

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLES

Effective leadership as a model for schools in 21st Century Malta

David Debono

Maria Regina College, Malta
dvd586@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper aims to investigate a model of leadership for Maltese schools in the light of recent changes in the educational system. Effective leadership in the Maltese educational system is urgently needed. It is argued that leadership needs to be taken seriously if we want the reforms to bear fruition. This research explores whether forms of distributed leadership can render the system more effective. Furthermore, it aims to explore the roles played by members of the Senior Management Team in primary and secondary schools and what their views are about leadership. A combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches were adopted and the study was carried out in one particular college in Malta. Methods of data collection used were questionnaires and one-to-one semi-structured interviews. 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. 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.

The main recommendations emanating from this research are that teachers should be crucial decision-makers, paper-work and bureaucratic tasks should be reduced, and a middle-manager for time-tables and schedules should be introduced. Moreover, given that the reforms have brought about the introduction of College Principals this should not imply that the role of the heads of school should be undervalued.

Keywords: primary and secondary schools, senior management teams, distributed leadership

Introduction

Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach (1999) state that over the last century a great deal has been learnt about leadership. However, 'effective' leadership in the Maltese educational system remains a topical issue. Education Minister Evarist Bartolo stated that effective leadership happens when "leading is done by serving" and added that a third of all Maltese students do not even obtain a pass in one ordinary level examination. He believes that this is definitely not the result that one would like to have when talking about effective schools. He maintains that it is necessary to have creative leaders who understand the job of the teacher and that problems should be addressed "instead of being hidden under the carpet" (Bartolo, 2013a).

In education, as in many other settings, being an effective leader means "getting the best out of the people you work with" (MacBeath & Myers, 1999, p.61). Day & Sammons (2013, p.6) outline that "working effectively with people" is an important characteristic in effective leadership. Co-operation is necessary to ensure effective leadership. Involving staff in decision-making helps staff to feel valued as outlined by Bush & Middlewood (2005) who maintain that people are most likely to show commitment if they are valued by those who have responsibility for them. Effective leadership "encompasses a social process of influencing others" (Lee & Pang, 2011, p.331). This ensures the need for a professional learning community and good relationships with all the staff. Sala (2003) claims effective leadership must rely less on popularity and appeasement and more on strong, confident and risk-taking leaders.

An effective school is generally defined as one that promotes better student outcomes (Day & Sammons, 2013) and in this regard, the main aim of school leaders is to improve teaching and learning. The latter argue that the more leaders focus their influence, their learning, and their relationships with teachers on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their influence on student outcomes. Green (2002) notes that it is leadership that creates a climate in schools and classrooms that will allow learning to flourish. Moreover, to enhance student outcomes, an effective leader should support, evaluate and develop teacher quality, setting school goals, measuring progress and making improvements, whilst also strategically using resources to focus all activities on improving teaching and learning (Stewart, 2013). Good teaching and learning is ensured by a School Development Plan (SDP) with action plans focusing on student learning and having success criteria that are clearly measurable when possible. The SDP should be the fulcrum of the school.

An OECD report (2009) claims that more and more tasks have been added to school leaders' workload. Whilst most of the leadership tasks seem to be carried out by one individual, there is the need to redistribute tasks. An effective leader "remains the major driving force" (Day & Sammons, 2013, p.25) whilst there still remains the need to prioritise tasks which are mainly teaching related. Maxwell (2009) refers to this as self-discipline and argues that if priorities are determined it becomes easier to focus on what is important. Moreover, Dimmock & Tan (2013, p. 335) argue that "distributed leadership and instructional leadership are inextricably intertwined." It is not easy to be an effective leader as it takes time, energy and determination in order to create a professional learning community that can lead to better student outcomes and the attainment of desired school goals. Bezzina (2014) states that a sense of purpose and commitment to the attainment of school goals is required but adds that all effective leaders "can vouch for the fact that visionary goals cannot be achieved within the constraint of a 40-hour week."

It is within such a context that this study was carried out. This paper aims to investigate how the recent changes in the educational system will affect leadership in Maltese schools. This research was undertaken as part of a Masters degree in Educational Leadership that the author undertook with the University of Leicester (Debono, 2014). The areas about effective school leadership that will be explored in this paper include inspiration, motivation, consultation, decision-making, distributing leadership and establishing positive relationships.

Research Method

The choice of research instruments was intended to collect deep and rich data as well as to take into account the widest number of respondents possible. A questionnaire was developed using Likert scales. Questionnaires were administered to a sample of members of the Senior Management Team and teaching staff from one of the ten colleges that consisute the state education sector in Malta and Gozo. This college consists of 6 primary schools and 2 secondary schools. Analysing a particular college gave a more holistic view when analysing effective leadership in the light of the recent changes in Malta's educational system. Semi-structured interviews were also deemed the best way to achieve triangulation and hence the authenticity of data was confirmed.

