourish or stagnate and decline. This blend will differ from area to area and from school to school due to the school's norms, tradition, history and culture. Various studies have shown that school improvement works best when there is more support than pressure on schools (e.g. Harris and Lambert, 2003).

Furthermore, within the school context teachers work collaboratively and engage in positive dialogue about teaching when they are encouraged and supported (Heller, 1993, p. 96).

The move to enhance school autonomy through devolved financial management, increased parental and community involvement in school governance, more teacher accountability, is putting considerable pressure on schools. Hargreaves and Hopkins (1994) argue that this needs to be counteracted. A well planned school evaluation process would help to create an appropriate climate that would help the school community to address both internal and external demands and pressures. A systematic and holistic school approach to planning is necessary if development planning is to enhance morale, improve communication, nurture a culture of collegiality and participation from all stakeholders.

Self-evaluation processes within the National Context

The concept of self-evaluation in conjunction with the school development planning process in Maltese State Schools started evolving in 1997 when Assistant Directors shadowed HM Inspectors at the Scottish Office in Edinburgh. Towards the end of 2000, the Maltese National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) took effect by law. This was a landmark event in the educational, political and cultural world of Malta. The vision of the new NMC shows a move towards greater decentralization to the site with each school becoming more involved in curriculum development and management. Besides, the NMC calls for radical changes in the whole culture of philosophical and pedagogical practices towards collegiality and collaboration among all stakeholders. In the first week of June 2004 Assistant Directors and Education Officers participated in a seminar entitled *Knowing our Schools Better,* a Senior Staff development exercise relating to the introduction of school audits. 'A major objective of the Education Division is to introduce a structure of external evaluation of Maltese schools for quality assurance purposes' (Address by Permanent Secretary 2004). The manual *Knowing our Schools* issued by the Department of Operations was launched and presented to the participants.

School Context

St.Madeleine School is a Catholic Secondary Church School open only to girls coming from all over the island and from all walks of society. The student population of approximately 250 aged 11-16 of mixed ability, comprises classes of approximately 25 girls in each class. Most of the students attending secondary education within the school are a product of the primary school of the same organization. The all female staff is made up of a religious Head, a lay Assistant Head, a shared lay school counsellor, 22 teachers (one religious), one full-time secretary, one full-time and a part-time caretaker and a part-time handyman. As yet, no male teachers have been recruited to teach at the school. All Church School staff salaries are State funded.

Self-evaluation processes in the school

Research evidence indicates that except for a couple of meetings on the School's Mission statement prior to 1999, there are no records of SSE processes in the school. However, since then one of the authors who served there as deputy head was instrumental in initiating various initiatives that were instrumental in creating the necessary climate for the eventual introduction of a self-evaluation process.

Activities included school-based practices that allowed teachers to start meeting in teams to discuss various school matters; seminars on topical issues such as school development planning, assessment practices and curriculum development.

A brief review of the literature

Change is now accepted as a constant feature in our lives. Even though we may be working in an environment that encourages greater devolution of authority (and

responsibility) to the school site external pressures for change are still the rule of the day. As Fullan (1993, p. vii) argues:

> *Change is ubiquitous and relentless, forcing itself on us at every turn. At the same time, the secret of growth and development is learning how to contend with the forces of changes – turning positive forces to our advantage, while blunting negative ones. The future of the world is a learning future.*

Being able to reflect on experiences, analyse and evaluate periodically the effectiveness of one's practices is an invaluable tool for any human being and any organization. Literature emanating from policy bodies perceive the individual school as the unique primary unit whereby whole school and particularly student improvement is inculcated.

School Self-Evaluation (SSE)

Educationists in the late eighties and early nineties quickly sought to explore the concepts and concerns of 'quality' within the educational environment. 'Quality' in education became the key motivator for the introduction of bodies such as OFSTED in the UK. OFSTED has now become the custodians of 'quality' in schools. Other quality assurance mechanisms include Investors in People, ISO 9000, Charter Mark, and The European Business Excellence Model. Added to these there is increasing pressure among stakeholders for more accountability in the running of the educational organizations in their country (Boyd, 1999).

