

## *Maltese Secondary School Heads In The Making<sup>1</sup>*

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### **Abstract:**

The key purpose of this paper is to present the findings of the Maltese study which is part of a collective research project involving four island states: Cyprus, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malta. The views and perspectives that a small group of secondary school heads bring to their life and work are outlined. The study adopts a biographical/portrait-based approach to understanding headship and thus provides us with new insights into the growing literature in the field. As such the paper briefly explores the career paths of the heads interviewed and focuses on the first two stages of their personal and professional lives – formation and accession. The views of heads are represented and the issues and concerns identified with leading schools in times of change are outlined. The study shows that family, family experiences and the community have an important part to play in influencing the lives of prospective leaders. The study also highlights the link between vicarious learning, continuous professional development and personal reflection.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper presents part of a collective study involving four small states in the Commonwealth: Cyprus, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malta. The approach builds on the theoretical and empirical studies conducted by Peter Gronn in Australia and Peter Ribbins in the United Kingdom. The main findings of this collective study were first presented at the International Intervisitation Programme, Hobart, Tasmania, September 2000.

## **Introduction**

It is widely recognised that heads of school play an important role in determining organisational effectiveness (e.g. Reynolds and Cuttance, 1992; Ribbins and Marland, 1994). In Malta, over the past decade or so the importance behind administration in general and headship in particular has been boosted due to two main reasons. On the one hand, a number of major developments are taking place in education which is affecting the way schools are organised, managed and run. As a result, the job of the head (or any educational leader) has become increasingly complex and constrained (e.g. Bezzina, 1999, 2002; Fullan, 1998). On the other hand, back in 1985, the first diploma programme in educational administration and management was introduced by the Faculty of Education. This programme was aimed at attracting those in administrative positions and/or those who wanted to be considered for such posts. The 1994 Reorganisation Agreement recognised the diploma as a prerequisite to headship. This meant that anyone who wanted to become a head of school would require not only five years experience as an assistant head of school but need to have successfully completed the diploma course.

Thanks to the diploma course practically all deputy heads of school currently in position are in possession of this qualification. Being in possession of this degree has helped quite a number of educators to be promoted to administrative positions in schools and Division level. This has meant that educators being promoted to management positions in schools are younger than in the past. Not only that, but there is growing evidence that such holders are in a better position to address the growing initiatives to improve the effectiveness of schools through decentralisation practices.

Before turning to a discussion of our findings, it is worth noting that research into the headship has grown considerably over the last decade (e.g. Abdilla and Spiteri, 1999; Bezzina, 1995; Micallef, 2002; Quintano, 1999; Xerri, 2000). Heads of school have only been asked to administer their schools rather than manage or lead them forward. In most of these studies questionnaires and / or interviews were conducted. Although the research on which this paper reports employed a very different methodological approach, in important ways it was stimulated by such studies.

## Purpose of Study

This paper presents the findings of part of an international study involving four island states, namely Cyprus, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malta. The key purpose of this collective study is to contribute to our collective understanding of how heads of school are made and make themselves.

Based on the theoretical and empirical work carried out by Peter Gronn and Peter Ribbins (e.g. Gronn, 1999; Rayner and Ribbins, 1999; Ribbins, 1997) the main aim was to “enable heads to speak for themselves” (Mortimer and Mortimer, 1991, p. vii). This was carried out through a series of face-to-face conversations with eight heads of school: four men and four women. The approach adopted by Gronn and Ribbins aimed at providing a series of individual portraits based upon the accounts which individual heads gave of their personal and professional lives.