The target population for this research was Heads of School, SMT members and teaching staff sampled from schools within one particular college. Heads of School and SMT members were selected in order to analyse their perceptions and views about effective leadership, whilst teaching staff were selected in order to analyse their views about how they perceive leadership within their school. The persons involved in the research population were in

possession of a Bachelor's Degree (and in some cases had even higher qualifications) and were not newly qualified teachers. In the questionnaire, in view of the fact that the six primary schools have a staff population nearly equal to the two secondary schools, it was decided to adopt proportional stratified sampling using 95% confidence level and 5% confidence interval with the two main strata being the primary and the secondary schools. Whilst a sample of 165 respondents was required from a population of 290 Heads, SMT members and teachers within this college, 200 questionnaires were distributed of which 168 were returned. All the SMT members in the two secondary schools responded, while 80% of teachers in the secondary schools participated. Responses of primary SMT members and primary teachers were 81% and 88% respectively. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted and non-probability sampling, namely purposive sampling was used. Two primary teachers, two secondary teachers, a primary SMT member and a secondary SMT member were interviewed. The table below shows the codes used for excerpts from semi-structured interviews and also questionnaire data which will be discussed with the findings in the next section.

Interviewee	Code
Primary Teacher 1	PT1
Primary Teacher 2	PT2
Secondary Teacher 1	ST1
Secondary Teacher 2	ST2
Primary SMT Member	PL
Secondary SMT Member	SL
Questionnaire - Open-ended question	QUE

Figure 1: Codes used for excerpts

Access to the research sample followed the required procedure. Ethical permission from the Research and Development Department of the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education was granted and permission from the respective Heads of School sought after meeting up with the College Principal. Both the questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews were carried out in strict confidentiality, whilst anonymity was promised and guaranteed. From the pilot study it was noted that the questionnaire was too long. Hence, amongst other minor changes, the original 39 questions involving the Likert scales were reduced to 32 questions.

Analysis and Discussion of Results

Inspiration, motivation, consultation, staff involvement in decision making, decision-making, distributing leadership and establishing positive relationships are crucial areas that can lead to effective leadership in the day-to-day running of the school and this was the main reason why these areas were analysed and discussed. Issues of satisfaction, discipline and the effects

of the new roles emerging from the college system with regards to effective leadership are also discussed within this paper.

58% of the questionnaire respondents agreed that their head of school inspires them to perform, whilst only 14% of the respondents disagreed that the head of school in the college under review inspires teachers to perform.

“He [referring to a head of school] is already at school at 7:00am” (ST2).

“She’s [referring to a head of school] always coming up with new creative ideas: concerts, parents’ days and visits for the children in kindergarten” (PT1).

These ideas appear to concur with Green (2002, p.4) who states that a vital aspect of effective leadership is “motivating oneself and other people in the team whilst providing plenty of encouragement and support.” Moreover, a leader can be considered to be effective if he is a role model or a “leading learner” (Barth, 1990, p.18) who strives to become “the incredible performer” (Allen, 2007, p.1). A significant quarter of the respondents (26%) were neutral about their position: “A good leader must inspire all his staff, so why all this demotivation in the school?” (ST2).

These findings express concern as to whether school leaders are motivating their staff or seen to be motivating their staff to achieve school goals.

The literature notes that it is important that leaders know what they want to accomplish as without a vision there can be no leadership (Bezzina, 2013). Day & Sammons (2013) suggest that an effective leader should strive to create a shared vision and a strategic plan for the school that will motivate staff and other persons in the community. Almost 83% of the primary school teachers and SMT agreed that their head of school uses various skills and styles to lead effectively. On the other hand, only 40% of the teachers and the SMT in the secondary sector expressed agreement, whilst almost 32% disagreed that their head of school uses various styles to lead effectively. There is quite a significant difference in the responses given by primary and secondary school respondents. Although using different styles will help in each and every particular situation, Bezzina (2014) states that “leadership is a difficult undertaking as it takes exceptional, sometimes heroic, people to do it well.” It is argued that

“sometimes he [the head of school] takes decisions but at other times he consults and involves all the staff” (PT1)

“he divides and rules; that is how our head of school operates” (ST2)

80% of the primary and 34% of the secondary sample agree that their head of school involves teachers in decision-making. It was found that there is a significant difference in regard to teachers' involvement in decision-making between the primary and secondary sectors as 48% of the secondary staff disagreed. However, similar feelings were expressed about consultation by the head of school as shown in Figure 2.