Purpose of SSE

The process of educational decentralization is genuinely seen as an attempt to make schools become largely self-directing. Goodlad (1984), in a study of school effectiveness, stressed that changes must be school based, and Lezotte (1989) through his research also demonstrated that the top-down approach to changes did not work. Externally driven changes run the risk of improvements that are only cosmetic. This may reflect the limited success achieved by central authorities in achieving sustainable improvements in teaching and learning without the support of both schools and local stakeholders.

Within the international arena the Lisbon Council in March 2000 has set specific targets on the member states within the EU including that of making Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. This is pushing countries to analyse the education system on the basis of measurable outcomes. At the state level, the concern of ministries of education to show that the money invested in education is being spent wisely is increasingly holding schools accountable for the delivery of quality education for all pupils.

In quest of School Improvement

Within these changing scenarios where now even the progress made by member states of the EU will be assessed, schools therefore can make a difference primarily by involving themselves in a continuous assessment of their achievements particularly:
- In their management of teaching and learning (NREL, 2000),

- The professional development of teaching staff (Harris, 2004),
- Strengthening the culture in and around the school (DfES, 2005).

Each school needs to take responsibility for its improvement and/or change efforts for substantial progress to take place (Fullan, 1993, p. 46). This in itself is claiming a series of management changes that schools are being driven to address.

SSE Models

In some countries (e.g. the Danish folkeskole), the underlying process applied by schools to identify their strengths and weaknesses is not prescribed (Taylor, 2002). Schools are free to follow any model which gives them the best insights into their improvement priorities. On the other hand, in other in countries, regardless of model used, some elements of practice will be common to self-evaluation in all schools (DfES, 2005). Other projects and comparisons of SSE systems have been reported and discussed by various researchers (e.g. Barzano, 2002; Devos & Verhoeven, 2003; MacBeath, 2005; Shan Wong, 2004).

The benefits and tensions behind SSE

 It was reported during the ADEA Biennial Meeting (Dec. 2003) that various research studies by Davis and Rudd (2000), MacBeath (1999) and Nevo (1995) suggest that:
- SSE can bring about a change in the culture of a school providing a forum for greater participation for all stakeholders concerned with the quality and improvement of the school.
- Self-evaluating schools can develop their own agenda, enabling staff to focus on areas for improvement of relevance to their own context. This helps to promote ownership of the process. In the local context, the initial impetus for self-evaluation is generated by the head, or an entrusted representative. However, it should be possible through support and training, to encourage the school community to become more involved in strategic planning and self-evaluation programmes and activities.
- Teachers' professional development can benefit from a school's commitment to self-evaluation, particularly in an institution that lacks a tradition of collaborative planning and evaluation (McNamara, O'Hara, Aingleis, 2002). Staff is encouraged to share expertise with colleagues and to initiate development opportunities within their own school. Back in the 1980s Bezzina was already indicating the way forward, and expressed caution - (1988, p.34) 'But I would maintain that most schools are unlikely to become more effective unless they move towards a culture of collaboration' (1988, p.34). School development planning with a commitment to collegiality and shared decision making can lead to a culture of continuous self-renewal and progress.

- SSE can provide a mechanism with which school leaders can learn about their school and initiate organizational change.
- SSE can be used to encourage community involvement. Community and business leaders can provide useful feedback and support the agenda for change.
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In many countries principals have said that they have benefited from having the support of a critical friend whether a local education officer/advisor or a fellow practitioner (MacBeath, 2005). A knowledgeable critical friend, who is external to the school, can help to identify areas for development and where necessary ask challenging questions.

Commercially available self-evaluation packages, or those developed by local/national education authorities can provide information on a range of 'tools and techniques' for implementing evaluation activities. These may take the form of questionnaires, observation checklists and forms for recording data. They are useful in that they avoid the need for a school to 'reinvent the wheel', however it is important to remember that almost all programs and activities will need to be adapted to meet the specific needs of individual schools.

