AUTHENTIC EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP FOR 21ST CENTURY MALTA: BREAKING THE BONDS OF DEPENDENCY

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> *'Life is like a path you beat while you walk it'*
> – Antonio Machado

Abstract – *Currently educational leadership in Malta is undergoing a radical transformation at both systems and school level. The Maltese education authorities are decentralising a number of responsibilities to the school site. This paper argues that whilst creating the self-managing school is the way forward to improve the quality of education there is doubt as to what leadership model, if any, central authorities are trying to institutionalise at both systems and school level. It is argued that central authorities need to project a clear vision which will help schools establish a professional culture which offers choice, authority and responsibility. Whilst the changes that await us call for adaptive and technical challenges, a claim is made for a focus on the human side of management. The paper highlights the importance of principle-centred leadership, a leadership which finds its source in the intellect, heart, mind and souls of individuals and one which is sustained through meaningful relationships. Educational managers need to be given opportunities to develop as persons with special focus on areas like learning, creativity, values, empowerment and collegiality.*

Introduction

*I*n numerous research studies, conducted in recent years in a variety of cultures, leaders and others who were asked to identify factors/characteristics of effective leaders, point out qualities such as honesty, integrity, credibility, trust, dependability and straightforwardness (Kouzes and Posner, 1991; Cooper and Sawaf, 1997). The search for authenticity, integrity and trust in and among members within institutions is very much a reality (Bhindi and Duignan, 1997; Duignan, 1998). As Duignan (1998: 20) points out 'authenticity in leadership calls for a radical shift away from much of the traditional, conventional wisdom about leadership'.

> 'We see that people are not just resources or assets, not just economic, social, and psychological beings. They are also spiritual beings; they want meaning, a sense of doing something that matters. People do not want to work for a cause with little meaning, even though it taps their mental capacities to their fullest. There must be purposes that lift them, and bring them to their highest selves.'

(Covey 1992: 178-9)

This quote highlights the importance of principle-centred leadership, a leadership which has its source in the intellect, heart, mind and souls of individuals and is sustained through meaningful relationships. At the same time it illustrates some of the central ingredients behind the type of educational leadership needed in Malta or any country for that matter to act as a driving force which can spur us on through the next millennium. The paradigm shift that is taking place is one which focuses on the whole person, on people who want to be seen as having an important part to play in the field of educational development in their respective institutions. They are therefore searching to give meaning to their existence as individuals (Duignan, 1998) and as part of the learning community (Fullan, 1995; Keefe and Howard, 1997; Sackney, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1996).

Covey's quote also highlights that leadership and how it is defined and practised very much depends on: the cultural conditions in which we work at micro and macro level; the field we are dealing with; the context in which it has developed over the years, hence its prehistory; the nature of its constituents; the issues involved; the agendas and predispositions of our leaders and policy makers; and the unique personalities which make up our organisations at the systems and school level.

The concept of leadership has to be understood within this wider context if countries/institutions want to make leadership not only directly meaningful but relevant to people's lives.

It is within this context that this paper is written. It is based on research and professional work I have conducted in the field of educational leadership and management over the past twelve years. As we approach the next millennium, the big question which preoccupies many an educator is what mindset and type of leadership is necessary to help us break from the current bonds of dependency, to coin Fullan's (1998) term, and therefore lead the country forward.

The context

Current initiatives show a move by central authorities toward greater decentralisation to the school site. The latest initiatives involve all state primary and secondary schools who are being encouraged to develop draft school

development plans. Such a move seems to express the view that school improvement can be brought about by concentrating development efforts on the school, hence seeing the school as the major unit of change in the education system.

Such a conceptualisation provides an alternative view to the centralised, prescriptive model of school improvement that state schools have been used to. In Malta state schools are working within a system which is hierarchical, centralised and bureaucratic. As a result, teachers have grown weary through disillusionment and stress (Bezzina, 1995; Borg and Falzon, 1989; Farrugia, 1986). Teachers constantly find themselves sandwiched between a belief in democracy and participation on the one hand, and the daily experiencing of a lack of structures to function as decision-makers. Schools have never been given the opportunity to develop into vital places of learning, into sites of professional inquiry and reflective practice (Bezzina, 1997, 1998).

