

Lorenzo Gafa' Boys' Secondary School, Vittoriosa

Paul A. Attard interviews

Emmanuel Phetcuti, Head of School

Well-managed
schools

LORENZO Gafa' Boys' Secondary School, Fortini, Vittoriosa, is a relatively small secondary school with a population of just over 200 students. Over the years, the Education Division has kept the school as small as possible and has given it particular attention in order to compensate for some disadvantages it has to face. The school building is currently being enlarged and refurbished.

“Response from parents was not forthcoming to the extent that we would have wished for”

P. A. A. How long have you been Head of Lorenzo Gafa' Boys' Secondary School, Vittoriosa?

E. C.: I was posted to the School in October 1996 on my appointment as Head of School. This year is my third year as Head of this school.

P. A. A.: What other school administrative experiences have you had in the past?

E. C.: Since November 1990, I have been carrying duties of Assistant Head in two other schools: Dun Guzepp Zammit Brighella Junior Lyceum, Hamrun, and Antonio Bosio Boys' Secondary School, Gzira. During the six years I spent in the administration of these two schools, I have been lucky to meet two Heads of School, Mr. George Grech and Mr. Paul Degabriele, who gave me and the other Assistant Heads enough space and opportunity to take initiatives and gather a lot of hands-on experiences that proved to be so useful for the role I am practising now. During that time, I have been delegated with so many tasks related to school administration that on my appointment to Head of school I could slip into my new shoes with relative ease.

P. A. A.: How have you developed the necessary rapport with parents?

E. C.: Without doubt parents are main stakeholders in a school organization. Having said that with conviction, it was one of my main strategies as soon as I set foot in my school to create a school atmosphere where parents feel they are more than welcome. This could not

happen overnight, but, at the same time, little things help: the way parents are dealt with on the phone; the various meetings organized prior to the start of every school year; the welcoming attitude to visiting parents; activities organized during the year which give the opportunity to parents to see what their children are doing at school; involving parents in various school activities; regular communication with them through circulars, school newsletter and so on; all this and more broke the ice that for various reasons created barriers between the school and the parents, and slowly but steadily an excellent rapport has been built for the benefit of all, especially for the main stakeholders: the students.

P. A. A.: What kind of response do you get from parents?

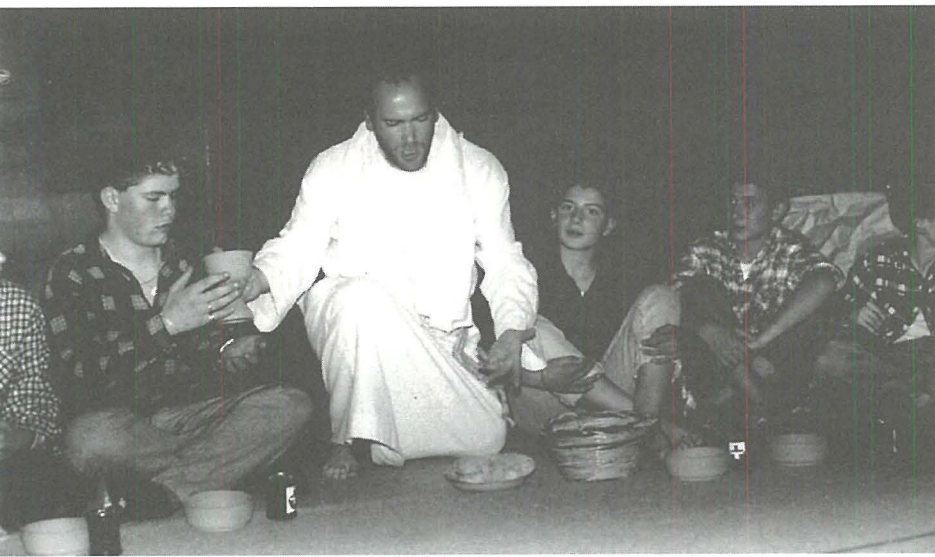
E. C.: One of our main preoccupations has always been the fact that in spite of all our efforts, response from parents was not forthcoming to the extent that we would have wished for. Up to two years ago only about 53% of parents attended Parents' Day and only a small number of parents of the upper forms attended meetings organized for them by the school. This low level response from parents needed to be addressed, because we believe that without their participation school effectiveness suffers. At the same time, however, there has always been a number of parents who volunteered to participate on the School Council and every year an election for parents' representatives on the School Council has been



Paul A. Attard is Assistant Director of Education, Planning and Research. For 20 years he was Head of Department in a Technical Institute, pioneering Teaching English for Specific Purposes. He was Director of Studies for the Council of Europe Workshop on language and culture awareness held in Malta in 1996.

