

## **Editorial –Special Issue**

### **Addressing educational reforms and developments in the Maltese context**

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This special issue collects a series of papers written by a number of Maltese educators who read for a doctoral or masters degree in foreign universities. This issue serves, first of all, as a tribute to those educators who take on the exciting challenge of furthering their studies and learning by committing themselves to studying abroad. This is, in itself, quite a feat, one that needs to be acknowledged. Secondly, it shows the commitment of these researchers to share of what they have learnt with others. Giving something back something to the country that has supported you, maybe even financially, is I believe an obligation and these authors are doing just that. It is to be noted that these 6 researchers/authors have also presented their work during various professional development sessions held both locally and abroad. Thirdly, it shows the commitment of this journal to disseminate research work that can inform policy direction and influence policy making.

Various researchers in the educational management and leadership arena have proposed new models of leadership which are particularly suited to a 'change and transformation' context, namely adopting distributed forms of leadership. Various studies have shown that leaders make a difference. What they think, do and say matters (Sparks, 2005). Through their actions, leaders demonstrate that they value community and consider the school as a community with shared vision, norms and goals. The leader serves as a role model. Research informs us that school leaders work indirectly through a) their influence on teachers, and b) their effect on the learning environment to improve both teacher quality and student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2008). Numerous studies have found that transformational leaders enhance follower and organizational performance by articulating a compelling vision, by inspiring and intellectually stimulating their followers, and by building

individualised relationships. That is, assuredness, confidence and vision of the leader is a source of psychological comfort for the followers, where the leaders shows how uncertainty can be turned into opportunities and success (Bass, 1985).

The first paper by David Debono follows the same vein. He argues for the development of a leadership model that is more distributed in nature if we want educational reforms to bear fruition. Adopting a mixed-methods approach Debono explores whether forms of distributed leadership can render the Maltese educational system more effective. Furthermore, the study explores the roles played by members of the Senior Management Team in primary and secondary schools and what their views are about leadership. This research established that an effective leader is one who prioritises, knows what is going on in the classrooms and who listens to staff concerns. This study once again confirms that we still have not acknowledged the critical and central role that school leaders need to play in taking our schools forward (Bezzina & Vella, 2013). The study brings out that various tasks that are not related to curriculum work are a huge burden on the SMT and while student learning is the main concern of the school SMT, this study confirms that there is very little time to monitor curricular and pedagogical work. Teachers express concern about the size of large secondary schools and they prefer working in small schools which would allow for more direct contact with members of the SMT. It also emerged that stronger external support from the education authorities is necessary to address discipline and absenteeism in schools.

Whilst we may all agree about the importance of distributed forms of leadership Denise Mifsud challenges us to critically (re)view the way reforms are being undertaken in Malta. In the unfolding Maltese education scenario of gradual decentralization and school networking, Mifsud explores the reception of policy-mandated collegiality among the Principal and the Heads of School within one Maltese college, and its subsequent effects on the unfolding network leadership dynamics. This is explored through the leaders' understanding of the collegiality concept; their reaction to the 'forced' implementation of policy-mandated networks through *'For All Children to Succeed'* (2005); and the resulting 'effects' of this implementation. The study is framed within a postmodern paradigm and adopts a Foucauldian theoretical framework. The Heads experience the college as simultaneous individualization and totalization, acknowledging its benefits but criticizing their lack of autonomy, loss of individual school identity, and its imposition in the form of geographical clustering. Whilst acknowledging the attractions, benefits and attributes of networking this study helps to highlight that the fact that networks have been used as a vehicle for government-driven school reform it is leaving school leaders with a sense of what Huxham and Vangen (2005) describe as "collaborative inertia". This is an interesting paper that

engages the reader to reflect on issues like power and control, on leadership dynamics, on empowerment and policy making.

Another two papers this time conducted in Maltese church schools help to give us a positive feel to the values, principles, norms and attributes that are needed to take our schools forward. In the first paper by Mark Farrugia the study explores the culture of a new primary school, as it is engaged in the process of setting its policies, developing pedagogies and introducing organisational structures. Specifically, it examines the Professional Learning Community (PLC) model which is reported in the literature to create a *collaborative culture* aimed at improving both the educational environment and students' achievement. The paper endorses the PLC principles as propounded by Senge (2006, p.3) who see "people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together". This action research study is unique in that we go through a starting school that is involved in not only building but changing a school culture. As the author notes building the culture of a starting school involves a culture change needed to harmonise the vision of the school with that of new staff that comes with preconceived beliefs, ideas and practices. In this context, a culture of collaboration was designated as the most comprehensive to achieve the desired aims. The study is interesting on at least two fronts. It reinforces the belief that a collaborative approach can be beneficial if there is a strong commitment by one and all, helping us to address and contextualise the study of Denise Mifsud. Secondly, it presents insights into what leaders can learn not only from the engagement with the research methodology adopted but as they too related with the PLC principles. This study helps us to appreciate that action research is a strong method to engage and affect practices as it is embedded in school life.

