

## *The making of secondary school heads: Some perspectives from the island of Malta*

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### **Abstract:**

The key purpose of this paper is to present the findings of the Maltese study which is part of a collective research project involving four island states: Cyprus, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malta. The views and perspectives that a small group of secondary school heads brings to their life and work are outlined. The study adopts a biographical/portrait-based approach to understanding headship and, thus, provides us with new insights into the growing literature in the field. It is aimed at contributing to our understanding of how heads are made and make themselves.

As such the paper briefly explores the career paths of a small group of eight heads interviewed and focuses on the first two stages of their personal and professional lives – formation and accession. The views of heads are represented and the issues and concerns identified with leading schools in times of change are outlined. The study shows that family, family experiences and the community have an important part to play in influencing the lives of prospective leaders. The study also highlights the link between vicarious learning, continuous professional development and personal reflection.

## **The making of secondary school heads in a small island state**

### **Introduction**

In Malta, over the past decade or so, the importance behind administration in general and headship in particular has been boosted for two main reasons. First, a number of major developments are taking place in education which is affecting the way schools are organised, managed and run. As a result, the job of the head (or any educational leader) has become increasingly complex and demanding:

Decentralisation means also greater responsibility for the Head of School as the leader of the school community. In this context, the managerial competencies and leadership skills of the Head of School come into play. No amount of goodwill from the central agency will redress weakness in management at school level. ...

(Ministry of Education, 2001, p.114)

Second, the last decade has witnessed a number of initiatives by the education authorities to give greater authority to schools and to its members and thus counter the autocratic, isolationist and individualistic system of managing schools that we have been used to (Bezzina, 2005; Ministry of Education, Youth & Employment, 2005). In fact, the Ministerial Strategic Plan presents the leadership style that Heads need to adopt in order to take schools forward:

A consultative style of management should be cultivated to ensure the nurturing of decentralization. Decision-making processes have to ensure whole staff involvement based on effective top-down and bottom-up lines of communication. Within the school community a culture of self-assessment has to be cultivated and developed to ensure continuous improvement. The Head of School will be required to share responsibilities through real delegation. This will involve the passing on to the management team and other ranks key tasks that many heads are reluctant to let go. A management approach with these characteristics would ensure ownership of decision-making and enhance levels of staff motivation.

(Ministry of Education, 2001, pp.114-115)

Similarly, the last decade has also seen an increase in local research on headship (e.g. Abdilla and Spiteri, 1999; Bezzina, 1995, 1999, 2003; National Curriculum Council, 2004; Quintano, 1999; Testa, 2004; Xerri, 2000). In most of these studies the methodology used has been mainly quantitative in nature with questionnaires being the main instruments used. Others have relied on interviews and ethnography as a means of learning more about this field. It is within this backdrop that the study reported in this paper has been undertaken.

### **Methodology**

This paper presents the findings of part of an international study involving four island states, namely Cyprus, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malta. The key purpose of this collective study is to contribute to our collective understanding of how heads are

made and make themselves. Based on the theoretical and empirical work carried out by Peter Gronn and Peter Ribbins (e.g. Gronn, 1999; Rayner and Ribbins, 1999; Ribbins, 1997) the main aim was to “enable heads to speak for themselves” (Mortimer and Mortimer, 1999, p. vii). This was carried out through a series of face-to-face conversations with eight heads. The approach adopted by Gronn and Ribbins aimed at providing a series of individual portraits based upon the accounts which individual heads gave of their personal and professional lives.

This paper presents the findings of a number of key themes explored in the study, namely:

- 1) The influence of family, friends, early life, schooling, etc. on their views/values/lives.
- 2) The influences which shaped their views/values as educators/managers.
- 3) Their careers before headship.
- 4) How they went about becoming heads.
- 5) Their views on headship and the influences which have shaped them.

These conversations took place beginning of 2000 and the final version of the scripts was agreed in April 2000.

#### Pathways to Headship: an analysis of the research study

This section will focus on the professional formation and accession of the eight heads. It will explore the early influences on the interviewees and their professional experiences before they were appointed to headship. It will start by analysing the influence of parents and other family members; then moves on to explore the influence of peer groups and the local community; and then reviews their lives as teachers before they were appointed assistant heads and eventually heads.

