

# **From 'Adjuncts' to 'Subjects' parental involvement in a working-class community**

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## **Introduction**

It would be politically naive to assume that greater involvement of parents is the panacea for the problem of school achievement of 'at-risk' students (Fine, 1993; Apple, 1996).

Some of the more critical literature in the area has indicated how policies in this regard are fraught with problems. One of these is that the State abdicates its responsibilities in providing that to which all pupils are 'entitled', guided by the principles of 'equity' (see, for instance, Darmanin, 1994, p. 29; Smyth, 1994, p. 132; Mansfield, cited in Symeonides, 1996).

In a similar vein, others have indicated how, in this present Neo-liberal climate, it has become fashionable to promote the idea of community involvement, within the context of 'active democratic citizenship' (Ledwith, 1997, p. 148), especially in a scenario characterised by attempts to cut back on public spending (Apple, 1996; Kachur & Harrison, 1999). Parental involvement constitutes one such form of community action,

which runs the danger of reflecting the all-pervasive market ideology, the parent being the consumer in this case (Smyth, 1994, p. 131).

The neo-liberal agenda that characterises education in most countries is also informed by a near-hysterical concern with falling standards, loss of 'values', violence in schools, league tables, streaming/tracking and special programmes. It has had the effect of superficially addressing the oppressive reality in which disenfranchised families are living, turning parents and their children into 'objects' for rehabilitation. This is very much apparent with respect to the whole issue of 'values'. There has always been a connection between parent education and the recovery of lost or the promulgation of new values.

For instance, Karl Mannheim considered Parent Education to be a very important vehicle for the much desired process of social reconstruction in post-World War II Europe, a reconstruction that involved the fostering of certain values to avoid a repeat of the advent of Nazism (Mannheim, 1943, p. 29).

The present historical conjuncture is characterised by the co-existence of neo-conservative values, emerging in reaction to welfare states, especially 'in metropolitan state formations' (Torres, 1998, p. 46), alongside others entailing liberalisation of the economy. This co-existence, as Apple (1993) and others have argued, lies at the core of the New Right ideology. The call for Parent Education becomes louder as part of an attempt to recover the perceived loss of 'traditional values'. The blame for perceived loss of values is often laid squarely on the parents of today's youth.

As is generally the case when the oppressive reality of disenfranchised families is ignored, we are presented with a 'deficit model' of parenthood. This notion of 'cultural

deficit' is often reinforced by that literature which tends to 'psychologise' the relationship between parent involvement in education and student success or failure (for example, Gross, 1989; Wolfson, 1989; Yapp, 1991).

There is also literature that raises serious questions about who participates in these programmes. The important issue of 'cultural capital' comes into play here, a point illustrated in several works. A quite recent work is that by Sefa Dei et al. (1997, pp. 189-198) where, among other things, the issue is discussed with respect to Black parents and 'drop-outs' of the Canadian public school system. Feeling that they lack the requisite cultural capital to participate effectively in the educational process (Lareau, 2000), parents often delegate the responsibility for their child's education to 'professionals' (Borg, 1994, p. 25). These professionals include the teachers. This lack of participation on the part of subordinate groups leaves the door wide open for dominant groups to lobby for their own agenda (Grimes, 1995; Henry, 1996). Equipped with the cultural capital legitimised by the dominant discourse in education, middle classes are very vocal and deeply involved in the educational system (Crozier, 1997). In the US, McCaleb (1997) reports that:

Although many schools are apparently committed to programs that invite community input and strive to reflect family values, many ethnic and linguistic minority parents are intimidated by the large, institutional structure of the school and schooling (p. 31; see, also, Darmanin, 1994, p. 31)

The issue concerning the absence of parental voice also becomes pertinent with respect to symposia or conferences on 'Parental Involvement in Education.' In 1996, an International Conference on Parent Education was held in Nicosia, Cyprus (Symeonides, 1996; Phtiaka, 1999). Parents who are not also engaged in education in a professional capacity (educator, professor, minister, etc.) were conspicuous by their absence at the

conference, being visible only in the British contingent from the City Lit (The City Literary Institute, London-an adult education centre) (Mayo, 1997, p. 129).

There is also the question of conventional definitions of 'parent' and 'family', which often exclude single parents and guardians, and which often reflect a totalising white and middle-class notion of parenthood (Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997). This liberal assumption tends to de-politicise educational outcomes and parent-teacher relationships (Stanley & Wyness, 1999). Popular television programmes such as the *Cosby Show* have often been criticised for their politics of representation in projecting the image of Afro-American parents embracing white middle-class values. These conventional definitions tend 'to favour and accord powerful voices to certain groups in society ...' (Sefa Dei *et al.* 1997, p. 197). In Malta, such conventional definitions of 'parent' and 'family' would include such identity features as being 'Catholic' and 'heterosexual', given that the Catholic worldview is hegemonic (Borg, 1995).

Related to the issue of conventional definitions of 'parent' and 'family' is the notion of 'parentocracy' predicated on self or specific group interest. Other literature deals with the conventional idea of promoting parental education to raise test scores, even though, as reported by Coleman (1998), 'Citizens when consulted prefer broader school goals than those measured by tests' (p.9). If the politics motivating a programme of parental involvement is that of genuine grassroots participatory democracy, those involved would do well to heed this literature in order to avoid some of the pitfalls. This notwithstanding, parental participation, together with deep systemic reform of the very organisational structures and leadership of schools (Henry, 1996), is known to have brought substantial changes in individual schools and communities that house them

## **This Paper**

This paper reports on the rationale, progress, limitations and future possibilities of a parental empowerment programme taking place in a primary school, in a working-class area of Malta. Formal educational achievement in this locality has been low for quite some time. In 1995, there were only five new University students and five University graduates from the locality (Parliamentary Question, No. 34, 490). A recent study indicates that the area in which this locality is found has a 'graduate density which is a staggering twenty times less' than that enjoyed in 'the fashionable, upper middle class areas of Attard, Balzan and Lija' (Baldacchino, 1999, p. 210).