Redressing this situation in Malta will not be easy. Indeed, it will be extraordinarily difficult. Present conditions and circumstances of schools could not have been planned to be more antithetical to their becoming centres of inquiry and change. Among the worst of these conditions are: isolation of educators (both teachers and school administrators) from one another; the fragmentation of the school day into separate subject matters; the apportionment of specific time per subject; the untenable ratio of students to teachers; the lack of time for genuine reflection, sharing and critical inquiry amongst teachers.

Efforts to improve the effectiveness of schools cannot be intelligently directed without understanding the dynamics of schools: the actions and influences of teachers, students, department officials, parents, community members, the curriculum, and the ways in which these influences operate.

The present initiatives, although undertaken at central level, tend to lack the necessary values, features and indeed the sense of mission, which brings forth with it that burning desire to achieve stated goals. We are facing a wave of reforms which require a careful re-examination of the concepts of power and authority. Leadership and management need to be redefined and a clear shift away from the traditional hierarchical control mechanisms manifested. However, there is no indication as to how this is going to take place, if at all. What is lacking is a strong and clear vision which is especially needed in times of change (MEU, 1998b).

As Senge (1990: 9) points out:

'If any one idea about leadership has inspired organisations for thousands of years, it is the capacity to hold a shared picture of the future we seek to create. One is hard-pressed to think of any organisation that has sustained some measure of greatness in the absence of goals, values, and missions that become deeply shared throughout the organisation.'

Recent initiatives have placed leadership, its basis and function, under close scrutiny. Whereas Bhindi and Duignan (1997: 118) speak of 'environmental complexities and turbulence' as the main reasons behind the need to review areas like leadership, organisational structures, culture and management practice, in Malta we are experiencing the same very much due to the varied initiatives being introduced by the education authorities. These initiatives are raising concern in education circles that central authorities lack a vision and a strategic plan which reflects the realities facing Maltese schools. Thus, schools are having to address central initiatives, laudable as they may seem, without knowing where they are going and paradoxically, whether or not they will be allowed to get there by the same central authorities. We are faced with a system which is decentralising 'certain' responsibilities to the school site. As a result it is slowly having to loosen its grip over schools – a grip which it has enjoyed for a considerable number of years – but at the same time not wanting to lose ultimate power and control (Bezzina, 1998).

This concern is well brought out in a recent study the author has been involved in (MEU, 1998a, 1998b). This extensive study aimed, amongst other things, to examine the organisational and management structure of the Education Division; to examine the communication process between the Division and schools; to examine the Division's role toward further decentralisation to schools, and to make recommendations for improvements in school management and administration.

Briefly, this study highlighted the concerns, especially of those in the schools, that school administrators still have to follow the dictates of the Education Division, thus ignoring the unique position of the school as an agent of reform. They argue that schools lack the necessary support from the Division. They feel that the school management team and the Division were not adequately prepared for their change in roles. It is important that the role of the Division complements the changes occurring in school management. In order to meet the challenges involved in such a complex undertaking, the Division needs highly developed management and administration skills. The Division must focus on team efforts which in themselves will bring about the synergy which is required (MEU, 1998b).

A dependency culture

In my opinion educational reform in Malta has been littered with what Fullan (1998: 10) describes as 'pockets of innovation' with schools and their members mainly on the receiving end. The move toward decentralisation has been sporadic,

fragmented, incoherent and without the necessary visionary framework to keep them going (Bezzina, 1998). And, to complicate matters further, decentralisation practices are creating more demands on schools which are now of a more intrusive quality as school boundaries become more permeable and transparent (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1998; Fullan and Hargreaves, 1996). The relentless pressures of today's complex environment have intensified the overload.

In fact, school administrators feel that educational reform lacks a conceptual framework which defines the way forward. It is crucial for the Education Division to establish the type of centralised and decentralised practices it wants; to create the appropriate structures and provide effective support services. As a consequence, this lack of a strategic direction has major implications in other areas of school administration (MEU, 1998b).

At the same time school leaders, and leaders at central level for that matter, are not being prepared to take up the challenge of decentralisation. Leaders need to be involved in the process and the required training in order for them to create a sense of purpose and enough confidence engendered (Fidler, 1997).

