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Notions of Quality Education through an Educational Policy

– the Reflexive Case Study of a Collegial School Network in Malta

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Notions of Quality Education through an Educational Policy

– the Reflexive Case Study of a Collegial School Network in Malta

Ian Mifsud

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ABSTRACT

This research qualitatively delves into claims on quality education through policy-mandated collegial school networks in Malta. I set to ask how this organisational arrangement can serve as a vehicle for quality education, how can contextually relevant and stakeholder considerate definitions of quality education be construed, and how are these networks in Malta perceived as impacting stakeholders' notions of quality education. The voices of policy makers, educational leaders, educators, parents and students, intertwined with my own distinct yet complementary reflexive contributions, are given centre stage to unravel variables determining the perceived and/or actual impact of the educational policy. I concluded that collegial school networks require specific characteristics to benefit definitions of quality education construed through a composite organic framework. In view of this, common gains and losses reside alongside contested divergences on the impact of collegial school networks in Malta as impacting stakeholders' notions of quality education.

After introducing the research and its context, including myself, the literature review contextualises the study within the milestones of Malta's educational system, focussing on reforms mostly related to the research. It explores the quest for quality as an enigmatic and contested priority for education. An exposition of the contextual definitions, multiple applications, intended benefits and potential pitfalls of the pivotal concept of school networks interlaces with the claim for quality. Interests served by education also emerge as the running thread particularly when discussing the role of stakeholders. The enhanced appreciation of the interpretations and inferences of the themes being studied and how these dynamically interrelate in educational policy and quality education enabled the identification of critical elements, forming the basis for the field research.

Morphing around my intimate experiences, setting an autoethnographic backdrop throughout the research and exposing extensive ethical considerations, I rely on a case study of one specific school network in Malta from an interpretivist paradigmatic position. The research employs semi-structured one-to-one interviews with designated educational leaders within the network, namely College Principal and Heads of School, and focus groups with teachers, students and parents. Other high-level interviews were held with critical figures in educational policy development in Malta, specifically, the Minister and Shadow Minister for Education, the President of the Teachers' Trade Union, the Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta and an officially recognised representative of Employers as another key stakeholder. In Vivo and Initial Coding of the transcribed data, evolved into Theoretical and Axial Coding delineating a structure serving both the presentation of findings and the theoretical framework for the discussion and conclusions.

The limitations of the study include my intricate involvement and the extended temporal component, paradoxically characterising its unique contribution. Conclusions drawn reveal complex intra- and inter-related constituents of the *Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure of Quality Education,* also serving as the theoretical framework. Whereas generalisability of the study has restrictions, emerging recommendations may support the integrity of educational policy development and implementation, whilst creating the space for further research in the area.

STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICITY

This is to certify that this research is my own authentic work, prepared and completed under the supervision of Dr Joss Winn and, preceding him, Professor Emeritus Angela Thody.

Ian Mifsud

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DEDICATION

To three pillars in my life:
my wife **Janice**,
my two sons, **Isaac** and **Jacob**,
and my parents, **Tony** and **Alexandra**
for their self-sacrificing love, care and support.

In memory of:

Paul Sammut,
my father-in-law, who dedicated his life to the wellbeing of his family.

Daphne Caruana Galizia,
a loving mother, wife, daughter, sister and friend stolen from her beloved,
"a journalist in a member state of the European Union assassinated in a perfectly planned, chilling attack, meant to silence her anti-corruption crusade …" (Chetcuti, 2017, p. 81),
a beacon of belittling stature to me and so many others who yearn for truth and justice.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Making Acquaintance

Hi! Pleased to meet you, I'm Ian. It's the end of an even drier February (2020) during which Malta, my home country, has practically seen no rain, reminding us of the tangible harm we've caused, and continue to cause, to our common home, Earth, often for selfish short-sightedness virtually afflicting us all to varied degrees and manifested in various other ways. I'm a forty-four-year-old educator with more than twenty years of professional experience in various roles within the educational field. I currently serve in a designated leadership role within the central, coordinating authority for Roman Catholic Church Schools in Malta and Gozo (the only other major island forming part of the Maltese Archipelago) which cater for approximately thirty per cent of compulsory-aged students locally.

I'm at home on a Saturday morning, secluded in our study bringing this research project together. My wife Janice, busy with house chores, always attentive to our family's needs, occasionally pops in with some tea or other comforting treat. Jacob, our younger, fifteen year-old son, is enjoying a day of relief from studies after finishing his mock end of compulsory schooling exams, locally referred to as 'Ordinary Level Exams', whilst Isaac, our elder son, now eighteen-year old, in his first year as a university student, is slowly waking up after a late night party at one of his friends. The silent or noisy presence of each, as the case may be, our daily struggles, pains and joys, and the all-embracing love we strive to continually nourish, keep alive and grow, is my most intimate and precious surrounding. Welcome to this window into my life, within which this research project unfolds.

What to you is the start of an engagement with my text, is to me a retrospective exercise aimed at helping you understand what this project is all about and in which ways it might prove helpful to different extents. Apart from giving an overview of the study's main aim, its research questions, structure, and context, I'll start making myself known to you. This effort and invitation to become acquainted with me, my baggage and outlook, continues throughout the Chapters, facilitating a deeper and more correct interpretation of the study allowing you to filter my exposed or more hidden biases.

The Research Project

Research Background

The seminal document *Tomorrow's Schools: Developing Effective Learning Cultures* (Wain et al., 1995) focused on what was regarded *"as the key concerns of any schooling system, namely: the schools themselves as learning communities, the educational leaders and their role in the schools and in the system, and the curriculum as the instrument and programme of learning in the schools"* (Wain et al., 1995, p. 3). Apart from paving the way for the revised *National Minimum Curriculum, NMC* (Ministry of Education, 1999) for Malta, more recently revisited as the *National Curriculum Framework, NCF* (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012), this report initiated a discussion in Malta on the need for decentralisation and greater school autonomy for them to better respond to and be held accountable for meeting students' needs (Fabri, 2008).

On the premise that *"a well-designed and an effective application of the principle of subsidiarity, through greater autonomy of schools and decentralisation of services, ought to better facilitate the improvement in the quality and standards of children's and students' educational experience and performance"* (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005, p. 29), in 2005 the Nationalist Government of Malta published the policy document, *For All Children to Succeed – A New Network Organisation for Quality Education in Malta Succeed* (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005), *FACTS* in short. It was the catalyst for a major reform in Maltese educational provision, proposing the formal clustering of State Schools into networks as having *"a vital role"* in the achievement of *"creating a first class system of education and of schools"* (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005).

As an ambitious young professional, urged by a desire to witness and support a positive change in the local educational system which gave signs of stagnation, and unashamedly determined to succeed in my career, I recall eagerly attending the launch of this policy. Doubts had crossed my mind, "Do we need to force schools into such structures to nurture quality education? How will actors relate with each other? Will this benefit learners?", but the foresight of possible widened career opportunities resulting from this structural reform, from which I could also attempt to benefit, was too enticing for me at the time not to be convinced of its legitimacy and be motivated by the purported potential gains.

This reorganisation of Maltese State Schools was piloted between 2005 and 2007 until it was implemented on a national scale as from 2007, after the necessary legislative amendments had been made to the *Education Act* (House of Representatives, 2006). This also required agreement with the only trade union at the time representing educators in Malta, the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT), enjoying collective bargaining power also due to heavy membership – declared 9,903 members out of a total of 10,372 educators translating to more than 95% representation nationally in 2019 (Registrar of Trade Unions, 2019, pp. 23, 906; Ministry for Education and Employment, 2019). Central to this restructuring of the Maltese Educational System was the drive towards enhanced levels of quality education. The term *Colleges* was selected by the respective policy makers to signify the intended collegiality amongst constituent network members, and to distinguish these school networks from other arrangements found internationally. For ease of interpretation, the term *Collegial School Networks* may be adopted interchangeably with *Colleges* to refer to this specific form of school network wherever deemed more appropriate throughout this research.

After having already experienced both noble and shameful facets of educators' practice in local schools whilst practising as a budding teacher of Art, at the time of the launch I was engaged as a Guidance Teacher entrusted with the prevention and intervention of drug misuse by learners across different schools, before transitioning into Assistant Headship of a State School. This had lent itself as an opportunity for me to touch with and learn from various contexts, and could gauge the climate, which was anecdotally emerging as one of uncertainty. I could not sufficiently appreciate the apprehensions that many colleagues in schools expressed, and I often used to dismiss their concerns as weak professionalism, lack of confidence and/or excessive self-centredness.

Although close encounters with painful realities in vulnerable social contexts had already started teaching me to be less judgemental, to empathise and be grateful, the punishingly high expectations of myself, further nourished by deep accomplishment when reaching out and making a difference in people's lives, silently distorted my view of other educators locally, as yet insufficiently recognising the human fragility also within the educator.

That lesson was soon learnt only a few months later, when my wife and I went through the toughest experience to date – the news that our younger son who was 1 year 5 months at the time, had been diagnosed with a tumour. I shudder and feel palpitations remembering the excruciating pain and fear. Even our elder son who was not yet five, but sensitive nonetheless about what was happening, was significantly affected, manifesting separation anxieties as our family's stability went temporarily lost. The helplessness and full dependence on others, most especially my wife who in that occasion revealed herself to be our family's firmest pillar, lasted a few, but never-ending months until we were blessed to be reassured that the tumour was benign. Today my eyes still fill with tears overwhelmed by gratitude knowing that I can and will hug my teenaged children as soon as I pause from typing these words. A perhaps unintended, intense and surreal crash course in sensitivity training, this life-marking episode, during which I was heavily supported as an employee myself, significantly further elevated the value of every life in my eyes. It heavily impacted all my interactions, including those with colleagues, whom I increasingly recognised as individuals struggling through life, carrying a unique baggage generally unknown to others.

Enhanced quality education through school improvement is an implied thread running across the various forms and interpretations of school networks including *Colleges*. In the Maltese context, the notion of quality education provision may start to be constructed from a legal entitlement perspective, seeking roots embedded in laws addressing and safeguarding education at differing levels. The fundamental right declared in Article 3 of the *Education Act* is perhaps the most significant (House of Representatives, 2016):

> *"It is the right of every citizen of the Republic of Malta to receive education and instruction without any distinction of age, sex, disability, belief or economic means."*
>
> (House of Representatives, 2016, p. 4)

The Ministry responsible for Education declares to date that part of its core functions is *"To ensure equal opportunities of quality education for all; An education system which provides every young person with the lifelong skills, values, and self-reliance to be independent …"* (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2020).

The echoes of animated debates on what constitutes quality, what should or should not be included in Malta's *National Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012), come to mind. Following the Council Recommendations on key competences for lifelong learning (Council of the European Union) in 2006 recommending Member States to develop their own as part of lifelong learning strategies, Malta embarked on a process which led to the development of its *National Curriculum Framework* in 2012 (Ministry of Education and Employment), or *NCF*. I later refer to this in more detail given my first-hand involvement on the national board entrusted with the final production of the *NCF*. Although I had already engaged in other educational fora at national level, till then, none had such a high stakes profile.

The politics that I was soon to be immersed in, and with which I would have had to deal on a daily basis over the coming years in the roles I later occupied, immediately presented themselves as 'a', if not 'the', pivotal element in decision-making processes even in the educational field. I was often troubled, "Am I sufficiently prepared and equipped? Who are we serving? What is quality education? Do we, in policymaking fora, elevate ourselves at illegitimate levels of power?", hardly appreciating that these and other fundamental questions would have continued to accompany me for the years to come, often pushing me out of my comfort zones. I gradually realised, or defeatedly I resolved to accept, that as much as I believe in the centrality of the person, and we speak of learner-centred approaches, societal priorities exert explicit and covert pressures which shape all spheres of life, including education, and for individuals to function effectively within a society, and if need be change it, they need to meet its set requirements.

However, internalised convictions on quality education, thankfully refuse to subside, sustaining a continuous tension, still unrestful to date. I approached teaching because of my love for Art but remained and progressed in the profession because of the realisation of the privilege to participate with parents in the formation of their children. The impact we have as educators on so many lives, became evident very early on in my career, bringing with it recognition of the grave responsibility shouldered and a deeply fulfilling, passionate drive to make a positive difference in the lives of others. I spent most of the years as a practitioner in schools, working in contexts with a higher proportion of students being pushed out, or at risk of being pushed out from the education system. Most of these students would have diverse situations, but often would be coming from disadvantaged socio-economic and/or troubled backgrounds, possibly compounded by learning difficulties. Teaching Art, unjustly considered as a soft option by many, meant that I often was entrusted with students who were deemed to have less academic potential, but who given the safe and therapeutic comfort of the subject would often share complexities pervading their lives whilst expressing themselves not only through their artwork. More opportunities were offered to me to question what quality education was being offered when working with students abusing of illegal substances and when part of the Senior Management in schools serving communities with a concentration of social deprivation. I questioned and still do, whether what we offer to students is what they individually expect for the accomplishment of a fulfilling life as defined by them, whether we vest ourselves with the right to determine what is best for others, whether we retain models of structured social domination perpetuated also through formal education, whether we sufficiently problematise what we mean by quality education.

Informed by claims that *"networks in education have a key role to play in supporting innovation and school improvement, and in building school and system capacity"* (Hopkins & Jackson, 2003, p. 94), the *Colleges* in Malta were meant to provide the context and serve as the catalyst for the accomplishment of such a mission.

> *"Transformation will only occur by shaping and stimulating disciplined processes of innovation within the school system, and building an infrastructure capable of transferring ideas, knowledge and new practices laterally across it… The organisational form which can give depth and scale to this process of transformation is the network."*
>
> (Bentley, 2005, p. 3)

However, for such a transformative change to occur there must be a *"conscious decision… to work on participants' cultural norms and assumptions"* (Stoll & Fink, 2003, p. 89).

Through dynamics of power and influence discussed throughout the study, we may be accepting these norms unquestionably, constructing our habits, which in turn characterise most of our personal and professional dealings, on these straightjacketing mind-sets. Not to condone, but to appreciate how we smoothly and uncannily slither into life's ruts, I reflexively and retrospectively examine my path. The deliberate reflection on why I made or was making particular choices, became a more persistently afflicting thought when I joined the central education authorities: "Am I more concerned about fulfilling my ambitions? Am I acting coherently with the values I profess to uphold? What am I called to do?", are questions I started raising more often.

Research Aim & Questions

Set against this backdrop, the main aim of this research was to investigate the concept of quality education and determine extents its notions may be related to policy-enacted structural school reforms, particularly *Collegial School Networks*, as perceived by stakeholders. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How can collegial school networks serve as a vehicle to quality education?
2. How can contextually relevant and stakeholder considerate definitions of quality education be construed?
3. How is the *College* perceived as impacting stakeholders' notions of quality education?

The research questions are further discussed in Chapter 3.

Research Structure

Notwithstanding the deliberate inclusion of my explicit voice, the study investigates these research questions following a rather conventional structure. Through a *Literature Review* and a case study of one *Collegial School Network* in Malta, with participants including students, parents, teachers and Heads of School, as well as key central figures at national level, the study explored the central themes of quality education, school networks and stakeholders' roles in educational policy, considering the interplay of power in society and decision-making processes at the different levels. The *Methodology* transparently exposes how the linear research design evolved also in response to the intricate effect of life. This dynamic nature characterising humanity emerged as the framework for the *Findings* and *Discussion* chapters in what I baptised as the *Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure of Quality Education.* The latter not only became the theoretical framework but a central key finding amidst other conclusions. Furthermore, whilst remaining faithful to expected academic canons and rigour, I also chose to embark on *"… a courageous persistence in confronting painful memories and insights"* (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2016, p. 147) adding layers "*of authenticity, authorial exposure, and reflexivity"* (Humphreys, 2005, p. 2) through autoethnographic vignettes distinguishable by being set in shaded textboxes (already encountered in these first pages).

The Context

About My Country, Malta

The Maltese Archipelago situated in the southernmost part of Europe right in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea between Sicily and the African continent, is constituted of three main islands, Malta, Gozo and Comino, and other uninhabited smaller ones, covering an area of just 316km^2 (EU2017.MT, 2020). The current official population of almost half a million inhabiting Malta and Gozo, and mainly concentrated on the Eastern half of Malta, has seen a twenty per cent increase when compared to 2008, due to a significant immigration of foreigners whose population on the islands grew fivefold (National Statistics Office, 2019, p. 12). This results in Malta having the highest population density in the European Union (European Commission, 2017). With generally *"low, rocky, flat to dissected plains* [and] *many coastal cliffs"*, the Maltese islands have mild winters and hot, dry summers, typically described as a Mediterranean climate (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020). This benefits greatly Malta's main industry, tourism, which is complemented by other service-oriented economic activities, especially in the financial sector (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020). Malta's economy has seen a steady growth over the past decades, with a significant increase *"attributable to domestic demand"* in recent years (National Statistics Office, 2019, p. 28).

Malta has a rich history boasting *"some of the oldest megalithic sites in the world"* (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020) dating to the Neolithic period, c. 3600 B.C. (National Geographic, 2020). Its geographical location, making it a strategic military, trade and commercial asset, explains its occupations from the times of the Phoenicians (c. 750 B.C.) till gaining Independence in 1964 from the British Empire, passing through different rules in between, and in 2004 joining the European Union as an Independent Republic (Malta Tourism Authority, 2020; Central Intelligence Agency, 2020). Notwithstanding troubled times, the different ruling powers, particularly the Knights of St John (from 1530 till 1798), with which Malta is closely associated, and the British, who had ousted the French at the beginning of the 19th Century assuming an agreed sovereignty upon the locals' request, contributed significantly to the Maltese Islands' architectural and cultural heritage as well as most of its governing structures.

Cautiously acknowledging that *"the historian's rendering is valuable, but sometimes naively biased"* (Mifsud Bonnici, 1993, p. vii), it is stated that *"Maltese constitutional development has had a rather turbulent history"* (Parliament of Malta, 2020). Malta's political development may be charted as a struggle *"and aspiration to self-determination"* (Frendo, 1993, p. vii), whose journey, particularly from the turn of the 18th and the 19th Centuries *"is linked to goings-on in Britain as well as in Europe and the world generally"* (Frendo, 1993, p. viii). Whilst still a British colony, at the beginning of the 20th Century, *"*[t]*he political aspirations of the Maltese grew stronger"* gradually paving the way to the setting up of Malta's first government elected by its people and eventually its independence obtained from the United Kingdom in 1964 (Parliament of Malta, 2020). Without underestimating the contributions made by smaller parties such as *'Alternattiva Demokratika'* (the local Greens Party) and the more recent *'Partit Demokratiku'*, contemporary Maltese Politics have been dominated by two major political parties, the Labour Party, currently leading the Government since 2013, and the Nationalist Party, which, with the exception of a very short Labour legislation between 1996 and 1998, had previously been in power since 1987. The change of Government in 2013 and the subsequent early election in 2017, were marked by unprecedented heavy votes in favour of the Labour Party, leaving a Nationalist Party in opposition grappling with severe internal issues. These years have been characterised by expedited economic prosperity and conversely troubling claims of poor governance, as well as serious accusations and revelations of corruption leading to resignations in 2019 at highest echelons of power, including the Prime Minister himself *"amid investigation of a journalist's killing"* (Capelouto & Cullen, 2020). Regretfully, the persisting tribal politics in Malta, whose constituents *"are concerned with material benefit, rather than abstract ideas, such as 'rights'",* sustain a self-serving *"loyalty* [that] *deforms democratic political competition and debilitates governing institutions"* (Warrington, 2017). Although the current Labour administration was dubbed as one of *"continuity"* (BBC, 2020), it set itself the task to strengthen the rule of law, good governance and ensure greater social justice (Galea, 2020). As it continues to unfold, history will judge and determine the extent this will be accomplished.

About Malta's Education System

Although *"Maltese education can truly go back to the Arab period in Malta (870-1090 AD) …* [t]*he arrival in Malta of the Religious orders also played an important role in the spread of formal education in these Islands in the Middle Ages"* (Calleja, 1994, p. 186). However, the intent *" 'to promote every means by which the affections of the [Maltese] people could be drawn more closely to the British Crown'* (Laferla, 1945)*"* led to an institutionalisation of an education system built on the British one as from the mid-1800s (Calleja, 1994, p. 187). It is therefore not surprising that, albeit reforms have been occurring ever since gaining Independence (Cutajar, 2015, pp. 24, 25) with major landmarks being outlined in the *Literature Review*, contributing to the Maltese Education System's somewhat unique arrangement, it still broadly resembles the British model.

The undiscriminating right to education is enshrined in Malta's Constitution (The Republic of Malta, 1964, p. 8) and Education Act (House of Representatives, 2016). Compulsory Education from the age of 5 to 16, is provided by State, Church and Independent Schools, approximately catering for sixty, thirty and ten per cent of the student population respectively. Child care provision (0 to 3 years) incentivised in recent years and two years of kindergarten education (3 to 5 years) attended by virtually all the cohort, precede compulsory education which is generally organised in six years of primary education and five years of secondary education, offered completely for free in all State Schools spread throughout Malta and Gozo. Following a milestone agreement in 1991 between the Holy See and the Republic of Malta (Celata & Mifsud Bonnici, 1991), education in Church Schools, offered by schools having a Roman Catholic denomination, is also free, but parents may give donations to support the schools. Whereas, Independent Schools are fee-paying institutions, with parents benefitting from specific tax-relief measures (European Commission, 2020).

All State Schools are ultimately governed centrally by designated authorities within the Ministry responsible for education, whereas individual Church and Independent Schools are autonomous organisations. The central authorities within the Ministry, are known as Directorates with different Departments within them. Until 2006 Departments formed the Education Division which was vested with both the regulatory and service provision responsibilities. From 2007 these functions were split between two different Directorates, one for Quality and Standards in Education serving as the regulator for all early years and compulsory education nationally, and the other for Educational Services mainly taking charge of provision by State Schools. These Directorates and the respective Departments, occasionally switching hierarchical order (with Departments becoming the larger unit embracing Directorates) continue to evolve, aspiring to elucidate their differing roles.

All schools are bound to adhere to the same curriculum (currently the *National Curriculum Framework* of 2012) which outlines the general competences and foundations of lifelong learning as established by the Government, and which is assessed through high stakes national standardised 'Ordinary Level' exams at the end of compulsory education (European Commission, 2020). Following compulsory education, students follow programmes of studies depending on their choice and attainment in these national exams, in either academic or vocational institutions (see Figure 1.1 – Structure of the Education System). Albeit the sustained public investment and significant improvements in education, notably in rates of early leavers from education and training between the ages of 18 and 24 (down to 17.5% in 2018 from 25.7% in 2009) and tertiary educational attainment for youth between the ages of 30 and 34 (up to 34.2% in 2018 from 21.9% in 2009), amidst prospects of further improvement, concerns remain particularly because *"educational outcomes and attainment rates are generally lower in EU comparison"* (European Commission, 2019, pp. 192-201, 195).

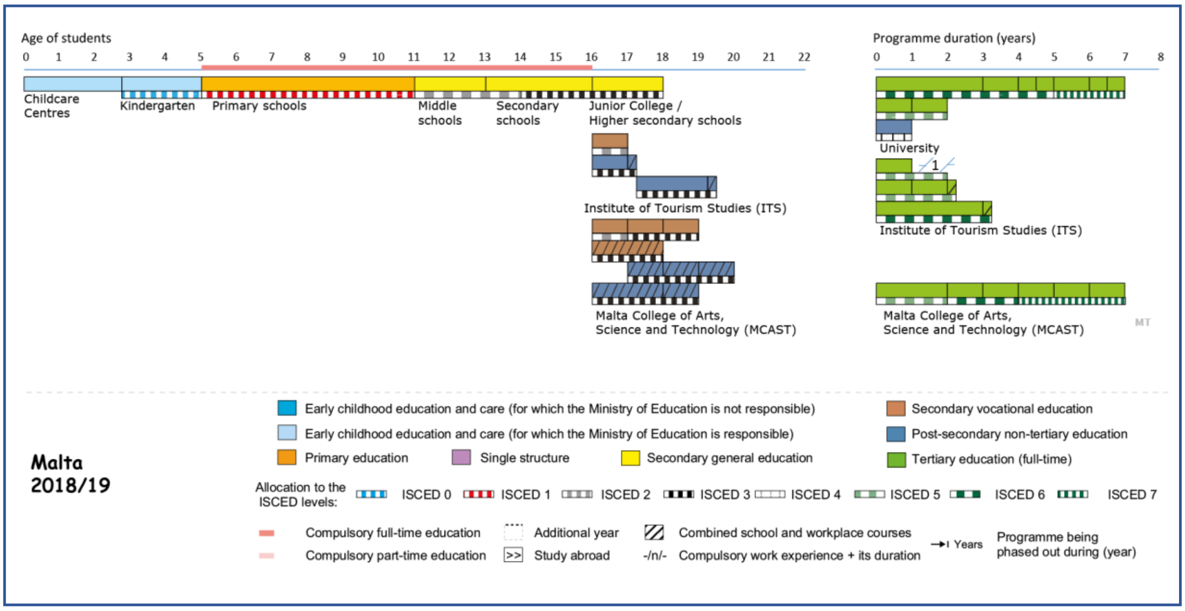
Age of students
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22
Childcare Centres
Kindergarten
Primary schools
Middle schools
Secondary schools
Junior College / Higher secondary schools
Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS)
Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST)
Programme duration (years)
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
University
1
Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS)
Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST)
MT
Malta
2018/19
Early childhood education and care (for which the Ministry of Education is not responsible)
Early childhood education and care (for which the Ministry of Education is responsible)
Primary education
Single structure
Secondary general education
Secondary vocational education
Post-secondary non-tertiary education
Tertiary education (full-time)
Allocation to the ISCED levels:
ISCED 0
ISCED 1
ISCED 2
ISCED 3
ISCED 4
ISCED 5
ISCED 6
ISCED 7
Compulsory full-time education
Compulsory part-time education
Additional year
Study abroad
Combined school and workplace courses
-/n/- Compulsory work experience + its duration
Years
Programme being phased out during (year)

Figure 1.1 Structure of the Maltese Education System
(European Commission, 2018, p. 21)

About Me

Born in 1975 as the only child to humble and fervent Roman Catholic middle-class parents, I grew up in Ħamrun, close to Malta's Capital, Valletta. My father, Tony, professionally trained as a Psychiatric Nurse at Harperbury Hospital on the outskirts of London through a scholarship, spent more than forty years passionately serving in different roles at Malta's Psychiatric Hospital, which from a very young age I recall occasionally visiting and there coming into first contact with human vulnerability manifested in mental health issues. His dedication and uncompromised care to marginalised others, anchored him as my uncontested role model and point of reference. Trained as a Hairdresser, which she practised more as hobby from my grandmother's house, next door to us, whilst marginally topping up the family's modest monthly earnings, my mother Alexandra was mainly a stay home mum. Throughout my childhood and youth, my mother feebly disguised her extensive fears from life's unexpected detours from which she tried to continually protect us, under a somewhat authoritarian disposition which faded as I grew older. My parents' love, support and direction, with which I'm still thankfully blessed, have been constant, as their trust in my potential and choices, nurturing stability and space for me to grow independently.

As I matured, I fondly embraced core Catholic values, struggling with my human fragility and departing from populist religiosity which in my eyes is perhaps too often an alienation, if not a form of idolatry. Albeit more recently feeling politically orphaned, my political leaning is best described as upholding the principles professed by the local Christian Democratic Party, namely the Nationalist Party. The internalisation of my political beliefs was particularly reinforced through the way I experienced my childhood when the Socialist, or Labour, government at the time, whilst creditably establishing a Welfare State, increasingly adopted questionable governance under the claim to achieve greater social justice. A grave ramification of this socio-political discordance led to an outright, at times violent, civil conflict which saw the unwarranted and highly contested closure of Church Schools, where I was schooled at the time. This extended for several weeks until they were reopened following mass public demonstrations and activism. Although experienced at a very tender age, with a limited understanding of the complexities involved, I still have palpable recollections of fear and vulnerability, yet counteracted with proud resilience and determination. In 1987, the Nationalist Party was elected into government and a less-known democratic, tolerant and participatory climate, reinforced to unknown extents with Malta's accession into the European Union in 2004, appeared to being established, yet, also in view of more recent developments, this remains difficult to ascertain.

I met my wife Janice, who, two years younger than me, was already employed on a production line at a shoe factory, whilst I was still pursuing my undergraduate studies at the University of Malta to become a teacher. The youngest of five siblings, and daughter to working-class, yet reasonably affluent parents from Birkirkara, in a more central part of Malta, Janice and I progressively brought our different worlds closer to forge our own. We married very young and soon became the proud parents of two boys, Isaac and Jacob, who will be turning nineteen and sixteen years respectively in the coming months. My wife chose to dedicate her life to us, heavily contributing to our family's wellbeing, and allowing me to pursue a professional journey which at times, as disclosed in this study's vignettes, proved as demanding as it is fulfilling to date. Isaac, who is so natural with numbers, has started his first degree in Commerce with the intent to prospectively become an Accountant, whereas Jacob, who is both creative and balanced in all areas, is still to discover his path as he is successfully completing compulsory schooling. As we continue to share life's peaks and pits in our home in Naxxar (central/northern area of Malta), we are each other's strength and motivation. Whilst continually striving to sustain an inner source of peace and vitality, family remains my most treasured and greatest external dependence.

After graduating from an honours bachelor's degree in education, my professional practice started in 1997 as an Art Teacher mainly within the State School system, predominantly in less advantaged areas. Following an unpleasant encounter with a darker side of our profession which lurked in a forgotten school where I served for one year, I was about to give up on education, but shifted to being part of a very small team at national level responsible to work closely with students who were suspected to be misusing substances and managed to regenerate myself. Meanwhile, hooked by the elating feeling of participating in the formation of individuals, eager to develop further and ambitious to be appointed a Head of School, from 2003 till 2008 I pursued post graduate studies at diploma and master level in educational management and leadership at the University of Malta. In fact, after serving as Assistant Head of School for a number of years, in 2011 I was Heading a State Boys Secondary School. I cherish this short-lived experience as one of professional culmination which gave me the privileged opportunity to work in direct contact with students, their families and educators, influencing and fostering a microcosm to extents which are rarely experienced. What followed was a breathless rapid, which moulded me further, but from which I admittedly am still recovering.

Having started this study in 2009 and professionally striving to contribute wherever possible, further enabled crossing of paths with high officials in Malta’s central education authority, leading to strong encouragement for consideration of widening my horizons. At the end of 2012 I was appointed Director Quality Assurance and in 2014 I was further appointed as the Director General for Quality and Standards in Education at the helm of the regulatory arm for general education within the Ministry responsible for Education in Malta. In 2018 I moved out of the State-controlled organ and joined the central authority supporting Church Schools in Malta and Gozo in the role of Director at the Secretariat for Catholic Education, where I still serve to date. What may come across as a linear progression spanning over more than twenty years, my career has been imbued with life-marking experiences, with some of the most significant being shared throughout this study.

Time and life experiences lent themselves to continually question my beliefs in all spheres of life, and currently I humbly strive to hone indiscriminate respect towards others, irrespective of differing, contrasting views, recognising that differences may be enriching and that tensions often reside also within me. Nonetheless, whilst taking cognisance of a different temporal context, where in contemporary Malta, the larger political parties compete on becoming servile to populism, when society seems alienated by (factional) affluence, where violence and gruesome hostility appears sophisticatedly remitted to generally be made less evident and crude, I declare my roots which remain and may have been deliberately or unwittingly further solidified over the years. Undeniably there are other equally valid truths which are divergent to mine, but this is what I have been experiencing, what has scarred and continues to mark my flesh, and hence, what may transpire in my voice.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Engaging with Literature in the Field

I sit at my desk in my home's study, battling between the burning desire to wander along the calmer streets on Boxing Day with my family, and the aching need to work notwithstanding I'm in the middle of the Christmas recess. Reason overturns passion, as most often has been happening in my life, and yet it doesn't necessarily feel right; I pause and ask myself: "Could the individual construction and experiences of reason and passion be another underestimated assumption that underpins the tensions created in society in general and the educational system in particular?". Ultimately, like most, arguably all of us, I'm on a personal discovery of wellbeing, of happiness, of meaning, struggling amidst circumstances which define the parameters within which I incessantly 'was', 'am' and 'become', as time instantaneously slips, irreverent of my crave for life.

I move on to revisit the literature review to my doctorate research I had compiled some years back also aware of the need to include new research that has been published since then. I grab Spiteri's monograph (Spiteri, 2016) and am soon flung deep into the complexity of the local context. Spiteri has been a highly influential person in my professional life, almost single-handedly pushing me to start my doctorate. I had served as an Assistant Head of School at a particularly challenging turn of events for the respective school, under his leadership as one of the first College Principals. An Area Secondary School in dire need of recognition and healing, serving a community with a high concentration of students having a low socio-economic background, a proportion of which referred to various psycho-social services, corrupted by society and manifesting the anger whose root is always pain. Building on significant foundations established by a piloting predecessor, Spiteri was in my eyes pivotal in the bold, contextually grounded decision-making required to support the schools within the *College* he led at the time.

Like me, but even before me, Spiteri occupied various prominent positions within the local central authorities, and unlike me was also involved in designing the *Colleges* reform, whose *"new school management paradigm"*, he acknowledges, *"had been overtly optimistic"* (Spiteri, 2016, p. 1). Spiteri affirms,

> *"*[*FACTS* (Ministry of Education, 2005)] *called for the greatest change in schooling in Malta since the introduction of compulsory secondary education in 1971. One of the many purported advantages … was that it would answer schools' long-standing demands for greater autonomy … and enhance their ability to effectively address their students' needs."*
>
> (Spiteri, 2016, p. 1)

This Literature Review discusses the enigmatic concept of quality education by exploring definitions it has been attributed, its measurement, its curricular manifestation and how it links with school networks. The key concept of school networks is then investigated within networking theories, exposing facets of such structures, their potential benefits and limitations in general, with a particular focus on *Colleges* in Malta. An emerging central theme to this study involves the role of stakeholders in education, their influence and involvement in educational policy, is also considered, amidst the power dynamics that shape decision-making processes.

The Quest for Quality Education

What is Quality Education?

As its name implies, echoing other national initiatives with similar expressed intents in the educational field across the globe, *FACTS* presents the need for quality education for all as the driver, the justification for the proposed change, and is therefore characterised by a promise of its achievement (Gonzi, 2004, p. 691; Galea, 2006, p. 743).

> *"Quality is at the top of most agendas and improving quality is probably the most important task facing any institution. However, despite its importance, many people find quality an enigmatic concept. It is perplexing to define and often difficult to measure. One person's idea of quality often conflicts with another and, as we are all too aware, no two experts ever come to the same conclusion when discussing what makes an excellent school, college or university."*
>
> (Sallis, 2002, p. 1)

The vivid memory of heated discussions on the notion of quality education that would regularly crop around the Minister's expansive (physically and metaphorically) mahogany table, whilst I was serving amongst the top officials in Malta's educational authorities, reverberate. I recall the encouraging reassurance felt in confirming that despite the differences in beliefs, approaches and strategies, a decade after *FACTS* had been launched and prime actors, including the Government itself, had changed, I was witnessing the continuation of a declared strong commitment to quality education (the authenticity and extent of such commitment, as well as its perceived enactment, irrespective of quoted achievements, remain reliant on personal choices and convictions, fraught with internal and external pressures). Such debates were often inspired and/or stirred from either the frustration of Malta's insufficiently satisfactory results in international standardised assessments (beyond any blindfold and uncontested legitimacy and validity of such tests), or the deep awareness of an educational system that 'pushes out' individuals at risk of marginalisation, creating cyclical models of societal reproduction. The question repeatedly begs: "what is quality education?"

Quality can be defined as both an absolute, *"an ideal with which there can be no compromise, as well as a relative concept, by which a product or service meets an ascribed standard"* (Rao, 2007, p. 14). The relative definition is twofold, either *"measuring up to a specification …* [or] *… meeting customer requirements"* (Rao, 2007, p. 15). In education both of these aspects offer considerable challenges, particularly as to which specifications or whose customer requirements should the service provision meet? In other words, what purpose should education serve and "*who should decide whether a school or college is providing a quality service?"* (Rao, 2007, p. 17).

In Malta, the unquantified, yet apparently prevailing popular definition of quality education is commonly expressed as an "*education that increases learning and is thus measured as improvements in test scores in the formal primary and secondary schooling system"* (Channa, 2016, p. 132). Over recent years this has been increasingly accompanied by a dangerously emphatic quotation of international assessments by informed and less informed exponents, who might not be sufficiently aware or appreciative of the fact that over-reliance on *"standardised testing via internationally set instruments (such as PISA, PIRLS or TIMSS) … could lead to* [an even more globally] *standardised curriculum at the expense of promoting contextually appropriate approaches"* (Rose, 2015, p. 291). Spiteri (2016) quotes Fullan (2011) to warn that *"using test results and teacher appraisal to reward or punish teachers and schools instead of using capacity building in teachers and schools, as* [being] *one of the four wrong drivers for systemic change"* (Spiteri, 2016, p. 13). However,

> *"bureaucracies and politicians are partial to statistics because the numbers present a picture of decision cleanliness and simplicity. The idea that inspection, now called accountability, in education will solve most of education's problems has become a fact few want to challenge."*
>
> (English & Hill, 1994, p. 95)

Harvey (1995) draws on Harvey and Green (1993) who *"identify five broad approaches to quality … in higher education"* (Harvey, 1995, p. 8): "*The 'exceptional' view sees quality as something special. …* [,] *Quality as 'perfection' sees quality as a consistent or flawless outcome. …* [,] *Quality as 'fitness for purpose' sees quality in terms of fulfilling a customer's requirements, needs or desires. …* [,] *Quality as 'value for money' sees quality in terms of* *return on investment. …* [,] *Quality as 'transformation' is a classic notion of quality that sees it in terms of change from one state to another"* (Harvey, 1995, p. 9).

A number of particularities make education more of a service rather than a product, and as such "*the quality of the service is determined both by the person delivering and the person receiving the service"* (Rao, 2007, p. 20). These characteristics include: the "*direct contact between* the *provider and the end-users",* the need for a timely delivery and "*to achieve the right first time standard"*, the "*problem of intangibility", "the fact that services are usually rendered directly to customers by junior employees"* and the fact that *"it is very difficult to measure successful output and productivity in services"* (Rao, 2007, pp. 21-22).

This rekindles a contestable assertion I sustain, that 'intangibles' often lie at the heart of individuals' deepest beliefs, most precious experiences, 'belongings', and greatest life-impacting decisions, also determining the 'tangibles' that may follow. Although equally met with dismissing reactions, education practitioners I had the opportunity to meet over more than two decades of professional practice, seem to feel a stronger sense of resonance with the centrality of 'intangibles' in the quality of the educational process, arguably more than influential policy-makers. Without generalising, the years I spent forming part of the educational policy-making group in Malta, exposed greater risks of becoming alienated by, or succumbing under the pressures of, having to necessarily satisfy 'materialistic return on investment' demands dictated by variably laudable tangibles.

From another perspective, "*the quality of something can be said to be part of its nature"* (Sallis, 2002, p. 12). The quality of formal education may therefore be viewed as intrinsic to the intended purposes and outcomes, or the educational process itself, as ascribed by its various stakeholders. Hence delineating quality education also requires the investigation of the actual raison d'être of education.

> *"Education is the process by which an individual is adjusted to his whole ambit of existence; the whole being is the subject of education; and the whole of life is its end."*
>
> (Leathes, 1913, p. 2)

Notwithstanding the rather passive view of the learner in this definition, which may be attributed to its historical context, contrasting with the more participative discourse in modern literature, its holistic approach captures the essentials of education, giving it contemporary, possibly unconfined, relevance. It may be implied that quality education is directly reflected in the quality of an individual's life. However, for the purposes of this study, education shall be narrowed down to its structured more formal application which may be categorised into two main approaches as defined by Burbles (2004), the "*Teleological"* and "*Anti-Teleological"*. In the former all actions in the process*,* both those which are intended for "*societal-reproduction"* and those which are "*transcendental",* are related to the intended or projected purposes (Burbles, 2004, pp. 5-6). On the other hand, "*Anti-Teleological"* methods allow the individual to shape his/her own education by defining, negotiating and establishing personal educational purposes (Burbles, 2004, pp. 5-6).

Necessarily, these two differing strands imply a different interpretation of quality education. Whereas the "*Teleological"* paradigm advocates for a comparison between achievements with intended goals to determine the level of quality, the "*Anti-Teleological"* one regards quality as relevant to itself and is more descriptive rather than measurable. Malta's educational system oscillates around *"Teleological"* drivers, enshrined in the State's right and obligation to determine the *"National Curriculum Framework"* (House of Representatives, 2006; Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012) later expanded in the *"Learning Outcomes Framework"* (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2015), mainly inspired by global and European developments, particularly the Council Recommendations on key competences for lifelong learning (Council of the European Union, 2006; Council of the European Union, 2018). Notwithstanding this traditional predominance, *"Anti-Teleological"* argumentation regularly resurfaces, and whereas national attempts in such direction, such as *"My Journey"* (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016), often result in different guises of *"Teleological"* models, at local level, schools' and educators' positively obstinate agency in responding to individual student needs create snippets of *"Anti-Teleological"* experiences.

In 2016, *ASCD* and *Education International (EI)*, two leading education organisations *"released a joint statement applauding the establishment of the stand-alone education goal as part of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) ratified at the United Nations on September 25, 2015 …* [and] *called for a clear definition of quality education that places the needs of the child at the fore"* (Romano & Melvin, 2020). In this statement, quality education is regarded as one that indiscriminately *"focuses on the whole child …* [preparing] *for life, not just for testing …* [and] *provides the outcomes needed for individuals, communities, and societies to prosper"* (ASCD & Education International, 2016, p. 2).

> *"A Quality Education provides resources and directs policy to ensure that each child enters school healthy and learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle; learns in an environment that is physically and emotionally safe for students and adults; is actively engaged in learning and is connected to the school and broader community; has access to personalized learning and is supported by qualified, caring adults; and is challenged academically and prepared for success in college or further study and for employment and participation in a global environment."*
>
> (ASCD & Education International, 2016, p. 2)

Such quality education in schools is *"supported by three key pillars: ensuring access to quality teachers; providing use of quality learning tools and professional development; and the establishment of safe and supportive quality learning environments"* (ASCD & Education International, 2016, p. 3). Nevertheless, schools are also increasingly being challenged against notions of quality and efficiency advocated by external forces for more productivity (Boyd, 1998, p. 2). Maltese central educational authorities recognise that "*there has been a general increase in society's interest and demands with the educational sphere"* (Wood, 2005). The extensive investment devoted to education, that has been consistently increasing in the case of Malta, often appears disproportionate in comparison to its difficultly quantifiable product – learning (Boyd, 2004, p. 161). In fact, although the Maltese Prime Minister at the time had been repeatedly affirming: *"Quality education for all is a priority"* (Gonzi, 2004, p. 691), exponents of the Opposition concertedly challenged this investment, as it was being claimed that the increased investment was not yielding the desired results (Coleiro, 2006, p. 49).

Whilst refuting the stance of education and efficiency as being at opposing poles or "*antithetical"*, fears raised on the compatibility of these two spheres are as legitimate as the inevitable pressures for greater accountability (Boyd, 2004, pp. 161-162). Nevertheless, Spiteri (2016) reminds of Hopkins' (2013) rejection of market-driven forces for educational excellence as *"myths that increased variation between schools and reduced overall system performance"* (Spiteri, 2016, p. 12).

Sallis (2002) argues that in an attempt to address these external pressures and following examples set by successful organisations in other spheres, "*education is also recognising the need to pursue…"* such an "*…important quest"* (Sallis, 2002, p. 1). As a result, various factors believed to be conducive to quality education have been drawn by researchers. A number of these emerge as common elements: "*outstanding teachers, high moral values, excellent examination results, the support of parents, business and the local community, plentiful resources, the application of the latest technology, strong and purposeful leadership, the care and concern for pupils and students,* and *a well-balanced and challenging curriculum"* (Sallis, 2002, pp. 1-2). The adoption of quality assurance in other similar scenarios particularly higher education, suggests a more synthetic framework from which professionals engaged in any educational endeavour might benefit: "*focusing on pupils and on learning, quality must reflect stakeholders' needs, quality has to be demonstrable* [and] *quality is about feedback"* (Freeman, 1994, pp. 21-25).

Measuring Quality Education

"Quality is not easily assessed" (Freeman, 1994, p. 21), particularly because such an endeavour is challenged by the need to reconcile diverging approaches which best suit stakeholders' needs. Whilst ensuring the achievement of desired levels of quality also implies the adoption of monitoring mechanisms, these may take various forms which may be embraced as well as refuted by differing interest groups. Traditionally such mechanisms involve forms of external school evaluations which focus on controlling and predicting, establishing objectives set by society, having a tendency to replicate existing social structures (English & Hill, 1994, p. 100). Nevertheless, inspections are *"an important source*

of information about how successfully [the] *aim … to provide all children with the best possible education … is being achieved"* enabling governments *"to make informed and coherent decisions about educational policy"* (Learmouth, 2000, p. 6).

Whereas scrutiny by external authorities might prove useful to produce data and perhaps take stock at a particular point in time on quality education, such practices are arguably one of the most contested bones in the field of education. *"Total Quality Education"* (TQE) offers an alternative to such traditional models (English & Hill, 1994, p. 100) and features qualities traceable in the *Colleges*' vision. Its emphasis is on the individual students' learning hence the quality it aims at, and the accountability structures it inspires, are directed towards the individuals' understanding and development. TQE regards process as both the end and the means to achieving it, hence envisages an evaluation or a quality assurance exercise which describes rather than measures. From this perspective "*the meaning of the experience* becomes *intrinsically worthwhile to the student and no other outcomes may be necessary or required to justify it"* (English & Hill, 1994, p. 73).

> *"It would be the same for playing a game of golf. The activity is, in itself, intrinsically worthwhile and interesting to the player. ... The outcome is the activity."*
>
> (English & Hill, 1994, p. 73)

Table 2.1, overleaf, highlights the differences between traditional and TQE approaches in determining quality and its extent in education. The TQE learning place might be disregarded or dismissed as being too romantic and non-quantifiable; especially by policy makers who seek immediacy, clarity and standardisation for decision-making purposes. However, if the quality education that is being sought by educational institutions, such as what seems to be promoted by *Colleges*, aims at increasingly respect towards stakeholders' interests, a compromise between models could be sought and negotiated.

Dimensions	The Traditional School	The TQE Learning Place
Centred on	Control	Personal development
Control point	Societal needs Specified objectives	Purpose of learner
Driven by	Outcomes/ results	Meaning making
Strategy	External Intervention	Internalisation
Form	Particularistic	Dialogic
Evaluation modes	Proficiency tests Achievement tests Behaviour/ performance Teacher tests Letter grades Curriculum-based tests Basic skills test Lab tests I.E.P.s Job-rating performance	Biography Sketch books Inquiry groups Community service Hands-on work Exhibitions Apprenticeships Quest experiences Portfolios Collaborative planning
Evaluation forms	Statistics Letter symbols Comparative graphs	Presentations Creative expressions Qualitative feedback

Table 2.1 Traditional School Evaluation vs TQE's Learning Place
(adapted from English & Hill, 1994, p. 101)

Quality education is reliant on teachers, tools and environments (ASCD & Education International, 2016, p. 3) coming together in schools. From a perspective as depicted by Hargreaves (2003), resonating with Bourdieu's forms of capital as accumulated labour (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 241), as organisations, schools may be said to have three interlocking dimensions: *"intellectual capital, social capital and organisational capital"* (Hargreaves, 2003, pp. 24-25).

> *"Intellectual capital embraces what we usually call human capital…– their knowledge, skills, capabilities, competences, talents, expertise, practices and routines. … Culturally, social capital consists in the trust that exists between the school's members and its various stakeholders; structurally, social capital is the extent and quality of the networks among its members… Organisational capital refers to the knowledge and skill about how to improve the school by making better use of its intellectual and social capital, especially to enhance teaching and learning."*
>
> (Hargreaves, 2003, pp. 24-25)

An implied common thread also links quality education to school effectiveness, which whilst retaining learning at its core, is far more complex and is dependent on a myriad of variables. This has been the focus of various researchers in education and several lists of indicators or qualities of effective schools have been proposed. Table 2.2 exhibits a synthesis of what may be considered a rather comprehensive collection of eleven key characteristics for effective schools (Sammons, 1999, pp. 195-210).

Characteristic	Description
1. Professional leadership	Firm and purposeful A participative approach The leading professional
2. Shared vision and goals	Unity of purpose Consistency of practice Collegiality and collaboration
3. A learning environment	An orderly atmosphere An attractive working environment
4. Concentration on teaching and learning	Maximisation of learning time Academic emphasis Focus on achievement
5. High expectations	High expectations all round Communicating expectations Providing intellectual challenge
6. Positive reinforcement	Clear and fair discipline Feedback
7. Monitoring progress	Monitoring pupil performance Evaluating school performance
8. Pupil rights and responsibilities	High pupil self-esteem Positions of responsibility Control of work
9. Purposeful teaching	Efficient organisation Clarity of purpose Structured lessons Adaptive practice
10. A learning organisation	School-based staff development
11. Home-school partnership	Parental involvement

Table 2.2 Key Characteristics of Effective Schools
(*adapted from Sammons, 1999, pp. 195 - 210*)

Experiencing Quality Education

Boyle and Charles (2016) explain that research into educational policy and structural reforms globally over a span of twenty-five years, *"locates 'the curriculum' at the centre of these changes"* (Boyle & Charles, 2016, p. 2). Students' learning at school is formally contemplated and articulated in the curriculum, a "*multifaceted concept, constructed, negotiated and renegotiated at a variety of levels and in a variety of arenas"* (Goodson, 1994, p. 111) setting the parameters for the intended quality education.

> *"There is no such thing as a "value-free curriculum." All curricula, overtly or covertly, contain values. So the curriculum is contested grounds for answering the question, whose values shall be included and excluded in the creation of curriculum?"*
>
> (English & Hill, 1994, p. 62)

In Malta it is the Minister responsible for education who has the right and obligation emerging from the Education Act (House of Representatives, 2006) to establish the *National Curriculum Framework* for all schools on the island, with the intent to ensure the envisaged quality education. Speaking of the British context whereby by virtue of the 1988 Education Reform Act a first ever national curriculum was introduced in England, Boyle and Charles (2016) affirm that through such a legislative stance, *"education became highlighted as a political domain",* gradually making it *"the inevitably passive and submissive victim and object of political soundbites and more and more political control"* (Boyle & Charles, 2016, p. 1). In the process the purpose of the curriculum shifted from being intended to support the learner to becoming *"a measurement framework"* (Boyle & Charles, 2016, p. 1).

Maltese educational authorities claimed that whereas the *Colleges* reform values and addresses all aspects of schooling, "*however, curriculum implementation, syllabus design and teaching methodology* [are meant to be given] *prime focus* [aiming at] *further improving the teaching and learning processes that are occurring within each and every classroom"* (Wood, 2005). The *National Curriculum Framework* (NCF) published in 2012 (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012) had been the result of a rather widespread consultation process on an arguably even richer draft published in 2009 (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012) developed by groups of technical experts. Inspired by the Key Competences issued by the Council of the European Union (2006; 2018) in turn influenced by the *Bologna Process* for the sake of learning mobility (European Commission, 2020), the NCF advocated for and preceded the *Learning Outcomes Framework* (LOF) published in 2015 (Ministry for Education and Employment) and whilst being implemented, undergoing continuous revision ever-since.

Boyle and Charles (2016) sustain that the key questions to be asked in relation to curriculum development are:

> *"Who determines the aims of a curriculum? What are these aims? How can the aims be addressed and achieved through curricular arrangements? What is the role of a 'subject'? How can a curriculum structure manage both 'breadth' and balance across subjects? How can progression be ensured within the need for breadth and balance of curriculum experiences? What is the link between the curriculum and effective teaching, learning and assessment?"*
>
> (Boyle & Charles, 2016, p. 2)

Whereas during the consultation process in 2010, I was leading a school and hence already contributing as part of the wider group of participants, in 2012 I had been appointed to sit on the Ministerial Board responsible to look into and consider the feedback received to develop the final version of the *NCF*. The Board was constituted of different stakeholder representatives: the Ministry, State Schools (whom I represented together with another Head of School), Non-State Schools, the Malta Union of Teachers (at the time being the sole Trade Union for Educators in Malta), the University of Malta (Malta's home-bred and leading university), the local authority responsible for national assessment (the Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate – MATSEC - Examinations Board) and civil society in the form of a commissioned reviewer.

Although I arguably lacked sufficient shrewdness, and was enthusiastic of the learning experience, I felt, but only timidly remarked on, the missing figure of parents on this Board which was dismissed by the fact that a number of us were parents too, hence wore multiple hats. Moreover, the void left by not having students actively participating, had been only superficially addressed by organising facilitated opportunities for students to 'contribute'. Throughout, the State's intent to embrace *The Key Competences* (Council of the European Union, 2006), industry-driven demands, educators' industrial and employment issues, and similarities as well as differences amongst State and Non-State Schooling, dominated the discussion amongst members, articulating a negotiated agreeable 'zone'.

Through a series of circumstances, in 2014/2015, I found myself in the trenches, strenuously leading the development of the Learning Outcomes Framework (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2015) involving the design of learning outcomes per learning area, cross-curricular (transversal) themes, and at subject level. The process for the accomplishment of this project was infused with endless internal and external tensions, attempting to achieve a right balance between local and global relevance.

In hindsight, both conceptual and procedural aspects needed strengthening further. The exhausting dynamics, rhythm, scale and complexity of the massive project, involving hundreds but relying on a handful of leaders under my inexperienced (on such a project) direction, over a relatively limited timeframe, may have somewhat detracted from the wider and deeper value of both the process and the product.

The process by which a curriculum is designed intrinsically impinges on quality education. This may depart from the premise that there exists a universal body of knowledge, skills, concepts and values which ought to be identified, experienced and learnt by all students (English & Hill, 1994, p. 63). Traditionally this unfolds as a rather elitist process, often excluding *"those meant to be served by the schools"* (English & Hill, 1994, p. 63). In their own distinctive ways, all "c*hildren have been successful learners before they ever entered a school"* (English & Hill, 1994, p. 21). However, being led by middle class representatives, when educational opportunities are increased, it is the latter that take the most advantage of them (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 22) perpetuating the dichotomy of successful and failing students. The ambitious aspiration *"for all children to succeed"* (Galea, 2005, p. xiii) set by the seminal document for the establishment of *Colleges*, appears to be inspired by the intent to address this undesired state of structural exclusion.

In this regard, *"Total Quality Education"* (TQE) suggests moving away from fitting children into fixed structures and offering them more flexibility, choice and active participation (English & Hill, 1994, p. 66). Table 2.3 summarises this alternative vision which is designed around individual student learning in contrast with that of the traditional school.

The Traditional School	The TQE Learning School
Curriculum is stable.	Curriculum is fluid.
Curriculum is factual.	Facticity is contestable.
Curriculum is objective.	Objectivity is a myth.
Curriculum is value free.	Curriculum is value centred.
Curriculum is historical.	Curriculum is nonhistorical.
History makes sense.	History is an invention, a grand imposition.
Curriculum should be good for all children. What is common is the "core".	Some curriculum is bad for some children; a "core" is antithetical to natural development.
Curriculum should teach students the essentials.	Curriculum is learning. What is essential is negotiable in context.
Children should experience curriculum.	Experience becomes curriculum.
Learning should be orderly and logical.	Learning is decidedly chaotic and messy.
It is possible to decide ahead of time the essentials to be learned in a curriculum.	Importance of the curriculum is always negotiated by the learner in context.
Curriculum can be decided apart from the learner and prior to instruction; it is impersonal.	Curriculum is what the learner decides to accept; it is always personal and immediate.
The role of the teacher is to present the curriculum.	The role of the teacher is to help the child encounter and approach the curriculum.

Table 2.3 Traditional School vs TQE Learning Place
(adapted from English & Hill, 1994: 66)

The clinical linearity of portraying such concepts in segregated columns is surreal, missing the richness found in messier real-life situations, which are manifested in an intricacy characterised by a blurring of boundaries between these facets of curriculum development. Furthermore, the traditional distinction between curriculum, as *"content"* and pedagogy as the *"delivery of that content"* is no longer valid (Boyle & Charles, 2016, p. 2).