The school caters for the education of children whose ages range between 3 and 11 years. Its population consists of 350 pupils and 12 teachers, a Head and two Assistant Heads. The school area is 1500 square metres. The school population is approximately four times as much as the number (82 pupils) allowed in Italy for schools with the same area, as can be inferred from a 1995 study (Mintoff et al; 1995, p. 35). This study indicates that this particular school is one of the most densely populated in Malta and Gozo.

Our paper privileges the voices of actors involved in the school in question, *l-x-Xlokk State Primary School* [1]. The data for this paper derives from our first-hand involvement as co-ordinators in the project and from taped interviews that we carried out with 20 parents (out of the 30 parents who consistently participate in the project) and the Head of School. Teachers' voices, and that of the School Council President, derive from another source (A. Borg, 1999), the work in question having been supervised by one of the authors of this paper. Both our taped interviews and those by A. Borg (1999) took place when the project was already in its second year and at the time when a new Head

had just been appointed. The parents were familiar with us at the time of the interviews since they had been meeting us for the best part of the year. We feel that their familiarity with us enabled them to take us into their confidence. One of the parents, arguably the only middle-class parent involved in the project, was also very familiar with us since she happens to be one of the project's co-ordinators and has collaborated with one of the authors in another sector of the 'public sphere.' The interviews were all carried out in the native Maltese language and, in reproducing excerpts from them, we have sought to remain as faithful to the original as possible.

We shall attempt to extrapolate theoretical considerations from the ethnographic data in question. However, before focusing directly on the school and its surrounding community, it would be most appropriate to look at the scenario within which this project is developing: (a) the larger context of parental involvement in Maltese schools, and (b) the socio-economic set up of the region in question, namely the Cottonera [2].

### **Parental Involvement in Maltese Schools**

Parental presence is now routine in many schools in Malta, as is parental representation on school councils. The councils constitute a body, with parent, teacher, school administrative and community representation (there is now an attempt to ensure a long overdue presence of student representation), entrusted with the tasks of: (a) administering school funds and assets; (b) ensuring contact between school and parents; (c) ensuring contact between school and local organisations; (d) maintaining the school environment; and (e) administering the school except for matters regarding curricula and discipline (Legal Notice 135, 1993) (Zammit Ciantar, 1993, pp. 66-75).

Presence and Representation, however, do not mean parents and educators necessarily work well together or equally share decision-making. Parents have traditionally adopted the role of supporters or representatives, rather than full and equal partners. However, there has been much activity over the years around the issue of parental involvement in schools. Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) have been in existence for a long time. They were granted official status by the Minister of Education in 1978 (Buhagiar, 1994, p. 83). During a 7-week teachers' strike in 1984, the Labour Government in Malta called in parents to help out in the running of schools during the striking teachers' absence. When the strike came to an end, these same parents were allowed to retain their presence in schools and were organised into a national Parents' Association (Briffa, 1985, p. 30; Grixti, 1986, pp.94-101; Zammit Mangion, 1992, p. 146). In 1987, this association was given the status of a legal entity by Education Act, No. 9 (Malta Government, 1987). It would not be amiss to state that the connection of these parents' involvement in the public school system with the teachers' strike did breed a sense of distrust between several teachers and, particularly, the teachers' union, MUT (Malta Union of Teachers, then the Movement of United Teachers), and members of the Parents' Association. The MUT insisted on a return to the creation of PTAs, which entailed the presence of teachers in parents' groups. The Parents Association came to an end following the Nationalist Party's electoral victory in 1987. The Education Act of 1988 prepared the ground for the setting up of school councils, which were to include parent representatives. Through a legal notice in 1993, the Minister of Education published the regulations governing the functions of these councils (Falzon, 1994, p. 45). In 1994, designated as the International Year of the Family, the Faculty of Education

organised a national conference focusing on the idea of a partnership between teachers and parents for a better education (Sultana, 1994a).

This conference led to the setting up of the Association of School Councils, a year later, which has served to promote even further the idea of parental involvement in schools. This concept was further underlined in two very important educational documents,

namely the publication *Tomorrow's Schools* produced by the Consultative Committee on Education (1995) and, most importantly, the draft document for a revised National Curriculum for Malta and Gozo. The latter document warrants some consideration.

In April 1998, the Ministry for Education and National Culture published the draft National Minimum Curriculum (NMC). This document recognises parents as important partners in the educational process, and encourages the education community to enhance the presence, participation and education of parents within schools. The draft NMC also recognises the active presence of parents in the education system as another important step forward in consolidating democracy within the country (Ministeru Ta' l-Edukazzjoni u Kultura Nazzjonali, 1998).

The draft NMC recognises and respects the skills and interests of parents, and encourages schools to use this energy for the benefit of the community. In sections 11 and 12, the document expounds on the concept of schools as community centres and sets the parameters for parental involvement. Next to the traditional call for a stable and stimulating home environment, parents are invited to participate in action research, avail themselves of adult education programmes, share information, knowledge and skills, and participate in community projects. A recent NMC follow-up paper, with empirical data,



indicates the way forward in this respect (Fenech et al; 2000).

### **Context: the Cottonera**

The site in question is situated in the predominantly impoverished Cottonera area of Malta. The Cottonera area consists of 'Three Cities' (Cospicua, Senglea and Vittoriosa) [3]. These share with Malta's past and present capital cities (Mdina and Valletta, respectively) and the Gozo 'Citadel' the characteristic of being fortified areas. These three fortified cities have historically been the most substantially inhabited and important Maltese localities for the greater part of the second Millenium.

The Cottonera's 'fortress' image is inextricably bound up with the type of activity the steel 'monsters' [4] that flank the fortifications represent. The region's one-time economic strength derived from its prominent role in the development of the country's 'fortress economy' during the period of British colonisation. This was an economy that revolved around the British garrison's needs. It was a war economy characterised by a situation of 'boom and bust.'

