Restructuring schools in Malta: the road to improvement

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Introduction

George Marshall, a 42-year-old secondary school teacher recalls the day that his headteacher, whom he had always addressed as Mrs Bennett, invited him to call her by her first name. That event came after George, who had already been teaching at the school for around six years, had gained confidence through participation in an INSET programme and had finally started asserting himself professionally. “I think she saw me in a new way”, George said of his headteacher.

Teachers, whether in Malta, or any other country need to be seen in a new way. That change in perception can be the beginning of empowerment, and the empowerment of teachers is essential if the schools are to improve (Bezzina, 1996; Constable, 1995). A long as teachers are not adequately valued by themselves and by others they are not apt to perform with the necessary assurance and authority to do the job as well as they can (Adelman and Walking-Eagle, 1997; Goodlad, 1994; Reynolds and Cuttance, 1992).

If teachers can be lifted in three key areas – each complementing the other – they will be able to flex muscles that have been allowed to atrophy. These three areas involve status, their knowledge, and their access to decision making.

This paper attempts to present some ideas for discussion and proposes particular routes which can help empower teachers and schools in particular as they strive towards quality improvement.

Throughout the world, educational systems have been accused of being extremely conservative social institutions that respond very slowly, if at all, to educational reforms, social changes and advances in technology. The reasons for this are a multitude of complex interrelated factors. Political, religious, social, cultural, and other independent forces affect the economic growth and social development of all nations and hence the quality of education provided (King, 1983; Rassekh and Vaideanu, 1987).

Due to the inability to respond directly to change, the influence of schools is being attacked from various quarters. In the heart of this debate stands the teaching profession. Teachers are pointed to as both the primary cause of the current crisis and at the same time the best hope for its eventual resolution (e.g. Carnegie Task Force, 1986; Goodlad, 1984). As educators we believe that we can play an important, maybe even determining role in society. We truly believe that schools can make a difference. Yet, our personal experience within schools and schooling systems shows that we are most of the time chasing what can easily be termed an elusive aim, that of promoting the full development of the individual and establishing an educative society. One wonders how far schools can truly act as change agents, where they change and innovate in order to meet the demands of social change. One main reason why schools are powerless in this respect is because, more often than not, they have to reflect the whims of political ideologies. In fact, in order to understand why schools and teaching practices are constituted as they are, and how alternatives may be implemented, we need to be aware of the often contradictory social and political forces within which schools and their teachers are caught (Bradley et al., 1994; Lambert, 1988).

This paper is based on the premise that schools, under certain conditions, can become much more vital than they currently are. For schools to respond more effectively to an ever-changing social reality, it is crucial that their present orientation and focus are rethought and eventually restructured.

In Malta we are currently faced with a rigidly hierarchical, centralized system in which teachers have grown weary through disillusionment and stress (Borg and Falzon, 1989; Farrugia, 1985, 1986, 1994). Maltese schools have been mainly organized in this hierarchy and managed from a top-down approach. Consequently, heads and teachers have been mainly responsible for implementing policies and decisions taken by educational authorities at central level (Bezzina, 1995; Fenech, 1992). When teachers and other stakeholders have participated in the decision-making of the school their involvement has usually been mere tokenism, and, as I have argued in the past (Bezzina, 1991), and recently (Bezzina and West, 1997),
teachers have not been given the opportunity to develop into learning organizations. In recent decades there has been a growing trend towards decentralization and hence school-site management (David, 1995-1996; Herman and Herman, 1993; Mohrman et al., 1994). One of the major implications behind decentralization and devolution of authority to schools is teacher empowerment (Steyn and Squelch, 1996; Weiss, 1993). As Gabor and Meunier (1993) and Schmoker (1997) among others have pointed out, teacher empowerment is the way forward and the only way the organization can truly learn and improve.

The most important point this paper will try to make is that development plans for the improvement of education can arise within each individual school – by those who work and live in them each day. Such school restructuring will also need the support of effective and efficient support services. Therefore, a productive tension between inner-directed and outer-directed efforts to improve is needed.

The paper will be directed at presenting a process of how schools, and hence the members of the institutions, can develop the capacity to reflect on the nature and purpose of their work together. Schools, which are a personification of the people who comprise them, must become more responsive to their own particular problems and needs.

Research evidence (Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1991; Hopkins and Sebba, 1995) has shown that the quality of education in schools is highly dependent on:

- the professional competence of the educators within the school;
- an efficient supportive infrastructure; and
- a more decentralized governance structure.