The situation facing the Maltese education authorities is well illustrated by Heifetz and Laurie (1997: 124)

> 'To stay alive, Jack Pritchard had to change his life. Triple bypass surgery and medication could help, the heart surgeon told him, but no technical fix could release Pritchard from his own responsibility for changing the habits of a lifetime. He had to stop smoking, improve his diet, get some exercise, and take time to relax, remembering to breathe more deeply each day. Pritchard's doctor could provide sustaining technical expertise and take supportive action, but only Pritchard could adapt his ingrained habits to improve his long-term health. The doctor faced the leadership task of mobilizing the patient to make critical behavioral changes; Jack Pritchard faced the adaptive work of figuring out which specific changes to make and how to incorporate them into his daily life.'

Organisations face challenges similar to the ones that confronted Pritchard and his doctor. They face adaptive challenges. Changes require that we clarify our values, develop new strategies, new ways of thinking and learning. Adaptive work is required especially when our deeply held beliefs are challenged, when ingrained attitudes have to be contested, when particular ways of doing things are questioned.

This is the challenge facing the Maltese education system. Providing

leadership which moves away from a purely authoritative style of administration to a more collaborative style of management is extremely difficult. This is so for at least four main reasons. First, in order to bring about change, or rather to make change possible, those having executive powers need to break a long-standing behaviour pattern of their own, that of dictating what has to be done to all problems as they arise. Solutions cannot remain the prerogative of one but reside in the collective intelligence of members at all levels.

Second, adaptive change is demanding on all those who have to experience it. New roles, new relationships, new values, new behaviours and new approaches to work have to be forged. This is quite a challenge that requires patience, practice and perseverance. And, one also has to accept the fact - for this itself is a challenge - that not everyone is willing to go through these inner changes.

Third, being prepared and willing to address change and development also raises the question of competence. Transforming individuals (administrators at central level, teachers and school administrators) into managers who are willing to address whole school/community issues rather than concentrate on their own current prescribed area(s) is by far a more demanding and difficult task. Maybe nor everyone is capable of fulfilling such a role.

A fourth and final factor is that of ownership. Once responsibilities are delegated to the school site will school administrators be willing to manage their institutions not through a top-down model of administration but through a collaborative style of management? This raises the concern as to how far members are willing to take on responsibilities for determining the vision and way forward for their institutions.

Leading through this period which requires systematic change calls for a number of principles which will guide good practice. The focus of the discussion in the following section in this paper will explore these principles.

Building an educational vision

Education reform and development in particular need a set of core values and a core purpose which can steer it forward in times of change and in times of continuity and stability. What is lacking is that vision which provides guidance about what core to preserve and what future to aim for.

Over the years, research on leadership and management has extolled the centrality of vision as the main ingredient behind effective change (Champy, 1995; Fullan, 1995). Terry (1993: 38) clearly identifies the problems currently facing educational reform in Malta when he states that

'Vision is the heart of leadership because vision transcends political interests, testing the outer limits of the vested views that lock people into parochial perspectives, limit creativity, and prevent the emergence of new cultural and political realities. Vision designs new synergies. Vision challenges everyday, taken-for-granted assumptions by offering new directions and articulating what people feel but lack words to say. Vision speaks the unspeakable, challenges the unchallengeable, and defends the undefendable.'

It is this visionary activity that is lacking at central level. However, as Wheatley (1992) and Bhindi and Duignan (1997) argue, vision depends on the intentionality of those who want to work together and help shape the future. This is a forceful statement which presents challenges at a number of levels: Do individuals at central level desire, let alone want to share their power over decision making? Do they have a clear idea of what type of schools they want for the future? Do they really believe in the self-managing school? Do they believe in a collaborative and collegial style of management? Do the education authorities understand the need to move from administering the education system to leading and managing it? Do school members want to enjoy the benefits and challenge that empowerment brings with it? These are crucial issues that need to be addressed and answered if there is ever going to be a genuine commitment to development and change (Wain et al., 1995). Bhindi and Duignan (1997: 126) illustrate the challenge and at the same time the way forward:

'A challenging task for authentic leaders is to help transform the goodwill, good intentions, good hearts and talents of organizational members into a vision, and a hope for a better future. Nurturing vision as a shared energy field helps instil a sense of community and interdependence in a group or organization, celebrates an awakening of the spirit in each individual and an enhanced sense of spirituality in relationships.'

