

A Total Quality Management Approach to Secondary Education

An initiative of St. Theresa Junior Lyceum, Mriehel

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"If changing is really learning, if effective organisations need more and more intelligent people, if careers are shorter and more changeable, above all, if more people need to be self-sufficient for more of their lives, then education has become the single most important investment that any person can make in their own destiny"
C.B. Handy

Establishing a norm of continuous improvement by applying the principles of Total Quality Management was the theme of a one-day seminar for the staff of St. Theresa Junior Lyceum held on the 22 October, 1998. The school has been innovating on its educational practices and the provision of a total quality education is the leading ultimate goal.

In her speech on the occasion of Prize Giving Ceremony back on May 6th, 1998, The Head of School at St. Theresa Junior Lyceum, Mriehel, Miss J. Mifsud-Matrenza, said that *"if we intend to be successful in our preparations for the new millenium, we need an education that is broader in scope, flexible and purposeful to the students; an education that identifies and releases the full potential of students' talents."*

WHY TQM?

The multi-dimensional role of the school demands a change in the existing school culture. Teaching and learning is a way of life and not a process restricted to the school years of the individual. Flexibility and mobility are the qualities we are seeking to equip our students and our staff with. It is a long-term process that demands:

- a) continuous reviewing of resources and teaching strategies;
- b) upgrading the content of and questioning the appropriateness of activities;
- c) modifying practice to increase effectiveness.

With the decentralisation of power at Systems level, schools are consequently acquiring an increased degree of autonomy in many aspects of the internal educational dynamics. Although curriculum design is still centralised the school has a substantial amount of autonomy in developing curriculum content at classroom level.

St. Theresa JL endorses the fact that enhanced autonomy creates a more complex form of accountability to the shareholders. Members of staff require job satisfaction and professional development. Students' quality of life depends to a large degree on the type of education the school provides. Parents'

expectations and involvement are being translated in tangible terms since they expect higher academic standards but at the same time want their children to be balanced, mature citizens. Employers expect schools to be instrumental in building up a 'learning society' and all over the globe there is a pronounced emphasis on the role of schools as mechanisms from where the solutions of the pressing problem of unemployment may be proactively implemented. They also require greater learning skills, teamwork and self-motivation based on a good grasp of the basics. The European Commission's White Paper on Education and Training claims that "building up a broad base of knowledge, i.e. the wherewithal to grasp the meaning of things, to understand and to create, is the essential function of school". The Paper sustains that the broader the knowledge base of individuals the better their chances of employability and mobility. In fact it was management guru Peter F. Drucker who coined the term "knowledge workers" (Drucker, F. Peter, *Landmarks of Tomorrow*, 1959) in predicting a new class succeeding that of industrial workers.

Internationalisation and new technologies have caused a boom in unemployment. Workers, both those who performed routine and repetitive tasks and those who had paper qualifications that did not correspond to standard profiles, were not flexible in adapting to changes in work conditions. The function of schools is to train students to acquire skills by which they will be able to revalidate their qualifications through a dynamic process of lifelong learning. Let us quote one example close to 'home'. The role of teachers was restricted to unloading compartmentalised chunks of knowledge within the isolation of the classroom and to formally test how much of that information pupils had retained by the end of the scholastic year. Teachers are now expected to fulfil the function of educational managers who can be effective as long as they are living an ongoing process of professional development themselves. "They need to develop skills in group processes; to become enablers rather than instructors; to facilitate learning at first hand (through experience)



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West-Burnham John, 1992***

rather than at second hand (by gathering others' knowledge).” [Handy, Ch., 1990, Pg.29] Furthermore, this newly-defined role of the teacher has entailed a change in the internal organisation of educational establishments. These arguments substantiate the necessity for schools to apply the principles of total quality management to education.

WHAT IS TQM?

“Total quality management is a process which derives its content and values from the needs of its clients. Thus TQM in a company producing luxury cars will be driven by consumerism – in a school it needs to be driven by educational values.” [West-Burnham John; 1992, page 56-57]. Schools, like business organisations, are providing a service to their clients. Schools that aim at providing a quality education are better known in the educational context as effective schools and empirical studies have identified certain characteristics common to effective schools, namely;

- Purposeful leadership
- Professional expertise
- Ongoing professional development amongst staff
- Links with external agencies
- Strategic planning

If we are resorting to the tried and proven concept of TQM in the provision of education we have to bear in mind certain principles that were originated by W. Edwards Deming.

Achieve a constancy of purpose and improve constantly

Long-term planning and continuous improvement of all processes is the initial step towards quality. By no means do we pretend that a school development plan is an insurance for total quality but it is surely an indispensable factor.