If we believe that educators are to have any effect on change, and that educational change depends largely on the quality of the teaching force, then we need to analyse critically present education systems, the goals they are trying to achieve and how they are going about them (Chapman, 1993; Fullan, 1995; Hargreaves et al., 1996).

It is recognized that the transformation of education requires a transformation of education staff of all kinds and at all levels. The quality of such staff depends not merely on their knowledge and skill, but also on the degree of their motivation to utilize this knowledge and skill and on the extent of the opportunity available to them to do so. Consequently, qualitative improvement demands consideration of a wide range of education staff, the provision of adequate incentives, and the creation of genuine opportunity through the provision of support services, adequate resources and opportunities to participate in the decision making affecting their work (e.g. Farrugia, 1985, 1986, 1994).

The main thrust being made here is that implementation strategies ought, as much as possible, to consider the main implementors, that is, those working in schools and in classrooms, when considering reforms. Naturally, no one strategy for improvement is definite. Success and/or failure depend on a variety of factors. The characteristics which need to be highlighted are, first, the approach adopted – whether top-down or bottom-up – depends a lot on the prevailing attitudes of the authorities concerned (be they, for example, departmental officials or a school head), and second, that mixes of top-down and bottom-up strategies, which are not necessarily tied either to central or school-based application, can also occur (see Figure 1).

The top-down strategy of implementation means that directions drafted at central level will be executed in each school across the district. (Note: the word district is here used throughout to represent the "smallest unit" into which a country is divided. Countries might use different terms such as regions or wards to mean the same thing). Similarly, a bottom-up approach means that school-generated decisions, unique to each setting, will vary from school to school in the district. Mixes of both strategies are, however, also possible. For example, a director at national level can direct headteachers in each school to set goals, plan and establish programmes, and to assess outcomes. By directing from the top a process to occur at each school without prescribing the content of the decisions, a variation on the bottom-up approach emerges.

The focus of this paper will be directed towards school-site management (SSM). The purpose of reform policies need to be directed towards creating the kinds of institutional arrangements and organizational structures that promote educational excellence. Eventual success or failure of school reform depend on the degree to which that purpose can be accomplished. The paper suggests the

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**Figure 1**

Implementation strategies to school action (adapted from Cuban, 1984, p. 139)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Central authorities</th>
<th>District wide</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Top-down</td>
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<td>School bottom-up</td>
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need to reframe the fundamental questions about school reform. Many reforms intended to alter the fundamental structures of schools have met with little success because they fail to ask the right questions (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1996; Ruddock, 1991; Sarason, 1990). Most state reforms often aim for quality control, seeking to make existing systems more productive but at the same time not disturbing classroom roles or the governance structures of schools. The paper looks into ways and means of strengthening schools as organizations – by changing their institutional nature (e.g. Bimber, 1994; Brennan, 1989) mainly through school-site management practices (e.g. Caldwell and Spinks, 1989; Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 1995; David, 1994; Duigan, 1988; Herman and Herman, 1993).

The essence of educational reform
Concern for the improvement of education is widely evident today in practically all countries. One major development that can be observed within the present trend is that more emphasis is being directed at school level, at the way the school functions. Nations have wasted billions of pounds on many poorly conceived but politically popular reforms which in the end failed to produce an impact at the most critical level, the school, and more so, the classroom. Too frequently, reforms have been contradictory in nature, poorly implemented and had to be eventually abandoned or else left to die a natural death (e.g. Hopkins, 1987). Any effort to improve the effectiveness of schools cannot be intelligently directed without understanding the dynamics of schools. In fact James Conant’s advice over 30 years ago that schools should be improved “school by school” (Conant, 1989, p. 96) is being re-echoed now by many educationalists (e.g. Ferguson, 1984; Goodlad, 1983; Miles et al., 1987). Understanding the dynamics of school entails learning about the actions and influences of teachers, pupils, parents, community members and community organizations, and the ways in which these influences operate (Lindle, 1995/1996; Glickman, 1993).

Such a perspective stresses the view that schools need to occupy a central position in educational discourse directed towards school improvement, and, teacher empowerment is seen as a powerful means and a crucial ingredient if schools are to improve (Fielding, 1995; Sickler, 1988; West et al., 1995). Let us explore the terms “school improvement” and “teacher empowerment” in some more detail.