> *"The pedagogical experience conveys norms and values (albeit, on occasions 'poor' or 'rich' norms and values) based on the teacher's role, style, inputs and beliefs. If the assumption is to develop the learner and the learner is an active subject in the process of becoming autonomous and self-determining (a self-regulated learner: Zimmerman, 2000), then the margins between teacher and learner, curriculum and pedagogy become less fixed, flexible and, to a formative thinker, more positive (Perrenoud, 1991; Perrenoud, 1998; Allal & Ducrey, 2000)."*
>
> (Boyle & Charles, 2016, p. 2)

Linking Quality Education with School Networks

> *"In the past, schools tended to work in relative isolation with relatively few links other than across phases of education. While this way of working might have been appropriate a decade or so ago, in the current climate of rapid and technological change there is a need for collective knowledge creation and information sharing at classroom, school, and system level."*
>
> (Chapman et al., 2010, p. 53)

Maltese Educational Authorities recognised this new emerging reality and tried to seize the opportunity for school improvement through the innovation and collaboration brought by networks, mandating *Colleges* as the vector towards quality education. This was not unique to Malta, School Federations just to mention an example, represent another form of school network in the UK, also viewed *"as an innovative strategy for improving schools"* providing amplified opportunities for sharing, communal professional and curriculum development and leadership (Chapman et al., 2010, p. 54).

Borg and Giordmaina (2012, p. 9) identify the following *"main educational landmarks in the history of Maltese Education"*:

> - *"The Compulsory Attendance Act of 1924*
> - *The Compulsory Education Ordinance of 1946 that made school attendance compulsory until the age of 14*
> - *Secondary education for all in 1970 (Sultana et al., 1997)*
> - *Reviewing the school leaving age in 1974*
> - *The introduction of a National Minimum Curriculum in 1989/1990 (Wain, 1991) followed that of 1999 (Ministry of Education, 1999)*
> - *The Setting up of School Networks in 2006 (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005)."*
>
> (Borg & Giordmaina, 2012, p. 9)

In 2005 the publication of the policy document *For All Children To Succeed* (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005) by the Maltese Government, proposing "*concrete measures to increase the level of quality within educational provision"* (Wood, 2005) was to bring about yet another significant milestone in Maltese educational history, one that Cutajar et al. (2013) paraphrasing Bezzina (2006) define as *"a move from a highly centralised system characterised by isolationist institutional practices"* (Cutajar et al., 2013,

p. 123). Apart from the restructuring of schools into more autonomous *Colleges* functioning within a stipulated framework of accountability, the former Education Division was made to evolve into two separate entities - a body responsible for regulation, standard setting and quality assurance, and another entity focussing on service-provision to and in schools (Wood, 2005). This led to an evolved Education Act in 2006 (House of Representatives, 2006) that served as the legislative framework for the reform that was to follow, built on *"the devolution of responsibilities to schools* [by the Minister of Education]*, which* [in 1989/1990] *began to enhance school autonomy and empowerment"* (Cutajar et al., 2013, p. 119).

The ambitious objective set by the Maltese government, to provide quality education to all learners through *Colleges* implied a leap forward in the provision of formal education by schools, hence resonating the global phenomenon of school improvement. All schools in Western countries face expectations for school improvement (Harris, 2006, p. 1). Stoll and Fink (2003) aptly remark that *"although not all change is improvement, all improvement involves change"* (Stoll & Fink, 2003, p. 44). Successful school improvement *"depends on an understanding of the problem of change at the level of practice and the development of corresponding strategies for bringing about beneficial reforms"* (Fullan, 1992, p. 27). Moreover, for such improvement to bring about quality education *"there must be the will to undertake change, the skill to make it happen and the persistence to see it through"* (Harris, 2006, p. 112). Mifsud (2015) further problematizes the impact of the intended change brought forth by Malta's introduction of *Colleges* by borrowing inquisitiveness by Woods et al. (2004) asking whether this would have seen *"autonomy and empowerment widely spread, or the same leaders applying constraint and control in new ways"* (Mifsud, 2015, p. 54).

Change stands better chances of success when it is owned locally by all stakeholders, especially by those on whom its implementation relies. Bentley (2003) explains that resistance to change and "*self-protection"* is likely to occur amongst educators, noting however, that they could "*embrace new and better practices"* more when forming part of networked identities such as professional learning communities inclined towards innovation (Bentley, 2003, pp. 13-14).

> *"Teachers willingly accept new practices that are teacher-friendly, that make their lives better or easier in some way. Teachers do not mind doing something that is unfamiliar and difficult, provided that they can see some real benefit to students and that the effort demanded is not unreasonable."*
>
> (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 48)

Successful networks are formed by schools with a shared interest for collaboration, driven by their own priorities but with a common purpose "*rather than being forced into alliances to solve problems defined and driven by outside agencies"* (Chapman et al., 2010, pp. 58, 69). In this regard, *Colleges* in Malta present a further challenge as the formation of and participation in such networks was mandated by central education authorities. Change, becomes justifiable when it has been proved to lead to sustained improvement, hence when "*these improvements last over time"* (Sergiovanni, 2006, p. 348). This may be legitimately claimed when five interrelated characteristics surface predominantly:

- *"Improvement that sustains learning, not merely change that alters schooling;*
- *Improvement that endures over time;*
- *Improvement that can be supported by available or achievable resources;*
- *Improvement that does not impact negatively on the surrounding environment of other schools and systems;*
- *Improvement that promotes ecological diversity and capacity throughout the educational and community environment."*

(Hargreaves & Fink, 2003, p. 438)

The Government of Malta had asserted that improving and strengthening the leadership and quality of its schools by giving *Colleges* more autonomy within a predetermined framework constituted of interlinked groups of schools, together with central authorities to regulate and operate more effectively represented an important step in ensuring more quality education (Gonzi, 2004, p. 705). In congruence with concurrent international trends, it seems that most school improvement initiatives focused more on the restructuring of management arrangements and systems "*rather than at the level of the classroom"* (Harris, 2006, p. 1). However, Education systems in general and the newly introduced *Colleges*, or school networks in particular, should respond to such demands with caution not to detract *"the role of learning from being the centrepiece of education"* (English & Hill, 1994, p. 95).

Cutajar and Bezzina (Cutajar & Bezzina, 2013) refer to Cordingley and Temperley (2006) in affirming *"that educational networks, as learning organizations, promote collaboration and require people who can work and solve problems collaboratively so as to develop structures and processes that would facilitate learning"* (Cutajar & Bezzina, 2013, p. 20). Channa (2016) acknowledges that *"locating decision makers closer to parents and the community … can increase accountability"*, yet warns that *"possibilities of elite capture, the chances of inequity, and the lack of capacity of local governments and schools to deliver quality education"* heighten concerns on whether decentralisation may necessarily improve quality education in a country (Channa, 2016, p. 132). Hence, whereas *"the movement towards... school networks ...may signal the beginnings of a genuine shift towards locally generated and co-ordinated school improvement approaches"* (Chapman et al., 2010, p. 72), there may be insufficiently researched evidence that may incontestably link such initiatives with school improvement (Chapman et al., 2009). Nevertheless, economic advantages; school improvement and raised standards, including an enhanced educational experience and improvements in pupil attainment; professional collaboration, better relationships and understanding of each other's contexts by participating schools were all identified as potential gains for inter-school collaboration (Atkinson et al., pp. ix-x) that is meant to characterise school networks.

School Networks: The Debate

Moving from quality education to school networks, portraying a link between the two, this section delves deeper into the debated concept of school networks in general and Maltese *Colleges* in particular. Notwithstanding the particularities of *Colleges*, as interpreted by Maltese authorities, common elements appear to be shared amongst similar social and organisational arrangements. Regardless of the remarkable complexities involved in functioning as part of a group, the social nature within humans, the fast changing societal norms and dynamics, in which technological advancement acts as a strong catalyst, and the potential advantages of effective collaboration, drive individuals to explore alliance both at a personal as well an organisational level.

Networking

Castells (2000) defines *"the organisational arrangements of humans in relationships of production/consumption, experience, and power, as expressed in meaningful interaction framed by culture",* as *"social structure"*, which in our societies is being redefined by networks (2000, p. 695).

> *"The present day paradigm of networking can be considered as the most important organisational form of contemporary life, since networks are all about efforts of people working together, collaborative efforts to know what is happening, to identify issues, improve existing practice and stimulate a culture of sharing good practices to strengthen the teaching and learning process."*
>
> (Borg & Giordmaina, 2012, p. 13)

The interactions and interpersonal ties between individuals have been and still are, at the heart of sociological research (Freeman, 2003, p. 39). Castells (2011) explains that *"power relationships are the foundation of society, as institutions and norms are constructed to fulfil the interests and values of those in power. However, wherever there is power, there is counterpower, enacting the interests and values of those in subordinate positions in the social organization"* (Castells, 2011, pp. 1-2). The extent of cohesion and/or type of relationship generated by such dynamics, shapes groups of individuals, including institutions and organisations, depending on the *"interaction between power and counterpower"* (Castells, 2011, p. 2). These social structures extend from the simplest interaction between a few *"actors"* (participants within the group) to varying degrees of complexity with multidirectional and multiple relationships amongst more actors (Doreian & Stokman, 1997, pp. 1-2). A network is, in this context interpreted, as a structure which involves a set of relatively stable, formal or informal connections, or purposeful interactions, amongst individuals or organisations (Lazer, 2003, p. 103), or *" a set of interconnected nodes"* (Castells, 2010, p. 501).

Natural social networks revolving around the family, community, religion and other ties, are nowadays cohabiting with more formal networks (Kerr et al., 2003, p. 3) exacerbated by the advancement of information technology systems and globalisation. Whereas the 'we' is generally acclaimed as being smarter and more effective than the 'I', in organisational terms "*bringing people together does not necessarily produce better outcomes, unless the collaborative work is organised to engage people in the process and is supported to move them beyond their established patterns"* (Katz et al., 2009, p. 7). When forming part of a group, individuals tend to be reluctant in assuming responsibility, relying on other members of the group to do so; as a result, "*nobody does anything because everyone thinks that someone else will!"* (Katz et al., 2009, p. 8). Most managers would invariably identify collaboration as a crucial factor in their organisations' effectiveness, but nonetheless most of these could also confirm that they've invested heavily in terms of time, energy and financial resources, only to get marginal, if any, improvement (Cross & Parker, 2004, p. 7). Hence it is suggested that, "*for networks to be effective, they need to do more than create connections"* (Katz et al., 2009, p. 7).

However, Castells (2010) concludes that *"as an historical trend, dominant functions and processes in the Information Age are increasingly organised around networks"* (Castells, 2010, p. 500).

> *"Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and thus the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power and culture. … Presence or absence in the network and the dynamics of each network vis-à-vis others are critical sources of domination and change in our society:*

> *… the network society, characterised by the pre-eminence of social morphology over social action."*
>
> (Castells, 2010, p. 500)

Castells (2011) explains that determining *"The Source of Power"* as a single entity could lead to *"an analytical dead-end"* (Castells, 2011, p. 775), adding that *"the question of power as traditionally formulated does not make sense in the network society, but new forms of domination and determination are critical in shaping people's lives regardless of their will"* (Castells, 2011, p. 776). The author proposes four (4) different forms of power in his network theory:

> 1. *"Networking Power: the power of the actors and organizations included in the networks that constitute the core of the global network society over human collectives and individuals who are not included in these global networks.*
> 2. *Network Power: the power resulting from the standards required to coordinate social interaction in the networks. In this case, power is exercised not by exclusion from the networks but by the imposition of the rules of inclusion.*
> 3. *Networked Power: the power of social actors over other social actors in the network. The forms and processes of networked power are specific to each network.*
> 4. *Network-making Power: the power to program specific networks according to the interests and values of the programmers, and the power to switch different networks following the strategic alliances between the dominant actors of various networks."*
>
> (Castells, 2011, p. 1)

Hodge (2013) problematizes Castells' theory of network forces further introducing a disruptive element claiming that the concept of *"the world community"* gives a false impression of unity, perhaps as a result of *"the still immature network forces"* (Hodge, 2013, p. 340). This leads to an inherent contradiction since the associated *"'we', who must 'forge' this new ethic, are the same people who are creating the problems: people destroying the planet in the interests of profit, and consumers whose habits feed that profit"*, and therefore needs to be resolved *"in a network solution"* (Hodge, 2013, p. 340).

School Networks

Atkinson et al. (2007) suggest that *"the main aims of collaboration, as well as raising attainment and improving school standards,* [are] *the sharing of professional expertise amongst teachers, the enrichment of learning opportunities for students and the breaking down of barriers between schools and between individuals"* (Atkinson et al., 2007, p. vi). The authors present various drivers for inter-school collaboration, primarily pointing at:

> - *"Government agendas and local authority requirements …*
> - *… locally instigated and even school initiated projects …*
> - *… funding for the operation of inter-school collaboration …*
> - *… the energy and commitment of the participants themselves … [particularly] of key personnel such as headteachers and the senior management team (SMT) …*
> - *… the need to overcome or counter challenging circumstances …"*
>
> (Atkinson et al., 2007, p. vi)

Hopkins (2005) claims that with the introduction of networks in school life, a positive impact is experienced on the organisational culture and student achievement (Hopkins, 2005, p. 5). It is intended, that to varying extents, in a school network, *"members are connected to each other for mutual benefit and to pursue common goals by establishing a sense of felt interdependence and mutual obligation"* (Sergiovanni, 2006, p. 103). Networks tend to be *"characterised by a commitment to quality, rigour, and a focus on standards and student learning"*, particularly proving to be *"also an effective means of supporting innovation in times of change"* (Hopkins, 2005, p. 5). However, Mifsud (2015) quotes Black (2008) who argues about a persisting *"moated or walled culture of schooling"* (Black, 2008, p. 44) and notes that *"sharing leadership with agencies outside their walls is still not a very strong point for many schools"* (Mifsud, 2015, p. 54).

> *"In education, networks promote the dissemination, development of teachers, support capacity building in schools, mediate between centralised and decentralised structures, and assist in the process of re-structuring and re-culturing educational organisations and systems."*
>
> (Hopkins, 2005, p. 5)

More specifically, Bentley argues that school networks can effectively bring about a positive development for four reasons (Bentley, 2005, p. 4):

1. *"Networks foster innovation"*:

   The notion of innovation enhances sustainability by continuously amending and updating good practices. Since "*the outcomes of innovation need to be spread further and faster through the system"*, Distributed Leadership across the network assists in creating the necessary conditions for fostering innovation.

2. *"Networks are a test bed for new ideas"*:

   Networks offer "*a platform for segmented innovation"*. When different schools within the *College* innovate in different areas, risks and workload are distributed amongst the network.

3. *"Networks provide challenge and discipline to teachers' learning":*

   The lateral transfer of knowledge within the network helps teachers "*to take decisions based on a wealth of professional knowledge drawn from a wider context".*

4. *"Networks help integrate services":*

   The efforts and expertise of all stakeholders are maximised in this collegial set up. They allow a more efficient and effective access and use of external agencies, such as psycho-social services.

On the other hand, Atkinson et al. (2007) group the potential gains of inter-school collaboration in a more concrete, and perhaps more comprehensive, manner, namely as *"Benefits for schools …, Benefits for staff …,* [and] *Benefits for pupils"* (Atkinson et al., 2007, pp. 57-72). Table 2.4 overleaf summarises the benefits associated with inter-school collaboration by these authors, attributing the related advantages and suggesting how these may be manifested in practice.

Benefits for schools	**Economic advantages**	• Access to a wider pool of resources; • Access to new funding streams; • Economies of scale and cost effectiveness;
	School improvement and raised standards	• Sharing of good practice and increased professional development fuels improvements in pupil attainment; • Wider co-developed curricular offerings better responding to pupils' needs;
	Closer relationships between schools and greater awareness of other schools	• Access to mutual support from heads and other teachers; • Development of communication, mutual trust and commitment; • Experience promotes further collaboration in the future; • Challenging misconceptions and breaking down barriers; • Recognising the commonalities that exist between schools; • Understanding that different schools can work together for mutual benefit – cooperation rather than competition;
	Organisational improvements	• Improvements to how schools are managed; • Opportunities to plan events, curriculum and projects collectively; • Introduction of new practices;
	Development of other relationships	• Improved partnerships with the local authority; • Increased community liaison;
Benefits for school staff	**Exchange of ideas and good practice**	• Collaborative working facilitates transmission of knowledge, skills and good practice; • Opportunities for reflection and discussion; • Contact with others fosters creativity and innovation;
	Training and professional development opportunities	• Widened opportunities for professional development; • Access to expertise and specialist knowledge; • An expansion of career pathways for teachers; • Opportunities to learn informally through an extended community; • Development of teaching expertise;
	Overcoming professional isolation	• Increased dialogue and contact with other teachers reduces isolation and creates a culture of mutual support
	Staff confidence, motivation and morale	• Development of teaching expertise, access to a support network and increased opportunities for professional development have knock-on effects for staff confidence, motivation and morale;
Benefits for school pupils	**Enhanced educational experiences**	• Extension of the curriculum; • Opportunities for out-of-school excursions; • Access to more personalised learning;
	Increased pupil attainment	• Improved performance of individual students, particularly where the focus of collaboration, e.g. pupils with SEN, low attainers; • Increasing engagement and improved attitudes to learning amongst pupils due to opportunities created from inter-school collaboration;
	Interactions with pupils from other schools	• Increased contact with pupils from other schools; • Experiencing other cultures through shared activities and learning; • Greater awareness and understanding of pupils from different backgrounds, cultures and faiths;
	Improved transition to secondary school	• Partnerships across phases familiarise children with the secondary school environment, thereby easing their transition;

Table 2.4 Benefits of Inter-School Collaboration
(adapted from Atkinson et al., 2007, pp. 57-72)

"One of the distinctive features of successful networks is dedicated facilitation and leadership" (National College for School Leadership, 2005, p. 1). As *"Systems Thinkers in*

Action" (Fullan, 2004, p. 8) the leaders involved in similar structures should work on the notion: *"think global and act local"* (Anderson, 2005, p. 3), in clear distinction from isolated leadership. The network leader facilitates a simultaneous dynamic relationship which takes into consideration strategic and operational planning, and other system forces. Fundamentally, network leadership creates a paradigm shift of relational boundaries moving from: working alone, wariness, busyness and unfocused, as well as independent multiple agendas; to: interdependence, trust and engagement, purposeful and disciplined action, and a concept of 'like-mindedness', which enhance "*strategic… capacity building measures towards sustainability"* (Anderson, 2005, p. 3).

Mifsud (2015) exposes Hall et al.'s (2011) claim that despite the widespread recognition of distributed leadership as a model of good practice, *"discussions around this notion reflect normative narratives and are just part of … government rhetoric to claim that power and autonomy are being shared with schools, whereas reality points to centralization and managerialism"* (Mifsud, 2015, p. 54). Furthermore, Hopkins (2005, p. 5) warns that the valid but vague conceptual underpinnings may lack clearly defined structural and organisational interpretations. Hence *"some networks can simply be 'clubs' for sharing good practice. If networks are genuinely to deliver the outcomes claimed for them, we require a far more robust definition of the term and a clearer specification of the processes involved"* (Hopkins, 2005, p. 5).

This search for more synergy within such networks and autonomy from central authorities, can at another extreme, lead to isolation at a national level or "*Balkanization cultures"*, characterised by "*insulation of sub-groups from each other; little movement between them; strong identification and with views of learning associated with that subgroup; and by concern with micropolitical issues of status, promotion and power dynamics"* (Stoll & Fink, 2003, p. 88).

> *"With the emphasis on lateral forms of communication, the fundamental innovation of networks is an enhanced ability to promote the exchange of knowledge and skills to solve problems collaboratively…. On the other hand, networks whose operations rely on a cadre of leaders require significant group process skills for all participants and especially for the position of network leader."*
>
> (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001, p. 517)

Spiteri (2016) presents the argument made by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) in which *"they cautioned that the school networks should not be too loose, since they could lose their way and dissipate. Nor should they be too tight, lest they:"* (Spiteri, 2016, p. 13)

> *"turn into administratively constructed clusters of schools whose purpose is to implement or serve as a reference group to government policy. In the end, emerging ideas and innovations are suppressed when they conflict with mandated policies or are hijacked by those policies to advance their people's ends."*
>
> (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, p. 99)

Nonetheless, being constrained by community values and socio-organisational structures, such strategies need to be implemented in an unobtrusive fashion (Pitner & Ogawa, 1981, p. 62) if negative sentiments are not to be aroused. Smith and Wohlstetter (2001) suggest that researching networks revealed that for them to serve as a *"reform tool"* the style of management to be adopted had to depart from *"mandates and control"* and move *"towards collective norms and collaboration"* (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001, p. 517)**.** This is also corroborated by Spiteri (2016) who describes effective school networks as "*voluntary aggregations of schools who"* recognise benefits as outweighing drawbacks, who have "*a moral purpose"* to provide a quality education, and who, through purposive leadership, "*are agents of school empowerment and improvement*" (Spiteri, 2016, p. 14).

Forms of School Networks

Atkinson et al. (2007), propose two different approaches to classify inter-school collaboration. One that is primarily hierarchical, with subsequent levels indicating a deeper form of engagement amongst participants; and another that adopts multiple variables to define the extent and depth characterising collaboration (Atkinson et al., 2007, pp. 9-11). Whilst acknowledging the scale of the initiative, hence the number of participating schools, as another determinant (with the larger sets presenting increased challenges), the authors propose three (3) principal dimensions, respectively having a range of different constituent variables, underlying *"all of these classification systems, each dimension ranging from low risk/low benefit potential to high risk/high benefit potential:"* (Atkinson et al., 2007, pp. 12, 11)

> - *"Organisation: How far do organisational structures support the collaborative working?*
> - *Penetration: How deeply into the fabric of the school does the collaboration penetrate?*
> - *Joint investment: To what extent do partner organisations share a vision and aspirations for the collaboration?"*
>
> (Atkinson et al., 2007, p. 11)

Amidst global movements exhibiting elements of school networks, the United Kingdom and the United States have seen the adoption of particular arrangements, a few of which are being outlined to draw upon the similarities and differences with the *College* system in Malta. Local Education Authorities (LEAs) were introduced in the United Kingdom, after the Education Act of 1902, and took responsibility of the educational provision within their borough. Whilst bound by central educational authorities' policies and national funding, the LEAs had a crucial administrative and strategic role. Throughout the years, especially following the 'Children Act' of 2004, the LEA officially ceased to exist as its functions had been absorbed by the Local Authority which was attributed a wider scope of responsibility. It is due noting that with the setting up of Academies further strengthened by virtue of the 'Academies Act' of 2010, Local Authorities lost significant control over eligible schools who *"are freed from excessive bureaucracy and given greater freedom and autonomy to develop their own ethos and approach"* (Abbott et al., 2013, p. 184). In this context, whereas Local Education Authorities and eventually Local Authorities were responsible for a cluster of schools, the actual notion of networking within the British educational system, as interpreted within this research, with a strong element of collaboration interwoven in its nature and function, has developed from voluntary collaborations between schools for the sake of mutual support and capacity building aimed at improvement.

Networked Learning Communities (NLCs) is one such partnership programme initiated by the National College for School Leadership[1], in consultation with the Department for Education and Skills[2], and the General Teaching Council[3] which became widely spread. The

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[1] At time of writing replaced by the Department for Education and Teaching Regulation Agency

[2] At time of writing replaced by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, and the Department for Children, Schools and Families

[3] The General Teaching Council was abolished in 2012 with some of its functions being assumed by a new body known as the Teaching Regulation Agency

"interrelated... core attributes" of NLCs and other similar networks (Kerr et al., 2003, pp. 3-4) are portrayed in Table 2.5 (Network Core Attributes).

Networks' Core Attributes	
Participation	Three (3) types of network participation: · contribution (action) · organisation (process) · empowerment (values)
Relationships and trust	Relationships built on trust are critical in creating a strong network structure and these. Building trust, which does not happen by accident, is particularly important in peer networks.
Coordination, facilitation and leadership	Coordination, facilitation and leadership are vital in keeping network participants up-to-date and engaged, as well as in linking them to other networks.
Communication	Communication is also important in building trust. It is best achieved through face-to-face encounters rather than through electronic links, such as email and websites, which are more impersonal.
Structural balance	A balance must be struck between regulations that govern the network and freedom to act and innovate, which is based on trust between participants.
Diversity and dynamism	Diversity is the need to ensure interaction between diverse opinions and ideas in the network in order to facilitate ideas that are creative and progressive. Dynamism involves freeing participants to be dynamic and encouraging them to make suggestions.
Decentralisation and democracy	Decentralisation means that local interests and issues have a place within the global context of the network. Democracy is about ensuring that the decision-making process in the network is inclusive and transparent.
Time and resources	In networks time and resources are vital ingredients and are always at a premium.
Monitoring and evaluation	Networks ought to monitor and evaluate their operation in order to identify 'what works' and why.

Table 2.5 Networks' Core Attributes
(adapted from Kerr et al., 2003, pp. 3-4)

The particularities of a NLC as presented by Kerr et al. (2003, pp. 4-5) can be synthesised as initiatives revolving around schools and their communities, seeking the creation and exchange of knowledge, developing a professional learning community in the process, encouraging collaborative and distributed types of leadership which aim at building the schools' capacity for continuous enquiry and development, offering an ideal arena to mediate between local needs and national agendas. Such school networks are portrayed as having a tendency to evolve in response to contingent circumstances, attempting to strike the right balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches, whilst taking in consideration issues of centralisation and autonomy (Kerr et al., 2003, p. 6). Whilst noting a degree of parallelism with Maltese *Colleges*, such an application of school networks is also a relatively new concept and the fluid, multi-faceted and multi-dimensional data collection and analysis processes involved prove to be extremely complex (Kerr et al., 2003, p. 9).

Mifsud (2015), draws interesting reflections on the concept of power in school networks, using Foucault's theoretical basis. The sceptisism towards an uncontested view of school networks' validity in her work, is particularly evident in the citation of Frankham's (2006) "*claims to the 'institutionalised utopianism'*" (Mifsud, 2015, p. 91), and Angus's (Angus, 2004) expressed concern of a *"totalizing structure which imposes its will without much, if any, consideration of agency, local politics or resistance"* (Angus, 2004, p. 24). She reminds that power *"exists only within relationships"* (Mifsud, 2015, p. 56) and recognises it as *"both coercive and enabling, in that it is not imposed from 'outside' or 'above', but circulates within institutions and social bodies, producing subjects who exert a 'mutual hold' on one another"* (Mifsud, 2015, p. 56).

In 1998, *Education Action Zones* (EAZs) were introduced in the United Kingdom with the expectation of: *"improving teaching and learning; working with business and other organisations; making education and other services work better in targeting social exclusion; and supporting families and pupils"* (Reid & Brain, 2003, p. 197). The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2003) describe EAZs as *"partnerships usually formed between the schools, their LEA and other local organisations, especially from the business community, and other agencies, such as higher education institutions"* (Ofsted, 2003, p. 5). EAZs had *"a legally constituted corporate governance body – the Action Forum …* [having] *… responsibility for drawing up and implementing an action plan designed to raise educational standards"* (Reid & Brain, 2003, p. 197). Through its inspections, Oftsed (2003) deemed most EAZs as having *"had limited initial effect on school improvement … due to over-ambitious programmes of activities that did not always focus specifically or radically enough on the challenges faced by school in their areas"* (Ofsted, 2003, p. 4). The Guardian's education editor, Will Woodward (2001) claimed that the *"government scheme … was condemned as 'an embarrassing flop' … after research showed it had fallen well short of targets"* (Woodward, 2001). In fact in November 2001 it was announced that EAZs were formally being discontinued and were not being *"extended beyond their initial five year terms"* (Woodward, 2001). Reid and Brain (2003) conclude that *"in evaluation terminology*

EAZ policy is appropriately reviewed in the light of three types of error: concept, process and outcomes" (Reid & Brain, 2003, p. 211). EAZs failed to adequately consider structural elements in policy which lead to educational inequalities and were conceptually unduly complex, inevitably facing processing challenges, further exacerbated by *"confusion and/or fatigue"* by concurrent initiatives (Reid & Brain, 2003, p. 211). Amidst other considerations, the same authors recognise *"that giving EAZs a short shelf life (three years initially, with an additional two) may in itself have been a conceptual error"* (Reid & Brain, 2003, p. 212).

Nevertheless, the concept of network amongst schools in the United Kingdom, was still supported through *Federations* which allowed and encouraged the formation of more formal structures. Whereas the term federation *"is often used loosely to describe many different types of collaborative groups, partnerships and clusters…",* in this context*, "… federation is a governance structure whereby one or more schools share a single governing body"* as legislated by Section 24 of the British Education Act of 2002 (Department for Children, Schools and Families).

The term *Hard Federations* is sometimes used to refer to formal federations distinguishing them from collaborating schools retaining distinct governing bodies (Chapman et al., 2009, p. 2). In such an arrangement, schools should enjoy *"increased collaborative arrangements with other maintained schools, including joint meetings of governing bodies and joint committees"* (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2003). Amongst other advantages, it is claimed that in *Hard Federations* schools stand to gain by "*Developing Leadership"* through added opportunities for professional development and career advancement, *"Personalised Learning"* suiting specific needs and "*Widen*[d] *Opportunities"* for students (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009, p. 5). Initial studies indicate "*that federations can have a positive impact on student outcomes and that the impact is greatest where the aim of the federation is to raise educational standards by federating high – and lower – attaining schools"* (Chapman et al., 2009, p. 17).

School Districts, in the United States, usually encompass schools from the various levels, clustered together on the basis of geographical divisions. The School Board, the district's governing body, which is usually elected by direct popular vote or appointed by the government, designates a Superintendent to act as its Chief Executive Officer. The Superintendent would typically be responsible for "*all the district's instructional policy and fiscal matters, including hiring, allocations to schools, curriculum initiatives, remediation, and professional development"* (Iatarola & Frunchte, 2004, p. 496). Amidst this scenario, various attempts at 'managing' schools through standardised tests, performance indicators and similar techniques, typically serving centralised modes of operation, have been recorded to operate simultaneously with apparently contradictory decentralisation approaches, encouraging an increase in school-based decision-making (Taylor et al., 2002, p. 469).

Whereas school districts encompass a number of schools within their jurisdiction, unlike *Colleges*, their structure does not necessarily entail schools to collaborate. Urban school districts have been criticised *"for failing to prepare students adequately for entering the internationally competitive economy of the 21st century"* due to the districts' inability to adapt to changing circumstances in a timely manner (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001, pp. 499, 500). However, notwithstanding assertions that *"few schools if any can be totally self-sufficient, either in providing quality instruction or performing more basic organisational maintenance tasks"* (Education Commission of the States, 1995, p. 11) various recommendations made by reformers tend to *"focus on individual schools as being responsible for student outcomes"* (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001, p. 500) neglecting the collective potential. Given the added stability and coherence experienced by individual students when schools, ranging from kindergarten to secondary, cooperate with each other and with external service-providing agencies, a number of districts have started adopting collaboration within networking structures (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001, p. 500). One type of such school networks in US districts is known as *"affiliation network…,* [where] *people representing different organisations can work together to solve a problem or issue of mutual concern that is too large for any one organisation to handle on its own"* (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001, p. 501). This approach is more in congruence with the United Kingdom's *Networked Learning Communities* or *Federations* and Maltese *Colleges*.

Philanthropic or non-governmental organisations in the United States, such as the Annenberg Foundation, intended to challenge "*public schools to improve performance,* *especially student achievement"* also promoted collaboration in the form of school networks as a means to improvement (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001, p. 502). The Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project (LAAMP) originated to *"encourage collaboration across grades, schools, and disciplines",* which leads *"to a shared commitment to making schools work for children"* (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001, p. 503). *"School families* [formed within LAAMP networks adopted] *interdependency among network members* rather than hierarchical structures *to improve school performance"* (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001, p. 504). A major distinction between such networks and *Colleges* is that whilst the latter *"attempt to coerce participation,* [LAAMP] *networks rely on voluntary association"* (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001, p. 517).

Colleges: School Networks in Malta

In the Maltese context, the first reference to school networks was made in the Ministerial Publication '*For All Children to Succeed – A New Network Organisation for Quality Education in Malta'* (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005). One of the major issues referred to within the document was *"the shift from centralisation to decentralisation…"* which, as presented by Maltese Central Education Authorities at the time, required *"…that schools network together"* forming what were referred to as *Colleges*, in an effort to *"ensure a smoother flow from one level of education to another, as well as provide"* individual students with curricula relevant to their needs (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005, p. 19). It was envisaged that this collective endeavour would assist schools in building capacity, coherence, sustainability and shared leadership rather than working in isolation. The guiding principle behind this assertion was that *"none of us is smarter than all of us"* (Mizzi, 2005, p. xv).

The bond of collaboration between schools may be laid on a continuum (see Figure 2.1 – Continuum of Network Collaboration) stretching from loose, informal, voluntary, ad-hoc networking, to tight, formal, statutory, permanently interdependent organisations as adapted from Chapman et al., (2010, pp. 55-59). The Maltese *College*, defined in Articles 50 and 49 of the Education Act as amended in 2006, "*is a body corporate having a legal and* *distinct personality”* (House of Representatives, 2006), *“under the responsibility, guidance and administration of a Principal” ”* (House of Representatives, 2006). Article 52 further specifies that the latter ought to serve as *“the Chief Executive Officer of the College”* (House of Representatives, 2006), hence of the respective schools clustered within the particular network.

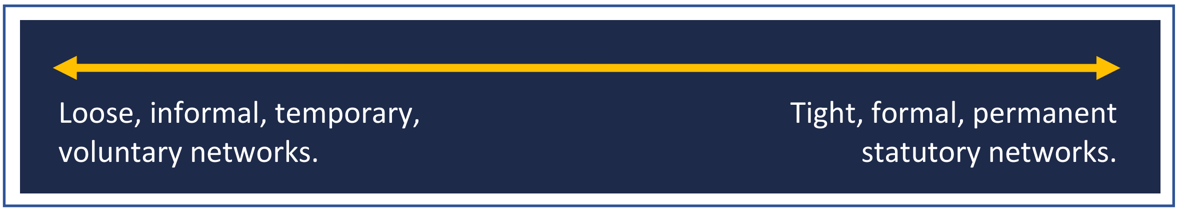
Loose, informal, temporary, voluntary networks.
Tight, formal, permanent statutory networks.

Figure 2.1 Continuum of Network Collaboration
(adapted from Chapman et al., 2010: 55 – 59)

Notwithstanding an intended increase of Maltese State Schools’ autonomy from central authorities, as legally construed networks, *Colleges* feature closer to the tight, formal, statutory pole on the continuum in Figure 2.1. than the loose, informal voluntary networks at the other end. In fact, the Maltese Opposition at the time when *Colleges were being launched* (at the time of writing, the then Opposition was elected in Government) asserted that the proposed reform increased bureaucracy with top heavy structures, also adding unnecessary financial burden (Abela, 2006, p. 756). It was claimed that the amended Education Act focused exclusively on administrative aspects, limiting itself to a mechanism that should eventually lead to what actually matters (Abela, 2006, p. 754).

The concept of *Colleges* as contemplated by the Policy Document ‘*For All Children to Succeed’* (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005), aims at facilitating the convergence of all stakeholders, assisting their mutual development for the sake of the individual student. Consequently, through networks, educational institutions aim at parting from the traditional isolation often characterised by reactive attitudes to more pro-active and collegial modes of operation. Furthermore, the network was proposed as having the ability to provide opportunities for embracing the wider community in assisting both the students and society at large in the promotion of lifelong learning (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005, pp. 23-27). It was expected that such enhancement of parental and community involvement into school life increases credibility in the educational service provided.

> *"…the greater objectives are designed to help students in state schools benefit from better management, better networking with other schools, better teaching methods and better practices in the field of education… the reform is meant to bring out a greater display of initiative, better use of teachers' talents, skills and abilities, better use of state funds - and far more important than anything else, better results by students, as well as an educational experience that is more satisfying."*
>
> (Sciberras, 2005)

Notwithstanding the common core principles and legal framework for all *Colleges*, the differing contextual needs, limitations and longer-term strategic planning, induced Maltese Central Education authorities to propose varying clustering arrangements for most *Colleges* as contemplated in the original policy document, *'For All Children to Succeed'* (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005). This eventually evolved even further with the adoption of other variations mainly determined by demographic trends (which changed significantly from the inception of *Colleges* through an unprecedented influx of diverse immigrant groups rocketing the population, especially but not exclusively in specific localities), existing and projected physical structures required to accommodate the respective student populations in properly equipped, modern schools, and new policy development, such as the concept of Middle Schools for the first two years of Secondary Schooling and co-education throughout compulsory education introduced at Secondary level following the change in Government in 2013.

However, for the sake of depicting what may be defined as a fully established typical *College* at the time of writing (as an evolved organisational arrangement from its inception), it constitutes of eight to ten comprehensive schools, namely, six to eight co-ed primary schools which act as feeder schools to a co-ed middle school, further progressing into a co-ed secondary school, whose Heads of School under the leadership of the *College* Principal act as the Council of Heads as in Figure 2.2. Nonetheless, whilst sharing the same structural arrangement, each of the ten (10) *Colleges* (for compulsory, mainstream education) in Malta differs from the rest, having its own particularities.

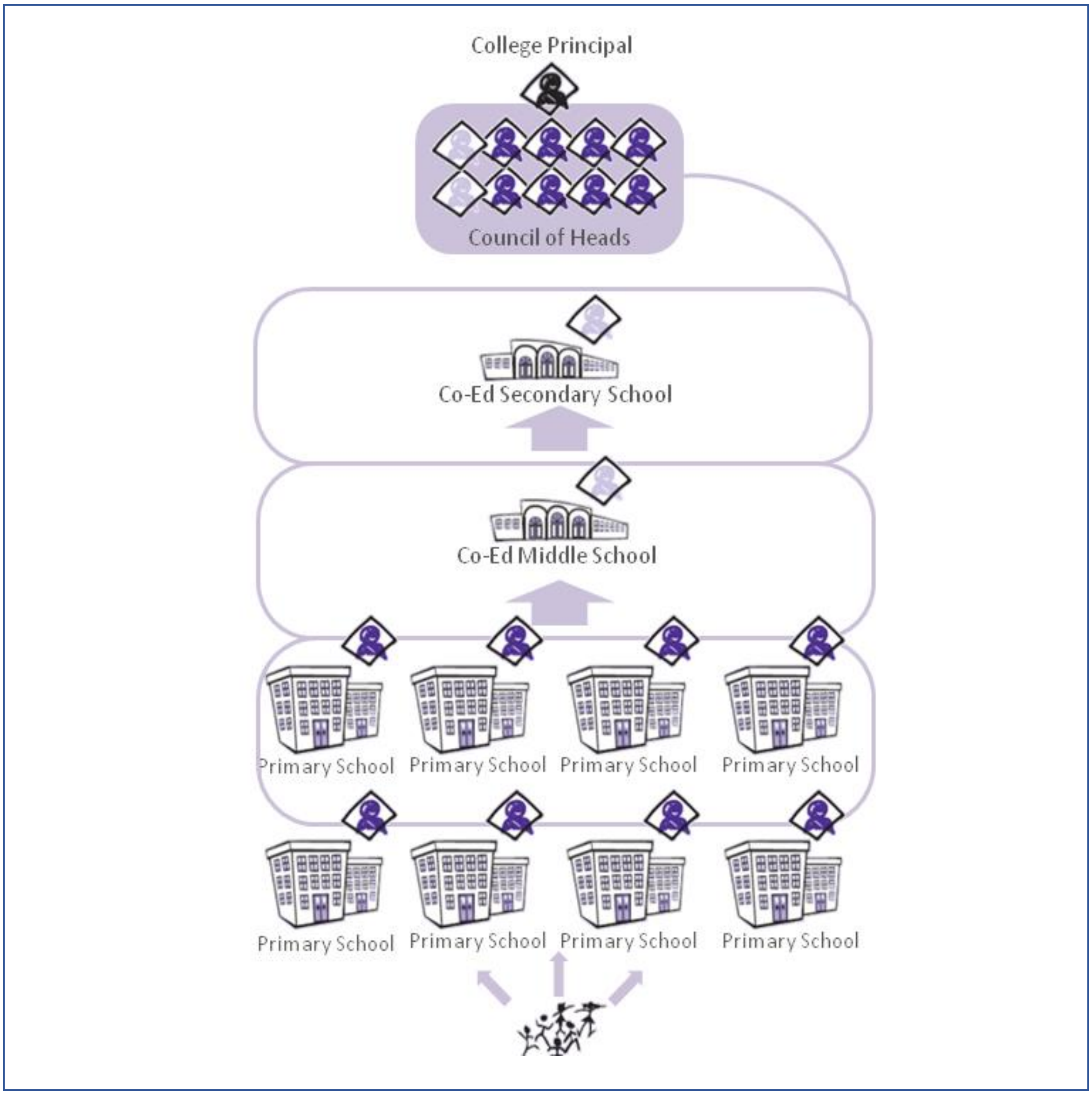
College Principal
Council of Heads
Co-Ed Secondary School
Co-Ed Middle School
Primary School
Primary School
Primary School
Primary School
Primary School
Primary School
Primary School
Primary School

Figure 2.2 Constitution of Typical College in Malta
(adapted from Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005, pp. 47-61)

In this newly organised setup students belonging to a particular *College* are predominantly determined by the geographical region where they live (as portrayed in Figure 2.3 overleaf). This structural reform acknowledged that parents and teachers alike favoured a continuous educational process with the least possible transitions for students (Gonzi, 2004, p. 705). In practice any student is enrolled in a primary school depending on the catchment area (virtually all villages in Malta have their own primary school) and eventually completes compulsory schooling at the secondary school pertaining to the same *College*, hence potentially favouring a smoother transition and greater stability. On the other hand, counter arguments state that grouping children on the basis of their hometown, hence having students from a few adjacent villages, possibly sharing the same culture and binding them to spend thirteen years together within the same educational organisation might prove more harmful than productive, offering a limited diversity (Galdes, 2006, p. 20).

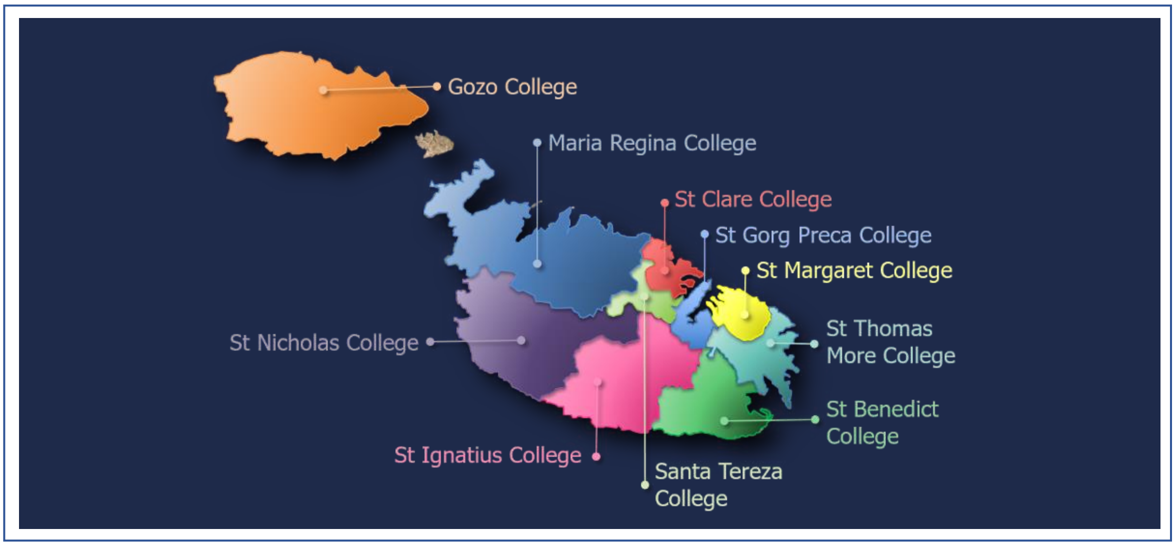
Gozo College
Maria Regina College
St Clare College
St Gorg Preca College
St Margaret College
St Thomas More College
St Nicholas College
St Benedict College
St Ignatius College
Santa Tereza College

Figure 2.3 *Colleges* per Geographical Region in Malta

Nevertheless, when the Opposition was elected in Government, the same arrangement was broadly retained resting on the parents' expressed preference that emerged from a public consultation primarily aimed at parents as a major stakeholder on whether or not to reorganise the original geographical constitution of *Colleges*. The different colours in Figure 2.3 distinguish between the geographical regions covered by each *College* as determined by Maltese Central Education Authorities. Although some *Colleges* span over larger geographical regions, the latter are more rural areas, hence are less densely populated, whereas the inner harbour and urban areas are very densely populated[4].

In the *Colleges* reform there was also a clear direction towards developing more art, music, drama and sports education, whilst promoting schools as community centres (Galea L. , 2006, p. 744). However, whilst welcoming this emphasis, it was unclear whether the appropriate time was being allocated for such enriching activities in schools and although there appeared to be convergence and agreement on the utilisation of schools as community centres, this had not materialised (Abela, 2006a, p. 779). Alongside structural changes, considerable investment was also being made in the psychosocial services especially in terms of human resources and specialised training. Schools were being equipped with Learning Support Zones (LSZs) and Learning Support Centres (LSCs) aimed at providing in-school (LSZs) and out-of-school (LSCs) time-out programmes respectively, where students exhibiting emotional and behavioural difficulties could attend school and be assisted by professionals specialised in the field. As challenging as it could be, the ultimate aim of these institutions always was that of reintegrating referred students into the respective mainstream schools with the help of behavioural, educational support teams, and not their exclusion (Cassar, 2006, p. 785).

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[4] Malta has the highest population density in the European Union (European Commission, 2017), with an estimated 493,559 inhabitants in 2018 over an area of 316 km^2, hence averaging at 1,867 inhabitants per km^2 in 2018 (National Statistics Office, 2019, p. 13).

Within *Colleges*, schools were meant to benefit from an increased autonomy *"operating within a stipulated, agreed framework which also ensures accountability"* (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005, p. 19). Table 2.6 (Intended Benefits of *Colleges* in Malta), summarises the projected benefits of *Colleges* and how these might be experienced, categorised in nine (9) distinct, yet inter-related areas, adapted from *'For All Children to Succeed'* (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005, p. 41).

Intended Benefits of *Colleges* in Malta	
Synergy	• Facilitated autonomy through networking with other schools • Pooling of resources and sharing of experiences • Improved environment, fostering more initiative and innovation • Increased shared sense of purpose and direction
Curricular Development	• Better curricular management to serve contextual needs • Widening of curricular experiences better matching students' aspirations • Enhancement of students' acquisition of key competences
Professional Educational Leadership	• More opportunity for Heads of School to focus on Professional Educational Leadership • Employment of *College* administrative and managerial personnel to assist Heads of School
Cost-Effectiveness	• Better cost-effectiveness through economies of scale, making new initiatives and innovation more feasible
Sharing and Dissemination	• More appreciation and sharing of good practices • Wider dissemination of knowledge amongst schools and the community at large
Evaluation	• Better implementation of improved internal educational self-evaluation, audit mechanisms and external quality assurance processes
Cross-School Teams	• Formation of cross-school teams to manage co-school initiatives and address common concerns across schools, like in the area of psycho-social services
Identification and Use of Teachers' Abilities	• Teachers' talents, interests and motivations are more appreciated • More effective deployment of teachers' abilities to better serve students' needs and reinforce corporate identity
Horizontal and Vertical Linkages	• Facilitation of horizontal and vertical linkages from early childhood on to primary and then through to secondary education • Lessening the challenges of transition from primary to secondary schooling

Table 2.6 Intended Benefits of *Colleges* in Malta
(adapted from Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005, pp. 41-42)

The establishment of *Colleges* was accompanied by an array of other changes[5] within the Maltese Educational System intended to supplement the required capacity to achieve the desired improvement. This collective effort potentially gives more opportunities to promote equity amongst children within the educational context, catering for each and every child according to his/her particular needs, upholding the belief that no child ought to be *"somebody else's responsibility"* (Mizzi, 2005, p. xvi). The main challenge identified by policy makers was actually to *"achieve both equity and excellence"* (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005, p. 62). This ambitious endeavour implies a deep cultural change, whereby stakeholders seek trust and collaboration instead of wariness and competition, potential and opportunities rather than limitations and challenges, enduring quality and not cosmetic ameliorations, and responsible ownership of moral, civic and professional obligations towards each other as opposed to personal entitlement.

Research on *Colleges* in Malta

Various research initiatives have been exploring different facets of *Colleges* in Malta. Arguably one of the most expansive was the one by Borg and Giordmaina (2012) commissioned by the Malta Union of Teachers that sought:

> 1. *"To determine the impact of the College System on:*
>   1.1. *the autonomy of individual schools;*
>   1.2. *the role and responsibilities of Heads and Assistant Heads of schools;*
>   1.3. *the integration of students who formerly were placed in Area Secondary Schools and Junior Lyceums.*
> 2. *To investigate the views, opinions and concerns, of primary and secondary school personnel in all teaching grades on, and about, the College System and how it is operating, and the accompanying reforms.*
> 3. *To present a report outlining the findings of this research project."*
>
> (Borg & Giordmaina, 2012, p. 5)

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[5] Main changes included: Setting up of two central educational authorities with the Ministry responsible for Education – Directorate for Educational Services, being the service provider and Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education, acting as the regulator; The abolishment of a national selective examination at the end of primary schooling and simultaneous introduction of comprehensive compulsory education; Introduction of Specialised Professionals especially within the Psycho-Social Services; The introduction of Middle Schools catering for the first two (2) years of Secondary Schooling as separate from the remaining three (3) years, which remained known as Secondary Schools and Co-Education at Middle and Secondary level.

This research concluded that "*there are many encouraging aspects which augur well for the success of the College Reform"* (Borg & Giordmaina, 2012, p. 245). Indicating that the majority of participants in the research had an extent of agreement to the *College* System in general, evolved forms of assessment and setting of students, as well as with internal and external forms of school evaluations (Borg & Giordmaina, 2012, p. 245), authors affirmed that *"the majority of respondents* [were] *of the opinion that the College System ha*[d]*… facilitated increased collaboration … among schools within a College* [,] *increased professional support to children* [and] *rendered schools more inclusive in the wider sense of the word*" (Borg & Giordmaina, 2012, p. 245). On the other hand the authors also reported that *"several weaknesses"* had been identified, with the *"most salient …* [being related to] *… ownership and implementation"* (Borg & Giordmaina, 2012, p. 245). They explained that the majority of respondents perceived inadequate information and consultation on the reforms, their voices as being left unheard and that "*for the most part they* [were] *being led rather than being actively involved in these reforms*" (Borg & Giordmaina, 2012, p. 245).

In fact, acknowledging a lack or preparedness by practitioners, also confirmed by Fabri (2010) as quoted by Spiteri (2016, p. 20), there was also a strong reference to an unreasonable pace with which the several reforms were being implemented, the fact that the latter was poorly coordinated and that there was an increased administrative work load particularly perceived by members of the schools' Senior Management Teams (Borg & Giordmaina, 2012, pp. 245-247). This has also been broadly confirmed by Spiteri (2016) who draws on various other researches affirming that:

> *"When school management members were asked about the effect of the reform on school autonomy, most respondents indicated that they viewed the decentralisation process positively and preferred the new emphasis on their role as educational leaders. However, they reported a significant increase in administrative workload."*
>
> (Spiteri, 2016, p. 19)

Spiteri (2016) continues to explain that essentially with the exception of the Head of School respondents, all other education stakeholders expressed scepticism about the outcomes of the *College* Reform (Spiteri, 2016, p. 22). Cutajar and Bezzina (2013) proposed that this may also be caused by the fact that *"the work is taking place in a context where teachers, in the main, have little time for what is essential to establish the fundamental principles* *behind networking and networked learning"* (Cutajar & Bezzina, 2013, p. 23). Furthermore, whilst *"Head of school respondents were generally in favour of the principle and implementation of the Reforms, with primary Heads being more favourably inclined than the secondary Heads …, they were also concerned"* of inadequate preparation, lack of focus on teaching and learning, and insufficient autonomy, as well as increased administration deviating attention from leadership (Spiteri, 2016, p. 22).

Cutajar et al. (2013) argue that alongside this reform process, policy-makers in Malta felt the need to strengthen the central authority as *"surrendering decision-making power would entail the central government relinquishing its responsibility and would be a dangerous path to take"* (Cutajar et al., 2013, p. 121). They report interviewed Heads of School, who, generally respected the leadership qualities of their respective *College* Principal, but felt unauthorised *"to act autonomously"* and asserted that *"decentralisation of leadership responsibility is at best artificial"* (Cutajar et al., 2013, p. 121).

> *"There is a remarkable difference between the narratives of the decision-making process and its performance. The Heads 'talk' a lot, but their voices, though loud and audible, are not as powerful as the steady voice of the Principal – 'democracy' is utilized as a masked power relation as the Heads have plenty of space to make their voice heard but little room for negotiation. … The Directors* [at the central authority] *turn the Principal into a "docile body", who, in turn, does this to the Heads – they are all rendered subjects at different hierarchical levels in a unidirectional downward flow of power."*
>
> (Mifsud, 2015, pp. 61-62)

This somewhat contrasts with Fabri's (2009) assertion that *"Maltese educational leaders are aware that collaboration and networking …* [are] *… essential ingredient*[s] *of educational change"* (Fabri, 2009). In fact, Spiteri (2016) quotes Fabri (2010) who *"explained how in the Maltese experience of Colleges, the quality of leadership of College Principals changed along a developmental model that transited from the dominant 'I' of the new and inexperienced Principal, to a middle stage of delegated leadership, to a final stage […] of distributed leadership by the experienced Principal that is characterised by a 'We' culture"* (Spiteri, 2016, pp. 14-15). Fabri (2009) actually states that *"generally, Maltese educational leaders h*[e]*ld a positive experience about the College system and note that* *school autonomy, freedom and flexibility at school level* [had been] *maintained and no new barriers* [we]*re being faced"* (Fabri, 2009).

Divergently, Mifsud (2015) describes Maltese *Colleges* as exhibiting what Huxham and Vangen (2005) call *"'collaborative inertia' as an evident gap exists between the policy makers' view of networking and how it unfolds on a day-to-day basis"* (Mifsud, 2015, p. 101). Pointing at the fact that school networks were statutorily imposed in Malta, Mifsud (2015) labels *Colleges* by borrowing Sullivan and Skelcher's (2002) words as *"'a mechanism for increased surveillance' by both the Principal and the Heads due to higher levels of accountability and monitoring measures"* (Mifsud, 2015, p. 101).

Nonetheless, amongst other conclusions and acknowledging that this reform was in response to the particular Maltese context at the time which Spiteri (2016) defines as *"a micro-state, mindful of its realities and opportunities, striving to transform its educational system from a selective and elitist 19th century paradigm to a 21st century paradigm of equity and attainment*" (Spiteri, 2016, p. 24), the author sustains that *Colleges* ultimately served

> *"as a vehicle for school improvement leading to enhanced teaching and learning – the moral imperative advocated by Fullan (2003) and Hopkins (2007)). It was this that made the surrendering of a measure of school autonomy worthwhile."*
>
> (Spiteri, 2016, p. 61)

The Role of Stakeholders in the *College*'s Debate

Refraining myself from rushing through the text, I keep returning to the notion of 'stakeholder involvement'. Contrasting emotions of fulfilment versus guilt, empowerment versus constraint, and agency versus instrumentalisation, experienced at different extents when sitting in a nationally designated leadership seat, make me rhetorically question again: "are all stakeholders equally involved in determining the nature of the education being provided, hence its quality, particularly at a system-wide level?" I remember my timid silence whilst witnessing the influence of blood-thirsty Capitalism, transposed in a global race to beef up our respective country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), overtly and subliminally impacting our thoughts and actions, mine included. The repentance comes from a realisation of an extent of complicity with such an all-engulfing machine of greed, especially when during national and European educational policy-making fora determining priorities and actions in education, I failed to loudly and persistently voice the need for education not to remain servile to a superficial and ephemeral culture of material wealth, which does not allow for an equitable stakeholder voice. On the other hand, I contrastingly also recall myself nervously, yet self-assuredly, standing on the podium delivering one of my most cherished presentations to date addressing the Directors General for Schools of European Member States during Malta's Presidency of the Council of the European Union on the 10th of April 2017, which I was responsible for as the lead organiser. Relying on five (5) years of acutely lived experiences and reflection (amidst by then, the almost twenty years as a practising professional in education), I had developed just about enough confidence to finally give a wide-reaching platform to my values, to voice frustrations and contradictions through challenging reflections, asking and/or asserting:

- *"We speak of achieving a meaningful life; how is this being defined? Is there coherence in the overt and covert messages that are being conveyed?*
- *Schools have an extensive impact on individuals' lives, but there seems to be an unstated expectation of completely taking over the formation of children, in stark contrast with the proverb attributed to African cultures: it takes a village to raise a child.*

- *Some learners afford a parasitic symbiosis with educators, however increasingly more learners need individual recognition and affective engagement.*
- *Tools affect the quality of their product, but it is the mastery of who adopts them that may help achieve the desired excellence; investments in tools, ought to be matched if not exceeded by our investment (not just financial) in educators.*
- *Education is a facilitative journey which requires giving of self; are we, fostering the required inner peace for this to occur, especially amongst educators?*
- *We recognise that learners need to be equipped with '21st Century Skills' for we're cognisant of the need for them to reinvent themselves through life and thrive in a fast changing world, but meanwhile we experience pressures to increase content in formal education."*

(Mifsud, 2017)

A sense of warmth, thrill and accomplishment still take over as I relive the sight of the participants' affirming body language throughout the presentation, the sustaining sound of their clapping hands as I ended my address, and the encouraging feeling of cohesion from participants' compliments for boldly pronouncing what seemed to could have been their own and so many others' voice across Europe. Yet, these spaces, are still a far call from claiming an equitable, wide stakeholder involvement, and soon disperse amidst the forces of the driven agenda.