### **The making of eight people**

#### Influence of fathers and mothers

For several of the heads, their fathers and mothers played an important, often also a crucial role in our heads' lives in influencing who they became and what they had achieved. Many of these heads spoke of their parents with great admiration and respect and in doing so acknowledged the extent to which it was their insistence and persistence which had set them on their way to taking on a career in education. As Ms Ciappara, testifying to the influence of her parents, put it:

*As a family I have to consider myself lucky because we were very close ... We are still very close and are lucky to have our parents still with us ... since they were always my main role models.*

Another two heads recalled that their parents loved education for its own sake and kept pushing them towards more and more education.

*My parents were always supportive, even at the extent of personal sacrifices on the whole family. You can imagine the burden of a family of nine and only one source of income.*

*The fact that my mother was a teacher helped us a lot because she encouraged us to further our education ... mother did all the housework herself and always refused a helping hand, instead insisting that we go to study ... I think my mother, more than any other person was the one who inspired me most.*

In line with the love for education and encouragement to learn, that the parents of our heads exhibited, family values have also been highlighted:

*Caring values. All out to help, concern, love and demanding of discipline.*

At times, as this other extract shows, with a prevailing Christian propensity:

*Very conservative Christian values, for sure. But since my father was in the Services we had liberal views about mixing with other people. I was quite free to run wild in the streets, I was quite free to mix and visit families, people of non-Christian denomination and I was allowed to read ... When I was naughty she used to take me to church for confession and make sure I would bathe my senses into the whiteness of the Church.*

The heads also stressed how their fathers are still considered by these heads as central figures in their lives and what they have achieved. As Ms Micallef pointed out:

*I know that when I had to make a decision about my career my father wanted me to go to university. In those days one had to pay fees to have a tertiary education and being a very fair person, my father who had supported my brother so as to become a doctor, was ready and expected to pay for me as well and go to university to continue studying.*

As another head, Mr Bonello reported, his father, at age 88, is still referred to for advice regarding problems encountered at school and has also been influential in the professional shaping of his career:

*My family environment - with my father still studying at 88, still mentally alert - so much so that I frequently discuss with him certain matters which concern my profession. His sound advice based on experience has often illuminated me regarding administrative procedures.*

However, it was not just the fathers who were strong and potent in character. A number of heads mentioned their mothers with great affection:

*I was the youngest so I was considered as special - I was born during the war, when my mother was already 42, so I was unexpected but very welcome and she wanted to make sure that I would get a good education ... After the war the people who were living in my vicinity were not all going to government schools and she didn't want me to go to the Lyceum and encouraged me to make an effort and go to a private school. Eventually I sat for the entry examinations into the Seminary and St Aloysius College.*

Ms Aquilina was even more specific on her mother's strong will and personality. Her mother was described as a boss, who at the same time, had a strong sense of realism

and determination to see that an education in those times was indispensable for a better future.

The male heads brought forward the nostalgic, soft and gentle side of the motherly role model that their mothers have been in the years of their formation. Mr Bonello described her so:

*My mother was still, although we had left our village birthplace for the suburb, the woman connected to a rural ambience and every Saturday she used to take me back to that village.*

Another head, Ms Ciappara, presents how her mother had been such a tremendous influence in her life, that at times, it sounds as if she was too assertive or belligerent, as if mother and father had inverse roles:

*In fact I recall that mum brought us up with an inferiority complex, such as none of us would run around the house saying, he or she was the most beautiful or the most intelligent, even though I knew that in her heart of hearts she believed we were so and she would talk about us in this way, but not in front of us ... but my father on the contrary would do the opposite. He would praise us and was very proud of us.*

#### Influence of other members of the family

Whilst most of these heads identified their fathers and mothers as being very influential in their studies and in moulding them into the kind of persons they are now, some also mentioned brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, and cousins as also being influential. One head recalled how his older brother had persuaded their father to support his education as well.