The bulk of the labour force, which directly sustained this economy, hailed from the three cities. An entire educational programme for the working class was provided in these three cities and this focused on enabling men to gain employment at the Dockyard. The Lasallian religious community played an important role here. A much respected Dockyard School, which not only furnished the island with skilled tradesmen but also contributed to the emergence of a crop of qualified engineers, lay at the heart of this educational provision (see Ellul Galea, 1993, pp. 65-67; Sultana, 1995). The Dockyard and its surrounding working-class milieu constituted an area where one would come across a lot of incidental learning (see Foley, 1994, 1999) and forms of workers'

education. These forms, often regarded as types of 'independent working class education', have historically characterised working-class culture in various parts of the world (see Sharp et al; 1989; Simon, 1992; Livingstone, 1995, 1997). Some preliminary Maltese research and writings in the area are available (Sant, 1971; Caruana, 1997; Zammit Marmara, 1997).

The population in this area historically constituted the nearest thing the islands had to an industrial working class. It has, over the years, provided the power base for Malta's labour politics, having traditionally been a Malta Labour Party stronghold. Suffice to mention that, for a long period of time, the party obtained, in the general elections, four of the five parliamentary seats available from the relevant electoral district. It was only during the last elections (1998) that this tradition was broken, with the now ruling Nationalist Party (Christian Democrat) obtaining a second seat.

As for the Cottonera, this once prosperous area, with its fortune revolving around the harbour activity, gradually fell on hard times (Fabri, 1997, p. 90). The economic returns from this source of activity dwindled during the latter part of this century, especially following the process of British decolonisation (read: rundown of British forces). Ironically, the increase in affluence enjoyed by the militant dock workers during Labour's 16-year rule (1971-1987), as well as developments in the means of transportation, led many of them to move out of the area to live in other communities throughout Malta.

Parts of the area are now characterised by cheap housing and a concentration of members of low-income groups coming from different other parts of the island. Because of its cheap housing, the area is (or parts of the area are) also proving attractive to

immigrants from Africa and the Southern Mediterranean, especially those who have not been granted a work permit (Caruana, 1999). This demographic shift, or process of displacement/dislocation, led to the Cottonera being an architectural melange in which sturdy medieval-like fortifications provide the backdrop to an area in which Baroque churches and palaces exist alongside impressive old dwelling places, plain housing estates (product of the Labour government's social housing programme in the 1970s and early 1980s) and an alarming number of decrepit houses (see Planning Council, 1998). The latter mentioned buildings are reminiscent of a Dickensian setting. More appropriately, given the Mediterranean context, they would provide an excellent backdrop to an Eduardo de Filippo play.

More strongly associated with the area are the sounds emanating from the Malta Drydocks, notably the sound of grit blasting and the sound of the sirens that, in the latter case, indicate such things as stoppages for breaks and resumption of work. Alas, there have been sounds from the Drydocks with a tragic ring to them; the sounds of explosions resulting in a number of deaths (Coleiro, 1995). This region is also regarded as among the hardest hit in terms of environmental degradation (Callus, 1997). Sound pollution and the other effects of grit blasting are not the only environmental hazards to be found. There is also oil pollution, which stems from intense marine activity (Axiaq, 1997, pp. 11-24). Also evident throughout the Cottonera are the scars of World War II, with the harbour area having been the main target for bombing by the Axis powers, since the British naval base was located in this part of the island.

The foregoing scenario makes the Cottonera the perfect site for a series of interventionist programmes, referred to by the Italians as *assistenzialismo*. These are

based on a 'deficit' construction of the participant/learner. They would be programmes that view the participant as 'object' rather than 'subject'. It is this danger that we are seeking to avoid in the project in question.

## **The Project**

Drawing inspiration from the work of Paulo Freire and other writers in the area of critical education, we could not have asked for a better context to extend our work as cultural workers beyond the hallowed walls of the academy. Incidentally, one major coincidence, regarding our main source of inspiration, is that parent education constituted one of Paulo Freire's first activities as an educator when he worked for SESI (Social Service of Industry) in Recife (see Freire, cited in Betto & Freire, 1986, p. 22; Freire, 1994, pp. 18-22; Freire, 1996, p. 90). We were approached, for the purpose of this project, by a parent who is a member of the School Council. Sylvia is perhaps the only middle-class parent who sends her child to this state school. In general, state schools are perceived by middle-class parents as inferior to church or private schools, and as a melting pot for children 'of all sorts' (sic).

Failure to secure a place in one of the Catholic church's early schools, through the Church's annual lottery, or not being able to afford private education is a major concern of most middle-class families. Sylvia holds a higher degree, has travelled widely and lived abroad, is a committed feminist, has taught at university level and is a full-time researcher. Her father was an esteemed figure in the community and the rest of the parents look up to her. She expressed the Council's wish to develop a parental empowerment project and felt we can both make a contribution in this regard. We gladly accepted the invitation and, together with Sylvia, whose popularity in and knowledge of

the community have been instrumental in attracting other parents to the project, have been acting as co-ordinators.

## **The First Steps**

Over 50 parents, all women, turned up for the first meeting. The first session centred around the theme of 'Homework', which the parent co-ordinator and staff at the school identified as a topic very much on the minds of mothers/female guardians within the community. The session itself, which was co-ordinated by one of us, consisted of a mixture of 'teaching' and dialogue. The second topic was identified by the women themselves. Every effort is made to ensure that the women participants have a direct say in the selection of the theme for co-investigation. Only thus can one ascertain that the object of co-investigation is one that connects with their 'thematic universe'. The pedagogy throughout is 'directive' (Freire cited, in Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 103). One of the co-ordinators, or the guest 'resource person', anchors the discussion on the topic agreed to by the participants, interspersing the dialogue with brief expositions. The intention is to ensure that the sessions do not degenerate into examples of laissez faire pedagogy. On the other hand, every effort is made to ensure that the 'authority' the guest speaker enjoys, granted to him/her by the participants as a result of their recognition of the guest's competence in the matter at issue and as a pedagogue, does not degenerate into 'authoritarianism' (Freire, cited in Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 91; Freire, cited in Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 181).

