

## COMMENTARY

### A reflection on the Learning Outcomes Framework Project

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In our role as Head of Project and Project Leader of the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF), we have been entrusted with leading the compilation and implementation of the project, and together with other education officials we have been privileged with the opportunity of observing the way the local educational scenario is preparing itself for this reform. As a result of this experience we have reflected on the factors that we believe can enhance the impact or success of the Learning Outcomes Framework project in influencing and embedding change in the Maltese classroom. In our opinion, and as a result of our research, the success, or otherwise of this framework relates to the type of management arrangements in place both at the administrative structures of the Education Directorates and in schools.

In this reflection we speak: of teacher development and building capacity; of schools empowered to embrace change; of the transformation of learning environments to adopt the new pedagogies which the Learning Outcomes Framework will bring; and of the capacity to reinforce existing knowledge, skills, dispositions through relevant professional learning opportunities for educators. Our evaluation of the Train the Trainer programme which enabled a number of educators to build their capacity as LOF trainers will be central to this discussion.

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) document, launched in 2012, claims to be 'a response to the changing demands of individuals and society, rapid changes in our education system driven by globalisation, ICT development, competition, shift of traditional values and new paradigms' (Ministry of Education and Employment 2012, iii). A paradigm shift away

from a prescriptive curriculum towards a framework based on learning outcomes which allows for internal flexibility and attractiveness to lifelong learning, is promised (Ministry of Education and Employment 2012, xiii). There is also reference to a reform in national assessment which will complement the change in pedagogy being advised.

The NCF document proposed a Learning Outcomes Framework as the keystone for learning and assessment throughout the years of compulsory schooling. In 2011 and 2012, a framework of ten levels of achievement was developed and partially implemented in the Learning and Assessment programmes of all subjects in Years 7 and 8. In 2014 and 2015, the Learning Outcomes for 8 Learning Areas, 6 Cross-Curricular themes and 48 different subjects taught in compulsory schooling were developed and verified by local and foreign curriculum experts, as part of a €3.6 million EU funded ESF project. Learning and Assessment programmes for each of the 48 different subjects were also formulated and are available online at [www.schoolslearningoutcomes.edu.mt](http://www.schoolslearningoutcomes.edu.mt). The proposed changes will free schools and learners from centrally-imposed knowledge-centric syllabi, giving them the freedom to develop programmes that fulfil the framework of knowledge, attitudes and skills-based outcomes that are considered national education entitlement of all learners in Malta.

This reform will be accompanied by a change in the assessment regime and culture whereby school-based assessment will complement national summative assessment. Assessment of Learning, for Learning and as Learning will be promoted with all educators for the benefit of learners. The National Curriculum Framework and the Learning Outcomes Framework also intend to bring about a number of changes at school/classroom level, including: a reduction of subject content whilst placing more emphasis on 21<sup>st</sup> century skills; a better transition between the various stages of the curriculum, in particular between the Early Years and Primary and between Primary and Secondary; and a larger choice of learning programmes to meet the needs of all learners, ensuring that all learning is recognised and certified, amongst others.

Both the NCF and the LOF have a strong focus on school effectiveness, promoting improved management and school development planning. To this effect, structures like the Directorate of Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE)<sup>24</sup> are in place to provide advice to schools. There is also a more explicit focus on accountability, both at the level of the school sector and at the level of individual schools. A case in point is the practice of External School Reviews, established since 2011, which is carried out with the scope of evaluating schools' effectiveness.

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<sup>24</sup> Defined by the Laws of Malta, Chapter 327 (Education Act) Part II, XIII

Nonetheless, we are aware that a real impact in the classrooms does not simply come about by the introduction of new policies, but by educators owning the process of change. A quick review of international reforms in education confirms that what actually happens in classrooms has proved resistant to external pressure to change (Evans 1996; Hargreaves & Fink 2006). There is no automatic relationship between what policymakers say will happen, and what actually happens as a consequence of policy. Policymakers are not accountable to educators for providing institutional structures and resources necessary to produce improvements in education (Elmore 2007) and educational reform has only a limited track record of success because it is difficult to move practices beyond those educators who are intrinsically motivated to engage in them (Donaldson 2014). Additionally, it is problematic when teachers are seen as 'deliverers' of the curriculum and their performance appraised and managed against targets being set which are external to their daily lives and practices. This can result in a loss of autonomy and a confusion of identity, together with an increase in bureaucratic layers, reduced collegial involvement and more centralised decision making (Campbell, McNamara and Gilroy 2004).