Fraternal support is also further encountered both directly and indirectly, in the forms that brothers or sisters provided books and other educational material or served as significant role-models in the moulding of these heads:

*My brother became a priest and joined the priesthood. He was 10 years older than I and therefore we had books at home because he was studying... So books I always had access to and could always get help.*

Furthermore,

*I admire and respect my eldest sister a great deal. She attended the Teachers' Training College. When she returned home for weekends, I remember I used to go and look in her bag to see the teacher's magazine.*

### Influence of peer groups and the local community

The local community seemed to have great influence on almost all the heads we spoke to. One explanation for this might lie in the fact that most towns and villages in Malta at the time were relatively small communities in which most people knew each other.

Certainly, most of the heads who participated in this project were born and raised in small villages where everybody knew the whole village and relationships were close. The descriptions which follow may be taken as representative of villages and of life within them during those times. Mr Gatt describes the environment of a Maltese village after the Second World War:

*Living in those days was indeed hard. Perhaps that's where I find the roots for some of my leadership skills that I believe I still got today. Being a man from Vittoriosa also helped in shaping me, since it was a city, which was heavily bombarded with so many children running around, with so much debris around, inventing and being creative to survive and to have a good time. Having a childhood in this regard, we had a very happy childhood, we managed to live together and invent a lot of activities to spend our leisure time and I think all has been beneficial to me ...*

Furthermore, as the next excerpt defines, the critical personas in the community in those times were the following:

*In those times the persons who cared for the people in the community were the chaplain, the doctor and the head of school. If it was a problem with values and spirituality everyone was referred to the chaplain, if it was physical ailments the doctor was called and academic problems and children's progress were my father's domain.*

The small communities, the constant striving to be educated, was a characteristic many of the heads spoke of. Having close friends and relatives around all the time was another factor, which gave them a sense of security, warmth and strength and was mentioned as a positive factor by the heads involved.

Living in small communities meant that it was easy for teachers to get to know their students, their parents and often, most of the extended family. Some teachers were close friends of the family, and, therefore, their influence on their students' future and professional careers could be a very important determinant.

*... but I still chose the Lyceum, because my mother who was an uneducated person, had asked for advice, and I remember she asked Mr Bisazza who used to teach Italian in the Lyceum, and who represented an important role figure. He advised her I should go to the Lyceum. The Lyceum in those days was an elite school, we used to pay for our books, and more or less it was like the private schools. All this was in 1952.*

On the other hand, it was interesting to note that the families also had an influence on the community. For example, Ms Micallef stressed the support which her family gave to the local community:

*I remember in summer especially when schools were closed and parents had difficulties and worries about their children they used to come over to our flat. And I remember the sitting room serving as an office where my father would receive these people and discuss with them their problems and their concerns. I liked his approach in sorting out the problems they had.*

In this section the community has been viewed from two angles. On the one hand the interviewees' families have had a positive impact on their immediate environment. On the other hand, the community has also played an influential role on the character formation of some of the interviewees. Thus we can conclude that they are both positive and active agents of their social realities.

### **The making of eight students**

#### **Attitudes to school**

All eight heads appear to have retained very positive feelings towards schools and education, especially towards primary education. Unfortunately, a number of less confident experiences were reported in relation to their secondary years mainly due to the type of schools the heads attended. The rest seem to remember their schooling years with affection. This was particularly marked with respect to both their primary and secondary schooling experiences, which seem to have been very supportive. They tended to recall a great deal of adventure and fun both during the primary and secondary school years. For example, the experience in secondary school left an indelible mark on Mr Caruana, which assisted and created the optimum environment for his character formation:

*It was a disciplined environment and the character formation I gleaned still inspires me and I would like to adopt an 'updated version' of that value laden environment in my school.*

The next stage of the formative years for some of the heads interviewed was the personal experiences during the post-secondary years at sixth form level. There was only one school that catered for sixth form, and this was a boys' school. So, one could imagine the stir and disturbance that this environment might have created within the female sex.