The research also brought to light the inevitable tensions that accompanied the initial implementation of school evaluation in the UK and other countries. Amongst these were:

- The purpose of SSE and issues relating to accountability and quality control and their effect on the implementation of the process.
- The lack of reliable and extensive educational data.
- The experience within schools about target setting.
- The identification of performance indicators.
- Dealing with the unknown.
- The level of support required in order to provide staff with the capacity to undertake a systematic evaluation process and develop feasible action plans.

David Nevo (1995) points out that in the initial stages of implementation, SSE is usually undertaken by 'amateurs', teachers, and in many cases, principals who lack experience and training in the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. A recent report (SICI, 2005) highlights the most significant barriers for SSE to be successful:

- Poor leadership
- Lack of shared professional language
- Lack of motivation
- No implementation process
- A negative view to learning
- No clear view as to what is in it for teachers and pupils
- Fear among teachers of losing professional autonomy, and
- Fear of sharing ideas and practices.

On the other hand, the same report identifies a number of common themes which emerged in schools with very effective self-evaluation procedures. These included:

- Strong leadership

- School aims which were shared and clearly understood by all key shareholders
- Engagement of key stakeholders in self-evaluation and improvement activities
- Well set out and clearly communicated policies and guidelines
- Self-evaluation activities that focused on learning, teaching and improving outcomes
- Strong staff commitment to self-evaluation
- Monitoring and evaluation processes that were systematic, rigorous and robust
- Well planned action to develop and improve provision
- A beneficial balance between external support and challenge from local authorities and/or Inspectorates and internal quality assurance
- A generally strong infrastructure of national or local support for self-evaluation as a process.

Data-Driven Evaluation for School Improvement

Educators are accustomed to viewing data as something to report to somebody else, not as information useful for guiding their own efforts and improvement. Information collected by schools include attendance, grades, courses taken, school completion and drop outs. Usually it is stored in administrative records/ files and often not regarded as important for school improvement purposes. At the same time educators at school receive little or no training in interpreting and using such data (Hoachlander, Levesque & Mandel, 1998).

On the other hand, schools have long been the subject of evaluation by external bodies (e.g. Education Authorities). Whilst outside experts are evaluating schools, evaluation is not done by schools as part of an ongoing process of self-reflection, analyses and development (MacBeath, 1998/9). SREB (2001) recommends that what is needed is basic 'data literacy' by teachers, heads and other school members in order to start:

- Making informed first impressions from information on school performance
- Analysing performance indicators
- Connecting these quantitative inferences to understandings based on their qualitative experience, personal judgement and professional expertise.

Although this kind of participatory self-evaluation probably will lack the rigour and conclusiveness of an external evaluation by experts, it will have greater relevance, specificity and timeliness. Researchers (e.g. Harris & Bennett, 2001; Harris & Lambert 2003) are of the opinion that as long as the findings are consistent with the results of more stringent research or with the expectation of accepted theory and practice, school-based evaluation and assessment can play an important role in sustaining continuous improvement.

Much more work needs to be put into finding the best way to develop data literacy and self-evaluation in schools. Levesque, Bradby, Rossi, & Teitelbaum (1998) offer one practical guide for using data to improve practice, but such initiatives need more than just strategies for implementation and design. Schagen (2004), on the other hand,

challenges the supposition that school data on the pupils' performance necessarily leads to improvements. Several points are outlined:

- The mechanism depends on all its stages working effectively, otherwise it will fail.
- Feedback needs to be based on 'value-added' data i.e. comparing like with like, clear and accessible to all staff.
- The use of such data is key to staff development.
- Time is a serious issue.
- Everything is based on past performance, and the assumption that there are underlying mechanisms which gave rise to that performance, are stable in the medium term, but can be changed to bring about improvements in the future.