Core ideology

Collins and Porras (1996: 66) put forward a conceptual framework to define vision: 'a well-conceived vision consists of two major components: core ideology and envisioned future ... Core ideology, the yin ... defines what we stand for and why we exist. Yin is unchanging and complements yang, the envisioned future. The envisioned future is what we aspire to become, to achieve, to create.'

The core ideology defines the character of an organisation. It provides the glue that holds the organisation together as it grows. Any effective vision must embody the core ideology of the organisation, which consists of two distinct parts: core values – a system of guiding principles and tenets; and core purpose, the organisation's most fundamental reason for existence. One's core ideology is discovered by looking inside. Ideology is therefore authentic, not artificial.

Core values

Core values are the essential and enduring tenets of the learning organisation. It is the individuals within the institution which decide for themselves what values they uphold. It is essential for institutions to identify and define the values that are central to them and the way they function. Collins and Porras (1996: 67) put forward an important argument which is also relevant to us in the field of education (which is, in quite a number of countries, becoming more market oriented).

'A company should not change its core values in response to market changes; rather, it should change markets, if necessary, to remain true to its core values.'

There are no universally right set of core values. Usually companies have a few values which stand the test of time. Schools have their own. Figure 1 illustrates some values which can be considered as core to a school or educational institution.

FIGURE 1: Core Values: the essential tenets of a learning organisation

❏ Honesty, trust, integrity
❏ Hardwork, self / collective improvement
❏ Empowerment and creativity
❏ Service
❏ Holism

Core purpose

The core purpose explains the organisation's reason for being. An effective purpose helps to reflect the member's idealistic motivations for being in the organisation and working to fulfil its goals. Members need to have a clear

understanding of their purpose in order to make work meaningful and worth pursuing. These often reflect the type of aims that schools highlight in their prospectus or brochures (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: Core Purpose: the reason for being

Some suggestions

❑ To provide a holistic education to children entrusted in our care

❑ To prepare children to live in a multicultural and technological world

❑ To create learning opportunities for all members of the organisation

❑ To be a role model and a tool for social change

Envisioned future

The second component of the vision framework is envisioned future. It consists of two main parts: clear aims and strategies used to achieve the aims/ goals.

Aims

As Maltese state schools embark on developing School Development Plans, school members are being encouraged to articulate, amongst other things, a Mission Statement. This statement states the reason why an organisation is in existence, sets the direction and provides the foundation for planning at all levels of the school. Whitaker and Moses beautifully describes a Mission Statement as 'an inspiring declaration of a compelling dream, accompanied by a clear scenario of how it will be accomplished' (in Lashway, 1997: 2). Fritz (1996) argues that organisations will advance when a clear, widely understood mission creates tension between the real and the ideal, encouraging people to work together.

This unifying effect is important to school settings which are especially entrenched in an 'isolation culture'. The Mission Statement needs to be translated into various aims which school members identify as essential to reach their ideals. The aims no longer belong to specific individuals but belong to the institution as a whole where all members have a role to play. For some, even locally, the development of the Mission Statement was a straightforward, simple task. However, as international studies suggests (eg. Hong, 1996), and local experience proving, the Mission statement needs to be seen as an evolutionary process that

requires continuous reflection, action and education. Through such a process the goals are challenged and challenging.

Aims need to be clearly stated, free from vague statements and therefore precise, such that members know when they have been achieved. Aims are to reflect the values and philosophy of each respective school and are underpinned by statements, as Rogers argues, which clearly show the vision and aspirations of the individual, the group and the organisation (1994 : 20).

Strategies

Devising aims is an important step in the process of improvement as it helps school members identify where they are and what directions they want to take. However, the process does not stop there. It is essential to formulate strategies of how the stated aims are to be achieved. As such each identified aim can have a number of strategies that will be tackled in order to achieve stated aims.