Initially, we approached various educationalists and sought their opinions as to whom we could interview. We knew that we wished to interview only a small number of heads holding office in the public sector at the time. Without expecting our sample to be representative, we hoped to talk to heads from a range of schools, a variety of social settings, and a diversity of experience. Armed with these criteria we identified ten heads. We approached the first eight through a telephone call, all of which agreed to be interviewed<sup>2</sup>. This was followed by a letter which, *inter alia*, noted that they would be involved as follows:

- There would be an initial conversation face-to-face, and preferably in private and uninterrupted, for about 90 minutes with one of the researchers. The main themes to be discussed would be as listed in the interview schedule included with the letter. It would be possible for either party to raise additional issues as the conversation progresses.
- The conversation would be taped and transcribed. The researcher involved would undertake a preliminary editing to ensure that the transcript was coherent and read

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<sup>2</sup> The authors would like to acknowledge Mr. Andrew Triganza Scott for his involvement in the data collection and review of the transcripts.

with some fluency whilst yet remaining as reasonably faithful as possible to what the head of school involved said to the way in which this was expressed.

- The transcript in its edited form would then be sent to the head for any revisions, additions, etc., which they might wish to propose.
- It would be possible for any head to withdraw at any time.
- Individual heads and their current institutions would not be named.

All those we approached responded positively. Some of the heads engaged in much preparation and came to the conversations with substantial notes whilst others relied upon a more spontaneous approach.

We sent a detailed interview schedule to each head before the meeting with one of the researchers. The schedule was built around a number of key themes which included:

- The influence of family, friends, local community, early life, schooling, higher education, etc., on their views, values, lives and careers
- The influences which shaped their views/values as educators/ heads of school
- Their reasons for becoming teachers
- Their career before the headship
- Their reasons for becoming school administrators
- How they went about becoming deputy heads of school/ heads of school
- How well prepared they felt
- Their views on the headship and the influences which have shaped them
- The evolving role of the head of school
- Their level of involvement in issues like staff recruitment, appointments and promotions.

None of the participants ruled out any particular topic from our schedule and almost all had important ideas for further themes which they introduced during the interview. Nobody asked to pull out at any stage. These conversations took place between January and February of 2000 and the final version of the scripts was agreed in April 2000.

This paper presents the main findings of this study. It begins with a brief review of current developments. This is followed by a discussion of aspects of their formation and accession of this group of educational leaders. The last section presents some of the conclusions that can be drawn from this study and the challenges facing us.

## **Contextualisation**

Current initiatives being undertaken by education authorities show a move towards greater decentralisation to the school site. The latest initiatives involve all state primary and secondary schools who are being encouraged to develop school development plans. Such a move expresses the view that school improvement can be brought about by concentrating development efforts on the school, hence seeing the school as the major unit of change in the education system.

Such a conceptualisation provides an alternative view to the centralised, prescriptive model of school improvement that state schools have been used to. In Malta state schools are working within a system which is hierarchical, centralised and bureaucratic. As a result, teachers have grown weary through disillusionment and stress (Bezzina, 1995; Borg and Falzon, 1989). Teachers constantly find themselves, sandwiched between a belief in democracy and participation on the one hand, and the daily experiencing of a lack of structures to function as decision-makers. Schools have never been given the opportunity to develop into vital places of learning, into sites of professional inquiry and reflective practice (Bezzina, 1997, 1998, 1999).

Redressing this situation in Malta will not be easy. Indeed, it will be extraordinary difficult. Present conditions and circumstances of schools could not have been planned to be more antithetical to their becoming centres of inquiry and change. Among the worst of those conditions are: isolation of educators (both teachers and school administrators) from one another; the fragmentation of the school day into separate subject matters; the apportionment of specific time per subject; the untenable ratio of students to teachers; the lack of time for genuine reflection, sharing and critical inquiry amongst teachers.

Efforts to improve the effectiveness of schools cannot be intelligently directed without understanding the dynamics of schools: the actions and influences of teachers, students, department officials, parents, community members, the curriculum, and the ways in which these influences operate.

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

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

At the same time school leaders, and leaders at central level for that matter, are not being prepared to take up the challenge of decentralisation. Leaders need to be involved in the process and the required training in order for them to create a sense of purpose and enough confidence engendered (Fidler, 1997).