School improvement: what does it entail?
The working definition proposed here is that developed by the International School Improvement Project (ISIP) (Hopkins, 1990). ISIP defines school improvement as:

...a systematic, sustained effort aimed at change in learning conditions and other related internal conditions in one or more schools, with the ultimate aim of accomplishing educational goals more effectively (Van Velzen et al., 1985, p. 48).

Practical and research experience over the past decade has supported three main conclusions. First, achieving change is much more a matter of implementation of new practices at school level than it is of simply deciding to adopt them. Second, school improvement is a carefully planned and managed process that takes place over a period of years. It is not something haphazard, or that can take place overnight. On the contrary it requires a systematic and sustained effort over time. Change is a process not an event. Third, school improvement is a multilevel process. That is, it goes beyond classroom change, adopting a “classroom exceeding” perspective. Change presupposes attention to other related conditions both within and outside the school, such as the school organizational structure, communication between teachers, the school ethos and climate, and the type of support services the school receives from education authorities (Hopkins, 1990; Van Velzen et al., 1985).

Such a definition challenges the existing model which sees schools (and teachers) as passive recipients to the change process. The proposal here is one which sees schools as both the objects of and the arenas for educational improvement and change. Schools and their staff need to become active participants in the process of school improvement. This implies that educators at school level need to be willing to take charge. This leads us to explore the area of teacher empowerment.

What is empowerment?
Teacher empowerment is defined as the transfer of authority of key school issues to those who are centrally involved in school life. In other words, empowerment deals with the giving of decision-making authority to people who in the past had looked to an authority to make decisions. Such an approach encourages heads and teachers to become the main actors in decisions which affect school life and school development in particular (Herman and Herman, 1993; Maeroff, 1988).
According to a number of authors, empowerment covers three main areas: status, knowledge and access to decision making. Maeroff believes that “boosting the status of teachers is fundamental” (Maeroff, 1988, p. 474) as this will help them to look on themselves and their colleagues with the appropriate dignity and respect. Teachers can only gain this through their own individual and concerted effort to really take ownership of their profession which for so long has been in the hands of others. To achieve such status, teachers need to feel that they are important, and that their experiences and expertise are valued and trusted. On the other hand, knowledge is in itself power and an increase in one’s knowledge base is an obvious step to empowerment. Teachers can make greater demands on school-site management practices if they show the authorities and the community at large that they (i.e. teachers) know what they are talking about. Access to decision making implies that teachers’ ideas and contributions are important and fundamental if the school is to move forward. Hence, headteachers need to create opportunities for teachers to exercise decision making which goes beyond what takes place in the classroom.

Teachers experience empowerment when they have opportunities to improve their instructional techniques; when they deepen their knowledge and understanding of the areas they teach; when they adopt a holistic perspective to school life; when teachers start involving themselves in different school matters beyond their subject matter. Such involvement means having a greater say in decisions which affect their roles at school both directly and indirectly.

Unfortunately this is not very much evidenced in our schools. 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, some research on teacher empowerment reveal 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; Midgley and Wood, 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 (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 (Clift et al., 1989; Goodlad, 1984; Hargreaves, 1997; Hopkins, 1987) then future school reform policies and practices will reflect such an orientation.

This, in my opinion, is one of the major challenges facing educators worldwide: that of shifting from a bureaucratic, top-down model to one which emphasizes school-site management, that is, one in which educators at school level are encouraged to take decision making more seriously and endorse the responsibilities that such devolution entails (Holly and Southworth, 1989; West-Burnham, 1992; West, 1995). If teacher empowerment is utilized 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.

Improving schools from within

The concept of school-site management (SSM) therefore implies and involves significant and consistent decentralization to the school level, of authority to make decisions related to the allocation of resources. Hence the self-managing school conceptualized by Caldwell and Spinks and others is one in which the individual school is given the power, responsibility and resources to set goals and determine needs and priorities; to create school policies consistent with system guidelines and parameters; to plan and implement programmes and to allocate resources accordingly; and to evaluate the effectiveness of resource allocation decisions (Caldwell and Spinks, 1989; Wallace et al., 1996).

This section presents the main potential characteristics of SSM, develops a rationale based on school effectiveness, presents a framework for professional development and the main characteristics behind a school development process. For several years now I have been reviewing the literature on SSM, discussing, analysing, trying out possibilities with colleagues in different contexts and in different countries, and undertaking my own empirical research. From this I have drawn a number of conclusions as to what SSM entails:

- SSM is about ownership.
- SSM is about empowerment of key stakeholders in educational decision making.
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- SSM offers potential for enhanced organizational effectiveness and improved student outcomes.
- SSM is based on one major belief: the school as a centre of critical inquiry not as a target of change.
- SSM involves staff development, networking and problem-centred activities.
- SSM entails a collaborative approach to development.
- SSM is not about money.
- SSM focuses directly on the learner (i.e. pupil or educator) and his/her needs.

