The professional development of headteachers in Malta: trends and developments

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Introduction
The headteacher has become the centre of concern in educational reform in Malta. This article presents some of the developments that are being undertaken in the small island nation of Malta to address the management development of educational leaders in general and of school heads in particular. This choice of theme is especially timely because currently we are witnessing a number of initiatives aimed at devolving greater responsibilities to schools.

The article argues that whilst the education authorities are devolving particular responsibilities to schools it is the University through the Faculty of Education that addresses and is currently launching a new initiative to address the growing demands on school administrators and education officials. The main argument is quite straightforward. The author argues that whilst the drive to increase the level of responsibility and decision making powers to the schools is indeed laudable, improvement cannot be brought about unless there is a clear understanding of the cultural context in which developments are taking place. This will help us to identify the conditions and needs that management development has to address for such initiatives to succeed (Bezzina, 1999a). Accordingly, it presents an analytic and semi-historical account of developments in theory, research, policy and practice in school management training in Malta.

The local context
Various initiatives over the past few years express a move by education authorities to give more powers of responsibility and authority to the schools. All state primary and secondary schools are being encouraged to develop draft school development plans. This move expresses the view that school improvement can be brought about by concentrating development efforts on the school, hence seeing the school as the major unit of change in the education system.

This conceptualisation provides an alternative view to the centralised, prescriptive model of school improvement that state schools have been used to. State schools in Malta have been used to working within a system which is hierarchical, centralised and bureaucratic. As a result, teachers have grown weary through disillusionment and stress (Bezzina, 1995; Borg and Falzon, 1989; Farrugia, 1986).

Teachers constantly find themselves sandwiched between a belief in democracy and participation on the one hand, and the daily experiencing of a lack of structures to function as decision makers. Over the years schools have never been given the opportunity to develop into vital places of learning, into sites of professional inquiry and reflective practice (Bezzina, 1997, 1998).

Moving from the shackles of dependency to one of autonomy will not be easy. One cannot talk of such moves without really understanding the culture and climate that
have evolved over the years which have led to the current situation and in actual fact determine, to a large extent, how people think and act. Present conditions and circumstances of schools could not have been planned to be more antithetical to their becoming centres of inquiry and change. Among the worst of these conditions are: isolation of educators (both teachers and school administrators) from one another; the fragmentation of the school day into separate subject matters; the apportionment of specific time per subject; the untenable ratio of students to teachers; the lack of time for genuine reflection, sharing and critical inquiry amongst teachers (Bezzina, 1999b).

Any effort to improve the effectiveness of schools depends on an understanding of the dynamics of schools. This implies exploring the actions and influences of teachers, students, education officials, parents, community members, the curriculum, and the ways in which these influences operate. These initiatives, although being undertaken by central authorities, lack the necessary ethical framework, values, features and indeed the sense of mission, which brings forth with it that burning desire to achieve stated goals. We are facing a wave of reforms which require a careful re-examination of the concepts of power and authority. Leadership and management need to be redefined and a clear shift away from the traditional hierarchical control mechanisms manifested. However, there is no indication as to how this is going to take place, if at all. What is lacking is a strong and clear vision which is especially needed in times of change (MEU, 1998b).

At the same time we need to challenge the boundaries of sameness, to use Walker and Walker’s (1998) term, and celebrate and value differences. As Senge (1990, p. 9) points out:

If any one idea about leadership has inspired organisations for thousands of years, it is the capacity to hold a shared picture of the future we seek to create. One is hard-pressed to think of any organisation that has sustained some measure of greatness in the absence of goals, values, and missions that become deeply shared throughout the organisation.

Recent initiatives have placed leadership, its basis and function, under close scrutiny. Whereas Bhindi and Duignan (1997, p. 118) speak of “environmental complexities and turbulence” as the main reasons behind the need to review areas like leadership, organisational structures, culture and management practice, in Malta we are experiencing the same, very much due to the varied initiatives being introduced by the education authorities. These initiatives are raising concern in education circles that central authorities lack a vision and a strategic plan which reflects the realities facing Maltese schools. Thus, schools are having to address central initiatives, laudable as they may seem, without knowing where they are going and, paradoxically, whether or not they will be allowed to get there by the same central authorities. We are faced with a system which is decentralising “certain” responsibilities to the school site. As a result it is slowly having to loosen its grip over schools – a grip which it has enjoyed for a considerable number of years – but at the same time not wanting to lose ultimate power and control (Bezzina, 1998).