*I went to sixth form for my 'A' Levels but it was a boys' school. I attended sixth form in Hamrun in Brighella Street and that was quite an experience. I was never in a boys' school and suddenly at age 16 I found myself surrounded by boys! I remember refusing to go especially because of the sudden change from secondary to sixth form. I had finished school, I missed my friends and everybody was new and everybody belonged to the opposite sex. In those days we didn't mix very much and girls going to a boys' school was something very innovative in those days.*

#### *Attitudes to teachers*

Teachers can have a lasting effect. Some are still remembered with great affection. Ms Ciappara cherished those moments when teachers and students met and interacted on a more personal level:

*We used to love the long breaks during which we used to go for hikes at Mtarfa, just half a mile away from school. We used to socialise with the teachers accompanying us during these outings and we created a very friendly relationship. I appreciated that a lot. That was so special.*

Furthermore, those teachers who did reciprocate and exchanged life experiences on a personal level did manage to leave a great and lasting influence on these heads:

*... it was during my time at the secondary school that I started to consider teaching as a worthy profession. One can help students to develop aptitudes and I felt the inclination. I think and believe I was made and born to be a teacher just as we say poeta nascitur. And when I started teaching I think I made the right decision. I really felt it.*

In times when parents and siblings were usually not educated enough to provide advice on further education, or future professional plans, a good teacher can be seen as the only viable alternative source of guidance in a young student's life. The following quote indicates what good teachers can do which will have a lasting affect on their students:

*I was still very young when I entered Mdina Secondary School. There again there were other teachers who influenced me and they used to say to me, you will make it in life and this type of close affinity with the teachers helped me to take teaching as my career perhaps. I started teaching straight, after reading for a degree...*

## **Accession**

### **The making of eight teachers**

The next phase in the career path to headship is accession. Accession, as Rayner and Ribbins state "should, as such, be regarded as a developmental period geared to the accomplishment of two crucial tasks: the preparation and construction of oneself as a credible candidate for promotion and the acquisition of a persuasive performance routine to convince those controlling promotion opportunities." (1999, p.18)

#### *The How and Why of Teaching?*

In this group, similar to the one studied by Rayner and Ribbins (1999), few came early to the recognition that they wanted to become teachers. For example, two male heads saw teaching as a means to go up the social ladder. Mr Caruana was quite explicit in this regard: "It wasn't a vocation, it was the highest point of the social ladder that I considered I could go up to."



On the other hand, Mr Bonello, even though he read for a university degree, saw teaching as “a natural and automatic consequence.” At the same time he always wanted to teach and felt that through teaching you develop personally and professionally. Similarly, Ms Aquilina believed and wanted to be a teacher so that she could influence other peoples’ lives.

### *Teacher Training*

It is worth noting that all heads interviewed spoke with a sense of great nostalgia about the days at College. Ms Micallef described the years at the college as “*one of the most beautiful experiences in my life.*” Ms Aquilina stated that “*I was very happy at college and remember saying to myself that if it had to last forever I would stay there...*” Another head spoke of the independence she gained since the teacher training programme was residential and thus they had to leave home from Monday to Friday and only returned home for the weekend. It was also a great opportunity to meet and make new friends. Another was quite emotional and described it as “*the culmination of his hopes.*”

*I succeeded. It was a long way to go from an illiterate background to become a professionally trained teacher. Many teachers learnt a lot of social skills there. The poverty of social skills that people lacked such as, for example, simple table manners, was unbelievable. Very few people were refined in their social skills. There (i.e. at the college) I nurtured the love for the profession. I felt I matured a lot on the personal, social and emotional levels.*

This quote may be taken as representative of how all the interviewees felt about the Teacher Training College. The college provided them not only with adequate training to enter the teaching profession but also helped them to develop personally and socially.

### *First Years of Teaching*

In general, all eight heads had very fond memories of their years as teachers. All enjoyed experiences in teaching either primary and/or secondary. They spoke of their love for teaching mainly in terms of their involvement with children. Interestingly, practically all heads actively involved themselves in guidance and counselling activities or in various youth groups. Such involvement could be seen as the inception to taking on leadership roles in schools.

