

The process of teacher education reform: a case-study in the management of change

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Introduction

A number of inter-related concerns led the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta to consider a series of wide-ranging reforms to the programme of teacher education that it was offering. Established in 1978, the Faculty focuses mainly on pre-service training, a role that had previously and since the post-war years been fulfilled by two training colleges, one for men and one for women. Both of these pre-service institutions had been in the hands of religious orders in what is still a largely Catholic island (see Camilleri, 1994 for an account). A four-year concurrent course leading to a B.Ed. (Hons.) degree has been offered – with various modifications – to undergraduates over the past twenty five years, the main features of which include (a) open entry to all those who obtain the necessary qualifications – namely the Matriculation Certificate, with good ‘A’ level passes in the subject of their choice; (b) study of both primary and secondary teaching during the first two years of the course, with a choice of either of the two areas during the second part of the B.Ed.(Hons.) degree; (c) a strong field placement component throughout the course, consisting of a one-day-per-week teaching observation session in schools during the first year, and a six-week block teaching practice during the following three years; (d) a curriculum based on a study-unit and credit system, with students being guided – and occasionally obliged – to fulfil requirements regarding both number and type of units per year. Quality auditing of the course is maintained through computer-processed student evaluation forms, which are filled in at the end of the delivery of every study-unit. External, foreign

examiners also monitor standards, particularly during the students' final teaching practice.

The Faculty provides other teacher education courses: a one-year pre-service PGCE course for graduates from other Faculties, and several in-service specialised courses offering certificate, diploma and occasionally masters level courses in various areas, including counselling, school administration, adult education, and teaching in inclusive education settings. There are 56 members of full-time staff involved in the teacher education programme of the Faculty of Education, catering for about 900 undergraduate students and 150 PGCE students at any one time.

Problems in the pre-service preparation of Maltese teachers

A set of inter-related factors, both academic and administrative in nature, and mostly connected to the concurrent nature of the course offered as just described, led to a situation where reform was felt to be inevitable. Among the main concerns expressed by Faculty staff were the following:

- The disruption of the flow, continuity and focus of content courses by the six-week teaching practice placement in schools. While Faculty generally felt that the field placements were by far the most important element of the course, Faculties of Arts and Science who offered study units in content areas were not always keen to deliver their programme to take education students into account. This led to a situation where the latter either missed out on core elements of their contents area, or were obliged to go to University to follow courses after a day of teaching at school, to the detriment of the preparation and evaluation exercises that are generally required of them. Occasionally too, education students were obliged to disrupt the sequence of contents courses, and this was particularly

significant in the area of mathematics and science, were foundational skills and concepts were sometimes learnt after more advanced courses had been attended, to the detriment of incremental learning.

- The problems that arose from the above led Faculties of Arts and Science to cluster the courses offered to education students in the semester when there was no field placement. This tended to create a curricular imbalance between semesters, with several courses being taught during half of the year, to the detriment of integration of knowledge, and with a consequent decline in the quality of assignments submitted.
- The students' experience of the course as fragmented. In over 140 semi-structured interviews with small groups of students, it was generally declared that it was difficult to focus on the professional elements of the course, particularly since the institutional cultures promoted by the different Faculties they attended were at odds with each other.
- The difficulties experienced in co-ordinating the delivery of both subject content and pedagogy in a concurrent-type course led to a rather weak framing of the curriculum, in order to allow sufficient flexibility to students and to permit better time-tabling management. As a result of this, however, an analysis of the choices of study units made by education students showed that the discretion in choice often led to a selection of those content units which were least challenging. It became obvious that students were not necessarily being exposed to a substantive framework in a particular discipline.
- Given the fact that the course was experienced as fragmented, there was clear evidence that a key element of

teacher education - the socialisation into the profession - was not being achieved. In a sense, this can be considered to be a direct result of the move away from the 'seminaristic tradition' of the Teacher Training Colleges, to the 'academic tradition' that constitutes the institutional culture of a University. Indeed, several educational partners who recruited Faculty graduates often commented on the lack of professional ethos they displayed, and which they considered the Colleges to have transmitted more effectively.

- A common complaint by education students - one that is often found in the literature on concurrent courses (see Moon, 1995) - was that they felt treated as 'second class citizens' by Faculty of Arts and Science staff, who were perceived to consider 'pure Arts' and 'pure Science' students more highly. This feeling of inferiority often had a deleterious effect on morale and on motivation.