A study the author has been involved in (MEU, 1998a, 1998b) highlighted the concerns, especially of those in the schools, that school administrators still have to follow the dictates of the Education Division, thus ignoring the unique position of the school as an agent of reform. They argue that schools lack the necessary support from the Division. They feel that the school management team and the Division were not adequately prepared for their change in roles. It is important that the role of the Division complements the changes occurring in school management. In order to meet the challenges involved in such a complex undertaking, the Division needs highly developed management and administration skills. The Division must focus on team efforts which in themselves will bring about the synergy which is required (MEU, 1998b).

### A dependency culture

Educational reform in Malta has been littered with what Fullan (1998, p. 10) describes as “pockets of innovation” with schools and their members mainly on the receiving end. The move towards decentralisation has been sporadic, fragmented, incoherent and without the necessary visionary framework to keep them going (Bezzina, 1998). Furthermore, decentralisation practices are creating more demands on schools which are now of a more intrusive quality as school boundaries become more permeable and transparent (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1996; Hargreaves and Fullan, 1998). The relentless pressures of today’s complex environment have intensified the overload.

School administrators argue that educational reform lacks a conceptual framework which defines the way forward. As a consequence, this lack of a strategic direction has major implications in other...
areas of school administration (MEU, 1998b). It is imperative for the Education Division to establish the type of centralised and decentralised practices it wants; to create the appropriate structures and provide effective support services.

At the same time neither school leaders nor those at central level, are being prepared to take up the challenge of decentralisation. Leaders need to be involved in the process and the required training in order for them to create a sense of purpose and enough confidence engendered (Fidlet, 1997).

**Professional training for heads**

In spite of these concerns we can also observe that over the past decade or so a number of national policy initiatives, changing conceptions of the overall school culture research findings, local conferences and seminars, local publications and other initiatives have all helped to highlight the need to take management development and, even more, the field of educational management and leadership seriously. At the same time it is interesting to note that central authorities have not done much to address such developments, limiting themselves mainly to conducting talks and seminars. In the main the education authorities tend to adopt a more reactive stance rather than a proactive one and this has created particular difficulties when addressing particular reforms that the Faculty of Education is directly involved in (Bezzina, 1999a; 1999b).

In the past no specific long-term training was offered to headteachers and no appropriate professional qualification in management was required of applicants for the post. The professionality of the post of head of school began to materialise practically at the same time as teaching was legally recognised as a profession in the 1988 Education Act and the Government-Union agreement that followed in 1989. This agreement stated that in the promotion of teachers to assistant head of school on the basis of merit and efficiency following a call for application, “preference shall be given to teachers in possession of the Diploma in Educational Administration and Management” (1989, A.2b).

In 1985, the Faculty of Education had initiated the course in educational administration and management for teachers holding or aspiring to posts of administrative responsibility in education. The course aims to acquaint participants with theories and research in the behavioural sciences that are related to the studies of the organisation. Within the framework of current developments in educational theory and practice, it also aims to provide participants with opportunities to analyse situations and formulate strategies for tackling administrative and management problems in education. From the very beginning, the course attracted both assistant headteachers and teachers who were due or aspired to become heads of school or, as their career progressed, education officials in the education system. By contrast, very few heads in post have undertaken the course since. It is to be noted that in Malta we are faced with an aging teaching population, especially at the primary level, and this is also evident among heads who would have been appointed to headship in their late 40s or 50s.

The main aim behind this course was to prepare future school administrators in the various aspects and levels of administration and management. There could have been the tendency to overemphasise the managerial role during the course but one tried to achieve a balance through the inclusion of various educational components, such as curriculum design and development, communication, school improvement, professional development and evaluation and assessment. All of these components form a part of the technical knowledge required of school administrators. Over the years the course has made a unique contribution to the professional development of teaching grades, and the sensitisation of participants to specific school management functions and challenges.

The course has been quite beneficial in that it:

- has helped policy makers contextualise the importance behind the professional development of those who are behind educational reform at the school site;
- has helped participants establish the theoretical background and link it with practice, hence developing and refining their craft knowledge theories (Attard, in Muscat, 1997);
- is preparing administrators to address the day-to-day needs/concerns they encounter in their schools.