A framework for professional development
For SSM to succeed and be effective, schools, and more so central authorities, need to develop a framework for such professional development to take place. The conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 2 provides a structural starting point for planning and organizing the design of the various activities that constitute the “self-innovative” school. Its purpose is to assist school administrators to recognize the elements contributing to an integrated programme that acknowledges the importance of a variety of concepts and features which, when brought together, contribute to a description of staff development that is holistic, balanced and devised to benefit the school and individual practitioners in it.

Strategic planning and development
Whether you are a head or leader of a smaller school team, you have a part to play in the planned operation and achievements of the school. Hence this framework for professional development starts with a focus on strategic planning and development, issues which managers at all levels in a school should be not only familiar with but actively involved in – in a collaborative sense (Davies and Ellison, 1996; Robbins and Alvy, 1995; Russ, 1995; Wallace et al., 1996).

Instructional leadership
Instructional leadership is a concept that goes by many names. In the literature on this topic it is variously referred to as curriculum leadership, educative, professional or even academic leadership. It is leadership that orients itself on instruction first and foremost. It is leadership that concerns itself with what goes on in classrooms and makes educational matters the priority. Its positioning in this framework is deliberate and signifies its status as the underlying solid base supporting the mix of elements that constitute a balanced staff development programme.

The core tasks of instructional leadership are related to planning for instruction (programme development, staff deployment and resource provision); managing the operation of instruction (organization, staff orientation, programme supervision, assessment and teaching supervision); and development (appraising staff, arranging staff development and evaluating programmes). In spite of competing demands on the priorities of school leaders today, this role is acknowledged by most heads as crucial to successful school management and, in reality, the success of instructional leadership endeavours will depend on the extent to which administrators and teachers are empowered to contribute to the task (Bezzena, 1995; Poplin, 1992; West-Burnham, 1992).

Performance appraisal process
At the heart of any school development programme is the means by which we get to know what needs to be improved and why, before we set about the task of deciding how we will do this. In short, appraisal is about two things: accountability and evaluation. I particularly like the way Kelly states the facts:

Accountability, as was well appreciated by the ancient Greeks, is an essential element of democracy – an element which is too little evident in present-day versions of democracy. And some form of evaluation or
appraisal of performance is clearly its base. Without some kind of evaluation it is difficult to see what basis might exist for any real development either of the curriculum or of the teachers themselves. For a prerequisite of improvement must be some evaluation of previous performance. (Kelly, 1987, p. 215)

While we can be confident that teachers have always engaged in constant, informal appraisal of their work, or in the past have had this function performed by an outside agency, we must not be complacent about the need to formalize and implement visible appraisal processes which are in the nature of professional development rather than periodic detention. An ideal process would be effective in achieving four things:

1. identifying development needs;
2. providing honest and objective feedback;
3. making dialogue about improvement possible; and
4. bringing about agreed and desired change.

At this point I must state my position in the ongoing debate on the contentious topic of appraisal. I believe it is not only essential for profession people to grasp the nettle but also vital that they handle it well. In order to judge the work of those we are responsible for, we must be able to obtain and give quality feedback about performance. It is therefore critical that we have management and interpersonal skills that make talking and listening possible in this context.

Elements of a staff development programme

A staff development programme founded on a core element of appraisal is supported by sound guiding principles related to school plans and quality instructional leadership. Once a school's strategic plan is established and leaders at all levels agree that instruction is the priority to focus on, and the organization is able to identify and communicate strengths and weaknesses, then leaders are in a position to plan for staff development in a way that acknowledges personal targets, team targets and whole-school plans for institutional change. A staff development programme calls for four general ingredients to obtain the right mix. These are:

1. curriculum development;
2. personal development;
3. management development;
4. school development.

All of these must be present to some degree in order to create a sound programme.

Curriculum development

In the first quadrant is curriculum development. This term can apply either to a set of lessons or to a national curriculum project and everything in between! Several classical theorists in this field have devised processes for curriculum development which, although they date back to the middle of this century, are still in use today. One such model, with which you are probably familiar, is Tyler's model that requires consideration of four aspects of a curriculum: objectives, content, organization and evaluation. For a more complex model one can turn to the work of Reid et al. (1987) who recommended a looping approach, on the assumption that steps may be revisited along the way.