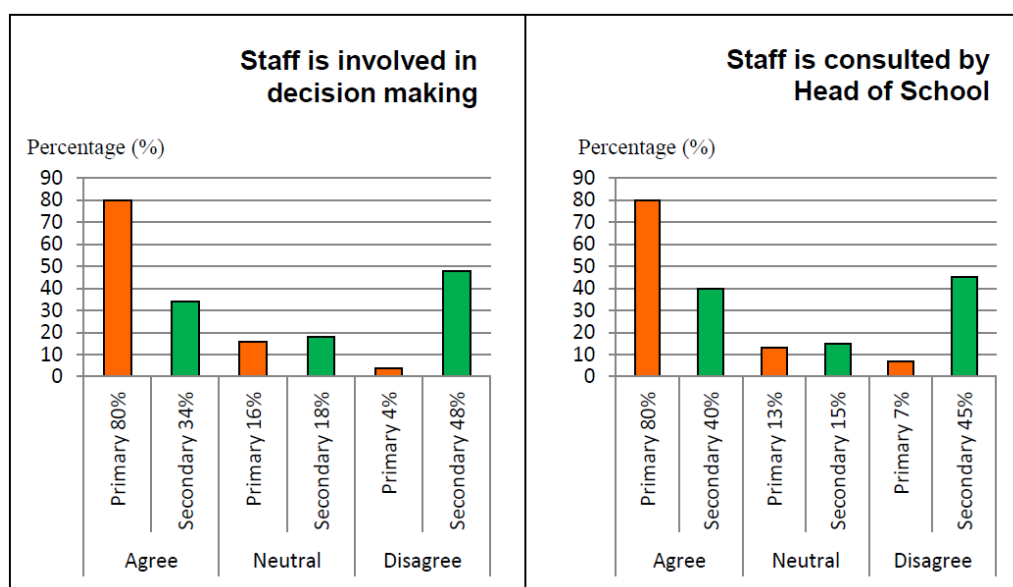


Figure 2: Staff involved in decision making and consultation by head of school according to sector

Whilst a primary teacher argued that “all staff must be consulted and not the very few” (PT1), secondary teachers argued that

“we were notified to give our views about which track (level) each student has to follow but in the beginning of the scholastic year everything was mixed up” (ST2)

“Sometimes we are not even notified. So how do you expect to be involved in decision-making?” (ST1)

This runs counter to what is suggested in *The Strategic Plan* for the implementation of the National Minimum Curriculum (2001, pp.114-5) where it is outlined that decision-making processes have to ensure whole staff involvement based on effective top-down and bottom-up lines of communication. Hence “the most successful school leaders are flexible rather than dogmatic in their thinking within a system of core values including persistence, resilience and optimism” (Day & Sammons, 2013, p.21).

The study brought out that the SMT are of the opinion that the head consults more with them than the teachers with 96% of the former noting that head

communicates and consults them on issues and only 57% of teachers believe that there is communication and consultation taking place. Teachers argued that there should be

“...more discussion between the head of school and the staff about teaching and learning issues” (QUE).

“The head uses effective methods and has good communication so that we [teachers] feel part of the school community” (PT2).

More involvement of teachers in school activities and projects create a high level of teamwork

“...and a sense of collegiality that already exists between SMT and staff members” (ST2)

“...that can be created even by having an effective board of discipline composed of different teachers.” (QUE)

Day & Sammons (2013) outline the importance of building effective relationships which can help to build a professional learning community. Investing in good relationships will enhance leadership and the leader will be able to “attract followers” (Stewart, 2013, p.54) and gain support.

A resounding 95% of staff agreed that their head of school is always there to listen to staff concerns.

“‘Good morning, how are you?’ These are his first words every single morning” (PT2).

“The head of school understands me when I need resources and when equipment happens to be faulty.” (ST1).

This was corroborated by what an SMT member noted:

“When a teacher asks if he or she can talk to you, I usually accept at once because I feel that the teacher might have already made a significant step in trying to come forward. So it’s my duty to speak to the person concerned.” (PL)

These ideas show elements of collegiality, support, an ability to listen to teachers’ ideas and consideration for teachers’ personal and professional welfare, and also appear to be in agreement with what Day & Sammons (2013) believe a head of school should be. Moreover, 96% of the SMT and 79% of the teachers believe that the head of school is accessible and operates an open door policy. Teachers argued that the head of school is “regularly in the office for a chat” (PT1)

At the same time, some concern is raised: “although sometimes it’s very difficult to find the head when needed” (ST2). Green (2002) suggests that it is a crucial responsibility of head teachers to find quality-time for whole-school leadership. 70% of the primary and 78% of secondary teachers and SMT believe that the head of school’s time is taken up by meetings. Heads of school were in agreement with their teachers noting that they are involved in numerous meetings such as Council of Heads and meetings within the directorates. They argued that they can do without certain meetings of a nature that others could attend:

“Sometimes I can’t do otherwise... I wish I can visit the classrooms but I do end up with meetings about renting premises and the school ground to be used outside school hours or for arranging classrooms to be used for elections or Matsec examinations” (SL)

This is not curriculum related. Green (2002) argues that spending time with a building contractor may help to ensure improvement in the physical aspect of the school, but does this leave enough time for strategic thinking and planning and core activities such as classroom observation? This does not seem to be what Stewart (2013) meant when arguing that the leader’s role has changed from “bells, buildings, and buses to a focus on instructional leadership” (p.52). Moreover, as Green (2002) states, “the shift in emphasis from administration to management, and now to leadership, to support effective teaching and learning has been necessary” (p.1).

Effective leadership also means leading with various initiatives being taken during the scholastic year. It was found that there is no difference between primary and secondary schools in regard to various initiatives being carried out. 76% of the sample agrees that there are various initiatives ranging from extra-curricular to major events being organized within this college.

