

# Floriana Primary School: One of the First Purpose-built Schools in Malta

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Canon P.P. Pullincino (1815-1890)

As in so many other countries in Europe, the elementary education of the masses was introduced in Malta in the middle of the nineteenth century. Locally, as a result of both internal and external pressures, more often than not in the form of recommendations and exhortations rather than more forceful manifestations, the Government assumed responsibility for this.

One of the major problems which, given local conditions, such an ambitious undertaking faced was to provide places where the children of the poor could be taught. Financial allocation to education was too meagre to allow for the building of purpose-built institutions, and, for many decades, private houses were rented to serve as elementary schools. The schools at Floriana and Rabat (Gozo) were the earliest exceptions to this policy.

Pullicino, as Chief Director of Elementary Schools, had, on various occasions throughout his long tenure, recommended the building of schools in every locality but the government was never enthusiastic to make budgetary allocation for this purpose. This explains, at least partly, Pullicino's elation evident in the part of the fifth Report presented to Governor Sir John Gaspard Le Marchant in November 1858 we reproduce in the following page.

Besides the glaring evidence of Pullicino's elation, however, two things are implicit in this part of his report : first, that, in the socio-economic climate of the time, it was extremely difficult to convince the authorities about the necessity of building schools for the education of the masses; and, secondly, that Pullicino had a very clear notion of the architectural requirements for the implementation of the principles of school organization and management current at the time. These can be briefly summarized as follows:

1. Order and discipline were the most important requisites of successful school administration;
2. Simultaneous instruction and the classroom system, both inventions of the nineteenth century (Hamilton, 1989), were the mechanisms to bring this about efficiently;
3. The idiosyncratic divisions of rented houses did not make the implementation of the new pedagogy possible as they prevented the schoolmaster from supervising all the classes simultaneously, which was one of accepted principles of school management at the time;
4. The playground was an important architectural feature of the school because it provided an opportunity for both physical education and the moral training of the children (Stow, 1840).

## References

- Hamilton, D. (1989) *Toward A Theory of Schooling* Lewes, Falmer.  
Stow, D. (1840) *The Training System*, Glasgow, Blackie and Son.

Quantunque il passato biennio non si distingua per molto numero di nuove scuole al pubblico aperte, mi sia lecito però di notare, non essere circostanza di poco momento la installazione della scuola della Floriana nel nuovo edificio per essa fabbricato, in luogo centrale e cospicuo, fra la chiesa di San Publio e l'altra rotonda detta di Sarria, in uno spazio altre volte appellato Giardino Botanico, perché in esso molti anni addietro grande raccolta era di piante, inserviente alla istruzioni de' giovani studenti; ai quali poscia simile comodo venne prestato nel Giardino Argotti: si che il primo spazio rimasto disoccupato si trovo' molto proprio a essere in iscuola convertito.

Io diceva essere cosa da notarsi il nuovo edificio dato alla scuola della Floriana per essere stata questa la primaria del Governo fabbricata di pianta in Malta, dopo di avere innalzata l'altra fatta egualmente edificare nel Rabato del Gozo. L'aver una scuola distribuita appositamente a uso delle classi, che in essa devonsi collocare, e cosa che influisce non poco sulla regolarità dello insegnamento, sopra tutto nelle scuole elementari. Al buon ordinamento delle nostre scuole oppongono ancora molta difficoltà le partizioni irregolarissime di molte delle case, prese in affitto per farle servire a uso di scuole. Spesso avviene, che le classi lontane troppo le une dalle altre, non possano essere messe sotto la immediata sorveglianza del maestro. Questo allontanamento rallenta l'ordine, e la mancanza di ordine nuoce alla istruzione.

La scuola nuova della Floriana, divisa in tre differenti compartimenti, separati da due cortili, offre i comodi che si desiderano ai tre ordini di scuole che in essa sono. Nel mezzo sta la scuola infantile, comune a maschi ed a femmine. A destra sta la scuola primaria femminile, ed a sinistra sta quella de' maschi. De' due cortili, l'uno destinato per esercizi ginnastici, serve a' maschi de' la primaria; e l'altro, da essere convertito in piccolo giardino di fiori, tiensi aperto alle femmine ed agli infanti. Unico e' l'ingresso a queste tre scuole; però le porte sono tante, e talmente distribuite, da dare passaggio facile a tutti, senza lasciar campo ad alcun disordine o confusione.