Efforts to improve the diploma programme over the years have been based on the feedback sought and received on all course units covered and a sensitivity and awareness of the needs of schools and evolving policy directives.

It is interesting to note that unlike concerns raised abroad about the
higher education institutions being “compelled” (Bolam, 1997) and “criticised” (Craig, 1982; Murphy and Hallinger, 1989; Witters-Churchill, 1991) for the type of university-based programmes being offered for school administrators, or even the creation of alternative programmes to cater for such needs (e.g. Ford, 1996; Gunraj and Rutherford, 1999; Glatter, 1996), in Malta the Faculty of Education has been at the forefront of management development initiatives.

### Locally based research

Over the past decade I have been involved directly as researcher or as supervisor of a number of studies which explored, amongst other things, the training needs of school administrators, their perceptions of autonomy and their leadership styles. These studies, to some extent, all highlight a definite departure from their traditional role which portrayed them merely as administrators and a channel for directives by central education authorities.

Recent findings show that heads of school are high on both the initiating structure and consideration dimensions of leadership (Behling and Schreisheim, 1976), and more so on the latter. In a study involving secondary school heads the respondents scored highest on: encouraging staff to be more innovative, and being clear about teacher direction, in the initiating structure dimension; and taking personal interest in their staff, positively responding to laments, and embellishing the school environment, in the consideration dimension. It may be noticed that these are the items in which the personal relations of the head of school with the staff could be viewed as determinant in enhancing curricular effectiveness and in providing environmental or school culture development (Quintano, 1999). These findings are similar to those of another study involving headteachers and assistant headteachers in the primary and secondary sector (Abdilla and Spiten, 1999). In this study the majority of school administrators want to take a more professional leadership role with the majority of respondents wanting to support the teachers’ professional development and helping teachers develop the curriculum and to involve them in whole school development planning.

A study conducted in the early 1990s (see Bezzina, 1995) involving primary school headteachers, and prior to the introduction of current initiatives, explored, amongst other things, the training needs headteachers felt they ought to receive. The following were the main ones highlighted: staff appraisal and professional development; personal professional development; evaluation; relationships, and leadership.

In a more recent study secondary school headteachers identified the following areas which they felt need to be addressed:

- staff development of teachers, including induction, motivating, supporting and evaluating;
- professional team building;
- enhancing an efficient communications system with all stakeholders;
- monitoring and supervision of the quality of teaching and learning (Quintano, 1999, p. 56).

It is noteworthy that the list is highest on the leadership and human relations category of tasks as identified by Goodwin (1968) and Morgan et al. (1984). This is exactly the contrary to what has been explored in England (Evans, 1986), but coincides with the staff development issues which New Zealand heads of secondary schools identified as being their weak areas (Wadsworth, 1988).

These results show that whilst headteachers are becoming slowly more task centred, due to the fact that schools are being given more responsibilities and being held accountable for what happens at the school site, they are also having to spend more time working with and through people. These developments/findings help to highlight the management development opportunities that educational leaders and school leaders in particular, need to receive in order to be adequately prepared for their evolving role.

Given current educational reforms which are affecting schools and school members in particular, together with the results of locally based research (albeit presented briefly in this article), the Faculty of Education has felt it opportune to design, introduce and run a Masters degree programme. The proposal was approved by the Faculty Board and the first course commenced in academic year 1999-2000.

In the next section the main aims behind the proposal, the objectives and course programme outline are presented. It is to be noted that given the fact that it is still in its inception it is envisaged that the ongoing evaluation that will be conducted throughout the course, which will also include the advice and support of foreign input, will help us to make the necessary changes and developments that are needed to make this programme as beneficial as possible to the course participants.
University preparation of educational leaders

Introduction
The degree of Master of Education (Leadership) is an advanced level, field-based programme intended for those engaged in the management of the education process. The MEd (Leadership) at the University of Malta provides an opportunity to study contemporary education management theory and practice at masters level.

The course will be particularly relevant for those who have leadership and management responsibilities in primary and secondary schools and in post-secondary institutions; for principals, headteachers, assistant headteachers, subject co-ordinators, education officers, assistant directors and directors of education, and for those preparing themselves for promotion in the system.

Purpose
The proposed programme is designed to confront the problems of leadership in the educational setting. It will focus on the development of managerially-oriented competencies and on leadership development. The aim of the course is to assist practitioners to reflect more analytically and constructively on the nature of their own management experience. On successful completion of the course graduates should be able to provide increased professional leadership as they contribute to the decisions shaping the institutions in which they work.