Furthermore, when recounting their experiences as teachers, some of our heads immediately levelled their narratives against the effectiveness or not of the heads they encountered. As the following extract reports this particular head was also accumulating experiences to be able to make that crucial decision when the right opportunity came along:

*...the background I had from the Salesians together with the experiences I accumulated talking to other teachers influenced me a lot. I can also recall that a particular head was also influential.*

## **The Making of Eight Heads**

### *Seeking Headship*

One of the heads said “*I have never had a career plan.*” In this he was representative of the group. None of the heads regarded themselves as working to a career plan designed to a headship position. It has to be borne in mind that whilst most of the interviewees were promoted to headship on the basis of seniority, however some had actually furthered their studies and are in possession of post graduate certification in the field of educational administration and management, one up to Masters degree level.

For one head becoming an assistant head was defined as “*natural*” after a thirteen year spell of teaching. Ms Mifsud Matrenza talks of how colleagues of hers encouraged her and “*insisted*” that she should apply for the post of assistant head.

Ms Micallef expressed her reluctance to achieve full headship:

*I did aspire to become an Assistant Head. I remember saying to myself I would become an Assistant Head and stop there. In fact I said to myself I would apply for headship but just do it for the sake of sitting for an interview and see what placing I would get and eventually refuse the post.*

The following remarks confirm how some of the interviewees categorically did not initially aspire to become heads. In some cases, if for very different reasons, this determination came slowly and even reluctantly. Mr Bonello, who spent many years as an assistant head, identified inhibiting factors such as, isolation, being ‘in the hot seat’, diplomatic skills, foresight and fear of responsibility:

*I do not think I ever wanted to end up in an authoritative position. It is too isolated as a post and so delicate in nature. It requires diplomatic skills, great self-control and foresight...I was never ambitious. I always trusted in God. ... I was appointed as an Assistant Head. I was not interested in headship because I was always frightened of responsibility. I used to look upon a Head as a highly responsible job.*

Another head, almost regretting his present position, shows how he loved teaching and the classroom environment and the relationships he had developed with the students:

*I was so happy teaching Religion at a Junior Lyceum with so much personal satisfaction with my own class and student participation in my lessons. So I didn't really want to move out. However, I don't know why, probably I was conscious that during my teaching career, I used to involve myself in extra-curricular activities in school, I was getting older and older, some administrative tasks used to fall on me for various initiatives and used to do them with pleasure. So I was conscious that I had some skills that could be of good use if I moved up the hierarchical ladder.*

After a number of years teaching, finally it was time to put into practice some of the ideas accumulated during the years:

*I said now is the time and this was the opportunity I had to prove myself. I must have been a little cheeky and also a little ideological but what an opportunity. I was sent there as an Assistant Head but with the duty of headship, an Acting Head. We had sat for an interview and eventually when I was in the school the appointment arrived. In 1984 I had been 26 years teaching more or less, which is quite an experience. Personally, as well, it was a great opportunity to put into practice some of the ideas I had in mind. Eventually I spent there quite a number of years.*

Others were urged to take on such a position as they felt the need to address the true challenge of education – student achievement - and to get there through staff motivation:

*In motivating students that is my primary involvement because many students come with no motivation to learn as they are underachievers. My leadership skills are shown in curriculum management and also in motivating teachers themselves to be enthusiastic about what they teach. I pass on my own enthusiasm to teachers, giving them the facility to try out new methods. Even during staff meetings I try to get experts on different methods of teaching etc.*

How, then, did the heads prepare themselves for such a post? And, who or what helped them to do so?

#### *Preparing for Headship*

Whilst there is no formal training required for those striving for the post of assistant head, all prospective heads need to be in possession of at least a diploma in educational administration and management. Five out of the eight heads interviewed, do in fact possess this qualification even though most of them were appointed to headship before this condition came into effect.

All participants raised some interesting points which highlight the way and what led to those individuals to pursue headship. Three important issues seem to surface through the interviews – that of vicarious learning, continuing professional development (CPD), and personal reflection.

