

Improving the essence of teaching

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“If we really want to improve student achievement, we ultimately have to improve teacher expertise”



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Good professional development requires that we constantly analyse what one has tried, what one has accomplished, and then what one must do to make the next attempt more powerful. *If we really want to improve student achievement, we ultimately have to improve teacher expertise.* That is why my argument has always been that if we want to improve the quality of education we are providing to our students (from a small rural primary school to the post-secondary institutions/ higher education institutions we may be teaching in) we cannot neglect the profession that needs to address such developments.

Those who teach, or who lead teaching, have to become better at what they do. And, the only way they are going to become better is by focusing their time and energy on improving their knowledge and skill base. This is not about going to a workshop and being motivated by a speaker. This is about improving the essence of teaching.

One professional development strategy that is absolutely necessary is the use of peer review or visitations. When teachers hear descriptions of a new practice they want to see a teacher doing it – with the same kind of students that they have!! This is where theory is put to the test. I still have vivid memories of the benefits of micro teaching that we enjoyed during university life. These were the sessions in which we shared ideas, put them into practise and discussed our outcomes. And, we did this without ever feeling under scrutiny, under threat of a quality assurance exercise that we may associate it with today! The whole idea then, was to develop insights as to how one can improve ones ways of teaching. That is a process that needs to be addressed even now. It is a practise that has been lost over the years, and one that I feel the Faculty should reintroduce. Not only that, I feel that, given the drive towards greater devolution of authority to the school site and the accountability that is attached to it opening the door to teacher-guided observations is indeed one avenue we should introduce to improve the teaching and learning process.

The focus of the teacher-generated observation model has to be collaboration since the goal is to grow as educators together. Is this not what school-site management is all about? Is this not the ultimate aim of educators – that we constantly review practise in order to address, in the best possible ways, the needs of students?

The teacher-guided observation/ curriculum analysis is a continuously evolving instructional and curricular development programme whose basic tenets are neither radical in practice nor revolutionary in thought. Rather, they recognise the basic needs of teachers as lifelong learners:

- To be treated and respected as professionals
- To have opportunities to grow personally and professionally in a conducive learning environment
- To have the primary responsibility for curriculum review and development
- To feel in charge of the change process
- To experience camaraderie.

Basic principles which are, or rather, need to be found in anyone's profession. We cannot expect to have learnt everything prior to becoming a teacher. In fact, as educators we are constantly in the making as the learning environments we collectively create help us to question our thoughts, our ideas, our practices. As a result we are *learning to be* as Faure back in the 1970s defined it.

Take small steps towards big changes

It is essential to take, as Sahakian and Stockton (1996) point out, small steps towards big changes. There are innumerable questions that we need to ask and answer. In this way we are actually developing the climate for developments (mental ones at first) to take place. Are we happy with the way things are happening in our schools, with teachers often working in isolation from each other? Are we ready to consider new ways of doing things? Do we want to watch one another teach? Could we become better teachers by learning from one another? How are we going to find the time? Should this be made compulsory? Is this going to be a method of assessing teachers?

These are some of the questions that are raised by educators in general. Questions which need to be addressed if one wants people to grow comfortably with the process. Visitations need to be done for an express purpose. For example, teacher X observes teacher Y because the teacher has a particular way of introducing fractions and teacher X is not particularly confident in that area. It is advised that a teacher should not visit a class for some generic observation. Observations need to be focused. And, teachers should make these visits in groups of two or more. You need to be able to talk with others about what you have seen.