Locally, we think that this perceived gap between policymakers and practitioners may also be the result of centrally-driven curriculum reforms which often characterise the Maltese educational scenario. As a 2014 report about education in Malta published by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusion Education asserts, the education system in Malta is highly centralised and 'top-down' and many decisions regarding school-level organisation and practice are guided by the Ministry or taken at Ministry level' (Education Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education 2014). Although the launch of the policy document 'For All Children to Succeed' (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment 2005) and the introduction in 2006 of the current 10 college structure was aimed to move from a 'top down' system to 'learning communities' in schools, the college system has not resulted in the envisaged decentralisation (Borg & Giordmaina 2012).

In our review of the system, the notion of innovation and how this manifests itself in schools was very intriguing for us, also because of our role within the LOF reform. We tried to evaluate how far is the LOF innovative and how far it poses challenges to educators, schools and national education bodies. We asked ourselves what were the implications for teacher leadership in a reform project of this nature and how were the changes which this project intended to introduce significantly different from previous classroom practices. Essentially, the LOF has a strong focus on pedagogy and assessment; it promotes learner-centred learning and favours models of assessment which give clear and continuous feedback of one's progress. This framework encourages different forms of assessment which cater for the learners' needs

and the guidance it provides to teachers is less specific and rigid than previous syllabi. While this may be testing to teachers who are used to working within more centrally driven structures, the practices it encourages are already visible in a number of classrooms and, therefore, the proposed change is not so radical for a number of teachers.

Within the LOF project we tried to develop a framework which gives teachers the opportunity to use their professional judgement to translate the broad guidance as articulated through the learning outcomes, into practice. We recognise that the realisation this policy intention necessitates an investment in teacher capacity within schools. The LOF poses significant challenges to existing learning and teaching practice because it explicitly leaves key decisions about relevant content to the school and demands of educators to reconceptualise examinations as an extension of learning rather than a principal driving force of education. Our concerns, frequently based on what we observed when we visited schools to increase familiarity with the LOF, were that educators may not feel comfortable or sufficiently prepared to work in a system where there is lack of specificity in the curricula. There may be teachers who do not sufficiently understand what is expected of them, or who may not be capable of generating appropriate content. In reform literature, teachers are often regarded as 'agents of change', and it is important to ensure that they are enabled to bring about this change and rise to the challenges posed by the LOF.

One of the tensions running through this process was that while we tried to guarantee that the principles of the NCF were safeguarded, at the same time we tried to develop an implementation strategy which moved away from regarding schools and educators as adopters and implementers of externally determined reform. In order for schools to be effective, they need to own change and take responsibility for change. The critical importance of the teacher in the reform process is asserted in a number of research studies (Brundrett 2013; Donnell & Gettinger 2015; OECD 2016). We sought to create a strong element of ownership principally in two ways:

- Educators from various sectors contributed to the development and validation of the learning outcomes in the role of Local Curriculum Development Experts. We believed that local educators are among the most powerful influences on learning and can best determine the needs of the learners.
- Educators from a number of schools and entities were trained as LOF Trainers, through a Train the Trainer programme, with the scope of them implementing this process among their peers, within contexts they are familiar with.

Teacher professional learning has been considered as a strategy to build the capacities of teachers, administrators and schools in the LOF project. We felt

it was important to focus on the quality of educators and their leadership capabilities as key variables in educational quality, and to give opportunities to schools to create a culture of sustained and effective change. This culture may not always find fertile ground in our system characterised by traditions of central leadership. A greater flexibility to schools also signifies an increased responsibility and workload on educators, together with the need for more resources and time to dedicate to this development. It is specifically for this reason that we felt the need for a number of LOF Trainers to be based in schools, or to be accessible to educators, in order to support staff to build these requirements and to help form professional learning communities with the capability to embrace this change.