"There is growing recognition of the importance of stakeholder participation" (Orr, 2010, p. 558). In recognition of this, Maltese central educational authorities on behalf of the Government, claimed that all stakeholders have the potential to make the proposed structural reform to succeed in raising the country's standards of education or to *"make it an abject failure"* (Sciberras, 2005). As in any high-stakes debate, controversies accompanied the implementation of this reform. From its onset, the Labour Opposition at the time had been claiming that there was very poor consultation and little time allowed by the Government from the publication of the draft amendments until the actual discussion in parliament, for it to gain sufficient knowledge on the subject and awareness from stakeholders in the field, who would have been directly affected by the proposed

changes (Abela, 2006, p. 753). The Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) had stated that prior to taking a position on the proposed reform it wanted to perform an evaluation, particularly with regards to *Colleges*, so as to assess progress and achievements made (Abela, 2006, p. 755). This was performed by Borg and Giordmaina in 2012 on commission by the MUT. Legitimacy of such pretentions by stakeholders is also the subject of study in stakeholder theories.

Who are the Stakeholders in Education?

> *"Stakeholders are the social actors who play a role in the survival and success of the school system and who are affected by a school system' activities – that is they have a stake in its operations."*
>
> (Sims & Sims, 2004, p. 68)

In this context, all citizens may to varying degrees be deemed as having a stake in education as they should all feel *"responsible for the educational experience of each and every child* as opposed to the idea that formal education is *solely the business of the school"* (Wood, 2005) and hence could rightfully claim their expectations. Evidently, comprehensive participation of stakeholders offers opportunities as well as challenges (Shannon, 2010: 558) but the latter should not be exploited as a justification to refrain from exploring the potential benefits, as such arguments persevere the *"status quo, of maintaining power in whatever hands currently hold it"* (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 52).

A clear distinction between internal and external stakeholders, with the former representing those who are formally part of the organisation as against the latter being other groups or individuals who affect or are affected by the organisation but do not form part of it, is often made. However, in school systems, this distinction *"is difficult to maintain rigorously because many internal stakeholders have multiple stakeholder identities"*; for example school employees may well be parents, part of the local community and members of a teachers union (Sims & Sims, 2004, p. 70). By definition, stakeholders *"have something at stake"*, hence may be viewed as groups at risk (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 51). Although the size and nature of the stake varies from one group or individual to another,

> *"the existence of a stake, whatever its form or size, is sufficient warrant in an open society for a stakeholder group to expect, and to receive the opportunity to provide input... and exercise some control on behalf of its own interests."*
>
> (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 51)

Stakeholders need to be identified and within the given constraints involved, promoting in particular the inclusion of less powerful groups or individuals (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1994, p. 25). Since stakes lead to contentions, the publication of the policy document *For All Children to Succeed* which was determining for the reform that followed, was criticised for not having *"generated more momentum for consultation"*, and it was hoped that with time, it would have regained *"resonance and dialogue with the education stakeholders, especially because of the high number of students it* [would] *affect"* (Psaila, 2006). The alleged lack of consultation was interpreted as disconnectedness; a Minister which is disconnected from teachers, who in turn seem to be purposely situated to be disconnected from their students and an educational system that is disconnected from the rest of the country, its industries and economy, resulting in the Maltese Educational system being disconnected from the world of work (Sant, 2006, p. 56). Throughout the implementation of the same reform, the issue of consultation was once again contested on the grounds that the series of meetings organised as part of the consultation process *"with the public and with the educational community"* were claimed to have been reduced to *"simply information meetings, relaying what* had *already been decided by a few"* (Calleja, 2007).

In maintaining the same definition of stakeholders as proposed earlier, some of the most critical stakeholder groups in education *"include teachers and teachers' organisations; school administrators* [at the various levels] *and the groups that represent them; the school boards* [or councils depending on the context]*; parents; civic, business, and political leaders...; and taxpayers generally"* (Sims & Sims, 2004, p. 34). The latter are further subdivided into distinct groups, the most influential being voiced through representative associations. For instance, the *Malta Employers Association* (MEA), whilst having welcomed the educational reform as a step in the right direction, queried and criticised a number of factors. Amongst these were a lack of projected costings and measurable intended outcomes necessary for evaluation purposes, as well as the choice of forming *Colleges* by geographical region, inhibiting a heterogeneous community, which had been identified by the MEA as one of Maltese Independent Schools' strong points when compared to State Schools (Malta Employer's Association, Undated).

Another influential stakeholder is the academics group which is formally organised in respective university faculties. In Malta, the *"need of collaboration between the Faculty of Education, the Ministry of Education and the Education Division"* was acknowledged through claimed consultations with members of the Faculty "*all through the formation of ... For All Children to Succeed"* (Sciberras, 2005). With respect to the multifaceted reform inspired by the latter, the same Faculty stated that *"emphasis should be given more prominently to learning and its relationship with/to assessment,* [adding that in order] *to bridge the achievement gap between people of different social class, race, ethnicity, birth date, gender and other forms of social difference*, educational stakeholders should seek to explore possible *structures, environments and practices* that ought to be developed *to ensure better learning outcomes for all"* (Sollars, 2009). Moreover, it was pointed out that the proposed arrangement of students in 'settings' at *College* secondary schools as a way of grouping should *"not become an alternative to streaming"*, supported by claims that research showed that:

> - *"Children in streamed settings have difficulties with regard to self-esteem and stress;*
> - *Academic results obtained do not improve, especially for those in the lower sets;*
> - *This system does not create an inclusive community of learners."*
>
> (Sollars, 2009)

However, it should be recognised that students are the ones who stand to gain or lose the most in schools (Storm et al., 2011, p. 11) and hence understanding their expectations from schools should be an integral part of improvement initiatives (Storm et al., 2011, p. 12). The Maltese Labour Party, when still in Opposition, expressed a similar belief stating that it would be futile to plan various attractive initiatives unless at the centre of every effort there are the students and their needs, with the foremost aim of invested energy being to improve there where education actually takes place – the classroom (Abela, 2006, p. 752). In agreement with this principle, Ministerial representatives asserted that...

> *"When the day is done the government wants to make sure that parents derive full satisfaction from the funds and the opportunities the government is making available to the education authorities and that students have been given every best possible chance to succeed."*
> (Sciberras, 2005)

Counter arguments by the Maltese Labour Opposition of the time, claim that 'opportunities' is a rhetoric and abstract word, insisting that unlike Maltese discourse, Finland, an established leader in the educational field, didn't simply want equality of opportunities but had far more ambitious aspirations, namely equality of outcomes (Bartolo, 2006, p. 787). Whilst recognising the centrality of the curriculum as meant to be guiding practitioners in the field and hence having a direct influence on what happens in the classroom, it was argued that the structural reform being enacted failed in establishing benchmarks against which to assess whether and what progress has been made (Abela, 2006a, p. 777). Bartolo (2006a, p. 203) asserted that until the Maltese Educational System remained examination-driven, and unless the extensive syllabi are scaled down, allowing more emphasis on an experiential approach to a diverse curriculum, the message being conveyed is that examinations are what matters, and irrespective of the formula adopted, the situation will remain unchanged.

It has been proven that when parents are valued as collaborators and they are ready to share accountability with educators, students stand better chances to achieve (Shumow, 2009, p. 2). Through this reform in the Maltese Educational System it was being acknowledged that *"education begins primarily in the home and parents are major stakeholders and contributors to the educational experience of the child"* (Wood, 2005). Central educational authorities wanted parents to be more socially involved in their children's education and to play a more significant role in their educational development (Sciberras, 2005). As such parents were being encouraged to demand a rise in standards and schools similarly expected to aspire for a rise in the quality of parental involvement (Wood, 2005). On the other hand, notwithstanding such beliefs and efforts, concern over student absenteeism rates, possibly exposed a lack of understanding of the need for education on behalf of particular students and their parents (Abela, 2004, p. 959), hence failure in widening the relevance of education to all students. In fact, it was being claimed that whilst the Maltese educational system was giving positive results for highly abled students, it was failing lesser abled ones (Caruana, 2006, p. 16).

Whilst *"standards set by the State shape the curriculum* and *instructional time"* (Storm et al., 2011, p. 6), the recognition of teachers as *"key stakeholders"* is instrumental in the success of implemented changes and resonates with the relationships school systems establish with other stakeholders (Sims & Sims, 2004, p. 33). Bartolo (2009) challenged that teachers were being exhorted to deliver a better education system but they were not being treated as equal partners in the process: *"Teachers are expressing discontent for not being treated as partners in the change process through effective consultative processes and all decisions are being taken by top officials some of whom have little experience in class"* (Bartolo, 2009). Educational leaders at school level, an unquestioned stakeholder have seen their workload increase constantly, becoming over-burdened with administrative rather than curricular issues (Galdes, 2006, p. 20). On these lines, the Maltese Shadow Minister of Education at the time the reform was launched, asserted in parliament that notwithstanding politicians' discourse, what matters is what actually happens in schools, adding that formal education ultimately translates to an adult's ability to stimulate and educate a group of youngsters to explore and learn new things. Hence the system should work towards supporting teachers by providing the facilities and resources required to achieve that aim and structures within the ministry, directorates and schools should be geared towards the core of the educational process, thus the classroom (Bartolo, 2006, p. 790).

> *"Expectations should also be used to provide feedback to communities regarding the quality of schools. All stakeholders, including secondary students, can be involved in identifying and applying appropriate expectations for schools."*
>
> (Storm et al., 2011, p. 6)

The inevitable increment in networking amidst stakeholders within and beyond school systems through various platforms, should be used as a vessel to engage *"groups that are often not formally organised but are potentially important and can be mobilised, such as parents and alumni(ae)"* (Sims & Sims, 2004, p. 70).

Stakeholder Influence and Involvement in Educational Policy

> *"The significance of the state in the development of educational policy cannot be overstated. The influence of the state, and state institutions, in shaping the socio-political environment is profound. Voices from within the state are powerful and have the capacity to shape decisively the dominant discourses within which policy is framed and from which strategic direction emerges. One can argue that these discourses reflect the function of the state in securing economic, social and ideological objectives … However, the state is not simply the expression of a monolithic set of social or economic interests, formulating policy solely in the interests of a narrow elite. Consent is far more important than coercion (Gramsci, 1971) and it is important to see state policy, and the discourses it develops, as sites of contestation in which different interest groups seek to assert their value positions."*
>
> (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 37)

Nonetheless, particularly when introducing new stakeholders into the scene, responsibilities and roles need to be clearly defined and distinguished, as its absence, allegedly mirrored in the early implementation stages of the Maltese *Colleges'* structural reform, could lead to individuals becoming oblivious of their respective authority, competences and responsibilities, hence resulting in conflicting relationships (Refalo, 2006, p. 58). Four common types of influence in decision-making processes include: *"State domination"* – in which the state maintains rigid control through bureaucracy and legislation; *"Institutional autonomy"* – where organisations controlled by the government may decide independently; *"The elite theory"* – when power is retained and monopolised by a smaller group; and *"Interest representation"* – with decisions being a reflection of the preferences expressed by individuals and or groups (Powell, 2008, p. 388). In an attempt to move away from *"State domination",* prior to the publication of the *Colleges* reform, the Government of Malta, through its Ministry responsible for Education, had appointed a number of academics and individuals of widely-acknowledged reputation from various walks of life, to set up various working groups entrusted with publishing evaluative reports on the field. However it was claimed that there was little involvement of front line practitioners in these working groups and that the discussion was dominated by the Minister himself leaving very little, if any space left for proper consultation (Galdes, 2006, p. 19).

The post-war consensus in educational policy and practice experienced in Britain, over the years "*began to come apart*" (Abbott et al., 2013, p. 66) and educational policies became the "*focus of considerable controversy and public contestation … Educational policy-making has become highly politicised (Olssen et al., pp. 2-3)"* (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 1). In today's globalised world, the same occurs in Malta; possibly sharing further commonalities because it was part of the British colony until 1964 and still shares aspects of its heritage. Whilst education policy is high on the agenda of governments particularly due to its relationship with the economy, *"there is often an underdeveloped understanding of how education policy is formed, what drives it and how it impacts on schools and colleges"* (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. i).

Bell and Stevenson (2006, p. 22) partially present policy *"as the analysis of change and the way in which change is managed"*, affirming that *"change may be inevitable – but there is no inevitability about how change is experienced."*

> *"Those with power are often able to shape the way the 'real world' is perceived – to define the problem, to set the limits within which solutions might be acceptable and even to select and impose specific solutions. … Policy, as one of the ways in which people experience change, will inevitably be contested, and its outcomes shaped by the consequences of macro and micropolitical processes in which competing groups seek to shape and influence policy"*
>
> (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 22)

At one extreme the Labour Opposition at the time claimed that *FACTS* was only a change of vessels without giving importance to content, accusing the Government that it was relying on the unsubstantiated assumption that changing the container would necessarily solve existing problems (Sant, 2006, p. 55). On the other hand, the then Nationalist Government asserted that the concept of networking implemented through *Colleges*, that ultimately promoted the concept of subsidiarity, ensured more continuity and coordination amongst the various entities within the educational system, inevitably resulting in improved quality and standards in this sector (Azzopardi, 2006, p. 9; Galea, 2006, p. 743).

The Labour Party had asserted that several concerns were aired by various stakeholders ranging from educators to parents during consultative meetings organised by the Maltese

Nationalist Government at the time in an attempt to capture an holistic perspective of interested parties (Malta Labour Party, 2009). On the other hand, the Nationalist Government reassured that the proposed amendments to the Education Act and the emerging structural reforms were not set in stone and should be viewed as a tool for supporting the thousands with a direct involvement in the educational field to reach the ambitious target, whereby children may all succeed (Galea, 2006a, p. 69).

The arguments on the *Colleges* structural reform by the major, opposing Political Parties in the Maltese context, not only expose how diverging stakeholder's interests and perspectives vary, but confirm that notwithstanding contextual variations, the State always plays a pivotal role in education (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 7).

> *"'State policy', whether national or local (or increasingly supranational), therefore has a considerable impact on shaping what happens on a daily basis in schools and colleges, and the lived experiences of those who study and work in those establishments."*
>
> (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 8)

"Striving for maximum stakeholder involvement is critical to change success" (Sims & Sims, 2004, p. 119). This involves *"expanding who is expected (and actually gets) to participate in every phase of the change process"* (Sims & Sims, 2004, p. 116). When considering stakeholders, two variables ought to be the focus:

> - *"Interests*
>   - *What does each set of stakeholders want?*
>   - *How clearly defined are those interests?*
>   - *What are the priorities assigned to those interests, and can priorities be altered?*
> - *Power and influence*
>   - *What is the basis of power or influence of each set of stakeholders?"*
>
> (Sims & Sims, 2004, p. 70)

Bell and Stevenson (2006) draw on various other authors (Taylor et al., 1997; Bowe et al., 1992; Kogan, 1975; Bachrach & Baratz, 2002, amongst others) to discuss policy development as both a product and an ongoing, organic process, shaping and reshaping policy at macro and micro-levels considering the contextual values, the role of the individual, the collective and power relationships. The authors (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 19) quote Bachrach & Baratz (2002) who discuss the multi-layered intricacy of power in decision-making:

> *"Of course power is exercised when A participates in the making of decisions that affect B. But power is also exercised when A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A. To the extent that A succeeds in doing this, B is prevented, for all practical purposes, from bringing to the fore any issues that might in their resolution be seriously detrimental to A's preferences."*
>
> (Bachrach & Baratz, 2002, pp. 30-31)

Bell & Stevenson (2006, p. 20) explain that Lukes (1974) conceives power in a more complex and sophisticated manner, with explicit and veiled layers, where individuals exercise power through collectives, indeed shaping values lying at the basis of decision-making, further distinguishing between authority and influence (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, pp. 20-21). They relate this to *"the importance of the socio-political environment within which notions of 'common sense' (Gramsci, 1971) are formed and in which policy is subsequently developed"* (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 20).

> *"… policy development is fuzzy, messy and complex. It is the product of compromise, negotiation, dispute and struggle as those with competing, sometimes conflicting, values seek to secure specific objectives …"*
>
> (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 19)

Summarising Literature Covered

Quality education is problematic to define and approach but challenged by claims for greater accountability and needs to raise standards, it is at the heart of educational policy arousing great interest at a local, national and global level. The linear clarity of statistics, further exacerbated by international assessments that feed into influential league tables, are in contrast with the messier, more complex context where education occurs. Diverse practice reveals variations of traditional schooling centred on control, as well as alternative models which give greater value to personal development focussing on purpose and meaning rather than societal needs and results. Studies on effective schools propose an array of key characteristics which rely on the organisation's capital. Nevertheless, who, what, how, where and when, goes into and determines quality education, remain critical indicators of whose interests are being served.

Society is organised around varied forms of networks within which power is exercised. The expedited development of information technology has further exacerbated this social structure. In the contemporary, negotiated networked society, power does not come from a single entity and as much as other sources coexist, these may remain unveiled even to participants themselves. Claimed benefits have driven networks into education also under guises of school networks. Dedication to sustained mutuality in school networks led to improvement and gains, but this does not necessarily occur naturally or in all contexts. Moreover, creeping insularity of sub-groups from the rest create other concerns about power dynamics within and beyond the school network.

Lured by a potentially enhanced educational provision and responsive to recommended decentralisation, the Government of Malta reorganised its State schooling system by mandating geographically delineated school networks called *Colleges*, with fixed feeder primary schools and receiving secondary schools under the formal designated leadership of a *College* Principal. Research about *Colleges* generally indicated increased collaboration and inclusivity in schools, but also reported inadequate preparedness for and involvement in reforms. Comprehensive stakeholders' participation in influencing educational policy, based on legitimate stakes, offers both opportunities and challenges. However, failed attempts at such widespread involvement, only favours whoever mostly controls power.

Chapter 3

Methodology

A Morphed Methodology

Thody (2006) explains that a research methodology ought to *"always give the impression that the research design followed a calm, linear and orderly development from* [the] *initial idea, its determining philosophy, choice of methods, design of research instruments, data collection, data analysis, through to its final resting place in a document"* (Thody, 2006, p. 99). She thankfully continues to quote Hammersley who discloses that *"the conventions of academic writing … tend to obscure the muddled and makeshift nature of what really happens"* (Hammersley, 1993, p. 146).

The single element that could be said to have mostly characterised this research spanning over a decade, has been time and its far-reaching effect. Life unfolds, blooms, decomposes and gives life again over time. If life itself is so heavily impacted by time, how could this research not be shaped by time over more than ten years of one's life journey. Remaining faithful to the tidiness … *"dictated by the conventions of academic writing"* (Thody, 2006, p. 99), would have meant giving a deceitful impression that all the choices made throughout this research had been planned at inception stage. As I continued to read and write, the methodology adopted, particularly in the manner I analysed and presented this research, in contrast to the philosophical underpinnings which are more static, continued to morph. Although I do fear that this openness in laying the struggles experienced and resulting evolution of practice, may not be unreservedly met with the desired receptiveness, I choose to remain authentic, disclosing as truthfully and comprehensively as possible the reasoning, planning, adaptations, and decisions made in the face of life circumstances, and perhaps an ongoing search and discovery of purpose and meaning.

The thought-out research plan had to deal with and was irreversibly impacted by intense professional and life experiences. This affected me to the extent, that I sincerely feel to have emerged as a different man, fraught with more uncertainties, yet, perhaps contradictorily, so much more being the person who I always was, firmly anchored on concrete elucidated core values. This kaleidoscopic, almost psychedelic, turning of events that characterised the years during which this study unfolded, especially conditioning its culmination, analysis and presentation, are worth indulging in to help interpret the whole more authentically.

Struggling with Intricacies

As the sunlight fades from our sitting room on an anonymous autumn late afternoon in 2018, I recline on our sofa trying to re-engage with my studies. Whilst I stretch slowly for the laptop, the sight of my younger son finishing off his homework on the dining table and my wife returning from an errand, dignifyingly carrying the anguish of having recently lost her father, the sound of my older son studying upstairs and the smell of home, bring back a revitalising warmth. The subdued pain from a surgery I performed five days back, together with the vivid experience of my father-in-law passing away the week before, piercingly remind me of my frailty. Why do I need to continue wasting precious time on so called doctoral research, when I could savour more what is already within reach and to me matters most?

This contrasts with my initial enthusiasm, but ten years and various experiences in between have recently raised fundamental questions regarding my studies – what may be the gains as opposed to what appear to be the losses? As Michael Humphreys (2005, p. 4) affirmed, I purposefully am infusing the text with *“my feelings, my personal involvement, and my emotions”* to help create an intimacy with you as the reader and help contextualise my voice, which inevitably has a bias that I will strive not to be concealed. As the same author quotes Vickers (2002), this style of *“authentic writing …* [in a world that may be a] *treacherous space . . .* [creates] *anxiety as I consider who might read this—colleagues, strangers, even enemies”* (Humphreys, 2005, p. 6). Nevertheless, it also feels liberating and is loyal to the cause of exposing this research, which can never be neutral, in as transparent a way possible.

Meanwhile, I recompose myself to a more upright position and as I start typing the first words, my mind rushes to a few weeks back. It’s half past three on a hot summer afternoon, I’m drained after a tense meeting at work and the scorching Mediterranean sun almost makes it unbearable to firmly hold the car’s steering and safely drive to destination. The accumulated fatigue from my past role and the energies invested in the new work environment over the past months since I took up the offer to serve in the role of Director within the Secretariat for Catholic Education (the central office for

Church Schools in the Archdiocese of the Maltese Islands), obscure my thoughts. Why does it have to be always a struggle? I only wish to render service, help nurture meaning and purpose, whilst earning an honest living … why does it need to be so complex? A trail of spiralling, rhetoric questions invade me, further digging into a reprieved subconscious. In no time I'm parking at the side of the Mellieħa Parish Church, a beautiful northern coastal village, and in the rear-view mirror I spot Ronald. Revered by myself and others, especially within the Euro-Mediterranean Region, as a leading academic figure troubled with the concepts of equity and social justice in education, I had come across Professor Ronald Sultana first when I was a student (at both undergraduate and post graduate levels), and more recently, whilst I had been serving in designated leadership roles at national level. I refocus on the purpose of my informal meeting with him – the conflicting need to re-engage with my studies. *"As with any doctoral work, I experienced false starts, discarded material, rejected themes, and feelings of despair and disappointment as well as insight, creative breakthrough, new understanding, inspirational moments …"* (Humphreys, 2005, p. 7).

We do not know each other excessively well, yet the chemistry works, and our expressed core values resonate. Whilst awed by the magnificent views of the rugged landscape and expansive sea this village thankfully still offers, as opposed to concrete jungles budding all over my country in a frenzy of bourgeoisie delusions and capitalists' megalomania, I disclose my disenchantment with the research. "It has been dragging for too long", I admit, "over the past decade my life has gone through a whirlwind primarily due to twists in my career, our society has significantly morphed, and the doctoral research has lost its significance to me!". Ronald asks, "Remind me what was your research about … is it still relevant?". I promptly reply, "it focusses on exploring the relationship between the claimed quality education and collegial school networks introduced more than a decade ago in Malta. It's relevance …" I sigh.

The year when I started my research was 2009 and since then various factors, including a change from a Nationalist government after almost a quarter of a century, to the current Labour government in 2013, have contributed in reshaping Malta in general and the local educational context in particular, hence affecting the meant-to-be *Collegial*

School Networks under investigation. I am no political researcher or historian, but Malta's strong political polarisation, which dates even before the Independence acquired from the United Kingdom in 1964, is, in my view a dilapidating plague, known to all compatriots, but so far has, perhaps comfortably, continued to prevail.

Ronald rightly reminds, "and there have already been a couple of doctoral researches on the local school networks", but quickly continues, "yet your experience is unique". He was referring to the uncommon opportunity I had as an insider at the highest echelons of Malta's educational authorities, whilst serving as Director and later as Director General for Quality and Standards in Education within the Ministry for Education and Employment in Malta. December 2012 till January 2018 has been a psychedelic time of unsettlement, unease, turmoil, internal conflict, oscillating between snippets of profound fulfilment and frustration – essentially it was a period of great growth, but which came at an expense. Nonetheless, the thought was intriguing; intertwining the research with my experiences, allowing my values to be made eloquently visible, was also appealing for its potentially therapeutic properties. A seed had been sown.

A few days later, I was at home after work apprehensively setting the laptop for the first Skype supervision after a two-year suspension of studies. The manner by which I chose to live the roles I had been entrusted at national level over the past years, the time and incessant engagement these demanded, had made it impossible for me to keep up with almost anything else in my life. Thankfully my wife had been very supportive throughout and our family was 'only' short-changed by my temporary heavily reduced presence and deserving mindfulness at home. Emeritus Professor Angela Thody, my original supervisor, had retired some time before my suspension, and circumstances hadn't as yet allowed me to establish a profound relationship with Dr Joss Winn, my new supervisor. Yet, in a few minutes I needed to decide with him whether or not, and how, to proceed with my studies.

Ten minutes into the conversation, Joss posed two questions, "is the data still relevant ... and will you manage to finish the work on time?". In replying I presented the case for introducing my voice, my experience, as a means to enhance relevance, and perhaps more importantly at a personal level, an opportunity to exorcise the process and be inspired again by and for my research. “Autoethnography is the academic term for the approach you’re proposing,” Joss explained, “it is an emergent contemporary methodology that not all supervisors would be willing to endorse, but I’m happy to, as, notwithstanding it is more contested than more traditional styles, it is arguably the only way it could work for you.” Within a few hours from the meeting, Joss had forwarded some readings on Autoethnography which I started exploring.

This chapter continues to expose the more linear development, initiated at the discovery of an amalgam between interpretivist and critical paradigmatic positioning, the case study research design, and collection of the planned qualitative data. However, it later embraces and gives centre-stage to the delayed, and perhaps messier, but from my perspective, gratifyingly enriching, crossing of paths with an enhanced reflexive mode of pursuing and concluding my research.

My Positioning

Seated in a quiet corner of the contemporary designed hotel's lobby, close to the University of Lincoln campus in 2011, sipping a cup of tea, I prudently debated with Emeritus Professor Angela Thody, my doctorate supervisor at the time, my reluctance to necessarily fit in anyone else's construct. My ardent objection was against the subliminal tendency to simplify complexities by categorising anything, everything and everyone. In her wisdom, Angela enigmatically smiled and proposed further reading. Digging deep into one's soul admittedly reveals a predominant positioning in life, or paradigm, that is shaped by and shapes our path in life. My same rejection of having to identify which paradigm I operate from, was in itself indicative of where I stood, and broadly still stand today. Hence, it similarly underpins my epistemological (view on the nature of knowledge) and ontological (view on the nature of reality) beliefs construing the research.

Morrison (2007) regards paradigms as the *"traditions about how research evidence might be understood, patterned, reasoned and compiled"* (Morrison, 2007, p. 19). Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) borrow Kuhn's (1996) perspective affirming,

> *"Paradigms are incommensurable, they picture the world in incompatible ways, so that the data themselves are interpreted differently by those working within different paradigms. This implies that judgements of the validity of scientific claims is always relative to the paradigm within which they operate are judged; they are never simply a reflection of some independent domain of reality."*
>
> (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 11)

A critical perspective on educational research, embraces the notion that researchers carry certain philosophical assumptions about the world into their research even if such assumptions are not acknowledged or made explicit (Grogan & Simmons, 2007, p. 37). The original desire and intent in 2009 to explore the relationship between the collegial school network structural reform that was being implemented in Malta and its claimed channelling towards quality education, particularly as perceived by the various stakeholders, is already indicative of my apparently contradictory perspective, individually-centred yet societally-focused, reflecting emancipatory yet conservative values. In exploring the various research traditions so as to identify the school of thought with which this study is mostly attuned, I waded through constructs which are in continuous evolvement and which, in my view, have over time developed blurred boundaries.

Grogan and Simmons (2007) trace a continuum placing the *"positivist"* and the *"critical"* paradigms at opposing poles. With the intent of describing and understanding social phenomena and transforming them, researches performed in the *"critical … paradigms … define the nature of the world subjectively and use methodologies that define knowledge from a subjectivist point of view"* (Grogan & Simmons, 2007, p. 37). Amongst these latter paradigms is *"interpretivism"* which recognises *"the inter-subjectivity of educational research ... as 'obviously' the most appropriate way of conducting research on, with or for human beings"* (Morrison, 2007, p. 24). Resonating with my earlier dismissal of positional classification, researchers working in this paradigm do not always recognise their stance, while others *"may not perceive, or indeed value a specific distinctiveness in paradigmatic approaches to research activities"* (Morrison, 2007, p. 24).

Educational research viewed from the *"interpretivist"* perspective *"needs to be grounded in people's experience* as *reality is not 'out there' as an amalgam of external phenomena waiting to be uncovered as 'facts', but a construct in which people understand reality in different ways"* (Morrison, 2007, p. 24). In recognition of the fact that ontological foundations may range from treating reality as an objective absolute to one that is *"constructed by the perceiver",* this study upholds the *"critical stance* [which] *embraces the latter...*[and]... *also takes the epistemological position that there is no knowledge that is value neutral in contrast to the belief that there is an objective truth"* (Grogan & Simmons, 2007, p. 38). On the other hand, shifting from the *"interpretivist"* paradigm to a more *"transformative"* realm, this research aims at constructing knowledge "*'with' instead of 'for'"* (Grogan & Simmons, 2007, p. 38) participants based on their perceptions of quality education and its manifestation, or lack thereof, in *Collegial School Networks*. However, both paradigms share a number of similarities within the critical tradition, hence this study may be contemplated as a ramification of *"interpretivism"* into the *"transformative"* domain.

A Qualitative Case Study

In deciding on the collection and analysis of data I intrinsically leaned towards more qualitative rather than quantitative modes, valuing the richness in the individual's voice and reflecting the *"over-arching view that all human life is experienced and constructed from a subjective perspective"* (Morrison, 2007, p. 27). Qualitative research is particularly interested in: seeking strategies that treat participants' perspectives as central, emphasising their importance *"regardless of whether the subjects are children or adults"*; capturing and conveying data that is characterised by *"'rich' and 'deep' description*[s]*"*; setting the research in its context, giving an *"holistic picture"* which allows a better interpretation of the data; acquiring insight on *"process(es)"*, often requiring longitudinal research; liberating the investigation from the imposition of *"prior structures...*[and] *...theoretical frameworks... so as not to foreclose issues which would be invisible at the start of the research..."*; and accentuating *"words rather than numbers...* [hence, retaining] *...textual analysis...* [as a] *...key issue..."* (Morrison, 2007, p. 27).

At the onset of this research, as an Assistant Head of School at the time, I was enjoying the initial years in my first designated leadership role within the formal educational system. Blooming with enthusiasm, which thankfully remains but in a more rational, perhaps seasoned demeanour, and dazzled by the ambition of greater self-fulfilment and possible career prospects, the proposal of embarking on a doctorate, was too seducing to reject. Freshly graduated from a Master of Education in Educational Leadership, reflecting on the critical, interpretive paradigm, was also enlightening on earlier choices in life, particularly in adopting qualitative methodologies also in my previous research. Little could have I known, and foretold, the extent of complexities that I would have been encountering through the evolution of my life journey. The unfolding of pertinent events, the challenges and opportunities these created, and their impact on the research are laid out explicitly as my voice to help you interpret the decision-making processes and reach your own conclusions. After all, as Skultans (2001) quoted by Thody (2006) affirms, *"the cacophony* [in qualitative research] *can include the voices of respondents, readers and the researcher and even the silences between voices"* (Thody, 2006, p. 129).

The qualitative field research of this study revolves around a case study of one Maltese *Collegial School Network* or as it is referred to in its context, a *College*. As in Bassey's (2007, p. 143) portrayal of educational case studies, this research *"is an empirical enquiry"* conducted in a particular context, focussing on a specific aspect (*"activity, or programme, or institution, or system"*). It aims at informing *"practitioners or policy-makers or … theoreticians"*, relying on *"sufficient data"* to: *"… explore significant features of the case*[;] *… create plausible interpretations of what is found*[;] *… test the trustworthiness of these interpretations*[;] *… construct a worthwhile argument or story*[;] *… relate the argument or story to any relevant research in the literature*[;] *… convey convincingly to an audience this argument or story to provide an audit trail by which other researchers may validate or challenge the findings, or construct alternative arguments"* (Bassey, 2007, p. 143).

Whilst being conscious of the limitations for generalisability this approach may have, I yearn for the unique reality found in concrete microcosms, which dialogue with, influence, and are in turn influenced by, the wider macrocosms. Reference is later made to, how autoethnography, or perhaps reflexive autobiographic elements I borrowed from more contemporary ethnography, have added another significant layer of meaning to this research. Delamont (2014) cites Fine (2003), stating that *"ethnographic work at the micro-level is fundamental even when the theoretical issues to be illuminated are macro-level"*, and proposes Brown-Saracino et al.'s (2008, p. 549) *"seven pillars of 'peopled ethnography' (PE) … to move beyond small groups"* (Delamont, 2014, p. 5):

> 1. *"PE is theoretical: it is not just a description …, but can answer 'why?' and 'how?' questions and allow the identification of other settings where the theory might apply.*
> 2. *PE builds on other ethnographic studies to prevent 'blind' entry …*
> 3. *PE studies the interaction of small groups in settings where there is meaningful, ongoing, social life.*
> 4. *PE meets calls for generalisations by working on multiple … sites.*
> 5. *PE relies on extensive, in-depth fieldwork, only concluded when theoretical saturation is reached.*
> 6. *PE reports on interaction through thick description.*
> 7. *PE relies on 'analytic objectivity' (Brown-Saracino et al., 2008, p. 549): a distance sustained between the scholar and the members of the group under investigation."*
>
> (Delamont, 2014, p. 5)

This research predominantly remains a case study, but blends in my senses, my insider experiences, overtly outlaying my biases, whilst drawing on stakeholders' varying perspectives of quality education and its relationship with *Collegial School Networks*. The study's approach may be classified as having aspects of what Gunter (2005, p. 166) describes as *"illuminative"*, interpreting meaning on how and why practice occurs, and *"critical"*, delving into the power relationships affecting such practice. Table 3.1 outlays the study's focus expressing the guiding research questions.

Research Questions
1. How can collegial school networks serve as a vehicle to quality education?
2. How can contextually relevant and stakeholder considerate definitions of quality education be construed?
3. How is the *College* perceived as impacting stakeholders' notions of quality education?

Table 3.1 Research Questions

Table IV in Appendix IV further expands these research questions enabling reinterpretation into questions adopted in interviews and focus groups as discussed later in this chapter.

Selecting Participants & the *College*

In order to substantiate prospective claims emerging from researching these questions, I was faced with a number of critical decisions, one of which is 'sampling' (Fogelman & Comber, 2007: 130). In this study, my intent was to explore the perspectives of 'stakeholders'. As recommended by Busher and James (2007) the participants' number, identity and/or stakeholder representation defined in the research design were intended to *"strengthen the trustworthiness of the study"*, but were inevitably also determined by practicable elements such as the extent of resources that could be invested (including time) and the individuals who accepted to contribute (Busher & James, 2007, pp. 115-116).

The notion of stakeholder has been adopted by educational researchers, policy makers and practitioners from the business sector, where it is defined as *"individuals who have a stake in the success or failure of a business"* (Freeman et al., 2010, p. XV). A wider and perhaps more appropriate definition of stakeholders for the purposes of this study is *"any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives"* (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Notwithstanding the fact that in a globalised, interdependent world, such a definition of the term in an educational context may be extended to virtually encompass the international community, for the purposes of this investigation, a twofold approach was adopted in identifying stakeholders, translating the generic term into a researchable sample:

1. at a macro level, determining who are those central figures, who has direct interest in the field and is responsible for decision-making processes at national level that should be part of the research participants;
2. at a micro level, selecting the *Collegial School Network*, or *College* and the respective individuals and groups that directly affect or are affected by the organisation, to constitute the second portion of the sample;

At a macro level, *"purposive or judgemental sampling,* whereby... *the researcher applies his/her experience to select cases which are – in the researcher's judgement – representative or typical"* (Fogelman & Comber, 2007, p. 135), was adopted. In Malta, as in several other countries, it is the State's responsibility to provide and ensure *"education and instruction"* (House of Representatives, 2006, p. 4). Moreover, the structural reform involving the formation of *Collegial School Networks* claiming quality education for all (Galea, 2005, p. xi), was launched and implemented by the State, through the Ministry responsible for Education and its different operational arms.

At design stage, the Minister of Education, Directors General and Director Quality Assurance from the Directorates of Education were amongst the first to be identified as key stakeholders. Quite clearly, at the time I was oblivious of the fact that my research would have been pursued over a period of time when I would have been serving in two of these roles, necessitating rethinking from my part. By the time I performed the field research in 2014, I had already served as Director Quality Assurance and had been appointed Director General for Quality and Standards in Education, inducing me to inevitably omit myself, and leaving only the Minister, namely Honourable Evarist Bartolo (at the time of the field research) as one of the actual participants. Nevertheless, my experiences and working in close contact with my predecessors added different insights which emerge throughout the study.

Almost invariably, Political Parties play a significant role in actively influencing public opinion, as varied or homogenous as this may be, also in themes related to education. Furthermore, the reform was enshrined in legislation, requiring it to go through a process involving an intensive, documented, parliamentary debate with the Minister and Shadow Ministers at the time taking centre stage. In view of this, I included the Shadow Minister of Education amongst my list of participants at macro-level. Again, Honourable Evarist Bartolo, who at the time of the debate was the Shadow Minister of Education, was to change role and eventually became the Minister of Education, following the change in government in 2013, and hence participated in his new guise of Minister. Nevertheless, the Shadow Minister in place in 2014, Honourable Therese Comodini Cachia (at the time a Member of the European Parliament as part of the European People's Party, on behalf of the Nationalist Party of Malta) was also included, not to miss out on the opportunity to gather the views of this potentially influential stakeholder's representative.

The Malta Union of Teachers (MUT), at the time being the only Trade Union representing educational professionals, and having a constituency of more than 80% membership of the total population of educators employed in the local educational field (Registrar of Trade Unions, 2015, pp. 14,918; National Statistics Office, 2014, p. 9), similarly was and still remains, a highly influential actor in education locally. Hence, the President of the MUT, Mr Kevin Bonello was the third actual figure to be included as a participant. Finally, I considered another two major sectors, namely the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta, who, almost exclusively (at least at the time of the field research) prepare educators locally, and the Malta Employer's Association (MEA), who represent a significant proportion of local employers, hence another central beneficiary of education and stakeholder group. The Dean of the Faculty, Professor Sandro Caruana and the Director General, Mr Joseph Farrugia, represented the two stakeholder groups respectively.

In handpicking the afore mentioned personalities, I heavily considered the centrality of their respective roles, but was inevitably influenced by my perceived access to these and other potential exponents. However, I embraced Hammersley and Atkinson's (2007) advice when, paraphrasing Hammersley (2005), they warned that "*one cannot bias the fieldwork by talking only with the people one finds most congenial or politically sympathetic: one cannot choose one's informants on the same basis as one chooses friends (for the most part). Indeed, it may be necessary to tolerate situations, actions, and people of which one disapproves, or that one finds distasteful or shocking"* (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 72).

Selecting the particular *Collegial School Network* or *College* for this study from amongst the ten (10) *Colleges* required a number of considerations. In discussing this choice and describing the characteristics of this *College*, a number of details which overtly disclose the identity of the *College*, particularly to local readers, will purposely be omitted. Not doing so, would in the least identify the *College* Principal and possibly a number of Heads of School, all of whom were guaranteed anonymity. The selected *College* had more than ten (10) and less than sixteen (16) constituent schools, the great majority being primary feeder schools and the rest being single gender secondary schools (since then State Secondary Schools have become coeducational), catering for a total student population between 3,500 and 4,500 students distributed unequally amongst schools.

The factors portrayed below track the sequential logic adopted in reaching the specific choice:

1. Researcher Familiarity –

In a small State like Malta, there is a high probability for researchers to perform studies with participants and in contexts with which they were already acquainted to varying extents. In an attempt to minimise the potential conflict of interest, at design stage I decided to exclude the following from the available pool of ten *Colleges*:

- the *College* in which I was rendering service at the onset of the field research;
- the *Colleges* in which I performed the pilot study and previous research at Masters level.

In 2014 when the field research was performed, I was no longer serving at any particular *College*, as at the time, I had been appointed first Director, and then Director General. Both appointments came unexpectedly and carried a price, amongst which was a radically affected perception of me, in my new role/s by participants. Irrespective whether these were positive and/or negative, my formal position, created an inevitable power relationship with all participants which I was very much aware of. It was for this purpose, and due to the very limited time I could dedicate to the field research, that for encounters with various participants I chose to involve a Research Assistant, which again had other implications discussed later. The challenges that come with familiarity are also discussed after the exposition of these criteria used to determine the choice of the specific *College* for part of the field research.

2. *College* Maturity –

In 2005, following the publication of the seminal document *For All Children to Succeed* (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005) three *Collegial School Networks* were set up to serve as pilot studies adopting different models of the proposed *College* system. The accumulated experiences, and investment in human and physical resources, place these *Colleges* at a level of maturity which allow its constituent members to have gained more awareness of the implications brought forth by the formation of the *College*, than those pertaining to other *Colleges*. From amongst these three, I had performed previous research in one of them, hence restricting the available pool to two.

3. Access to the Field of Research –

Research is a time-consuming exercise not only for the researcher but also for participants, especially taking into account the considerable increase of such an activity in schools by under/post graduate students, academics and policy makers. Trust is another critical element which the researcher needs to nurture so as to develop a fruitful relationship with participants. Moreover, the latter often fail to acknowledge the benefits of research, especially if these are not viewed as yielding an immediate, personal gain. These factors often lead to a reluctance of participants to engage in studies, hence undermining such initiatives. Personal acquaintances, past colleagues and friendships assisted me in acquiring access to the field of research and possibly facilitated a greater level of involvement by participants. Professional connections created throughout the years with critical educational leaders in one of these *Colleges*, particularly, but not exclusively with the *College* Principal, proved vital in encouraging participant enrolment, yet these supportive elements in turn created a different tension, that of having to constantly detach myself from familiarity which could limit my understanding from a more objective position.

Acknowledging & Dealing with Familiarity

Before progressing further with other methodological aspects, I'll briefly discuss the issue of familiarity present in various research contexts, but that perhaps is exacerbated in this and similar cases, particularly when in a Small Island State. I have been investigating a field within which I had been professionally operating (and studying) for more than twenty years and have been familiar with for a lifetime. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) paraphrase Delamont and Atkinson (1995) explaining that,

> *"… in researching settings that are more familiar, it can be much more difficult to suspend one's preconceptions, whether these derive from social science or from everyday knowledge. One reason for this is that what one finds is so obvious, it may be necessary to 'fight familiarity'."*
>
> (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 81)

Sara Delamont in turn quotes Geer (1964) who "*formulated the familiarity problem, highlighting the difficulties faced by beginner ethnographers who often find the research processes hard. These 'untrained observers … can spend a day in hospital and come back with one page of notes and no hypotheses'. The hospital was too familiar: 'everyone knows what hospitals are like'*" (Delamont, 2014, p. 11). What essentially this meant, was the need for me to almost unlearn what had been learnt over a lifetime in schools, or rather pushing myself to constantly strive to view the familiar through heightened senses, which transcend the habitual. Delamont (2014, p. 15) proposes six strategies to educational ethnographers in alleviating familiarity:

1. Looking at other ethnographies that reached a deep level of understanding.
2. Researching formal education in unfamiliar cultures.
3. Researching the educational process from the other's angle.
4. Researching from an atypical perspective rather than from the classic educators' and learners' viewpoint.

5. Researching teaching and learning processes outside formal education settings.
6. Embracing innovative mind-sets borrowed from disciplines, such as the observing *"flâneur"* tracing meaning in the surrounding fleeting world, to reinvigorate educational ethnography.

This research is not being framed strictly within the ethnographic school, but Delamont's advice reverberates, particularly when analysing data. The study was performed in the native culture's formal educational setting, within which I operated since 'always'. Nevertheless, the privileged positions I occupied proved to give an unusual research perspective and together with the longevity of the study, which in blending with life experiences, naturally developed into a resemblance with the *flâneur*'s discrete, yet discerning eye and reflexivity, contrasting and mitigating the evident familiarity.

Data Collection Methods

The different stakeholder groups identified within the *College* were the *College* Principal, the various Heads of School, as the educational leaders setting the vision and necessary context for quality education to be provided at *College* and school level respectively; Teachers, as the prime actors in schools interpreting the perceived vision for quality education through their own lenses, and transforming it into practice at the front line; Students and Parents, as the primary clients who benefit, or otherwise, from the provision of a quality education. Whereas the *College* Principal and the Heads of School were all included as participants, a sample of the teachers, students and parents had to be selected. Whilst, probability sampling is recommended for representation purposes, *"it may not be possible to create a true probability sample for various practical reasons"* (Fogelman & Comber, 2007, p. 132).

The choice of teachers, students and parents to participate in the focus groups was inevitably constrained by the following factors:

1. Willingness of individual to participate in the research;
2. Availability of the participant at the time of the focus group;

3. Restrictions imposed by schools to minimise the disruption of lessons or school activities.

This resulted in partially having a *"convenience sample... also known as accidental or opportunity sampling"* (Fogelman & Comber, 2007, p. 135).

> *"Although convenience sampling should... be avoided ... if sound claims for generalisation are to be made... where there really is no alternative, it is essential that as much information as possible is reported about the sample and how it was selected."*
>
> (Fogelman & Comber, 2007, p. 135)

In fact, the detailed portrayal of the factors inducing the specific choice of participants and a description which sufficiently informs about the characteristics of the sample, whilst respecting ethical implications, is included to allow judgements on *"how such factors may affect any conclusions that are drawn from the research, and the potential generalising from the sample data to a wider population"* (Fogelman & Comber, 2007, p. 135).

"Interviews can produce rich and relevant data" (Ribbins, 2007, p. 207). Nevertheless, Delamont (2014), warns that *"… the main point that cannot be over-stressed is that interview data have to be recognised for what they are and, more vitally, what they are not"* (Delamont, 2014, p. 141). Hence, whilst interpretatively eliciting knowledge, the analysis of this research deeply considers what comes across as being said and what appears to be relevant but remains unsaid, acknowledging both the strengths and limitations of the methodologies adopted. In the case of participating teachers, the great majority of whom where female and relatively young (averaging in their thirties, as informally reported), participants predominantly shared the first and one or more other criteria to different extents from the ones mentioned below:

- Available on the day and at the time of the focus group;
- Engaged in some form of research themselves and/or intrigued by the subject;
- Ambitious and motivated seeking opportunities for growth;
- Frustrated by the system in general and seeking opportunities to communicate it;
- Respectful towards the Head of School and willing to support research.

Likewise, those students pertaining to year groups deemed by local practitioners (and society at large) as the most sensitive due to national assessments (particularly end of Primary and end of Secondary Years) in a rather high stakes context, were avoided. In most instances, where student councils where set up, Heads of School often found it convenient for its members to form the focus group. Also because participation in such research initiatives was regarded as a learning opportunity by the school, the students themselves would be more willing, and their parents/legal guardians similarly inclined to accept their participation. Invariably, schools tried to include students whom they felt could express their views in a more articulate manner, but not necessarily always being those who are amongst the highest academic achievers. On the other hand, parents/legal guardians who were approached and accepted to join the focus group, where all either School Council members or had a close relationship with the school. Although details weren't gathered, from what was reported by the Research Assistant, the parents'/legal guardians' groups were rather homogenous in terms of: gender – all participants were female; fulltime engagement – generally housewives or on career break; and age – ranging from late twenties to forties.

The field research adopted two similar but distinct interviewing techniques for data collection: face-to-face semi-structured individual interviews and face-to-face semi-structured focus-group interviews. In contrast with more structured approaches, such interviews allow participants the freedom to *"respond in their own way...* [and each] *interviewee contributes to shaping the conversation. What they want to say becomes as important as what the researcher wants to ask"* (Bush, 2007, pp. 94-95). Interviews with stakeholders *"explore their views in ways that cannot be achieved by other forms of research"* (Ribbins, 2007, p. 208). The first form of interview technique was used with all participants in designated leadership roles at national, *College* and School level. In *policy-related research... interviews ...* are ...

> *"... undertaken to establish whether... [the declared] ...aims were realised or if the policy has had certain unintended consequences. Conducting such interviews with different user groups (for example teachers and school leaders) may lead to the conclusion that the policy impacted differently on each group."*
>
> (Bush, 2007, p. 101)

On the other hand, focus group interviews were adopted with educators, students and parents. This technique is characterised by its key objective *"to achieve an accurate representation of the views of the group as a whole in interaction"* (Ribbins, 2007, p. 212). The interactivity and relative freedom of dialogue inherent to this qualitative technique generates reflective discussions, encouraging the engagement of participants in a safe and guided environment.

Table 3.2 summarises the field research identifying participants or participant groups as contributors to research questions. Participant groups are distinguished between macro and micro level, with the *College* Principal being the only one in between. It is worth noting that participant groups at micro level have been clustered and are purposely not indicative of the actual number of schools in the *College* to minimise identification of the particular *College* for ethical purposes. All one-to-one interviews were performed by myself, but the focus groups were entrusted to a Research Assistant.

Intended Contributors to Research Question			Participant Stakeholder	Research Tool
RQ1	RQ2	RQ3		
√√	√√	√√	Minister of Education and Employment	5 Face-to-Face Individual Semi-structured Interviews at Macro Level
√	√√	√√	Shadow Minister of Education	
√	√√	√√	President of the Malta Union of Teachers	
√	√√	√√	Dean – Faculty of Education (University of Malta)	
√	√√	√√	Director General – Malta Employers Association	
√√	√√	√√	Case Study *College* (CSC) Principal	1 Face-to-Face Individual Semi-structured Interview
√	√√	√√	CSC Heads of Primary Schools	10 -15 Face-to-Face Individual Semi-structured Interviews at Micro Level
√	√√	√√	CSC Heads of Secondary Schools	
√	√√	√√	CSC Primary School Teachers	10 - 15 Face-to-Face Semi-Structured Focus Groups *(each group was constituted of 5 to 7 representatives)*
√	√√	√√	CSC Secondary School Teachers	
√	√√	√√	CSC Primary School Students	
√	√√	√√	CSC Secondary School Students	
√	√√	√√	CSC Primary School Parents	
√	√√	√√	CSC Secondary School Parents	
Legend	√√	Main Contributor to RQ	🟥	Macro level Participants
	√	Contributor to RQ	🟩	Micro level Participants

Table 3.2 Field Research Participants

When considering whether or not to take on the post of Director General in 2014, my mind was clouded with endless concerns, doubts, fears and uncertainties. There was one certainty, that the time that I could dedicate to my studies, which had already become very limited when appointed to Directorship, would be rendered to nothing but mirages. In view of this, before committing to the post, I had asked for support to sustain my studies, which my employer was willing to agree upon. Naively, I thought that I was strong and capable enough to manage the feat of occupying such a position with responsibility and pursuing doctorate studies. Time, physical and mental energy, resilience and dedication to the cause, almost to life, are all tried to the limits in living these experiences in a meaningful manner, as they both parasitically drain the same reserve. In fact, I chose to hibernate my studies and most of all other aspects of my life, to maintain a degree of sanity whilst trying to fulfil what I intrinsically felt was expected of me in occupying such a role, not necessarily (although not excluded) from my employer, but from my values, which admittedly was more taxing than, and contentious with, others' expectations. However, amidst all this, I had been allowed to ask a colleague who was serving as a semi-retired advisor to the office I occupied, to dedicate enough hours to lead the focus groups as my Research Assistant.

The significantly increased workload and intricacies turned out to be an issue, especially because of incessant thoughts clouding the required lucidity for my studies, to the extent that it necessitated my formal suspension from the doctoral programme for two years. However, occupying a high-level position within the national central authority added other layers of complexity to my deepening role as an insider researcher. Apart from the evident inability to interview the Director General Quality and Standards, whose role I was occupying at the time, my relationship with participants, especially educators and educational leaders at school and College level, was characterised to different extents by the fact that I was their superior in terms of designated hierarchical authority.

Impeded from performing all field research myself due to time constraints, I had to determine which to delegate to my Research Assistant and which to perform myself. The sheer logistics of organising all focus groups for students, parents and teachers was sufficiently daunting. However, the further increased clout burdening me despite my efforts to maintain the same humane type of leadership and approach I always embraced, affected all interactions, but most especially with teachers. In a closed social and professional network as is the educational field in Malta, many individuals would be wary to trust a high level official, particularly if previously unknown to them personally, fearing whether there could be implications on their career if they express non-conforming views. Although I gladly note a gradually changing mentality in line with democratic principles, 'urban legends' of individuals whose career suffered unjustly because of their expressed beliefs persist, further fuelled by instances of possible ongoing discrimination of the sort. This was less the case with participants in the role of Head of School or College Principal, as participants in these roles would have at least been in the profession for fourteen years*, most of them having been practicing in the local field for even more years than myself, enabling me to have crossed professional paths with all, to have worked variably close with most, and to have established work-related friendships with a significant proportion. Hence, the closer relationship with this latter group allowed them to be far less affected by my role.

Therefore, apart from interviews with the five central figures at macro level, I had also decided to perform interviews to Heads of School and the College Principal myself. The almost blindfolded trust in me by the majority of these educational leaders, relying on past experiences of each other, actually created another concern to me as a researcher since they often were sharing and disclosing their views with their colleague 'Ian' and not necessarily the researcher, possibly pulling down all defence mechanisms they might have otherwise wished to retain. Once again, the very particular context of a small, insular educational community in Malta, where virtually everyone knows each other, further exacerbated by a political polarisation in the country which regretfully means that opinions expressed are often narrowly interpreted as either being in favour of one or the other Political Party, individuals may be reluctant to disclose their opinion fearing immediate or prospective unethical negative consequences on themselves by disgruntled exponents of the Party perceived to be criticised. Hence, the participants' (here particularly referring to Heads of School) confidence that I would treat their views with sensitivity and respect, placed an even greater responsibility to protect them.

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* As at of time of research and to date of submission of this thesis, eligibility into the role of Head of School in Malta requires individuals to have a permanent Teacher's Warrant (issued by the Council for the Teaching Profession in Malta), a recognised full qualification at MQF Level 7 in Educational Leadership, four years experience in the role of Assistant Head of School or equivalent, and ten years teaching experience in a licenced school. The role of College Principal is an even more senior position which albeit not requiring the same eligibility for Head of School, is most often occupied by experienced professionals.

Occupying high level roles requires becoming accustomed to shouldering extensive responsibilities. Like others, I experienced severe regression in my physical and general wellbeing when in such stress-inducing roles, including several sleepless nights. The gradual growth in the role, learning to know oneself, learning to prioritise and to factor the relativity of issues within the larger picture in relation to our deepest values, helped these symptoms to slowly subside, though occasionally still resurfacing. Nevertheless, I believe it is similarly important not to become excessively comfortable when vested with such designated authority and/or 'power', as it might indicate numbness and insensitivity towards others and responsibilities. This learnt, and continually revisited, equilibrium assisted me in living with the added layers of responsibility created by the fact that I was an insider researcher, exposing participants' voices in as an authentic way as possible, whilst protecting their wellbeing and where appropriate concealing identities also through added academic labour wherever required, such as the merging of Heads of School voices into four composite identities, and similar treatment to focus group participants (as explained in this chapter).

The inclusion of a Research Assistant was also considered useful to minimise the impact there could have been by the perceived power imbalance arising from my role, especially with participating educators. When approached, the Research Assistant accepted without hesitation, both out of genuine respect towards me, and as the research was of personal interest to him as a retired *College* Principal himself. His professional experience in the field and gentle disposition towards others, were assets for my intended purpose. In fact, he required only minimal preparation and induction into the research questions and tool to be adopted. On the other hand, his insider knowledge and beliefs, insufficient cognisance of the need to mitigate familiarity, together with his exclusively executional role, rather than having authorship insights and foresight, possibly had a limiting effect on the richness of the data collected from these focus groups. Had it not been to this Research Assistant, it would have been almost impossible to organise the number of focus groups that were actually managed, but the expense needs to similarly be acknowledged. All semi-structured interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, with the participants' prior consent, using a non-invasive digital voice recorder. This allowed the interviewer, either myself or the Research Assistant to dedicate full attention at the participants' needs, and the production of a detailed transcription after each session, as well as revisiting of data, whenever necessary at analysis stage. Although code-switching between Maltese and English is common in Malta being a bilingual country, Maltese was the predominant language of communication, with major code-switching mainly occurring in one-to-one interviews. Having a first language command of both Maltese and English, I performed transcripts directly translating into English all audio recordings to facilitate the process.