The project is now 1.5 years old and has entered its 'concrete' stage. All 30 persons who consistently attend the sessions are women. One of the interviewed participants is the grandmother of a pupil attending the school. It would be relevant to refer here to the claim by Paul Belanger, Director of UNESCO's Institute of Education

(Hamburg), that 'Grand-parenthood will become a significant issue in the transition towards learning societies' (Belanger, cited in Symeonides, 1996, p. 68), although we feel that it would be more accurate to use the term 'Grand-motherhood' in such contexts. This would be particularly relevant to countries like Malta and Cyprus where size is small, where public a specialist in Creative Arts among primary school children. Given the importance of a language of international currency in a micro-state context (Bray, 1991; Baldacchino & Mayo, 1996), it is not surprising that parents chose, as the other priority area, the teaching of English.

### **Voices and Issues**

The small size of the school population reflects the small size and aging population of the city, and the refusal of middle-class parents to send their children to this school. In Sylvia's view, there is very little information flowing between school and home, a situation that is not unique to the Ix-Xlokk school. It is typical of schools in Malta and elsewhere. As Sefa Dei et al. (1997) point out: '... there are few structures in place to help parents better understand the system, so they can be more effectively involved in their children's education' (p. 192).

Sylvia states, with respect to the ix-Xlokk school:

I have a child in the school ... I wanted to see what is happening in the school  
... I wanted to have a closer look at what was happening ... at (another)  
primary, where my child attended kindergarten, there was much more involvement  
on the parents' part.

Other parents lamented the lack of opportunities to engage in dialogue with the teachers or receive information concerning their children's progress at school. Some even stated that they appreciate the presence of teachers at sessions held as part of the project.

*Mary:* Twice a year! (Parents communicate with teachers) You cannot speak to her (the teacher) outside (the school). Definitely. Now, for example, I came to speak to her. She told me she has to go through the trouble of coming downstairs. You feel kind of awkward to make the teacher come down four flights of stairs. Is it possible to tell her, on two occasions, all that you need to tell her? ... Secondly, what if you have an everyday problem, concerning homework etc.? Do you keep it unresolved for six months? It's impossible. You need to solve the problem now ... there and then, before it gets worse.

*Jane:* Just like parents day, which we have twice a year, can't we have, at least on just one other occasion, an 'Open day'? ... so that we can come (here), we can speak to the teacher and can see what they (the children) are doing in class ... like when they were at kindergarten?

*Doris:* However it should not be held once. At least once a month.

Josephine: I would also like to suggest a monthly report ... we do not have to have Parents' Day to see where he (the child) is weak. If we get a report every month, you can see, for example, that he is good at Reading but weak at Maths (sic).

The general attitude of the school is perceived by Sylvia as that of sticking to its traditional remit, as prescribed in official documents, namely that of teaching children within classrooms during the 08:30-14:30 h school period. As a result, there is very little happening beyond the confines of the classroom walls.

*Sylvia:* My perception of the school was not very positive. There was very little going on. The very little activities were of a traditional nature. In submitting my nomination (for the School Council) I hoped that something more creative would happen in the school.

The Faculty colleague, specialising in Creative Arts, experienced great difficulty in getting teachers at Ix-Xlokk school to engage in drama sessions. These sessions were intended to help teachers provide creative activities for the pupils under their care. She will now be concentrating her efforts on the parents and children.

In keeping with international trends (Van Galen, 1987; Lareau, 2000; Henry, 1996; Bhering & Siraj-Blatchford, 1996), parental participation in schools is gender

specific. It is 'female territory'. For instance, the majority of narratives in the British parents' presentation at the Cyprus conference (Symeonides, 1996) were those of women (eight out of 10) (Mayo, 1997, p. 131). This gender specificity often applies also to the identity of parent educators. Kathie Wiederkehr indicates that three-quarters of the parent educators in Switzerland are women, many of whom combine this work with family duties (Wiederkehr, cited in Symeonides, 1996, p.16). With respect to the Ix-Xlokk project, Sylvia states:

I was nominated by one woman. Three other women supported my nomination by submitting their signature.

The gender specificity in parental involvement could be caused by structural constraints:

*Sylvia:* The activities of the school are conditioned by the working conditions of the teachers. You cannot do anything beyond school hours. I do not accept that teachers insist that they are not prepared to do anything beyond 2.30 p.m. I am really bothered by their attitude.

There have been suggestions to lengthen the school hours to provide greater opportunities for sporting and creative activities (Consultative Committee on Education, 1995) but these suggestions have, thus far, not been taken up. One must keep in mind that Malta has one of the lowest rates in Europe with regard to the participation of mothers in the full-time waged labour market (WPDC, 1992, p. 30). The majority of parents who attend the sessions at this school are homemakers, even though, in this age of increasingly casualised or part-time labour in which several women find themselves (for an in-depth discussion on this issue, see Darmanin, (1997, pp. 199-202)), we come across women who manage to juggle attendance at their children's school in between the requirements of part-time work. This is the sort of situation on which certain firms seem to be capitalising, a situation that could well be the product of a 'normalising discourse' concerning women's role in the family (Darmanin, 1997, p. 200). One woman (Rose)



feels so enthusiastic about the project, and attaches so much importance to her child's education, that she even admitted to missing out on work each time there is a meeting, thus forfeiting pay for the day, given that she is paid at piece rate [6]. But would a change in the time of the sessions attract more male parents/guardians? Many of the female parents we interviewed sounded very pessimistic. When asked this question, some women first reacted by stating that their husbands either work evening shifts or else work also in the evening, presumably part-time, in the latter case [7]. Others indicated that there is a mentality that has to be confronted here, namely the patriarchal notion that the child's schooling is primarily the mother's concern:

*Jane:* Let me tell you ... Since we have children who are being prepared for their Holy Confirmation and so forth, he (presumably the Parish Priest) holds meetings for parents in the evening. It's mainly women. There would be perhaps about three or four men ... it is held at 6 pm.

*Rose:* We have meetings on parental skills. They needed twelve couples to form it (the group). I do not think we formed it (the group) ... twelve couples ... since you have to be accompanied by your husband. Because if it was possible to come alone there would have been more people ... which means ... Even when we have church meetings there would not be any men. These take place in the evening.

*Lillian:* When we had MUSEUM (Society of Christian Doctrine) [8] meetings, there were no men present ... and this applies not only to the MUSEUM meetings ... mothers take greater interest in their children than men. You find few (men) who do (take interest).