“Celebration day, sports day, social events for parents, a pet-show, carnival and end-of-exams bash amongst other events for all the staff outside school hours are all great initiatives which are being supported by the school administration and praised for” (ST1).

This resonates with what Roberts & Pruitt (2009) state that “all actions or outcomes that promote the values of the learning community are reasons to celebrate” (p.221). Moreover, they argue that awards, assemblies and dinners amongst others are traditional ways of celebrating success, but accomplishments may be recognized on an ongoing, day-by-day basis.

Day & Sammons (2013) argue that the main challenges of effective leadership today include increased workload, stress and behaviour management, and attendance. This leads to the fact that unfortunately leaders do not focus on

ensuring consistently good teaching and learning in a context where school leadership is only second to teaching in its effects on student learning (Leithwood et. al., 2006). Besides the main challenges mentioned by Day & Sammons (2013), one major issue is being able to take decisions. Effective leadership requires a head of school to take decisions when necessary in order to ensure a safe environment. Hence, when possible “decisions should be taken straightaway without further delay” (QUE) keeping in mind both the teachers and the students. Also, “problems ignored usually escalate” (Green, 2002, p.4). Alongside this, refraining from informing teachers for fear of complaints is a weakness in leadership and denotes lack of transparency.

Hughes & Pickeral (2013) found that shared leadership that engages staff, parents, and students becomes a force multiplier in school climate work. They argue that “if we do not empower one another to become leaders, we are missing out on a great opportunity to improve our schools, our students and our community” (p.4). The Strategic Plan (2001) states that a consultative style of management should be cultivated to ensure the nurturing of decentralization whilst the head of school will be required to share responsibilities through distributed leadership. Using the chi-square test it was found that there is a significant difference between the primary and secondary sectors in regard to fair distribution of tasks. Whilst 74% of the SMT in primary schools agree that tasks are fairly distributed, only 31% of the SMT in secondary schools agree.

“I can’t distribute equally, how can I leave a task if I’m sure that a particular assistant head can’t handle it” (PL).

“The major task is the time-table, special leave and replacements which I’ve delegated to one of the assistant heads” (SL).

Although the head of school distributed this major task to his assistant head, “she’s always in her office with a closed door” (ST2)

These feelings contradict Earley (1998) who maintains that effective middle managers contribute to whole-school issues and do not simply conduct their tasks. However, in some cases

“more effective distribution of duties is necessary which must have the same weighting whilst assistant heads need to be less insular with their duties, that is, they must remember that they always form part of a team, that is, the SMT” (QUE).

This can be viewed as a narrow conceptualisation of the work and definitely not an undertaking of distributed leadership. Earley (1998) makes a critical point that although one is given a task it does not mean that one is only focused on fulfilling that task. Assistant heads are ultimately part of a team,

and ownership of the SMT is essential. However this much depends on how the head of school looks at work and whether he/she is in favour of distributing leadership amongst his SMT and even teachers.

Although it was noted that some SMTs are more focused on their particular duties, it was found that student learning is in fact a main concern of the school SMT. 92% of the primary and 71% of the secondary teachers agree that student learning is a main concern.

“We have subject meetings weekly with a head of department or an assistant head to discuss the way forward for our students attainment and achievement” (ST1).

Teachers are in agreement that the SMT expresses concern about student learning. On the other hand, as shown in Figure 3, the SMT and secondary teachers seem to hold quite similar opinion that the SMT has little time to monitor curricular work. The primary school teachers hold varied opinions with a significant amount on the neutral side. Secondary teachers felt the need for more frequent visits in classrooms by SMT members.

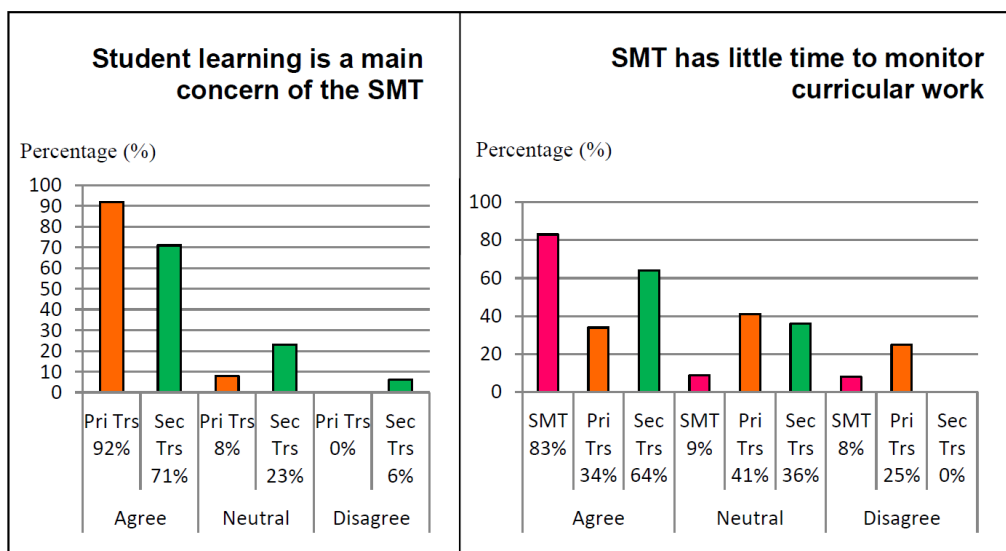


Figure 3: Student learning is a concern for SMT and SMT has little time to monitor curricular work according to grade and sector