Currently Maltese schools are facing adaptive challenges. Changes require that we clarify our values, develop new strategies, new ways of thinking and learning. Adaptive work is required especially when our deeply held beliefs are challenged, when ingrained attitudes have to be contested, when particular ways of doing things are questioned.

This is the challenge facing the Maltese education system. It is within this context that this study has been conducted.

## **Formation**

### **The making of eight people**

#### *Influence of fathers and mothers*

For several of the interviewees, their fathers and mothers played an important, often crucial role in their lives, by influencing their development and achievements. One female head of school described her mother as the major influence on her future decision to become a teacher and described it in emotive terms: “She gave that motherly care, she thought them (i.e. school children) and I liked her role and what she was doing.” As from an early age this head “was intrigued by the world of teaching” that was made accessible to her by her mother who was a primary school teacher and her father who was a head of school. Another spoke of her mother’s strong personality and described her as her “major influence.” All interviewees made explicit reference to the values their parents projected and imparted to their siblings. Words like “caring”, “help”, “concern”, “love”, “support” were repeatedly used to describe the way they were brought up.

A male head of school, whilst stating that both his parents were illiterate, went on to claim that his mother did her best “to make sure that I would get a good education.” Similarly another head states that his parents “were always supportive even at the extent of personal sacrifices.”

#### *Influence of other members of the family*

Whilst fathers and/or mothers were regarded as key influences in shaping their views and lives by most of the heads, few identified other members of the family or extended family as having played a significant role. One female head expressed “admiration and respect” toward her elder sister who was training to become a teacher when she was still very young. She also mentioned a “close aunt” whose company she used to enjoy.

*Influence of peer groups and the local community*

If comments on the place of the extended family were rare, references to the influence of the local community were not. One female head, for example, like several others, stressed the support which her family gave to the local community:

I remember in summer especially when schools were closed and parents had difficulties and worries about their children they used to come over to our flat. And I remember the sitting room serving as an office where my father would receive these people and discuss with them their problems and their concerns. I liked his approach in sorting out the problems they had. This was in the 1960's. In those times the persons who cared for the people in the community were the chaplain, the doctor and the head of school. If it was a problem with values and spirituality everyone was referred to the chaplain, if it was physical ailments the doctor was called and academic problems and children's progress were my father's domain.

One head of school recalled his early years as a child just after the Second World War:

We came from the South – the harbour area .....Living in those days was indeed hard. Perhaps that's where I find the roots for some of my leadership skills that I believe I still have today. Being a man from Vittoriosa also helped in shaping me, since it was a city, which was heavily bombarded with so many children running around, with so many debris around, inventing and being creative to survive and to have a good time. ... We had a very happy childhood. We managed to live together and invent a lot of activities to spend our leisure time and I think all has been beneficial to me.

The positive influence that the community can have to boost one's self-esteem is vividly brought out in the following account: "because I liked to study I was treated as the special one in the ... community and I was treated with respect."

The community has been viewed from two angles. On the one hand the interviewees' families have had a positive impact on their immediate environment. On the other hand, the community has also played an influential role on the character formation of some of the interviewees. Thus we can conclude that they are both positive and active agents of their social realities.



### **The making of eight students**

#### *Attitudes to school*

Each of the eight heads reported in this study acknowledge that their experience of schooling, primary and secondary, had a considerable influence upon their attitudes in general and with regards to education in particular. All spoke positively of their school experiences.

One describes her school days as “happy” ones since it allowed her to make friends and socialise:

I was very keen in making friends because of the fact that my brother was older than me, so school for me was meeting friends and playing around.

Another female head saw particular aspects of school life, especially the Creative/Performing Arts at secondary level, as having an impact on her as a person:

At secondary school level I was pinpointed for drama. Even today I still love it and believe in it as an educational way of teaching and motivating students ... I still remember how good the English Literature classes were ... We used to study difficult poetry such as the poems by Keats, Wordsworth and Milton – I miss those Literature classes.