*Helen:* My husband is a shift worker. He can be off during the morning. He tells me 'Tell me what happened during the meeting'.

Such structural limitations, exacerbated by popular constructions of masculinities, limit the range and quality of activities that can be organised, and exclude the majority of working males and females. Apart from industrial intransigence, prejudice against the idea of parental participation is perhaps the major obstacle in the way of developing a

genuine parental involvement programme within the school. This is what two of the teachers at Ix-Xlokk Primary School had to say in interviews with A. Borg:

Parents seem to be embarrassed to attend these courses and feel that it is too late for them to learn. Their culture also reflects the idea that the teacher is responsible for educating their children. Parents do not set future objectives for their children's achievement as they see it as something impossible and useless. A. Borg, 1999, p. 38).

By introducing parents in classrooms there will be disorder ... and children will never learn to be independent (A. Borg, 1999, p. 38)

In much of the international literature, it is argued that teachers' perception of parents is often fashioned by their social-class location, often a contradictory class location, to use Eric Olin Wright's term (Wright, 1980, p. 265).

*Sylvia*: I was irritated by the underlying prejudice. During the last meeting, one of the teachers passed a pejorative comment. I responded aggressively to her comment. I told the teacher that 'if you're saying something against these people, you're saying it against me.' The teacher responded by telling me 'you are different.' I am also frustrated by their attitude towards children ... comments like 'these kids are terrible' are frequent. If the teachers on the council are representative of the teachers in the school, I do not think that the school is doing anything to alleviate the plight of the children. They are too dismissive. Unfortunately, I have to be negative. What we get from the teachers are negative comments. No ... the teachers are not from ... One of the teachers sends her kids to a private school. In fact I was repeatedly asked why am I sending my kid to this school ... they were surprised.

*Head of School* (new, male, middle-aged): My impression is that teachers are still wary of parents. Of course, there are teachers who are prepared to accept parents. There are also teachers who view parents as obstacles ... 'They are creating difficulties for us, they are obstructing us ... that's what they're doing' .. they do not accept the fact that the parent will be biased towards his child. They (the teachers) do not accept this ... However, in terms of attitude, the teachers are still wary of parents ... not all of them.

*Interviewer*: Do you think that the effect of the 1984 Strike is still being felt among the teachers?

*Head*. No, I don't think so ... I would answer 'yes' for the older ones. Here I

have a young staff.

*Interviewer:* They are a minority (the older teachers).

*Head:* A minority. The younger staff are more willing to accept parents. In fact, they accept them more. Still, the teachers' fear lies here ... this is what we need to establish ... we need to establish regulations ... let's say procedures ... clear parameters ... let's say clear parameters regarding the role of the parent and the role of the teacher. Because the teacher's fear is that the parent begins to interfere in his professional work (sic.) ... we should establish clear parameters, that the parent has the right to know what is going on at school. The parent has the right to know what the child is learning. However the teacher remains the professional. When it comes to the child's behaviour, the parent knows more than the teacher. However professionalism must remain in the teacher's hands. The teachers are afraid that the parents start interfering as to how much homework is being assigned, whether homework is being assigned ... this is really their fear ..

Of course, the parents do not deny the teachers' competence in terms of pedagogy and content. In fact, their quest for greater dialogue with the teacher is often based on respect for the latter's pedagogical competence ('authority', not 'authoritarianism').

Mary stresses this point in her taped interview with us:

It pays the teacher to discuss matters with us and for us to discuss matters with her. For, if we work hand in hand, this would be for the benefit of the child. At the same time we would not be undermining her work. (when helping the child with homework) and the way she teaches ... and we would not be confused either ... because we learnt our things in the past ... the teacher would certainly tell you not to tell those things to the child because you could confuse her ... we're not up to date ...

As a corollary to the prejudice mentioned by Sylvia, teachers tend to look down on parents. Such a feeling of superiority can be detected in what teachers perceive as parental involvement and in what they are prepared to contribute to the development of parental involvement within the school.

*Sylvia:* When I first introduced myself, I was asked by the Assistant Head of School if I could sew ... they needed somebody to sew the curtains for the school. I bought the material for my curtains 10 years ago, and it is still in the chest of drawers. In the beginning they used to call me to take care of the food and drinks. They have this rigid mentality that anything beyond their responsibilities in class is not their work. Once I was very busy and I asked them to take care of the food and beverages. They (the teachers) took it so badly that I decided to bend over backwards and provide them myself by asking my husband to shop for the stuff ... during my first (council) meeting, I remember very well that the purchasing of food and drinks and their distribution was turned into the central issue.

*School Council President:* Their job (the parents' task) in the school is to take part in the School Council and help out teachers in organising various activities including outings and others. (A. Borg, 1999, p. 35)

The perception here, on the part of the 'professionals' involved (the School Council President is a retired qualified teacher), is that of pseudo-participation. The participatory experience does not focus on the power structure of the school and, say, the politics of its curricula. On the contrary, as with the pseudo-participatory schemes associated with certain worker-management teams, a feature of 'TQM' (Total Quality Management), the participatory experience often centres on little else apart from 'tea, toilet and towel' issues (Mayo, 1999, p. 3), fund-raising activities (Sultana, 1994b, p. 13) or the consolidation of schoolwork at home. This is what a teacher at Ix-Xlokk Primary had to say:

Parents can help academically from home without interfering in class ... parents can help students read outside school by organising a meeting place where, let's say, a group of five to eight students read together. (A. Borg, 1999, pp. 37-38)

One of the parent representatives suggested a women's programme to be run by the school after school hours. She claims that the teachers' reaction was negative.

*Sylvia:* I tried to start a project with women. I suggested several meetings ... these were boycotted by the Council. The women who I wanted to invite as speakers were conceived of as too politically involved. School topics are considered as harmless and are usually accepted. Another objection was that

the meetings suggested were to take place after school hours. They resisted the idea on the grounds that it was difficult to organise and manage.

Two basic ingredients for real transformative action are genuine dialogue and transparency.

*Sylvia:* The situation is very formal. We are extremely nice to each other. There is very little debate. The atmosphere is not democratic ... The atmosphere is not democratic because they have never experienced democracy. It is not a question of manipulation. It is simply an issue of inexperience in democracy.