In case study research, particularly when this adopts semi-structured interviews, as in this study, the notion of reliability becomes *"problematic"* (Bush, 2007, p. 96) due to the potentially higher element of subjectivity involved. Triangulation of multiple sources may assist in reducing this and securing the portrayal of more authentic findings (Bush, 2007, p. 101). Nevertheless, the rigour adopted by the researcher in making decisions related to research design and sampling, accuracy in reporting participants' genuine perspectives as faithful to the original as possible, clearly expressing limitations of the research and the ability to provide a detailed audit trail which informs about and justifies actions (Ribbins, 2007, p. 208; Bush, 2007, pp. 97-99) become critical to the reliability and validity of the research. Moreover, appropriate consideration of ethical implications, exposed in as overtly a manner as possible, indulging in reflexive autobiographical snippets of life affecting my experiences, perception and hence my reporting and interpretation of the research, further contributes to the authenticity of this study.

Coding, Reporting & Analysing Data

Social phenomena, particularly in the network society revolve around non-linear dynamics, hence their analysis cannot rely on approaches which consider linear relationships (Castells, 2000, p. 698). Raw data may be interesting but does not help understand the social world. *"Coding or categorizing the data has an important role in analysis.* [Nevertheless,] … *coding and analysis are not synonymous …"* (Basit, 2003, pp. 144, 145). Drawing on similarities with ethnographic work, which are discussed at the end of this chapter, the collection of data focused on a limited number of participants within a specific context with the aim to go deep. Albeit the semi-structured approach, the data still relies on participants and its emergence remains generally unstructured, requiring categorisation at analysis stage (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3), which for the purposes of this research is seen to include coding as part of the process. In this tradition,

> *"The analysis of data involves interpretation of the meanings, functions, and consequences of human actions and institutional practices, and how these are implicated in local, and perhaps also wider, contexts. What are produced, for the most part, are verbal descriptions, explanations, and theories..."*
>
> (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3)

A code in qualitative research is a word or short phrase generated by the researcher that symbolises, in interpretable ways, portions of recorded information. Since it starts ascribing an element of meaning to data, it enables *"pattern detection, categorization, theory building, and other analytic processes"* (Saldaña, 2012, pp. 3-4). In fact, Saldaña (2012) agrees with Charmaz (2001) when defining *"coding as the 'critical link' between data collection and their explanation of meaning"* (Saldaña, 2012, p. 3). Nevertheless, he juxtaposes the recognition of coding as central for the excellence of any research (Strauss, 1987, p. 27) with categorical dismissal that coding as a way to analyse qualitative research is impossible in practice (Packer, 2011, p. 80), resolving that *"there are times when coding the data is absolutely necessary, and times when it is most inappropriate for the study at hand"* (Saldaña, 2012, p. 2).

Whilst acknowledging that coding is essentially an *"interpretive act …* [and] *… not a precise science"* (Saldaña, 2012, p. 4), it still tends to follow a logical sequence. It is inevitable that biases and experiences influence the researcher's perceptions and interpretations even when coding (Saldaña, 2012, p. 7). When I initially engaged with transcripts of interviews and focus-groups, I adopted a variety of First Cycle coding methods. Although at this stage, I mainly relied on *"Elemental Methods"*, particularly *"In Vivo Coding"*, using direct language of participants, and *"Initial Coding"* (also referred to as *"Open Coding"*), deconstructing the data into parts which may be compared and contrasted, allowing the analysis to take any direction, elements of *"Affective"* and *"Exploratory Methods"* sneaked in (Saldaña, 2012, pp. 59 - 61, 100). In performing this task, I opted for the basic function of inserting codes as comments in word-processed data offered by Microsoft's Word over Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS). Learning the multiple functions of CAQDAS programmes whilst simultaneously coming to terms with handling the extensive data, amidst all other life circumstances, came across as overwhelming (Saldaña, 2012, p. 26). In parallel with the identification of codes on processed transcripts, a separate document was compiled listing the First Cycle codes, accompanied with a brief description of the transcribed segment or an actual quote, a reference to the respective interview or focus group transcript and page from where it was taken, and an indication of the research question/s it may be addressing (see an excerpt from such document in Appendix I).

During First Cycle coding, through a deliberate deeper and more reflective engagement, I earned greater *"ownership of the data …* [facilitating] *… the transition to Second Cycle methods …"* (Saldaña, 2012, p. 58). Admittedly, this painstakingly lengthy process, required sustained significant levels of connectedness, attention and mental lucidity as forewarned by Saldaña (2012, p. 10). The demands it places on the researcher, induced occasional dips in meticulousness, possibly justifying the original long list of 181 codes (see Appendix II), some of which could have fit under already ascribed Initial Codes.

> *"As you code and recode, expect – or rather, strive for – your codes and categories to become more refined … more conceptual and abstract. Some of your First Cycle codes may be later subsumed by other codes, relabelled, or dropped altogether. As you progress toward Second Cycle coding, there may be some rearrangement and reclassification of coded data into different and even new categories."*
>
> (Saldaña, 2012, p. 11)

"Axial" and *"Theoretical Coding"* were my preferred Second Cycle methods to organise and reorganise First Cycle codes into categories, prioritising and establishing relationships amongst them, enabling the discovery of the core category or formulation of a theoretical framework that becomes *"the foundation for explication of a grounded theory"* (Saldaña, 2012, pp. 52, 209). The resulting reorganisation and interrelatedness was first outlaid as in Appendix III and later enhanced as depicted in Figures 4.2 and 5.2 in Chapters 4 and 5. When I found myself creating categories of categories, exhibiting themes, links and interrelated concepts, that is when I realised that theory was being developed, not necessarily as new knowledge, but as a way of understanding it (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Saldaña, 2012). It was only after endless hours, days and weeks of struggled engagement and reflection on the data, that there came a sudden crystallisation of a resolution to the analytic puzzle. Indeed, *"rich ideas need time to formulate, so* [I had to] *have trust and faith in* [my]*self that these may emerge in due time"* (Saldaña, 2012, p. 36).

The findings are organised in the emerging theoretical framework, explained in the introduction to Chapter 4 and later, in more depth in Chapter 5. It aims at presenting processed data in a manner that leads to the concluding analysis and discussion, making it *"open to analysis and relatability from those who practise in other settings"* (Gunter, 2005, p. 169). In the analysis, the framed themes are related to the research questions and literature in the field, construing reflexive-led and data-informed inferences, whose 'trustworthiness' is mainly achieved by the detailed accounts of biases, procedures and methods that have shaped the research *"allowing the readers to see how the lines of inquiry have led to particular conclusions"* (Roberts et al., 2019, p. 2).

> *"… you need to be rigorously ethical. Honesty is perhaps another way to describe this, but I deliberately choose the phrase because it implies that you will always be: rigorously ethical with your participants and treat them with respect; rigorously ethical with your data and not ignore or delete those seemingly problematic passages of text; and rigorously ethical with your analysis by maintaining a sense of scholarly integrity and working hard toward the final outcomes."*
>
> (Saldaña, 2012, p. 36)

Ethical Considerations

A guiding recognition has been that any researcher *"may spend a few weeks or months in a setting which has existed for many years before her arrival and will continue for many years afterwards"* (Delamont, 2014, p. 61). The subject under investigation has been and still remains a topical issue in Malta, discussed not only by professionals in the field but also by community members, most of them being service users of the educational system, hence having direct interest in the matter. Moreover, education has always been a bone of contention between the two major political parties in Malta, the Nationalist (who initiated this reform) and the Labour Party, often with polarising arguments. The particularity of Malta being a Small Island State (see *About Malta* in *Chapter 1*) further amplifies such debates, through the tightly knit social construct, where opinions expressed are always perceived to be in favour of, or against the agenda of one of the two major parties. Amidst this scenario, where people are part of a small community, the issue of participants' identity becomes even more significant to the same individual and to me as a researcher whose priority is that of safeguarding the wellbeing of participants and the same community. The potential risks and opportunities to conceal identity vary among respondents and are therefore treated distinctly.

- *Students' Focus Groups:* Whilst being the most vulnerable given the age group, students faced the least risk of adversity from participating in this study. They contributed in the safer environment provided by focus groups finding comfort in the presence of peers as a group avoiding the uncomfortable situation of being singled out by the researcher. The discussion solicited individuals' sharing of their experiences and perspectives on formal education, but did not delve into personal issues, hence did not require any confidential disclosures from students. In order to guarantee a minimum level of verbal articulation, participating students' age varied between 10 and 16 years of age. Each focus group had a more homogenous age group, generally either 9 to 10-year olds in the Primary School context, or 12 to 14-year olds in the Secondary Schools. Sessions typically lasted forty-five (45) minutes each and were held within the respective students' school, therefore in a familiar environment, with familiar faces (other than the Research Assistant who led the session) and at times most convenient to the school causing the least disturbance possible. Parents/legal guardians of all students who participated in focus groups were informed of the focus group by virtue of a letter (see Appendix IV) that gave all details necessary about the research, and outlining the rights of participants, seeking their written consent in advance.

- *Parents' Focus Groups*: The typical participating parent/legal guardian could be best described as a working-class housewife, or mother on a career break due to parental responsibilities, ranging from late twenties to early forties. The majority transpired not to have studied beyond a secondary level of education. This dominant profile not only influenced responses, but also heavily contributed to a context characterised by participants of this group manifesting the greatest risk of adversity arising from an initial psychological discomfort caused by what possibly was an unusual setup for most of them. In fact, the Research Assistant did report, and is witnessed in recordings, about his role in reassuring and making participants feel at ease, especially when introducing the focus group. On the other hand, this opportunity, not only offered participating parents/legal guardians the possibility to voice their opinion but constituted a learning experience for all those who had never contributed in similar focus groups before.

- *Teachers' Focus Groups*: Whilst most educators generally feel rather safe and comfortable in expressing themselves, some of these professionals could have felt intimidated by the thought that should individuals be associated with a given stance towards the unfolding structural reforms, which by the time of the field research had continued to evolve, then they could have suffered discrimination within or beyond the institution. To mitigate such fears, before every focus group, the Research Assistant reminded participants on the parameters set out in the letter they each received (see Appendix IV). Participants were informed of the research purpose and thanked for their kind contribution. Furthermore, they were reassured of confidentiality, requesting mutual respect at each other's views, which included non-disclosure of sources of any specific perspective and/or information acquired during the focus group. Nevertheless, it could also be said that participating educators collectively contributed to the generation of insights and knowledge, from which they each benefitted as a professional learning community.

- *College and School Leaders Semi-Structured Interviews*: Malta's small size and limited number of *Colleges* presents a considerable challenge when it comes to guarantee anonymity of educational institutions. Hence gaining participants' trust to unravel their inner thoughts about critical issues has been even more crucial. In view of the fact that these were performed directly by me, participants also relied on the trust vested in me through their prior experiences. This further nourished my intent to omit all elements that could lead to an easy identification of the *College*, of a School or an individual from the study. Nonetheless Maltese readers might acquire information which reveals identity in other ways, for instance through participants themselves. In view of this, data gathered from Heads of School, is being presented in the form of composite interviews by blending more participants into one voice, to further reduce the possibility of tracing sources for specific pieces of data. For the sake of consistency while guaranteeing similar degrees of anonymity, the same approach was adopted for Teachers, Parents and Students Focus Groups. Hence, *Head of Primary School 1* is in actual fact the voice of more than one Head (the number of Heads of School in each voice is not being disclosed to help safeguard anonymity) which I consistently merged into a singular voice. The voices of teachers from the same schools are reported as *Teachers – Primary School 1.* The same occurred for parents and students.

- *All other Semi-Structured Interviews*: These respondents occupy distinctive roles which make it point-less to attempt obscuring identity. These participants are high profile members of the Maltese community and their opinion is crucial at national level and for the purpose of this study. Whilst leading interviews with these participants, I adopted a more facilitative role allowing more flexibility and freedom to the respondents respecting to the role each one of them occupied. Although these key stakeholders will remain the inevitably identifiable protagonists, they are all well versed, proficient and skilful in the art of giving interviews as it forms an integral part of the position they occupy, hence having accrued wisdom in the extent to expose themselves. Moreover, like all one-to-one interview participants, they also benefited from having been provided with the guiding questions in advance (see Appendix IV for sample) so they could have been prepared on what to share.

Although educational research may tend to resolve common ethical dilemmas in similar ways, the mix of strategies adopted is often unique to specific studies (British Educational Research Association, 2018, pp. 1-2). In this research, unless previously stated otherwise for specific groups or individuals, participants benefited from:

- Informed voluntary consent (minors were further protected by written parental consent – see Appendix IV for sample);
- Anonymity;
- The right to refuse the use of a digital voice recording device if felt intimidating;
- The right to skip questions with which the individual/s feels uncomfortable;
- The right to request access, amendment or omittance of data gathered from one's own contribution;
- The right of withdrawal from research at any point prior to publication;
- Protection of all data collected; which is securely stored on a personal computer that requires a unique log-in, password-protected cloud storage, and a back-up device safely stored at home. No one is being given access to this data, unless if requested for verification purposes by authorised University officials.
- Provision of proposed interview questions in advance of semi-structured interviews so as to allow individuals to add, change or omit questions and to encourage critical reflection;
- Access to the final study in electronic format to all semi-structured interview participants for reference and subsequent dissemination amongst other participants, where applicable; the Ministry will in addition be supplied with a hard copy of the final study.

Ethical decision-making occurred at all stages of the study, from planning to conducting and reporting about the research, becoming an ongoing self-assessing process of arising issues (British Educational Research Association, 2018, p. 2). Apart from the ethical clearance through the University committee, a formal authorisation to perform research in State Schools was requested from the designated department within the local central authority, prior to actually performing the pilot study. This contained all critical information required, particularly the research questions, research methodology, ethical considerations and proposed research tools. The questions intended to be addressed to the various participants during the semi-structured interviews and focus groups were also supplied for approval, which was granted without any required amendments. The pilot field research, performed soon after, involved a *College* Principal and a group of educators, constituted of an Assistant Head of School and six teachers, all different than those who would have been eventually involved. The feedback provided by these participants through the semi-structured interview and focus group respectively, further assisted in refining the questions actually used in the proper field research portrayed in this study.

In gaining access to the various stakeholders, letters explaining the aim of the research and expressing the intent of interviewing the respective individual, giving details on ethical standards being deployed, had been formulated and addressed to all interviewees. Upon acceptance, the latter received the proposed semi-structured interview questions and were reassured that they could add, amend or omit questions as they deemed most appropriate. At *College* level, once formal permission was granted by the relevant Education Authorities, a meeting was set with the specific *College* Principal who was given all the details concerning the study particularly the field research that would have been performed in his/her *College*. Arrangements were also made to meet the respective Heads of School at a Council of Heads meeting, during which I personally briefed these critical participants about the research, their potential personal and institutional community's voluntary contribution to the study, all ethical safeguards being implemented, including rights of non-participation or withdrawal, and answered queries that arose, mainly related to logistic considerations for the organisation of the focus groups.

All semi-structured interviews and focus groups were held at times most convenient to participants and that least disturbed the smooth running of the respective organisations. Whilst acknowledging the fact that research participants had to necessarily devote some time and energy, which they could have otherwise utilised in their own personal interest, their contribution not only provided the raw data for the purposes of this research, but will continue to inform policy makers and other researchers with the much sought after feedback of the various stakeholders. Nonetheless, whilst aspiring to portray a comprehensive, reliable and authentic picture, respect and sensitivity towards participants has been upheld as a priority; hence all participants enjoyed an opt-out clause with the possibility of reclaiming all data pertinent to themselves, up to a reasonable point of finalisation of this study. Handling the authentic relationships with participants throughout the process required a continuous revisiting of my actions, as described by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) when referring to ethnographic work:

> *"… ethnographers often experience some feelings of personal disquiet, wondering whether they are unduly exploitative in offering 'friendship' in return for data. There are no easy answers to such questions, they always depend upon the particular circumstances and personal judgement.*
>
> *A problem that the ethnographer often faces in the course of fieldwork is deciding how much self-disclosure is appropriate or fruitful. It is hard to expect 'honesty' and 'frankness' on the part of participants and informants, while never being frank and honest about oneself."*
>
> (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 72)

Reflexivity as a Nuance of Autoethnography

Carolyn Ellis in her Preface to *Handbook of Autoethnography* by Holman Jones et. al (2013) asserts:

> *"…autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world; it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, and reflexively. It asks that we not only examine our lives but also consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do. Autoethnography requires that we observe ourselves observing, that we interrogate what we think and believe, and that we challenge our own assumptions, asking over and over if we have penetrated as many layers of our own defences, fears, and insecurities as our project requires."*
>
> (Ellis C. , 2013, p. 16)

These words resonated, reminding me of the moral purpose I seek, the intangible that motivated me to declare fundamental beliefs and act accordingly. This is where my doctoral journey pursued in its final years, reconsidering "*how we think, how we do research and relationships, and how we live",* illustrating my story through "*a narrative of coming to an experience and a moment in time when excluding or obscuring the personal in research felt uncomfortable, even untenable"* (Adams, 2013, p. 39). I am non-oblivious of Delamont's (2014) harsh criticism, quoting a series of authors including Anderson (2006) in defining *"autoethnography as texts which claim to be research but in which the only topic or focus is the author herself or himself"* (Delamont, 2014, p. 185). Nonetheless, as for this thesis, I do not believe this to be the case as I will explain in this section.

Humphreys (2005, p. 3) cites Ellis and Bochner (2000) in defining *autoethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural".* The same author further quotes Reed-Danahay's (1997) definition of autoethnography as …

> *"… a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text … [and] can be done by either an anthropologist who is doing 'home' or 'native' ethnography or by a non-anthropologist/ethnographer."*
>
> (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9)

Given its affinity with ethnography, before elucidating further what elements of, or attributable to autoethnography have been deployed throughout the research, it is pertinent to delve into the former to appreciate the hard-earned subtleties instituting its recognition amidst the academic community. Ethnography generally requires the researcher to immerse in the field over a span of time, tactfully, but not necessarily openly, scrutinising and enquiring about the manner in which life unfolds in the particular context, collecting evidence on all relevant dynamics between actors, and details on the context. Ethnographic work is often characterised by common elements. The field research of such endeavours occurs in the context being studied, often gathering data from multiple sources but predominantly reliant on observations of and conversations with participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3).

The positivists argumentation *"that it is only through the exercise of physical or statistical control of variables, and their rigorous measurement, that science is able to produce a body of knowledge whose validity is conclusive"*, dismisses ethnography as inadequate to social sciences *"on the grounds that the data and findings it produces are 'subjective', mere idiosyncratic impressions of one or two cases that cannot provide a solid foundation for rigorous scientific analysis"* (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, pp. 4, 7). However, naturalism suggests that the social world should be discretely studied in as natural a setting as possible. The main purpose ought to be to depict authentic human dynamics in context-rich descriptions. It involves portrayal of *"what happens, how the people involved see and talk about their own actions and those of others, the contexts in which the action takes place, and what follows from it*" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 7). It is interesting how naturalism relates with the wider *"philosophical and sociological ideas … collectively labelled 'interpretivism'"* (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 7), which together with aspects of *'critical studies'* have been dealt with earlier as the paradigm within which this research unfolds. Delamont (2014) also refers to absences in educational ethnography. These may be addressed by focusing on the gaps created by missing research, as well as in existing studies, which unintentionally omit *"the taken for granted"*, and by looking at what may be lacking in the field site, in the narratives or in observations (Delamont, 2014, p. 8).

Delamont's (2014) citation of Zora Neale Hurston's (1935) reference to "*'the spyglass of Anthropology' to look through",* incited me to dig deeper not only into what was being stated, but likewise in the untold, the void that is created. Like in ethnographic research, the "*scholar goes, physically, to the spaces and places where the data are to be collected, and spends time there. In the resultant written accounts, the reader is also taken to those spaces and places. One of the surviving differences between sociological ethnographer and anthropological fieldworkers is that anthropologists are more likely to believe they should live, i.e. eat and sleep, in their field setting for extended periods, rather than visit it for data collection"* (Delamont, 2014, p. 27). This resonates with a key characteristic of this research, whereby, I have lived in the 'field' of the study, as part of my professional practice. Furthermore,

> *"… for ethnographers in both sociology and anthropology today there is less concern about whether the fieldsite was 'abroad', or 'exotic' or required long-term immersion, but the scholar needs to establish the authenticity of their data collection by vivid evocations of the spaces and places they have absorbed."*
>
> (Delamont, 2014, p. 28)

Arguing deeper on the evolution of ethnography, Delamont (2014) not only accepts but actually reminds us about the importance *"to be reflexive about all the groups in a setting,"* encouraging the researcher to constantly remain conscious of implications, *"and to keep the reader aware of these"* (Delamont, 2014, p. 125). She further elucidates that,

> *"… one increasingly common form of narrative found in the educational research literature is the researcher's account of how she got on in the field. These are often called 'confessional' tales, or less evaluatively, autobiographical pieces. … The novice reader can fall into the trap of reading these as factual accounts, when of course, they are constructed rhetorically, and need to be read in that way."*
>
> (Delamont, 2014, p. 14)

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) refer to *"… the concept of reflexivity* [as one that] *acknowledges that the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them"* (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 15). They posit that at opposing poles, both positivism and naturalism neglect reflexivity defined as: *"… the fact that we are part of the social world* *we study, and that there is no escape from reliance on common-sense knowledge and methods of investigation"* (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 18). I wholly subscribe to the importance of being as transparent as possible with the reader, involving him/her through rich accounts which aid interpretation

> *"… by including our own role within the research focus, and perhaps even systematically exploiting our participation in the settings under study as researchers, we can produce accounts of the social world and justify them without placing reliance on futile appeals to empiricism, of either positivist or naturalist varieties."*
>
> (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 18)

Katz (2001) speaks about the subcultures within sociology and anthropology developing what he refers to as *"craft concerns for qualities of description",* as having a common preoccupation with *" 'rich and varied', 'contextualised' or 'context-sensitive', and 'densely textured' data",* emphasising that data may only be considered as rich if it contains the necessary elements for a *"casual explanation"* (Katz, 2001, p. 464). Peshkin (1997, p. 22) however, distinguishes between the autoethnographer, who in writing about oneself tell the reader *"Look at me!",* and the scholar who asks the reader to *"look at who it is that was here"* so as to help understanding. Perceiving autoethnographic writing as *"an intellectual cul de sac",* whilst recognising autobiographical reflexivity as *"central to the progress of ethnography",* Delamont (2014) examines this distinction further. Whereas in reflexive ethnography the *"the scholar is studying a setting, a subculture, an activity or some actors other than herself, and is acutely sensitive to the interrelationship(s) between herself and the focus of the research …* [, in] *autoethnography … there is no object except the author* [him/] *herself to study"* (Delamont, 2014, p. 186).

Delamont (2014) vehemently lashes against autoethnography by spelling a *"manifesto of six objections".* She argues that proper ethnographic research should be anthropologically unfamiliar to the researcher, ethical, analytic, explores unknown social worlds from a hard-to-reach perspective, and serve a moral obligation. Whereas, autoethnographic work is a study of oneself, unable to disguise or protect other actors, broadly experiential reporting of easy to access and uninteresting field and comfortably relies on introspection, making it fall severely short of the expected academic rigour (Delamont, 2014, pp. 186-187).

I believe Delamont raises legitimate points, drawing boundaries which I deliberately will be respecting. Juxtaposing my research against each of these criteria respectively below, I suggest that by Delamont's definition, this research may not be categorised as an autoethnographic work, perhaps as I thought it was at an earlier stage, but has nuances of reflexivity which give the reader an added layer of interpretation and meaning.

- The object of the study is the phenomenon of the claimed quality education within a *Collegial School Network*. I introduce myself as an actor to trace my origins, baggage and hence bias, intentionally placing the reader in a better-informed, more powerful position when interpreting my conclusions. In the process, admittedly with an unknown extent of success, I continually sought to combat familiarity, reflexively questioning the taken for granted.
- Ethical implications pervade our lives, and it wasn't less so throughout this research process. I set out with an agenda of authenticity but felt equally morally bound to weigh anything against the potential harm that could be caused to others. The more vulnerable participants have their identities safely concealed in composite voices and impossible to be traced. Contrastingly, the fewer high-profile participants are blatantly exposed given the inevitable identification caused by their respective roles. It ultimately meant relying on my personal judgement, construed and possibly jeopardised by my own experiences.
- Research occurred and was steered by me, within a historical point in time, affecting and being affected by experiences. The experiential element intertwined within the research is the backdrop, enriching the reader's senses and understanding, but supports without usurping the study itself.
- In portraying this study, I struggle to place myself on whose side am I. Perhaps, to the undiscerned, I might transpire as being on the side of the periphery, service users, practitioners. Upholding the value of service, there is where I push myself to be, however I'm uncertain whether I have liberated myself to the extent of avoiding relapses into the comforts of modern aristocracy, in condoning a 'necessary' status of power imbalance.
- I do not place myself as the object of the research, but aware of the control I possess on the study, as if the master puppeteer pulling the strings to mesmerise the audience, I intentionally add texture, colour and senses through my reflexive

disclosure of self. Whilst acknowledging the personally therapeutic liberating effect, these confessions are primarily aimed at describing the veils I might have placed intentionally or otherwise, on the research itself, again placing the reader in a different position of governance than had I not chosen to do so.

- I have pursued my studies in parallel to my career which has always been in education, but never in the vest of a full time academic. However, having been in the privileged position which only a selected few get to have, I similarly feel an obligation to contribute to society more than I have managed so far, by investigating and sharing what matters to the common good (admittedly as interpreted by me).

I am comforted by Hammersley and Atkinson's (2007) concession that all research is fraught with problems, which cannot be anticipated or resolved by following methodological rules, and therefore *"requiring the exercise of judgement in context"* (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 20). As dismissed by Humphreys (2005, p. 4), "*my intention here is to provide access to some of my natural and spontaneous reactions and dispel any notion of a researcher as an independent, objective observer* (Stacey, 1996). … [I] *am aiming to connect myself both as writer and subject with the reader via an autobiographical account that allows members of the academic community to engage with events in my professional life and with me as a person"* (Varner, 2000). However, this introspect is used with caution, *"capitalising on all the insights that can be drawn from reflexive writing"* without neglecting Delamont's harsh accusation that *"Retreat into Autoethnography is an abrogation of the honourable trade of the scholar"* (Delamont, 2014, p. 189).

Chapter 4

Findings

Approaching Data

After endless hours of engaging with data, ideas start floating, fleeting the subconscious, interacting with the conscious and almost transcending beyond oneself. It creates a tension, an anxiety of wanting to reach out to these seemingly unrelated thoughts, and re-establish a sense of order, which, if achieved at a higher order level, rewards with an enriched inner peace. As with most of life, this has been my experience in approaching the data gathered and assimilated over an expansive span of time. In organising these thoughts, very early on in the process, the complex intra- and inter-relationship between variables started to graphically visualise as a three-dimensional matrix (graphically portrayed in Chapter 5).

Whilst retaining relevance to the extent that I shall refer to it in both the Discussion and Conclusion Chapters, hence not only temporarily appeasing my need for regained stability, this image still remained somewhat limiting. This unsettlement was heightened when departing from the In Vivo and Initial Coding, and metamorphically transitioned into the Axial and Theoretical Coding. Ironically, reminiscent elements of my own schooling years, particularly the intersection of Biology with the only subject area I had refuted to adequately engage with (cheekily almost deserving a study in itself), Chemistry, engulfed my thoughts and re-emerged representing concepts in a personally increasingly codifiable manner. The famous double helix structure of the DNA Code (see Figure 4.1) defining the characteristics of organisms, given a twist as discussed and graphically reproduced in Chapter 5 to fit the needs of the study, not only analogously conceptualised a meaningfully organised portrayal of the findings, but developed into a central theoretical framework.

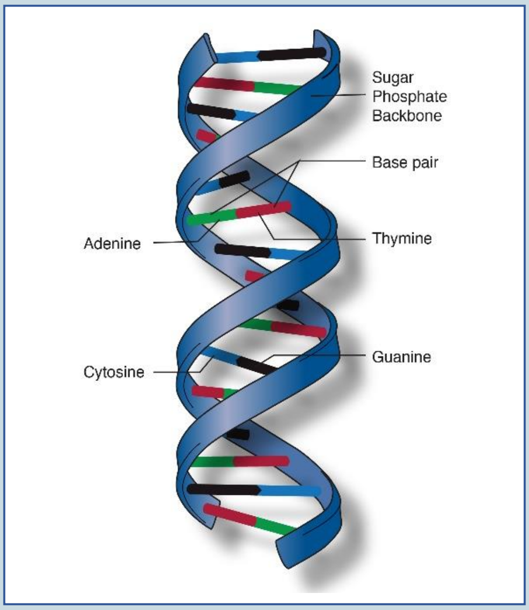

Figure 4.1 - Double Helix Structure of the DNA
(adopted from National Human Genome Research Institute, 2020)

The emerging theoretical framework I refer to as the *Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure of Quality Education* is further elaborated in Chapter 5, figuratively portraying the interplay of parts within an organic whole in the shape of a DNA Strand. Nevertheless, an initial brief description of how the framework organises variables contributing to quality education as emerged from this study, follows for the sake of facilitating an understanding of the findings' presentation. Figure 4.2 – *Linking Axial and Theoretical with specific In Vivo and Initial Codes,* portrays connections between the higher-level Axial and Theoretical Codes with the rawer specific In Vivo and Initial Codes (may be referred to in Appendix II) from which they were developed.

The DNA lookalike structure developed as part of this study, is composed of a double helix orbiting around a pivotal axis. The axis is a polarised spectrum ranging from '**Stability**' to '**Flux**', whereas the double helix is composed of two linear strands, connected by 'base spectra' (instead of the Base Pairs in DNA), that run opposite to each other, or anti-parallel, and twist together. Each strand within the double helix is a long, linear structure respectively standing for '**Idiosyncrasy**' and '**Universality**', acting as the backbone for the chain. The two helical strands are connected through spectra, with each spectrum dealing with a particular characteristic along a continuum between poles. The *Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure of Quality Education* has three segments of spectra, each representing the genes for '**Context**', '**Content**' and '**Agency**'. The intra- and inter-molecular binding agent is '**Purpose**'. The actual and perceived integrity and positionality of the purpose determine the cohesion of the structure.

As with all categories, these artificially differentiate findings as if pertaining to distinct domains, whereas in natural settings, knowledge and understanding permeate the whole of life without constricting boundaries. To an extent, this is also graphically represented in Chapter 5 together with a discussion on the interaction of the various components of the chromosomic structure. Each of the *Axial* and *Theoretical Codes*, is further tied to regrouped and/or specific *In Vivo* and *Initial Codes* as reproduced in Figure 4.2 – *Relationship between Axial & Theoretical Codes, and In Vivo & Initial Codes*, overleaf. Findings portrayed in this chapter have been systematically organised under these dynamically interacting elements as headings and subheadings to facilitate a logical flow.

Like in the gradual unravelling of genes within the DNA strand by medical researchers, what has emerged from this study is not pretentiously presented in a conclusive manner but is rather structured in a way that is predisposed for further discovery and expansion.

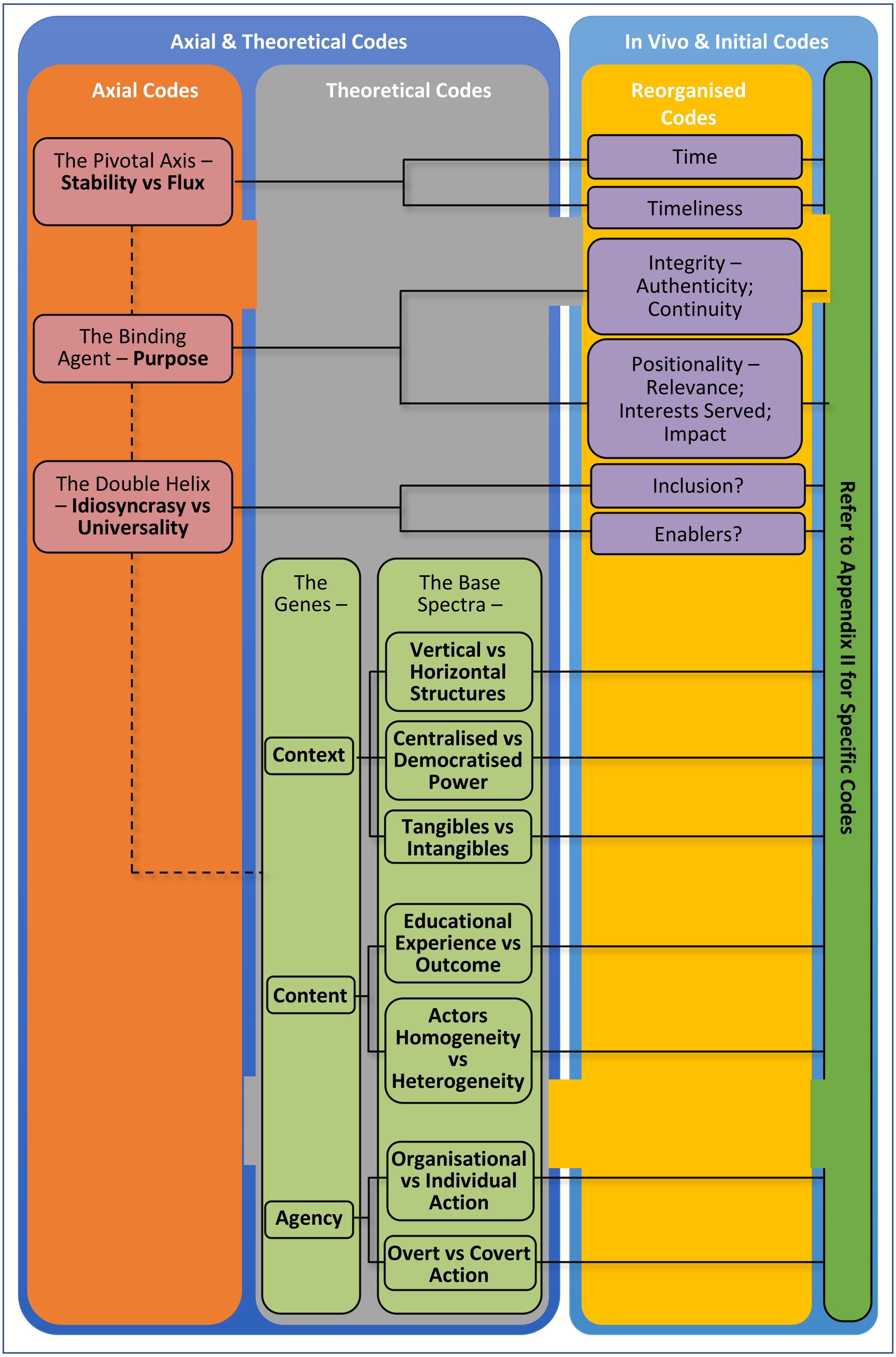
Axial & Theoretical Codes
In Vivo & Initial Codes
Axial Codes
Theoretical Codes
Reorganised Codes
The Pivotal Axis – Stability vs Flux
The Binding Agent – Purpose
The Double Helix – Idiosyncrasy vs Universality
Time
Timeliness
Integrity – Authenticity; Continuity
Positionality – Relevance; Interests Served; Impact
Inclusion?
Enablers?
The Genes –
Context
Content
Agency
The Base Spectra –
Vertical vs Horizontal Structures
Centralised vs Democratised Power
Tangibles vs Intangibles
Educational Experience vs Outcome
Actors Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity
Organisational vs Individual Action
Overt vs Covert Action
Refer to Appendix II for Specific Codes

Figure 4.2 Relationship between Axial & Theoretical Codes, and In Vivo & Initial Codes

The Data – What Participants Had to Say

What follows is the exclusive voice of participants organised in the organic framework – the *Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure of Quality Education*. The participant/s identified in parenthesis following one or more paraphrased statements or verbatim quotes indicates whose voice is being reported. Hence, coded findings are presented as part of specific components of this structure representing different categories under headings and subheadings. High-level participants' voices are labelled and overtly identifiable as: *Minister*, *Shadow Minister*, *MUT President* (Malta Union of Teachers President) and *MEA DG* (Malta Employers Association Director General). The *College Principal* sits in between and enjoys a degree of anonymity as s/he is one of ten (10) at the time. Whereas all others as explained in Chapter 3 are presented as composite participants: *Head of Secondary School* (combining the voices of the Heads of Secondary Schools in the *College*), *Head of Primary School 1*, *Head of Primary School 2* and *Head of Primary School 3* (consistently combining the voices of specific Heads of Primary Schools within the *College* in three respective groups). Likewise, *Teachers – Secondary School, Teachers – Primary School 1, Teacher – Primary School 2, Teachers – Primary School 3, Parents – Secondary School, Parents – Primary School 1, Parents – Primary School 2, Parents – Primary School 3, Students – Secondary School, Students – Primary School 1, Students – Students School 2* and *Students – Primary School 3* (consistently reflecting composite combinations for Heads of School).

The Pivotal Axis – *Stability vs Flux*

The pivotal axis sustains the integrity of the helix structure which revolves around a balanced tension between the poles of '**Stability**' and '**Flux**'. Education needs to remain relevant, which implies ongoing development as opposed to stagnation. Nonetheless, excessive change and a fierce pace, do not sustain a steady growth, and as fatigue permeates widely and deeply, risks of spiralling away into undesirable regress increase. Understanding as well as managing expectations on *Time* and *Timeliness* are critical in nurturing a delicate and essential balance for quality education.

Time

Education Systems have to deal with an inherent tension as education is both meant to protect and transmit traditions (roots) from one generation to the next, and to prepare citizens and society for the future (Head of Primary School 3). The need for change in education is bound to be inevitable as various aspects of life change over time and education has to keep updating itself to remain relevant to the outside world, and to respond to, possibly proactively, rather than tardily reactively, to the ongoing evolution of life (Teachers – Primary School 2, Head of Primary School 3).

It is also due considering that whilst schools ought to prepare students for the future, they rely on educators who may be anchored in the past and loaded with the present. Looking at a local school's typical teaching cohort reveals that considering the range of professionals' ages, any particular group of educators will cumulatively have influence on youngsters for approximately a span of approximately 90 years (an educator's career in Malta is normally spread over 40 years; this assertion is assuming having three different, overlapping generations). In favour of a claim for ongoing growth, it is therefore fair to deduce that a good proportion of the formal training received by a school's teaching cohort, specifically their pre-service training, dates back years if not decades, and yet they are expected to prepare students for an unknown future. This is not to say that education needs not revisit the past to learn from our ancestors, including from their mistakes to avoid undignified tragedies such as the genocide during holocaust. Regrettably, extreme right discourse and politics currently pervading nations, seem to have neglected this atrocious part of recent history (Head of Primary School 1).

Malta seems to have all the structures in place and yet the desired, results remain undeservedly unachieved. The premature replacement of key individuals in strategic positions has a bearing on this struggle, as with new actors in the driver's seat, come new ideas without giving sufficient time for the implementation of previous initiatives (Head of Primary School 1). Teachers are in fact being expected to change from one pedagogical strategy to another without being given enough time to consolidate any learnt approach or to evaluate its impact (Teachers – Primary School 1).

The sense of continuity resulting from the realisation of the fact that the *National Curriculum Framework* of 2012 and emerging *Learning Outcomes Framework* (2015), in process of implementation, are rooted in the seminal document, Tomorrow's Schools (1995), tracing policy development through the previous *National Minimum Curriculum* (1999) helps in achieving the desired level of quality education (Head of Primary School 1). Nevertheless, in planning for this state of flux and ongoing change, all stakeholders have to be informed and involved through appropriate consultative processes (Head of Primary School 3). Furthermore, in a context of ongoing change which is, perhaps necessary, but undeniably negatively affecting educators, the Head of School has a central role in instilling a much sought-after sense of stability (Head of Primary School 2).

Timeliness

Practitioners vehemently accuse that the Maltese Educational System has been experiencing what they deemed to be a change overdose, with too "*many changes, created by people who believe they are experts, expected over unreasonable timeframes*" (Teachers – Primary School 2, Teachers – Secondary School). The excessively complex structure of the local central authorities, with the many Directors and respective policies, have made it impossible for Teachers to keep up with changes (Teachers – Primary School 2). Furthermore, although it is believed that Politics should be kept as far as possible from education, every new Government brings along new changes without being sufficiently aware of the impact this will have at the classroom level (Teachers – Primary School 2). Students themselves assert that before changing, one should research and evaluate the impact of whatever is being proposed locally, and not rely on research carried out in a foreign context (Students – Secondary School).

The trend to implement new initiatives when schools would still be dealing with former changes, hence hindering effectiveness, has become so customary that it is described as a *"modern way of life"* (Head of Primary School 3). Notwithstanding these incessant changes draining investment from public funds, which could be channelled where educators deem more necessary, education is still not of the desired quality (Teachers – Primary School 2).

If teachers are consulted more, these situations would be avoided (Teachers – Secondary School).

Implementing the desired educational initiatives in Malta repeatedly proves to be a hurdle. We seem to have everything in place but fail to implement effectively (Head of Primary School 1). In fact,

> *"…planning nationwide leaves much to be desired; year in and year out we are going through crisis management. The programme which has to be devised for each student cannot be set out on a yearly basis."*
>
> (Teachers – Secondary School)

On the other hand, there is a timid acknowledgment that an extent of positive change is happening. It may be gradual, and certainly depends on the drive and vision of the Head of School who leads change at school level. It is proposed that the higher the exposure of educators and educational leaders to wider educational fora, the clearer the vision, the higher the expectations of oneself and of educational provision, and hence, the stronger the drive for positive change (Head of Primary School 1).

The Binding Agent – *Purpose*

The composite DNA structure's cohesion relies on balancing forces and a binding agent to keep its various components together. The binding agent of this framework is '**Purpose**' which is influenced by *Integrity* and *Positionality*. *Integrity* is sustained by a commitment to *Authenticity* and *Continuity*, whereas *Positionality* reflects *Relevance*, *Interests Served* and *Impact*. *Authenticity* implies a moral underpinning and *Continuity* is representing extents of consistency of actions, including with declared principles. *Relevance* considers diverse current and future needs in the light of societal, group and individual *Interests Served* in determining the desired *Impact*. Actual and perceived notions of these elements contribute to the cohesion of the framework, hence towards the development or otherwise of the aspired quality education.

Integrity – Authenticity and Continuity

Authenticity

Quality Education should foster critical thinking, creativity and research skills, for development and innovation to occur especially in a small country as is Malta. Education should constitute the provision of a service (Shadow Minister). However,

> *"teachers seem to be functioning in an imposed tight-jacket not reflecting their professional status."*
>
> (Shadow Minister)

This becomes particularly evident when learners are required to fit in the system, with some being pushed out instead of being supported to develop their own abilities (Shadow Minister). Recognising learners' needs, including consideration of their socioeconomic backgrounds should not lead to complacency and mediocrity –

> *"high standards, also in terms of governance, enacting the rule of law at school, should remain constant to improve society."*
>
> (Head of Primary School 1)

Superficial attitudes adopted by specific Heads of School flaunting about what appear to be achievements of their respective schools aimed at impressing the Principal, undermine genuine discussion at the Council of Heads meeting which ought to include all stakeholders and potentially impacts students' learning in a meaningful way (Head of Secondary School). Gaining staff members trust and commitment is demanding but essential and possible. It becomes unattainable only when individuals selfishly seek only their personal gain (Head of Primary School 1).

Over the years, education has become completely unbalanced, focussing on and investing in the professional technical competencies, but neglecting the humanistic moral aspect, including religion. Quality education should seek a newly found balance which includes both aspects (technical competencies and humanistic moral aspects) together (Minister).

> *"We (as parents and as politicians) have created a moral wilderness, where our youngsters can do, dress and behave in any way they like. We just can't let it happen because it is our responsibility! Youngsters cannot*

> *be blamed for this. Education is only a part of it all, because there are other sectors, the family and society in general, that should also carry a part of the responsibility. I strongly feel that we (people in high positions) must be the first to set the example.”*
>
> (Minister)

Continuity

Changes in direction also in terms of network structure and constituency by central authorities, have surfaced as hindering continuity, causing increased frustrations and challenges created due to out-of-school factors (Head of Secondary School).

There is a known dichotomy between Educational Policy and practice. The quality professed by policy, which is also reliant on the quality of the teachers delivering education, may be in stark contrast with the attitudes, beliefs and actions of the same teachers (Head of Primary School 1). A degree of this inconsistency between policy and actual action at classroom level is also a result of a lack of coherent thoughts amongst professionals themselves (Head of Primary School 1). The sense of commitment is manifested in initiatives having a varying degree of meaning and impact on the students’ educational experience (Head of Primary School 2).

> *“Notwithstanding the huge undertaking, desired characteristics and values cannot be viewed as absolute or static. This does not mean that in an absolute sense there is no wrong or right. It means that even these underpinnings need to be dynamic, affecting and affected by sharing through people coming together in multiple ways, whilst recognising and celebrating diversity.”*
>
> (Minister)

Positionality – Relevance, Interests Served and Impact

Relevance

Quality education needs to first and foremost be in the children’s best interest (Teachers – Primary School 2). It should nurture a love for learning, equipping learners in becoming independent critical thinkers and lifelong learners, who are capable of reaching their own conclusions and to adapt throughout life (Teachers – Secondary School).

Nevertheless, education should also consider what the labour market requires and infuse its curriculum with such aspects (Parents – Secondary School). Education is reliant on and affects the Nation's economy, hence the need to remain relevant also in such terms (Head of Primary School 3). Students learn to have a job in the future (Students – Primary School 3). Although employers do expect skills matching, this is a complex issue, requiring projections and considerations on so many unknown factors. Adequate Career Guidance, particularly at Secondary level, should guide learners to grow in the area towards which they feel most inclined, and not towards a specific factory or workplace. This is part of the human capacity building for the country, which is of most concern to employers (MEA DG).

> *"Quality education is the educational experience both in and out of school, both formal and informal, assisting individuals to develop skills, abilities and their own values in the best possible way for their own use. One of the most dangerous phenomena hitting education today is the fixation on good results in standardised tests. Pasi Sahlberg purposefully calls this the 'Global Education Reform Movement', 'GERM' infecting systems with the belief that obtaining good placings in international tests equates to quality education. Those who do not, seem to be labelled as having something wrong with their education system. This is leading to a standardisation intended to fit in the mould of 'successful' countries who emphasise the need to achieve within these set parameters. … Is there the certainty that their educational experience is one that fosters sensibility towards each other's' problems, democratic values, honesty etc.? If the latter qualities are not amongst our priorities, especially when considering that some of the greatest scandals were caused by highly venerated and academically equipped professionals, how will we make a better world? Competence should not be at the detriment of ethic. The end should not necessarily justify the means; hence, education should include and nurture the moral aspect. I feel that we should take this into consideration, when seeing our children going through life's journey from kinder to tertiary education. Are we at any point during this journey asking them to take a good look at what they are doing and ask, 'what's the purpose of all this?'"*
>
> (Minister)

Quality education has to bring together the technical aspect which gives individuals the professional competence, to do whatever is required in the best possible manner, and also the humanistic moral aspect, to be able to ask what is the effect of whatever is being done on individuals, on society and on oneself (Minister). A complementary position to this, recognises values and work values (work ethic) as a very important component of quality education. It is asserted that some employers would rather engage someone with less qualifications (albeit meeting the expected level of education) but having these fundamental qualities and who is willing to continue learning on the job than others lacking such desired characteristics (MEA DG).

At the end of it all, the core function of the school remains the teaching and learning occurring in class, which remains of utmost importance (Head of Primary School 2). Students are legally obliged to attend school, placing an added responsibility to make this a fruitful and enjoyable experience. Furthermore, learners are to be assisted in growing at their own pace, supporting and/or challenging as may be required by the individual student.

> *"They need to be stimulated and stretched to help them reach their full potential. Being part of the College as an 'extended family', sharing practices and learning from each other assists in achieving this target."*
>
> (*College* Principal)

Quality Education is a right of all individuals, not only of those who do well in exams. It is one which does not discriminate against any student, assisting each in their developmental journey, not only those having academic abilities (Students – Secondary School, Teachers – Secondary School).

Whereas having students with varied abilities in the same class is challenging and places more responsibility on the teacher, it has had a positive impact on learners as they personally feel to be part of the same *College*, significantly mitigating on differences arising from abilities (Teachers Secondary School). However, students who are too street wise to be left with the rest of the students, cause teachers to advocate in favour of streaming to allow learning, asserting that the State should incentivise those who wish to learn (Teachers – Primary School 2). Quality Education is addressing the average child, leaving both ends of the spectrum - the gifted and talented, as well as those who are struggling, behind. This is a result of various constraints including fears from teachers how and to what extent can they stretch or support the learner (*College* Principal).

> *"When quality of education is linked with status, it becomes exclusively reserved for those in the upper social strata and relegates any other form of education as inferior."*
>
> (Minister)

Interests Served

One of the intended purposes of establishing *Colleges* was to have a common ethos and aims aligned with national objectives (MEA DG). When the Government at the time proposed the concept of *Colleges*, it was inspired by the fact that the Church Schools Sector in Malta appeared to be successful in every aspect and argued why couldn't State Schools learn from this positive experience. An aspect which was identified as being conducive to this, was a structural one – Vertical Integration. Hence, ensuring that students transitioned into schools having a similar ethos infused in their operation (Minister).

Whilst students from different schools within the same *College* meet on outings and associate themselves with each other through the uniform (Students – Secondary School), other students remark that they never visited another school within the same *College*, other than any physically adjacent one (Students – Primary School 1). Having the same uniform, badge and *College* Principal, are all indicative of being part of the same *College*, having a common identity (Students – Primary School 1, Students – Secondary School, Parents – Primary School 1, Parents – Secondary School).

> *"Schools with separate identities came together influencing and being influenced by the formation of a new identity for a common College, whilst retaining unique characteristics. Many variables affect the similarities and differences between schools and Colleges."*
>
> (*College* Principal)

Whilst acknowledging the common platform with a shared ethos that developed over time within the *College* network (Head of Primary School 3), it was also considered that with the unification into a *College*, the school's individual identity was being lost, particularly symbolised by the identical uniform adopted across all schools of the same *College*

(Teachers – Primary School 2). It is argued that there was pressure for the *College* to take over the School's identity, but this did not happen in the case of strong schools who resisted it forcefully (Teachers – Secondary School).

> *"For the College to nurture an identity such as the charisma professed by religious schools, it would be positive, but has become ever more so difficult also for the latter in today's secular world where institutions have become highly porous (permeable with influences coming in and leaking out). In yesterday's society it was easier for an institution to gain its own identity because it was 'closed' within itself and could therefore remain different from others. The influence of society has also left its impression on the family unit, which has become more of an open institution. It's useless regretting the past and this development will not be reverted. So the challenge remains on how to cultivate specific values conscious of the fact that we are living in an open society."*
>
> (Minister)

Today's complexity requires a composite multi-layered identity. Children come from very different social realities, bringing their own ambitions and cultures. There no longer may be the assumption of homogeneity because if it ever was, it has now broken down and no longer is. The complexity of human nature may be also understood in our own children. For this reason, *"one cannot simply list elements which would construe the identity of the ideal College, as this is not and can never be a static aim which may ever be fully achieved, it'll always remain an unfished business, an ongoing journey"* (Minister).

There is an impression that most changes are politically driven instead of necessarily ensuring relevance for the future. Hence, even though on certain principle aspects there is consensus, from an industrial perspective, problems arise when it comes to implementing such changes (MUT President). A strong desire for Education to be removed from partisan politics, which stifles progress in Malta, exists (Head of Primary School 1).

> *"On paper, political parties agree on a large number of topics, but then in practice, when in power, they do exactly the opposite. I feel that the time has come when all political parties should respect and treat the general population intelligently. The time has come for them to lead by example."*
>
> (MUT President)

Impact

There is uncertainty expressed whether the different reforms are leading to any sustained improvement in students' lifelong learning and lives in general (Head of Secondary School). Whereas some claim: *"we have mainly lost more than gained; education in general has lost because of the College"* (Teachers – Primary School 1), others recognise that the undeniable efforts on addressing students' challenging behaviour have been impacting positively not only on the individual but also on the learning of other students in class whose disruption has decreased and hence may focus more (Head of Secondary School). Although research is often proposed as a means to determine the validity of implemented policies, there also is scepticism revolving notions of contrived research, whose findings may be biased in accordance to the researcher's own (or adopted) agenda (Head of Secondary School).

Nevertheless, since the Ministry responsible for Education, hence for the implementation of *Colleges*, never published any evaluation of the system, the MUT carried its own research on the impact of *Colleges*. This evidenced that *Colleges* brought about increased workloads, bureaucracy, projects (and related work), meetings etc. Some Heads of School disclose to still be unhappy with the situation that has been created, also because of an excessive need to be engaged in out-of-school meetings. There undeniably is room for improvement and not all *Colleges* are being managed as they should be (MUT President).

Gauging quality education is a feat in itself. Indicators include tracer studies of school leavers, the extent that the education system's supply matches the industry's/economy's demands, and whether school leavers are adequately equipped and skilled, amongst others (*College* Principal). Debates on the subject organised by the MUT are claimed to have been a huge success and help gauge quality. *Colleges* could facilitate similar initiatives also by making use of contemporary technologies (MUT President). Further local research to identify specific variables contributing to quality education could help, however tangible outcomes are what matter most at the end. In fact, greater reliance on empirical data ought to help schools and *Colleges* better determine effectiveness and quality at a local and national level (*College* Principal).

On the other hand, there emerges a degree of agreement on the fact that quality education may be gauged through various means, with exam results being an important one, but not the predominant, if not exclusive, mode as seems to be experienced in Malta (MUT President, Shadow Minister, Minister). Quality cannot be demonstrated by the number of learners obtaining qualifications, which is only part of the wider picture. Individuals not gaining qualifications are indicative of the deeper issue, whereby the educational system hasn’t even managed to understand these individuals’ needs and potential (Shadow Minister).

Quality may be hard to determine but is very visible when achieved, also through the extent and quality of participation by members of the community in public debate. Regretfully even students pursuing post-graduate studies anecdotally struggle to conduct valid research supporting robust arguments (Shadow Minister). Compulsory education should be judged by the extent that our adolescents are being prepared to transition into adulthood on a sure footing. Anyone gauging quality education with blinkers on, would possibly rely on employability rates emphasising that Malta’s rate of employability for graduates is one of the best, and the very low unemployment rates Malta has been experiencing, hence claiming that our system is doing great. However, considering the significant percentage (declared to be 20%+ by the Minister himself at the time of the research) of students not engaged in anything after finishing compulsory schooling, it is evident that such a claim of success would not be portraying the whole truth. In fact, these members of our communities are at a higher risk of encountering other problems including abuse of substances and poor health conditions amongst others. On the other hand, some accuse the education system to be failing because of mismatches with the employment field, or of its inability to distribute work fairly, however, even this isn’t entirely correct as there are other variables affecting these phenomena (Minister).

Educational leaders and educators state that quality education is determined or measured by the extent of value added every individual student has gained when comparing the student at exit to his/her point of entry rather than with others (Teachers – Secondary School, Head of Primary School 2, Head of Primary School 3). Achieving quality education is an ongoing endeavour, or journey of collective growth (Head of Primary School 1, *College*

Principal). It requires all members of the community to continually critically reflect on the current state and not act complacent, numbing the drive to improve. Otherwise, quality education would only be a resemblance of mediocrity (Head of Primary School 1).

Whilst discourse of accountability has become common, and perhaps its applicability at higher levels increasingly present, at teacher level it is claimed to leave much to be desired. Teachers seem to know that they can get away with a poor performance without any particular implication. In contrast with Independent Schools, where parents are paying and demand a proper service, Teachers in State Schools seem to have negligible pressures to perform, as Heads feel powerless through learnt experiences. The Head is continually torn between supporting his staff, also by defending them against unjustified complaints, and similarly addressing practices to improve the service provision, especially in the light of unprofessional attitudes by teachers (Head of Primary School 1).

> *"External Reviews offer an outsider's view into what may be deemed to be a partially staged situation at school. … Nonetheless, these give insights into engrained practices, both positive and less positive ones, visible more to the eyes of an outsider. They may not necessarily give the full picture since certain aspects may be concealed by the school community, but the general impression is definitely worth discovering for further development."*
>
> (*College* Principal)

However, external quality assurance mechanisms alone are not enough (*College* Principal). The importance of internally reviewing the school's operation exceeds the impact there may ever be through external audits (Head of Primary School 1). Furthermore, it is up to the Head of School and the *College* Principal to daily monitor teaching and learning, intended more to serve as support, guidance and development rather than mere assessment (*College* Principal).

