

Well Managed Schools - A Case Study

The Xghajra Primary School A Labour of Love and Professional Dedication

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Schools exist to promote the development of pupils through their engagement with the curriculum. The curriculum includes not only the National Minimum Curriculum but also teaching methods, learning styles and other elements such as the quality of relationships in the school and the organisation and management of classes. Head and class teachers are not required to organise their schools and classes in prescribed ways. This is very much left to their professional discretion. However it is important that they keep their organisation and teaching under review. To engage in this process of review heads and teachers need not only to examine their own practice but also to have access to the practice of others.

The Context

The Xghajra Primary School is small with 49 children in the kindergarten classes and 123 children in the primary classes. The socio-economic backgrounds of the pupils are varied. The school is tucked away in the valley called 'Golf tat-Tafal' in the village of Xghajra (Haż-Zabbar). The countryside and sea-views are spectacular. The school is painted in pastel colours. The classes, which are all on one level, are attractive and the walls feature charts and displays of children's work. Each one of them is equipped with a ceiling fan and a heater. Each class has an adjoining toilet with a wash-hand basin. There is a hand-dryer in each one of them. Cleanliness is the order of the day.

Ms Pauline Galea took over the running of the school on the 20 September 1994. Previously she had been assistant head of school at the Zejtun Junior Lyceum for girls. The water and electricity supply in the school were cut off. The water tanks did not have a lid. The head teacher went on a ladder herself to fix this. The only items in the school were 'a desk, a chair, a clock and a telephone set'. The roof was leaking and falling down to pieces. One of her priorities was to ensure that membrane was applied to the roof. She had to 'roll up her sleeves and set to work'. Ms Galea was determined that together with her staff, despite all odds, she was going to turn this into an 'ideal school'.

There are six teachers and three kindergarten assistants in the school. They are very positive about the school and some consider it to be their second home. Three of them are recent graduates of the Faculty of Education. There is also a learning support teacher who works with the Year 2, 3 and 4 classes. All of the teachers are very keen on staying on in this school. They have ready

“Mixed-ability teaching and learning can be successful if they are organised well”



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access to the teaching resources. Some teachers purchase additional resources for their classes.

Teaching and Learning

Since there is only one class in each year level all the classes are mixed-ability. Both the children and the teachers seem to take this in their stride. The teachers use a variety of groupings: the whole class; ability, friendship or interest groups; pairs or individuals. The size and formation of the groups are based on the subject matter and the learning needs of the pupils concerned. Some subjects like Mathematics, the languages (Maltese and English) and Science are taught to ability groups. Other subjects such as Social Studies and Art & Craft are taught to mixed ability groups. Pupils have various opportunities to engage in collaborative group work.

Ms Galea is very concerned that the teachers in her school adopt progressive and effective teaching methods. She believes that: "Teaching is a continuous process. It never stops. You have to teach in a modern way otherwise you stagnate".

A number of notice-boards are affixed to



The school playground will have more coloured markings. Now they have 'passju' and footprint markings.

the walls of the school corridors. These have different learning themes which focus on a specific topic, like for example the importance of reading, science concepts, etc. and are meant to be read by the pupils and to be used by the teachers as sources of information. Computers are used extensively in the Year 1 class. Expectations are high all round. Children are treated as individuals with individual needs. Last year the school won three medals for sports and obtained a high pass rate in the Junior Lyceum exams.



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The Role of the Head

Ms Galea, the head of school, is very congenial but firm. Besides her pedagogical and curricular commitments she is responsible for maintaining the accounts of the school and supervises any work which needs to be done in the school. Despite the limited clerical assistance the head copes quite well with the administrative tasks. "I live for my school, it's my home," she states with enthusiasm.

Both the teachers and the parents are actively involved in the running of the school. "It is very important to involve the staff, the parents and the School Council in the running of the school," she insists.



Parent Participation

The School Council is made up of four parents, three teachers and the head of school. Parent participation is clearly evident in this school. When walking around the school you are bound to bump into a parent or two. The parents that I talked to insist that they have a very positive relationship with the head of school, the teachers and the ancillary staff. Their main activities revolve around the school library as they organise the lending of books to the pupils on a rotation basis. They help the children to choose books which are appropriate for their level of reading ability. They show a keen interest in the kind of books that the children are reading. One parent expressed concern that most of the pupils tend to go for the classics rather than the modern titles.

It is hoped that parent participation is extended effectively to the classrooms where they and other adults are used in an instructional capacity with particular groups of pupils or with individuals.