Other parents pointed out that the Ix-Xlokk project is innovative for them precisely because, perhaps for the first time ever, they are being allowed to participate actively and air their views rather than remain passive recipients. It is innovative, in this respect, also in contrast to their previous experiences, both at school and outside in the community.

*Grace:* In previous meetings you generally listen and that's it. And he (the speaker) often tells you at the end 'would you like to ask me anything?' ... But ... you are either shy. The way we are doing them now ... even with chairs in a semi-circle ... I see this as something positive.

*Victoria:* These meetings are more open. You can say what you feel about it (the matter at issue) and you are respected and listened to ... not as though it (the idea) entered one ear and emerged from the other.

*Interviewer:* Was this a new experience for you?

*Victoria:* Certainly!

*Interviewer:* Didn't you have any such opportunities before?

*Victoria:* No!

*Mary:* In fact, before, only somebody, for example, like you could speak and we listened. We were like fools. Now, at least, we can express our opinions. We are being given the chance to say what we think about the issue ... we have already made great progress ... because it is useless to listen, listen, listen and not say what you feel is good for the children. At least, we now have the opportunity to express our views ... (when exploring reasons why other parents, apart from the usual 30, do not attend the session) ... You know why?... because they (the other parents who do not turn

up) think that the meeting is being held the way it used to be held in the past ... that he (the speaker) is the only one who speaks ... the same litany as usual ... they do not know that they have the opportunity to speak and state whatever is bothering them at school, do you understand?

*Rita:* It's as though we now found you, meaning that we do not just listen. You are also listening to us ... we are easily finding somebody who is prepared to listen to us.

*Rose:* At other meetings you sit down and only listen ... in this kind of meeting, we discuss among ourselves and not just listen. We express our point of view, the way we see things ... It has to be said that these kinds of meetings started only now, which means ... We never (before) had any meetings of this sort ... which means that once we had something organised for us, we responded.

*Carmen:* We often have meetings held by (mentions a particular organisation in the community) ... All right, we listen ... but it is not possible for you to give your opinion. You do not agree with everything. There could be something which you do not like. You cannot participate and express what you feel. You only listen. Here (in this project) at least, if I do not like this particular thing, I have the opportunity to tell you and tell you what I like ... after all, not everyone agrees, isn't it so?

The parents are constantly referring to past experiences, often related to Church activities or activities that occur within the Church's larger social network, characterised by what Freire would call the 'Banking' process of communication. Freire argues that genuine knowledge production is not possible where dialogue and reflection are considered as secondary to the educational process. The art of trying to impress the audience with one's verbosity is a typical feature of this part of the world. One can easily refer, here, to Gramsci's (1988, p. 67) criticism of teachers in the Italian 'popular universities'.

This approach is an important feature of what we term 'pulpit pedagogy', again a recurring form of pedagogy in a context where the Church and its rituals feature strongly in many aspects of social life. The Church's traditional mode of 'pulpit' delivery (homilies, panegyrics) has provided the prototype for public addresses by many a public

figure, ironically including politicians well known for their anti-clericalism, a situation that recalls Guareschi's Peppone in the popular Don Camillo series.

'Pulpit pedagogy' not only silences creativity, but also blocks the possibility of integrating knowledge with the parents' own experiences and the reality of their world. In the Ix-Xlokk project, parents influence the agenda for discussion and subsequently action. It is felt that such an approach allows spaces for a variety of voices and can therefore serve a counter-hegemonic function in a scenario being characterised, in a variety of contexts, by the return 'with a vengeance' of the 'Banking or transmission theory of school knowledge' (Aronowitz, 1998, pp. 4-5).

One of the challenges facing the group is therefore that of generating the right conditions, including the right amount of trust, to move in the direction of what Freire would call 'authentic dialogue'. It is imperative, in this context, that the dialogical process involved does not become a cosmetic exercise. Even when the crudest form of 'banking education' is apparently avoided, we often come across situations when 'participatory techniques' are used to 'facilitate' the transmission of prescribed notions or else to 'facilitate' 'commonsense wisdom ... values clarification' (Aronowitz, 1998, p. 9). The concern here is purely with 'method' (Aronowitz, 1993; Macedo, 1994) rather than with 'problem posing', the latter involving the unveiling of contradictions and structures of oppression.

We derived comfort from the fact, indicated in the taped comments, that the parents were eager to participate and engage in dialogue, obviously having been frustrated by their earlier exposure to the 'Banking' model. It did not take long for the parent/participants to 'come into voice', given the evidence, in much of the Freire-inspired

literature, that there is often initial resistance to dialogical approaches (see Shor, 1992, p. 3; Shor, 1996). The parents at Ix-Xlokk did not appear 'to fear freedom' (in this case, the freedom to air their views), in the sense developed by Paulo Freire in his most celebrated work (Freire, 1970, p. 31). What they have been clamouring for, and the excerpts indicate this, is the sort of parent involvement programme that 'requires listening and responding on the families' own terms, on the understanding that they too want the best for their children's education' (Phtiaka, 1998, p. 47). The environment must have struck them as being an enabling rather than a 'disabling' one, the educational experience approximating that of 'popular education' involving 'listening to and articulating voices which have been silenced and excluded' (Martin, 1999, p. 21).

The parents constantly place the emphasis on 'Listening'. In a society in which eloquence is revered, knowing how to listen is perhaps the greatest pedagogical challenge facing cultural workers like ourselves. The earlier excerpts from the parents' interviews indicate, in no uncertain terms, that they were dissatisfied with communal institutions that were not disposed to listen. This is the one major aspect of the project that, judging from these excerpts, they really appreciated: 'a school that listens' (Sultana, 1994, pp.14-16). For this is perhaps the first basic step in the long and arduous task of rendering the school in working-class communities less alien to the life of these communities, less of an institution regarded by the community members as 'not ours' (see Corrigan, 1990, p. 243).