The majority of teachers believe that the SMT makes itself available to staff but there exists a significant difference between the SMT in primary and secondary schools. 97% of the primary teachers stated that the SMT apart from creating structured time for teachers to consult them they can “refer a problem or case to an assistant head immediately” (PT1). However, only 65% of the secondary teachers stated that the SMT is available to cater for their needs.

“Some of the assistant heads help you in regard to special leave, resources, behaviour difficulties but there are others who seem to be busy doing nothing” (ST1).

It resulted that there is no significant difference in the proportion of teachers and SMT replies, as both agree that there are strong relations between the teaching staff and SMT. 97% of the respondents in the primary sector and 60% in the secondary sector agree that there are good relations. The NCF (2011) points out that SMTs must be supported to dedicate effective, quality time to work together as they lead the schools, critically reflect upon issues concerning learning and teaching, and engage with teachers and other support staff. More effort is necessary in ensuring strong relations especially in the secondary sector since 37% of the other secondary teachers and SMT members opted for a neutral response in regard to good working relations.

A few primary teachers argued that

“there is a sense of conflict among certain members, mostly the assistant heads, which hinders the main aim of our profession: the teaching of our students” (QUE).

Secondary school teachers and SMT members seem to have more serious concerns regarding conflicts.

“how can you run a school when all SMT are at war with each other with guns pointed...” (ST2),

so “better affinity between SMT members is needed” (QUE).

In Hartley’s (2007) view, the competence of its members and collective endeavour is what makes the school work. This is a necessity which ensures effective leadership and which, according to Leithwood et al. (2006), has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed. It was also pointed out that “the SMT needs to build more trust and belief in one another” (QUE).

Woods et al. (2004) argue that effective teams need to find ways to face and resolve conflicts as distributed leadership in action also needs to acknowledge and deal with conflict. Graetz (2000) points out that “the dynamics of loose-tight working relationships meld strong personalised leadership at the top with distributed leadership” (p.556). Moreover, “collaboration is the glue that keeps learning communities together” (Roberts & Pruitt, 2009, p.189). It is here that the head of school shows his/her true worth as they create opportunities for shared leadership. It is here that SMT members learn to take on responsibilities, to make mistakes, to learn from such mistakes, to be there for each other. Without this belief then it is hard to see things improving.

It also seems that some primary heads of school distribute only a minimum number of tasks to their assistant heads as reported by McEwen, Carlisle, Knipe, Neil & McClune (2002) who found that heads in the primary sector only distribute a quarter to a third of their duties. This can lead to what Green (2002) states that “perhaps school leaders sometimes treat adults too much like children” as they “find it even more difficult to allow people to fail and then learn from their mistakes” (p.6)

Challenges to effective leadership differ in primary and secondary schools. Primary SMT and teachers are more concerned with complimentary education arguing that what is being done is not enough and hence “there should be daily withdrawal from classrooms” (PL) instead of offering complimentary education on a weekly basis. It is argued that a long period of time passes for students to be examined and statemented: “We had children in year 3 who were statemented in year 6” (PT2)

It was also argued that the school SMT is
“not finding help from authorities” (PL), and

“if psychological service continues to be offered without payment this must be a good service since parents are not opting to take their children for a private service but they are awaiting the service, free for all by government” (PL).

Discipline is also an important characteristic with regards to effective leadership. Both staff in the primary and secondary schools had similar views to the issue of discipline and it is a huge burden on the school SMTs in both the primary and secondary sector. Difficulties such as “more discipline is needed in regard to the school uniform” (QUE) were among the priorities of primary school teachers in order to ensure effective leadership in their school. Moreover, secondary school teachers and SMT are also aware of discipline problems and propose possible actions

“a tangible discipline policy which everyone would be aware of is needed” (QUE),

“school population has to be reduced to 500-550 students in order to ensure discipline” (SL).

However, as to discipline policies leading to effective leadership, there is a significant difference between primary and secondary schools. Whilst 77% of primary staff agree, 59% of secondary staff disagree. Teachers argued that the responsibility of year groups to SMT members can enhance discipline issues with regards to effective leadership. Primary teachers recognised the need to have an SMT member “in charge of a particular year group” (PT2). The system of year groups is adopted in both secondary schools where

“it’s better to have an assistant head in charge of a particular form” (SL) but

“it does not make any sense having an assistant head who does not correct a student who is not under his responsibility” (ST1) and

Both primary and secondary teachers also feel the need

“to decrease the amount of paper work and meetings so that the SMT and the Head of School communicate more both with teachers and students” (QUE).