Schagen (2004) concludes that if feedback can raise attainment it is surely worth looking for evidence of its effects in this kind of way. Otherwise there is no real point in collecting data, developing complex models and providing detailed feedback if it all results in no change in performance.

School improvement

The dilemmatic relationship between school improvement or development and accountability as the dual-purposes of SSE has been discussed since the 1980s (e.g. Nuttall, 1981; Clift, Nuttall and McCormick, 1987). Slowly but surely, SSE became a vital component in education systems worldwide. However, whilst some saw school-based evaluation as a necessary component of school development in general (e.g. Canaven, 2004) others saw it as part of a wider process involving both internal and external evaluation, with the latter being considered as the main driving force in terms of the evaluation of school and student performance (Davies & Rudd, 2000).

Several years on, however, it is apparent that the processes and frameworks used as a basis for inspection have been modified so as to take greater account of a growing drive for internal self-evaluation, arising from the desire of schools and teachers to assess for themselves how well they are doing. For example, in the U.K. by 1996, a new inspection framework was introduced which gave greater emphasis to a school's own evaluation ('self-inspection') of its strengths and weaknesses (Ferguson, Earley, Fidler, Ouston, 2000). OFSTED now views external inspection and self-evaluation as complementary activities (1999a, 1999b).

However it is reported that there are still some tensions between the (external) requirement for inspection and (internal) school-based desires for self-evaluation and improvement. Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and a number of schools in fact have made use of frameworks other than that supplied by OFSTED, including quality assurance standards, such as TQM, British Standards indicator BS5750, Investors in People and school driven frameworks such as those suggested by MacBeath (1999).

Typically, schools or LEAs make use of a combination of elements of the OFSTED framework (including relevant checklists from the OFSTED Handbooks) and customized LEA produced evaluation tools or elements from other frameworks (Rudd & Davies, 2000). The debate about the current inspection system with the possibility

of alternatives that may do more to promote school improvement is still open (DfES, 2005). The complete replacement of OFSTED with a system based purely on self-evaluation is hardly argued upon (Ferguson, Earley, Fidler, & Ouston 2000; Mallard, 2000).

In some European countries, teachers are central to an external evaluation, this applies to the French and German speaking communities of Belgium, Greece and Bulgaria and France and Luxembourg (solely at primary education). Internal evaluation of schools in these countries is still not very widespread (Eurydice, 2004).

In the Nordic countries, with the exception of Iceland, the municipalities, as the authorities responsible for providing education, are at the heart of evaluation. Evaluation here is generally carried out by national agencies. In most cases, teachers are not evaluated individually but the results of pupil assessment are used to evaluate the system (Eurydice, 2004).

In the early nineties, Malta's public education started to shed its centralised character and introduce aspects of school self-management. In scholastic year 1997/8 each secondary state school had to produce its first School Development Plan. This became mandatory for all schools in Malta and Gozo after the new National Minimum Curriculum took effect by law towards the end of 2000 (Ministry of Education, 2001).

Internal evaluation is very slowly becoming the norm. It also seems to have become an increasingly essential stage in the process of quality improvement. In line with other countries, the results of internal evaluation will be used at the start of external evaluation. While the present culture in Malta is not hostile to the idea of external audit, it is not exactly fully tuned to it and quite a substantial shift will be required before external audit becomes an integral part of the whole monitoring process (Borg & Vella, 2001). And, as one of the authors has argued (see Bezzina, 2005, 2006), it is essential that the education authorities provide the necessary support and time to allow schools to develop the internal capacity necessary for school self-evaluation to start taking place before introducing a system of external audits. Within a context of internal evaluation schools will embrace external evaluation as another opportunity to look at practices from an external perspective.