The disposition to listen intensely, and in a manner that one engages critically/dialectically with what is being heard, implies that we must constantly struggle to die as Narrators and be reborn again as Listeners, for:

Listening is an activity that obviously goes beyond mere hearing. To listen ... is a permanent attitude on the part of the subject who is listening, of being



open to the word of the other, to the gesture of the other, to the differences of the other. (Freire, 1998, p. 107).

To what extent is the process of listening extending 'beyond mere hearing' in the *Ix-Xlokk* project? Are the parents' voices being valorised, taken up and translated into action?

The parents themselves admit to seeing tangible results.

*Gemma:* During our last meeting, we mentioned, for example, cultural outings. It was immediately taken up. Because our teacher (the teacher who teaches Gemma's child) is going to take them out this Thursday. He is going to take them to Valletta. He is going to take them to a museum and similar places. It (the suggestion) was immediately taken up. That's why they're (the meetings) good.

*Rose:* (identifying concrete developments) The English issue, for example.  
Interviewer Have there been developments?

*Gemma:* There certainly have been developments because my daughter is now even speaking English at home ... Which means there certainly have been developments.

*Carmen:* And even our suggestion that, during English lessons, they (the pupils and teacher) speak English, has been taken up.

*Jane:* First of all, as we were saying (before the tape was switched on), we immediately noticed progress ... And the children are also reading more in class ... if we are talking about 'reading', right? We also spoke about encouraging more children (to read) and the Headmaster (sic) told us that he is taking them down to the Library. This is supposed to have also started. I would like to see more (things happening) ... Now, last week, we also spoke about cultural outings. Now they will be starting next week. Which means that what we asked for last week did not fall on deaf ears ...

*Victoria:* The project is developing well ... I think that English, as my friend said, is being spoken in the classroom. The children are speaking English. And as for myself, I feel satisfied until now ...

*Grace:* and even when we ask for something to take place, it happens. Perhaps it does not happen quickly ... since you cannot change things suddenly. But they are happening ... slowly but they happen ...

Given the parents' enthusiasm for the project, it is imperative that the commitment on everyone's part remains a long-term one. There is always the danger, when academics

like ourselves are involved as coordinators, that we engage in 'Studying and anthropologizing subordinated cultural groups' (Macedo, 1998, p. xxvii), being 'tourists' (ibid.). As 'tourists' we could easily be 'enamored and perhaps interested in the [groups] for a time' (Memmi, cited in Macedo, 1998, p. xxvii) and then move onto something else, but not before having colonised the discourse of the subaltern group (Lynch & O'Neill, 1994).

When providing suggestions concerning the future of the project, many of the parents interviewed stressed the point that the sessions must continue and should involve not just the co-ordinators, Head, School Council members and parents but also the teachers. One parent (Mary) even suggested that there should be one or two children at each session so that the parents and teachers can listen to the pupils' views on particular topics [9]. One of the biggest challenges facing all those involved in the project is to explore ways and means of attracting teachers to the meetings.

*Victoria:*... that we continue with what we are doing and not stop ... meaning, that we must avoid a situation where the things we are talking about, that have to be done, are not done.

*Rose:* We continue with the meetings. We continue with the meetings so that we can always communicate with each other ... you, us, the teachers.

*Gemma:* If only they were held more frequently

*Interviewer:* That means we should carry on. It should not be a temporary thing that captures our imagination for a short time and then fizzles out.

*Gemma:* No we carry on. Instead of once a month, they (the meetings) should be held once a fortnight.

*Rose:* And there should be contact with the teachers during the meeting ... and the idea that two teachers were present (during the previous meeting) was very good because they can note what we would like to see take place and so ...

*Gemma* (interrupts): However we noticed that the teachers who attend are those

who teach the very young. We had nobody teaching from Yr. 4 upwards.

*Interviewer:* What's the problem?

*Gemma:* So that they (the teachers) can listen to our problems since it's not only the very young who attend this school.

*Carmen:* And also the teachers need not have to sit at the back. They should mix with the people (the parents) and voice their opinions.

When providing suggestions for the future development of the project, and therefore the future development of the school, the parents raised the issue of early action in the area of literacy, a key issue in this particular region of Malta that denotes high levels of illiteracy (Central of Office Statistics, 1995) as well as unemployment.

*Grace:* Admittedly, our children are in Yr 5, which means that they are about to end their primary schooling. However, one thing I would like to see taking place in future ... we began to talk about reading and literacy ... I would like to see this starting early. Between Yr 1 and Yr 4, they would reach the stage when they either know or do not know how to read. By Yr 2, the matter would have been decided. How is it possible for children to reach Yr 5 and not know how to read? So I would like to see more care being given to those children who are promoted and do not know how to read. This is a sure sign that there is lack of interest in reading. There is no help. I would like to see this taking place, even though my son will soon be finishing (primary school), but this is for future pupils.

The parents, throughout the sessions, have expressed concerns that lie beyond the specific interest of their own children. They suggested various ways and means by which they could use their influence in the community to attract more parents to the project than the 30 who participate regularly. The latter quote from the taped interviews reflects the kind of concern shown by parents for the well-being of children from the community at large. These concerns are at odds with some of the stereotypical images of parents projected throughout much of the literature on parental involvement in education, namely the stereotype of parents whose actions are governed solely by self-interest.

The school has a new Head who is a firm believer in the idea of parental involvement in education, having written his dissertation, for the University of Malta's Diploma in Educational Administration, precisely in this area. Parents have spoken favourably of the new Head in the interviews we carried out, indicating that he immediately won their confidence. It is important for Heads to be exposed to the issue of parental involvement or, more generally, community education, in their formal preparation. This is one area that is conspicuously missing from the coursework in the aforementioned university diploma programme. In small states like Malta, where there is pressure to make multifunctional use of such resources as schools, that cost more per capita than in larger countries (Baldacchino & Mayo, 1996), the Head would play an important role in any effort to extend the school's mission beyond that of providing initial education. The same applies to teachers. They should be exposed, in both their initial and ongoing formation, to strategies for involving parents, to improving communication with parents, to interpersonal skills for working with parents, to models for parental involvement and, more generally, to the development of a community school (Hornby, 2000).