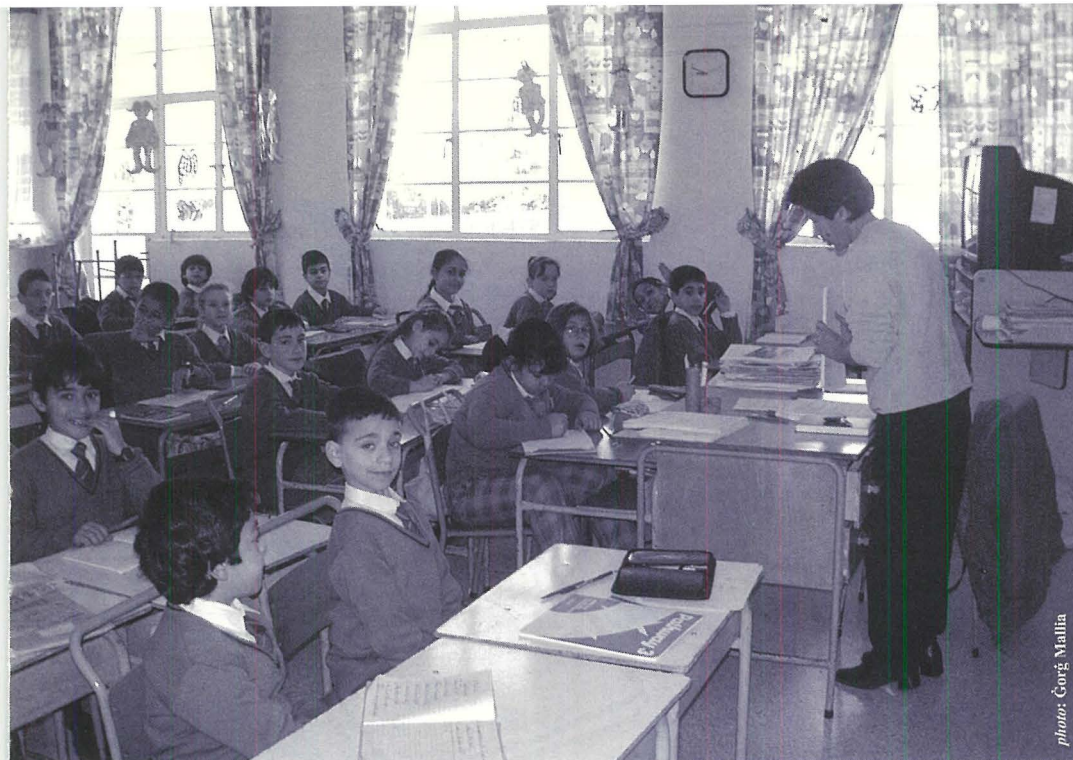


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(1988, p.476), feel confident that "teachers are hungry for stimulating educational experiences" then we will do our utmost to create opportunities where teacher empowerment can take place. If we accept the premise that the ultimate power to change is in the "heads, hands and heart" of the educators who work in schools (Sirotnik and Clark, 1988, p.660), and that the school staff is the key to improvement (Birman, et al., 2000; Combs, Miser and Whitaker, 1999; Kessler, 2000) then future school reform policies and practices must reflect such an orientation.

This, in my opinion, is one of the major challenges facing educators world wide: that of shifting from a bureaucratic, top-down model to one which

emphasizes school-site management. Thus, educators at the school level are encouraged to take decision making more seriously and endorse the responsibilities that such devolution entails (Holly and Southworth, 1989; West, 1995; West-Burnham, 1992). If teacher empowerment is utilised properly, members of staff will slowly begin to feel that they are respected and valued as individuals who can contribute in meaningful ways to school improvement. It is a slow process which can be gruelling at times, with its ups and downs, however it is the road worth taking.

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“Are we happy with the way things are happening in our schools, with teachers often working in isolation from each other?”

Furthermore, there should be a direct connection between the visitation and implementation. When you have seen something, when you have discussed it, understood it well enough, you should put it into practice.

Teachers should also build a connection between the visitation and their attempts to use the new practice. That connection is usually in the form of the practitioner who was viewed and the on the discourse that takes place at, what is usually termed, the post conference session. The conversation among those who made the visit about the quality of the implementation is important. Once this sharing starts to take place systemic professional development is nurtured within the school site.

Apart from the creation of such concentric circles of teacher learners the use of study groups can be a real and possible strategy for professional development to take place in the schools. Schools now have to be organised for the learning of adults. Only in this way can we turn schools into sites of professional learning. Indeed, it is how well the adults are learning that determines how well the students are learning.

Indeed no easy task when teaching is still very much practised in isolation, and collegiality is non-existent for many teachers. As a result, the teacher's own knowledge and attitude towards professional development has been allowed to atrophy. Moreover, research on teacher empowerment reveals that some teachers do not understand empowerment, others do not want to accept the responsibility that accompanies empowerment, and others want to avoid the leadership and power it offers (Herman and Herman, 1993).

However, if we are optimistic that teachers possess leadership qualities, or are willing to learn and commit themselves towards the improvement of the school, and, like Maeroff