The issue of preparation was taken seriously by most of the heads interviewed. As one stated:

*An important stage in my preparation for headship was that I followed an intensive diploma course in educational management and administration. At first I was quite hesitant to start studying at 52. Yet, you needed that kind of preparation and training and dialogue with your course colleagues - at that time still deputy heads. I suggest that if we are allocated more support staff at school we should have more courses or updating sessions, now that we're heads.*

In fact, the same head mentions how significant and influential the training he received abroad was when he had to take the hot seat:

*A very important chapter in my preparation for headship was when I was attached to a school abroad. It was a wonderful experience. I think I am applying a lot of things I learned during that visit. I consider visits to schools abroad a must for anyone leading a school.*

Most heads spoke of their period as assistant heads as crucial to their professional growth. They did so thanks to both positive and negative experiences which they gained by working with or under particular heads. Mr Bonello recalls how different heads had taught him the art of headship, from what to do and what to avoid:

*There was the head that taught me the art of communication and office organisation. He had a great influence on me and I still call him to discuss certain situations at school. Then there was the head that excelled in school publications he produced. He also delegated tasks which had a great say in school planning and day-to-day running of the school. He was also a great commentator on school autonomy, which was being gradually introduced. ... Then there was the other head who was an expert in the delegation of duties, but who did not 'abdicate' after delegating. And, because of his absence from school for a long period gave me the opportunity to become acting head of a relatively big school. He gave me my baptism of fire!*

However, not all heads were as helpful and influential as this. As Mr Caruana put it:

*I always had my own personal view of the role of headship and in the school I was in I have to admit there was none and no style of headship whatsoever. No real vision...*

In our conversations other forms of preparation were identified which reflected the active social life of the interviewees. Their involvement in sports, clubs, parish communities, politics and unions helped them to gain the right apprenticeship to headship.

The notion of vicarious learning is tied to that of CPD. There seems to be a parallel mix between leadership experiences and CPD in educators. It is not merely a question of having a direct route to headship but a mixture of separate experiences.

Mr Chetcuti explained that he had equipped himself in various ways:

*I felt that my career prospects were a bit restricted in that environment. So, after a year I left that school because I had applied successfully for a post at a Junior Lyceum a type of bigger school to which I was already accustomed.*

Mr Cachia was very active in sport and also holding administrative positions in various associations:

*Concurrently ... I was also playing football and coaching both football and water polo. And I was also in the committee of the Sliema Sports Association and the Sliema Aquatic Sport Club. Coaching and committee meetings required some good leadership skills.*

Another head underwent training abroad in Leeds and another head attended in-service courses organised by the Education Division. Ms Mifsud Matrenza had started a course in Psychology as she felt this would give her the opportunity to understand herself better.

### *Achieving Headship*

Prospective heads identified the need to have supportive heads who adequately prepare them for headship. Too often the interviewees showed that the management style adopted by their predecessors tended to be quite autocratic and the major decisions were always “in their hands.” Some of the interviewed showed that they had to wait a considerable number of years prior to their appointment to headship, an average of ten years after their first appointment as Assistant Heads.

A number of heads also pointed out that their appointment to headship was determined by a lot of hard work, perseverance and commitment during their apprenticeship as Assistant Heads.

*I was lucky because I worked with two heads from whom I really learnt a lot. I used to say to myself that I would copy and adopt their methods when I would become head.... So automatically they were training me.*

One specific concern, shared to a greater or lesser extent by all the women heads, was what they regarded as lingering manifestations of gender prejudice. As Ms Mifsud Matrenza put it:

*When you have difficult people, especially if there is one particular difficult person, with a strong male ego, things can really get tough. I also remember another male teacher telling me that he couldn't stand having a female as his superior ...*

On the other hand, the male heads also spoke of political discrimination:

*I had some years of disappointments. The post of Assistant Head was very difficult to get because of the political atmosphere in those days. If you had any connection with the Malta Union of Teachers or if you were not particularly tied with the government party then you wouldn't have any chance of getting the post. It was the normal dictum in those days that one knew beforehand who would be chosen, so there were always a chosen few.*

### **Reviewing Headship**

It is clear that with a move towards decentralisation heads have had to modify their role. The Maltese literature on headship in the eighties and early nineties saw heads very much entrenched in administrative roles. Now no longer:

*I think we have come a long way since my father's style of headship. Today schools are more autonomous than in the past years in several aspects. I remember the time when heads had to ask permission from the Head Office to*