The Tomorrow's Teachers Project

The *Tomorrow's Teachers Project* (TTP) was conceived by the present author as an on-going Faculty-wide initiative established in October 1996 as a strategy to confront the problems referred to above, and with the following broad goal in mind:

'To discover the strengths and weaknesses of current pre-service teacher education and training programmes; to systematically compare current local practice with that obtaining in other countries, to identify trends, as well as to develop insights in addressing perceived problems; and to make recommendations regarding changes in structures and practices that will help improve the Faculty's contribution to the national educational enterprise.'

After a thorough literature review - where the work carried out by Buchberger (1992), Sander (1994) and Sander et al. (1996) proved particularly useful - and on the basis of previous evaluations that had been carried out in the Faculty (Sultana, 1995a), the Project identified 12 key categories around which most discussions on teacher education revolve. A Working Group made up of from four to six staff members volunteered to focus on one of the twelve categories identified. Co-ordination of each working group was in the hands of full-time staff, with members being co-opted from leaders in the education field working in various national organisations. These included education officers from the central Education Division, heads of schools, teacher union members, and key people in the national Association for School Councils.

Each Working Group met regularly in order to identify the issues that needed to be raised within their own particular area of focus. Members were asked to draw up a position paper about those issues, making use of available local and international research, and commissioning or carrying out related research in order to illuminate areas that were considered to be crucially important in reaching the aims of the project.

The twelve Working Groups met in a plenary session at three-weekly intervals or as the need arose, in order to report progress achieved, to share insights, and to ensure that research agendas were clearly set out. Common areas of concern were thus identified in order to facilitate the possibility of collaborative research. These position papers were presented at six monthly intervals at Faculty conferences, lasting one or two days according to the agenda that had been developed. These conferences took stock of research findings, and facilitated the complex process of weaving together the insights generated by each Working Group into a policy document for teacher education and training in Malta. At the end of the conference,

goals and agendas for the subsequent cycle of consultation and research were set out. One feature of these Faculty conferences was the introduction of what were called 'critical friends'. These were local - and occasionally foreign - consultants who were invited to attend meetings in order to help the Faculty identify themes, and to reflect on issues as they arose. Patterns which had escaped the attention of those who were too personally involved in the matters at hand could thus be picked up by these 'critical friends', who brought different perspectives to the meetings.

Data generated by the Project

The Project generated original data on several aspects of Faculty's work, which led to the writing up of a set of position papers (Faculty of Education, 1997), and to a number of research articles that are currently being submitted to different education journals internationally. This data includes material that was collected by different members of staff in the following contexts:

- Meetings with Heads of State Primary and Secondary Schools;
- A Questionnaire with all Heads of Malta's Primary and Secondary State Schools;
- A Meeting with Education Officers in the Curriculum section of the Education Division;
- A Knowledge Base questionnaire with Faculty staff;
- Knowledge Base questionnaire with final year B.Ed.(Hons.) students
- A Meeting with final year B.Ed.(Hons.) students;
- A Questionnaire on Modes of Teaching on the Course, distributed among Faculty staff;
- A Questionnaire on Modes of Teaching on the Course, distributed among students;
- A Questionnaire with all Maltese teachers regarding their ideals for teaching, and their in-service needs.

- Semi-structured interviews with a theoretical sample of students from across the four years of the course.

The working groups

As has been noted earlier, and on the basis of both a literature review and the experience of Faculty staff, twelve working groups were set up to consider the different challenges that were perceived to be hindering the delivery of a quality teacher education programme. These are here outlined in sequence, with a brief description of the activity generated by each group, as well as the changes that such deliberations led to.

Entry Point

This particular group carried out research on criteria for entry into Faculties of Education in European countries. Given the specificities of the politics of educational development on the island (see Sultana, 1992 and Zammit Mangion, 1992 for an account) the strategy of controlling entry through a *numerus clausus* could not be implemented. As a result, staff/student ratios have been consistently high, leading to students feeling that they belonged to an impersonal institution. While several arguments were made on the part of the Faculty in favour of controlled entry, the best that it could achieve within the framework of the University statutes was, on the advice of this particular working group, to increase the level of qualifications required, and to encourage future applicants to undertake a period of work experience in schools before they made up their mind to be teachers. Interviews with individuals or groups of applicants to the course - widely used to manage access in a number of Faculties of Education in the U.K. and the U.S.A (Wilson and Mitchell, 1985; Malvern, 1991) - were deemed inappropriate in this case, both because of the sheer number that would have had to be processed, and also because the available literature does not deem such interviews to be reliable in predicting performance on the course and aptitude for teaching. The idea of asking candidates to present references

from professionals in the field was adopted, even though it was acknowledged that in a small state context where everybody knows everybody else and therefore has to find ways of 'managing intimacy', such references were unlikely to be of great value. Access to the profession would therefore be controlled rather more through the performance on the course itself, which presented ample opportunities to counsel out students who clearly proved not to be cut out for teaching, rather than through the gate at entry.