Using the chi-square test, it results that there is a difference in primary and secondary schools about SMT monitoring in the classroom. 93% of primary teachers agree that there is adequate monitoring, however only 28% of the secondary teachers agree. This contrasts with 35% of secondary teachers who disagree.

“I have 15 weekly lessons with Form 3 classes in 3 different sets... their assistant head never came to my class” (ST2)

Discussing the workload of the SMT, especially in secondary schools, it was argued that

“by increasing the SMT, one would not be solving anything, as it would be more difficult to have everyone on the same wavelength” (QUE).

It was argued that these problems in secondary schools are mainly being faced because large schools are hindering the building of a professional learning community. Sala (2003) argues that leaders from small schools are more likely to have direct contact with all administrators and teachers, and that their leadership is therefore more directly associated with performance.

82% of the teachers and SMT members agreed that large schools hinder effective leadership. It was also found that there is no difference between the opinion of teachers and SMT members as “a school population has to be limited to 500 students while premises should be such that they are conducive to teaching and learning” (SL). Authorities in Malta seem to be concerned about the size of some schools as “the population of students depends on the size of each locality. Too many big schools and too many small schools are not ideal for the type of education we wish to offer... the ideal size of schools should be between 400 and 500 students” the Minister for Education noted (Bartolo, 2013b).

“The enormous school population with the various track/levels in each subject is making schooling a nightmare, especially when it comes to setting exam papers” (QUE).

In the context of the educational changes of the last few years, the study showed that 54% of the primary school teachers are feeling a greater level of satisfaction than they did five years ago. On the other hand, only 30% of the SMT in both primary and secondary schools feel more satisfied than they did five years ago. There seems to be no difference between teachers and SMT in primary schools. A significant difference between the SMT and teachers in secondary schools was registered. Whilst 60% of the secondary SMT felt neutral about work satisfaction, no less than 72% of secondary teachers disagreed. The following response seems to be representative of the majority of teachers:

“I have been teaching for 12 years... each year seems to be worse than the previous one” (ST2).

Moreover,

“Three assistant-heads have been locked in for three whole weeks doing tasks related to the half-yearly examination period: ranging from jackets for examination papers, teacher duties and special arrangements for students” (SL).

The study also explored views about the salary of heads of school. Various teachers and SMT members argue that the salary is not attractive for various leadership posts that entail high levels of responsibility.

“Leadership is not worth it as it involves many responsibilities... there is no considerable increase in salary so I prefer doing my lessons and I’m done” (ST1).

This has brought about a situation where fewer teachers appear to be interested in taking up leadership posts. The OECD (2009) reported shortages in leadership personnel and highlighted the fact that application numbers have decreased. Stewart (2013) points out that although a number of teachers enrol in programs to get credits and masters’ degrees that earn them an increase in salary, they refrain from becoming school leaders. Bartolo (2013) believes that in Malta it is necessary to identify those interested in leadership when they are still young. It is being suggested that these young people should follow various programmes that will allow for the sharing of good practice between different countries.

One must say that teachers’ satisfaction is nowadays a concern especially ever since the major reform of the college system which also saw the introduction of new positions such as that of the College Principal, Prefect of Discipline, Inco, Precincts Officer and the psycho-social team. There were mixed feelings about these new roles:

“Our school would run better without interference from the college principal who many times instead of helping and supporting the school hinders good practices” (QUE).

“Effective leadership is hindered when the principal needs to be consulted on a trivial matter. The SMT should have more autonomy” (QUE).

Dimmock & Tan (2013) point out that such situations as described above could lead to possible instability and have an effect upon the school’s strategic direction. It is important to establish that the principal’s primary role is to facilitate cooperation between schools.

“It is not effective having a Prefect of Discipline who comes every now and then. We need a board that is continuously monitoring and take actions” (ST2).

Having a Precincts Officer

“was really needed especially being a newly-built school and some works still needed to be done” (SL).

“I can’t have an assistant-head who went on the roof to check a tank with water” (PL).

“Increasing minor staff” (PL) is necessary while “having three handymen in a whole college is not acceptable” (QUE).

Moreover, 87% of the SMT agree that the roles of psycho-social team increased support for the Head of School. However,

“more disciplinary action needs to be taken but there must be a stronger backup when it comes to schooling so as to empower the SMT, Prefect of Discipline and the psycho-social team” (QUE).

Whilst one cannot underestimate the work carried out in the Learning Zones and with particular students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in the Alternative Programmes, it was also mentioned that

“more human resources are needed to deal with certain challenging students who need individual help” (ST1).

“Teachers are doing a great job in this regard and I’ll give them my full support” (SL)

While Day & Sammons’ (2013) suggestion of “creating links and collaborating with other schools, parents, carers and other agencies to share expertise and ensure students’ well-being” (p.7) is being addressed, the general feeling is

that the ever-growing demands made on schools requires more specialised personnel on the school premises.