The Double Helix – Idiosyncrasy vs Universality

The characteristic twisting ladder form of the double helix is a result of equalising counteracting forces of the two vertical strands of the structure pushing and pulling in opposite directions. In this theoretical framework, one of these strands is '**Idiosyncrasy**', which upholds the uniqueness and value of the individual, emphasising the need for the tailored over the generic even if it comes at a cost. The other is '**Universality**' recognising the self-sacrificing value of the common good for greater and wider societal benefits. The contested theme of *Inclusion* and *Enablers* for the latter fraught with challenging notions of equity and equality, feed these strands and frame quality education.

Inclusion?

Quality education is best defined as the opportunity provided to each learner to access education according to one's own abilities, needs and baggage (Head of Primary School 2). All learners, irrespective of abilities, may and ought to register progress in their educational development, always having a way forward to pursue (Head of Secondary School).

> *"It is difficult to analyse the impact of Colleges if taken on their own, in isolation from other systemic reforms. The one big change which happened was not the Colleges but the comprehensive schools. There are people who attack the College System while in fact they are attacking the comprehensive system."*
>
> (Minister)

Parents equate being part of a *College* with the removal of the selective examination at the end of Primary schooling, reducing stress on young learners (Parents – Primary School 2). Parents have mixed opinions on the worth or otherwise of the selective examination at the end of Primary. However, there seems to be agreement on the need to group students according to ability within the school as it benefits both the children and the teacher (Parents – Secondary School). Certain parents are so concerned about mixed-ability schools and the situation in State Secondary Schools that the Non-State Schooling option is also considered as the mix is believed to be less. To be reassured, parents had been promised that learners would be given work that reflects their respective abilities, but it appears not to be happening in practice. Whilst misinformation and/or lack of information persists, parents suggest that there should be teachers dedicated exclusively for students who are struggling (Parents – Primary School 1). Parents decisively assert, *"there cannot be risks of getting things wrong as these are OUR CHILDREN!"* (Parents – Secondary School).

The trailing effects of the shift from a highly selective tripartite system to a more comprehensive system, which still bands and sets students (*on the continuum of streaming, but of lesser accentuated forms,*) within the same institution, are manifested in common nostalgic perceptions of regression (Head of Secondary School). Managing a diverse range of abilities in one class is deemed to be too high an expectation from teachers (Head of Primary School 3). In fact, whereas the removal of the harm inflicted by the labelling on students not making it to Junior Lyceums (*schools for the academically-abled students as determined through a high-stakes summative exam*) cannot be denied, similarly doing away with streaming and expecting results from a mixed ability class is considered unreasonable (Teachers – Primary School 3).

The comprehensive system has been benefitting less academically abled students by allowing them to continue schooling at the same school as the rest, retaining high expectations and being supported accordingly, but may have short-changed highly abled students. Banding may be mitigating on this impact (Head of Primary School 2). Educators claim that with the removal of a selective system at Secondary Schooling, students lost the incentive to work hard to achieve, with certain students having excessively relaxed and not engaging adequately, whereas the more diligent students are concerned because they'll end up in the same school as others who do not perform. This also increases the risk of highly-abled and diligent students to pick up bad habits from other less committed learners, whilst by the end of compulsory schooling they still need to sit for national high stakes exams (Teachers – Primary School 2, Primary School 3).

> *"Why is it that we have to ingrain in the student's brains that we have all the same standards? Why is it that because a student attends an Area Secondary School, he/she has something less than others? If our Area Secondary Schools were given due attention … things would have been much better. There should have been a bigger investment in these and in Trade schools. Some of the children show signs from primary schooling that they are not inclined to continue with higher education. Even life itself shows us that we cannot be all the same."*
>
> (Teachers – Secondary School)

Mixed abilities appear to be better managed at Primary than at Secondary School level, where numbers are claimed not to allow the individual attention required to meet the different abilities (Head of Primary School 3). There is a differing preparedness of teachers through experiences with particular groups of students, which in terms of greater readiness for meeting the needs of mixed ability, seems to favour those who prior to the comprehensive system supported the least academically abled. This has surfaced also through perceived/actual antagonism created amongst different groups of teachers (Head of Secondary School). Even newer teachers, who cannot compare systems before and after the introduction of *Colleges*, repeat elder teachers' views that the situation was better before especially in terms of students' behaviour. They insist that meeting the varied needs of students within the same class is an extremely challenging feat, complaining that setting of students according to ability was not offered in all subjects, as they believe should have been done (Teachers – Secondary School).

Whereas various teachers may still be in favour of streaming, other particular teachers are very much against this structure on principles of social justice. They accept setting and banding as a compromise to facilitate the teacher's work, but not segregation of learners which could hinder their life chances as from a very young age. The fact that students progress to the same Secondary school, had both its positive and negative aspects; for instance, bullying amongst students seems to have been negatively affected (Teachers – Secondary School).

A number of students agree with the comprehensive system as they deem it is the right of every student to have a quality education. Nonetheless, they express fears of possible bullying and exclusion, coming from preconceived stereotypes, harvested also by educators and educational leaders (Students – Secondary School). Others claim that,

> *"Academically abled students should not be placed in the same school as less academically abled, as they can never integrate with each other and the level of education required differs. Both groups suffer when placing them together, in terms of self-esteem and learning as teachers can't reach out to such a diverse spectrum."*
>
> (Students – Secondary School)

This wasn't directly caused by *Colleges* but by the decision to bring all students together (Students – Secondary School).

The intended decentralisation ignited a fear that local decisions may create or re-create gaps between *Colleges* negatively impacting learners' expected achievements. It is believed that this meant that, whilst not all may agree with central direction, the risk of greater differences was too high to allow the most critical decisions to be taken at a local level (Head of Secondary School). This was also reflected in the reassurance of a retained level of quality through the participation in nationally set annual exam papers, at the expense of greater relevance but possibly resulting in declining standards. This element of standardisation should also be reflected in the school-based assessments which ought to be discussed with (subject-specialist) Heads of Department whose role allows them to have a reach at *College* and national level (Head of Primary School 3, Head of Secondary School).

Regrettably, specific schools feel their needs are not being equitably met through the *College* System (MUT President). Particular concerns especially emerge from smaller schools, who struggle to benefit from the same or similar support structures to cope with contemporary complexities and changes (Teachers – Primary School 2). Furthermore, pervasive territorial issues emerge as struggles to gain more, or protect one's, space amidst certain schools, Heads of School and *College* Principals (Head of Secondary School).

It is important to involve and consult the widest stakeholder group possible. This also involves considering not only the current local context but also the foreseeable future and the international dimension if our country wishes to remain relevant and competitive (Head of Primary School 1). Malta can learn from other countries, but it needs to continually consider relevance to its local context (Parents – Secondary School).

> *"In nurturing the desired values in today's open society, there needs to be a consistent and ongoing effort to connect with the other. This is complex and multi-layered as it ought to include all levels – within and between Schools, Communities, Colleges, Sectors, Systems, Industries, Countries to reflect the globalised world. One needs to be personal, local and global at the same time, emphasising the need for effective interactions and communication"*
>
> (Minister)

Enablers?

"Inclusion is easier said than done!" Not everyone understands the same by the term inclusion (Teachers – Primary School 1). In recent years there has been a significantly increased understanding and acceptance of individual needs, perhaps especially when individuals are affected by (easily categorised) disabilities (Head of Primary School 2). However, albeit the commonly expressed value of inclusivity, the incumbent belief that the need to support a diverse group of students within the same context presents itself as a huge challenge for educators persists even amongst educational leaders (Head of Secondary School).

There should be no objection for classes to have mixed abilities, as it promotes an inclusive society whose members appreciate differences and support each other (Parents – Primary School 2). However, there is a perceived unbalanced approach to inclusion which is allegedly considering only parents' views, hence reliant on the knowledge and access that parents may have to seek support for their children (Head of Primary School 2). Whilst a balance needs to be sought to also cater for students' and parents' expectations, there are certain students who ought not be integrated in mainstream classes (Teachers – Primary School 1).

Educational Leaders' express concern about the lack of focus on the need to meet and stretch high achievers' abilities (Head of Secondary School). Parents similarly state that the system seems to be concerned and geared towards students who are struggling, at the detriment of the rest. They insist, *"whilst individuals experiencing challenges need to be assisted accordingly, other students should similarly be given the best opportunities possible"* (Parents – Secondary School).

Schools dependence on central authorities and structures creates ongoing tensions related to trust and provision or otherwise of the required resources to meet the needs of the specific community.

> *"Such authorities' (perceived or actual) reluctance to provide schools with the necessary resources, without personally experiencing the issue at hand, often results in less effectiveness in inclusion."*
>
> (Head of Primary School 1)

Apart from the challenges in the referral process itself, teachers also perceive parents as not always being in agreement on particular educational needs their children may be deemed to have, requiring them to be referred for assessments (Teachers – Primary School 3). Irrespectively, students boldly affirm undiscriminating respect towards each other stating, *"they are persons like me"* (Students – Primary School 2). To experience quality education, a student making use of a wheelchair for example, expects teachers not to identify him/her as different from the rest, especially in front of others as it makes him/her feel bad and possibly more exposed to (subtle or more overt) bullying, leading to other issues (Students – Primary School 2).

> *"Reflecting a tradition of segregation and selectivity, Malta introduced Co-Education in Secondary Schooling only in recent years adjusting the College System which had already contemplated such an evolution at inception stage in For All Children to Succeed (2005), splitting Secondary Schools into Middle and Secondary Schools mainly because of logistics."*
> (Head of Secondary School)

The comprehensive system together with the introduced Co-Education created a situation whereby students remain together possibly from Kinder till the end of Secondary, requiring peers to endure individuals with challenging behaviour for all those years (Teachers – Primary School 2). In fact, whilst students are generally in favour of Co-Educational Schools, as the rely on experiences at Primary level, in local Non-State Schools and in other European States, they emphasise that "*teachers need to enforce greater discipline within this system"* (Students – Secondary School).

Mixed feelings arise among parents when discussing Co-Education. It is acknowledged that Malta is amongst few Western countries still transitioning from single sex public secondary schooling and that in primary as well as post-secondary the setting has always been mixed gender. Nevertheless, concerns exist on adequate supervision, reliability on adolescents when unsupervised, and careful planning (Parents – Primary School 1, Parents – Secondary School). Parents express a degree of fear from mixed gender schools/classes at secondary level, as learners are at a developmental stage where the two genders require different approaches and arrangements, impacting differently on each other (Parents – Primary School 2). On the other hand (*albeit at the time still unaware of what the experience would* *have been like*), teachers generally retain a positive outlook not only to start on the right foot, but as in their view it helps the development of children's self-esteem (Teachers – Primary School 3, Teachers – Secondary School).

> *"Holistic quality education implies involving the community in different ways. Programmes which bring learners closer to the world of work, such as job-shadowing for instance, provide various opportunities for collaboration, mutual benefits and growth. It also allows another stakeholder group to support and influence what is occurring in education, nurturing greater collective ownership and potentially enhanced quality education."*
>
> (*College* Principal)

The greater opportunities to learn about, appreciate and understand the wider context, which may be impacting on the specific realities brought forth by *Colleges* (Head of Primary School 2) is complemented with the school's willingness to establish links with the local community (Head of Primary School 3). It is always positive to exchange as varied ideas as possible, since it creates opportunities for learning (Parents – Primary School 2).

> *"In determining local educational policy, we ought to widen our horizons, look at what is happening elsewhere internationally, evaluate studies being presented and consider what aspects of such practices could be beneficial in the local context. Is sufficient capital being made of professionals gaining such insights through participation in international fora?"*
>
> (Head of Primary School 1)

Furthermore, whilst schools within the same *College* share a lot of commonality, there would still be differences in students' culture from which schools can mutually learn. As enabled by *Colleges* but insufficiently taken advantage of, teachers would greatly benefit from intra-*College* exchanges to observe, reflect upon and learn from each other's best practices (Head of Primary School 1).

> *"For the College to bear more fruit, teachers ought to be given the opportunity to meet peers from other schools to discuss and exchange views. This would start addressing the pervading isolation especially in small schools."*
>
> (Head of Primary School 2)

The Genes

Each of the twisted ladder's horizontal 'slats', in the *Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure for Quality Education,* represents a particular continuum, referred to as the *'Base Spectrum'*. A singular *'Base Spectrum'* defines a very specific characteristic contributing towards quality education. A '**Gene**' is a segment of the chromosomic structure that is made of a number of these *'Base Spectra'* clustering specifics to collectively construct a wider aspect of the framework. Three distinct, yet interrelated genes have been identified. The '**Context Gene**' which describes the physical, organisational and dynamics setting together with other surroundings, includes *'Base Spectra'* for *Vertical vs Horizontal Structures*, *Centralised vs Democratised Power* and *Tangibles vs Intangibles.* The '**Content Gene**' embraces the objects and the subjects involved, under *Educational Experience vs Outcome* and *Actors Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity*. The '**Agency Gene**' deals with the efforts or otherwise to accomplish, in *Organisational vs Individual Action* and *Overt vs Covert Action.* These genes framed by the double helix with its anti-parallel forces, all of which kept together by the binding agent and revolving around the steady pivotal axis, enable the complex understanding of quality education.

The Context Gene

Vertical vs Horizontal Structures

> *"Undeniably, Colleges most significant positive change needs to be the fact that schools have at last been mobilised to at least speak to each other and wherever possible collaborate. Most of this depends on the leadership of the Head and Principal. Moving away from a tradition of isolation is a feat. Vertical and horizontal collaboration within and beyond Colleges is to be aspired."*
>
> (Minister)

A prime intention for *Colleges* was to induce more collaboration amongst schools (MUT President). This particularly rests on the *College* Principal, the Heads of School, and the Schools themselves working together (Head of Secondary School). Heads of School recognise a sense of collegiality which wasn't present before the *College* network structure

(Head of Primary School 1). Furthermore, the newly created opportunities for collaboration help deconstruct the isolation of schools, particularly primary schools, which rarely sought support from other schools prior to the establishment of the *College* network (Head of Secondary School). Parents recognise that being part of a *College* and the presence of a *College* Principal facilitate inter-school collaboration (Parents – Primary School 1).

> *"The Council of Heads meeting once a month acts as a space where information and directives are relayed by the College Principal to the Heads and a discussion is held on implications and implementation. In exchanging ideas, stronger and weaker practices are identified, and mutual learning occurs. Discussing policy implementation is extremely valuable as it processes central policies through front line leaders/practitioners who would ultimately be implementing, providing critical feedback also to central authorities. On the other hand, this forum also acts as a channel for practitioners to put forward recommendations, ideas of their own arising out of practice."*
>
> (*College* Principal)

This is seen by the Principal as a highly democratic mechanism allowing a vertical and horizontal exchange of ideas. Prior to *College* networks as an organisational arrangement, involvement of stakeholders was far less effective (*College* Principal).

> *"A positive dialogue between Heads of Secondary Schools with Heads of feeder Primary Schools was initiated through the setting up of Colleges. At least what may insufficiently be/have been happening horizontally, started occurring vertically. Heads became more concerned on what is happening not only in their schools but also in other schools, feeders especially, realising that it all impacts their respective reality."*
>
> (Minister)

Teachers of certain subjects from different schools within the same *College* have started to meet, but this is not happening across the board (Teachers – Secondary School). Teachers state that through the *College* they're networking and meeting with peers from other schools, sharing material, working on common issues and/or projects (Teachers – Secondary School). For instance, Foreign Language Awareness Programmes, whereby Foreign Languages Teachers from the Secondary visit and give taster lessons to Primary School students, are being implemented widely also thanks to the *College* System (Teachers

– Secondary School). However, teachers serving in a primary school declare themselves as unaware of what is occurring at secondary level, placing responsibility of this on the system (Teachers – Primary School 3). Likewise, the Head of a smaller primary school remarked,

> *"Smaller Primary Schools, who would benefit even more from opportunities for networking amongst educators, perceive their size to be a further limiting factor, as if insignificant in the greater picture, and end up being more isolated."*
>
> (Head of Primary School 2)

Notwithstanding initiatives, primary school teachers in particular remain insular and would benefit greatly from opportunities of professional development which require them to break out of their insularity. Stakeholders of primary schools, particularly teachers and parents, tend to be more isolated than those of secondary schools. Opportunities for more networking could help in mitigating this effect and help stakeholders appreciate further the benefits of being part of a *College* – *"These are seldom!"* (Head of Primary School 2).

Through *Colleges*, improvement of standards, of quality education is essentially brought forth by collegiality. *Colleges* allow for better monitoring of, standardisation amongst and assistance to schools (MUT President). Teachers recognise an enhanced level of quality in activities organised since forming part of the *College*, which can be attributed to collaboration (Teachers – Primary School 2). However, this budding sense of collegiality between Heads of Schools pertaining to the same network, has not as yet sufficiently been affecting the more significant curricular matters (Head of Primary School 2).

In turn, Heads of School know that they cannot function effectively in isolation but are dependent on collaboration within one's own school, with other schools and central authorities (Head of Primary School 3). This places a need for Heads of School to ensure that members of staff are given the space to contribute and are continually kept on board, requiring constant planning and commitment (Head of Primary School 2). Even teachers acknowledge that collaboration between teachers and the school administration is necessary to achieve quality education (Teachers – Primary School 2).

> *"Malta's size ought to enable greater intra- and inter-College networking fuelled by genuine collegiality, however our territorial culture does not help."*
>
> (Minister)

Regrettably, *Colleges* also confined interactions within a limited pool, excluding a greater diversification of experiences and opportunities (Head of Primary School 2). *Colleges* limit children's exposure to peers coming from different environments and cultures. Although there had been discourse of learners joining *Colleges* coming from different parts of the island – *"this didn't materialise!"* (Teachers – Primary School 1).

> *"Colleges have been constructed geographically not on the basis of specialisation, as it was once mentioned."*
>
> (Teachers – Secondary School)

A *College* with greater diversity would have a more positive impact on learners. Particularly for students coming from areas with a low socio-economic standing (Teachers – Primary School 1). Whereas logistic arrangements need to be considered, had there been a more differentiated group of learners, it would have mitigated on the labelling that still occurs on *Colleges* (Teachers – Secondary School).

> *"One … aspect, which I feel strongly about, that at the time we didn't predict, is the fact that the setting up of Colleges has produced an element of class distinction between certain Colleges. The union gets requests from teachers and parents not to be transferred or have their children sent to a certain College because of this. The union has put forward its ideas regarding this matter to the Education Directorate."*
>
> (MUT President)

Furthermore, inward looking community members, possibly overwhelmed with other issues, miss out on opportunities of growth through EU-funded programmes (Head of Primary School 1).

> *"There should be more interactions between all schools at all levels and there should be more participation when it comes to European matters."*
>
> (Students – Secondary School)

From another perspective, thanks to the clear constitution of schools to a particular *College* network, students and their parents are reassured knowing which schools would the student be attending to as from enrolment till the end of secondary (Parents – Primary School 2, Head of Primary School 1, Head of Primary School 2, Head of Secondary School). This also allows greater follow-up and monitoring of students by professionals (Head of Primary School 1, Head of Primary School 2, Head of Secondary School). Heads of School feel safer when discussing transitioning students' needs with other Heads from the same *College*, with whom there is a trustful relationship (Head of Primary School 2). After all, one of the main purposes for *Colleges* was to facilitate smoother transitions from primary to secondary (MUT President). In fact, students feel safer and happier knowing where they will proceed after primary school especially comforted by the fact that they will retain contact with their friends, also thanks to the Co-Education Schooling System which no longer segregates boys from girls (Students – Primary School 3). The visits to receiving secondary schools also help in smoothening this transition (Students – Primary School 2), and according to a teacher, since being part of a *College*, such orientation visits have become better organised (Teachers – Primary School 2).

> *"Transition programmes, that occurred even before the introduction of Colleges, smoothened the transition from Primary to Secondary. The College further improved this process."*
>
> (Parents – Secondary School)

Admittedly, albeit parents know which secondary school will their primary school-aged children attend, this doesn't stop them from worrying, especially if (in/correct) fearful preconceived ideas of the specific secondary school precede enrolment (Parents – Primary School 1). Although eventually parents got used to the idea, at first there were great concerns upon learning about the new school their children would be attending to (Teachers – Primary School 3). Regrettably, parents' sense of belonging to a *College* is often limited to the reassurance of continuity for the children's education within the same *College*, which in this system is usually known to them upon entry at Kindergarten (Head of Secondary School). Moreover, knowing where students would progress to does not necessarily assist a smoother transition between schools. Whereas at school level, adequate handing-over of learners from one level to the next is dealt with by teachers, when transitioning from one school to another, meetings are organised by members of the respective Senior Management Teams assisted by Psychosocial Professionals at *College* level (Teachers – Primary School 3).

Colleges cater for the contextual needs of a particular community with specific socio-economic needs, hence focussing efforts and resources accordingly (Head of Secondary School). The Psychosocial Services offered at a *College* level have meant a significant leap forward also thanks to services which previously were either non-existent or very hard to access through added layers of bureaucracy (*College* Principal). Part of this support is the presence of Guidance Teachers in the Primary ensuring both support to younger learners and greater continuity of service (Head of Primary School 2).

> *"Colleges contributed greatly in the development of a robust support network (safety nets) for students to achieve goals which would have been unattainable for isolated schools to achieve."*
>
> (Head of Secondary School)

Parents are also supported and are aware that even though there may not necessarily be ongoing contact with the Principal, if required, after referring to the school's authorities, there always is the possibility to refer to him/her (Parents – Secondary School).

> *"The office of the Principal has brought the Directorates closer to parents, significantly improving accessibility, communication and coordination."*
>
> (Parents – Secondary School)

Similarly, teachers believe that from an administrative perspective Heads of School are more supported with the advent of *Colleges*, since before they had to deal directly with the central authorities (Teachers – Primary School 2). However,

> *"The feel-good factor of being part of a College is not being felt by us or the students."*
>
> (Teachers – Secondary School)

Colleges have increased bureaucracy without achieving the desired equity and feelings of parity on behalf of students, that was claimed to have been achieved with the removal of Area Secondary Schools (*which during the segregation of students in different schools on the basis of ability, catered for those with a deemed lower ability*). *Colleges* have increased bureaucracy and specific officials seem to have multiple lines of management and accountability creating tensions and unnecessary/unproductive added workload (MUT President).

> *"There should always be one line management. I am not saying that these issues are happening because of the College system, but because of the increased bureaucracy which I am positive that we can do without."*
>
> (MUT President)

Colleges created positions for specific purposes, but the demands on these new officials are greater than they can take. It is the case also for Heads of Department (who were in place even before *Colleges* but were now reorganised) who were meant to support Curriculum matters but cannot cope (Teachers – Secondary School).

> *"The introduction of various specialised professionals intended to complement the Class Teacher, ought to have served to support an enhanced educational service to learners, whereas there is no (or insufficient) complementarity resulting in fragmented provision which is incomprehensible to learners. This also applies to the fragmentation of the curriculum as early as in Primary Years with Subject Teachers being introduced in more and more areas increasingly taking over students from the Class Teacher. In these early years of schooling, the Class Teacher's presence is essential … for both cognitive and affective purposes."*
>
> (*College* Principal)

The integration of schools on the basis of geographical territory is an arrangement which is not entirely unique to Malta and also reminds of the segregation created by Bantu Schools, as it brings specific schools together but excludes from the rest. Although comparing the Maltese *College* System to Bantu Schools may sound extreme, there undeniably are similarities (Minister).

> *"Retaining students in the same educational and social environment for the whole process limits aspirations to the boundaries created by the 'world' familiar to the individual. Allowing children to mix with others coming from different contexts pushes these boundaries and encourages them to view the world from a different perspective. Although in Malta students do mix slightly when moving from their village's Primary School, the formalisation of the boundaries between Colleges still exists and is still of concern."*
>
> (Minister)

There is an advantage of having schools pertaining to the same *College* rendering service to students from the same geographical region, as the context, social structure and needs are similar. However, it limits students, especially if their schools are also physically located in the same region, creating situations where some students never leave the same area (Head of Secondary School). The structural reorganisation of students and schools induced by *Colleges* caused a segregation of students on the basis of their residential geographical location from the rest of the national cohort (Head of Primary School 2). Although learners benefitted from remaining with the same learners from their feeder primary school, when transitioning to secondary they mingled only with other learners from different schools within the *College* (Parents – Primary School 2). Teachers would have preferred students, particularly at secondary level, to be coming from a wider mix of geographical regions. Mixing cultures would have been healthier (Teachers – Secondary School).

> *“Keeping students from the same geographical region together even at Secondary level might be limiting their awareness and knowledge of other situations.”*
>
> (Teachers – Primary School 3)

Teachers understand that the *Colleges* constitution revolved on geographical proximity and logistic issues, yet this had to be considered against the concentration of difficulties that may be present in the selected area (Teachers – Primary School 2). *“The fact that the children cannot be integrated with other children from other areas has had its negative effect, when it comes to secondary level”* (Teachers – Primary School 2).

There could be changes, particularly at the senior secondary level which encourages student mobility across *Colleges*, hence combatting social and territorial segregation. *“How and when this can happen is another story!”* (Minister).

> *“Ghettoism remains the greatest loss of the Colleges as through them it has been institutionalised!”*
>
> (Minister)

Centralised vs Democratised Power

The Maltese Educational System has a heavy central structure, with too many Directorates, Departments and Directors dishing out Policies, making it unbearable for the teacher to keep up with the pace (Teachers – Primary School 2). Whereas there could have been school practitioners who regard the *College* as an added layer of bureaucracy, this relies heavily on the way it was presented to them by the Head of School and the *College* Principal. When presented correctly practitioners appreciate that there is someone else whom they could relate to and seek support from, who is not at the Ministry. The fear of an imposing *"big brother"* who inconsiderately places one and all in the same box, was a hindrance at the initial stages of *College* formation (*College* Principal). However,

> *"… this has now been overcome, although admittedly some uncertainties regarding when to refer to the College Principal, Director, Director General, remain. Nonetheless, certain elements of negativity towards the College have been surpassed and even the teaching staff knows that if there is an issue at school level there is someone else at a higher level than the Head, but sufficiently close, to address the issue. Parents' concerns arose by the fact of not being involved in the setting up of the Colleges, but they are now being involved."*
>
> (*College* Principal)

If quality education should be manifested as professed, then *Colleges* ought to foster an ethos which promotes it and creates a sense of belonging amongst all stakeholders. *"If I have a sense of ownership, I will protect what I own."* Specific Heads of School manage to retain this sense of belonging at their respective school, the same should happen at a *College* level (Shadow Minister).

Apart from legislation, the setting up of *Colleges* required structural changes. Before it was the Head of School alone who managed the school. Through this new setup, *College* Principals (or *College* Coordinators at Pilot Project stage) were getting more involved in the daily running of schools. Some Heads of School actually encouraged this type of management, but it wasn't making sense (MUT President). Moreover,

> *"Colleges ought to have been governed by a Board and not the Principal, but the MUT was always against such structure because of uncertainty about who would be on such Board, whether they would be political appointees or similar."*
>
> (MUT President)

Colleges promote the desired greater adoption of democratic structures and processes in schools which allow for equitable and greater involvement of the different stakeholders in schools (Head of Secondary School). The Council of Heads itself is intended to serve as a democratic structure for co-constructed decision-making. However, it rarely, if ever reaches a level of involvement that includes teachers. This is also reliant on the respective Head of School's approach with the staff. Moreover, dynamics within the Council are also affected by the characters within it; seemingly Heads of larger schools appear more likely to take over (Teachers – Primary School 2). The intended involvement of parents in consultative processes by the school should contribute also in the wider, national picture, enhancing the democratic principles in action (Head of Primary School 3). Nonetheless, the presence of parents on the School Council is at times a source of antagonism and not collegiality with teachers (Teachers – Primary School 2). In fact,

> *"… parents seem to have multiple channels to air their concerns whilst teachers only have their Head of School, who in turn refers to the Principal. Our voice seems weak and not listened to."*
>
> (Teachers – Primary School 2)

Structures, space and disposition for students to air their views, express opinions and take initiative are also nurtured. Nevertheless, there is an apparent focus on events rather than on core elements such as learning experiences, which would foster more ownership and possibly educational success (Head of Secondary School). Moreover, the management of schools should not only allow greater, wider and more effective participation in decision-making, but should also influence and model learners. (Students – Primary School 1).

> *"Whilst working with others is encouraged by teachers, also through group work, our choices and voice may still be limited."*
>
> (Students – Primary School 3)

The Head of School facilitates, supports and guides students in articulating their thoughts and putting forward their voice effectively (Students – Primary School 2). Students feel they may suggest improvements to the Head of School, but this relies on the Head's personality (Students – Primary School 3). Although students insist that they need to follow rules and fit within the structure, when encouraged, they attempt to suggest improvements which better fit their needs, but realise that compromises are required to suit everybody (Students – Primary School 3).

> *"The Student Council as a structure to support democratic practices exists but does not consult with all students and is more focused on organising activities."*
>
> (Students – Secondary School)

The student council meets regularly to discuss issues of interest to students, proposing changes to the school's management after consulting with peers. Examples of such initiatives seem to revolve around fun or fund-raising activities. Student Council representatives are occasionally also given the opportunity to meet with peers from other schools within the *College* (Students – Primary School 2).

> *"There is one way in which to build a network identity, values and ethos; having a network which is close to those using it. What makes sense to you is your immediate school, the College is 'abstract' while the school is concrete. … If I'll have some say about the future, it will be (and it is my one true wish) that the real protagonists will be the schools and the Colleges help them to really work together."*
>
> (Minister)

The dispersion of a felt sense of collegiality was broadly limited to members of the Senior Management Team at first, only gradually spreading amongst other educators through opportunities created for them as well (Head of Primary School 2). Although there is an increase in opportunities for staff members to participate in initiatives that bring colleagues from other schools together, teachers still "*do not really feel they belong to the College*". Educators feel less of an impact in being part of a *College*. Perhaps an example of an impact is the development and adoption of the same half-yearly exam papers at *College* level (Teachers – Primary School 2, Teachers – Primary School 3). However, it is the members of the Senior Management from each school who meet to discuss this: "*teachers have never met to discuss ideas*". Teachers explain that contact with counterparts in other schools is very limited or non-existent. It actually only occurs during In-Service Training as used to happen even before the *Colleges* were introduced. Only members of the Senior Management meet, even for development and coordination of half-yearly exam papers (Teachers – Primary School 2).

Although *Colleges* have introduced another level of safeguards for students and parents (MUT President), to students being part of a *College* seemed not to have made any difference, other than some greater opportunities to mix with learners from other schools and abilities. On the other hand, the loss of the school's identity – name – did impact learners (Students – Secondary School). According to parents, the fact that the School is part of the *College* had no impact on children. It only impacted the Administration, at times hindering the Head of acting as he needs approval (Parents – Primary School 1). There was no significant difference felt by parents between before and after the introduction of *Colleges* (Parents – Secondary School). It is the Head of School's responsibility to remind parents that the school belongs to a *College* and emphasise its benefits (Head of Primary School 1). Admittedly the *College* Principal acknowledges that parents are still rather sceptical about the whole concept of *Colleges*. On the other hand, some may have a better understanding. The community in general is still lacking behind (*College* Principal).

> *"The fact that we were able to bypass the school ethos and embrace the College ethos, allows us to move further and accept the fact that we all have to work with other teachers and professionals towards the same goal, that is to offer a complete education to our students. Achieving this harmony between all professional is the success being aimed for."*
>
> (*College* Principal)

College and schools, face issues related to dependence on a central authority. This lack of autonomy is particularly visible in the inability for the school to select its own staff (Head of Secondary School). If the *College* was freed from so much dependence on the Directorates, schools could be more effective in terms of timeliness, relevance and ownership (Head of Primary School 1).

> *"A central authority that preaches autonomy, but practices dictatorship, can only stall not facilitate progress."*
>
> (Head of Primary School 1)

This should not preclude a central authority well equipped with qualified professionals from acting as an effective, further point of reference when required (Head of Primary School 1). The positive intention to decentralise authority through *Colleges* needs to be equitably supplemented by sufficient and technically competent human resources, which is still extremely frail especially if compared to the humongous central structure (Head of Primary School 2). In actual fact, the professed decentralisation and devolution of power never materialised in significant ways; arguably, the only manifestation of this is in student transfers between schools and *Colleges*, but not in curricular decisions, recruitment and other key decisions (Head of Secondary School). Retention of centralised Human Resources is a particularly missed opportunity (Head of Primary School 2).

> *"Until staff members are centrally employed and deployed in schools, the Head of School is faced with a huge constraint in achieving quality education."*
>
> (Head of Primary School 1)

The original proposal for *Colleges* to recruit and employ their own staff, was met with great resistance by the trade union. *"This would have led to poaching from one College to another as happens in Non-State Schools, although it is far more controlled today even in those schools"* (MUT President).

Whilst being offered opportunities to discuss how best to address specific issues at school level, current structures still do not allow enough discretion at school level (Head of Primary School 3). Teachers believe that there needs to be a balance between centralised and autonomous decision-making. For instance, decisions which would have no effect on other *Colleges* should be taken at *College* level whilst others such as Curriculum should remain at national level. More autonomy would also help in making teachers more accountable (Teachers – Secondary School). *"Autonomy is about accountability!"* As long as the Head of School is willing to shoulder the related accountability, autonomy (within relative parameters) is granted. However, many Heads do not want to be held accountable, hence claim they are not autonomous (Head of Primary School 1).

> *"Whereas central authorities continue to develop and proclaim national policies and the national curriculum, with the creation of the College, professionals at College and school level can better focus on students' abilities."*
>
> (*College* Principal)

Whilst an extent of autonomy is desirable to allow adaptation of policy implementation in relation to the local context, standards and policies should remain national to avoid short-changing learners (Teachers – Secondary School). In view of the closer relationship with *College* members, hence better knowing the context and different realities, the *College* Principal should be given more autonomy in terms of managing people and the curriculum.

This further underlines the importance of the Head of School to be backed by teachers who are in the classroom (Head of Primary School 2). *Colleges* also serve as an effective platform for localised research which may cumulatively portray an accurate national picture (Teachers – Primary School 2).

> *"The education system should provide parameters, but then allow educators to use their professional discretion in deciding what is best for the particular class and individual, since none of the policy makers may ever replace the teacher when facing the class. Current practices, forcing educators to follow prescriptive directions and pedagogies, including the use of specific resources such as the interactive whiteboard, are leading to ineffective practices – for instances interactive whiteboards end up being used as if blackboards. Autonomy requires trust, space and drive by educators which need to be nurtured by educational leaders and policy makers."*
>
> (Shadow Minister)

Policy development in education must include everyone, separating the partisan Political dimension from civil society. *"In situations like in Malta where tribal Politics reign, it is even more important, with the surprising result that those who are Politically active may take an even more active role in civil society."* Pasi Sahlberg insists that in the 1980's Political and civil consensus was achieved in Finland as there was a big economic crisis that required a long-term educational plan that was agreed upon by all parties. *"In Malta reaching consensus in the Political society is more difficult, hence the importance of reaching consensus in the civil society not to wait for partisan politics which has opposing poles."* In approaching this balance both sides of the situation need to be known. (Minister)

> *"There should be a group made up of students, Parents, teachers and those who are planning future plans. Eventually somebody then decides after listening to what was said. Why not let the majority decide? One has to keep in mind the needs of the nation (although one must be careful not to go to the extremes, otherwise we will end in a communist state). It is important that whoever has to decide has to look at the wider picture keeping in mind the best interest of the population."*
>
> (Students – Secondary School)

There appears to be a widespread agreement in the stakeholders' right to determine by what and how would they be impacted through educational policy (Parents – Secondary

School, Head of Primary School 1, Head of Primary School 2, Head of Primary School 3, Head of Secondary School).

> *"Democratically, all stakeholders should have a right of say on education, but not all have the same insights. Whereas in medicine we recognise the doctor's esoteric knowledge and rely on the professional expertise, most believe they possess enough knowledge to express opinion on education. Regretfully, even officials in high positions do not necessarily quote researches correctly."*
>
> (Head of Primary School 1)

Hence, the belief that front-line educators and educational leaders should have a greater say in educational policy design (Students – Primary School 1, Students – Primary School 2, Parents – Secondary School, Teachers – Primary School 1, Teachers – Primary School 2, Teachers – Primary School 3, Teachers – Secondary School, Head of Primary School 1, Head of Primary School 2, Head of Primary School 3). Whilst parents are acknowledged as being owed the opportunity, and should be engaged by Heads of School, to participate (Students – Primary School 1, Parents – Primary School 2, Teachers – Primary School 3, Head of Primary School 1), their contribution is perceived to potentially be more superficial (Head of Primary School 3). Parents need to be heard too, but they trust educators (Parents – Secondary School). Nevertheless, everyone should be adequately informed and 'educated' to participate in consultative processes that determine national policy (Head of Secondary School).

> *"Everyone should have a right to plan future policies as education effects everybody – Parents, Politicians, Economists, Academics, etc… No one should be excluded. Educators ought not believe that education is exclusively theirs to determine."*
>
> (Head of Primary School 3)

Whilst recognising the need to involve as many stakeholders as possible in ongoing consultations, including academics from the University of Malta who may contribute from a different perspective (Head of Primary School 1), is also met with other, more forceful practitioners in their outlook who declare that,

> *"… it should be front liners in the classroom who should determine educational policy. Those not in touch with classroom practice should definitely not be involved, or even worse be allowed to take decisions*

> *alone, as they are completely detached from reality. This has been the case in so many changes occurring in the local system which do not consider the practitioners' hands-on challenges!"*
>
> (Teachers – Secondary School)

Experience has shown that those who mostly influence policy are those least in contact with the first-hand experience of practice, creating a wide gap between what is expected and what may be implemented (Teachers – Primary School 2). There is a detachment of policies from practice which occurs at school (Head of Secondary School). Central authorities who do not necessarily appreciate the local context and/or who require all to be the same, should not constrain the Principal and Teachers, who should in turn decide taking into consideration the views of parents and students (Parents – Secondary School).

> *"Policies and decisions today are clearly vote-driven. MUT suggested the establishment of a permanent committee with all stakeholders represented, including both the Government and the Opposition with the hopeful intent that partisan Politics does not interfere with education especially at election time. The general public should be treated with more respect by Political Parties."*
>
> (MUT President)

Contrastingly, the universal right to have an extent of influence on decisions affecting oneself irrespective of partisan Politics, these regrettably still afflict the educational system (Teachers – Primary School 2, Head of Primary School 2). Nevertheless, a number remind that primarily it is the elected Government who has the legitimate right to legislate and determine what type of quality education should be provided as mandated by the electorate (Parents – Primary School 2, Head of Secondary School). It should be the State that should decide like a benevolent parent who knows what is best for his/her children (Parents – Primary School 1). However, proper consultation as occurred in the introduction of the Co-Educational system and the development of the *National Curriculum Framework* (NCF) is advisable as it ensures greater ownership by those who would be implementing and/or be affected by the specific policy direction (Head of Secondary School). It is a professional's obligation to provide feedback when consulted otherwise changes would not reflect the real, contextual needs. Opportunities have been created and notwithstanding the workload, there have been various instances where practitioners have contributed.

There similarly has to be a degree of acceptance that an extent of centrally driven policymaking is required (Head of Primary School 1).

> *"Ideally it is the student who should decide, because if we are not listening to what they are saying and if we turn a blind eye to what the student is going through, the pressures of the media, and if we cannot accept the fact the today's students can learn without the presence of the teacher, we would be deluding ourselves. But at the end of the day there still has to be the top management, who on behalf of all starts to plan and together with our help implement."*
>
> (*College* Principal)

Children should also have a say in deciding what happens in Education as they are the ultimate beneficiaries (Students – Primary School 1, Students – Primary School 2, Teachers – Primary School 2). *"Above all, it is children themselves who should also be involved"* (Parents – Primary School 2). Students' ideas and voices should be guided and supported to be effective. Heads of School should involve learners organising suitable channels for them to express their views on education and what should/should not be included (Students – Primary School 2, Students – Secondary School). Other students recognise the authority's right to determine what should constitute education, trusting that it would be best for them (Students – Primary School 3).

> *"There should be more input from the industry in education, especially at post-secondary level, but not excluding secondary schooling. Educators should also be more exposed to various workplaces, especially if they are responsible for career guidance. However, the driver should be the State, because local educational policies should tie in with other nations' policies. This should involve consultations with the various stakeholders. This is already happening also through the Malta Council for Economic and Social Development (MCESD), which is an advisory council that issues opinions and recommendations to the Maltese Government on behalf of social partners. However, there needs to be wider consultations involving society at large, placing the State in a stronger position to develop policies that may be owned and deliver results. We should be evaluating more the impact of our policies, who are we leaving behind and why is this happening. Uncomfortable questions should be asked, and this is an area where the State and Employers could collaborate."*
>
> (MEA DG)

When considering the introduction of something, it should be led by someone who is experienced, relying on research, applying it adequately to the local context, and considering the views of all involved (Teachers – Primary School 2). It would also be appropriate to consider what other countries are doing, as there must be something we could learn from them (Parents – Primary School 2). Nonetheless, as much as it is important to be inspired from foreign systems, not everything may apply to the local needs (Parents – Secondary School). Decision-making based on local research is greatly lacking in the local context, often transplanting foreign research to the local system. Such research should take into consideration both foreign and local perspectives. Questionnaires aren't always objective (Teachers – Primary School 2) or appropriate as they do not give a proper voice, whereas qualitative interviews/focus groups such as this (*referring to this specific study*) allow educators to express themselves better. Final decisions should always be based on local consultation and research, allowing some autonomy at *College* level as long as standards are upheld (Teachers – Secondary School).

> *"Stakeholders' involvement is one of the most important aspects. It needs to go beyond mere consultation, especially if their voice is not given any weight in the decision-making. The policy maker needs to perform a balancing act amongst the various diverging views. This should be part of the leadership role of those elected, but they seem to weakly reflect people's opinions."*
>
> (Shadow Minister)

Tangibles vs Intangibles

For *Colleges* to be introduced it required a change in legislation (MUT President). Quality Education within a *College* context and the effectivity of the latter is dependent on multiple variables amongst which team effort, the *College* Principal's availability and support, allocation and quality of the required human resources, the physical environment of the school/s and support to meet expectations … (Head of Secondary School). The implementation of other educational initiatives such as the *National Curriculum Framework*, and Quality Assurance (QA) provisions complementing *Colleges* have helped in the thrust towards improvement. Processes introduced as part of QA mechanisms to properly induce Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) into the profession, have given the opportunity to the *College* Principal to personally get to know each and every NQT starting in the respective *College*, influencing and mutually moulding enhanced professional practices. (*College* Principal)

> *"I firmly believe that the College System has done a lot of good and we have made great strides forward."*
>
> (MUT President)

Nonetheless, there still remains a desire to rethink the whole educational system as educators are continually struggling, and not necessarily managing, to meet students' needs (Head of Secondary School). In this context, parents, educators and educational leaders insist that the larger student population in schools (arguably a measure to achieve economies of scale through *Colleges*) is not allowing them to develop an individual relationship with every learner, which is particularly important to continue providing quality education with increased social, emotional, behavioural and educational needs (Parents – Primary School 1, Parents – Primary School 2, Teachers – Primary School 1, Teachers – Secondary School, Head of Primary School 2, Head of Primary School 3).

> *"Student population in classes with diverse abilities cannot be as large as other mainstream classes, so as to allow the teacher to dedicate more individual attention. This is a fundamental element in the provision of quality education."*
>
> (Head of Secondary School)

"The class size and students' varied abilities make a lot of difference." To meet the students' diverse needs, smaller class populations are required, otherwise there needs to be support for the teacher by a Learning Support Assistant/Educator (Teachers – Primary School 2). In mixed-ability settings, there has been positive impact demonstrated in achieving significant improvement in student attainment when the student population in class allows more individual attention (Head of Secondary School), but finances are being channelled in accordance to different priorities (Teachers – Secondary School). Likewise, the larger the number of schools in a *College* the less the opportunity to establish the desired relationships and level of support (Head of Primary School 3).

Although the number of students in class makes a difference, the characteristics of every individual within the group also contribute, and where student abilities vary significantly the teacher requires assistance even in small classes. Having children with different abilities in the same class, requires the teacher to know her/his students even better (Teachers – Primary School 2).

> *"The myth that smaller class sizes will necessarily lead to better results is disproven by current practices. Teachers need to be persuaded through demonstrated practices that appropriate strategies may lead to better results even in larger classes. Regretfully, the central dependency (also in terms of industrial relations and agreements) hinders learned professionals from feeling empowered and enacting change."*
>
> (Head of Secondary School)

Other challenges include the provision of the intended educational experiences with limited time and expertise (Head of Primary School 2), or perhaps the blur created between the *College* Principal's and the Head of School's role still creating unintended tensions, which when challenged by circumstances are often resolved with the *College* Principal's authority prevailing over and undermining that of the Head of School (Head of Secondary School). At a time when Information Technology solutions should aid effectiveness and communication between school and home, and coordination amongst teachers (Head of Secondary School), others identify the use of anachronistic processes and/or tools in a digital era, adopted by the centrally-driven slow-moving State School system wasting precious time from the schools' core function and focus (Head of Primary School 1). Context-specific challenges also characterise differences between schools offering Early Years education and those serving older groups. For instance, the lack of sufficiently qualified professionals is more predominant in the Early Years (Head of Primary School 1).

It generally transpires that the desired change seems not to materialise due to the inability to bring stakeholders on board (Head of Primary School 3). Some parents' understanding of the *College* is limited to being aware that feeder Primary Schools and Receiving Secondary Schools form part of the same group called a *College* and are 'headed' by the Principal (Parents – Secondary School). This is further exacerbated by the fact that certain parents claim they learnt about the *College* through the Media (Parents – Primary School 1). Others, place importance on the fact that being part of a *College* implies students wearing the same uniform (Parents – Primary School 2) remarking that this signifies a common identity which differentiates from other *Colleges* (Students – Primary School 2, Students – Primary School 3, Teachers – Primary School 2, Teachers – Primary School 3). Students' learnt behaviour to fit within a school's set structure, also defines learning time and expectations (Students – Primary School 3).

Quality education needs significant financial investment too (Teachers – Primary School 1). Effectiveness not only rests on the quality of Principals but also on the resources their respective *Colleges* are equipped with (Shadow Minister). *Colleges* need to be equipped properly. For instance, the concept of the Precincts Officer would have been effective if the resources (including human) assigned, were adequate (MUT President). From a resource-management perspective, *Colleges* allow better coordination and use of resources, including human (MEA DG).

> *"The College Principal is strategically positioned in a way that gives him/her visibility of the respective schools' available resources, enabling pooling and sharing of such resources. Besides the direct benefit of access to previously unavailable resources, this creates a need for collaboration, and improvement of management structures."*
>
> (*College* Principal)

In contrast, certain *College* Principals appear to be detached from schools' realities and in turn complain of lack of respect from stakeholders, without realising that it possibly is a result of the same detachment. They have the authority through their position, but lack the authority from their members which comes from sustained contact (Shadow Minister).

> *"The Head of School is the person who really knows the school, knows what is happening, and knows the staff, the students and their parents. If he is given a little more flexibility in the way he/she manages the school, things would work out much better."*
>
> (Shadow Minister)

The Content Gene

Educational Experience vs Outcome;

There cannot be one type of quality education as it needs to be construed around the individual learner's differing needs. Teachers need to know their learners well and it has to be complemented by all persons involved, including the parents, the Head of School, the *College* Principal and anyone else working with the child (Teachers – Primary School 1). It is important to keep the learner's current and future needs at the centre of all educational policy (Head of Primary School 3).

> *"The very fact that every teacher should be teaching in an individual manner, I think that this is already a positive move forward."*
>
> (Teachers – Primary School 1)

Quality education includes a continuum of formal and informal education (Teachers – Primary School 2). It may be associated with attainment (marks), but whilst results remain important, quality education implies offering students a wide variety of experiences in different domains, including character, social and emotional development assisting holistic development (Teachers – Primary School 2, Head of Primary School 1, Head of Primary School 2, Head of Primary School 3, Head of Secondary School). Furthermore, it should allow students to succeed at different levels (Head of Primary School 1, Head of Primary School 3, Head of Secondary School). From a minimal benchmark point of view, quality education ought to ensure all learners have at least acquired basic skills by the end of compulsory schooling (Teachers – Primary School 2, Head of Secondary School), even if this may not necessarily reflect the parents', at times unrealistic, expectations (Head of Secondary School). It should, however, also support the individual in the pursuit of a better quality of life (Head of Primary School 3).

> *"The delicate balance in determining quality education on the basis of both attainment and experiential, non-measurable growth, is fragile and may easily be lost."*
>
> (Head of Secondary School)

Quality education implies learners are exposed to the adequate curriculum, including being taught English, Mathematics and whatever else is deemed necessary. However, appropriateness of the pedagogy used, levels of engagement, varied modalities adopted, active participation, group-work and learner-led activities, are also indicators of quality education (Students – Primary School 1). Quality education should embrace different aptitudes allowing individuals to function effectively and independently in society (Head of Primary School 3). Important aspects include active citizenship and democracy which are promoted in the curriculum, but which need to be fostered especially through modelling (Head of Primary School 1). Not succeeding in this means failing in the educational mission (Teachers – Secondary School).

> *"Quality education is one which assists all learners to develop in all areas irrespective of their socio-economic background. For this to be achieved, educators need to be supported."*
>
> (Teachers – Primary School 3)

Quality education requires a holistic approach, which is not solely focused on academics but nurtures values and is for life (Parents – Secondary School, Teachers – Primary School 2, Teachers – Secondary School). Preparing students for life needs to start as early as in the primary years, since moulding individuals at secondary level might be too late (Teachers – Secondary School). Problem-solving is another important component of quality education as life is full of challenges (Head of Primary School 3).

> *"Apart from the academic component, quality education should also include other aspects including accepting others' differing perspectives, self-discipline etc."*
>
> (Students – Secondary School)

Quality education should help learners engage in constructive, respectful discussions in which parties active listen to each other's' views, are willing to take on positive criticism and evolve their thought accordingly. It should develop intercultural skills in learners making them able to thrive in a multicultural globalised community. This also builds on the awareness that within the same community there are differences, hence cultural barriers may further increase challenges (Teachers – Secondary School).

The trade union's perspective echoes that of educators and parents, whereby quality education is interpreted as holistic education through which students are prepared not only academically but have also acquired basic skills that assist them in facing life beyond schooling. Apart from having good attainment, students should be able to think critically and aren't blind-folded followers of any leader they are presented with. The MUT feels that this should be better addressed in compulsory education (MUT President).

> *"It is better to teach the child how to think, research and how to interpret matters, than teach academic subjects alone. Once the child has obtained these skills the others will follow naturally."*
>
> (MUT President)

Holistic education should also equip students to make them employable (Head of Secondary School). Character-formation is fundamental in quality education particularly because these students will not only be benefitting from society but shall also be contributors. Employers will obviously expect matching of skills. Knowing what skills will be required in the next decade is dependent on various factors, including advancement in technology and the type of direction being embarked upon by the country. When particular emphasis is placed on specific areas of learning and needs arise for new subjects the Ministry needs to decide which to keep and which to discard as there is a limited time factor to deal with. Skills mismatch appears to be a growing and worrying phenomenon throughout Europe. Education Systems should be ensuring that graduates find employment. Thankfully Malta performs well in this area, but it is important not to be complacent and to learn from others. Whilst increasing the number of graduates is important and needs to be sustained, it is similarly important to ensure that they all find employment in the respective fields of specialisation. The volume of qualified potential employees is an important aspect for employers too, as is their productivity. Since subjects studied after compulsory education are those in which students specialise, any other important area needs to be taught in compulsory years (MEA DG). For instance,

> *"Work Ethic in Malta has always given us a competitive advantage. When investors choose Malta, they take into great consideration the work force. Whereas labour costs are no longer attractive for investors, work ethic still is."*
>
> (MEA DG)

Job mobility has become more important than ever from an employee perspective as we no longer land on a good job and stay in it for life. Hence skills and competences need to be transferable. On the other hand, loyalty towards the employer is still sought, appreciated and rewarded. A greater balance between mobility and stability is to be reached (MEA DG).

Quality education inspires and provides avenues for the child to become a person. It isn't necessarily one that makes you a contributor to the economy, since that is quality for the economy but not for the education of a person (Shadow Minister).

> *"Holistic education also links to what are we educating for? Are we educating children so that they no longer work in factories, but become professionals, or if they have to work in a factory they have a certificate in hand, or are we educating children because we want them to be happy, fulfilled people?"*
>
> (Shadow Minister)

There are layers in education which are more important and profound than others. If we manage to turn a child into a person who has critical thinking and sufficient skills to become what s/he wants to become, then that is quality education (Shadow Minister).

> *"Quality education for me means that we do things the way they should be done not in a haphazard way; I work to acquire the required skills that make me professional in my work; I have the technical skills to carry out the job and I possess the moral consideration to start and finish the work as it should be; ask a reasonable compensation for the work done and do no harm to self or others. Ideally this is what quality education should be."*
>
> (Minister)

Since education needs to be relevant for life (Teachers – Secondary School), the curriculum should respond to contemporary life, to students' interests, and to *"where we want our children to function best"*, allowing for sufficient flexibility for learners' holistic development (Teachers – Primary School 2). It should do away with content which is irrelevant and needs to increase aspects that are more relevant for life, also including those areas which may not necessarily be easily measurable, like PSCD (Parents – Secondary School).

> *"To remain relevant, the curriculum should reflect today's and tomorrow's needs, continually evolving to better respond to current needs."*
>
> (Head of Primary School 2)

For the teacher to devise programmes that best meet the diverse needs of learners, s/he must be allowed more professional discretion and be given the space to decide what is best. This shouldn't be to an extreme where teachers feel left without guidance, but neither should there be complete prescription, hence a better balance should be sought (Teachers – Primary School 1). The current curriculum offers an extent of curricular prescription which allows for relevance but similarly gives sufficient direction to teachers but is arguably unjustly met with negativity by teachers (Head of Secondary School). Teamwork can help teachers, especially if adopting similar methods, as it rests on a wider spectrum of experiences (Teachers – Primary School 1).

> *"Whilst there still needs to be an element of guidance that ensures an extent of consistency, the teacher is to be allowed space where to express creativity also because there is no fixed exclusive method that would yield results."*
>
> (Teachers – Primary School 1)

Colleges were proposed as having the opportunity to develop their own curriculum relevant to the context's needs; yet the fact that ultimately all learners need to sit for the same national exams at the end of formal schooling ('O' Level) remains limiting (Teachers – Primary School 3). Ironically, one of the negative aspects of *Colleges* the trade union receives several complaints about is the decreased flexibility of the teacher and expected greater standardised approach to teaching. There is less independence enjoyed by the teacher (MUT President).

Teachers make reference to systems which allow students to consolidate a broad base of basic learning, whilst being offered the opportunity to develop particular skills if they have been identified to possess a specific talent or disposition (Teachers – Primary School 2). In the Maltese context, there is an over-emphasis on reading and writing obscuring listening and speaking (Teachers – Primary School 2, Teachers – Secondary) and so many other important and relevant aspects to students' lives, such as Social Studies, the Arts, PSCD (Teachers – Primary School 2). All are fundamental in active citizens and evidently broadly missing in the local population. Very little if any thematic or interdisciplinary learning occurs; this would significantly help consolidate learning. Whilst investing extensive time on content, practice and application is given very little importance (Teachers – Secondary School).

> *"Teachers feel that there is still too much emphasis on the academic content alienating from similarly important aspects which cannot be*

> *given enough space. Although the teacher tries to introduce other elements, the content still haunts and eventually needs to be covered. There should be greater autonomy for teachers to decide what is best."*
> (Teachers – Secondary School)

When learners show a lack of disposition towards academic subjects, it is a good thing they are offered the opportunity to learn a trade so they may finish schooling equipped with a different skillset (Parents – Secondary School). The introduction of Vocational Education and Training (VET) subjects has offered technically abled students a choice which locally had been lost for years (Head of Primary School 2). Students agree with a wider choice of subjects that include VET to better meet individual dispositions and preferences (Students – Secondary School). Oblivious of the introduction of such subjects in secondary schooling, some teachers recommend the re-introduction of Trade Schools (Teachers – Primary School 2).

Moreover, employers remind that being a small country, Malta needs to remain flexible enough to respond quickly to changing industry requirements. A fine example was the *Lufthansa Technik* experiment, where the Malta College for Arts Science and Technology (MCAST), the local further and higher vocational education and training institution, hastily developed a programme for the preparation of staff required to man the aircraft maintenance facilities established on the island (MEA DG).