Alternative Structures

This working group focused on the problems that a concurrent course generated and which have already been outlined above, and tried to suggest different scenarios regarding the way the teacher education curriculum could be structured. A literature review revealed rather clearly that there is no one 'best way' to educate teachers - Most of the material available suggests that there is a rich diversity of structures of teacher education programmes, reflecting not only different ideological and curricular traditions, but also different ways of accommodating institutional pressures and facing up to challenges. Consensus was generated around a set of principles that were to provide a framework for any scenario envisaged. Examples of such principles include statements like 'all teachers should have a graduate education behind them'; 'there should be different access routes to graduate teacher training, in order to accommodate different needs and life circumstances, but these access routes should confer the same status and salary'; 'learning programmes should be integrated, and should be coherent to learners', and so on. Four possible scenarios were developed, and the positive and negative points of each outlined for Faculty-wide debate. It is not appropriate, in this context, to go into the details of each model: suffice it to say that two of the four proposed proved to be most attractive, namely the '3+2' model - whereby students first obtain a degree in their subject area/s, and then proceed to a

professional two year course in teaching, leading to either a Post-graduate Diploma or a Masters degree (the model that has been recommended by the Holmes Group, 1993). The other model, which was eventually adopted and which is currently being trailed out - requires primary students to follow a concurrent four-year course; while secondary students to follow a 'stepped' course, with content teaching being taught mainly in the first two years of the course, and methodology (including foundations) in the last two years of the course. It must be added, for the sake of clarity, that while the main focus of this paper is on the *process* rather than the content of the reform, one of the most important changes introduced was the choice of specialised primary or secondary teacher education from the very first year of the course.

The Knowledge Base: The formal curriculum

Group members here focused on what is actually taught during the four year course, with the idea of a 'knowledge base', as developed by, *inter alia*, Reynolds (1989), proving very useful. Several data collecting strategies were adopted, including interviews with students and heads of schools, and comparing what was in fact being taught with a minimal list of competencies that are required by professional teachers. Towards this end, a very useful check-list was developed and distributed among students and staff, in order to facilitate the identification of overlaps and lacunae in the curriculum, and also to pick up any mismatches between what staff declared to be doing, and what students perceived staff to be teaching. The check-list focused on such areas as communication and interpersonal skills, teaching preparation skills, teaching skills, classroom management skills, skills in using educational technology, competencies in the assessment and evaluation of learning, contextual and professional knowledge and values, and knowledge of theories of learning. Key lacunae and weaknesses were thus identified, and new courses developed, particularly in view of the Faculty's decision to make

'inclusive education' - in its broad meaning - as the leitmotif underlying the whole curriculum. A concern with values rather than just competencies was one important aspect of the work carried out within this group, with a clear predilection towards 'reconstructionist' and 'developmentalist' orientations within the traditions of teacher education curricula identified by Zeichner (1993).

Socialisation into the Profession

As has been intimated earlier, the abandonment of the separate, 'college-type' cocoon, and the adoption of the university as the new site for training teachers has led to several challenges, the most pertinent in this case being the maintenance of a commitment to the nourishment and development of a personality structure in students that makes them fit for teaching (see Atkinson & Delamont, 1985). A variety of new structures to enable specific forms of interaction between students, staff, and students and staff were proposed, with the underlying rationale being that such structures were a manifestation of the values, norms, beliefs and attitudes which the institution holds in high regard. Among these structures and practices one could mention the idea of peer support and tutoring, resource sharing, group assignments, a student association, a forum for cultural debate and activity, participation in voluntary work, involvement in student leadership bodies at university and in the public sphere, practical assignments and projects which lead students to involve themselves in schools, and to render a service within educational contexts, under the supervision of appropriately trained and exemplary mentors. Some of these activities had petered out in the transition from college to university, and attempts are being made to revive them. Others are quite new, and are being trailed out and evaluated.