One cannot discuss and reinforce effective leadership in our schools and not having a strong system of support. Teachers and SMT members feel that effective leadership in Malta seems to be hindered by policy gaps. Teachers and heads of school argued that:

“kindergarten must become obligatory as from three years” (PL),

“having parents going on holiday every now and then, doing their hair and nails but not having money for their children’s uniform is not acceptable” (PT2),

“paying a one-on-one LSA when the student doesn’t attend regularly is debatable” (SL),

“all PSD sets already had a maximum of 15 students in the beginning of the scholastic year but new students continue to be accepted” (SL).

Bonello (2014) highlights the relationship between schools and communities, particularly parents. He argues that it is useless to reform the educational sector unless the authorities tackle the issue of people with weak parenting skills.

The issue of autonomy is a recurrent subject in local debates on education. It seems that more autonomy for schools and school leaders is needed. Bartolo (2014) argued that no bullying on teachers and students is tolerated, “leaders must have more powers.” This brings us to the non-ending argument of whether or not a head of school must have the power of not accepting a student due to a valid reason. Moreover whilst a College Principal will surely be a major asset for the head of school giving the necessary advice and help when needed, Bartolo (2014) argued “heads of school should not be the ‘altar boys’ of the college principal.”

Whilst various bureaucratic procedures need to be revised and some (such as the school inventory) have already been removed, it was argued that it is necessary to “reduce the number of tasks not related to teaching and learning such as maintenance” (PL).

However, a head of school argued that “I wasn’t allowed to have two mobile unlimited contracts that cost €250 each and had to leave telephones with a bill of €900 per month instead of saving €400” (SL). The need for capital expenditure was also highlighted when an SMT member noted that: “the

capital decreased by €7,000 in 2 years” and this when “the wear and tear in the school is increasing.” (PL)

This appears to contradict the need for improvement urged by Day & Sammons (2013, p.19) when redefining school leadership responsibilities and emphasising the importance that autonomy does not automatically lead to improvement unless adequately supported at a higher level.

Conclusion

This paper advocates for school leadership with values such as trust, patience and most of all passion and love for the teaching profession because effective leadership “requires an intelligent head with an intelligent heart” (Day et al, 2000, p.24). Motivating teachers and “providing plenty of encouraging” is necessary (Green, 2002). An effective leader sells ideas to the staff but also shares the vision which is owned by the staff. There appears to be a greater need for consultation in secondary schools while primary level teachers feel more consulted and involved in the decision making process than their counterparts at secondary level. This is definitely an issue that can be addressed both at College level (for example through the Council of Heads meetings) and also through the Educational Leaders Council (ELC) meeting at Directorate level.

This research shows that secondary heads of school are involved in too many meetings which do not leave enough time for strategic thinking, planning and core activities such as classroom observation. Secondary SMT members seem only to be doing the tasks delegated and hence a “collective endeavour” (Hartley, 2007, p.206) is lacking.

A positive finding is that student learning is a main concern of the SMT. However, it was found that there is very little time to monitor curricular work. The Maltese educational system must give this issue importance as “the SMTs must critically reflect upon issues concerning learning and teaching.” (NCF, 2011, p.16). Various duties (such as supervising construction work and maintenance) were found to take up considerable time of the SMT members and in principle should be the responsibility of other personnel. Overall, SMT members are receptive to teachers’ needs and there are strong relationships between teachers and SMTs. Unfortunately, this was not true in the case of relationships between SMT members as it emerged that various conflicts hinder the smooth running of the particular school.

Paper-work and bureaucratic tasks (such as replying to e-mails with deadlines) should be reduced so that heads can focus on effective leadership. Team building activities should be organised to improve relationships within

and with the SMTs. If an SMT member is not comfortable with a particular duty, the head of school should have the option of relieving this member of this duty. Consideration should be given to the possibility of introducing a middle-manager with administrative duties responsible for handling timetables, examination arrangements and schedules. This will allow SMT members the possibility of dedicating more time to 'teaching and learning'. Besides the college based Precinct Officer, especially in large schools, consideration should be given to the possibility of having a person who is in charge of maintenance and equipment. School leaders should retain the responsibility they had and should not be undervalued by the College Principal. The education authorities need to review the existing hierarchical structures and ensure that 'new' relationships are established round distributed forms of leadership that are based on the principles of solidarity and collegiality.

This study has shown that heads of school must be given more autonomy and the college principals should be more collaborative in their approach. Dimmock & Tan (2013) had reported that in Singapore there has been a significant rhetorical shift towards favouring more autonomy of administrative and pedagogical authority to individual schools. This is needed in Malta especially when one keeps in mind the challenges of each particular college. However, stronger support from the education authorities is necessary to address issues such as discipline and absenteeism.

Education Minister Bartolo (2013) argued that "it's easier to be an Education Minister rather than to be a head of school." This resonates with the point raised by Day and Sammons (2013) who note that "most educational leaders will experience failure, disappointment, frustration, rejection and hostility at some time during their professional lives" (p.13). Being a leader can be a lonely job with little to no support. It is here that the College Principal and the education authorities can play a more critical role to ensure that they motivate and support their heads, and ensure that they learn how to distribute responsibilities as against purely delegating them. These are some of the challenges that this study has highlighted and hope that can enlighten future professional development opportunities and policy makers in their endeavour to improve the leadership taking place in our schools.