Schooling is all about nurturing persons, although I believe that sometimes we tend to forget this. It is not about creating homogeneous communities but rather to create homogeneity with respect to certain core beliefs concerning the curriculum, teaching and learning, civic virtue and norms of comportment as Ferrero (2005) argues. Values are therefore central to our discourse, something our next paper explores. Fr Mark Ellul investigates how the ethos, leadership and structure in a particular Catholic school affect character development.

The author argues that a well-balanced character is important as it will direct one in life. Values are thus guiding mechanisms that affect the social functioning of life, and given that students spend a substantial amount of time in schools exploring this dimension may help us to appreciate what determining factors exist. The study goes on to describe a small scale

investigation that was carried out with a number of students from different year groups within the same secondary school. The methodology used for the study took the phenomenological approach. Focus group discussions elicited the pupil's experiences on how the school processes and relationships with staff effect their character development. The study indicates that the interactions happening in school influence the personal formulation of individual ethos and values which ultimately aid in character development. The findings indicate that community life and individual care enhance the pupils' self-esteem and support their personal and social development further.

Anthony Satariano's paper helps us to reflect on the key area of assessment, with a focus on Assessment for Learning (AfL). This study goes beyond mere rhetoric, goes beyond presenting the ideals, the pros behind the introduction of assessment practices in our country and schools. It presents the teachers' viewpoints and perceptions, and provides insights into possible implications that AfL could have on teaching and learning. Data was collected through a series of one-to-one interviews and classroom observation. The research found that some AfL strategies such as the sharing of the learning intention, effective questioning techniques and the provision of quality feedback are generally being employed in the classroom. However, this study also revealed that crucial strategies such as the sharing of the success criteria and self-and peer-assessment were very rarely implemented. The data analysis also revealed the need for teachers to pass responsibility for learning to the learners themselves. Possible implications for the development of formative assessment practices that enhance the child's learning experience and progress are presented.

Amongst other things Satariano presents the importance behind sharing of good practices through both traditional methods or the use of social media; the need to develop AfL policies that give direction to the schools and Colleges noted. A key area that I subscribe to is the point raised that teachers are encouraged to entrust the responsibility for AfL practices to their learners, making them more self-directed in their own learning, especially through the delivery of objective-led lessons and self- and peer-assessment. This will enable learners to learn how to monitor their own learning, develop the capability to evaluate their own work and the work of their peers, and reflect on what to do next. Satariano argues that "the ability of learners to assess their own work contributes to learners taking control of their learning" and I would add would help them embrace the importance of learning throughout their lives. It is essential that we manage to do this and a PLC context, as Farrugia argues in his paper, will help us achieve this.

Another timely article is that by Chris Kenely who undertook research in the area of discipline in primary schools. The study examines the different

classroom disciplinary measures used at one secondary school in Malta, their effectiveness and why teachers resort to such measures. There is evidence in the literature that teachers resort to various disciplinary strategies, albeit not all effective, when trying to manage learners' behaviour. This study goes on to describe a small-scale research carried out with all the learners in Year 9 and Year 10 (i.e. 13 - 15 year-olds) and with all the teachers who teach one of four particular subjects in the afore mentioned years. The study compares the findings with similar international research conducted mostly with secondary school learners and teachers. The similarities and contrasts are highlighted in the research findings. The author contends that implementing effective disciplinary measures in the classroom would be beneficial for both teachers and learners, especially those who are often seen as the most troublesome. Similar to Satariano's observations, Kenely highlights the importance behind the establishment of class rules early in the scholastic year as these ensure greater student commitment and ownership towards these rules. Teachers can consider the more frequent use of various hinting techniques to censor misbehaviour and to embark on a system that recognises appropriate student and class behaviour as this creates a positive atmosphere of respect and trust where students are less likely to act irresponsibly. Teachers are encouraged to make use of one-to-one discussions, allowing students to come up with a behaviour modification plan, and when possible, monitor students' progress. The study recommends that teachers apply pre-established and reasonable logical consequences rather than resorting to punishments and illogical consequences which might breed resentment. Finally, teachers should focus their efforts on engaging students in well-managed, interesting and stimulating classroom activities rather than wasting time trying to implement measures that stop misbehaviour. This last point shows that preparation and a focus on engaging student in meaningful learning helps to minimise misbehaviour (Danielson, 2002; McCloud, 2005).

This collection of papers demonstrates that our younger generation of educators as professionals are not prepared to sit back and rest on any perceived laurels and they are prepared to challenge themselves and others, because, in the words of the President of the United States Barack Obama (2009): "We have the power to make the world we seek, but only if we have the courage to make a new beginning". This issue has served as a platform for a group of researchers/educators to share and challenge us as readers and the institutions they form part of to take a 'new' look around them and see how things are unfolding. At times we are so inundated with work, so focused on implementing that we do not stop to reflect, to share ideas, to challenge what is happening. We hope that at least some of these articles help to challenge your thoughts, what you believe in, how you relate to others, what you do on a daily basis. Only in this way can we engage in journeys where people matter.

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