Modes of Teaching on the Course

A key indictment of several teacher education courses is that Faculty staff do not serve 'as living examples of the pedagogical practices they seek to have their students adopt' (Liston and Zeichner, 1987: 133), and quite simply fail to practice what they preach. The *Modes of Teaching* group focused on precisely this problem, and through questionnaires distributed among both students and staff, came up with a set of rather challenging data which has - or ought to have - major implications for the whole Faculty. For instance, while lecturers claim that they engage mostly in an interactive style of lecturing, students chastised the Faculty for monologic deliveries that excluded participation and debate. Obviously, what was said earlier regarding large student numbers and high student to lecturer ratios contributes to our understanding of the situation. It is however instructive to note the discrepancy between the perceptions of students and staff in this, and a number of other areas linked to the instructional process. 88% of the staff, for instance, felt that by and large they gave adequate feedback for assignment presentations. The percentage of students who were equally happy with such feedback barely made it above 30%. Similarly problematic was Faculty's modelling of the use of information technology during lectures, and the lack of sufficient encouragement for problem-based learning or for learner autonomy, despite its promotion by staff as an important strategy in classrooms.

School-based Learning and Relationship with Schools

These two groups started off separately, but it became obvious during plenary sessions that their concerns merged, and that it would be more meaningful for them to work together as a team. A lot of the data generated by the different work groups led to the same conclusion, namely that students wanted to have more of their learning taking place within the context of the school, rather than in the lecture or tutorial room. School-based teacher education now has a long tradition, and several

books have been written about its value, as well as about the problematic nature of apprenticeship. In Malta, such problems are particularly acute, given that the late development of its educational system, rapid expansion of services led to a concern with quantity rather than quality (Sultana, 1997), to the extent that student placement in schools has often led to what a member of staff aptly called 'an apprenticeship in mediocrity'. However, the idea of developing a mentoring scheme on the lines proposed by Furlong and Maynard (1995) among others, has proved appealing, and indeed some staff members undertook a period of training with these very same authors in order to come to develop the skills that are required in this enterprise. Part of this appeal links back to the high staff to student ratio - where additional support from teachers in schools in the monitoring of student performance during their field placement seemed particularly attractive. Staff involved in mentoring soon discovered, however, that more, not less demand was made on their time, as the scheme can only work if there is constant conferencing between Faculty staff and teachers, and between them and students. Despite this, the early pilot project in mentoring - which had pre-dated the TTP by some five years - had persuaded several that the improvement in the quality of student supervision warranted their further investment. Two key tasks were highlighted by this working group, namely the identification of teachers in schools who could act as good models to Faculty students, and the provision of training to both these teachers and Faculty staff to undertake the task of mentoring. With regards to the latter, in-service courses were offered, and a new certificate-level course in mentoring was also launched. A second concept which this group developed reflects the 'professional development schools' movement in the U.S.A. (Holmes Group, 1991; Bullough et al., 1997) where a particular school enters into a special relationship with Faculty for the exchange of educational services. Such schools become training grounds for future teachers, while Faculty staff provide their expertise in

order to support the planning and implementation of whole school development.

Student-Teacher Evaluation

One of the main areas of weakness identified by several students following Faculty courses was the nature of assessment used by staff. Several problems were identified, including lack of sufficient feedback, lack of clear expectations, a stress on summative rather than formative concerns, inadequate provision of privacy in the display of grades on public notice-boards, tardiness in publishing results, and so on. Among the recommendations made by this particular working group were the development of a clear code of ethics concerning the Faculty's assessment policy, the encouragement of multi-modal forms of assessment, and the introduction of student portfolios. The group produced an Assessment Guidebook for students and staff alike, and piloted the introduction of portfolios, promoting them as strategies that encourage reflective practice throughout the course (see Loughran & Corrigan, 1995).

Teacher Education as a Field of Inquiry

As has already been suggested, the Project led to a research focus on teacher education. Over and above the survey of the literature that members of staff undertook, new data was generated with regards to several areas of the course, and by the different working groups. This particular working group took it upon itself to bring together the different findings (Mifsud and Mallia, 1997), and to focus on students' perceptions of the course. In order to facilitate a more faithful reflection of student concerns, a recent B.Ed. (Hons.) graduate was encouraged to complete a Masters' level dissertation on the topic, and, on the basis of semi-structured interviews with a theoretical sample of 60 students throughout the four year course, produced a rich account that was eventually presented to all staff for reflection and action (Mallia, 1998).