The literature, although by no means exhaustive, has tried to discuss issues pertinent to the topic under review. The process of school improvement through SSE has no universals for success. The learning school is always challenging itself.
This brief review has helped us to appreciate the centrality of purposeful leadership within school effectiveness with a move towards a devolved and shared approach to leadership within the school. There is the need to value people as individuals, creating a climate that encourages trust and respect as teachers collaborate and work together. Empowering teachers in this way and providing them with opportunities to lead is based on the simple but profound idea that if schools are to become better at providing learning for students, then they must also become better at providing opportunities for teachers to innovate, develop and learn together. Within such a context there is a concerted effort and focus on learning outcomes both in relation to teachers' professional development and improved teaching and learning for students. It is within this context that this study has been conducted.

Methodological approach

Aims and Objectives

The present research in school self-evaluation has a number of aims and objectives. The main aim of this study is to enquire into this particular school's performance in various key areas as perceived by staff, pupils and parents and be "illuminative" (Parlett & Hamilton, 1977). A second aim is to prepare the school for an external review.

In this respect, the study per se is meant to be introductory in nature. It aims to help sensitise teachers, students and parents to issues which are pertinent to all, and essential to improvements in all aspects. It helps the different stakeholders to come together (in the next phase) to review and assess the findings of this work within a collaborative setting.

Having given due consideration to the different methodologies available and the instruments best suited for this case study it was decided to utilize a multiple research design combining both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Data collation through this methodology included:
- Questionnaire surveys distributed to a random sample of students and their parents.
- Organisational Health Check for all teachers.
- Investigation of school and national academic results and tracer study reports over the last five years.
- Evaluation of all subjects taught in Form V and results obtained and compared with national results, covering the last five years.

All this took place within a 'case study' context. The case study has been presented as "the prime strategy for developing educational theory policy and enhances educational practice" (Bassey, 1999, p.3). The case study approach adopted at St Madeleine School is best described as an evaluative case study. Table 1 describes how the local study was conducted within the framework presented by Bassey (1999).

Bassey (1999)	Case study
Conducted within a localized boundary of space and time	Conducted within St Madeleine School from 2000 – 2004
Into interesting aspects of an educational activity, or programme, or institution or system	Researching the school's performance against the national performance and expected benchmarks
Mainly in its natural context and within an ethic of respect for persons	As a participant researcher in the school. Colleagues contributed to the study

In order to inform the judgements and decisions of practitioners or policy-makers	In order to offer possibilities as regards information for the school leadership and staff to improve on present performance and applicability of the benchmarks set by the education authorities

Table 1

Documents and archival records, although not easily and readily available, were gathered, sorted and cross-checked with others sources. After due consideration, it was decided that the teaching staff would be administered the checklists prescribed by the education authorities, whereas students and parents were handed different questionnaires. The questionnaires were pilot tested with a group of students (school leavers) and their parents. Tests carried out on the pilot questionnaires included a reliability assessment using SPSS Version 10 for Windows. Using Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Factor a reliability of .639 was achieved. This indicated a moderately reliable scale factor and for the purposes of this research presented a good basis on which the survey could be formulated.

Discussion

For this paper it was decided to present the salient findings of one of the school improvement indicators explored in this study, that of ethos. It presents a review of the findings as perceived by students, their parents and teachers in relation to this area.

As can be seen from Figures I and II, the responses are very positive. The majority of students (88.8%) are very happy at the school and are 'proud' to belong to it (87.8%). The school is seen as 'safe and secure' (95%), 'welcoming and reassuring' (89.8%) and 'pleasant' (84.7%) to be in. This positive response is reinforced by the fact that most girls feel 'respected by their friends' (91%) and that discipline is maintained within a caring environment (86.7%).

At the same time a number of responses warrant attention. Whilst the girls speak highly of the overall atmosphere within the school a number of concerns have been raised. One deals with discipline. Whilst the majority feel that discipline is good, 18.4 percent of the girls feel that not all girls behave well. Similarly, a significant 36.7 percent feel that not all the staff at the school treat them 'fairly and with respect'. Looking at the raw data this is significant in the responses given by students in the upper forms.