#### *Attitudes to teachers*

Asked to recall the experiences of school life and who influenced their decision to become teachers, it is interesting to note that few mentioned by name a particular teacher who influenced them. One spoke in general terms of the influence her secondary school teachers had on her. Thanks to them she felt cut out for this profession which gave one the possibility of “helping students develop aptitudes” and goes on to add she had such an “inclination”. This latter point leads her on to argue that “I think and believe I was made and born to be a teacher.” This is very much reinforced by another female head of school who categorically stated: “I think I wasn’t influenced. I think it was inborn. Before I went to school I wanted to [become a teacher], ... I can’t remember thinking of doing anything else”. Another head

decided to become a teacher once she had gained her 'O' levels. At the same time she acknowledged her background:

But I would imagine that my earlier experiences in school and watching my mother prepare and going to school by bike with my father and the environment at home, must have had a great influence on my decision to follow in my parents' footsteps.

Similarly, one head of school spoke highly of her older sister who was studying to become a teacher when she was still a teenager. She has fond recollections of her sister and what she represented: "... I used to admire and respect my eldest sister a great deal. She was quite intelligent. She attended the Teachers' Training College and when she returned home in the weekend I remember I used to go and look in her bag to see the teacher's magazine..."

Two heads in particular, whilst having "good memories" of their teachers through their comments highlighted the times they grew up in and the way teachers taught. One example will suffice to illustrate this:

I had a very good rapport – a working relationship, if any – with the teachers but rarely on a personal level. It was only on the academic level that we could relate. Of course, there were a few younger teachers who were starting to create this kind of personal relationship with the students ... We used to hold these teachers in very high esteem!

## **Accession**

### **The making of eight teachers**

The next phase in the career path to headship is accession. Accession, as Rayner and Ribbins state "should, as such, be regarded as a developmental period geared to the accomplishment of two crucial tasks: the preparation and construction of oneself as a credible candidate for promotion and the acquisition of a persuasive performance routine to convince those controlling promotion opportunities." (1999, p.18)

*The How and Why of Teaching?*

In this group, similar to the one studied by Rayner and Ribbins (1999), few came early to the recognition that they wanted to become teachers. For example, two male head of schools saw teaching as a means to go up to the social ladder. One is quite explicit in this regard: "It wasn't a vocation, it was the highest point of the social ladder that I considered I could go up to." Another response reflects the limited possibilities people had in those days: "Practically there were only two job opportunities I could pursue. I could either join the teaching profession or enter the civil service." Another head "applied for everything" that came along – reflecting the hard times they had to face.

Another stated that he always "wanted to teach others and (felt) that through teaching you develop personally and professionally." Similarly, a female head of school always believed and wanted to be a teacher so that she could influence other people's lives. On the other hand, one head never intended taking on teaching. She wanted to be a chemist but then later on in life after having helped some neighbours gain their certification she realised that she was cut out for teaching.

*Teacher Training*

It is worth noting that all interviewees spoke with a sense of great nostalgia about the days at College. One described the years at the college as "one of the most beautiful experiences in my life." Another stated that "I was very happy at college and remember saying to myself that if it had to last forever I would stay there..." Another head spoke of the independence she gained since the teacher training programme was residential and thus they had to leave home from Monday to Friday and only returned home for the weekend. It was also a great opportunity to meet and make new friends. Another was quite emotional and described it as "the culmination of his hopes" noting that:

I succeeded. It was a long way to go from an illiterate background to become a professionally trained teacher. Many teachers learnt a lot of social skills there. The poverty of social skills that people lacked such as, for example, simple table measures, was unbelievable. Very few people were refined in their social skills. There (i.e. at the college) I nurtured the love for the profession. I felt I matured a lot on the personal, social and emotional levels.