References

- Allen, S. J. (2007) Effective Leadership: Assess how well you are developing your leaders. *Journal of Leadership Excellence*, 24 (10), 8.
- Barth, R. S. (1990). *Improving schools from within*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bartolo, E. (2013a). Introductory Address presented at the MUT National Conference, Effective and Modern School Management. The Dolmen Hotel, Saturday 23rd November, 2013.

- Bartolo, E. (2013b). Parliament Question (PQ) 3147. Maltese Parliament - 01/07/2013.
- Bartolo, E. (2014). "Gvern li jisma": Consultation meeting with teachers. Points taken during consultation meeting held at St Ignatius College, Boys Secondary School on Thursday 10th April, 2014.
- Bezzina, C. (2014). Encouraging leaders to walk the talk. Article in *The Sunday Times of Malta*, April 6, 2014.
- Bezzina, C. (2013). The Thrust of Educational Leadership: the Challenges Facing School Leaders. Paper presented at the Malta Union of Teachers National Conference, *Effective and Modern School Management*, The Dolmen Hotel, Saturday 23rd November, 2013.
- Bonello, K. (2014). Middle schools concept will lead to some teachers transfers. Article in *The Malta Independent*, March, 2, 2014.
- Borg, M. G., & Giordmaina, J. (2002). The College System in State Schools: A study of its impact as perceived by College Principals, SMTs and personnel in the various teaching grades. A research project commissioned by the Malta Union of Teachers.
- Bush, T., & Middlewood, D. (2005). *Leading and managing people in education*. London: Sage Publications.
- Day C, Harris M, Tolky H & Beresford J (2000) *Leading schools in times of change*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Day, C., & Sammons, P. (2013). *Successful Leadership: a review of the international literature*. United Kingdom: The University of Nottingham.
- Debono, D. (2014). *Effective leadership: A model for schools in Malta in the light of recent changes in the educational system*. University of Leicester: Unpublished M.Sc. Dissertation.
- Dimmock, C., & Tan, C. Y., (2013). Educational leadership in Singapore: Tight coupling, sustainability, scalability, and succession. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 51 (3), 320-34.
- Earley, P. (1998). Middle management: the key to organizational success? In D. Middlewood & J. Lumby (Eds.) *Strategic Management in Schools and Colleges*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Graetz, F. (2000). Strategic Change Leadership. *Management Decision* 38 (8), 550-562.
- Green, H. (2002). *Ten questions for school leaders*. NCSL: National College for School Leadership.
- Hartley, D. (2007). The emergence of distributed leadership in education: why now? *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 55 (2), 202-214.
- Hughes, W., & Pickeral, T. (2013). School Climate and Shared Leadership. Retrieved from <http://www.schoolclimate.org/publications/documents/sc-brief-leadership.pdf> on May 15, 2014.
- Jacobson, S. & Bezzina, C. (2008). The effects of leadership on student academic/affective achievement. In *The international Handbook on the Preparation and Development of School Leaders*. G. Crow, J. Lumby & P. Pashiardis (Eds.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Lee, John C. K., & Pang, Nicholas S.K. (2011). Educational leadership in China: Contexts and issues. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 6 (3), 331-341.
- Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2006). *Successful School Leadership: What It Is and How It Influences Pupil Learning*. University of Nottingham: National College for School Leadership/Department for Education and Skills.

- Leithwood, K., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning*. New York: Wallace Foundation.
- Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D., & Steinbach, R. (1999). *Changing leadership for changing times*. Buckingham: Open University.
- MacBeath, J. & Myers, K. (1999). *Effective school leaders: How to evaluate and improve your leadership potential*. Great Britain: Pearson Education Limited.
- Maxwell, J. C. (2009). The 21 indispensable qualities of a leader – the complete summary. Retrieved on May 26, 2014 from <http://markdesollaprice.com/qualities-of-a-leader/>
- McEwen, A., Carlisle, K., Knipe, D., Neil, P., & McClune, B. (2002). Primary school leadership: values and actions. *Research Papers in Education*, 17, 2, 147-163.
- Ministry of Education (2005). *The National Minimum Curriculum: A Strategic Plan*. Malta: Salesian Press.
- Ministry of Education (2012). *The National Curriculum Framework*. Malta: Salesian Press.
- OECD (2009). Improving School Leadership: Policy and Practices in OECD countries. Retrieved online on October 12, 2013 from <http://www.oecd.org/education/school/44612785.pdf>
- Roberts, S. M., & Pruitt, E. Z. (2009). *Schools as professional learning communities: Collaborative activities and strategies for professional development*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Sala, F. (2003). Leadership in Education: Effective U.K. College Principals. *NonProfit Management & Leadership*, 14 (2), 171-189.
- Stewart, V. (2013). School leadership around the world. *The Effective Educator*, 70(7), 48-54.
- Woods, P. A. et. al. (2004). Variabilities and Dualities in Distributed Leadership: Findings from a Systematic Literature Review. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 32, 439-457.