St. Theresa JL has earned a reputation for being an effective school. The high examination scores achieved by the majority of students and the number of students who went on to tertiary education were for a long time considered as the primary indices of the effectiveness of the school. However, academic excellence is only one of the various nuclei that make up a holistic type of education. We can argue that pupils are motivated to achieve because the type of teaching and learning taking place in the school is learner orientated and educationally challenging. The SMT and the staff at ST. Theresa have devised a three-year development plan that focuses on innovation and change. St. Theresa JL aims to ‘provide a secure, caring and happy environment within which all students will encounter stimulating and challenging educational experiences [...], to “enable

students to develop their full potential, seize the opportunities, accept the responsibilities and prepare for the realities of the adult world.” [...] ‘ to enable them to look to the future, eager to face the challenges that confront them with a sense of self-worthiness, purpose, respect and regard for others.” (Vision Statement: School Development Plan 1998-2001)

Another aspect that aims at improvement is the shift from a paper-based organisation to a computerised one. The administrative section of the school is being computerised and the application of information technology for educational purposes is another of the areas that the school is developing. The school houses three I.T. laboratories that are also used for the realisation of a pilot project aimed at implementing a networking system in local schools. Another ‘communications room’ has started functioning this year so that there are now 36 networked computers in 3 labs. Members of staff are already availing themselves of this resource during and outside formal lesson time. Another two computers are available for the teaching staff and students alike in the school library. If we are seeking to be qualitative in our work computerisation is a sine qua non.

Institute leadership and break down barriers between departments

By capitalising on the strengths of each individual in the school we can render all activities more meaningful. In this respect, the entirety of the staff in a school adds another dimension to its’ managerial and administrative role; that of educational leaders seeking to translate the principles of their educational vision through planning, implementing, monitoring, evaluating and changing. This process is carried out through a team effort in collaboration with parents and external agencies for the fulfilment of set targets. Teaching and learning takes place at all times of the school-day. Morning assembly is an invaluable communication channel and there is a wealth of extra-curricular activities during break-times, after school and on weekends and holidays.

The classroom is, in more senses than one, a boardroom where the teacher-facilitator-coordinator regularly liaises with the team of learners to initiate and carry out projects, exchange ideas, develop learning skills and generally pursue educational goals.

An enhanced school ethos has enabled us to work together and share information. The school culture is undergoing a positive change in that all members of staff seek to work in a relaxed atmosphere where relationships

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develop trust. Meaningful relationships with students, parents and external agencies are the logical way towards quality education.

Institute a vigorous programme of education and retraining and encourage self-improvement for everyone

Members of staff are clients with requirements as much as the students themselves, their parents and the community. They need the autonomy to decide how they are going to reach goals and not feel victims of the system. Their ideas, their talents, their creativity and their expertise are a valuable resource to the organisation. Staff also needs continuous training and development. Staff professional development needs is one of the aims on our School Development Plan (1998 –2001). The target is “to devise a clear structure of school-based INSET whereby members of staff liaise and co-ordinate departmental and inter-departmental staff development opportunities in an atmosphere of professionalism and collegiality.” The direct involvement of members of

staff in facilitating school-based inset enhances collegiality and individual expertise is a benefit to other members. A school-based computer course for members of staff was oversubscribed within the hour the circular was pinned to the staff notice board in May 1998. This initiative was welcomed by members of the staff, rewarding to the organisers and an empirical exercise.

We aim to create the best quality students capable of appropriating their own learning. All of our students are given the chance to develop their capacities. The wide range of extracurricular activities give the chance to all pupils, whatever their academic capabilities, to develop their talents. The school has a record of success marked by the winning of several competitions:

- Sports events, Video competition on Rubble Walls, French and Bible quizzes to mention a few that happened during scholastic year 1997-98)

- Participation in school exchange programmes

- Participation in international educational projects (JR Summit, Water Project)

Furthermore, slow achievers tend to feel inadequate therefore they are encouraged to participate in those activities which empower them to increase their self-esteem by identifying their strengths.

The responsibility for providing a quality education is assumed and shared by all members of our establishment

Our vision cannot be fulfilled unless it is also owned by our students and their parents. Positive staff-student-parents relationships can never be overestimated for the decisive role they play in education. The direct involvement of parents in school matters is one of the key

areas that the Lyceum is focusing on strengthening. The representation of students on the Students' Council means that they participate in decisions taken on important school issues. The leadership role of the Head Girl and Deputy Head Girl (who are elected by their peers) enhances communication between our 'clients' and ourselves 'the service-providers'. The opportunity to air their problems and concerns freely during their frequent informal meetings with the Head of School, together with a school culture where members of staff are supporting them at all times (very often even after school hours and on holidays), are all factors that reinforce our determination to resolve conflicts in a win-win situation and employ the richness of our differences by pulling in the same direction; towards continuous improvement.

Providing a total quality education is not a clean-cut package that is unwrapped and implemented at a whim. It is a lengthy process that unravels gradually. Constant commitment and evaluation will guide us through this initiative. Nor is it a question of applying Deming's industrial model tale quale. We need a combination of the best expertise in both this model and of the outstanding learning theories and methods from the world of education. Henceforth, our plans and efforts are all centred around focusing on the task of helping our students to learn how to navigate effectively these changing times, both at school and within society, now and in the future.

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