Quality education includes various aspects, with academic success and students' attainment in standardised national exams being an important aspect (MEA DG). There are practical challenges in determining the different learning and progress recorded by learners taking into consideration the differing points of departure and their prospective arrival (Head of Secondary School). Although there is ample discourse on holistic quality education, the ultimate driver in the local educational system are exams which broadly remained unaltered emphasising recollection of knowledge. Teachers doubt whether the current exams are guaranteeing quality education (Teachers – Secondary School). It is important to retain forms of assessment which validly and reliably measure students' abilities, also informing about the quality education being provided (Head of Primary School

2). If exams are not validly assessing students' learning, they ought to be modified but not abolished (Teachers – Primary School 2).

> *"Whilst many try to give the impression that exams aren't important, in reality they do have a huge impact on individuals' lives, hence their high stakes element."*
>
> (Teachers – Secondary School)

The excessive fixation on summative assessment is taking up precious time from education which could be more relevant and meaningful, helping students develop problem-solving skills as in real-life situations (Teachers – Primary School 3). Parents have mixed feelings on the removal of the selective exam and the introduction of the Benchmark. Some praise the reduced stress, while others accuse that this will lower standards as students know they need not study since they would all attend the same school (Parents – Secondary School). Students sit for the Benchmark exams so teachers may assess what they know (Students – Primary School 2). However, others remark:

> *"The Benchmark is yet another summative test. Wouldn't learners benefit more from ongoing assessment, especially at this tender age."*
>
> (Teachers – Primary School 3)

Although at the end of Primary the selective exam was replaced by the Benchmark exam, since the latter determines the class in which students would be placed especially for the core subjects, it still placed an important emphasis on students to perform well, with the resulting degree of stress. This is generally viewed positively by parents, as placing everyone in the same class is not deemed as correct, *"fair"* (Parents – Primary School 2). Referring to the change from the selective to the Benchmark exam, some parents actually ask, *"Why fix something which in our view was working well?"* (Parents – Primary School 1). While certain parents agree that assessment should be based on objective tests and not on teachers' subjective impressions (Parents – Secondary School), others appreciate a balance between ongoing assessment and end-of-year exams. The fear in these cases is the teachers' subjectivity which could influence learners' marks. In order to counter-effect this risk, written work, which may be reviewed 'objectively' seems to be preferred by parents (Parents – Primary School 1).

> *"The fact that the end-of-primary selective exam was replaced by the Benchmark exam, eased pressures but also resulted in students not giving their best, or actually not preparing at all. This attitude comes from home. Exams are important for a quality education. Together with continuous assessment, it helps teachers focus on the individual needs."*
>
> (Teachers – Primary School 2)

Quality education requires that students' declared entitlement is met by the school in its available time (Head of Secondary School). Depending on the children's abilities, teachers need time and assistance to secure learning. Covering the expected breadth of content within the limited timeframe works against the possible greater depth of understanding especially with students that need more time (Teachers – Primary School 2). Quality education requires time for the teacher to adopt a more hands-on approach. This is constrained by the need for a seemingly ever-increasing content and reliance on subject-specialist teachers (in the Primary), who may be more knowledgeable in terms of content but are inevitably deducting contact time for the Class Teacher (Teachers – Primary School 1). The teacher needs to be allowed more time to prepare and follow-up adequately if they are expected to be more creative and innovative (Head of Secondary School).

> *"Teachers believe there is not enough time for effective learning. Structures aren't adequately in place to support the teacher in having time to compile the expected documentation. Effective time on task has diminished, hence teachers are required to rush against their will as it results in poorer quality. There is no time left to reflect."*
>
> (Teachers – Primary School 2)

Quality time has not only been reduced at home but also at school as teachers struggle to meet the demands of the curriculum especially with the given number of learners in class (Teachers – Primary School 2).

> *"Teachers are haunted by the need to cover the required content whilst knowing that learners would benefit greatly from other learning experiences."*
>
> (Teachers – Secondary School)

The syllabus is excessive and to cover the breadth of the material the teacher can't delve into the desired depth, hence learning remains superficial, with students failing to make the required associations and forgetting what they've learnt over a holiday period. There are so many important aspects to touch upon and other services coming into schools to educate students about specific areas, that teachers are being left with insufficient time to delve deeply into learning. Educational outings in fact end up being reduced to create time, and regretfully, if a centrally-driven outing is organised, it is given priority over those organised by the school (Teachers – Primary School 2).

Quality education is also impacted by the actions taken from preceding educational institutions. The level of intervention to meet the needs of learners, particularly those with diverse needs, varies greatly and in certain instances lacks the provision of timely and adequate supportive structures for learning. Secondary schools rely on the feeder primary schools' understanding and actions on such needs (Head of Secondary School).

> *"Precious time is being wasted in the Early Years, which should in fact constitute the foundation for a seamlessly developing programme avoiding overload at any point in the child's educational journey."*
>
> (Parents – Secondary School)

With the introduction of various services to support learners and teachers, it has become even more important to ensure that the teacher retains the important element of time on task which allows him/her to focus on learning. The *College* is meant to ensure this aspect as well (*College* Principal). Heads of School need to better regulate learning time by accepting and refusing participation in activities only in accordance to their relevance to students' learning, irrespective of who the organiser is, including central authorities (Head of Secondary School).

There are benefits as well as downsides to having common projects amongst *College* network constituents (Head of Primary School 3). Nevertheless, events and activities organised at *College* level, are involving different schools for students to participate and interact with each other (Students – Primary School 2, Students – Primary School 3) for example in sports (Students – Primary School 3). In fact, students seem to have been given more opportunities to meet and mingle with peers from different schools even if from the same *College*, after the latter were established (Students – Secondary School). Moreover, events organised at *College* level reach a level of quality which would be difficult to achieve as an isolated school. *"It is truly a case of the product being larger than the sum of its parts"* (Head of Primary School 1).

> *"Had it not been for Colleges a good number of students would have not benefitted from student exchanges abroad, and programmes such as the Job Shadowing wouldn't have materialised at such a scale and level of quality."*
>
> (MUT President)

Educational leaders may not necessarily always strike an adequate balance, over-emphasising enhancements which while being beneficial are subtleties which fade when compared to more important needs. On the other hand, there needs to be concrete efforts to ensure that teachers are aptly prepared for all eventualities, professionally flexible enough to respond to the learners' arising needs. Unfortunately, it appears that whilst technology and other aspects are changing at a fast rate, quality education is not keeping up with the pace (*College* Principal).

> *"Dealing with the inevitable tension created between diverging internal and external expectations requires diligent, professional and effective members of the Senior Management who manage to sustain an important delicate balance converging towards quality provision that bridges the school with the outside world."*
>
> (*College* Principal)

The undeniably increased societal complexities have been requiring greater focus on pastoral care by schools, whose positive response is impacting on students' lives. This needs to be developed further (Head of Primary School 2). In fact, schools regard pastoral care as an intrinsic element to quality education (Head of Secondary School). Quality education implies that students are happy at school, enjoy different learning experiences in and out of school, and feel respected. Students seek basic needs such as safety and protection from school authorities (Students – Primary School 3).

> *"Students ought to follow their education without excessive stress. Starting school already sad and stressed may soon be conducive to feelings of depression. This cannot be positive or lead to learning. If passion is absent in teaching, students cannot be engaged."*
>
> (Teachers – Secondary School)

Quality education starts by the teacher establishing good order in class (Parents – Primary School 2). It is also about learners observing rules: *"not to fight, call names or bully others; performing work accurately, timely and tidily; not being nasty to others who perform less well; perform well not to be deemed lazy"* (Students – Primary School 3).

> *"Contrary to the current trend from both parents and authorities, quality education should seek a greater balance between rights and obligations and not just rights for learners."*
>
> (Teachers – Primary School 2)

Discipline is necessary at school as is respect towards teachers, peers and oneself (Parents – Secondary School). Teachers complain that in today's reality, there is no respect towards the teacher; that there is no respect towards authority in general. Although teachers feel generally respected by parents, there are those who blame the teacher for all students' failures exhibiting lack of appreciation and disrespectful attitudes/behaviours ironically requiring most attention (Teachers – Primary School 2). Good order and discipline should be an intrinsic element of a holistic education. This requires better structures in schools. *"Heads are being left alone to face difficult situations beyond their line of duties"* (Teachers – Primary School 2).

Students generally regard schooling as a positive experience. A number however, remark on the more negative experience at primary level, especially in the way they were treated by teachers. In contrast they appreciated the interactions with their teachers at secondary level (Students – Secondary School). Parents commend that students need to behave well, and teachers should address students respectfully to model students in addressing each other likewise (Students – Primary School 2, Parents – Secondary School).

Actors Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity;

> *"The figure of the College Principal is so central and critical, that it constitutes the single-most factor determining the effectiveness and quality of the College. This is also manifested in the extent of availability and support the Principal is willing to offer to Heads of School."*
>
> (Head of Secondary School)

The quality of leadership by the *College* Principal, including his/her vision and empowerment to Heads of School determines the level of quality of the *College*. Heads of School who value high standards need to assist the *College* Principal to ensure success (Head of Primary School 1). Although the Principal is not physically present in schools on a daily basis, his/her presence is still felt and has made a significant difference also at school level. S/he is also available to meet individual members of staff privately as may be required (Teachers – Secondary School).

> *"One must realize that these perceptions differ because of the personality of the College Principal, the Heads of School and the Teachers, not to also involve the students and their parents. When you have a College Principal with a strong personality, good communication etc., the response is positive, whereas, if you have a College Principal with a weak personality and leadership skills, difficulties and problems are almost inevitable."*
>
> (Shadow Minister)

The *College* Principal recognises that the role allows for more focus, greater availability of time and accessibility to the respective *College's* schools when compared to what could be dedicated by central authorities prior to the creation of *Colleges* (*College* Principal). Before introducing any new initiative, Heads of School discuss their intent with the Principal both to explore his/her views and for backing (Head of Primary School 1).

As anticipated the success of a *College* depends greatly on the *College* Principal. From a trade union perspective, success is measured by the extent of networking between schools and support they receive from each other and the *College* – ranging from cooperation, to services offered to students, meetings for parents etc. This is happening in certain *Colleges* where the *College* Principal is wise enough to be involved and empower colleagues. However, in other *Colleges* the Principal went overboard trespassing boundaries and taking over the role of Heads of Schools within the *College* (MUT President).

> *"It's not the amount of activities the College organises but it's the amount of networking between the various schools that counts."*
>
> (MUT President)

The *College* Principal's approachable personality, treating Heads as equals and acknowledging that learning occurs throughout our lives irrespective of one's role, is critical in the effectiveness of *Colleges* (Head of Primary School 1). Whereas before one could afford having a person with a difficult personality at the central authority, it is now more important to have a *College* Principal whose personality makes it easier for community members to work with as s/he cannot be avoided (Head of Primary School 2). On the other hand, the readiness to form a collaborative spirit amongst Heads of School pertaining to the same network was also reliant on the individual personalities (Head of Primary School 3). The personal traits of Heads of School and the *College* Principal are fundamental for collaboration (Head of Secondary School).

> *"The personality, leadership qualities and competence of the College Principal and the various Heads of School are determining factors that characterise the extent of success or otherwise of the expected networking, support, development etc."*
>
> (Shadow Minister)

College Principals should be qualified in education and have good management skills to make best use of available resources. Hence, "*it's not only the personalities, but very often the personalities make a big difference"* (Shadow Minister).

For parents the Head of School is a point of reference of critical importance. S/he is there to mediate with teachers and other parents, having the children's best interest at heart. S/he encourages participation of parents, including those who otherwise might be rather shy and keep back (Parents – Primary School 2). Students regard the Head (and in his/her absence the Assistant Head) as the person whom to refer to in case of difficulty (Students – Primary School 2). *Colleges* offer the support of specialist professionals alleviating the Head of School from having to cater for everything alone; the Precincts Officer is one such resource (Head of Primary School 2). However, Heads of School feel these do not suffice to serve as a desirable one-stop-shop for schools, avoiding the need to refer to central authorities who are less in touch with the local context (Head of Primary School 1).

The impact of the teacher's personality is similarly impactful on the students' educational experience and their learning. Students are being empowered by their educators to be protagonists of their own learning (Head of Secondary School), nurturing students' realisation about the importance and usefulness of education for life, highlighting relevance (Head of Primary School 2). Quality education is about the way teachers teach (Students – Primary School 2). It is mostly reliant on the teachers' diligence – how much they are prepared, how they convey and explain their lesson (Students Secondary School). Educators, particularly teachers, occupy a central role in the achievement of quality education for all learners despite the challenges (Head of Primary School 2, Head of Primary School 3).

> *"Quality education requires educators/teachers who may serve as role models. Regretfully, on a number of instances, educators lack competences, lack respect towards others and do not function effectively in a team … hence how can they inspire and provide a high quality education?"*
>
> (Head of Primary School 1)

Teachers need to present lessons that are relevant for their particular learners, setting realistic expectations, being innovative also in the use of IT, and able to discuss with their students. Managing well the class, establishing and maintaining good order are also very important, and the teacher needs to be there for everybody (Students – Secondary School). Poorly performing teachers harm many students, particularly the most vulnerable. Teachers need to meet expectations. As most often is the case, this implies, knowing the content, the learners, being sensitive and respectful towards learners, offer individual attention and love – have children's best interest at heart (Parents – Primary School 2).

> *"Although we as parents have the children's future at heart, but we are also leaving our children in their hands and at school the teacher is the mummy."*
>
> (Parents – Secondary School)

Generally, the quality of teaching is perceived as being of good quality by parents. On the other hand, what their children might encounter in the future is a matter of concern (Parents – Primary School 1). In such a small context as is Malta, the professional credibility earned by an individual quickly reaches other colleagues and stakeholders. Hence, officials whose professional credibility is weak are severely hindered in serving as positive agents of change (Head of Primary School 1).

> *"Who educators are as persons and their personality/character formation heavily impacts on their practice. Similarly, educators need to be well*

> *equipped professionally. The same applies to Heads of School, who need to emanate confidence and peace, not panic or frustrations which would be counterproductive to a healthy climate."*
>
> (Head of Primary School 1)

This further emphasises the undeniable importance of high-quality professional development. Experience of locally organised training seems to lack the desired level of quality in terms of content and delivery that nurtures formation (Head of Primary School 1). All the support services provided by the *College* are actually intended to assist the teacher, ensure continuity in class and gradually move towards the right direction (*College* Principal). However, although *Colleges* brought significant positive differences in schools, the concept of Comprehensive Schooling that came along with them also created tensions amongst teachers. Teachers in the former Lyceums (Secondary Schools for students who passed their end-of-primary selective exam) seem to pretend to have superiority over teachers in the former Area Secondary Schools, even though the latter feel better equipped in classroom management and meeting the needs of struggling students (Teachers – Secondary School). By mixing students of different abilities, challenging student behaviour seems to have been spread across schools, violating those educational institutions which were almost oblivious to such attitudes and making educators' lives less bearable and effective (Head of Secondary School). The unfitness of certain students' behaviour at school is disrupting other students and teachers, and *"wasting a lot of the Head Teacher's time with little success"* (Head of Primary School 3).

The family has a significant impact on the individual and his/her potential to succeed. This has become a major issue due to the complexities students are facing in their families (Head of Primary School 1). The extent of quality time dedicated by parents to their children, or whether there are problems at home, make a great difference in learners' chances in education (Teachers – Primary School 1). For quality education to succeed, parents need to be addressed, as learners are usually the problem bearers. Regretfully, when schools organise meetings/training sessions for parents, those who mostly need it are those who never turn up. This is possibly the greatest problem faced by education (Parents – Primary School 2). Some students do not show respect towards their teachers mostly because of circumstances in their respective families. *"The school can never compete with the family"* (Teachers – Secondary School).

> *"Society's fast changing pace and complexities and eclectic influences also through various forms of media have made teachers' lives a constant battle."*
>
> (Teachers – Primary School 2)

It is irrefutable that schooling does not constitute education in its entirety and that parents, who need to also be involved in schooling, remain the prime educators (Head of Primary School 3).

> *"When we start discussing education/schools we have to consider a bigger reality, in the social, economic and political reality in which they exist. We must never discuss education in a vacuum because if we do so it gives a wrong perspective, either because we expect too little or too much from education, or we expect education to perform where it cannot."*
>
> (Minister)

There are divergent expectations between educational leaders, educators, parents etc... and increasing disparities between stakeholders' views. Perceptions of stakeholders about quality education are construed on their personal experiences (Head of Secondary School). Quality education as defined by certain parents, contrasts significantly from the teachers' definition (Teachers – Primary School 2). Varying parental expectations also exist, particularly amongst those who regard education as a holistic, formative experience, and those who reject the notion that the school may have to affect their own lifestyle and upbringing of children; between those who believe that academic success is important and those who do not value education (Head of Primary School 3).

> *"Heads need to listen to and empathise with parents expressing concerns/complaints on the school's provision. There needs to be mutual understanding facilitated by the Head of School. When parents realise that the school is working in the best interest of their child, acknowledging that no one is perfect, conflicts are eased."*
>
> (Head of Primary School 1)

The ongoing balancing act to strike an equilibrium amidst the tensions created between educators, parents and possibly the rest of the community, is further backed by the researched recognition of successful schools being those who mostly include parents (Head of Primary School 2). A degree of agreement on the definition of quality education, or relative concertedness, is possible and helps stimulate an extent of converging actions from stakeholders, potentially reinforcing rather than hindering mutual efforts (Head of Secondary School).

> *"Furthermore, uncertain agreement or lack of clarity of how quality should look like, leads to mutual dissatisfaction and tensions. Intra- and Inter-school comparisons makes life even harder for teachers."*
> (Teachers – Primary School 2)

Persons responsible for planning changes seem not to necessarily always be on the same frequency as those who eventually need to implement the changes. Working together should help achieve better changes. Not only parents need to understand educators better, but even more so, whoever is in the top management structures. Furthermore, educational reforms should be coherent (Teachers – Primary School 1). For those who are not in contact with the class it might be difficult to understand the challenges encountered and hence perspectives will differ (Teachers – Secondary School).

> *"If connections with the community, including employers are not established gaps between what education is providing and what the community expects will widen with the resulting implications."*
> (*College* Principal)

Employers today aren't seeking employees who are only qualified but are in search for those who can accomplish/deliver (start and finish a task). In certain instances, students having hands-on experience as part of their programmes are possibly more equipped than those who are only academically equipped (MUT President). Different stakeholder groups' expectations vary. The Industry expects a workforce that suits its evolving demands, whilst parents want what's best for their children. Some parents also expect schools to compensate for their absence, also in character formation of the younger generation. This is partially being addressed in specific activities and curricular subjects (*College* Principal).

> *"There are many unrealistic expectations regarding education, which is not fair. There seems to be a general understanding that education will solve all our existing problems. We have to make it clear that there is a difference between schooling and education. … It is not realistic to expect*

> *that education will solve all personal, social, economic, psychological, political, and religious problems. A school needs to be sensitive and well in touch with the community to be in a position to bring all these internal and external forces together. The inability to do this, creates unproductive, opposing forces."*
>
> (Minister)

Even within a group of educators practicing in the same school, views on school-related issues vary, exposing the frail balance that educational leaders need to deal with (Teachers – Primary School 3).

> *"There is little convergence on the definition of what quality education should be as views vary within and amongst stakeholder groups. Even teachers and parents differ amongst them – for some it might be the joy of knowledge and wisdom, whilst for others it'll be employment."*
>
> (Shadow Minister)

From a trade union perspective, quality education would also mean what return on investment would an employee prospectively have for the years of study invested instead of starting employment at the earliest possible age – to date sixteen (16) years in Malta. There are various views of what constitutes quality education; they differ but are not necessarily divergent. Whilst employers may be seeking an education that instils skills, work ethic and loyalty, parents may have a slightly different perspective, perhaps aspiring for social mobility, wanting to see their children in employment better than theirs. Hence, they could seek achievement of higher educational standards than their own to help achieve their intent. They undoubtedly want more opportunities offering different options for their children to flourish. This is why vocational post-secondary educational institutions are very important to fill any missing gaps in educational provision. These different paths lead to different career choices (MEA DG).

There is both convergence and divergence of expectations since we create education in our own likeness, expecting what we want from it. Employers, for instance, are dissatisfied cause even when the standard of an employee is good, there often are issues with productivity, work ethic, dress code etc. Some parents expect that since students go to school, it is the latter's responsibility to see to all possible aspects, when in reality, even if schools do try to walk the extra mile and include other elements such as healthy eating, the student can only learn if there is continuity with home, which may not necessarily be the case. Divergence of views isn't necessarily always negative. When handled well, tension is positive and creates life, provided it does not get out of hand (Minister).

> *"The beauty of life is (democracy has many defects, but it is so much better than suppression/dictatorship) that it is a mixture of convergence and divergence. We need both because without convergence you will have a breakdown in society (see what has happened in Libya). One has to take on board both convergence and divergence including them in the educational experience, with the problems and conflicts this brings along."*
>
> (Minister)

The Agency Gene

Organisational vs Individual Action;

The educational leader needs to have a clear vision, nurtures ownership amongst community members (Head of Primary School 1, Head of Secondary School) and has the ability to plan in a strategic manner (Head of Secondary School). The *College* Principal's focus on one *College* allows greater involvement, sense of belonging, awareness and knowledge of context and community members (Teachers – Primary School 3). S/he has a closer presence and offers support to Heads of School mediating with central authorities, without being perceived as another hierarchical layer (Head of Primary School 3, Head of Secondary School). The availability and commitment of the *College* Principal in assisting Heads in their mission varies and is a critical element in the effectiveness of quality education in the *College* context (Head of Secondary School).

> *"The reassurance of having the possibility to refer to the Principal on challenging or dull days, is of great comfort to the Head of School, whose role is otherwise very lonely."*
>
> (Head of Primary School 1)

There are extensive benefits in having opportunities to meet with trusted peers whom to support, by whom to be supported, and with whom to share learning from each other's experiences (Head of Primary School 2). These serve as learning opportunities, with the added reassurance of mutual support amongst Heads of School (Head of Primary School 1, Head of Primary School 2).

> *"The processes required to nurture, enable and sustain a collaborative spirit also manifested through sharing of resources and exchanges of views is a growth experience for all, including the College Principal. Knowing that there is readily available help at hand and the feeling of being part of 'an extended family', gives strength and reassurance."*
>
> (*College* Principal)

Not being alone, learning from trusted colleagues and broadening your understanding of issues taking into consideration other professionals' perspectives is a certain benefit of *Colleges* (Head of Primary School 3).

> *"The College Principal and the Heads of School form a close group of colleagues sharing expertise and vision supporting each other in moving towards a common direction."*
>
> (*College* Principal)

The occasionally conflicting national, *College* and School events unveil some persisting issues of coordination, and power struggles as priority is often given to the national or *College* event over the School's (Head of Primary School 2). Levels of synergy vary, and it seems to be more challenging for Primary Schools to work in close collaboration. Nonetheless, this has improved significantly with the advent of *Colleges* (Head of Secondary School). However, between central authorities and schools there still remains insufficient understanding of each other's current needs and position (Head of Primary School 3).

> *"There might need to be a greater understanding by stakeholders that central authorities have the wider picture to consider."*
>
> (*College* Principal)

Nonetheless, there should be lessons learnt from experiences of non-participative policy development infused with pre-determined agendas driven by the State and bodies who have access to influence such policies (Head of Secondary School). Heads of School affirm that there was virtually no form of consultation on the creation of *Colleges* (Head of Primary School 2, Head of Primary School 3), whereas there was more consultation on the *National Curriculum Framework* (2012) and the Framework for the *Education Strategy 2014-2024* (2014) (Head of Primary School 3). In fact, a Head of School argues that the NCF is really owned by Heads as it was the product of a three to four-year long consultation process which involved all stakeholders (Head of Primary School 1). Schools may influence policy direction to an extent if actors are strategic and provide evidenced arguments – this has been the case in the introduction of the Middle-School and Co-Education systems. Although there may be some indirect consultation (Head of Primary School 3), there is no or very little genuine consultation prior to policy direction, hence ineffective on significant decision-making processes (Head of Secondary School).

> *"All stake holders have their agenda but since we form part of a democracy, then one has to listen, support, and make good use of what is being offered. Together we can pool our resources for the benefit of our students."*
>
> (*College* Principal)

The general perception towards quality has been infused in the system thanks to *Colleges*. Heads of School meet regularly amongst them to discuss with and report to the *College* Principal as part of a more professional type of management. The Head of School today is required to act in the vest of Manager just like in any other organisation, differing from the glorified senior teacher role attributed in the past (MEA DG).

> *"Nowadays the Head of School has to possess managerial skills to plan ahead, organise, ensure availability and upkeep of resources and develop human resources, whilst having an educational vision and meanwhile dealing with parents and students."*
>
> (MEA DG)

The Educational Leadership aspect required of Heads of School is not to be found in other Managers, hence the workload and responsibilities of Heads are even more than those of other Managers (MEA DG).

College effectiveness is reliant on a trusting two-way process starting from the Head of School and Principal (Head of Secondary School). The reassurance of the Principal's presence and support when needed, nurtures trust among educational leaders of the same network. The trustful relationships within the Council of Heads are further fostered by knowing that the issues discussed with the group would not be divulged by the other Heads of School (Head of Primary School 2). This required overcoming initial fears of judgement by other Heads (Head of Primary School 3). It also created the need for Educational Leaders to persuade educators and parents about the benefits of proposed changes for implementation, which needs to be supported by evidenced practice (Head of Primary School 2).

Colleges in fact require an added complexity to reach consensus not only amongst Heads of School within the same *College*, but also with the staff of the respective schools. This leads to extended processes of discussions to reach compromises (Head of Primary School 3). The Heads of School earns his/her colleagues' trust at school also by facilitating a completely open discussion without fears, even when there is lack of agreement (Head of Primary School 1).

> *"The ability of leaders to foster positive relationships within the community is critical."*
>
> (Head of Secondary School)

The need to perform specific tasks and implement initiatives, also serve as opportunities for the *College* Principal and other community members *"to build better relationships particularly with the students showing our continuous support"* (*College* Principal). Effective, ongoing communication by the leader with community members is fundamental as is the importance of intra- and inter-school communication for school/*College* effectiveness (Head of Secondary School). In fact, there should also be effective communication amongst teachers themselves to better coordinate work, taking into consideration that learners need to keep up with the demands of several teachers (Students – Secondary School).

Through *Colleges* teachers formerly deployed in Area Secondary Schools disclose that serving in a comprehensive school has given them more job satisfaction (Teachers – Secondary School). However, teachers also express a debilitating concern that irrespective of efforts, problems of illiteracy persist (Teachers – Primary School 2). Moreover, there is a palpable disheartening of teachers caused by their inability to adequately extend learning to embrace the wide range of students' abilities (Head of Secondary School). It is further noted that various teachers have two or three different jobs, alienating them from the required preparation and follow-up of lessons (Head of Primary School 1).

Some teachers feel consulted and involved. It doesn't necessarily mean that everyone is always in agreement, but at least one would have listened to the different views (Teachers – Secondary School). Others, however, feel not to be adequately informed, let alone consulted (Teachers – Primary School 2, Teachers – Secondary School) as was the case in the setting up of *Colleges* (Teachers – Secondary School). Changes are often learnt through emails or third parties with no consultation at the teachers' level. Furthermore, the smaller schools seem to be less important at *College* and national level, hence consultation with them is even rarer as the numbers may seem insignificant (Teachers – Primary School 2). Teachers disclosed that decisions taken at Council of Heads level were only communicated once decisions had been taken, but one particular teacher who experienced different schools, explained that there are Heads of School who keep teachers involved (Teachers – Primary School 2).

> *"Teachers are insufficiently listened to. Although surveys are disseminated it seems as if these are never given any weight and no feedback is ever given back to respondents."*
>
> (Teachers – Secondary School)

Admittedly, there seems to be a gradual improvement in involving teachers through questionnaires, but it will always be the detached person who takes the decision. There needs to be insight on what is happening abroad, but we need to consider contextual circumstances. Enhanced consultative processes would yield better results (Teachers – Primary School 1). It was added that, for the sake of correctness, feedback received from a specific central authority department might signal that things are slowly improving (Teachers – Primary School 2).

> *"Before decisions impacting on so many lives are taken, there should be effective communication with all those involved including parents."*
>
> (Parents – Secondary School)

Parents feel there generally is effective communication between the school and home (Parents – Primary School 2). They had been informed of the setting up of *Colleges* through meetings organised before their introduction (Parents – Primary School 2, Parents – Secondary School). However,

> *"parents are mostly often informed not consulted!"*
>
> (Parents – Secondary School)

Getting parents (and the rest of the community) on board is essential for a quality education which is truly holistic, seamlessly transitioning from home to school and vice versa. Challenges here are multiple, ranging from unavailability of parents due to other commitments, particularly work, to a deprived home environment. Nonetheless, the school can make a difference even with these constraints (*College* Principal). Admittedly,

> *"If the home environment of the child is not geared towards schooling it is difficult to instil the love for education in the child."*
>
> (Teachers – Primary School 2)

Unfortunately, a number of parents may have abdicated from their parental responsibilities and need to be re-engaged into their own children's education which ought to coherently start and continue at home. Parents are being incentivised by the State for them to meet their obligations. Meanwhile, quality time at home continues to be reduced due to work and other priorities (Teachers – Primary School 2). Lifestyles adopted by parents seem not allow enough time and energy to focus on their own children's needs, including education (Head of Secondary School). Parenting skills programmes could help develop better readiness. Parents need to be on board for school to achieve a high-quality education (Teachers – Primary School 2). The engagement in their child's education in and outside of school reflects their own belief on education (Head of Secondary School, Teachers – Primary School 2, Teachers – Secondary School).

Ongoing communication with parents is also necessary for effective quality education as it better ensures continuity and coherence. Students, especially those of a tender age, cannot receive conflicting messages as they'll be confused. Hence, it is of utmost importance for teachers and parents to be consistent (Parents – Primary School 2).

> *"Teachers should not have to wait for parents' day to communicate with parents. Although parents' attitudes differ, the majority have their children's work at heart and teachers should acknowledge and support this."*
>
> (Students – Secondary School)

Parents are cynical about the impact in consultative processes as experience has taught that if authorities are set on a particular path, this is pursued irrespective of what others', including parents, have to say. Nevertheless, concerted complaints may have occasionally made a difference (Parents – Secondary School). So much so, that parents' concerns expressed about Co-Education did not stop the change from occurring. Perhaps some concerns were addressed, such as specific subjects like Personal Social and Career Development (PSCD) are being held separately, but implementation proceeded undisturbed (Parents – Primary School 2, Teachers – Primary School 2). Moreover, students assert they are hardly ever consulted, and if so, not really given weight (Students – Secondary School).

> *"If as they say the customer is always right, then students as customers should be given our fair share. Our voices should be heard! Similarly, our parents should also be given more space than they currently enjoy, to participate effectively in consultation processes."*
>
> (Students – Secondary School)

It is important for educators to gather a comprehensive understanding of the way parents are feeling about their children's education. This may be achieved through regularly scheduled meetings and feedback questionnaires. This then feeds the school's development plan for the forthcoming scholastic year (*College* Principal).

> *"Having been part of more than one College as a Head of School and College Principal I can assert that the democratic approach adopted, allowed an expression of opinion that could be fed also at national level. Hence at a personal level, it was easy to accept the concept of Colleges also because it reflected my own beliefs. This facilitated my ownership and prospective nurturing of a similar belief amongst Heads of School within my Council."*
>
> (*College* Principal)

Overt vs Covert Action.

Educators' disposition and intention, initiative and agency are key. There can be active or passive resistance as much as engagement from individuals or entire institutions to collaborate (Head of Secondary School). Educators serving in primary schools declare themselves as unaware of what is occurring at secondary level (Teachers – Primary School 3). Other teachers claim that many do not express their views, as in the case on increased bureaucracy (Teachers – Primary School 2). The Head of School has the ability to directly and/or indirectly influence and affect other contexts through the Council of Heads, such as in another school for the benefit of the respective learners, without necessarily being directly involved (Head of Primary School 3). The extent of influence depends on the drive and initiative of the actors themselves – in this case Heads of School. When issues were of importance to schools these were presented to the highest authorities and it left an impact (Head of Primary School 1).

> *"Parents' influence on authorities and decisions vary. At school level, the extent of closeness with the Head of School and members of the Senior Management make a difference. At national level when consulted on different matters, if the Department is set on a particular direction, it will pursue in its implementation, irrespective of what others' including parents have to say."*
>
> (Parents of Secondary School)

Educators and educational leaders ought not fear exposing their human fragility and limitations. Heads of School should set the example by openly acknowledging potential to err with community members, including students. Whilst this is advisable also for teachers to earn greater credibility (especially since they no longer can be seen as the only source of knowledge), it seems to be very challenging for teachers to adopt such an approach (Head of Primary School 1).

> *"The under-remuneration of education grades is further exasperated at Headship level, where the level of commitment required is not commensurate with the compensation received. In view of this, Heads of School heavily rely on their intrinsic motivation, the vocational calling … but does this suffice?"*
>
> (Head of Primary School 1)

Quality education implies that students need to be loved. Some students need this more than ever as societal complexities impact on their wellbeing and are neglected love (Head of Secondary School). A mutual relationship of respect is to be established between students and teachers, as well as parents and teachers (Students – Secondary School).

> *"Education has been attributed excessive complexity when at the basis of a high-quality education is love. Where there is love in performing one's job, there is respect and integrity."*
>
> (Teachers – Primary School 2)

Playing with other students wearing one's same uniform but attending a different school conveys a sense of identification which facilitates interaction. "*It's like forming part of one big family"* (Students – Primary School 3). The benefits derived from being part of a *College* exceed any losses there may have been. The fact that there is a Principal who is approachable has a huge bearing on this perceived view (Head of Primary School 1).

> *"Losses only occur if they are allowed. The outlook of the Head of School is fundamental in determining the success or otherwise of an initiative and the same goes for Colleges. In committing to success, losses may not be perceived. Regretfully this approach is not embraced by all and protection of one's own territory is still an issue."*
>
> (Head of Primary School 1)

The *College* System has, in the particular Head of School's view, brought only gains and no losses. It has brought authority closer to the school and the community. It has also benefitted parents, who now have a point of reference beyond the Head of School within easy reach (Head of Primary School 1).

The *Learning Outcomes Framework* (LOF) that emerged from the NCF is a useful tool as it allows teachers greater freedom to adopt their professional discretion (Head of Primary School 1). On the other hand, according to a Teacher, the NCF places an over-emphasis on individual learning when group learning has benefits which should not be underestimated. If specific individuals need to be supported further/differently, they should be catered for accordingly (Teachers – Secondary School).

> *"Educators should be given more space to decide on curricular matters as ultimately they know what is best. Taking decisions at College level can be a good thing as long as teachers are involved. The pity is that when matters go wrong and educators need to follow Trade Union Directives, learners suffer."*
>
> (Head of Primary School 1)

Whilst syllabi give direction and need to be adhered to, it is up to the teacher to decide how best to present learning experiences. The pedagogy adopted makes a huge difference in the teaching and learning process (Teachers – Secondary School).

Students who drop out of education may have not succeeded in continuing because of the family circumstances. The State has an important role in this as it can continue creating support structures and initiatives which close the gap between students coming from different families. These include the breakfast and afterschool clubs giving opportunities to learners to mingle with peers from various backgrounds (MEA DG).

Another probable purpose for the creation of *Colleges* was to give State Schools an identity resembling more that of Non-State Schools, which were locally perceived as being of a higher quality. This also helped raise the general public's expectations, hence State Schools/*Colleges* have had to work for higher standards (MEA DG). Views are expressed on the basis of stakeholders' perceptions, which differ significantly (Shadow Minister).

> *"Research indicates that in contrast with Northern European countries, Southern countries perceive education on the basis of status not skill acquisition. The whole eco-system is different, giving value to the level of skill and not to the role itself. Hence, the struggle faced locally by* [former] *Trade Schools and MCAST, perceiving students attending such institutions as inferior since they did not make it to University. Regrettably this cyclically reinforcing binding of education with status, also creates other hurdles. For instance, professionals graduating with a degree tend to refuse to perform tasks associated with a 'demeaning' status even if it intrinsically pertains to the specific profession. This is increasingly becoming a huge problem."*
>
> (Minister)

The feeling to have contributed in something seems to rely on a need to being directly asked to form part of it. A public officer should offer his/her contribution and suggestions, accepting that a differing general direction is not an imposition. Seeing how the different *Colleges* function today, each with their own characteristics, shows that the change is now working (*College* Principal).

> *"Life is what you make of it!"*
>
> (*College* Principal)

Chapter 5

Discussion

Coming to Terms

It is January 2020. I am eager to complete an endeavour that has accompanied me for more than a decade but am likewise petrified by insecurities of not necessarily managing to bring my doctoral studies to the yearned successful conclusion. I am seated at the same desk where back in 2009 I was putting together the proposal for this research project, unaware of what was yet to come. My mind boggles – I am brought back and forth in time through lightning-fast flashes. One moment I see myself ten years younger, bursting with ambition, scribbling ideas as if time stood still, the next I am reminded by the reverberation of the deeper tone in my children's voice, who have since grown into young men, that I have spent almost a quarter of my life to date caught in this labyrinth. Like myself, the walls of this room show signs of the passing years and cry for some tender care. The intersection of my doctoral journey with very particular circumstances engulfing my life throughout this period, has plunged me into a maze, which I feared (and as I write I stare in the eyes of the paralysis that comes with this terror) would have captured me, my besieged inner peace, my tried sanity, forever. In the process, so many things, including myself and my loved ones, had to be put aside so often, be sacrificed. The path is still treacherous, but the battering experienced over the years, building resilience with every healing wound (notwithstanding the visible, proud scars that remain) and the increasing rays of hope cutting through the doubts with every piece of accomplished work, give me the strength to ram ahead.

The context continues to evolve. A new Prime Minister for Malta has been sworn in on the 13th of January 2020 (Borg, 2020), the day after taking the lead of the Malta Labour Party, following the resignation of his predecessor mid-way through the legislature. A heavy reshuffle in the Cabinet of Ministers, included a change of guard also for Education, with the former Minister now being entrusted with the Foreign Affairs portfolio, and the new coming from the Ministry for Justice. In November 2019, investigations into the brutal assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia, an investigative journalist who had been looking into and alleging serious corrupt practices (BBC NEWS, 2017), led to the arrest of a local magnate and resignations of officials in the highest echelons of political power over serious allegations. Embroiled in the midst of this controversy, with accusations being also levelled at him for the past years, the former Prime Minister had to resign following pressures by civil society groups regularly protesting in the streets (Hudson, 2019) and by the European Parliament demanding resignation (Rankin, 2019). So much remains unresolved and complexities soon become conveniently veiled under guises of new beginnings. It is still unknown whether the truth that lurks beneath craftily engineered smoke screens will ever be revealed, and justice be served. Regretfully, what is certain is that a daughter, a wife, a mother, a sister, one of us has been atrociously and irrevocably torn away from her family and society only because she expressed, or was about to express, uncomfortable words.

The already polarised local community, fragmented and parted further, with new rifts, seemingly becoming deeper and even more consolidated. The tribal politics that are evidently still fiercely strong in Malta, pulling people back to ranks in support of their respective political leaders, saw the insurgence of an unconventionally contrasting (for the Maltese context) growing nucleus of disenchanted citizens. Thirsty for a higher morality, this diverse group finds itself unwilling to respond to the parties' contrived appeals, almost unfitting in a numb society intoxicated by extents of material wealth, and hence required to move out of its comfort zones to demand basic human rights. What may come across to the reader as an allegory, a contemporary recital of Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), has been our life here on the rock (Malta). Sharing a common pain and desire for a morally healthier country, together with my wife, I personally felt compelled to join most of these protests. These events rekindled in me the anger towards violence, the disappointment in humanity's frail values, the crave for justice, and the same vigour to stand and be counted that had led me to issue an official letter circular entitled *"A Tragic Awakening"* (Mifsud, 2017) distributed amongst all Maltese schools and families with school-aged children, the day after the assassination. The recent unravelling of facts possibly sheds new light on reasons why this letter seemed to have irked individuals in power at the time, albeit being lauded by independent (for whatever meaning 'independent' here might have) press as a *"prime example of saying the right thing … which went to the heart of the matter"* (Cassar, 2017).

As for most of this research, this is another unforeseen juncture, which to me serves as an apt epilogue that sets a tone of deeper meaning and authenticity when discussing the pivotal theme of this study – quality education, whose subject is the whole person, and purpose is life in its entirety (Leathes, 1913). I have come to appreciate that this is one of many internalised assumptions that continues to mould my personal critical perspective affecting also this research (Grogan & Simmons, 2007) from design, through data collection, to analysis and conclusions. The ambition of conducting the research on, with and for the subjects themselves as proposed by the interpretivist paradigm (Morrison, 2007) which I set to embrace, may have not necessarily reached the desired transformative level which emphases the 'with' as opposed to 'for' (Grogan & Simmons, 2007). The impurity of embraced conventions informing my declared critical stance, are still internally challenged by traces of positivism, which I try to suppress but realise that the conflict within pursues. Furthermore, the reliance on a Research Assistant may have affected further the data gathered from focus groups entrusted to him as his paradigmatic positioning may have differed. However, the sheer intent to approach a co-construction of 'knowledge' with participants, to serve, and that serves, them, albeit being influenced by, and in turn satisfying, my baggage, as well as allowing the study to take shape as it progressed within flexible parameters only framed by guiding questions, hence grounded in people's experiences, remain significant shades of interpretivism with glimpses of a transformative nature (Morrison, 2007).

The findings have exhibited existing elements of commonality in the expressed needs and expectations across stakeholder groups which may hint at universal characteristics. However, the similarly evident divergences that have emerged between and within stakeholder groups, determine that there may be no fixed definition of quality education. Linking quality education with a specific structural reform, which had an amalgam and overlap of interventions, further heightens the level of complexity. Nevertheless, this interlace lent itself for the emergence of a theoretical framework that enables the policy maker, educational leader and/or researcher, to organically capture and construe a definition of quality education that may temporarily serve a specific context. This framework and the need for its application, are further reinforced when discussing the extent to which findings have indeed addressed the originally posed research questions.

An Organic Framework

A Three-Dimensional Matrix

The three-dimensional matrix referred to in Chapter 4 is graphically reproduced hereunder in Figure 5.1, representing an initial complexity that also materialised from participants' responses. Different stakeholders have a variety of vested interests in formal education making each of them dependencies for a desired effectiveness of formal education (Sims & Sims, 2004), legitimising their expectation to have an extent of control (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This creates tensions not only between different stakeholder groups but also within the same group, as whilst there may be elements of convergence, expectations have been proved to vary throughout the Findings Chapter, not least on individuals' Teleological or Anti-Teleological outlook on education (Burbles, 2004).

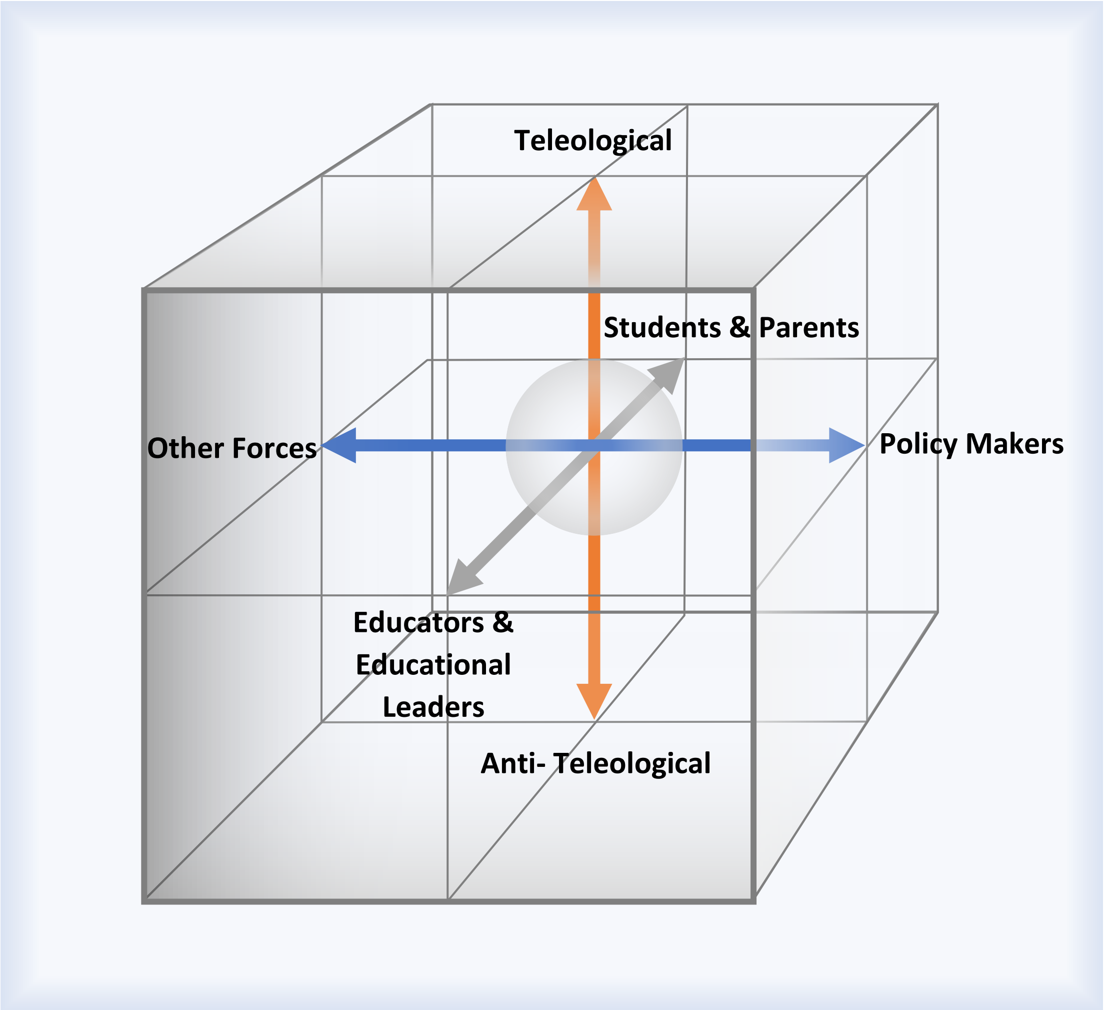

Figure 5.1 - 3D Matrix – Forces in Formal Education

Participants often recognised the learner as an individual whose needs and growth differ, requiring different developmental strategies and value-added measures[6]. However, high stakes standardised examinations not only still pervade the Maltese Educational System but remain sought for to different degrees by each stakeholder group, especially teachers and parents[7]. The sphere at the intersection of matrices in Figure 5.1 represents the nexus of power. The ongoing real or perceived shift of this sphere, perpetually pulled by policy makers under political pressure (Boyle & Charles, 2016), places a fragile, negotiated stability at risk. At the basis of this coexistence reliant on collaborative practices, characterising contemporary social and organisational structures, as in *Colleges*, are infinite loops of overt and covert power struggles intricately securing or compromising interests and values (Castells, 2011). With a notion of an exercised power that is ever so complex, that can no longer be viewed as residing in one source, or necessarily either controlling or submissive (Castells, 2011), existing contradictions lead to a perplexing ambiguity (Hodge, 2013). This partially ignited in me the need for a more organic and dynamically responsive theoretical structure.

I am once more flung back in time, when still occupying my previous role as the Director General for Quality and Standards in Education within the Ministry for Education and Employment. Without excessively exposing the whirlwind of circumstances that had engulfed the Ministry almost suspending it in time, I found myself, perhaps unwittingly, influencing and being influenced, to extents that will most likely remain unknown also to me. I still feel my sweating hands, as in an attempt to recover an acceptable climate at a severely contaminated workplace, I was deeply hauled into very sensitive conversations. As I spoke my mind, receptive to the open and hidden messages with which I was bombarded from the only other person in the room, it is hard to decipher how much of what I was stating was actually 'mine'. Nonetheless, the events that followed immediately after that conversation, gave me the impression to have had a strong influence, at least for a specific period. The irony is, that I can never be certain on the intentionality and consequentiality. To what extent did I affect, or was I instrumentalised by, so many other forces, including those in the room? This is just a facet of the complex interlace of power (Castells, 2011) that affects also education.

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[6] see *Impact – Chapter 4*. (References to Findings have been inserted in footnotes to ease reading flow)
[7] see *Inclusion? – Chapter 4*

A Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure

It is in making sense of the identified codes, that an orbiting double helix had started emerging as a flexible, yet meaningful structure that could capture what I am defining as the *Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure of Quality Education*, which may underpin the design, implementation and review of Educational Policy as depicted in Figure 5.2. Apart from explaining the framework itself, the discussion that follows looks into the dialectical opposites or contradictions that emerged and coexist, which are emblematically also represented in Figure 5.2 by the distinctive twisted form caused by anti-parallel forces.

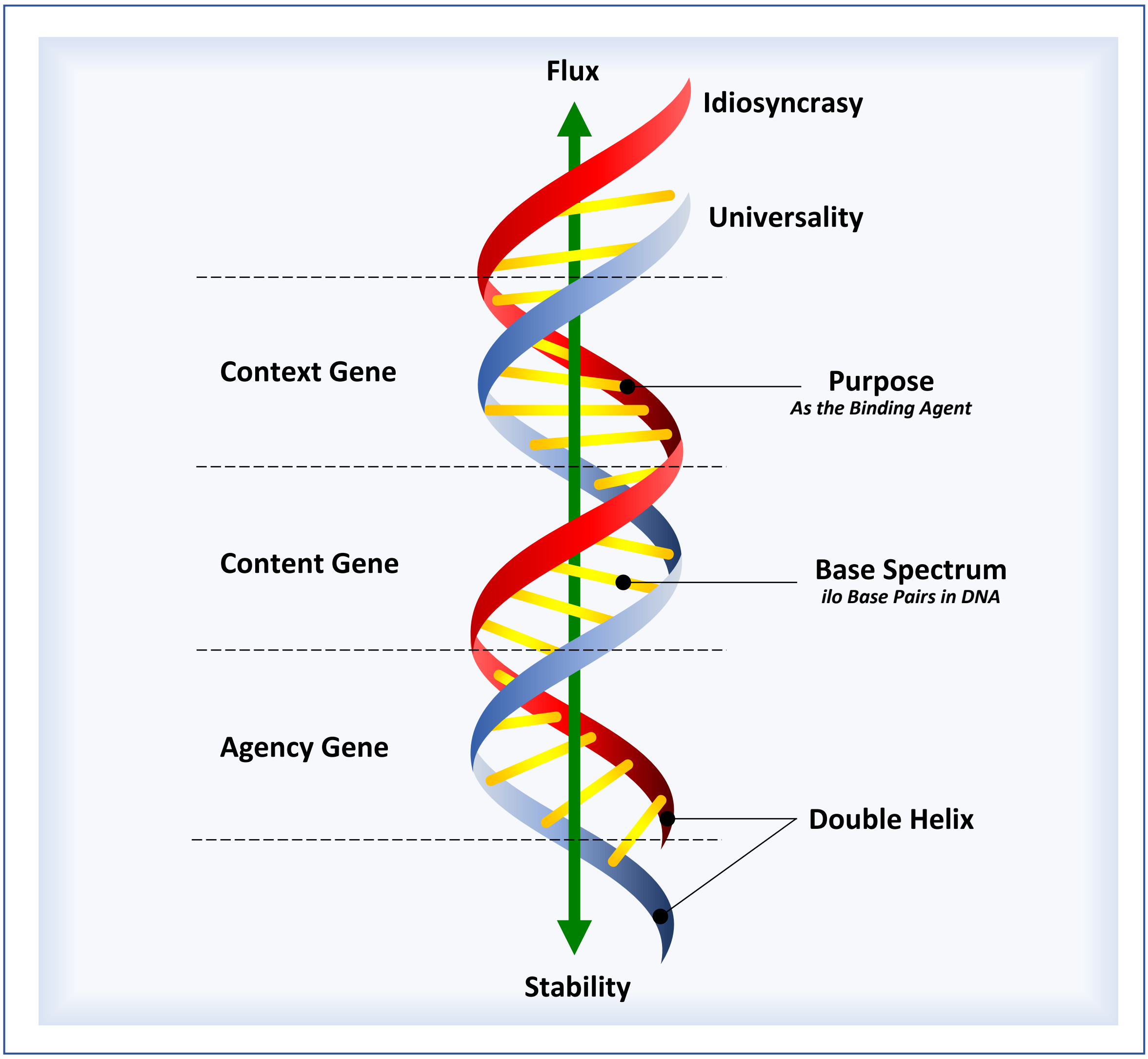
Flux
Idiosyncrasy
Universality
Context Gene
Purpose
As the Binding Agent
Content Gene
Base Spectrum
ilo Base Pairs in DNA
Agency Gene
Double Helix
Stability

Figure 5.2 Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure of Quality Education

The term *chromosome* has a Greek ancestry: *chroma* meaning colour and *soma* meaning body, implying that the chromosome defines the colour (as a characteristic) of the body. In fact chromosomes are long strands of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) containing genes, or segments of DNA strand with a specific code, which are considered to be the building blocks of plant and animal organisms, including humans (King, 2020). Whilst wanting to believe that as rational beings our will controls who we are and our purpose in life, every cell within our body contains chromosomes that define every characteristic, including our cognitive potential, hence almost predetermining us. Extensive medical research in this field, particularly dating back to the nineteenth (19th) century (Mandal, 2020), has gradually come up with the constitution of the human genome that maps the complete genetic blueprint for the human being (National Human Genome Research Institute, 2020), and continues to discover new knowledge to date. To no lesser extent the nature versus nurture debate, hence the impact of inherited and acquired influences on behaviour, continues (McLeod, 2020).

Locating the multidimensional, divergent and coherent, composite and inter-related elements, that started emerging on the main subject of the study, namely quality education, as parts of a double helix structure orbiting around a tense pivotal axis, conceptually reordered findings. It not only helped me find meaning but proposed itself as a useful framework for defining quality education. Since the enigmatic concept of quality education may be said to be inherent to education itself (Sallis, 2002), considering this framework becomes critical for educational policy and practice.

The pivotal axis sustains a balanced tension between '***Stability***' and '***Flux***', in order not to collapse. Gravitating around it, revolves the double helix, which similarly endures through the contrasting force of anti-parallel linear strands for ***'Idiosyncrasy'*** and ***'Universality'*** that run opposite to each other, bound by connecting bridges, giving the helix its peculiar spiral structure. As if 'base pairs' for the DNA strand, each of these bridges is constituted of a continuum with interchangeable poles (between idiosyncratic and universal perspectives) which refer to a specific characteristic and is being referred to as a 'base spectrum'. Segments of 'base spectra' make up a 'gene' for quality education. Three such 'genes' have been identified through this study: ***'Context Gene'***, ***'Content Gene'*** *and* ***'Agency Gene'***. Apart from the centripetal and centrifugal forces, the structure's integrity is maintained through the intra- and inter-molecular binding agent, ***'Purpose'***.

The metaphor of the chromosomic structure suited the purposes of this research without requiring artificially constraining the different elements emerging from this study, which would have otherwise been debilitating. Nevertheless, it implied specifically-designed parameters, particularly the acknowledgement of a critical perspective which values multiple views and the relativity honed by this stance, a non-hierarchical approach to the different elements of the framework, and their inextricable inter-relatedness. The component that perhaps challenged the framework most was the 'actors', namely students, their families, educators, educational leaders and other stakeholders. Having been placed into the '*Content Gene', t*heir centrality in education might appear as having been relegated to a lesser degree of importance. However, the *'Content Gene'* is hereby construed as constituting of both the object as well as the subject of quality education, irrespective of the variable importance that may be attributed to each. Giving in to the temptation of assigning actors a more visible position in the framework to seemingly recognise their importance, would have weakened the *Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure of Quality Education*, which, to serve the urge of the researcher would have, extending the metaphor, been subjected to soul-changing genetic engineering or mutation. This extension of the metaphor further reveals its apparent limitless potential, embracing opportunities for researchers to genetically modify the structure in ethically acceptable ways better serving specific needs. Yet it is acknowledged that further testing of the framework might similarly reveal boundaries to its applicability.

The Pivotal Axis

The opposing forces between *Flux* and *Stability*, create a dynamic tension which needs to be maintained. Should this tension subside to disproportionate stability it would lead to a decomposing stagnation, whereas excessive flux would lead to a lethal acceleration. In both instances the result is an equally catastrophic collapse of the structure. As contradictory as it may seem, the need to remain relevant with the changing times, and the fatigue experienced due to a state of ongoing reform, frustratingly coexist[8]. Handling change requires perseverance fuelled by the need for improvement (Stoll & Fink, 2003), a thorough conception of issues being addressed and strategies for enacting it (Fullan, 1992) that consider effects of unsensitised resistance (Bentley, 2003), and stakeholders' willingness for acceptance when change improves their lives (Hargreaves, 2003).