Attempts in this regard are being carried out at the level of initial teacher education. One of the core B.Ed. (Hons.) units at the University of Malta is called 'Families, the Educational System and the Community', which devotes ample space to the issue of parental involvement in schools and to the issue of the school as a Community Learning Centre. This unit, and others in critical pedagogy, especially those of Freirean inspiration, encourage prospective teachers to develop the attitude of being both teachers and learners in their interaction with pupils and parents. They encourage them to 'relearn'

that which they might already know through exposure to the insights, experiences and culture/s of those with whom they interact. This might help them begin to interact with parents on the latter's own terms.

In his vision for the development of the school, where he aims to promote a 'culture of co-operation rather than competition', the Head claims to reserve an important role for parents:

The parents have a very important role. I would have liked to give them a bigger role. However, I do not like to rush through things. I see the parents' role as helpers in the school ... helpers both from the academic angle, in the sense of helpers who engage with teachers in say a reading scheme ... However, I also see them as helpers in the running of the school ... Outings ... why should we not bring parents with us ... they can keep an eye on ... there would be that connection between the children and parents also as part of the school ... that is, children and parents identify with the school, regarding it as theirs.

This excerpt and the earlier one from the interview with the School Council Head project the conventional image of the parent as 'helper.' But, of course, the parents have been clamouring for a role that extends beyond that of 'helper'. The excerpts from the interviews with parents indicate that the project is likely to remain meaningful to them as long as they continue to perceive their voice for change in the school as not simply being heard, but as yielding concrete results, albeit gradually. Parental involvement entails more than being simply an 'adjunct' [10], helping with outings or with the children's homework. Important though this latter task is, it would still confine parents to a subordinate role in the relationship with teachers and other school personnel. They would still be engaging in a relationship with the school on the latter's own terms.

### **Conclusion: from 'Adjunct' to 'Subject'**

An alternative vision for parental involvement programmes is based on an emancipatory project that centres around the concept of the parent as 'subject' (Freire, 1970). In this

concept, parents are conceived of as authentic beings capable of engaging in creative endeavours and critical thinking (Borg, 1993, p. 5; Borg, 1998, p. 16-17; A. Borg, 1999, pp. 34-35). They are conceived of as capable of exercising that right which has been affirmed in a whole tradition of literature in political science, namely 'the right to govern,' a right which, in Freire's Hegelian sense of 'subject', connotes social collectivity. All parents have the potential to regard the world as a place where their contribution can make a difference. Thanks to the confidence inspired by this process, parents with different roots and social locations are encouraged to reclaim their subjectivity and to become active beings, therefore people capable of exercising control over this aspect of their reality. Of course, one must recognise the objective limitations involved in this regard. Change occurs not suddenly, but gradually. The 'victories', albeit small, could be sufficient to inspire confidence. The school now has its own newsletter and family literacy programme, two developments that were the outcome of pressure by the parents themselves.

We would like to think that sessions, such as those in connection with the *Ix-Xlokk* project, constitute an important forum for parents to articulate their needs and acquire the skills for real participation. This notwithstanding, parents and cultural workers cannot stop short of reflection. The 'language of critique' has to be transformed into a 'project of possibility' that, as we see it, will reach an important emancipatory stage when schools are reclaimed as sites of struggle for personal and social empowerment. In our view, this important stage can be reached through a process whereby society disowns the concept of schools as spheres of teaching in a hierarchical framework, controlled by an impersonal and centralised bureaucracy, and ultimately reshapes them as important

vehicles for community development (see Parson, 1990) embracing a wider spectrum of stakeholders. The traditional scenario of parents leaving their children at the school's door step and called in when needed will become obsolete in an equation that views teachers, parents and other stakeholders as community workers. We have to move away from the traditional image of schools as 'daytime enclaves that most students and teachers leave only for lunches or special outings', places that 'Community members rarely enter' (Curtis et al; 1992, p. 113).

These images have to be replaced, as part of a gradual transformation of the school into a community learning centre (Parson, 1990; Mayo, 1994), hopefully being very much involved in community development (Martin et al., 1999, p. 71). This would be in keeping with the reforms the Municipal Bureau of Sao Paulo sought to introduce when Paulo Freire was Education Secretary during the PT Mayor Luiza Erundina de Souza's term of office (Freire, 1993; Torres, 1994; O'Cadiz et al; 1997). As Nita Freire told us in an interview:

... he worked very much and seriously to 'Change the face of the school.' This means: to make it really popular because it would be happy, pretty, efficient, agreeable. To this end, he would be counting upon the participation of the educational agents (teachers, students, directors, supervisors, people in charge of pedagogic orientation, guards, people in charge of meals, cleaners, janitors, mothers and fathers of the students, etc.) (Borg & Mayo, 2000, p. 115)

With regard to Malta, this appears to be more than just a possibility in that the new NMC advocates the conversion of schools into community learning centres, and some of the NMC's follow-up literature provides detailed guidelines for this purpose (Ministry of Education, 2000). Genuine parental involvement entails the engagement, on equal terms, of a very important stakeholder in the educational enterprise, in a process intended to

'change the face of the school' into one that offers greater democratic spaces and possibilities to different members of the community.

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## **NOTES**

**[1] Both the school and parents interviewed are given pseudonyms for the purposes of confidentiality.**

**[2] This is the actual name of the region.**

**[3] This is an outsider's account. For an evocative description of the Cottonera, written by someone born and bred in the area, see the first chapter of Caruana (1999).**

**[4] We are here adopting the pejorative term Thomas Hardy applied to machines that came to the fore during the industrial revolution. The reference here is, of course, to the cranes at the Malta Drydocks.**

**[5] With regard to Cyprus, the tragic events of 1974 disrupted extended family ties, as people were scattered in 'a number of refugee settlements across the island' (Phtiaka, 1999, p. 98).**

**[6] Taped interview with Rose. The parent in question.**

**[7] At least two parents mention this in the taped interviews.**

**[8] It is common for children of primary school age to attend religious lessons at the Society of Christian Doctrine centres, found in each locality, in preparation for their Holy Communion and Holy Confirmation.**

**[9] Taped interview with Mary, the parent in question.**

**[10] We are indebted to our colleague, Mary Darmanin, for the use of this term.**

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