This quote may be taken as representative of how all the interviewees felt about the Teacher Training College. The College not only provided them with adequate training to enter the teaching profession but also helped them to develop personally and socially.

### *First Years of Teaching*

In general, all eight heads of school have very fond memories of their years as teachers. They enjoyed experiences in teaching either primary and/or secondary. They spoke of their love for teaching mainly due to them being involved with children. What is interesting to note is that practically all heads actively involved themselves in various youth groups such as the Catholic Action Movement and the Salesians Youth Centre. Such involvement could be seen as the inception to taking on leadership roles later on in schools.

## **The Making of Eight Heads of School**

### *Seeking Headship*

One of the heads of school said: "I never had a career plan." In this he was representative of the group. None of the heads regarded themselves as working to a career plan designed for a headship position. Whilst most of the interviewees were promoted to headship on the basis of seniority, some had furthered their studies and are in possession of post graduate certification in the field of educational administration and management, one of which also successfully completed a Masters degree in Educational Leadership.

The following remarks confirm how some interviewees categorically did not initially aspire to become heads. In some cases, if for very different reasons, this determination came slowly and even reluctantly. One head, who spent many years as an assistant head, identified inhibiting factors such as, isolation, being 'in the hot seat', the need for diplomatic skills, foresight and responsibility:

I do not think I ever wanted to end up in an authoritative position. It is too isolated as a post and so delicate in nature. It requires diplomatic skills, great self-control and foresight. I was never ambitious. ... I was

not interested in headship because I was always frightened of responsibility.

Other reasons for such reluctance included the recognition that to become a head meant ceasing to be a classroom teacher. For some this was regarded as a major sacrifice. In fact, one head does his best to leave his office to be closer with the students:

One of my main characteristics here is that I try to leave my office as often as possible. It's very important to visit classes so as to be at the chalk face in close contact with the students and their teachers. And it's quite often that I visit classes and stay on for lessons. I can help teachers and I can gauge the learning taking place.

After a number of years teaching, finally it was time to put in practice some of the ideas accumulated during the years and running a school as it should be:

I said now is the time and this was the opportunity I had to prove myself. I must have been a little cheeky and also a little ideological but what an opportunity. I was sent there as an Assistant Head but with the duty of headship, an Acting Head.

Once in the position of an Assistant Head it seems that some start to see things from a different perspective and their attitude to managing and leading takes on a different meaning:

When you spend a lot of time in a climate where you realise that with the help of good teams you can manage to achieve quite a lot is a great satisfaction. However, being in the post of Assistant can also have its disadvantages, the main one being that you can't just go ahead and do exactly what you want. So then you say, "Well, if I can climb the ladder a little further and become a Head, I could become Head of my own school. I could have my own vision and try to build on the experience I have gained and at least try to drive the boat the way I think is best without the fact that somebody else has to take the major decisions." Even though I worked in a collaborative environment when I was Assistant Head, however, the important decisions did come from the Head in any case. And I believe that this was the main aspect that encouraged me to aspire for Headship.

Others were urged to take on such a position as they felt the need to address the true challenge of education – student achievement and to get there through staff motivation:

In motivating students that is my primary involvement because many students come with no motivation to learn as they are underachievers. My leadership skills are shown in curriculum management and also in motivating teachers themselves to be enthusiastic about what they teach. I pass on my own enthusiasm to teachers, giving them the facility to try out new methods.

Another head defined becoming an assistant head as “natural” after a thirteen year spell of teaching. Another talks of how colleagues of hers encouraged her and “insisted” that she should apply for the post.

How, then did our heads of school prepare themselves for such a post? And, who or what helped them to do so?

#### *Preparing for Headship*

Whilst currently there is no formal training required for those aiming to become assistant heads of school, all prospective heads need to be in possession of a diploma in educational administration and management. Five out of the eight interviewees do in fact possess this qualification even though most of them were appointed to headship before this condition came into effect.