*take the children out on a cultural visit and then had to write reports as to where they were taking them and other things.*

*We used to have the head who would dictate and whether you like it or not, you had to follow what s/he says and do as you are told. This culture hindered the students, staff and parents from approaching the Head. The culture created so much distance and projected the head of school as some sort of dictator. But things have changed. I doubt whether this has happened with everyone, but things are changing. I have learnt from experience that such methods do not work at all. Secondly, I believe one doesn't have to impose on teachers. I always ask for help first, and I do it across the board so no one would say I am delegating to the same persons. More or less, everybody comes up offering assistance, so I move on.*

This helps to reflect some of the pressures exerting on heads who require, as Duignan so forcefully put it, leaders who are “full-blooded creatures who are politically and spiritually aware, credible, earthly and practical” (1998, pp. 21-22). They can no longer administer from a distance but have to lead by example and with others (Bezzina, in Pashiardis, 2001). Hence, concepts like collegiality, empowerment and collaboration surfaced in the interviews.

Whilst heads do feel that they are having to adjust their role and styles of leadership they are concerned that the education authorities are expecting heads to do too much with limited power to take the decisions that matter. Ms Ciappara expresses her concern:

*They have given us a lot of responsibilities but don't tell me we are autonomous, because we are not. In retrospect, I would think twice before accepting the post of head of a school. ...The only autonomy they gave us is in the way we spend our money, nothing else. That is why headship hasn't changed at all. They loaded us with work we shouldn't be doing, they added to our role the finances, which was a big headache to the education authorities and then they just handed it over to us. Funds are taking a lot of our time.*

With the introduction of the National Minimum Curriculum (Giordmaina, 2000; Ministry of Education, 2001) schools have been expected to develop curricula which address the individual needs of pupils entrusted to their care. This is very much in line with the heads who feel that their role should mainly be that of educational leaders. As Mr Chetcuti stated: “*Heads need to be more with students. They need to be educational leaders.*” They need to create the appropriate climate in which individuals feel that they belong, that they are important and that they can all contribute to school matters.

*The role of the Head has definitely changed. Whereas, the cliché of the past when referring to the Head was that of the 'glorified clerk', now not anymore, definitely. I firmly believe that the role of the head today has to be an educational leader. Yes, he has to be a good manager but an educational leader at the same time ... In fact, I don't believe that a head should be an administrator, but, yes I believe a head should have sharpened managerial skills. Now that things are as they are and that autonomy of schools will*

*eventually come in practice, I believe that the head has to be an educational leader because practically that's the best way to develop the right vision for the school.*

One challenge heads are currently facing is that they have no say in the recruitment of their teaching staff. Although there are no easy solutions to this concern, the majority of heads interviewed feel that they should be involved in the final choice of teaching personnel rather than having to accept anyone sent by central authorities. At the same time heads acknowledge their limited powers since they also have no say in determining whether a teacher is retained or not if they do not perform.

*As things stand, teachers know that if I write a negative report, they know that nothing much is going to happen. And this is absurd as it undermines my position.*

Mr Bonello identifies the implications of such a level of autonomy:

*Yes, of course, we should be more involved. But the problem of scale in Malta restricts us in this field, as relationships with the interviewed applicant would impede fair choices. If we were in England or somewhere else we would have a much broader field from which to choose.*

In the same line of thought another head discloses that:

*As a head I should be in a position to engage teachers that match the needs and characteristics of my school. If a teacher does not have a strong personality s/he would be ineffective in this school. If the teacher does not match the school ethos and the school culture s/he could not be effective.*

Further implications for improvement are suggested by Ms Aquilina recognising that autonomous governing bodies should run schools:

*If schools are run by a governing body and are granted full autonomy our schools definitely will be a lot better. If a teacher really works hard and the school is able to provide specialised services referring to the problems of illiteracy, school effectiveness will improve.*

The latest initiative by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment – *For All Children to Succeed* (2005) may be talking of autonomous schools boards by identifying networks and colleges as those autonomous bodies that can reculture our schools, to coin a term introduced by Fullan (1998).