The course is intended to enlarge the dimensions of the educational leader’s role by providing knowledge and skills in the following areas:
- authentic leadership;
- human resource management;
- organizational theory;
- school development; and
- policy making and planning.

Course objectives
The programme is designed to provide participants with the knowledge base and rigorous intellectual analysis experience that will equip them to harness the human and other resources necessary to ensure highly effective educational institutions. It is organized around what educational leaders need to know and to be able to do in order both to understand societal needs and demands regarding education and to be able to create transformative change that is responsive to societal requirements.

Graduates will have a deeper understanding of leadership theory and contextual knowledge to the solution of problems in education as well as to foster and sustain excellence. The programme will also develop the analytical and communication skills required for successful leadership.

The following seven objectives will guide the course:

1. To present and discuss different models of leadership and management in education.
2. To introduce course participants to the contemporary literature on the theory and practice of educational management and leadership.
3. To explore the essential skills of management and the qualities of leadership.
4. To help evaluate and understand the policy environment in which education functions.
5. To help and understand change in complex institutions.
6. To help inculcate the concepts of the learner, learning and the learning organisation.
7. To explore and develop the knowledge and skills required to become more effective managers and leaders in education at various levels and in various roles.

The objectives will be met in a variety of ways which will include, for example: lecture presentations, experiential learning, workshops, seminar discussions, practical exercises and case study material.

The aim of the programme is to build upon the skills and experiences of each course participant as they seek to enhance the contribution they already make in their organisations. The powerful combination of action learning and expert tutorial support results in a programme which will:
- help participants learn from their own experience and that of other trainers and educators;
- give participants real opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge from actually doing their job;
- improve their learning capacities;
- improve their inter and interpersonal skills;
- improve participants’ status and career prospects;
- achieve an internationally recognized Master’s qualification.

Duration
The course is part-time and the shortest time to finish the programme is two years. Students, depending on career and personal circumstance, may take longer and this is catered for.
Course structure
The degree is divided into two main phases:
Phase I consists of ten taught units. These can be completed in three semesters. Given the current MEd regulations there are four compulsory units which all MEd candidates have to follow. These are:
- Critical debates in educational theory and practice (one unit);
- Postmodernism and education (one unit);
- Research methods (two units)
Six specialised units will be covered:
- Educational organisation and leadership (three units);
- Principles of management (one unit);
- Interpersonal and intrapersonal skills (two units).
Phase II consists of:
1 International experience: international research perspectives: a case study approach:
   - Study visit in a foreign country;
   - Attendance at an international conference;
   - Visiting lecturers from foreign institutions.
2 Students completing a 20,000 word dissertation.

The international dimension will be achieved through the taught units and the overseas experience. This international perspective is provided by bringing key figures in the international education management world to the course and by participants choosing from a number of international experiences.
This is evidently just the start of a long process of analysis, review and learning for all those involved in the programme. There is still a lot that will need to be discussed at Faculty level given the current regulations which emphasise one format for all Masters degree courses. Thus, whilst a number of Master degree courses are being run by the Faculty of Education they all have an identical set of four core papers and another four papers to reflect some form of specialisation. The author is of the opinion that varied Masters degree programmes should be offered bearing in mind the different needs that each area of specialisation aims to address and also the learning styles of the course participants. These are pressing concerns which will need to be addressed in the near future.

Conclusion
This article has attempted to place the management development of educational leaders within the context of the educational reforms currently taking place. The justification for the design and delivery of the current Masters in Education (Leadership) are based on the growing demands being made on educational leaders as a result of greater devolution of authority to the school site, and because of the various studies which highlight a demand for courses that are practical in orientation with specific focus on job-related skills (e.g., communication, evaluation, budgeting, motivation) and generic skills (e.g., leadership, problem-solving, goal setting). It is hoped that this proposed course will address some of these needs.

However, it is also true that whilst this article has addressed what the university is currently doing to address the needs of educational leaders it is also clear that a lot of work still needs to be undertaken to engage in further and more in-depth research and trying out strategies/models so that the university, instead of working on its own, works in conjunction with the education authorities. Through this concerted effort they can provide a comprehensive range of professional development courses for educational leaders across the three stages: career preparation, induction and ongoing professional development.

References


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