The majority of students (72.5%) feel that the school is interested in the views held by students. At the same time, 27.5 percent are not of that opinion. Again, most of the negative responses come from girls in the upper forms. Interesting to note the comments made by students stating that whilst they were aware of the students' code of behaviour they do not agree with all or many of the aspects within the code. Such comments, together with other responses raise concern about the desire and need for greater co-operation between students and teachers. Similarly, it is important to link responses in this domain with other responses given by students in other domains. One also needs to see whether parents and teachers express and share similar views.

The overall perception of parents in this area is overwhelmingly positive (see Figure II). The majority of parents (94%) feel that their daughters are happy at the school and are proud to belong to it (91.3%). Like their daughters the parents describe the school as 'safe and secure' (96%), 'welcoming and reassuring' (90%) and 'pleasant' (81.5%).

Whilst the majority of parents (92%) feel that students in the school generally behave well, 26 per cent feel that not all the staff treat their daughters fairly and with respect. One area which the respondents feel needs to be addressed relates to school – parent relationships. Whilst 95 per cent agree that they are well informed of school events, 56 per cent are of the opinion that the school does not organize enough activities for parents. Similarly, 22.2 per cent feel that their views are not sought by the school authorities.

Teachers' opinions were also sought. Teachers were not asked to respond to a questionnaire. However, initial discussions with teachers did express their trepidation and anxiety in being involved in such an exercise. One teacher summed the general feeling of practically all teachers: 'At the start, like many others, I felt that we would be on the receiving end.' However, as another teacher responded at a later stage: 'Initially, to be honest, I wasn't quite keen about it. I really saw it as another exercise to increase our work. Then, as I was asked pertinent questions about school life, then I said well, this may be useful after all.'

Teachers feel that there is a strong sense of belonging and the general atmosphere provides re-assurance, although they also feel that there is room for improvement. The teaching staff believe that the school building is relatively safe and the extension under construction will provide a much needed space for sports and recreational activities.

Student's Response ETHOS	Total Responses All Forms				%Total Responses All Forms			
	S	A	D	SD	S	A	D	SD
This is a good school to be at	30	62	5	1	30.61%	63.27%	5.10%	1.02%
The school is welcoming and reassuring	26	62	9	1	26.53%	63.27%	9.18%	1.02%
I feel safe and secure at school	32	61	4	1	32.65%	62.24%	4.08%	1.02%
The school is interested in the views of its pupils	19	52	25	2	19.39%	53.06%	25.51%	2.04%
All the staff at school treats all students fairly and with respect	15	47	26	10	15.31%	47.96%	26.53%	10.20%
I am happy in the school	29	58	9	2	29.59%	59.18%	9.18%	2.04%
The school is pleasant, safe and stimulating	18	65	13	2	18.37%	66.33%	13.27%	2.04%
I am respected by my friends at school	46	43	7	2	46.94%	43.88%	7.14%	2.04%
Students in this school genarally behave well	22	58	16	2	22.45%	59.18%	16.33%	2.04%
I am proud to be a member in this school	30	56	9	1	30.61%	57.14%	9.18%	1.02%
I am clear about the student code of rules	34	56	6	2	34.69%	57.14%	6.12%	2.04%
There is a caring but firm discipline in the school	36	49	9	3	36.73%	50.00%	9.18%	3.06%
The school involves agencies eg SEDQA & CARITAS in giving me a better education	18	54	20	4	18.37%	55.10%	20.41%	4.08%
The school informs my parents about my achievements in HW, Tests and Exams	38	51	8	1	38.78%	52.04%	8.16%	1.02%