Leisure time is as important as study time at Fortini





Drama is playing a very important part in the education of students, helping to gain self-esteem and develop their personality

“ We often hear a lot of talk about, ‘inclusive education’ and yet the system is not inclusive at all, leaving about 50% of the 11+ students population in Malta at a disadvantage ”

held, with approximately 22% of parents casting their votes.

P. A. A.: How do you try to reach parents who never turn up for school activities?

E. C.: One has to bear in mind the social and educational background of a number of parents in this area for whom education is very low in the list of their priorities, having to battle against other priorities which for them are more basic and fundamental.

With all this at the back of our minds, the whole team of teachers and administrators at our school decided last year to address this major weakness hoping to improve parents' participation in school life, especially those parents who never turn up. We have launched several initiatives to achieve this. We have introduced a school newsletter, “*Mill-Fortini*” which is regularly sent to parents to serve as a means of communication; all Form Teachers invited all parents to meet them individually during the first term; we have organized several meetings for parents of the various forms; we have organized an Open Day for parents, giving them the opportunity to watch their children during lessons and other school activities; we have also set up a Ladies' Circle, made up of about fifteen mothers who help in school activities. We are hoping that all these initiatives will improve further the school / parents relationships, thereby improving their responses to our school's initiatives.

P. A. A.: What is the educational and social background of the students?

E. C.: “*An effective school is one that has a positive effect upon its pupils' educational outcomes, when account is taken of intake*” (Pamela Sammons: *Improving Education*. Ch. 4, p. 36). Peter Mortimore, during his splendid address to Heads of School in Valletta last year, reiterated the importance one has to give to students' intake when considering school effectiveness. As you well know, the Cottonera area has been labeled, and not without reasons, as ‘a depressed area’ by many. In their report issued in October 1997, the Archpriests of Cospicua, Vittoriosa, Senglea and Kalkara preferred to define the area as, “*a special priority area*”. Marisa Micallef Leyson, who

at present heads the Housing Authority and seems to be deeply committed to improve housing matters in the Valletta and Cottonera areas, expressed herself in this way: “*The problems (of the Valletta and Cottonera regions), which are not just about housing, have been building up for so long that it will be very hard to turn the corner. But turn the corner we must.....*” (*The Sunday Times*: 07.03.99)

Lorenzo Gafa' Boys Secondary School, Vittoriosa, is an Area Secondary School catering for students, from Form I to Form V, who hail from the Cottonera area. All these students commence their secondary education with a severe disadvantage which impinges seriously on their outlook and attitudes towards education. This is the simple fact that they did not make it to the Junior Lyceum. The percentage of pupils who pass this entrance examination from this area is among the lowest in Malta. They come to our school already marked for life as failures with the consequence that they start to believe it. You can imagine what level of self esteem our students have to bear.

Besides, a considerable number of them has been labeled as failures from their first years at primary school, because they have always been regaled with backbencher placing in a ‘C’, ‘D’ or ‘F’ class since they set foot there. Add to this their social and family environment, where housing facilities are depressing; unemployment is rampant and criminality is common.

We often hear a lot of talk about, ‘inclusive education’ and yet the system is not inclusive at all, leaving about 50% of the 11+ students population in Malta at a disadvantage. The percentage of this category in the Cottonera area is even higher.

P. A. A.: Which major challenges have you had to face when you joined the school?

E. C.: It took me some time and a lot of reflection to make a clear analysis of the major challenges that I had to confront in my new post as Head of School.

I realized that the most urgent task that needed a lot leadership skills to set in motion was the creation of a climate among the staff that would motivate each and every one to give his/her best so that the team-spirit would be enhanced. Introducing an open style management, empowering teachers to take initiatives and promoting a collaborative method of running the school were the main routes towards the building of a team of partners who work together marvelously.