Some interesting points were raised by practically all participants that highlight what led them to pursue headship. Three important issues surface through the interviews – issues which help us to reflect on important dimensions behind how and what influences learning. This, in our opinion, was one of the major findings of this study. The comments helped the researchers to understand and appreciate the complexity behind how leaders behave in practice and that there are many reasons behind decisions and paths that leaders pursue that have been determined by developments that have taken place in the past. The important issues were those of vicarious learning, continuing professional development (CPD), and personal reflection.

Prior to headship most of the interviewees had undergone various forms of vicarious learning as to how to behave in leadership positions:

It is a little unclear for me to identify the moment when I did decide to move into an administrative position because I was such a happy man teaching Religion at a Junior Lyceum with so much personal satisfaction with my own class and student participation in my lessons. So I didn't really want to move out. However, I don't know why, probably I was conscious that during my teaching career, I used to involve myself in extra-curricular activities in schools; I was getting older (and) some administrative tasks used to fall on me for various initiatives and used to do them with pleasure. So I became conscious that I had some kind of skills that could be of good use if I moved up the hierarchical ladder.

Another spoke of his time in the armed forces:

...I was recruited by the military forces as an officer...It was the first time I had the opportunity to teach ... and I began to discover myself... (and) in 1981 I started a new experience as a guidance teacher. I developed a flair to deal with problem students ... and I began to discover that my colleagues respected me and looked up to me as an opinion leader in staff meetings and discussions.

In our conversation all heads spoke highly of the course which prepared candidates for headship:

I found the course very challenging and formative. Today, headship is such a complex task, there are so many responsibilities and expectations that proper training is indispensable for effective management.

At the same time, and similar to the Rayner and Ribbins (1999, pp. 24-25) study, the Maltese respondents expressed the need for a formal induction procedure which is lacking in Malta. As one remarked:

I felt unprepared in the beginning to run a school on my own. I think that the students doing the Diploma should be attached to schools and shadow heads for a week or a month and experience some of the daily business in the running of the school.

Most heads spoke of their period as assistant heads as crucial to their professional growth. They did so thanks to both positive and negative experiences which they gained by working with or under particular heads of school.

Several acknowledge the positive influence of one or more heads for whom they had worked. As one described it:

There was the head of school that taught me the art of communication and office organisation. He had a great influence on me and I still call him to discuss certain situations at school. Then there was the other head of school who was an expert in the delegation of duties.

In similar cases the interviewees spoke of heads who served as “mentors”. However, not all heads were as helpful and influential as this. As one put it:

I always had my own personal view of the role of head, of headship and in the school I was in I have to admit there was none and no style of headship whatsoever. No real vision....

Finally, particularly all saw the post of assistant head as “an apprenticeship to headship”. It was a time that the interviewees described as one of learning. As one put it:

I learnt from them (the heads of school) about things that work and that therefore should be emulated, and others that should be scrapped away and never copied.

In our conversations we heard of other forms of preparation which reflected the active social life of the interviewees. Their involvement in sports, clubs, parish communities, politics and unions helped them to gain the right apprenticeship to headship.

The notion of vicarious learning is tied to that of CPD. There seems to be a parallel mix between leadership experiences and CPD in educators. It is not merely a question of having a direct route to headship but a mixture of separate experiences.



*Achieving Headship*

Definitely, one key element which all heads brought out is that headship offered them the opportunity to address and achieve what they personally felt the school(s) should be doing. As one head of school put it:

...You can't exactly say why you want to be an Assistant Head of School, so then you say, 'Well, if I can climb the ladder a little further and become a Head, I could [lead] my own school. I could have my own vision and try to build on the experience I have gained and at least try to drive the boat the way I think is best ...

All interviewees highlight the importance of prospective heads who have supportive heads who adequately prepare them for headship. Too often the interviewees showed that the management style adopted by their predecessors tended to be quite autocratic and the major decisions were always "in their hands."