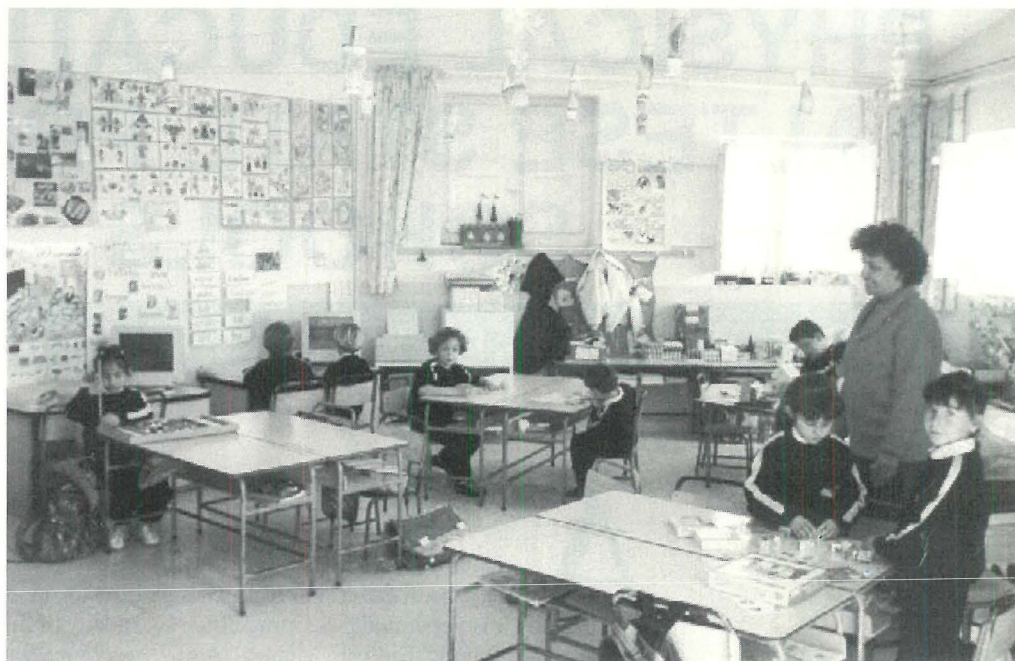
Private Enterprise

There is not much scope for fund-raising activities with such a limited number of parents. The curtains of the school hall, which is well furnished and in the shape of an amphitheatre, were donated by the Jerma Palace Hotel. The class curtains were donated by the Bugibba Holiday Complex. The head writes on a regular basis to private agencies asking for donations to fund school initiatives. The current annual budget allocation of Lm300 is very quickly used up and you need to be "financially inventive". It is common knowledge that on a number of occasions Ms Galea has forked out her own money to top up the school funds to pay for pressing school projects, for example, when she was determined that the classes should be whitewashed in plastic emulsion paint rather than water paint. She has been known to spend her Summer holidays mixing paint colours.

Plans for the Future

A scheme introduced some years ago by Ms Galea is to ask every child to donate a book to the school library before they move on to secondary school. She proposes a number of appropriate and reasonably priced titles that the parents and children can choose from. These are classified according to subject.

Pupils have various opportunities to engage in collaborative group work.



The head is eager to extend this scheme in order to make more books available to the pupils and teachers. She believes that high levels of reading ability in both Maltese and English are the key to success in the Primary school.

“The pupils require a large number of attractive books to extend their vocabulary, their imagination and to have the knowledge of the world placed at their fingertips.”

The school will have a new extension to the kindergarten section. The classes are to be enlarged to accommodate the envisaged increase in pupil numbers. It is hoped that this planned extension will not reduce the available facilities. The school playground will have more coloured markings. Now they have ‘passju’ and footprint markings. There is a dire need for a school photocopier (which has now been purchased). Teachers would like to acquire Primary English videos and more books.

The head of school would like to promote more musical activities. She believes that music has a crucial role to play in the education of children. She would like to acquire a number of musical instruments for the schools. However, these are too expensive.

The head would like to call the school: ‘Skola ta’ Mhabba’. However, ‘Skola ta’ l-Imhabba ta’ Pauline Galea’ would be more like it. Ms Galea believes truly that “love works miracles with the children of this school” (and with all the children of this world, for that matter).” No doubts about this are left in one’s mind when visiting this school.

Summary of the characteristics of a well managed school

From this case study it is possible to derive a number of features which characterise a well managed school:

1) Head and class teachers review their policies and practice on a regular basis.

2) A well ordered, attractive and a clean physical environment.

3) The leadership role of the head is vital. There needs to be a sense of collegiality among the school administrators (heads and assistant heads), the teachers and ancillary staff.

4) Mixed-ability teaching and learning can be successful if they are organised well. Teachers need to use a variety of groupings: the whole class; ability, friendship or interest groups; pairs or individuals. The size and formation of the groups has to be based on the subject matter and the learning needs of the pupils concerned. Some subjects like Mathematics, the Languages (Maltese and English) and Science are taught better to ability groups. Other subjects such as Social Studies and Art & Craft lend themselves more to mixed ability groups. Pupils need to be given various opportunities to engage in collaborative group work.

5) Parent participation is paramount. It is hoped that parents and other adults are used in an instructional capacity with particular groups of pupils or with individuals.

6) Huge emphasis is laid upon high levels of literacy, numeracy and creativity.

The Editorial Board would like to wish Ms Pauline Galea a well-deserved retirement. May her dedication continue to inspire other heads of schools and teachers.

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