A second major challenge on my agenda was the ethos of the school. Unfortunately, student teachers who were sent to our school for their teaching practice, newly graduated teachers who were assigned teaching duties at our school and parents whose children failed the entrance exams to the Junior Lyceum and had to attend our school, had very bad impressions of the school and tried their best to go elsewhere. The image of the school needed upgrading.

The building was a challenge on its own.

continued overleaf

Our school was originally built to host primary school pupils, but was instead being used as an area secondary school. This situation created several shortcomings for the smooth administration of the school and, once again, students who come to school with the afore-mentioned disadvantages had to be located in the wrong premises, lacking in elementary facilities and definitely unsuitable for them, both in space and in amenities.

P. A. A.: How did you formulate your School Development Plan ?

E. C.: The formulation of our SDP is a year-long process, involving all teachers together with the administration. We started first by formulating the school's mission statement, grounded on the fundamental values that we all profess to some extent. Then we identified five major objectives that our school strives to achieve, and which spell out in detail the goals expressed in the mission statement. During our November staff meeting, the staff chose a number of Performance Indicators that needed investigation and observation. Each member of the staff was allotted a single performance indicator to investigate, so that during the audit period of about a month, quality levels of each of them could be indicated. Subsequently, during a One-Day Seminar, held out of school, we discussed in detail each Performance Indicator presented, together with the information collated, and subsequently prioritized on those areas that needed to be addressed more urgently. Finally, a small group of teachers together with members of the administration worked on a draft action plan which was presented to the staff for further discussion and approval later on in May. The final detailed plan was presented to the staff on the last two days of the school year, in July, when together we agreed on time-scales for implementation; the persons to be responsible; resources

Students express their creativity through art and craft, proving their worth in the process



needed and methods to ascertain levels of success. During the same meeting, a small group of teachers was chosen to monitor the S. D. P.'s implementation and to present an Evaluation Report at the end of the following school year.

P. A. A.: How do you develop team-work among your teaching staff ?

E. C.: The fundamental pre-requisite for the development of team-work among the staff is the underlying philosophy of my style of management: collaboration and participation. The Assistant Head and the teachers have to be empowered so that they may give their best. There are so many latent talents out there that one cannot afford to suffocate them out of lack of use. Major decisions cannot be taken solely by the Head in the 'Sanctum Sanctorum' of his office but in consultation with the Assistant Heads, who should play a major role in the school management team, and the staff. A school is alive and kicking when various groups of teachers are working separately on various initiatives but all of them driven by the same motives and the same goals. Perhaps one of my major sins is that quite a chunk of my time is devoted to meetings with the several groups that have cropped up working on the various initiatives that the school takes. An outstanding characteristic of my school is the excellent team spirit that permeates among all members of the staff, including the auxiliary staff and this goes to the merit of us all.

P. A. A.: Which major initiatives have you undertaken to develop the school ?

E. C.: I have to limit myself to a few. One of the major initiatives undertaken by the school is the "School Behaviour Policy". Our first S. D. P. intended to address the behaviour of our students at school in order to have an orderly climate conducive to learning. We therefore put our heads together and articulated a detailed policy based on rewards rather than on punishments. A major rewards system introduced was a credit system for the lower forms, where prizes are distributed each month to students who are given the highest number

of credit points for their behaviour and achievement. We have also introduced a point system for each lesson for each class which would reward the class with the highest number of points with a Wednesday Afternoon of Sports.

Another initiative that was intended to meet the problem of lack of self-esteem that most of our students have to shoulder, is a Portfolio System, or a kind of Record of Achievements. Every month various certificates are distributed during morning assembly to reward students who have shown improvement or achievement in various areas. These certificates are then signed by parents and returned to school to be put inside their personal portfolios. In turn these Records of Achievements shall be presented to the students on their Graduation Day when they are in Form Five.

As several of our students lack motivation for learning in the class environment, we have directed their energy and motivation to drama, which we call, 'Social Drama'. Every year, my Assistant Head - Mr. H. Caruana - and a group of teachers with the help of the Drama Unit of the Education Division, work with a number of these students and, through discussion, a theme is chosen and drama sessions are held around that same theme. As from last year we started a similar project with the participation of students who attend a similar Area Secondary School for girls, Erin Serracino Inglott, Cospicua. It is amazing how committed these students become after some initial efforts and what amount of self-confidence they acquire out of such an exercise. We find this kind of drama as profoundly educational and at the same time therapeutic.