These strategies will involve staff in the process of action planning which help to ensure that plans do not remain on paper but are translated into action. Through this process individuals need to undertake regular progress checks so as to gauge progress and implementation. Progress checks will be made easier when success criteria are established. Success criteria are performance indicators which help to give clarity, point to the standard(s) expected, and give an indication of the time-scale involved (Ainscow et. al., 1996).

Facing up to the challenge

From all this it is evident that for central authorities and schools to improve they require changes in values, practices and relationships. The Education Division needs to develop a culture dedicated to serving people, acting on trust, respecting the individual and making teamwork happen across boundaries. What is needed is both a technical challenge and an adaptive one. Whilst the latter remains the major challenge as people learn new ways of doing things, develop new competencies and begin to work collectively, staff will also need to receive expert advice.

What I would like to emphasise in the rest of the paper is the tremendous energies that have to be dedicated to develop the human side of management. Over the years the meaning of leadership has not quite been understood in Malta. In educating and training leaders of schools and departments, we focus too much on technical proficiency and neglect the area of character. We tend to focus on areas like financial management, strategic planning, data analysis, etc., and probably

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we are good at teaching these. We tend to view leadership as an isolated component, as something to be added on to other skills. Such people later on discover that they were taught how to manage but were never given the chance to learn how to lead. We are still in the Dark Ages when it comes to teaching people how to behave like great leaders – somehow instilling in them capacities such as courage and integrity. These, as Teal (1996: 36) points out, cannot be taught and as a result many tend to downplay the human element in managing. Managing an organisation is not merely a series of mechanical tasks but a set of human interactions.

We are all fully aware of the literature that highlights the characteristics of an effective leader. We are also aware of the growing demands we make on leaders, demands that at times are impossible to meet. For a start, they need to acquire the traditional management skills in resource allocation, finance, cost control, planning and a few other areas. We also expect them to master the management arts, such as strategy, persuasion, negotiation, writing, listening and speaking. We also require them to demonstrate the qualities that define leadership, integrity and character – areas such as vision, passion, sensitivity, insight, understanding, commitment, charisma, courage, humility and intelligence. We also expect them to be friends, mentors and / or guardians. Yet, what stands out is that we need leaders who are 'full-blooded creatures who are politically and spiritually aware, credible, earthly and practical' (Duignan, 1998: 21-22).

So, whilst the lists of demands may be on the increase it is also obvious that there are particular characteristics / qualities that are required, and therefore we need to create opportunities for people to develop them. For, whilst some leaders may be born, all competent leaders become. I agree with Darmanin (1998) who states that people may be trained to become effective leaders. Most leaders, unfortunately, find themselves in leadership positions, without being adequately trained, prepared or exposed beforehand. Leadership also requires a practicum component which often leadership training and development programmes tend to neglect. A lot of work can and needs to be done at this level.

In the final section of this paper I would like to briefly explore a number of areas which, in my opinion, leaders need to explore at both the personal and collective level if we really want to bring about a paradigm shift in the way we conduct educational reform in Malta.

The leaders of tomorrow need to focus on developing the following areas:

Learner

The principle of lifelong learning needs to be upheld and practised by the leader. The leader needs to promote an environment where active learning can take place, an environment where mistakes can be made, and lessons learnt.

Learning needs to be seen as a social activity (Downs, 1995) where everyone has a role to play in helping people to learn.

Imagination

The visionary leader makes 'mental leaps' which take 'what is now' into 'what could or should be'. Imagining draws from a deep understanding of what already is, and is grounded in experience.

Tied to this is the quality of creativity. Creative leaders are capable of inventing new and original ways of seeing reality, creating new energy and life into the organisation. To be creative, the future leader must become an agent of change, especially transformational. A crucial characteristic of the future leader is that of setting the example, of communicating one's beliefs and ideas through one's own behaviour. Tomorrow's leader has to be visible – to be seen to be believed.

Promoting values

Underlying an organisation's goals is a choice of a specific set of prioritised values. The leader of the 21st century will be one who creates a culture or a value system centred round principles (Covey, 1992).

The principles that leaders will need to uphold are based on personal integrity, credibility and trusting relationships (Kouzez and Posner, 1991), and a commitment to ethical and moral values such as compassion, humility and service (Manz, 1998). It is through the authentic witness of such qualities that organisational structures, processes and practices will be built, nurtured and sustained.