We were thus aware that educators may not necessarily resist the change which the LOF would bring about, but perhaps experience and express the doubt and uncertainty that often accompany change. Change is usually resisted when individuals are unaware of its nature and consequences, if they are not involved and if they feel powerless over their own destinies. If change is unsystematic, planned by 'the few' and imposed on 'the many', it will not be well received. It is crucial to keep educators involved, informed and represented during a reform initiative. In this particular project, although this change was initiated by the central authorities, we tried to adopt an inclusive model which involved educators who are affected by this reform and kept everyone informed of the progress and the challenges encountered.

Through the Train the Trainer programme provided we tried to involve educators from all the organisations which will be impacted. In this way a team of trainers was developed who together worked to achieve goals that can move their organisations forward rapidly by implementing initiatives that will accomplish their overall objectives. The Train the Trainer programme developed brought educators together and as a team they generated a synergy and goodwill to implement this change.

The aspect of 'change' and how this will impact the system was a dominant factor in our evaluation of this reform process. The LOF project brought about a systemic innovation with the aim of improving the operation of schools and their performance. This curricular change involved the identification of the key areas for innovation - namely a learning outcomes approach to pedagogy and assessment, and the building of bridges between stakeholders coming from the various sectors of education, namely schools, the Faculty of Education, the Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC), the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) and parents' associations.

The change and innovation we refer to takes place within complex networks of people and across multiple organisations. Our evaluation of this reform involved the way change occurred within and across systems, rather than as isolated events. This necessitated the successful interaction among the actors involved as elements of a collective system of knowledge creation and use. The LOF process was not a linear progression, performed within a single organisation / school but a process involving a network of schools and institutions. In order to be successful, this reform process required the combination of activities and many inter-related actors who generate and use knowledge.

As we have already commented earlier on in this reflection, the professional learning of educators was a priority in the reform strategy we developed. Teachers must become leaders themselves, learn from inquiry and collaboration with their peers, and engage in approaches that build a strong community of professional educators. Teachers must learn to develop their skills to guide and support their students' learning, help deepen understanding and further develop 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

The LOF Train the Trainer programme helped the participating educators (in the role of teachers, Education Officers, Heads of Department and Members of the School Management Team) to become leaders in their school and local communities. As LOF Trainers, they are very important actors in this reform process. They can be the driving force to represent the concerns of the educators and find ways of addressing the challenges. They can provide a powerful voice regarding decisions about the curriculum because they have knowledge of how students learn, knowledge that policy makers and curriculum developers do not always have (Neumann, Jones, & Taylor Webb 2012).

The LOF Train the Trainer programme follows the model of a professional learning community. Teacher communities can create excellent conditions for teacher learning and within the Train the Trainer programme different educators, each with her / his own expertise, contributed to further learning and helped to enhance collaboration among strategic stakeholders within the system. Those educators involved in the training were committed to collaborating and to assuming responsibility for developing and sharing knowledge (Wenger 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder 2002; Cuddapah & Clayton 2011). Each LOF Trainer has the responsibility of supporting other educators in embracing the LOF reform for the next two scholastic years on completing the training programme. This works towards developing or strengthening teacher communities which can contribute to an improvement in the practices of teaching and schooling (Campbell, McNamara, & Gilroy 2004; Hashweh 2015) as well to individual teacher development and schools' capacity (Clandinin 2015; Trube, Prince, & Middleton 2015).



A professional learning community made of educators who share a concern for good practice and who can learn how to work better as they interact regularly has been developed. These educators are intended to be at the front line in this change when implemented in schools, so the training programme helped to prepare them to incorporate inquiry, design and collaborative teaching methods in their practice with teachers and other colleagues. As with all teacher professional learning opportunities, this programme has its limitations, and we also acknowledge that this group of trainers needs to be strengthened by other educators who eventually join this process and who take a leadership role in schools to implement this reform. We are however optimistic, thanks to the feedback we have received, that a number of local educators aspire for the changes in teaching and learning that can bring to fruition the aims and principles of the NCF, and that schools can indeed provide a fertile ground for transformation to happen.

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