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[8] see *Time* and *Timeliness – Chapter 4*

An over-engineered centralised system risks becoming detached, falling short of achieving the desired sensitivity and relevance[9]. *"Change, by definition, undermines the status quo",* questioning conventions from positions which aren't neutral, creating beneficiaries and benefactors, generating actions and reactions (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 22). In an era where *"it seems that nothing can stop the momentum of education reform … fundamentally chang*[ing] *the nature and form of education"* (Abbott et al., 2013, p. 191) it is crucial to firmly respond to participants' claims which further confirm existing studies' affirmation that change becomes justifiable only when it brings sustained positive impact on stakeholders and their context (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003; Sergiovanni, 2006). In doing so, a delicate equilibrium between flux and stability may be fostered and maintained.

The Binding Agent – Purpose

The underpinning *Purpose*, its *Integrity* and *Positionality*, constitute the binding agent between the different components of the framework. This may be pre-established for "*societal-reproduction"* or "*transcendental"* objectives fixed by others, or else may be unplanned, allowing for discovery, and shaping by the learner's resolve (Burbles, 2004).

Integrity

From a structural perspective, *"integrity ensures the load-carrying capacity of a structure"* (Tu & Wang, 2015, p. iv) avoiding 'failure', which results when *"a component* [of the structure] *does not perform the function for which it was intended"* (Open University, 2009, p. 3). When related to a person, integrity *"assumes a moral quality"* which suggests *"a broader connotation … a general state of the person",* in which particular qualities, such as honesty or sincerity, *"derive from a larger and more all-embracing quality – the wholeness*

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[9] see *Timeliness – Chapter 4*

and completeness of the person" (Nillsen, 2005, p. 86). Both the structural and the moral dimensions of integrity, imply cohesive unity which the term is also being attributed to in this study, and is being assigned codified findings on *Authenticity* and *Continuity.*

To me, *Authenticity* interlaces purpose, suggesting an ongoing struggle *"between what you are and what you want to be"*, challenging *"both personal and cultural alienation"* (Braman, 2008, p. 3). The concept has been problematised for centuries, originating from forms of individualism, amongst which the unimpeded search *"to make the person's will prior to any and all social obligation"* and the contrasting deeper connectedness to *"something greater than ourselves"* achieving harmony within a larger natural order (Braman, 2008, pp. 3, 4). The debate on authenticity is intricate and rife, but often implies a mindful existence that is not automatic, and is reliant on an exercise of sustained attentiveness, intelligence, reason, responsibility and self-sacrificing love, resulting in individual and communal progress (Braman, 2008). Participants' demands for an education that fosters critical thinking and creativity, liberating educators to act with professional discretion, whilst nurturing respect towards a communal sense of rule and order, infer an authenticity that contrasts with claims of ostentatious behaviours intended to impress for personal gain[10]. The bold confession of having *"created a moral wilderness"*[11]*,* reveals a collective *"inauthenticity"* from a *"civilisation in decline dig*[ging] *its own grave with a relentless consistency"* (Braman, 2008, p. 100), whilst aspiring for a higher morality and taking responsibility *"that we must be the first to set the example"*[12]*.*

Sharing aspirations, coherence and consistency describe aspects of key characteristics of effective formal education (Sammons, 1999). This *Continuity* of purpose cannot imply *"desired characteristics and values* [to] *be viewed as absolute or static",* but in acknowledging *"wrong or right"*, it *"need*[s] *to be dynamic, affecting and affected by sharing through people coming together in multiple ways, whilst recognising and celebrating diversity"*[13]. A policy which does not consider practice and processes thoroughly, becomes conceptually faulty, leading to incongruence, disillusion and exhaustion (Reid & Brain, 2003), failing in continuity. This frailty in the enacted mandatory school networks in Malta transpired in practitioners' voices, who further exacerbate discontinuity by referring to divergences between expectations of practising educational leaders and educators, as well as teachers amongst themselves[14].

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[10] see *Authenticity – Chapter 4*

[11] *Minister* in *Authenticity – Chapter 4*

[12] *Minister* in *Authenticity – Chapter 4*

[13] *Minister* in *Continuity – Chapter 4*

Positionality

Inferring from critical qualitative researchers questioning of *"theoretical bases of knowledge and method"*, *Positionality* assumes a reflexive *"analysis of how, why and in what ways"* is anything *"conducted …* [,] *understanding the role of power, privilege, and visibility in the … process"* (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019, p. 1). As complementary to *Integrity*, *Positionality* is proposed as co-defining the framework's *Binding Agent – Purpose.* Which and whose interests are being served by education, hence who has the authority to decide the expected quality education (Rao, 2007), together with the extent of relevance and impact of policies, are all fundamental questions which may strengthen or weaken the whole structure. Positionality is therefore being discussed in terms of *Relevance, Interests Served,* and *Impact.*

Relevance is defined as the degree of relatedness, connectedness or appropriateness (Cambridge University Press, 2020; Oxford University Press, 2019). Albeit using different words reflecting different priorities, participant groups almost unanimously placed all children's unique best interest[15], as interpreted by the respective group, as the measure for relevance of quality education. Some emphasised the need for developing independent critical thinkers and lifelong learners[16], whilst others the need for prospective employability[17]. Whilst not being excluded by respondents and possibly being upheld by most, as may be captured from fleeting reflections, only a few clearly articulated a need to stand against forceful externalities pressuring education to emulate seemingly 'perfect' formulae, whose standardising impact neutralises humanity, arguing in favour of a contextualised, balanced education which nurtures competence and ethic infused with humanistic morality[18]. This perspective is advocated by *"Total Quality Education"* (English & Hill, 1994, p. 66) resonating in other contemporary curricular research which recognises the norms and values conveyed through the pedagogical experience, proposing an interchangeable, facilitative role of the educator interacting with an active learner *"in the process of becoming autonomous and self-determining"*, hence blurring and liberating boundaries between the teacher and the student (Boyle & Charles, 2016, p. 2). Such an unbound and empowering approach may sound divinely correct to the *"formative thinker"* (Boyle & Charles, 2016, p. 2), but may be equally met with resistance in practice as occurs with debated discourse of equity and equality. In fact, although participants agree on the need to meet diverse students' needs and abilities[19], the unmet effort this requires, leading to a matched experience for only a limited spectrum of learners losing sight of so many others[20], finds shelter in sustained forms of segregation[21]. The prevailing danger remains that quality education becomes exclusively reserved for the privileged[22] as evidenced in other international research (Hargreaves, 2003).

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[14] see *Continuity – Chapter 4*

[15] *Teachers – Primary School 2; College Principal; Students – Secondary School; Teachers – Secondary School* in *Continuity – Chapter 4*

[16] *Teachers – Secondary School* in *Relevance – Chapter 4*

[17] *Parents – Secondary School; Head of Primary School 3; Students – Primary School 3; MEA DG* in *Relevance – Chapter 4*

Analysing *Interests Served* requires acknowledging the intricate loops of power and counterpower, and a realisation that institutions and norms still tend to be servile to those in power (Castells, 2011). The intended alignment of local with national objectives[23] is an explicit manifestation of this exertion of power. Fuelled by the policy makers' desire to emulate success in apparently similar contexts[24], the State Sector set to adopt concrete strategies from the Church Sector, including an attempt to streamline ethos[25], but was not adequately considerate of the overt and covert counterpower with which this would have been met when/where stakeholders felt it most critical[26]. This perhaps genuine ambition, furthermore, failed to realise the porosity of contemporary open society, hence becoming impaired to foster desirable core values which remains an ongoing coveted endeavour in uniquely heterogenous, multi-layered realities[27]. Whilst pleas to remove the heavily weighing influence of partisan politics from education[28] emerge as legitimate, interests served would inexplicably shift to *"the same people who are creating the problems: people destroying the planet in the interests of profit, and consumers whose habits feed that profit",* in a contradiction that cannot be avoided (Hodge, 2013, p. 340).

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[18] *Minister; MEA DG* in *Relevance – Chapter 4*

[19] *Students – Secondary School; Teachers – Secondary School; College Principal* in *Relevance – Chapter 4*

[20] *College Principal* in *Relevance – Chapter 4*

[21] *Teachers – Secondary School; Teachers – Primary School 2* in *Relevance – Chapter 4*

[22] *Minister* in *Relevance – Chapter 4*

[23] *MEA DG* in *Interests Served – Chapter 4*

[24] *Minister* in *Interests Served – Chapter 4*

[25] *Minister; Students – Secondary School; Students Primary School 1; Parents – Secondary School; College Principal* in *Interests Served – Chapter 4*

[26] *Teachers – Secondary School* in *Interests Served – Chapter 4*

The perceived *Impact,* hence what stakeholders feel to have been the effect of the introduced policy on people or situations (Cambridge University Press, 2020), is determining for its survival. This rests on stakeholder's involvement, their *"interests … power and influence"* (Sims & Sims, 2004, p. 70). Some respondents claim losses, whilst others recognise efforts and specific improvements[29]. Whereas this emerging discordance of views has a degree of resonance with other research, it does not create an emphatic divide between more positive opinions of Heads of School and scepticism voiced by all other educators on the impact of the reform found elsewhere (Spiteri, 2016). In fact, claims of dissatisfied Heads of School[30] coexist with positive as well as negative perceptions expressed by other participants, including Heads of School[31]

Gauging impact is interpreted with similar divergence, spanning from reliance on tangible outcomes and empirical data[32] to a recognition that results ought not be the predominant measure of quality[33]. The affirmation that behaviours make the achievement or otherwise of quality evidently visible[34], complements the advised non-reliance on the blinkered use of statistics which produces only partial truths[35]. Such assertions sustain more holistic views of quality which consider the experience in education as *"intrinsically worthwhile"* and an outcome in itself (English & Hill, 1994, p. 73). These are further emancipated by suggested measures of individually experienced value added, and collective cognisance of a need for reflective practice and ongoing growth[36], again more inclined towards *"Total Quality Education"* than traditional approaches (English & Hill, 1994, p. 101). However, traces of weak accountability[37], seem to be counterbalanced in the eyes of authority by formal beliefs in external quality assurance mechanisms complemented by cyclical internal reviewing processes[38].

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[27] *Minister* in *Interests Served – Chapter 4*
[28] *MUT President* in *Interests Served – Chapter 4*
[29] see *Impact – Chapter 4*
[30] *MUT President* in *Impact – Chapter 4*
[31] see *Impact – Chapter 4*
[32] *College Principal* in *Impact – Chapter 4*
[33] *MUT President, Shadow Minister, Minister* in *Impact – Chapter 4*
[34] *Shadow Minister* in *Impact – Chapter 4*
[35] *Minister* in *Impact – Chapter 4*

I therefore suggest that it isn't mere unison, which may be illusionary, but *Integrity* and *Positionality* that determine *Purpose* acting as the essential *Binding Agent* for the proposed framework.

The Double Helix – Idiosyncrasy vs Universality

As much as coming together, relating with oneself, each other and our surroundings in a multitude of ways has characterised and continues to characterise human existence, hence featuring predominantly in sociological research (Freeman, 2003; Borg & Giordmaina, 2012), conflicting individuals' values and interests, construe unsettling relationships of power (Castells, 2011). The extent and forces of *Inclusion* and *Enablers* for the latter, as well as the variegated inverse, emerging from this study, have been explored to construct an understanding of the anti-parallel linear strands of the *Double Helix* being dubbed as *Idiosyncrasy* and *Universality*.

Inclusion is the drive away from forms of segregation (Bennet et al., 1998) removing potential restrictions to access opportunities (Frederickson & Cline, 2015). Exclusion, or contrived forms of inclusion, may be executed through increasingly sophisticated and varied modalities of exercising power, as when defining and imposing parameters for inclusion (Castells, 2011). This troubled notion surfaced in various conflicting guises. Contrary to degrees of sought segregation[39], participants affirm the need for quality education to translate into opportunities for individual learners to access education according to their respective abilities, needs and baggage[40]. However, this apparent redemption subsides under insistently repeated claims for separation of students on the basis of their apparent academic abilities[41] and expressed nostalgia for past forms of more distinct exclusion[42] dismissing inclusionary practices as almost utopic[43]. Moreover, participants accuse that the comprehensive system enacted through the *Colleges* reform, may have somewhat benefitted less academically abled students, but has resulted in decreased overall expectations short-changing academically highly abled students[44]. Other respondents argue that the implemented reform proclaimed equity but enforced a levelling equality insufficiently sensitive to learners' needs and practitioners' readiness, which required differing approaches[45]. This drive concurs with the researched effort to depart *"from a selective and elitist 19th century paradigm to a 21st century paradigm of equity and attainment"* (Spiteri, 2016, p. 24).

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[36] *Teachers – Secondary School, Head of Primary School 2, Head of Primary School 3; Head of Primary School 1, College Principal; Head of Primary School 1* in *Impact – Chapter 4*

[37] *Head of Primary School 1* in *Impact – Chapter 4*

[38] *College Principal* in *Impact – Chapter 4*

[39] see *Positionality – Chapter 5*

Fears of potentially recreating gaps between communities at the detriment of individuals, arising from decentralisation, territorial tensions and unhealthy competitiveness[46], find resonance in warnings of possible *"elite capture …* [and] *chances of inequity"* when locating decision-making authority closer to the community (Channa, 2016, p. 132) and reinforces the conclusion that the surrendered school autonomy when schools merged to form *Colleges* was a worthwhile safeguard (Spiteri, 2016). Calls for connectedness with the other, consideration of widespread stakeholder views, current and future demands, as well as local and global contexts[47], meet *"the socio-political environment within which notions of 'common sense' (Gramsci, 1971) are formed and in which policy is subsequently developed"* (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 20).

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[40] *Head of Secondary School* in *Inclusion – Chapter 4*

[41] *Parents – Secondary School; Parents – Primary School 1* in *Inclusion – Chapter 4*

[42] *Head of Secondary School* in *Inclusion – Chapter 4*

[43] *Head of Primary School 3; Teachers – Primary School 3* in *Inclusion – Chapter 4*

[44] *Head of Primary School 2; Teachers – Primary School 2; Teachers – Primary School 3* in *Inclusion – Chapter 4*

[45] *Teachers – Secondary School; Head of Primary School 3; Head of Secondary School; Students – Secondary School* in *Inclusion – Chapter 4*

[46] *Head of Secondary School; MUT President; Teachers – Primary School 2; Head of Secondary School* in *Inclusion – Chapter 4*

[47] *Head of Primary School 1; Parents – Secondary School; Minister* in *Inclusion – Chapter 4*

Enablers make it possible for, or facilitate, something to occur (Cambridge University Press, 2020), but their absence, or forced presence, jeopardise or slow the desired growth. A marked appreciation of a wider definition of inclusion nurtured over the years is noticeable in participants' responses[48]. However, evident traits of internalised deficit thinking, through which *"marginalised students are often blamed for their poor educational outcomes by well-meaning educators who lack the efficacy to help them"* (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018, p. 2) characterise claims of unachievable, imbalanced and insufficiently resourced demands on educators to meet diverse needs, favouring minority groups, as well as the insurgence of requested segregation[49]. This contrasts views of educational provision as a service whose *"quality … is determined both by the person delivering and the person receiving the service"* (Rao, 2007, p. 20).

Whilst being met with less resistance than Comprehensive Education, the introduction of Co-Education marked yet another change necessitating adjustment[50]. Forming part of a *College* network, created opportunities for creation of collaborative practices within the same network and with the wider community at various levels and stages[51]. This commonly attributed element of networks (Bentley, 2005; Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005) is identified as conducive to quality education (Sallis, 2002; English & Hill, 1994; Hargreaves et al., 2003; Atkinson et al.). Nonetheless, as has been demonstrated, counter-tensions of inward- and outward-looking phenomena coexist in the framework's respective strands for *Idiosyncrasy* and *Universality.*

The Genes

A *Gene* is a segment of the double helix in this *Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure for Quality Education*, that contains varied quantities of 'base spectra' which collectively define characteristics. Each 'base spectrum' bridges the two anti-parallel strands – *Idiosyncrasy* and *Universality,* further specifying details of the respective characteristic accentuating either or both poles. The *Context Gene*, the *Content Gene* and the *Agency Gene* have emerged from this study, respectively containing continua or 'base spectra' for: *Vertical vs Horizontal Structures, Centralised vs Democratised Power* and *Tangibles vs Intangibles; Educational Experience vs Outcome* and *Actors' Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity; Organisational vs Individual Action* and *Overt vs Covert Action*.

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[48] *Teachers – Primary School 1; Head of Primary School 2* in *Enablers – Chapter 4*

[49] *Head of Secondary School; Parents – Primary School 2; Head of Primary School 2; Teachers – Primary School 1; Head of Secondary School; Parents – Secondary School* in *Enablers – Chapter 4*

[50] *Head of Secondary School; Teachers – Primary School 2; Students – Secondary School* in *Enablers – Chapter 4*

[51] *College Principal; Head of Primary School 3; Parents – Primary School 2; Head of Primary School 1; Head of Primary School 2* in *Enablers – Chapter 4*

The Context Gene

Through the driven networking of the *College* reform, vertical and horizontal, intra- and inter-school collaboration, reliant on *College* Principals and Heads of School, is acknowledged to have been promoted and enhanced, reducing isolation of individuals and schools to varied extents[52]. This reflects findings in other studies which confirm that collaboration is one of the main aims of school networks (Atkinson et al., 2007). What may be seen as a democratic process built on positive dialogue[53] to a few, may not necessarily be perceived as intended *"for mutual benefit"* and as bound by a *"sense of felt interdependence and mutual obligation"* as suggested for effective networks (Sergiovanni, 2006, p. 103). However, there was a reported marked shift in such direction with Heads of School especially becoming *"more concerned on what is happening … in other schools"* also because it impacts their reality[54]. Collaborative practices have started to gradually reach the teachers' level, supporting each other and improving curricular coherence, but this is yet to become common practice[55]. Ironically the isolation previously afflicting smaller primary schools, seems to occasionally rob individuals and communities within them, of the required competence and confidence to connect even when forming part of a network, shifting responsibility on others and leading to greater isolation[56]. This affirms that schools, even within the same network, are at differing distances from the preceding denounced *"isolationist institutional practices"* (Cutajar et al., 2013, p. 123).

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[52] *Minister; MUT President; Head of Primary School 1; Head of Secondary School; Parents – Primary School* in *Vertical vs Horizontal Structures – Chapter 4*

[53] *College Principal; Minister* in *Vertical vs Horizontal Structures – Chapter 4*

[54] *Minister* in *Vertical vs Horizontal Structures – Chapter 4*

[55] *Teachers – Secondary School* in *Vertical vs Horizontal Structures – Chapter 4*

[56] *Teachers – Primary School 3; Head of Primary School 2* in *Vertical vs Horizontal Structures – Chapter 4*

Networking is commonly intended to serve as a vehicle for improving quality education (Atkinson et al., 2007; Spiteri, 2016; Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001). *Colleges* brought monitoring, standardisation and support closer to schools[57], however it cannot be asserted that this led to a general improvement of curricular standards[58]. Regretfully, notwithstanding proximity and familiarity with each other, territorial cultures hinder this growth[59], but not necessarily sustaining the generalised depiction of a "*moated … culture of schooling"* (Black, 2008, p. 44) claimed in another research concluded earlier in Malta (Mifsud, 2015).

Whilst better planned, smoothened transitions from one school to the next have been eased and improved through *Colleges* for the benefit of students and parents[60], the fixed geographical constitution has been identified by respondents as the greatest limitation to learners' opportunities. This structural imposition by the *College* reform led to a segregation that lasts till the end of compulsory schooling years, restricting diversification of student regional cultures[61], particularly negatively impacting on students from areas with a higher concentration of socio-economic deprivations[62]. This reminds of *"Balkanization cultures"*, where *"insulation of sub-groups from each other* [with] *little movement between them, strong identification and with views of learning associated with that subgroup"* have been researched to be a cause of *"concern with micropolitical issues of status … and power dynamics"* (Stoll & Fink, 2003, p. 88).

On the other hand, the contextualisation of *Colleges* allowed sensitisation and tailor-made solutions for particular circumstances, removing layers of bureaucracy, targeting multiple interventions and better addressing the psychosocial needs of the community[63]. Admittedly, the amplified visibility of services also meant an inability to cope with increased demands and a fragmentation that is perplexing for community members[64]. Moreover, claims on increased bureaucracy and multiple lines of management[65] partially contradict assertions of leaner processes. The *College*, especially the Principal, also gave a face of someone whom parents could relate to when in need of further support, bringing the distant central authorities closer to the communities served[66]. This is in congruence with the assumption that *"locating decision makers closer to parents and the community … can increase accountability"* (Channa, 2016, p. 132).

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[57] *MUT President* in *Vertical vs Horizontal Structures – Chapter 4*

[58] *Head of Primary School 2* in *Vertical vs Horizontal Structures – Chapter 4*

[59] *Minister* in *Vertical vs Horizontal Structures – Chapter 4*

[60] *Parents – Primary School 2; Head of Primary School 1; Head of Primary School 2; Head of Secondary School; MUT President; Students – Primary School 3; Students – Primary School 2; Teachers – Primary School 2; Parents – Secondary School* in *Vertical vs Horizontal Structures – Chapter 4*

[61] *Head of Primary School 2; Teachers – Primary School 1; Teachers – Secondary School; Minister; MUT President* in *Vertical vs Horizontal Structures – Chapter 4*

[62] *Teachers – Primary School 1* in *Vertical vs Horizontal Structures – Chapter 4*

[63] *Head of Secondary School; College Principal; Head of Primary School 2* in *Vertical vs Horizontal Structures – Chapter 4*

The traditional dichotomy between the heavy central authority and the peripheral schools, which may have evolved but perseveres in the Maltese Educational System, also induced fears that *Colleges* could serve as a looming big brother on State Schools but is claimed to have subsided when trust was adequately nurtured[67]. Nevertheless, governance boundaries have reportedly been trespassed by central authorities through the *College* Principal, especially when allowed, if not encouraged, by respective Heads of School[68]. Whereas local interests and issues have been given a platform offered by a degree of decentralisation (Kerr et al., 2003), assertions of the latter to at best be artificial (Cutajar et al., 2013, p. 121), still seem to find support amongst members of Maltese *Colleges*.

It is claimed that *Colleges* promoted democracy in practice[69]. The main democratic structures identified by participants include the Council of Heads as the decision-making body at *College* level, the School Council which generally brings educators and parents together, and the Student Council often established to promote the students' voice and active student participation. However, all organs struggle with peculiar weaknesses. Depending on the Head of School, the Council of Heads does not filter down to the teachers' level and appears to be dominated by one or a few actors[70]. This may seem to resonate with claims of such structure that utilises 'democracy' to mask power driven by hierarchical authority (Mifsud, 2015). However, the latter assumes a single source and direction of power which no longer *"makes sense in the network society* … [where] *new forms of domination and determination are critical in shaping people's lives regardless of their will"* (Castells, 2011, p. 776). Other issues affect the School Council with diverging views on perceived or actual imbalance and legitimacy of say leading to unproductive antagonism[71], and the Student Council reportedly engrossed in organising activities and reliant on the Head of School's initiative to function[72].

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[64] *Teachers – Secondary School; College Principal* in *Vertical vs Horizontal Structures – Chapter 4*
[65] *MUT President* in *Vertical vs Horizontal Structures – Chapter 4*
[66] *Parents – Secondary School* in *Vertical vs Horizontal Structures – Chapter 4*
[67] *College Principal* in *Centralised vs Democratised Power – Chapter 4*
[68] *MUT President* in *Centralised vs Democratised Power – Chapter 4*
[69] *Head of Secondary School* in *Centralised vs Democratised Power – Chapter 4*
[70] *Teachers – Primary School 2* in *Centralised vs Democratised Power – Chapter 4*

A number of participants actually lament that the *Colleges* reform had marginal if any perceived impact[73], and missed on opportunities for greater autonomy such as in recruitment of staff which remained centralised facing heavy resistance from the trade union[74]. Moreover, whilst acknowledging benefits of an expert, supportive central authority[75] the perpetuation of a humongous, in relative size and hierarchical authority, central structure, which to some extent seems supported by teachers, is proof that the professed decentralisation and devolution of power did not occur in significant ways, possibly also because of a reluctance to assume accountability that comes with autonomy[76]. This converse position supports the affirmation that *"normative narratives … are just part of … government rhetoric to claim that power and autonomy are being shared with schools, whereas reality points to centralization and managerialism"* (Mifsud, 2015, p. 54). As has been stated, *"autonomy requires* [also] *trust, space and drive by educators which needs to be nurtured by educational leaders and policy makers"*[77].

The tribal politics that still scourge Malta infiltrating all structures and levels, warrants a more active civil society where a required consensus on education could be formed and driven[78]. An expressed involvement of all stakeholders in determining the essentials of educational policy[79], is met with what appears to be an equal, balancing belief by participants that front-line educators and educational leaders should have the greatest say in such processes[80]. Nonetheless, a voice conflictingly reminds *"educators ought not believe that education is exclusively theirs to determine"*[81]. Contrary to all this, respondents sustain that those who have most influence on policy-making decisions, unmistakably in close ties with the Political regime of the moment, are detached from practice in schools, causing wide divides and gaps which are hard, if ever possible, to overcome[82]. This permeation of Politics is not only known, but an extent of it is given legitimacy by some respondents[83]. Others may defend specific policy development processes as having been consultative with interested parties[84], but the heavily conflicting perspectives also start unveiling possible Political influence in respondents' voices. The situation not only exhibits the State's (and all influences this includes at both local and global levels) direct control over setting the national agenda in education (and not just), but almost hints at the abduction of societal beliefs by Political powers, possibly in exchange for hopes or delusions of wellbeing, reminiscent of a continuing *"State domination"* (Powell, 2008, p. 388) under different guises.

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[71] *Teachers – Primary School 2* in *Centralised vs Democratised Power – Chapter 4*

[72] *Students – Primary School 3; Students – Secondary School; Students – Primary School 2* in *Centralised vs Democratised Power – Chapter 4*

[73] *Students – Secondary School; Parents – Primary School 1; Parents – Secondary School* in *Centralised vs Democratised Power – Chapter 4*

[74] *Head of Secondary School; Head of Primary School 1; MUT President* in *Centralised vs Democratised Power – Chapter 4*

[75] *Head of Primary School 1* in *Centralised vs Democratised Power – Chapter 4*

[76] *Head of Primary School 2; Head of Primary School 3; Teachers – Secondary School; Head of Primary School 1* in *Centralised vs Democratised Power – Chapter 4*

[77] *Shadow Minister* in *Centralised vs Democratised Power – Chapter 4*

[78] *Minister* in *Centralised vs Democratised Power – Chapter 4*

The *Colleges* reform was legislatively embodied[85], exemplifying the mandating extent self-vested by the State. Discussing its impact in isolation from other planned, or newly emerging systemic changes, is as challenging as is evident that shifting from a highly selective to a more comprehensive system has had the greatest impact on schools leading to condemnation by a majority of the most vociferous factions in their communities[86]. Respondents refer to curricular, psychosocial, quality assurance mechanisms and professionals' induction to mention a few, as complementing the *Colleges* reform[87] and contributing to a recognised overall growth[88], which is not oblivious to required or perhaps desired, but not least contested, improvements[89]. As has been stated, *"… policy development is fuzzy, messy and complex. It is the product of* [ongoing] *compromise, negotiation, dispute and struggle as those with competing, sometimes conflicting, values seek to secure specific objectives …"* (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 19). Strives at achieving desired goals seem to face an inadequate understanding of this complexity, failing to involve and construct agreement, if ever possible, amongst stakeholders[90].

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[79] *Students – Secondary School; Parents – Secondary School; Head of Primary School 1; Head of Primary School 2; Head of Primary School 3; Head of Secondary School; College Principal; MEA DG; Shadow Minister* in *Centralised vs Democratised Power – Chapter 4*

[80] *Students – Primary School 1; Students – Primary School 2; Parents – Secondary School; Teachers – Primary School 1; Teachers – Primary School 2; Teachers – Primary School 3; Teachers – Secondary School; Head of Primary School 1; Head of Primary School 2; Head of Primary School 3* in *Centralised vs Democratised Power – Chapter 4*

[81] *Head of Primary School 3* in *Centralised vs Democratised Power – Chapter 4*

[82] *Teachers – Primary School 2; Head of Primary School 2; Head of Secondary School; Parents – Secondary School; MUT President* in *Centralised vs Democratised Power – Chapter 4*

[83] *Parents – Primary School 2; Head of Secondary School; Parents Primary School 1* in *Centralised vs Democratised Power – Chapter 4*

[84] *Head of Secondary School* in *Centralised vs Democratised Power – Chapter 4*

[85] *MUT President* in *Tangibles vs Intangibles – Chapter 4*

[86] *Minister* in *Tangibles vs Intangibles – Chapter 4*

The strategic positioning of the *College* allows visibility and best use of available resources in addressing contextual needs[91], but this does not impede claims of insufficient or inadequate resourcing[92]. Moreover, some *College* Principals may act by virtue of their designated authority but lack the influence that may only be earned from and attributed by the community, questioning whether the *College's* organisational arrangement was the most apt for quality education when it is the Head of School and the latter's community that may best decipher what is required and should therefore lead[93]. This further confirms that *"power is often more subtle and more elusive …, power is often exercised through collectiveness of individuals …* [who] *may not appreciate they are in a position of power at all",* and that influence on individuals' views and values are *"subtle and largely systemic"* (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 20).

The Content Gene

The repeated assertion that there cannot be one mould for quality education, as this needs to develop with the learner's needs and abilities[94], seems to imply more of an experiential, rather than a set outcome, frame of mind. However, pragmatic, almost utilitarian, views that learners need to meet explicit expectations[95], state the opposite. Although participating educators seemed to embrace a more holistic view of quality education[96], the resulting continuum is undeniably skewed by debates favouring attainment, especially in national standardised exams. Pro-exam views include fears of losing quality if exams are removed or significantly modified, pleas to correct what may need to be fixed but without changing the essence, and recognition of the high stakes carried by exams in preparation for life[97]. At the other end, participants denounce an excessive fixation on summative assessment counterproductively taking over applied and deeper learning, and excessive stress being experienced by learners from an early age robbing them from a love for learning which could be better supported by more formative forms of assessment[98]. *"The delicate balance in determining quality education on the basis of both attainment and experiential, non-measurable growth is fragile and may easily be lost"[99].* This has over the years also been exacerbated as with education becoming a *"victim"* of Politics, *"the curriculum and its assessment ceased to be a method for supporting the learner but became a means for constructing a measurement framework …"* (Boyle & Charles, 2016, p. 1). The emphasis on summative assessments is symptomatic of the *"global education reform movement or GERM",* with its focus on *"standardisation …, focus on core subjects …* [and] *test-based accountability policies"* (Sahlberg, 2020). What this implies, is that an over-reliance on standardised testing leads to a standardised curriculum inconsiderate of contextual and individual needs (Rose, 2015).

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[87] *College Principal* in *Tangibles vs Intangibles – Chapter 4*

[88] *College Principal; MUT President* in *Tangibles vs Intangibles – Chapter 4*

[89] *Parents – Primary School 1; Parents – Primary School 2; Teachers – Primary School 1; Teachers – Secondary School; Head of Primary School 2; Head of Primary School 3; Head of Secondary School; Teachers – Primary School 2; Head of Primary School 1* in *Tangibles vs Intangibles – Chapter 4*

[90] *Head of Primary School 3* in *Tangibles vs Intangibles – Chapter 4*

[91] *MEA DG; College Principal* in *Tangibles vs Intangibles – Chapter 4*

[92] *Teachers – Primary School 1; Shadow Minister; MUT President* in *Tangibles vs Intangibles – Chapter 4*

[93] *Shadow Minister* in *Tangibles vs Intangibles – Chapter 4*

[94] *Teachers – Primary School 1* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

A holistic curriculum which ensures quality education considers content and approach but above all learners[100]. This is sustained by other research insisting that the divide between content and its delivery cannot be upheld as these intertwine becoming an intricate whole (Boyle & Charles, 2016). It fosters independent and effective living in society, nurturing values, and modelling active citizenship and democratic principles developing learners into happy, fulfilled individuals irrespective of their socio-economic background[101]. This includes unrestricting areas and levels of development for all learners, for which *"educators need to be supported"*[102] as is happening with the expansion of vocational education and training that is widening opportunities for more technically abled students[103]. Together with the acquisition of competences required for today's and tomorrow's needs, engaging in constructive, respectful discussions, intercultural activity and critical reflection within a multicultural and diverse community, as well developing employability skills and work ethic are all considered essential elements in a quality education[104]. For such an experience to unfold, parties should reasonably work towards and accept a greater balance between curricular guidance and educators' professional discretion, relinquishing overwhelming prescription[105]. Ironically, a system introduced to facilitate decentralisation, seems to have limited flexibility and increased standardisation, decreasing the teacher's independence[106]. The creation of *"a well-balanced and challenging curriculum"* is a recognised ingredient for quality education (Sallis, 2002, pp. 1-2). Although there appears to be a predominance of holistic discourse, which would be in contrast with more traditional models and more inclined towards a *"TQE Learning Place"* model (English & Hill, 1994, p. 101), a deeper analysis of the converging and diverging views leads to a realisation that schools, if not classrooms, present uniquely differing hybrids of the two.

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[95] *Head of Primary School 3* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

[96] *Teachers – Primary School 2; Head of Primary School 1; Head of Primary School 2; Head of Primary School 3; Head of Secondary School* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

[97] *Teachers Secondary School; Head of Primary School 2; Teachers – Primary School 2; Parents – Secondary School* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

[98] *Teachers – Primary School 3; Parents – Secondary School; Teachers – Primary School 3; Parents – Primary School 1* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

[99] *Head of Secondary School* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

[100] *Students – Primary School 1* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

Quality education also implies that learners are entitled to a corpus of learning which needs to be met by the school[107]. With *"no time left to reflect"*[108], the increasingly limited time factor has been identified as a cause of major concern, especially for deep learning to occur, which would require less intrusion by external forces, a re-dimensioned extent of curricular breath to commensurate levels, and greater professional discretion to Heads of School and teachers, accompanied by responsibilisation[109]. This is even more the case when considering diverse learners' needs, differing starting points of individuals and time lost early in the educational journey which is hard to recover as years progress[110]. Mid-twentieth (20th) Century research into learning time, broadly differentiating between *"perseverance"* as the time the student focuses on learning, and *"opportunity"* as the time allocated for the learning activity, confirmed time as an important factor for learning (Carroll, 1963; Carroll & Spearritt, 1967). In the light that this finding was reinforced by subsequent studies recognising that *"time engaged in 'on-task'"* learning activities is a consistent predictor of student outcomes (Toste et al., 2019, pp. 1706 - 1707), assertions made by participants become even more of concern. Whilst acknowledging existing external disturbance, it is significant that there seems to be less cognisance that *"instructional time is … a malleable factor within the classroom setting"* (Toste et al., 2019, p. 1706) that could be tactfully managed by educational leaders[111], or realisation that specific external pressures being condemned, may also be resulting from internal actors' influence on authorities, including on trade unions.

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[101] *Head of Primary School 3; Head of Primary School 1; Teachers – Secondary School; Teachers – Primary School 3; Parents – Secondary School; Teachers – Primary School 2; Students – Secondary School; Shadow Minister* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

[102] *Teachers – Primary School 3* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

[103] *Head of Primary School 2* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

[104] *Teachers – Secondary School; MUT President; Head of Secondary School; MEA DG; Minister; Head of Primary School 2* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

[105] *Teachers – Primary School 1; Head of Secondary School* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

[106] *MUT President; Teachers Secondary School* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

[107] *Head of Secondary School* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

[108] *Teachers – Primary School 2* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

The fast paced and uncontained ramification of Maltese societal evolution led to complexities that inevitably impacted students' lives and are reflected in schools. This has motivated a significantly increased investment in pastoral care, an intrinsic element of quality education[112], including specialised psychosocial services, but the provision still seems to struggle to meet the widened and deepened challenges, insufficiently supporting learners and schools[113]. The safe and orderly environment in school and class necessary for learning[114] demands a greater balance between rights and obligations of community members built on mutual reciprocal respect, that should be better supported by stakeholders[115]. Whilst uncovering other deeply rooted societal issues exhausting practitioners, who in turn are both co-authors and victims of the same society they serve and form part of, views expressed confirm the identified potential of school networks in general and *Colleges* in particular to be sensitive to local issues, create supportive structures with specialised expertise and pooled resources (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005; Atkinson et al., 2007).

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[109] *Teachers – Secondary School; Teachers – Primary School 2; Teachers – Primary School 1; College Principal; Head of Secondary School* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

[110] *Head of Secondary School; Parents – Secondary School* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

[111] *College Principal* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

[112] *Head of Secondary School* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

[113] *Head of Primary School 2* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

[114] *Students – Primary School 3* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

[115] *Teachers – Primary School 2; Students – Primary School 2; Parents – Secondary School* in *Educational Experiences vs Outcome – Chapter 4*

Participants' views expose degrees of homogeneity or heterogeneity within and between stakeholder groups. Nonetheless, the centrality of the *College* Principal, his/her vision and leadership qualities, in determining the effectiveness of the *College* is virtually undisputed[116]. This prime actor's competence, personality and wisdom to nurture trusting relationships and empower Heads of School, being present, respectfully challenging and supportive as may be necessary, continually building bridges in the process, explain the variation between the extent of success or otherwise in one *College* and another[117]. With designated authority serving as intermediary to the central hierarchical structures, having come closer to the school, establishing healthy relationships became even more critical[118]. This also relies on Heads of School, their readiness to collaborate, their skills, commitment and individual personalities[119]. At school level the Head of School remains the point of reference, the educational leader, the motivator, the manager, the mediator between the different stakeholders, who knows and has the children's best interest at heart[120]. This is a tall order for which support provided by *Colleges* is claimed to be insufficient[121]. Quality education is about the teachers' ability to act as role models, the trust and reputation earned, their personality and classroom management, content knowledge, innovation and diligence, outlook on empowerment of learners and pedagogical approach, sensitivity to individual needs and relevance, caring disposition and dedication[122]. As challenging as this may seem, apart from being equipped professionally, who educators and educational leaders *"are as persons"*, their potential *"to emanate confidence and peace … heavily impacts on their practice"*[123]. There is no big revelation in the assertions made by participants on educators and educational leaders. This is all known and amply evidenced in research. The absence of novelty risks overseeing that the importance these actors are attributed, as persons and professionals, in formal education by respondents, belittles any mention and appreciation of organisational structures in the quest for quality education. Nevertheless, *"carefully thought-out school structures can provide relational resources …* [and] *inspire teachers"* (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 151) further enhancing their rightful position.

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[116] *Head of Secondary School; Head of Primary School 1; Teachers – Secondary School; Shadow Minister; College Principal; MUT President* in *Actors' Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity – Chapter 4*

[117] *Head of Primary School 1; MUT President; Shadow Minister* in *Actors' Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity – Chapter 4*

[118] *Head of Primary School 2* in *Actors' Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity – Chapter 4*

[119] *Head of Primary School 3; Head of Secondary School; Shadow Minister* in *Actors' Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity – Chapter 4*

[120] *Parents – Primary School 2; Students – Primary School 2; Head of Primary School 2* in *Actors' Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity – Chapter 4*

[121] *Head of Primary School 1* in *Actors' Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity – Chapter 4*

[122] *Head of Secondary School; Head of Primary School 2; Students – Primary School 2; Students Secondary School; Head of Primary School 3; Parents – Primary School 2; Parents Secondary School; Parents – Primary School 1* in *Actors' Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity – Chapter 4*

Education is a lifelong and life-wide ongoing experience, where the family represents the most fundamental constant that undeniably impacts the individual's potential to succeed. Formal educational achievement is significantly dependent on the *"cultural capital previously invested by the family"* which affects and is affected by the *"economic"* and *"social capital"* (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). Aware that schools may at best perform a complementary role to the family, it is no wonder then, that concerns on complexities students are facing in families feature high on participants' agenda[124]. Whilst recognising the life-changing difference schools may have on individuals, they need to be discussed within the bigger *"social, economic and political reality in which they exist"* and should never be expected to perform where they cannot[125]. The source of divergence of expectations is not limited to pertaining to different stakeholder groups, as even members within the same group having high expectations, may differ significantly[126]. The educational leader's role is to actively listen and build a negotiated consensus amongst stakeholders[127]. A disconnectedness of policy makers from practitioners and the community at large results in expectations which aren't owned and which may be or may be perceived as irrelevant and/or unrealistic[128]. The wider the community expected to reach a common definition of quality education, the greater the divergences and ambiguity created with endless expectations some of which conflicting[129]. *"It is not realistic to expect that education will solve all personal, social, economic, psychological, political, and religious problems. A school needs to be sensitive and well in touch with the community to be in a position to bring all these internal and external forces together. The inability to do this, creates unproductive, opposing forces. … The beauty of life is (democracy has many defects, but it is so much better than suppression/dictatorship) that it is a mixture of convergence and divergence. ... One has to take on board both convergence and divergence including them in the educational experience, with the problems and conflicts this brings along."*[130]. These perspectives confirm that involving stakeholders offers both risks and opportunities (Shannon, 2010), but fears from challenges should not halt the process as it would only result in preserving the *"status quo, of maintaining power in whatever hands currently hold it"* (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 52). Whilst acknowledging that power meets counterpower in seen and unseen ways (Castells, 2011), with subjects mutually retaining *"'hold' on one another"* (Mifsud, 2015, p. 56), as reluctant as the central government may be to relinquish power (Cutajar et al., 2013), there should be efforts in minimising the *"unidirectional downward flow of power"* (Mifsud, 2015, p. 62), possibly equalising it, at least from a structural and procedural perspective.

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[123] *Head of Primary School 1* in *Actors' Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity – Chapter 4*

[124] *Head of Primary School 1; Teachers – Primary School 1; Parents – Primary School 2; Head of Primary School 3; Teachers - Secondary School* in *Actors' Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity – Chapter 4*

[125] *Minister* in *Actors' Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity – Chapter 4*

[126] *Head of Secondary School; Teachers – Primary School 2; Head of Primary School 3* in *Actors' Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity – Chapter 4*

[127] *Head of Primary School 1; Head of Primary School 2; Head of Secondary School* in *Actors' Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity – Chapter 4*

The Agency Gene

Agency is *"the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power"* (Merriam-Webster, 2020). However, agency is far more complex than is often portrayed in literature and needs an *"ecological understanding … that pays attention to the conditions by means of which agency is achieved, as much as it does to the capacity of individual teachers"* or actors (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 151). Coded findings clustered under *Organisational vs Individual Action*, and *Overt vs Covert Action*[131] have been assigned to this gene.

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[128] *Teachers – Primary School 1; Teachers – Secondary School; College Principal* in *Actors' Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity – Chapter 4*

[129] *Teachers – Primary School 3; Shadow Minister* in *Actors' Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity – Chapter 4*

[130] *Minister* in *Actors' Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity – Chapter 4*

[131] see *Findings – Chapter 4*

Nevertheless, the ecological appreciation must be kept in mind to understand that action may be nurtured or curbed but is inevitably influenced.

The structural arrangement places both the *College* Principal, and even more so, the Head of School at critical positions to develop, foster and motivate towards a vision which is considerate of the context in general and the community members' viewpoint in particular[132]. The loneliness characterising Headship found reassurance in the supportive, arm-length distanced, presence of the *College* Principal and of familiar, trusted peers[133]. This camaraderie is especially valued in dealing with power struggles entered into with the hierarchical structures pointed at a convoluted centre[134]. Whilst having been noted to have improved, levels of collaborative engagement still vary, with indications that (smaller) primary schools tend to be more insular by choice or circumstances[135]. This coming together around the *College* Principal aids in sensitising (influencing) to appreciate the wider national and global picture which is considered by central authorities[136]. It has created a *"meso level of interpretation …* [where] *high-level policy statements are re-contextualised, …* [involving] *the selective reproduction and interpretation of government policy … which can result in emergent practices that are antithetical to the original policy intentions"* (Priestley et al., 2015, pp. 152,153). Whilst some budding participative approaches were deemed encouraging, perceptions of the *"macro level of policy formation … where global discourses and more local imperatives merge to produce statements of policy"* (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 152) still lean towards undesirable connotations of exclusivity and non-involvement as from design stage[137]. An isolated reference to local agency affecting national policy[138] further proves its rarity.

The *College* organisational setup has driven the notion of quality education forward and in the process elevated the Head of School to an educational leadership and managerial role, from contrasting past realities of a glorified senior teacher status[139]. The expense to this was the evolution into a role that requires both extensive technical expertise in education and managerial competence, creating an atypically burdened workload and combination of qualities[140]. The cultivation of trust, relying on reassured safety even when exposing vulnerabilities, remained pivotal at all levels[141]. The expected consensual paradigm within the network, added complexities and extended processes of dialogue putting at test relationships whose positivity needs to be fostered[142]. However, had it not been through *Colleges*, *"the new social morphology of our societies, and thus the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifie*[d] *the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power and culture"* (Castells, 2010, p. 500) would have generated other channels for such processes as *"… the network society* [is] *characterised by the pre-eminence of social morphology over social action"* (Castells, 2010, p. 500).

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[132] *Head of Primary School 1; Head of Secondary School; Teachers – Primary School 3; Head of Primary School 3* in *Organisational vs Individual Action – Chapter 4*

[133] *Head of Primary School 2; Head of Primary School 1; College Principal; Head of Primary School 3* in *Organisational vs Individual Action – Chapter 4*

[134] *Head of Primary School 2* in *Organisational vs Individual Action – Chapter 4*

[135] *Head of Primary School 3* in *Organisational vs Individual Action – Chapter 4*

[136] *College Principal* in *Organisational vs Individual Action – Chapter 4*

[137] *Head of Secondary School; Head of Primary School 2; Head of Primary School 3; Head of Primary School 1* in *Organisational vs Individual Action – Chapter 4*

[138] *Head of Primary School 3* in *Organisational vs Individual Action – Chapter 4*

Although experience may build resilience, perceived (or actual) persisting disappointments, as in the case of sustained illiteracy in students notwithstanding invested efforts, and alienations, as may be having two or three different jobs[143], which may be infused with conflicting interests and stronger extrinsic motivators, are amongst influences affecting the teachers' ecosystem. Moreover, earlier expressed concerns of non-consideration by national policy makers, or even in decision-making processes by the *College*, almost become resentment at teacher level[144]. Irrespective of their original involvement, at *"the micro level of policy enactment … teachers further re-contextualise the curriculum, developing whole-school and classroom practices to enact the curriculum …* [which] *is influenced and shaped by the beliefs and knowledge of teachers, the cultures of schools, as well as by external pressures such as accountability demands"* (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 153). Hence, prior consideration of the teachers' views, as complex as this may be, is worth being invested in, as it mitigates negativity at school and classroom level, which in turn impacts the learners.

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[139] *MEA DG* in *Organisational vs Individual Action – Chapter 4*

[140] *MEA DG* in *Organisational vs Individual Action – Chapter 4*

[141] *Head of Secondary School; Head of Primary School 2; Head of Primary School 3* in *Organisational vs Individual Action – Chapter 4*

[142] *Head of Primary School 3; Head of Primary School 1; Head of Secondary School* in *Organisational vs Individual Action – Chapter 4*

[143] *Teachers – Secondary School; Teachers – Primary School 2; Head of Secondary School; Head of Primary School 1* in *Organisational vs Individual Action – Chapter 4*

[144] *Teachers – Secondary School; Teachers – Primary School 2* in *Organisational vs Individual Action – Chapter 4*

Parental involvement in education is known to yield *"positive results"* as "[p]*arents become empowered"*, educators *"receive valuable assistance, and students achieve academically"* (The Editors of Salem Press, 2014, p. 2). Notwithstanding this is widely accepted, as is the expressed belief that parents, irrespective of their socio-economic standing and possible deprivations where these exist, ought to be involved for a high quality education, parents complain that at most they are informed after or at implementation stage but never consulted before decisions have been made[145]. On the other hand, apart from parents who feel disenchanted by schooling through negative personal experiences, hence reluctant to engage with their children's school, there is a reportedly growing lifestyle-induced abdication of parental responsibilities further impacting negatively on education[146]. Parents rebut consultative processes with cynicism, claiming a need for more and better communication, and students demand greater involvement of their parents by the school, which needs not be secluded to (infrequent and often rushed) parents' days[147]. It is to be further noted that not all parents have the same access to involve themselves, for instance those with a lower socio-economic standing are disadvantaged also in this regard (Park, 2006). Interpolating the *"ecological understanding of agency … it is one thing to expect …* [actors] *to be agentic in …* [education]*, but it is quite another thing for it to happen in practice …* [, requiring an] *ecological approach to understanding … agency …* [considering] *the macro level of policy formation …, the meso level of policy interpretation …* [and] *the micro level of policy enactment"* (Priestley et al., 2015, pp. 151, 152).

Each of these actors have their own agenda which may be overt, covert or a mix of both. This may present itself as engagement and motivation, or in active as well as passive resistance[148]. Some respondents claim unawareness of wider realities other than their own, whereas others suggest that many prefer not to openly express their views[149]. Action or inaction and the extent of effort to influence are attributed to the relevance to one's own cause[150]. It is argued that when compared to the commitment required, the vocational calling or the intrinsic motivation alone may not suffice, but participants encourage exposing vulnerabilities, which should be set as an example by educational leaders, to earn credibility[151]. In comparison to the excessive complexities with which education has been (perhaps unnecessarily) loaded, the disarming values of love and respect, particularly required in less congenial circumstances, may seem simplistic and yet remain so necessary and effective[152]. The concluding assertions made by two participants namely, *"losses only occur if they are allowed"* and *"Life is what you make of it!",* respectively assuming responsibility for ensuring success[153] are imbued with meaning. As posited in research on shared agency between youth and their parents, *"the parent–child relationship can have agency in its own right"* (Chang et al., 2010, p. 1301) built on *"dyadic coping whereby social partners can solve problems jointly with the mutual engagement of each person (Berg et al., 1998)"* (Chang et al., 2010, p. 1294). The ecological context and dynamic relationships amidst the various stakeholders imply multileveled, composite forms of agency which need to be understood, before fostering genuine involvement.

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[145] *Parents – Secondary School; Parents – Primary School 2; College Principal* in *Organisational vs Individual Action – Chapter 4*

[146] *Teachers– Primary School 2; Teachers – Secondary School* in *Organisational vs Individual Action – Chapter 4*

[147] *Parents – Primary School 2; Students – Secondary School; Parents – Secondary School* in *Organisational vs Individual Action – Chapter 4*

[148] *Head of Secondary School* in *Overt vs Covert Action – Chapter 4*

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[149] *Teachers – Primary School 3; Teachers – Primary School 2* in *Overt vs Covert Action – Chapter 4*
[150] *Head of Primary School 1* in *Overt vs Covert Action – Chapter 4*
[151] *Head of Primary School 1* in *Overt vs Covert Action – Chapter 4*
[152] *Head of Secondary School; Students – Secondary School; Teachers – Primary School 2* in *Overt vs Covert Action – Chapter 4*
[153] *Head of Primary School 1; College Principal* in *Overt vs Covert Action – Chapter 4*

Linking the Discussion to Research Questions

Intrigued by the pretext of quality education for the *Colleges* reform in Malta, I had set myself three original research questions:

1. How can collegial school networks serve as a vehicle to quality education?
2. How can contextually relevant and stakeholder considerate definitions of quality education be construed?
3. How is the *College* perceived as impacting stakeholders' notions of quality education?

Each of these three research questions was further broken down (see Table IV – Research and Interview Questions in Appendix IV) to help design both the literature review and the data collection tool (interview/focus-group questions). A brief discussion on each research question will follow to sequentially link questions with answers spread throughout the thesis but epitomised in the unforeseen discovery of the *Multidimensional Chromosomic Framework for Quality Education.*

Research Question 1

In the Chapter 2, work from Atkinson et al. (2007), Hopkins (2005), Sergiovanni (2006), Bentley (2005), the National College for School Leadership (2005), Anderson (2005), Smith and Wohlstetter (2001), Abbott et al. (2013), Reid and Brain (2003), the Office for Standards in Education (2003), Chapman et al. (2009), Chapman et al. (2010), the Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) was used to expose the potential benefits of school networks in general[154], whilst reference to Spiteri (2016), the policy document *For All Children to Succeed,* Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment (2005), the House of Representatives (2006), Borg and Giordmaina (2012) drew upon the intended benefits for *Colleges* in Malta[155].

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[154] see *School Networks; Forms of School Networks,* in *Chapter 2 – Literature Review*
[155] see *Colleges: School Networks in Malta,* in *Chapter 2 – Literature Review*

Throughout the various components of the theoretical framework used also to present and discuss findings in the preceding and this chapter, one may elicit benefits identified by participants. These could be referred to singularly but may be less relevant as possibly bound to specific episodes. Hence, I have condensed what come across to be common between the literature, findings and the discussion into four common benefits of school networks (see Table 5.1).

Common Benefits of School Networks
1. Influence The school network may serve as a platform where centrally driven and peripherally driven power (whilst considering the exposed intricacy of power), infused with the respective values and agenda, meet in a structured way allowing reciprocal pollination. When used wisely and in a morally correct manner, it enables the policy maker to sensitise frontline practitioners through their leaders in favour of the national and global dimension, whilst in turn being sensitised by, and hence increasingly reflecting the local dimension. It also provides school-based educators and educational leaders with opportunities to elevate and amplify the importance of their contextual needs through a purposeful channel. It also allows the school community to make use of an available structure to better maintain a desirable equilibrium between stakeholders' interests.
2. Growth Departing from isolation and moving towards collaboration is in itself a persevering process of growth. This growth also includes resources, capacity and outcomes. Resources available may be given more visibility and shared for mutual benefits. A variety of professional development opportunities, from the simplest to the more complex, may be facilitated and improved to higher levels of quality addressing both global and local needs. Creativity and innovation find more spark and testbed, generating possible improvement. Through these processes often inducing increased critical reflection and discovery of deeper meaning, professionals' performance, including that of the designated educational leaders, is refined, positively impacting their own practice and experience. This is ultimately reflected in an enhanced educational experience for learners whose outcomes may gradually improve.

3.	**Support** School networks may create mutually supportive constructs. There may be more provision of expertise, such as psychosocial professionals, to face varied realities impregnated with complexities and requiring different solutions, made available to community members (from staff to students and their families). Educators may be encouraged to find support from peers in another context expanding the available pool, creating new informal networks amongst them. Considering the loneliness that is often said to characterise school leadership, designated leaders themselves may engage in setting up a net of critical, trusted peers which may also serve as respite when tested resilience levels decrease.
4.	**Access** Coming together implies pulling down barriers which may be isolating whoever is on the inside from the rest of the wider local, national and global community. In a network society, insularity may seem antithetical, but it has been evidenced that stakeholders may not be all as involved. In opening to others, together with a result of the preceding benefits, a process of confidence-building may be nurtured within the community enabling further interactions. Not only may parents become rightfully more involved, but the school may also gain access to the wider community, such as industry, for mutual benefit. Most importantly, through cultivation of a moral imperative, notions of exclusion are challenged by greater opportunities to consider inclusion in its widest meaning and its practical application in schools.

Table 5.1 Common Benefits of School Networks

On the other hand, Mifsud (2015), Stoll and Fink (2003), Spiteri (2016), Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), Pitner and Ogawa (1981), Smith and Wohlstetter (2001), Atkinson et al. (2007), Kerr et al. (2003), the Office for Standards in Education (2003), Reid and Brain (2003), Chapman et al. (2009), Borg and Giordmaina (2012), Cutajar and Bezzina (2013) were examined in the Literature Review to describe what research identifies as essential characteristics of effective school networks[156]. This knowledge base was compared and contrasted with evidence gathered and discussed through this study to again elicit common essentials of school networks outlined in Table 5.2, which in turn may be further enhanced through networked activity (see Table 5.1). It is due noting that each of these characteristics have been extensively researched in various studies in the field of education, exposing further nuances and complexities.

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[156] see *School Networks; Forms of School Networks,* in *Chapter 2 – Literature Review*

Common Essentials of School Networks	
1.	**Moral Purpose** Connecting and committing to school networks requires giving up comfort zones. It implies exposing vulnerabilities and trusting against possible losses and uncertain gains. It means investment (of all types of resources – time, energy, human, material, knowledge etc.) for uncertain benefits, which in turn may not necessarily be the convenient extrinsic gains which seem to flourish in the contemporary consumeristic, in certain instances hedonistic, society. It requires people who notwithstanding their diversity, share a common purpose – making a meaningful positive difference in individuals' lives (of others and their own). This self-sacrificing commitment is here being referred to as the Moral Purpose.
2.	**Systemic Leadership** School leadership continues to be exposed as a role requiring significant expertise in education, managerial competence and all that comes with leadership, not least people skills. Moreover, distributed forms of leadership may be shared to varying degrees amongst members of the community, who are a product of the same society being served, and hence are bearing the same burden. Meanwhile, converging and/or diverging global and local forces continually impact on fragile, renegotiated equilibria. Systemic leadership is cognisant of, and fosters agency within, this complex ecosystem to drive sustainable ongoing improvement. It is this type of leadership, nurtured and spread across the community, but deeply residing in authentic designated leaders that is required to establish and sustain school networks.
3.	**Professional Communities** Professional communities involve morally and technically equipped reflective practitioners who are aware of, afflicted by and concerned on their continually evolving surroundings and are on an ongoing discovery of themselves (as individuals and professionals), purposefully coming together to support mutual growth. For these communities, individual and reciprocal wellbeing in meaningful ways, is as important as high quality professional practice realising that the two domains are interdependent and are inherent to one's ascribed meaning in life. Schools having cultivated communities with similar qualities will more eagerly engage in, and derive more benefits from, school networks.