They propose a seven-step curriculum development model:

1. identification of a purpose for development;
2. formulation of the design and objectives;
3. teaching strategy decisions and training;
4. production of materials and resources;
5. classroom research and trialling;
6. implementing the new curriculum;
7. evaluating the new curriculum.

Any attempt to develop a curriculum should of course encompass all these activities, whether organized on a national, regional or local scale. The types of questions we must ask ourselves at school level are:

- How much development can a school sustain?
- What will this mean for the training and development of those who will be involved?
- How is the curriculum programme to be monitored and reviewed?
- How often can or should we change the curricula?
- Who is to be involved in such work?
- How will this affect practice?

I am sure that the reader can add his/her own questions to this list.

Personal development

In the second quadrant is personal development. Into the area of personal development falls a whole range of social, political and cultural skills that affect our relationships with others. Social ability to communicate effectively or to be assertive in order to be effective; political competence in being able to negotiate a good deal for one's team; cultural sensitivity, understanding and confidence, are some of these essential skills. A crucial component in this area is self-development: the willingness to reflect on our own theories and actions and take steps to improve. And, as we have stated earlier, if appraisal systems are to be not only designed, but also implemented, then practitioners who manage other people will need training in skills that help to cope with difficult situations and interpersonal problem solving.
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skills that enable them to recognize the complexity of the teaching task and deal with contestable issues, and do this in a way that respects the dignity and professionalism of colleagues. There is still a lot of learning to be done in this area and we need to develop diagnostic and reflective approaches which allow one to confront professional concerns openly and negotiate plans for training and development along the way.

Management development
In the third quadrant is management development. This relates to the body of information, theory and skills which enables school administrators to work effectively with and through others to accomplish organizational goals. A comprehensive view of management development is presented by McMahon and Bolam (1990) who categorize management development in three ways:

1. Management support: which refers to school arrangements and procedures for professional growth, such as job rotation and enhancement, promotion, performance appraisal, equal employment opportunities, career development, and the practical issue of resourcing staff engagement in initiatives that empower them to develop.

2. Management training: which refers to in-service courses, workshops, conferences and training opportunities which the school organizes internally, or sends practitioners to, with the intention of gaining practical information and learning skills to share with colleagues.

3. Management education: which refers to external study programmes that emphasize theory and research based knowledge, lead to qualifications and increasingly incorporate experiential learning methods that encourage practitioners to apply learning to practice.

Leaders and potential leaders who have responsibility for managing schools or areas of curriculum and services should have access to development opportunities in all three of these management development categories.

School development
In the fourth quadrant is school development. This concept has been well defined by Prebble and Stewart:

School development is a planned, continuing effort to address how the institution diagnoses and makes decisions within its sphere of influence. It relates change with purpose, makes overt the prevailing beliefs, values, norms of its population, and begins with the assistance of a consultant who has the confidence of the entire group. Implicit within this definition is the notion that such a strategy must be a collaborative relationship dealing with both real and perceived problems (Prebble and Stewart, 1984, p. 156).

This involves the systematic review of school-wide activities in a problem-solving cycle of exploration, feedback, and trialling of initiatives leading to considered and well-planned change, which is then evaluated. School development is based on the characteristics shown in Figure 3.

Concluding remarks
For schools which wish to make the best use of limited resources, meet obligations to improve the capabilities of staff (and thus improve the educational experiences of students), and devise staff development programmes which are relevant, meaningful and effective, a commitment to planning and a form of needs analysis is essential. Although few schools agree that they do this task well, there are several examples of small and good beginnings on which to build.

The message being put forward is a simple one. In order to design and implement a SSM programme which could impact positively on school practices, one must start by evaluating the extent to which instructional leadership and planning practices are providing a sound foundation for programme development. The Old Testament tells us that “people without a vision shall perish”. Without a vision school people will continue to favour whatever action promises to extinguish a fire most quickly – so that they can move to the next fire. A school without a vision may not perish, it may even be free of fires, but it will not develop very much.

Passionate commitment, such as any SSM programme needs to be based on, comes with the emancipation of our minds and our attachment, reattachment for some, to purposes worth working for. Restrictive
environments confine and smother creativity and purpose. A professionally addressed and run school-site management programme can liberate professionals and enable them to redesign schooling. This is the challenge which awaits Maltese schools, one which is within our grasp.

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