Some of those interviewed showed that they had to wait a considerable number of years prior to their appointment as heads, at least an average of ten years after their first appointment as Assistant Heads. Some also highlighted their disappointments on not being successful in their initial attempts to gain headship:

The first time I sat for the interview the Chairman of the Board was an ex-Head of school of school and then an Education Officer. I met him prior to the issuing of the results for postings, and had told me that I had made it but then, funnily enough, my name wasn't there for the post when the results were published.

At the same time it is interesting to note that a number of heads pointed out that their appointment to headship also was determined by a lot of hard work during their apprenticeship as Assistant Heads.

As mentioned earlier, becoming a head of school, up to some time ago, depended on either seniority or else a public interview after a call for application has been issued.

Some were chosen on the basis of seniority and others through interview. One head of school in particular expresses concern as to the way teachers are promoted to administrative posts, although at the same time highlighting what maybe influences choice during an interview:

Now, having 11 years experience as an Assistant Head was an asset since I had more experience than the other applicants for the post of a Head of School. I think that if you really work hard people get to know it. Politics never helped me because I was never really involved in it. But most probably, my experience and my answers to the questions set during the interview helped me to gain the post. Still, I don't believe that much in interviews, because asking a set of questions and just providing there and then the answers is not really the best way to assess the potential of a person. I firmly believe that the profile of work of the applicant is very important and a real asset.

The last point in particular is here important. Creating a profile and thus being given the opportunity to do so especially during the years as an assistant head is essential. Thus, this cannot be left to chance. Once appointed they need to be given by their respective heads of school, and also through a possible mentor from systems level (i.e. an education officer, etc.), opportunities to adequately prepare for headship.

Another point brought out by the interviewees is that most of these heads have experienced being deputy heads of school/heads in a primary setting prior to their move to heading secondary schools. Whilst in a couple of cases the interviewees were asked whether they wanted to become heads of new schools, in other cases it all depended on the exigencies of the education authorities. Heads of school have to move from one school to another (if they wish to) in order to obtain promotion and move up the scales of headship. None of the heads are therefore usually informed regarding where they were to be placed until shortly before they were to take up their new posts. This made preparation (if one can call it so!), particularly for a beginning head of school, unnecessarily difficult:

I stayed in (name of school) for two years and then moved to a bigger primary school. There was a vacancy at ... and I was transferred there..... Then I learnt of the vacancy at this secondary school. I managed to get the appointment in spite of the fact that quite a number of people had applied for the post. I was informed at the very last minute!

This is an issue which the interviewees and the researchers feel needs to be addressed. It does not take much to address given the major developments that have taken place in education over the years and are still taking place. The fact that now heads of school are being selected on the basis of qualifications and experience argues well as the challenges the schools have to address now and in the future call for heads who have the necessary principles, qualities and skills necessary to take their schools forward.

### *Reviewing Headship*

It is evidently clear that with a move towards decentralisation heads have had to modify their role. The Maltese literature on headship in the eighties and early nineties saw heads very much entrenched in administrative roles. Now no longer:

I think we have come a long way since my father's style of headship. Today schools are more autonomous than in the past years in several aspects. I remember the time when heads had to ask permission from the Head Office to take the children out on a cultural visit and then had to write reports as to where they were taking them and other things.

“We used to have the Head who would dictate and whether you like it or not, you had to follow what s/he says and do as you are told. This culture hindered the students, staff and parents from approaching the Head. The culture created so much distance and projected the head of school as some sort of dictator. But things have changed. I doubt whether this has happened with everyone, but things are changing. I have learnt from experience that such methods do not work at all. Secondly, I believe one doesn't have to impose on teachers. I always ask for help first, and I do it across the board so no one would say I am delegating to the same persons. More or less, everybody comes up offering assistance, so I move on.