Figure I

Parent's Response ETHOS	Total Responses All Forms				%Total Responses All Forms			
	S	A	D	SD	S	A	D	SD
This is a good school to be at	29	47	5	0	35.80%	58.02%	6.17%	0.00%
The school is welcoming and reassuring	30	43	8	0	37.04%	53.09%	9.88%	0.00%
My daughter feels safe and secure at school	48	30	3	0	59.26%	37.04%	3.70%	0.00%
The school encourages parents to give their views, suggestions and concerns on school matters	17	46	15	3	20.99%	56.79%	18.52%	3.70%
Staff treats all students fairly and with respect	22	38	17	4	27.16%	46.91%	20.99%	4.94%
My daughter is happy in the school	23	53	4	1	28.40%	65.43%	4.94%	1.23%
The school is pleasant and stimulating	18	48	12	3	22.22%	59.26%	14.81%	3.70%
My daughter is respected by her friends at school	45	31	5	0	55.56%	38.27%	6.17%	0.00%
Students in this school genarally behave well	19	54	6	1	23.46%	66.67%	7.41%	1.23%
I am proud my daughter attends this school	45	32	4	0	55.56%	39.51%	4.94%	0.00%
As a parent I am clear about the school rules	50	30	1	0	61.73%	37.04%	1.23%	0.00%
Discipline in the school is caring but firm	43	35	3	0	53.09%	43.21%	3.70%	0.00%
The school organises enough parents' activities	8	27	36	10	9.88%	33.33%	44.44%	12.35%
I am well informed about my daughter's achievements in HW, Tests and Exams	43	30	7	1	53.09%	37.04%	8.64%	1.23%
I am well informed of the school's events through circulars	46	32	3	0	56.79%	39.51%	3.70%	0.00%
The arrangements for my daughter to settle in when she started at the school were good	32	44	3	1	39.51%	54.32%	3.70%	1.23%

Figure II

Teachers, however, also express similar feelings as parents and students on a number of matters. They express concern as to the need to be more consistent in the way teachers approach the issue of discipline. They highlight the need to set up a Students' Council as this will allow them to voice their opinions and thus serve to recognize the role they play in their own development.

When it comes to teacher – parent relationships, the former are of the opinion that most parents co-operate when teachers send for them to discuss their daughters' progress and that parents, in the majority of cases, respond regularly and positively to communications regarding their children. At the same time, teachers feel that those parents who have the school at heart, participate regularly and actively in school activities. However, they also feel a sense of passiveness from the majority of parents.

This paper has merely presented the feedback obtained in relation to one aspect of school improvement – ethos. What has emerged is that high scores on school ethos have been obtained from all stakeholders, particularly where care and a sense of belonging is concerned. Effort needs to be direct to improve the level and type of communication and activities with and for parents. The discipline aspect too needs to be reviewed as a whole school as elements of inconsistency have been evidenced.

The exercise as a whole has helped the various school members on a number of levels. This first school self-evaluation has helped to raise awareness among all concerned on the identified school improvement aspects, on what they perceive they are doing and how they are doing it.

The work by Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) regarding the creation of a climate of teacher collegiality as against contrived collegiality is the first evidence in the outcome of this first self-evaluation process. Throughout this common effort, in spite of differences in perceptions, common workable goals have been identified and established. This is a small move in desired improvement, yet a big step towards the success of an effectively improved school system confirming Goodlad's, (1984) assertion that change must be school based.

The DfES (2005) report identifies the engagement of key stakeholders in self evaluation and improvement activities as one of the themes in schools with very effective self-evaluation. The high participation rate of the three main stakeholders, that is teachers, parents and students in evaluating school performance has increased the transparency of school management in its operation and in sharing school ownership. The active role of parents in the education of their daughters in the school cannot be pushed back anymore. Parental involvement goes beyond socializing and organizing fund raising activities. In the School Development Plan closer parental links have been proposed, and an organising committee as a result of this study was set up in 2006. The proposition for a Student's Council is another big step towards a motivated student body. Communicating more with parents and students will definitely reap more benefits than misunderstandings and passivity.

The works by MacBeath, (1999), Davis & Rudd, (2000) and those of Bezzina (2005, 2006), in the local context, suggest that self-evaluating schools can develop their own agenda, enabling staff to focus on areas for improvement of relevance to their own context. This helps to promote ownership of the process. This introductory study has helped to confirm this point. In fact the school now has more information to formulate plans and carry out follow-up actions to address the needs of stakeholders, including teachers' development and professional growth in particular areas (e.g. classroom management, differentiated teaching and focused student's activities).