### **Concluding Note**

Various points brought out in this study which explored the formation and accession into headship help to highlight the need to take the headship more seriously. The study shows that family, family experiences, and the community have an important part to play in influencing the lives of prospective leaders. The study also highlights the link between vicarious learning, continuous professional development and personal reflection. The various experiences that the interviewees have undergone in life, together with the opportunities to develop professionally – academically and at work – show that the headship is based on a mix of various separate experiences

which individuals go through and which determine their life and life chances. These are naturally also conditioned by the social context in which they are working.

At the same time, it is evidently clear that heads bring out the need for prospective heads to have experiences with 'model' heads who can provide them with leadership opportunities during their apprenticeship. They also point out the importance behind having a mentor who acts as a critical friend.

Educational institutions do not exist to be administered. They may have in the past. However, I do believe that our 'best' educational leaders went well-beyond administering our schools. The National Minimum Curriculum calls for schools that encourage ideas and inquiry. Both those who teach and those who learn – i.e. everyone – can be impeded or encouraged by the quality of educational leadership at every level within the institution.

The conversations have helped us to understand and more so appreciate the major influences on some of our school leaders. Such conversations help us to understand the type of leadership traits that these heads have developed over the years and why they lead in certain ways and not others.

Definitely, leading today's school and those of tomorrow requires the skills, knowledge, aptitudes and values that can help give the schools meaning. The conversations help to highlight the importance that *purpose and meaning* have had on their lives, their upbringing. The heads have expressed concern that, more often than not, they are regarded as managerial mechanics who are enamoured of technique, clothed in the fashion of power and status and thinly veneered in social grace ... but empty in mind, heart and spirit. The interviewees emphasise the central role that particular values have had in their life. What we know will always be guided by what we believe. Thus, the values we carry across the threshold of our office doors each day are no trivial matter.

This is very much in line with the findings of a study by Christopher Day and his colleagues who stated that "good leaders are informed by, and communicate, clear sets of personal and educational values which represent their moral purposes for the school" (2000, p.165). The conversations strongly advocate the importance behind learning to revere the dignity of human personality and to affirm the power and potential of our own personality. Indeed, leadership in the true sense of the term is a high status activity – one involving an entrepreneurial spirit, the breaking of new ground, the forging of new visions and ideas.

The conversations also highlight an important quality – that of *servant leadership*. Servant leaders have found meaning in their lives, and they communicate that meaning to those whose life they touch. The leader who inspires an attitude of service in his/her colleagues is a maker of meaning. This is the type of leadership fulfillment expressed by our interviewees. One may argue that the quest for self-fulfillment is a common journey for those who lead and those who follow. But there is a difference. The leader's style, model and values determine the extent to which those who follow are able to achieve self-fulfillment. As Grady Bogue argues "power and pay cannot nourish the soul of the artist administrator. Only a devotion to service can do that"



(1985, p.106). This is what Sergiovanni (2001) describes as “resilience” – the passion that is necessary to take the school forward come rain or shine.

Throughout the conversations the interviewees emphasize the link of thought with action. The interviewees express a high level of *moral commitment* which is not without its difficulties or dilemmas. Interesting to note is that whilst these interviewees were different in personality, education and background they all possessed a common devotion to those principles that the leader of integrity cherishes, upholds, and models (Wesserberg in Tomlinson, Gunter and Smith, 1999).

Another important point highlighted by the conversations is the link between leadership and learning. Whilst this may seem obvious, however, the concept of learning, as expressed here, means more than seeking degrees or forms of certification. The various heads of school emphasised the need to be *open, receptive to different forms of learning*, be it through reading, discussing, sharing ideas with others, therefore learning with and through others. Within such a context, leadership can be seen as a quest, a search for ... a struggle to make sense of things around us. Embraced within this conceptualisation of learning is the virtue of humility, what Tom Morris describes as “a state of humble openness to receive what others have to offer ...” (1997, p.215). Within this context, learning is truly a lifelong experience.

This point permeates most conversations. The heads are indeed humble people, ready to be receptive to others. Whilst at the same time respecting what Maxwell has described as “the law of legacy” where “success is measured not by what you are leaving to, but by what you are leaving behind” (1998, p.224).

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