This helps to reflect some of the pressures exerting on heads who are required to be, as Duignan so forcefully put it, leaders who are “full-blooded creatures who are politically and spiritually aware, credible, earthly and practical (1998, pp. 21-22). They can no longer administer from a distance but have to lead by example and with others (see Bezzina in Pashiardis (ed), 2001). Given this, it is not surprising to find that concepts like collegiality, empowerment and collaboration surfaced in the interviews.

Whilst heads do feel that they are having to adjust their role and styles of leadership they are concerned that the education authorities are expecting them to do too much with limited power to take the decisions that matter:

They have given us a lot of responsibilities but don't tell me we are autonomous, because we are not. In retrospect, I would think twice before accepting the post of head ... The only autonomy they gave us is in the way we spend our money, nothing else. That is why headship hasn't changed at all. They loaded us with work we shouldn't be doing, they added to our role the finances, which was a big headache to the education authorities, and then they just handed it over to us. Funds are taking a lot of our time.

Now, with the introduction of the National Minimum Curriculum schools will, over the next few years, be expected to start developing curricula which address the individual needs of pupils entrusted to their care. This is very much in line with the heads of school who feel that their role should mainly be that of educational leaders. As one stated: "Heads of school need to be more with students. They need to be educational leaders." They need to create the appropriate climate in which individuals feel that they belong, that they are important and that they can all contribute to school matters.

One challenge heads are currently facing is that they have no say in the recruitment of their teaching staff. Although there are no easy solutions to this concern, the majority of the interviewees feel that they should be involved in the final choice of teaching personnel rather than having to accept anyone sent by central authorities. At the same time the heads acknowledge their limited powers since they also have no say in determining whether a teacher is retained or not if they do not perform.

Whilst certain initiatives seems to imply that schools will become more autonomous as the years go by the concern raised by Fullan (1998) on the need to restructure and reculture our institutions are very much evident. As one head of school pointed out: "It is an extraordinary situation where a government vows to delegate everything to schools and then decides to cherry pick the elements of teaching profession it wishes to deploy."

Radical changes in the whole culture of pedagogical practices towards collaboration and collegiality among educators, students and other stakeholders may prove to be the major challenge ahead of us since this requires a paradigm shift in norms, skills, attitudes and beliefs.

So, whilst changes are taking place and the power of the centre being challenged, much work still needs to be done within the centre where the personnel themselves undergo this paradigm shift, so that schools will be able to function as desired.

Another final point very much connected to the points raised is that most of the heads interviewed speak of the stress they are enduring. As a result of this not many assistant heads are willing to take the plunge and apply for headship. In fact a number of posts are still vacant. This helps to highlight that the implications behind headship as are being redefined today have not been fully understood.

### **Concluding Note**

The Maltese education system is undergoing major reforms at a number of levels, but especially at the school site calling for adaptive and technical challenges. All interviewees believe in the need for heads to take a more proactive and dynamic role, and people-centred approach in leading their respective schools forward.

What seems clear is that if current educational changes in Malta are to achieve the benefits claimed for them a strong, clear vision both at systems and school level will be necessary (Bezzina in Pashairdis (ed), 2001). For this reason the role that heads can play in such a transformation needs to be clearly understood and their concerns addressed.

Various points brought out in this study which explored the formation and accession into headship help to highlight the need to take headship more seriously. The study shows that family, family experiences, and the community have an important part to

play in influencing the lives of prospective leaders. It also highlights the link between vicarious learning, continuous professional development and personal reflection. The various experiences that the interviewees have undergone in life together with the opportunities to develop professionally – academically and at work – show that headship is based on a mix of various separate experiences which individuals go through and which determine their life and life chances which are also conditioned by the social context in which they are working in.

At the same time, the interviewees bring out the need for prospective heads to have experiences with ‘model’ heads of school who can provide them with leadership opportunities during their apprenticeship. They also point out the importance behind having a mentor who acts as a critical friend. Such observations help to illustrate the profound lesson in planning and strategy that one can extract from the words of the poet Antonio Machado – “Life is like a path you beat while you walk it”.

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