Table 5.2 Common Essentials of School Networks

Collegial school networks that possess and harness the essentials identified in Table 5.2 can lead to the benefits in Table 5.1. Whether these benefits are linked with definitions of quality education is addressed in the next research question.

Research Question 2

The fascinating but no less frustratingly complex concept of quality education has been my point of departure and continued to be the predominant theme of this study. Research by Sallis (2002), Rao (2007), Channa (2016), Rose (2015), Spiteri (2016), Fullan (2011), English and Hill (1994), Leathes (1913), Burbles (2004), Boyd (1998), Hopkins' (2013), Freeman (1994), Learmouth (2000), Hargreaves (2003), Sammons (1999), Boyle and Charles (2016) and Goodson (1994), together with claims from policy documents relevant to the Maltese context, fed into the field research, bringing them together in this chapter's discussion on quality education.

Whilst similarities exist both at a local and a global level on what constitutes quality education, the differing expectations and non-linear extents of legitimacy that have been exposed, mean that there can be no one definition of quality education. Nevertheless, the *Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure for Quality Education* (see Figure 5.2) originating from this study provides clear leads into constructing definitions of quality education that aren't universal but are contextually relevant and considerate of stakeholders. It is further posited that through this model, gauging quality education in a comprehensive way implies considering the different elements of this structure that have been identified as both characteristics and dependencies of quality education, individually and as part of the organic whole. Table 5.3, which needs to be considered together with Figures 4.2 and 5.2 to better understand interrelatedness, brings the various elements of the framework, each of which is unravelled in the discussion within the preceding sections of this chapter.

Elements of the Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure of Quality Education		
The Pivotal Axis		
Stability vs Flux	Time	The opposing forces between *Flux* and *Stability*, create a dynamic tension which needs to be maintained. Should this tension subside to disproportionate stability it would lead to a decomposing stagnation, whereas excessive flux would lead to a lethal acceleration. Historical points in *Time* have specific characteristics and necessities which need to be taken into account. Likewise, *Timeliness* considers the pace, fleeting relevance and readiness in addressing such needs.
	Timeliness	

The Binding Agent		
Purpose	Integrity	*Integrity* implies a load-bearing capacity coming from a cohesive unison driven by an all-embracing connectedness to something greater than the self. *Positionality* reflexively weighs the how, why and in what way, sensitive to the intricacy of power, counterpower and influence, considering interests being served in evident, subtle or even imperceptible ways. *Integrity* and *Positionality* constitute the critical underpinnings of *Purpose*.
	Positionality	
The Double Helix		
Idiosyncrasy vs Universality	Inclusion?	Contrasting drives for egocentrism and altruism respectively nourish *Idiosyncrasy* and *Universality.* Inclusion, as the drive away from forms of segregation hence of rightful access, involvement, sharing is opposed by exclusion of diversity. This may manifest itself in obvious and/or more sophisticated, less visible or clearly objectionable ways, influenced by converging or diverging individual, societal and global values as well as by assumptions of equality and equity.
	Enablers?	
The Genes		
The Context Gene	Vertical vs Horizontal Structures	The individual's centrality is relative to the wider dimension, to which one cannot be oblivious even for the most basic instinct to survive, let alone for the achievement of higher order aspirations. Power relationships permeate society, where interests and values are shaped and negotiated. Networks are forms of relatively stable formal or informal relationships. When in formal education, school networks are characterised by a moral purpose, systemic leadership and professional communities (see Table 5.2), they have been recognised to benefit their communities' influence, growth, support and access (see Table 5.1). Nevertheless, as much as heavily engineered centralisation may lead to depleting oppression, seemingly decentralised structures may similarly be contrived and antithetical to democracy.
	Centralised vs Democratised Power	
	Tangibles vs Intangibles	

The Content Gene	Educational Experience vs Outcome	The content and its delivery are intertwined in the educational experience, which is 'an', if not 'the', outcome of the process itself. Holistic education considers the value and competence formation for the meaningful betterment of the unique individual contributing to a wealthier society no less in its morality. With this intent, equipped educators model and facilitate the learning process also through feedback, interchanging with the active learner whenever appropriate. Heterogeneity advocates tailored approaches, whereas claimed quests for quality through standardised practices, including overrated high stakes exams, challenge the delicate balance that may be achieved, counterproductively risking overseeing contextual and specific needs, perpetuating a status quo in society. The lifelong and life-wide applicability implies ongoing efforts between stakeholders for a negotiated concertedness, with the family retaining its prime role, complemented and supported by educators and other committed professionals in full respect of reciprocal diversity.
	Actors Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity	
The Agency Gene	Organisational vs Individual Action	Agency requires an ecological understanding that considers the capacity of the individual and the conditions in which it may be achieved. In this sense, action may be nurtured or curbed but is inevitably influenced (relating back to notions of power). Organisations and individuals have extents of reciprocal influence through overt and covert action. Structures at the macro level of policy formation merge global demands to local necessities producing policy statements which are re-contextualised at the meso level of policy interpretation. It is at the micro level of policy enactment that further re-contextualisation occurs to reach implementation that is influenced and shaped by beliefs, knowledge, cultures and external pressures. Educational policy makers, educational leaders and educators need to remain cognisant of this composite ecosystem aspiring for dyadic support.
	Overt vs Covert Action	

Table 5.3 Elements of the Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure of Quality Education

It can therefore also be concluded that when the necessary characteristics of collegial school networks described in Table 5.2 are present, the benefits identified in Table 5.1, have direct links with definitions of quality education that consider the *Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure of Quality Education.*

Research Question 3

The concept of power intertwines with stakeholder theories and the two, have both direct and indirect impact on policy. Apart from the data collected from participants, sources on both themes included Sims and Sims (2004), Guba and Lincoln (1989), Storm et al. (2011), Bell and Stevenson (2006), Powell (2008), Abbott et al. (2013) and Castells (2011), as well as policy documents, periodical articles, position papers and parliamentary debates relevant to the historical context in Malta.

Speaking of stakeholder groups gives the false impression that individuals within it form a homogeneous whole. Findings exposed and discussed in this study affirm that these are heterogenous groups that have one or more characteristic by which they are categorized, but nonetheless may have diverse needs and expectations. This may seem to drift each stakeholder group further apart, when in fact it reveals that members in different categories may have divergent as much as convergent views, also because in education individuals may be in different categories at the same time (as could be the case for Heads of Schools or Teachers being parents of students still in the system). Virtually everyone has a stake in education, making them stakeholders in the field.

Nevertheless students, parents, educators, educational leaders and policy makers are arguably the prime stakeholders. They each have their respective significant and obvious vested interests, upon which legitimacy is rightfully claimed. Whilst generally recognising each other's rights in this intricate process, this does not prevent a constant tension from characterising the field which occasionally escalates to conflict in specific circumstances. This concept and the need for communities to establish and sustain an equilibrium has been illustrated in the *3D Matrix on Forces in Formal Education* (see Figure 5.1). Considering the varied expectations, Table 5.4 summarises the impact of *Colleges* on stakeholders' notions of quality education in terms of participants' commonly expressed gains, losses and contestations. Each of these aspects, presented in no particular order, other than tentatively aligning related facets under each column, has been discussed throughout Chapter 2 and under the different elements of the framework in Chapters 4 and 5.

***Colleges'* Perceived Gains, Losses and Contestations towards Quality Education**		
Gains	**Losses**	**Contestations**
Drive for Improvement	Reform Fatigue	Attainment
Inclusion	Increased Demands on Practitioners	Emphasis on at Risk of Marginalisation
Specialised Services	Fragmentation of Services	Equitable Access & Provision to All Students
Support Network	Blurred School Identity & Roles	Democratic Processes
Professional Discourse & CPD Opportunities	Entitlement-driven Mentality	Standardised Practices
Eased School Transitions	Balkanisation	Autonomy
Opening to the Community		Stakeholder Involvement

Table 5.4 Gains, Losses and Contestations on Quality Education through *Colleges*

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Stepping Back to Take In the Canvas

Like the artist, who has been continually moving in and out from his work to make sure it remains coherent, balanced and truthful to its inspiration, as I rest the palette and the brush, you may now join me in taking the last few more steps back to no longer focus on the single brushstrokes, the details, but to assimilate and make sense of the harmonic whole spread throughout the canvas.

The inspiration to this study, was to explore the posited quality education by the national policy *For All Children to Succeed* (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005) that proposed the reorganisation of State Schools in Malta into *Colleges* through mandatory school networks as a vehicle to achieve improved quality. Considering my critical stance, I chose to adopt a qualitative case study of one such network, infusing it with deliberate autoethnographic reflexivity. The literature review focused on the main themes of quality education, school networks and the role of stakeholders, touching upon concepts of power and policy development. Although this continued throughout the study, acquiring an initial familiarisation with the literature in the field enabled me to develop the research tools for the semi-structured interviews and focus groups that were to follow. As I coded the data through multiple cycles, I developed a theoretical framework which was adopted to present the findings and is to me, the main finding of this study. In the preceding chapter I discussed data against the literature, exposing it as elements of the theoretical framework.

In these concluding pages I will bring together in a concentrated way the key findings, including the central theoretical framework. Whilst exposing what I deem to be the limitations to the study, I will identify implications which ensue for policymakers, designated educational leaders, educators and academics. Before bidding farewell, I will also suggest areas of interest for further research.

Key Findings

1. **School networks may contribute to achieve benefits generally associated with definitions of quality education if certain conditions are present.** When driven by a *Moral Purpose*, led by *Systemic Leadership* and constituted of *Professional Communities,* school networks can reward the respective communities with *Influence, Growth, Support* and *Access* (see Tables 5.2 and 5.1 respectively). Nevertheless, as much as heavily engineered centralisation may lead to depleting oppression, deskilling, demotivation and the resulting plummeting quality, decentralised structures may similarly be contrived, antithetical to democracy and not lead to improved quality (Channa, 2016). The quality of the educational provision by schools is more dependent on the institutions' *"intellectual capital, social capital and organisational capital"*, or its human assets, the extent of trust between its community's members and various stakeholders, and its ability to make best use of the intellectual and social capital to bring about ongoing improvement in the educational experience (Hargreaves, 2003, pp. 24-25).

2. **Quality education is dynamic and complex to define, lending itself to better be construed through the *Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure of Quality Education*.** Whilst similarities exist both at a local and a global level on what constitutes quality education, "*the quality of the service is determined both by the person delivering and the person receiving the service"* (Rao, 2007, p. 20). The differing expectations and non-linear extents of legitimacy that have been exposed, mean that there can be no one definition of quality education. The framework provided by the *Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure for Quality Education* (see Figure 5.2 and Table 5.3) originating from this study provides clear leads into constructing definitions of quality education that aren't universal but are contextually relevant and considerate of stakeholders. It is further posited that through this model, gauging quality education in a comprehensive way implies considering the different elements of this structure (and possibly others that may surface through further studies) that have been identified as both characteristics

and dependencies of quality education, individually and as part of the organic whole.

3. **Every stakeholder of education has an implicit extent of vested interest and legitimately strives to reclaim commensurate control over the impact of such interest.** *"Stakeholders are the social actors who play a role in the survival and success of the school system and who are affected by a school system's activities – that is they have a stake in its operations"* (Sims & Sims, 2004, p. 68). Stakeholder groups are characterised by one or more common elements drawing its members together in one category, remaining no less heterogenous due to the individuality of each member. In fact, competing values and interests within and between stakeholder groups, charge forces in education as portrayed in Figure 5.1 – *3D Matrix – Forces in Formal Education*. Hence, comprehensive participation of stakeholders offers both opportunities and challenges (Shannon, 2010). However, this should not be conveniently used to refrain from such an endeavor, exploring the potential benefits, as such arguments persevere the *"status quo, of maintaining power in whatever hands currently hold it"* (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 52). An equilibrium in stakeholder participation, even if fragile and needs constant maintenance, should be continually negotiated and sustained.

4. **Power is pervasive and because it is inherent to society, it should not be demonised, but rather understood.** In society, competing interests and values are fulfilled through relationships of power and counterpower (Castells, 2011), where power, particularly in the contemporary network society, is not determined from a single source but from a complex web that may be shaping *"people's lives regardless of their will"* (Castells, 2011, p. 776). The provision of education is likewise impregnated with such dynamics manifesting themselves in various ways ranging from curriculum design, interpretation and delivery, to the various decision-making processes, amongst which those related to industrial negotiations. Merging the previous and this key finding together, *"striving for maximum stakeholder involvement is critical to change success"* (Sims & Sims, 2004, p. 119), requiring a deep understanding of *"interests"* (*"What does each stakeholder want? How clearly*

defined are those interests? What are the priorities assigned … and can priorities be altered?") as well as *"power and influence"* (*"What is the basis of power or influence of each set of stakeholders?"*) (Sims & Sims, 2004, p. 70). This understanding needs to consider the sophisticated and complex layers of power, where individuals exercise power through collectives, and influence is not necessarily vested in authority (Bell & Stevenson, 2006).

5. **Policy design and implementation requires an ecological appreciation of agency.** Policy development is a messy and complex product of struggle, conflictingly securing values through objectives (Bell & Stevenson, 2006). An ecological understanding of agency implies consideration of the individual's capacity, readiness and willingness, as well as of all those conditions conducive to agency (Priestley et al., 2015). Policy formation at the macro level merges *"global discourses and more local imperatives … to produce statements of policy"*, which are *"re-contextualised"* through, possibly deviating, interpretations at the meso level, and are further re-contextualised and reinterpreted by the front line practitioner, in education, often the teacher, at *"the micro level of policy enactment"* (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 153). Policy stands a better chance of value and objective coherence from inception to implementation, if there is an ecological understanding of agency at the three (3) different levels of policy development, cognisance of stakeholder legitimacy, power and influence.

6. **Extents of inclusion, which may be expressedly desirable but no less problematic, continue to characterise tensions in formal education in Malta.** Depicted as *The Double Helix* in the *Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure of Quality Education* (see *Chapters 4* and *5*), the multifaceted tension between inclusion and exclusion, touches all elements defining the educational experience. The same unsettling relationships that emerge when discussing power (Castells, 2011) are again at the basis of the dichotomy between inclusion and segregation, in which the former is the drive away from the latter (Bennet et al., 1998). Notwithstanding there seem to have been improvement through the effort to depart *"from a selective and elitist 19th century paradigm to a 21st century paradigm of equity and attainment"* (Spiteri,

2016, p. 24), traits of internalised deficit thinking, through which *"marginalised students are often blamed for their poor educational outcomes by well-meaning educators who lack the efficacy to help them"* (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018, p. 2), are still vehemently present amongst various stakeholders. Differing interpretations of quality, access, equality and equity, together with the contradiction that through wider participation and consideration of stakeholder voices, exclusionary pressures may prevail, exemplify the problematic nature of what would otherwise be the undisputed right of every individual. As much as the fundamental right to education that was enshrined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation – UNESCO in 1948, is still one of the UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4) for 2030 (UNESCO, 2020), formal education will remain troubled with the endeavour to better understand and achieve inclusion which inherently lies at its humanistic heart.

Implications, Limitations and Further Research

Implications of the Study

Apart from the findings generated by this study joining the increasing pool of research confirming or refuting other conclusions as applicable, the theoretical framework developed proposes an innovative way of approaching the subject of quality education, somewhat demystifying it. In respecting its organic complexity, the framework allows audiences to deconstruct and reconstruct quality education according to the specific exigencies.

At the macro level, the study directly impacts policy makers, including both Political and Technical exponents. Too often Political drives from potentially immediate or short-term gains, and/or personal ambitions for preservation, advancement and self-affirmation overturn longer term, and wider-ranging sustainable benefits for the broader community. These pressures are worsened by symbiotic crowds, who entangled in the threads of power, including that of capitalist agendas for consumerism, further nourish the individualistic, here and now culture. We are all effected by such dynamics and this culture to different extents, but the key findings should in this sense serve as points of reflection, as well as guidance and support for existing and prospective policy makers who committedly wish to serve otherwise.

Through these findings, educational leaders serving in different structures set at the meso level, may become more aware of their strategic role. This is not only limited to the recontextualisation of policy, but also in the influence, irrespective of the authority, they may have. To lead seems to imply having followers, but to me that should be the by-product of someone who is searching for meaning and purpose, inspirationally modelling it and communally co-constructing a negotiated direction. The importance of enhancing stakeholder involvement, as challenging as it may be, cannot be overestimated. Understanding these findings also has implications for frontline practitioners at the micro level, including both designated educational leaders and educators in schools. It helps assign matters their relativity in the wider picture, nurturing appreciation of a complexity which may be unknown or ignored, and fostering an empowering ecological agency.

The *Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure for Quality Education* provides a framework for all those involved at these three levels (macro, meso and micro) to reconsider any standardised form of defining quality education which becomes antithetical to its own meaning, proposing leads into co-constructing a definition which suits the specific purpose and community for the specified historic period in time.

Limitations of the Study

The non-clinical, life-imbued engagement characterising this research, inherently created its academic limitations, but nevertheless, exalts its relevance. The first and arguably most significant limitation is nothing but me. Throughout the study, I evolved from being a practitioner, an educational leader at a micro level at the onset of the research, to being a deeply involved insider in the central authority at the macro level for most years in between, until today, where, since the last two years, I moved out to a meso level educational leader role external to the State-run system. This made me an insider researcher of different sorts loaded with bias (and insightful experience). Apart from having reminded myself continually of this peculiarity, to curb any excessively negative effects, I made you as aware as was reasonably possible of who I am, sharing introspects in the process, to help you better interpret the study. Whilst inevitably having a bearing, my baggage does not necessarily burden the study, but it enriches it with a deeper texture that could otherwise not have been possible.

The lapse of time since 2009 till early 2020, has meant that the field of research and its context continued to develop in different ways. This meant that the policy *For All Children to Succeed* (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005), which was central in the educational field in Malta at the onset of the research, whilst continuing in its implementation, lost importance as a policy over the years with other changes being introduced; such as co-education, splitting of middle from secondary schools, revised and amplified curriculum with an emphasis on vocational education and training; impacting it in different ways. It also implies that views of participants may have continued to evolve. Nevertheless, this extended period of time has given the study an almost longitudinal dimension, especially by evidencing how the field and context continue to change. This has also allowed me to grow, hopefully being reflected in a refinement of the product.

The context of the study has characteristics which may constitute limitations. Malta owes a significant part of its identity and that of its community to *"a lingering post-colonialism"* common amongst small island states, which *"following development trajectories that have been modelled and designed by others",* are, more than other nations, *"ontological hostages of a development paradigm which they cannot fulfil"* (Baldacchino, 2018, p. 220). Dynamics and behaviours in small island states may have a sense of greater protectionism coming from the geographical insularity (Baldacchino, 2018), yet contemporary network society (Castells, 2010) continues to increasingly connect these communities to the global 'mainland' through non-geographical links, which together with flows of immigration and emigration may be mitigating on peculiarities. Furthermore, extents of commonality in findings with international research in the same field, indicates that, whilst due consideration is to be given to Malta's particular conformation, the key findings need not be confined to small island states.

The qualitative methodology adopted also imposed limitations. For practicability purposes, the case study was performed in one of the ten school networks (*Colleges*) in Malta. Although my wide-ranging experience in the field helps me perceive an extent of resonance with other school networks in Malta, which in my view is the case, this is not scientifically proven by this study alone. The administration of focus groups by a Research Assistant, who, whilst being an experienced professional and was well briefed on the study, has brought in 'his' own way of doing things. This role undeniably contributed by making focus groups possible at a time when my work commitments had almost exclusively taken over my life. It may have also helped by removing my presence, when my position could have been influencing participants' responses, allowing the latter to perhaps express themselves more freely. However, in transcribing and coding the data, I came across passages where I would have acted differently, seeking to delve deeper to possibly acquire greater richness. The pool of participants in focus groups may also represent a limitation. The voluntary participation was bound by two main variables: willingness and availability. Reasons behind one's willingness to participate in such research projects vary and may reflect the individual respondent's agenda. Sessions were set at specific times during school hours in consultation with the Head of School. Whilst this ensured the least disturbance possible on the school as determined by the school leader, it immediately precluded other possible participants due to their unavailability. This impacted both teachers, who might have been delivering lessons at the time of the focus groups, but especially parents who were mostly limited to stay home mothers, who are either on a career break for parenting purposes or not in employment. Nonetheless, comparisons with other studies on the subject in Malta and elsewhere, may still help ascertain this study's generalisability potential.

Further Research from this Study

Each of the key findings may provoke further research in similar and different contexts through qualitative and quantitative methodologies to test their generalisability. However, it is the emergent *Multidimensional Chromosomic Structure for Quality Education* that lends itself most for future research. The applicability of this theoretical framework may be tested in the local and global context through varied modalities. Moreover, there could be further investigation for the possible discovery of other 'genes'.

My Farewell

Although shadowed by COVID-19 being declared a Pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) a few days ago (Ducharme, 2020) overcasting the globe including my country, at the closure of this research project I decide to feel grateful and blessed. Whilst fearing for our collective and individual health, I look forward to recuperating as much time as I am bestowed, to dedicate to the continued rediscovery of my wider self – a husband, a father and a son cherishing family, a Catholic striving to be physically and spiritually healthier also through a greater connection with nature (and hopefully a dog whose presence and enviable selfless love is yet to reward our family) and a painter yearning to communicate again through his art after a long hibernation.

I was tempted to include a seventh finding that to me emerges so forcefully but is academically unsupported and hence I will add it as a reflection. Inner, experiential search for purpose and meaning, is transcendentally rewarding and self-sustaining, whereas external stimuli are mundanely overrated and ephemeral. The authenticity, or the mindful existence connecting us to *"something greater than ourselves"* (Braman, 2008, p. 4), required to face life's challenges, epitomised in the *" 'tragic triad' …: …(1) pain; (2) guilt; and (3) death…"* (Frankl, 2004, p. 139), transcends the individual and the material world. Whilst death is a constant *"reminder that challenges us to make the best possible use of each moment of our lives"* (Frankl, 2004, pp. 150, 151), through a *"tragic optimism"* we are invited to *"*[turn] *suffering into human achievement and accomplishment …*[, derive] *from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for the better …* [and derive] *from life's transitoriness an incentive to take responsible action"* (Frankl, 2004, p. 140). Ironically, the Coronavirus epidemic is painfully making this ever so relevant. I trust that humanity's resilience and science bestowed by God (in whatever form or energy perceived) will help overcome this plague. Likewise, I hope the rediscovery of a moral imperative to contribute for a better world, almost irreverent to economics, becoming mutually rewarding to oneself and the community as should be nurtured and modelled to inspire all and one in continually developing quality education, will survive this crisis and persist thereafter.

Meanwhile I will continue to plough with more callous hands in the field of education, increasingly taking the time to look over my shoulder, observe the covered land, appreciate and learn. In doing so the pace may consequentially slow, but through peaceful reflection the furrows improve better serving their purpose. Because it is not just the mere passing of time, but the richness of what we make of the experience, that helps us grow. Pope Francis affirmed:

> *"education that has at its centre the person in his or her integral reality has the purpose of bringing him or her to the knowledge of himself or herself, of the common home in which he or she lives, and above all to the discovery of fraternity as a relationship that produces the multicultural composition of humanity, a source of mutual enrichment."*
>
> (Vatican News, 2020)

His Holiness recognised the *"need to unite efforts … to … rebuild the fabric of relationships for a more fraternal humanity"* (Vatican News, 2020). It is all about life (and for those of us who irrespective of doubts choose to believe, also about what comes after life) which relentlessly continues to unfold as we all face our own Viktor Frankl's 'Auschwitz' (Viktor Frankl Institut, 2020) under different guises and extents. May this study, not only help by shedding insights on educational provision with the intent to support its ongoing improvement, but also inspire an inner journey that may lead to the discovery of meaning and purpose.

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Appendices

Appendix I – Excerpt from List of Codes Document

CODE No.	CODE	DEFINITION	INTERVIEW	RESEARCH QUESTION	PAGE
1	Willingness	Disposition and intention to collaborate	Head of Secondary School	1	1
2	(Intra- & Inter-School) Collaboration	Principal and Heads, Schools working together	Head of Secondary School	1	1
		A budding sense of collegiality between Heads of Schools pertaining to the same network, but not as yet sufficiently affecting the more significant curricular matters.	Head of Primary School 2	3	2
		The need for Heads to ensure that members of staff are given the space to contribute and are continually kept on board, requiring constant planning and commitment.	Head of Primary School 2	1	1
		The Head's recognition that s/he cannot effectively function in isolation but is dependent on collaboration within one's own school, with other schools and central authorities.	Head of Primary School 3	1	1
		Newly created opportunities for collaboration help deconstruct isolation of schools, particularly Primary Schools, which rarely sought support from other schools prior to the establishment of the College network.	Head of Secondary School	1	3
		A sense of collegiality which wasn't present before the College network structure.	Head of Primary School 1	1	3
		Smaller Primary Schools, who would benefit even more from opportunities for networking amongst educators, perceive their size to be a further limited factor, as if insignificant in the greater picture, and end up being more isolated.	Head of Primary School 2	3	3
		Being part of a College and the presence of a College Principal facilitate inter-school collaboration.	Head of Primary School 1	1/3	2
		Teachers of certain subjects from different schools within the same College have started	Teachers – Secondary School	3	2

		to meet, but this is not happening across the board.			
		Foreign Language Awareness Programmes, whereby Foreign Languages Teachers from the Secondary visit and give taster lessons to Primary School students, are being implemented widely also thanks to the College system.			3
		Teachers state that through the College they're networking and meeting with peers from other schools, sharing material, working on common issues and/or projects.	Teachers – Secondary School	3	2
		Teachers recognise an enhanced level of quality in activities organised since forming part of the College, which can be attributed to collaboration.	Teachers – Primary School 2	3	3
		Collaboration between teachers and the school administration is necessary to achieve quality education.	Teachers – Primary School 2	2	1
		Undeniably, Colleges most significant positive change needs to be the fact that schools have at last been mobilised to at least speak to each other and wherever possible collaborate. Most of this depends on the leadership of the Head and Principal. Moving away from a tradition of isolation is a feat. Vertical and horizontal collaboration within and beyond Colleges is to be aspired.	Minister	3	10
		Another intention for Colleges was to induce more collaboration amongst schools.	MUT President	1	1
		Through Colleges, improvement of standards/quality is essentially brought forth by collegiality. Colleges allow for better monitoring of, standardisation amongst and assistance to schools.			

Table I – Excerpt from List of Codes Document

Appendix II – Simplified List of Original Codes

CODE No.	CODE
1	Willingness
2	(Intra- & Inter-School) Collaboration
3	Territory
4	Resistance
5	Personality (Individual Characteristics)
6	Department Functions (Central Control)
7	Choice/Autonomy
8	(Visionary) Leadership (and School Development Planning) and Management
9	Strategic Planning
10	Building Relationships
11	Communication
12	Trust and Mutuality
13	Contextualised
14	Supportive Structures
15	Holistic Education
16	Social Skills
17	Employability
18	Initiative
19	Protagonists/Student Empowerment
20	Living Experiences
21	Fragile Balance
22	Systemic Reform
23	Diversity & Inclusion
24	Educators' Motivation / Concerns
25	(Contrasting) Expectations / Perspectives
26	Parental Engagement
27	(Parental and Professionals) Alienation
28	Students' Voice
29	Democratisation of Schools
30	Evolved Authority
31	Short-changing High Achievers
32	Autonomy/Devolution of Power (to eventually be joined with *Choice/Autonomy*) (Decentralisation)
33	Comprehensive System
34	Students' Aptitudes
35	Challenging Student Attitudes
36	(Minimal or Contrived) Consultation?
37	Stakeholders' Right of Say
38	School is where it all Happens
39	Gauging Success / Improving Students' Lives
40	Negative Schooling
41	Acquisition and Application of Basic Skills
42	Problem-Solving
43	Community Outreach
44	Presence & Support
45	Size Matters?
46	Smoother Transitions?
47	Access to Education
48	Diligent Educators? / Educators' Diligence
49	(Ipsative) Value Added?

50	(Summative/Diagnostic) Assessment & Attainment
51	Persuasion
52	Followership
53	Core Function
54	Mutual Support and Learning
55	Widening Contextual Understanding
56	Balkanisation
57	Persisting Isolation (Addressing Insularity)
58	Pastoral Care
59	Ghettoism?
60	Curricular Relevance (& Prescription)
61	Student Population
62	Opportunities in VET
63	Specialist Professionals
64	Enhanced Educational Experience (The Journey, Destinations, and Purpose)
65	Coordination and Autonomy
66	Constraints
67	Stability and Change (Continuity)
68	Belief and Commitment
69	No Dead End Education
70	Quality Time (on Task) vs Content
71	Differentiation & Recording Achievement
72	Relative Concertedness
73	Purposeful Dialogue
74	Standardisation
75	Blurred Roles
76	Contrived Research Findings
77	National vs Local Decision-Making
78	Impress rather than Essence
79	Parents as the Prime Educators
80	The Economic & Political Drive
81	The Future vs the Roots
82	(Lack of) Synergy / Synergy?
83	(Hasty) Implementation
84	Influence
85	Limited Dispersion of Collegial Impact? (Concrete vs Abstract)
86	Common Platform with a Shared Ethos
87	Common Projects
88	Children's Current and Future Needs
89	Inevitable Need for Change
90	Love
91	Entitlement
92	Multiple Dependence
93	Proper Scaffolding
94	Principal's Centrality
95	Inconsistent Direction
96	Co-ed System
97	Inconsistency of Thought and Action
98	Ongoing Journey of Growth
99	Educator's Formation & Influence on Climate
100	Exposing Vulnerabilities
101	Projected towards the Future, but Anchored in the Past and Loaded with the Present?
102	Gradual, Variably-Driven Change
103	Policy vs. Practice Dichotomy
104	Need for Greater Accountability at all Levels

105	Quality of Professional Development
106	Earned Credibility
107	Anachronistic Processes and Tools
108	Intercultural Learning
109	Teacher Exchanges
110	Agency, Outlook, Self-fulfilling Prophecies and Societal Reproduction
111	Retaining High Expectations
112	Personal Gain Plague?
113	Sufficient Intrinsic Motivation?
114	Reflective Practitioners
115	Professional Discretion
116	Contextualised Challenges
117	Out-of-School Factors
118	Internal Auditing
119	Pros Outweigh Cons
120	Decoupling Education from Partisan Politics
121	Infusing the Local with the International Dimension (Global and Local Relevance)
122	Oblivious (Passive)
123	Discontinuity
124	Superficial Benefits?
125	Diverging Views (within Relative Homogeneity)?
126	Utilitarian (Employment)
127	Affective Perspective
128	Respect / Good Order
129	Rules
130	Wellbeing
131	Intra-College, Inter-School Events
132	Structure
133	Effective Communication with Parents / Coherence
134	Exchanging Ideas
135	The Head as a Central Figure
136	Quality of Teaching
137	Children's Best Interest
138	Determining Progress
139	Power Relations
140	Feedback
141	Identity
142	Equity
143	Change Overdose
144	Student Encounters
145	Reciprocity
146	Organisational Insight
147	Focal Point, Coordination and Communication
148	Scaffolding from Early Years
149	Geared for Struggling Students
150	Our Children
151	In Loco Parentis
152	Crisis Management
153	Structure, Bureaucracy and (Missed) Opportunities? (Policy vs Reality Dichotomy)
154	Student-Centric Education
155	Quality and Resources (Maximisation of available Resources)
156	Media
157	Lifelong Learners
158	College-Induced Tensions?
159	Socially Just Education (Social Justice)

160	Independent Critical Thinkers
161	Rights vs Obligations
162	Formal and Informal Education
163	Apathy or Refrained
164	Mediating the Micro and Macro (Vertical and Horizontal Links)
165	Quality Education
166	Fragmentation
167	Gauging Quality
168	External Quality Assurance
169	Internal Quality Assurance
170	A Personal Experience
171	Perceptions
172	Detachment
173	Emulation
174	Expert and Foreign Influence
175	Connectedness (*somewhat tied to Identity*)
176	Absolute vs Relative and Dynamic
177	Moral Purpose vs Moral Wilderness (*to possibly be joined with The Journey, Destinations, and Purpose)*
178	Social Stratification and Perceptions of/Impact on Quality Education
179	Legislation
180	Policy Evaluation
181	Safeguards for Students and Parents

Table II – Simplified List of Original Codes

Appendix III – Reorganised Second Cycle Coding

AXIAL & THEORETICAL CODES			IN VIVO & INITIAL CODES		
AXIAL CODES	THEORETICAL CODES		REGROUPED CODES	SPECIFIC CODES	
The Pivotal Axis				**NO.**	**CODE**
Stability vs Flux			Time	67	Stability and Change (Continuity)
				81	The Future vs the Roots
				89	Inevitable Need for Change
				101	Projected towards the Future, but Anchored in the Past and Loaded with the Present?
			Timeliness	83	(Hasty) Implementation
				102	Gradual, Variably-Driven Change
				143	Change Overdose
				152	Crisis Management
The Binding Agent					
Purpose			Integrity – Authenticity; Continuity.	68	Belief and Commitment
				78	Impress rather than Essence
				95	Inconsistent Direction
				97	Inconsistency of Thought and Action
				103	Policy vs. Practice Dichotomy
				111	Retaining High Expectations
				112	Personal Gain Plague?
				118	Internal Auditing
				176	Absolute vs Relative and Dynamic
				177	Moral Purpose vs Moral Wilderness (*to possibly be joined with The Journey, Destinations, and Purpose)*
			Positionality – Interests Served; Relevance; Impact.	39	Gauging Success / Improving Students' Lives
				49	(Ipsative) Value Added?
				53	Core Function
				64	Enhanced Educational Experience (The Journey, Destinations, and Purpose)

				76	Contrived Research Findings
				80	The Economic & Political Drive
				86	Common Platform with a Shared Ethos
				98	Ongoing Journey of Growth
				104	Need for Greater Accountability at all Levels
				120	Decoupling Education from Partisan Politics
				126	Utilitarian (Employment)
				137	Children's Best Interest
				141	Identity
				157	Lifelong Learners
				159	Socially Just Education (Social Justice)
				160	Independent Critical Thinkers
				165	Quality Education
				167	Gauging Quality
				168	External Quality Assurance
				169	Internal Quality Assurance
				173	Emulation
				178	Social Stratification and Perceptions of/Impact on Quality Education
				180	Policy Evaluation
The Double Helix					
Idiosyncrasy vs Universality			Inclusion?	3	Territory
				33	Comprehensive System
				47	Access to Education
				69	No Dead End Education
				74	Standardisation
				77	National vs Local Decision-Making
				121	Infusing the Local with the International Dimension (Global and Local Relevance)
				142	Equity
				150	Our Children
				175	Connectedness (*somewhat tied to Identity*)
			Enablers?	23	Diversity & Inclusion
				31	Short-changing High Achievers
				43	Community Outreach
				55	Widening Contextual Understanding
				96	Co-ed System
				108	Intercultural Learning
				109	Teacher Exchanges
				114	Reflective Practitioners

				134	Exchanging Ideas
				149	Geared for Struggling Students
	The Genes	**The Base Spectra**			
	Context	Vertical vs Horizontal Structures		2	(Intra- & Inter-School) Collaboration
				13	Contextualised
				14	Supportive Structures
				46	Smoother Transitions?
				56	Balkanisation
				57	Persisting Isolation (Addressing Insularity)
				59	Ghettoism?
				123	Discontinuity
				147	Focal Point, Coordination and Communication
				164	Mediating the Micro and Macro (Vertical and Horizontal Links)
				166	Fragmentation
		Centralised vs Democratised Power		6	Department Functions (Central Control)
				7	Choice/Autonomy
				28	Students' Voice
				29	Democratisation of Schools
				30	Evolved Authority
				32	Autonomy/Devolution of Power (to eventually be joined with *Choice/Autonomy*) (Decentralisation)
				37	Stakeholders' Right of Say
				38	School is where it all Happens
				52	Followership
				85	Limited Dispersion of Collegial Impact? (Concrete vs Abstract)
				139	Power Relations
				153	Structure, Bureaucracy and (Missed) Opportunities? (Policy vs Reality Dichotomy)
				181	Safeguards for Students and Parents
		Tangibles vs Intangibles		22	Systemic Reform
				45	Size Matters?
				61	Student Population
				66	Constraints
				75	Blurred Roles
				92	Multiple Dependence
				107	Anachronistic Processes and Tools
				116	Contextualised Challenges

				124	Superficial Benefits?
				132	Structure
				146	Organisational Insight
				155	Quality and Resources (Maximisation of available Resources)
				156	Media
				172	Detachment
				179	Legislation
	Content	Educational Experience vs Outcome		15	Holistic Education
				16	Social Skills
				17	Employability
				21	Fragile Balance
				41	Acquisition and Application of Basic Skills
				42	Problem-Solving
				50	(Summative/Diagnostic) Assessment & Attainment
				58	Pastoral Care
				60	Curricular Relevance (& Prescription)
				62	Opportunities in VET
				70	Quality Time (on Task) vs Content
				71	Differentiation & Recording Achievement
				87	Common Projects
				88	Children's Current and Future Needs
				91	Entitlement
				93	Proper Scaffolding
				128	Respect / Good Order
				129	Rules
				130	Wellbeing
				131	Intra-College, Inter-School Events
				138	Determining Progress
				140	Feedback
				144	Student Encounters
				148	Scaffolding from Early Years
				154	Student-Centric Education
				161	Rights vs Obligations
				162	Formal and Informal Education
		Actors Homogeneity vs Heterogeneity		5	Personality (Individual Characteristics)
				19	Protagonists/Student Empowerment
				20	Living Experiences
				25	(Contrasting) Expectations / Perspectives
				34	Students' Aptitudes
				35	Challenging Student Attitudes

				40	Negative Schooling
				48	Diligent Educators? / Educators' Diligence
				63	Specialist Professionals
				72	Relative Concertedness
				79	Parents as the Prime Educators
				94	Principal's Centrality
				99	Educator's Formation & Influence on Climate
				105	Quality of Professional Development
				106	Earned Credibility
				117	Out-of-School Factors
				125	Diverging Views (within Relative Homogeneity)?
				135	The Head as a Central Figure
				136	Quality of Teaching
				151	In Loco Parentis
				158	College-Induced Tensions?
				174	Expert and Foreign Influence
	Agency	Organisational vs Individual Action		8	(Visionary) Leadership (and School Development Planning) and Management
				9	Strategic Planning
				10	Building Relationships
				11	Communication
				12	Trust and Mutuality
				24	Educators' Motivation / Concerns
				26	Parental Engagement
				27	(Parental and Professionals) Alienation
				36	(Minimal or Contrived) Consultation?
				44	Presence & Support
				51	Persuasion
				54	Mutual Support and Learning
				65	Coordination and Autonomy
				73	Purposeful Dialogue
				82	(Lack of) Synergy / Synergy?
				133	Effective Communication with Parents / Coherence
		Overt vs Covert Action		1	Willingness
				4	Resistance
				18	Initiative
				84	Influence
				90	Love
				100	Exposing Vulnerabilities
				110	Agency, Outlook, Self-fulfilling Prophecies and Societal Reproduction

				113	Sufficient Intrinsic Motivation?
				115	Professional Discretion
				119	Pros Outweigh Cons
				122	Oblivious (Passive)
				127	Affective Perspective
				145	Reciprocity
				163	Apathy or Refrained
				170	A Personal Experience
				171	Perceptions

Table III – Linking Axial and Theoretical with specific In Vivo and Initial Codes

Appendix IV – Letters & Information sent to Participants

Sample of Letter to Interviewees

Date

Dear Honourable Minister,

I am currently reading for my Doctorate in Education (PhD in Educational Development) with the Centre for Educational Research and Development (CERD) within the University of Lincoln, UK, under the supervision of Emeritus Professor Angela Thody. Kindly treat this letter as my formal request for a semi-structured interview (of not more than 60 minutes) with your goodself as a critical figure within the current Maltese educational scenario and my study.

My research entitled *Exploring the Interactions of Collegial School Networks and Quality Education: a Maltese Case Study,* aims to investigate the quest to quality education by the post 2005 introduction of collegial school networks in Malta, as perceived by the various stakeholders. The qualitative study revolves around an in-depth case study of one particular College adopting semi-structured interviews and focus groups with all major stakeholders ranging from students, parents and their teachers to educational leaders, community and Political representatives.

As the Minister responsible for Education, your perspective is not only pertinent but central to the study. I am sending attached my extended research questions and related interview questions in advance so you may take an informed decision and to provide sufficient time for critical reflection should you kindly accept my request. In the tradition of the semi-structured approach, you will have the right to add, change or omit any part of the interview. Furthermore, in respect of ethical considerations, you shall be presented with the transcript of your interview in soft format and be allowed a sensible period of time to make the desired amendments. Whilst aspiring to portray a comprehensive, reliable and authentic picture, I will uphold respect and sensitivity towards participants as a priority; hence, you will have an opt-out clause with the possibility of reclaiming all data pertinent to yourself, at any point of the research prior to publication.

In case of a positive reply, if convenient, I am suggesting that the interview is held between the _______________ and the _______________ at a date, time and venue of your choice. Should you require any other detail or clarification, don’t hesitate to contact me on the details provided.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Yours truly,

____

Ian Mifsud

Letter to College Principal

Date

Dear College Principal,

I am currently reading for my Doctorate in Education (PhD in Educational Development) with the Centre for Educational Research and Development (CERD) within the University of Lincoln, UK, under the supervision of Emeritus Professor Angela Thody. Kindly treat this letter as my formal request to perform a study in your College and a semi-structured interview (of not more than 60 minutes) with your goodself as a critical figure within the current Maltese educational scenario and my study.

My research entitled *Exploring the Interactions of Collegial School Networks and Quality Education: a Maltese Case Study,* aims to investigate the quest to quality education by the post 2005 introduction of collegial school networks in Malta, as perceived by the various stakeholders. The qualitative study revolves around an in-depth case study of one particular College adopting semi-structured interviews and focus groups with all major stakeholders ranging from students, parents and their teachers to educational leaders, community and Political representatives.

Whilst having already obtained formal authorisation to perform studies in schools by the Department of Research and Development (DQSE), I am seeking your support as College Principal, to perform the main investigation for my study in your College. Specifically this shall involve:

- Semi-structured interviews with all Heads of School and your goodself as the College Principal (proposed to be held between _____________ and October _____________) &
- Focus groups with a representative sample of students, parents and educators (proposed to be held between _________ and ____________ for educators and in ____________ for students and parents).

In respect of ethical considerations, the following standard practices shall be adopted:

- Informed voluntary participation in the study.
- Anonymity shall be guaranteed to all students, parents, and educators participating in focus groups by omitting names and any details which could lead to the identification of individuals.
- The attached parental consent form shall be distributed in advance to all participating students' parents to seek the latter's permission for their children's involvement in the study.
- Elements that could explicitly lead to the identification of the College, school or individual shall be omitted.
- Semi-structured interviews conducted with Heads of School will give participants the opportunity to:
    - Receive proposed interview questions in advance so as to add, change or omit questions and allow sufficient time for critical reflection;

  - Review interview transcripts and make the desired corrections or omissions within a sensible period of time prior to publication.
  - Be further protected by presenting data collected in the form of composite interviews to minimise the risk of tracing sources.
- All participants will have an opt-out clause with the possibility of reclaiming all data pertinent to themselves, at any point of the research prior to publication.

Your participation at both an individual and organisational level is not only pertinent but fundamental to the study. I am sending attached my extended research questions and related interview questions so you may take an informed decision.

If convenient and in case of a positive reply, I am suggesting that an introductory meeting is held between the _____ and the ___________ at a date, time and venue of your choice. Should you require any other detail or clarification, don't hesitate to contact me on the details provided.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Yours truly,

____

Ian Mifsud

Letter to Head of School

Date

Dear Head of School,

I am currently reading for my Doctorate in Education (PhD in Educational Development) with the Centre for Educational Research and Development (CERD) within the University of Lincoln, UK, under the supervision of Emeritus Professor Angela Thody. Kindly treat this letter as my formal request to perform a study in your school and a semi-structured interview (of not more than 60 minutes) with your goodself as a critical figure within the current Maltese educational scenario and my study.

My research entitled *Exploring the Interactions of Collegial School Networks and Quality Education: a Maltese Case Study,* aims to investigate the quest to quality education by the post 2005 introduction of collegial school networks in Malta, as perceived by the various stakeholders. The qualitative study revolves around an in-depth case study of one particular College adopting semi-structured interviews and focus groups with all major stakeholders ranging from students, parents and their teachers to educational leaders, community and Political representatives.

Whilst having already obtained formal authorisation to perform studies in schools by the Department of Research and Development (DQSE), I am seeking your support as Head of School, to perform the main investigation for my study in your School as part of the College being investigated. Specifically, this shall involve:

- Semi-structured interviews with all Heads of School and the College Principal &
- Focus groups with a representative sample of students, parents and educators (proposed to be held between ___________ for educators and in ____________ for students and parents).

In respect of ethical considerations, the following standard practices shall be adopted:

- Informed voluntary participation in the study.
- Anonymity shall be guaranteed to all students, parents, and educators participating in focus groups by omitting names and any details which could lead to the identification of individuals.
- The attached parental consent form shall be distributed in advance to all participating students' parents to seek the latter's permission for their children's involvement in the study.
- Elements that could explicitly lead to the identification of the College, school or individual shall be omitted.
- All participants will have an opt-out clause with the possibility of reclaiming all data pertinent to themselves, at any point of the research prior to publication.

As the prospective participant of a semi-structured interview in your role of Head of School, you are being given the opportunity to:

- Review the proposed interview questions being sent attached in advance so as to add, change or omit questions and allow sufficient time for critical reflection;
- Review interview transcripts following the interview and make the desired corrections or omissions within a sensible period of time prior to publication.
- Be further protected by presenting data collected in the form of composite interviews to minimise the risk of tracing sources.

Your participation at both an individual and organisational level is not only pertinent but fundamental to the study. I am sending attached my extended research questions and related interview questions so you may take an informed decision.

If convenient and in case of a positive reply, I am suggesting that the interview is held between the ____ and the ____________ at a date, time and venue of your choice. Should you require any other detail or clarification, don't hesitate to contact me on the details provided.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Yours truly,

____

Ian Mifsud

Letter to and Consent from Parents in Maltese

Kunsens tal-Ġenitur/Kustodju Legali

Data: _______________

Għażiż Ġenitur/Kustodju Legali,

Bħala parti minn riċerka tad-Dottorat tiegħi li qed ngħamel dwar ir-relazzjoni bejn Edukazzjoni ta' Kwalita' u r-riforma tal-Kulleġġi, qiegħed ngħamel stħarriġ fost l-edukaturi u l-istudenti fl-iskola tat-tifel/tifla tiegħek. L-istudenti li ser jipparteċipaw b'mod volontarju f'dan l-istħarriġ anonimu, ser jiġu mitluba jwieġbu il-mistoqsijiet li ġejjin fi grupp ta' bejn wieħed u ieħor sitt (6) studenti (xi mistoqsijiet jistgħu jinqabżu skond l-eta' tal-istudenti):

1. *Taf li l-iskola tiegħek tifforma parti minn Kulleġġ? X'jurik dan?*
2. *Kemm u kif qed jirnexxiela l-iskola tiegħek tagħtik servizz aħjar milli kieku mhux parti minn Kulleġġ?*
1. *X'tifhem b'edukazzjoni ta' kwalita' (tajba)?*
2. *Kif għandha tingħata edukazzjoni ta' kwalita' (tajba)?*
3. *Kif tkun taf kemm qed tingħata edukazzjoni ta' kwalita'?*
3. *Kemm taħseb li jablu n-nies dwar dak li jistennew minn edukazzjoni ta' kwalita'?*
1. *X'qed isir mill-iskola tiegħek bħala parti minn Kulleġġ biex tingħata edukazzjoni ta' kwalita' (tajba)?*
2. *X'diffikultajiet tara li forsi hemm minħabba li l-iskola hija parti minn Kulleġġ?*
3. *Kif temmen li jaħsbuha n-nies dwar il-vantaġġi u l-iżvantaġġi tal-edukazzjoni kif inhi llum?*
4. *Kemm tħoss li kellek leħen fl-edukazzjoni tiegħek?*
5. *Kemm tħoss li taqbel ma' dak li jemmnu l-oħrajn dwar l-edukazzjoni?*
6. *Min taħseb li għandu jiddeċiedi kif għandha tkun l-edukazzjoni?*

L-intervista' fi grupp għandha tieħu mhux aktar minn 45 minuta, f'ħin l-aktar konvenjenti għall-iskola u li ma jtellifx l-istudju tal-istudenti. Sabiex nassigura li nislet il-ħsibijiet tal-parteċipanti kollha, din l-intervista' ser tkun irrekordjata b'mezz ta' *voice recorder* digitali. Iżda l-parteċipanti jistgħu jgħażlu li din l-għodda ma tintużax. Kull parteċipant għandu d-dritt li jirtira mill-istudju f'kull ħin qabel il-publikazzjoni tal-istess studju.

Dan l-istudju għandu jgħini ukoll fi-qadi ta' dmirijieti bħala Direttur tal-Kwalita' fl-Edukazzjoni sabiex flimkien mal-kollegi u mal-imsieħba kollha (fosthom intkom il-ġenituri) inkomplu insawwru l-Edukazzjoni f'pajjiżna.

Jekk taqbel li t-tifel/tifla tiegħek jipparteċipa f'dan l-istħarriġ nitolbok timla' u tirritorna din l-ittra lill-Kap tal-iskola (jew id-delegat tiegħu/tagħha) tat-tifel/tifla tiegħek.

Nirringrazzjak bil-quddiem.

Dejjem tiegħek,

Ian Mifsud

Jiena ______________________________ ġenitur/kustodju legali ta' __________________________ li jattendi skola ____ u qiegħed fi klassi _____________ nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi li t-tifel/tifla jipparteċipa' f'dan l-istħarriġ bħala parti mir-riċerka dwar ir-relazzjoni bejn il-Kwalita' tal-Edukazzjoni u r-riforma tal-Kulleġġi mmexxija mis-Sur Ian Mifsud.

_________________ _________________ _________________

Firma Numru tal-Karta tal-Identita' Data

Research & Interview Questions

Research & Interview Questions

1. How can collegial school networks serve as a vehicle to quality education?

1.1 What qualities of collegial school networks are perceived as being conducive to quality education beyond those offered by schools prior to forming part of such a structure?
1.2 What characteristics are perceived as being critical for a collegial network to be established and thrive?

Interview Questions related to RQ 1 above:

1. What do you perceive as the key elements of a collegial school network?
    a. the essentials for establishing it;
    b. and the critical characteristics required for sustaining and developing it.
2. To what extent and in what ways differing from before, is the collegial school structure assisting the achievement of quality education?

Maltese Version:

1. *Xi tqis bħala l-kwalitajiet ewlenija ta' Kulleġġ?*
    a. *l-elementi meħtieġa sabiex dan jitwaqqaf;*
    b. *u l-karatteristiċi meħtieġa biex jiġi sostnut u żviluppat;*
2. *Kemm, u b'liema differenzi minn qabel, tħoss li l-Kulleġġ qed jirnexxielu jikseb edukazzjoni ta' kwalita'?*

Student-friendly Version in Maltese (some questions might need to be omitted with younger students):

1. *Taf li l-iskola tiegħek tifforma parti minn Kulleġġ? X'jurik dan?*
2. *Kemm u kif qed jirnexxiela l-iskola tiegħek tagħtik servizz aħjar milli kieku mhux parti minn Kulleġġ?*

2. How can contextually relevant and stakeholder considerate definitions of quality education be construed?

2.1 How do the different stakeholders define quality education, particularly in terms of expectations?
2.2 How do different stakeholders gauge quality education in Malta?
2.3 Is there reciprocal awareness and understanding of possible congruence and/or divergence of views and expectations of quality education amongst stakeholder groups?

Interview Questions related to RQ 2 above:

1. How do you define quality education?
2. In what ways would you expect quality education to be achieved?
3. How do you gauge the achievement of quality education?
4. In what ways and to what extent do you believe that expectations of the various stakeholders on quality education converge and/or diverge?

Maltese Version:

1. *X'tifhem b'edukazzjoni ta' kwalita'?*
2. *Kif tistenna li tintlaħaq edukazzjoni ta' kwalita'?*
3. *Kif tqis kemm inkisbet edukazzjoni ta' kwalita'?*
4. *Kif u kemm tħoss li l-fehemiet tad-diversi imsieħba jikkontrastaw u/jew jikkonverġu dwar l-aspettattivi tagħhom għal edukazzjoni ta' kwalita'?*

Student-friendly Version in Maltese (some questions might need to be omitted with younger students):

4. *X'tifhem b'edukazzjoni ta' kwalita' (tajba)?*
5. *Kif għandha tingħata edukazzjoni ta' kwalita' (tajba)?*
6. *Kif tkun taf kemm qed tingħata edukazzjoni ta' kwalita'?*
7. *Kemm taħseb li jablu n-nies dwar dak li jistennew minn edukazzjoni ta' kwalita'?*

3. How is the College perceived as impacting stakeholders' notions of quality education?

3.1 At the current stage of the reform in Malta, what aspects of collegial school networks do stakeholders perceive as meeting their expectations of quality education?
3.2 What do different stakeholder groups perceive as losses caused or challenges faced by collegial school networks in Malta?
3.3 How far do stakeholders' views converge on the gains and losses of implemented reforms?
3.4 What are stakeholders' perceptions on reciprocal rights and legitimacy to determine the success or otherwise of collegial school networks and hence influence future developments?

Interview Questions related to RQ 3 above:

1. What aspects of the collegial school networks as implemented to date are meeting your expectations in assisting the achievement of quality education?
2. What do you perceive as being the losses caused or challenges faced by collegial school networks at the current stage of implementation?
3. What is your understanding of other stakeholders' perceptions on the gains and losses brought forth by the implemented reforms?
4. How far do you feel to have contributed in the development of current reforms?
5. To what extent do you think you share the same perspectives as other stakeholders on the gains and losses from the current reforms?
6. Who should in your opinion have the right to determine and influence educational policy?
    a. the quality of education;
    b. whether collegial school networks are supporting the achievement of quality education.

Maltese Version:

1. *Liema huma l-kwalitijiet tal-Kulleggi hekk kif qed jitħaddmu sa llum, li jilħqu l-aspettattivi tiegħek sabiex tintlaħaq edukazzjoni ta' kwalita'?*
2. *Liema tħoss li huma t-telfiet jew l-isfidi miġjuba mill-Kulleġġi f'dan l-istadju ta' implementazzjoni?*
3. *X'taħseb li hi l-fehma tal-imsieħba l-oħra dwar il-kisbiet u t-telfiet miġjuba mill-implimentazzjoni tar-riformi?*
4. *Kemm tħoss li kkontribwixxejt fit-tfassil u l-iżvilupp tar-riformi attwali?*
5. *Kemm tħoss li taqbel mal-imsieħba l-oħra dwar il-kisbiet u t-telfiet ta' dawn ir-riformi?*
6. *Fl-opinjoni tiegħek, min għandu jkollu d-dritt li jiddetermina u jinfluenza l-politika tal-edukazzjoni?*
    a. l-kwalita' tal-edukazzjoni;
    b. jekk il-Kulleġġi hux qed jgħinu fit-tisħiħ tal-kwalita' tal-edukazzjoni.

Student-friendly Version in Maltese (some questions might need to be omitted with younger students):

7. *X'qed isir mill-iskola tiegħek bħala parti minn Kulleġġ biex tingħata edukazzjoni ta' kwalita' (tajba)?*
8. *X'diffikultajiet tara li forsi hemm minħabba li l-iskola hija parti minn Kulleġġ?*
9. *Kif temmen li jaħsbuha n-nies dwar il-vantaġġi u l-iżvantaġġi tal-edukazzjoni kif inhi llum?*
10. *Kemm tħoss li kellek leħen fl-edukazzjoni tiegħek?*
11. *Kemm tħoss li taqbel ma' dak li jemmnu l-oħrajn dwar l-edukazzjoni?*
12. *Min taħseb li għandu jiddeċiedi kif għandha tkun l-edukazzjoni?*

Table IV - Research & Interview Questions