Fear of the unknown is threatening. As has also been researched in the literature (DfES, 2005), initially SSE was perceived as a quality control mechanism for accountability, but once the genuine purposes were communicated a slow but steady commitment was achieved. A positive school climate, were values and perceptions are respected, teachers will accept to commit themselves and be led. Whilst way back in 1999 some members of staff felt threatened and resisted the initial initiative for subject teacher meetings, six years later, following the SSE process, groups of teachers acted as catalysts for this change within the school. Improving the Quality of

Education for All Project (IQEA) in the UK and the Manitoba School Improvement Project (MSIP) in Canada have highlighted among other things, this feature of effective school improvement. This also confirms Lezotte's, (1989) research that demonstrated that the top-down approach to change did not work.

When the school leader understands teachers' needs and seeks suitable methods of providing for those needs she/he will be able to directly but sensitively communicate with the teachers to face the challenges for improvement and accountability. A decentralized, devolved and shared approach to leadership within the school (Lambert, 1998) enhances school improvement.

SSE has contributed significantly for the students, not only because a rich source of information has been tapped because teachers now know better what students' experiences are and must help them to achieve (Fullan, 1992), but also as Flutter & Rudduck, (2004) propose, the student consultation process itself is a 'transformative potential' for the students to reflect on their learning experiences and development as independent, critical thinkers.

In the process of identifying challenges for school improvement through a self-evaluation process, as experienced by the researchers, the cost of implementing such an activity cannot be measured in quantifiable terms. A thorough understanding of the costs and benefits appertaining to such a project should be obtained by all concerned before it proceeds further than it should. Otherwise it might risk being stopped at a stage when it is incomplete and the project might be hijacked before it starts providing benefits. Since this is a cultural shift, it is important that this experience is shared as widely as possible with others who are going through the process, so that barriers for SSE to be successful as exposed in the DfES (2005) report will be minimised.

The main thrust of the school's strategy is that of steadily changing certain attitudes and catering for devolved collaborative experiences (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992). Making use of formal (such as SEC results and tracer reports) data (SREB, 2001), as well as informal information ensures that the conclusions extracted from such information is corroborated by other measures of a less tangible nature such as the students' perception of the teaching offered (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). This discourages management from taking too much of a short sighted approach to running the school which might lead to short term 'results' at the expense of long term 'stakeholder' dissatisfaction and consequently underachievement.

Self-evaluation also uncovers an open secret about school management. The majority of costs within a school organisation are the human and not the physical resources. Therefore, discretionary 'cost saving' in the deployment and development of personnel will result in a drop in 'service' to stakeholders. This is because traditional teaching systems and situations are not geared for today's students and tomorrow's adult citizens. A focus on continuous professional development will build the capacity to improve (Harris, 2004).

Moreover, as highlighted in the readings, since SSE is complimentary to external evaluation (OFSTED; 1999; Eurydice, 2004), the provision of effective external support in training in self-evaluation methods would minimise not only the initial

pitfalls in its implementation but also alleviate any misunderstandings that might arise between external requirements and internal desires for improvements.

The next step would be to continue with the practices in the coming years.

Concluding note

The introduction of school self-evaluation through the methodological approach used for this study has helped to emphasise that SSE is a 'learning journey'. It has helped all involved to appreciate the varied domains of school improvement which are all essential to help a school change and develop. It is a journey concerned with the hopes, aspirations and beliefs of all stakeholders. It has to do with professional commitment, on quality relationships, on opportunities. It is about how one responds to internal and external pressures and demands for change.

This phase, what has been identified as the first phase, has helped the varied participants to establish the principles of communication, trust and respect and helped the school members gain firsthand experience into the real dynamics of situations and people.

Note
[1] St. Madeleine School is a pseudonym

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