Teacher Development and Certification

This working group focused on the development of accreditation standards for the profession, taking into consideration the articulation of essential teacher qualities and competencies. Towards this end, the group, in collaboration with the Malta Union of Teachers, carried out a national survey of all school teachers, in order to identify those characteristics which teachers themselves think are the hallmark of the profession. Issues that were broached included the life-long learning profile of a committed teacher, the structures that could be set up to ensure professional competence and standards over a teacher's career, the setting up of a Teachers' Council, the accreditation and warranting of teachers, the contestation of the 1988 Education Act, which gave holders of masters and doctoral degrees an automatic entry into the teaching profession, without the requirement to follow training courses in pedagogy

Professional Development of Teacher Trainers

Naturally enough, the whole process of reflection led to the professional development of Faculty staff. Through such activities as debate, research, writing, articulating views publicly, and so on, Faculty members intensified their reflection on the work that they were about, a reflection which is ever-present, but which was given a structure within the TTP. Over and above that, it was felt necessary to organise half-day seminars on topics that were linked to the process of reform. Staff identified their needs on a questionnaire designed for the purpose, and seminars were held throughout the duration of the reform process in areas such as: skills in supervising and assessing dissertations; teaching strategies in higher education settings; alternative modes of assessment; publishing in academic journals and books; qualities of internationally-recognised top university teachers; current developments in teacher education programmes, and so on.

External Relations

Finally, and in line with the Faculty's policy of reaching out to different educational partners, both on national and international levels, a working group was set up specifically to develop links with a number of communities. The working group was responsible for publishing a newsletter regarding developments in the Faculty, and this was distributed in schools and other educational settings to publicise the work done by staff members, and to ensure a flow of information about teacher education to the public. The group also managed and disseminated information about foreign institutions which were interested in staff exchanges, or in other forms of collaboration. Over and above the targets achieved by this particular working group, heads of departments had regular meetings with politicians, teacher union leaders, the national Association of School Councils, the Commission for Persons with Disabilities, and several other constituted bodies in order to create a national climate of concern about the need for a qualitative improvement of teacher education at all levels, initial, induction, and in-service.

Overall achievements of the Tomorrow's Teachers Project

The process of teacher education reform, organised around an action-research type of cycle (Carr and Kemmis, 1986), served a number of purposes which are worth highlighting. In the first instance, it strengthened the Faculty focus on its teacher education programme; at a stage when massification of the higher education sector in Malta had led the University to adopt new roles and to venture into new areas of study (Sultana, 1995b), it was felt that the time had come to return to the Faculty's original brief, which was to ensure the formation of quality teachers for Malta's educational system. A second important development for the Faculty, which was facilitated by the TTP, was that for the first time, teacher education became a field of systematic study and research, with several

members of staff doing empirical work on the nature of teaching and learning in the programme, on student perceptions of the course, and so on. This is not to say that no programme evaluation had been carried out prior to the TTP (see, for instance, Mifsud, 1996), but rather that the TTP led to the generation of a rigorous and empirically-grounded *integrated* data-base that had not been available earlier.

The Project facilitated the identification of key areas of concern regarding the Faculty's contribution to teacher education in Malta. The emphasis on consultation in the whole reform process led to an intensification of staff interaction around professional issues. This in itself was very beneficial, even though it did occasionally lead, as is to be expected, to a greater propensity for confrontation, as opposing ideas about the nature of teacher education were articulated, proposed, and defended - and modified as a result of open debate.

Through the investigations carried out, as well as through the different meetings it organised on a national level, the Faculty moved closer to different educational partners, providing an opportunity for critical reflection and evaluation, for sharing of insights and perceptions, and for generating a context where the same language and discourse about educational aims and ideals could be used. Given the different fora that were developed, and the systematic search for models of good practice, the project gave a higher, Faculty-wide profile to the initiatives of individual lecturers, motivating them with well-deserved recognition for their creative and innovative teaching programmes, lecturing styles, and faculty-school links. The Project similarly highlighted the contribution that Heads and teachers could make to the Faculty's work: the fact that they were invited to join working groups, and the fact that they also attended Faculty meetings and conferences, sent a clear message to staff, to students, and to the educational community more generally that the business of preparing tomorrow's

teachers was a common concern, and that different groups had different sorts of insights, experiences and expertise which ought to be brought together. In this way, the Project helped develop an open and democratic structure for the formulation of consensual policy directions.

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