In spite of the many constraints that we have to face, such as lack of space and lack of personnel, we have introduced set lessons for small group of students who need special attention in certain subjects. We have also set adequate syllabi for another group of students who we consider as students with special educational needs. Even exams for this group are made to measure, thus helping them achieve

“Our school, with the dedicated team of teachers that day-in day-out work their hearts out with their students, is becoming more and more attractive both to students and to their parents”

more within the limits of their possibilities. This helped them improve their attainment and definitely their self-esteem.

An important project that was inaugurated in July last year was that worked out with the Malta Drydocks. A number of our senior students were given the opportunity to spend four weeks in summer on a working experience at the Drydocks.

P. A. A.: Which are the main activities of the school year ?

E. C.: I am listing school activities in chronological order and limiting myself to the main ones:

- Meeting for parents of new entrants in summer,
- Meeting for parents of all other Forms,
- Staff Meetings in September and November,
- Sports and Leisure activities during mid-day break throughout the year,
- Cultural Visits throughout the year,
- Vocational Visits for the upper forms,
- Open Day in early December,
- Christmas Activities,
- One Day Seminar for teachers in February,
- Easter Bible Services for students,
- Prize Day in April,
- Sports Day in April,
- Graduation Day for Fifth Formers in June,
- Malta Drydocks work experience in July.

P. A. A.: Which are the major achievements of the school ?

E. C.: One major achievement is the fact that the students in our school are happy and enjoy coming to school. However, I believe that, as expressed in our school's mission statement, our school is achieving a lot on the level of the social and personal development of our students.

Through the various initiatives undertaken, together with a staff who boasts a high level of commitment and who devotes considerable energy to pastoral care, the school is providing our students with that support which is severely lacking at home.

Another major achievement is the visible improvement in the school ethos, which, as a ripple effect, has improved considerably the image of Lorenzo Gafa 'Boy' Secondary School. Parents of students are now more than happy to send their children to our school and student teachers spending their teaching practice at our school do not regret their stay with us.

However, I consider the enthusiasm, high motivation and professional dedication of the teaching staff as the achievement that our school most proudly boasts of. In spite of the thousand and one constraints that they have to face, teachers' absenteeism is remarkably low and their commitment to the teaching and learning process is outstanding. The prevalent team spirit has brought this about.

P. A. A.: You are taking part in a Comenius project. What is your school's experience in this area?

E. C.: The staff, the parents and the administration of our school together with those of another school had been working for almost a whole year on this European Project on School Evaluation. A large amount of work had been accomplished and several meetings were organized in view of this project. At present I cannot hide my disappointment and that of my staff because for reasons that are not clear to us, the project has been stalled. It is frustrating to see such a project nipped in the bud.

P. A. A.: You have developed an important link with Malta Drydocks. How is this relationship helping students ?

E. C.: In November of 1997 our school struck an agreement with the Council of the Malta Drydocks whereby they bound themselves to sponsor our school for the following five years.

This agreement included:

- An annual financial contribution to the school for the procurement of equipment,
- Providing workers from the drydocks to do certain maintenance tasks on the school premises,
- Giving the opportunity to a number of senior students to have work experience in summer at the Malta Drydocks against remuneration,

Regular Guided visits to the Malta Drydocks.

This sponsorship was firstly aimed at providing our students with an opportunity to have a work experience, thereby gaining in their personal development. This same initiative could serve to motivate them to devote more time to study at school in view of being chosen for this initiative.

Besides, the annual contribution helped the school to improve school facilities such as the library which has acquired a large number of books, thus improving its service to students.

P. A. A.: I know that more students are staying on at your school than ever before. To what do you attribute this tendency ?

E. C.: As you have rightly said, this tendency is increasing every year. To be sincere, I do not have any scientific data to corroborate my impressions. However, in my view, there are two factors that are contributing to this development.

I have no ray of doubt that our school, with the dedicated team of teachers that day-in day-out work their hearts out with their students, is becoming more and more attractive both to students and to their parents. On the other hand, it seems to me that Trade Schools are not offering an adequate alternative to our students, with the consequence that students opt to stay.

P. A. A.: What is the key to success in challenging situations ?

E. C.: Create the team and there are no challenging situations that cannot be surmounted and turned into opportunities for further improvement.

P. A. A.: I wish you and your staff even more success in your school.