Eras creduto, da alcuni, che molto spazio si fosse occupato per innalzare queste scuole. Però l'esito fa vedere tutto l'opposto. In tutte le tre scuole concorrono niente meno di 500 fanciulli. Le stanze di tutti tre i comportamenti sono occupate. Quando dicesi occupate non vuolsi dire accumulati gli individui insieme in guisa di non lasciare luogo a respiro. In iscuole ove molto numero di persone devono raccogliere, e stare insieme per molte ore della giornata, e' cosa di somma importanza l'averesi totalmente ampio, da impedire, per quanto possibile, molta corruzione dell'atmosfera. Questo desiderasi massimamente in iscuole, ove raccogliersi si deono fanciulli, i quali si vogliono in istato di buona salute allevare. E se mai lo spazio dato a' cortili fosse purso talvolta a pochi superfluo; questo non doutra' ad alcuno parer tale, quando a questi due recinti saranno concessi tutti i comodi che si desiderano per l'esercizio corporale de' la gioventu'.

La scuola elementare senza un cortile bene corredato di oggetti inservienti all'esercizio del corpo e' sempre difettosa, perché mancante di un elemento essenzialissimo alla prima educazione dei fanciulli e delle ragazze, quale e' l'elemento della educazione fisica. Nella scuola della Floriana aveasi voluto dare un modello, per quanto possibile, perfetto di tutto quello che riguarda una scuola elementare. E questo credo che in qualche maniera si stia facendo coll'impiego di piccolo spazio di terreno, che non puo' dirsi giammai perduto, quando e' impiegato in oggetto di così grande entità.

D'altronde il danaro speso dal Governo per la fabbrica di tale scuola non fu totalmente infruttuoso. Dal piano inferiore, o sotterraneo, di tali scuole si ebbe il vantaggio di cavare fuori quattro botteghe: le quali affittansi oggigiorno a £33 10 l'anno; lasciando un profitto, che calcolato al 3% e; piu' del frutto della meta' del capitale di circa £2000 spese per la erezione tutt'intera di dette scuole.

**Pullicino, P.:**

**Fifth Report on the Primary Schools (November 1858)  
Translated from the original Italian by Dott. J. Eynand**

Although the opening of more new schools to the public is not a distinguishing feature of the past two years, I would like to point out that the installation of the Floriana school in a new building erected for the purpose on a central and conspicuous site, behind Saint Publius Church and the Rotunda Church known as Sarria, is an event of no small moment. This site is known also as the Botanic Gardens since many years ago it hosted a plant collection that served as a means of instruction to young students; for this reason the first site remained unused and therefore it was very appropriate to turn it into a school.

I sustained that it was a thing worthy of note that this new building was to serve as the Floriana school. Moreover it is the first primary school built by the government in Malta after the other built in Rabat, Gozo. Having a school used solely for classes is of great influence on discipline, the smooth procedure of teaching, especially in primary schools. The fact that many houses are rented to serve as schools and the way these houses are partitioned into classes is not a good sign to the running and administration of our schools. It happens often, that the classes are distant from each other and therefore the teacher cannot supervise them all at the same time. This slows down order and lack of order hinders instruction.

The new Floriana school, divided into three different compartments, separated by two courtyards, offers the comodities necessary to three sections of schools that the building hosts. The infants school is in the middle, both for girls and boys. On the right there is the girls primary school and on the left the boys' primary school. One of the courtyards is used for gymnastic exercises and is used by the boys of the primary school; the other courtyard will be converted into a small flower garden open for the girls and the infants. The entrance to these three schools is one; however many are the doors that are well distributed and give easy access to everyone, avoiding therefore disorder and confusion.

It was believed by some that to build these schools a lot of space would be occupied. However the outcome proved otherwise. The three schools can host 500 children. The rooms of all the three compartments are occupied. When it is said "occupied" this does not mean that the children are packed in such a manner that there is no breathing space. In packed schools where many persons are gathered and stay together for many hours of the day, it is of the utmost importance to have a big site, to prevent, as far as possible, bad ventilation. This is highly desirable in schools where children are gathered, who must be brought up in good health. And if the space allotted to the courtyards seems to some to be superfluous this should not be the case since the said courtyards will have all the necessary comodities for the corporal exercise of the youngsters.

A primary school without a well equipped courtyard for the body's exercise is always faulty, because it lacks a very essential element to the first education of children, boys and girls, that is physical education. The Floriana school was built to give as much as possible the perfect model of what constitutes a primary school. This, I believe, is what in a way is being done when utilizing small plots of land, that cannot be ever called wasted when they are intended to be used to achieve this extremely important purpose.

Besides, the money spent by the government in building this school has not been completely fruitless. The basement of these schools has been used for four shops: these are today let for £33.10 a year, leaving therefore a profit, that calculated at 3% is more than half the capital of about £2000 spent for the building of all the said schools.