Empowerment

We tend to recall with admiration those leaders who delegate their authority, who make subordinates feel powerful and capable. The leader who allows subordinates to feel ownership and responsibility for the tasks being tackled become part of what Mintzberg (1991) describes as an 'empowerment loop'. This means that leaders feel empowered by their subordinates. The subordinates hand back trust, support and praise to the leader, and this helps to strengthen the leader and the vision.

Collegial leadership

Once vision and values have been defined and communicated, the next critical step is the liberation of the individual so as to create a collaborative approach to decision making. Leadership cannot remain the prerogative of one single person. It has to become team base, collegial. Leaders of the future need to be trained to

master the art of forming teams, to collaborate through teams rather than directing through edicts. Shared leadership encourages a horizontal extension of power. The future calls for an extension of that power vertically downwards to involve all members of staff.

Heroic

'Management at its finest has a heroic dimension because it deals with eternal human challenges and offers no excuse for failure and no escape from responsibility. Managers can be as thoughtless and selfish as any other human being, but they can also be as idealistic and as noble' (Teal 1996: 42-43).

The qualities expressed so far verge on the heroic. When we state that we expect leaders to create a vision and a sense of purpose and value where there is none; where they are expected to bring people together when isolation is the rule; when they often have to lead a lonely life facing the harsh criticism of one and all; and of standing firm to the values they uphold in spite of the pressure. ... Are these not the very reasons why they are called to be leaders?

Naturally, such qualities are not easy to nurture. The starting point, in my opinion, has to be the person as individual. The leader as an authentic person, is one who believes in himself/herself, who is willing to start from the self by challenging he self, by examining one's own current thinking and way of doing things. This is the leader as learner; he/she is one who is prepared to challenge oneself but at the same time willing and expects to be challenged by others and by the social context they are working in.

Whilst the leader who is willing to stop and reflect, who is willing to challenge one's way of thinking and going is indeed challenging and a road not many may wish to take, it is also important for leaders to identify a person who is willing to be their mentor - their critical friend - who can support their personal/professional development. This step requires breaking from the boards of independent thinking/working and isolation (Bezzina, 1997) we are used to. This would be a step in creating the climate and culture that is required for empowerment and collegiality to be experienced and celebrated. This can be done by speaking about the school's vision often and enthusiastically, by encouraging school members to work in different groups (e.g. departments year levels; cross-curricular, creative arts) so as to experiment, and put ideas to the test.

As people learn to work individually, in pairs, in groups, in schools and outside, they learn to infuse practice, as Duignan (1998) puts it, with a higher purpose and meaning since at the basis of their discourse and actions are the values and attitudes they have helped develop. It is through such processes and actions that individuals discover that they perhaps can make the impossible possible.

Conclusion

The list, which is purposely not finite, helps to illustrate that great leaders are engaged in a continual exercise involving learning and a lot of persuasion. Getting members to do what is best – for the organisation, their clients, themselves – is often a struggle because it means getting people to understand and want to do what is best, and that requires integrity, the willingness to empower others, courage, tenacity and great teaching skills. Good leaders also thread very carefully the grounds they are working in. They learn to move slowly, assessing their own leadership styles and the school's culture before diving in. Change is a slow process, not a one-of event. It requires time, patience, perseverance, commitment to one's ideals with a clear focus on enhancing teacher performance and student learning.

Such a person is also one who is willing to ignore resentment and gives criticism its due. They are willing to delegate, to listen and treat people with respect. Such people are often described as motivators, people who are capable of motivating members enough to follow their goals. I think it goes deeper than that. They help to instil a sense of excitement in their followers and 'stir our souls' as Teal (1996: 42) so rightly states. Good leaders help to identify and celebrate the social core of human nature. They help to bring individual talents to fruition, create value, and combine these activities with enough passion to generate the greatest possible advantages for every group member.

Leadership is a difficult undertaking. It takes exceptional, sometimes heroic, people to do it well. The right blend of people who have a strong purpose in life can help us to break away from the bunker mentality currently facing us and define our future as we walk it.

> *'It is the walking that beats the path. It is not the path that makes the walk'*
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> – (DeGues 1997: 155).

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