

From Centralisation to Decentralisation: The real challenges facing Educational reforms in Malta

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Abstract:

Explores the crucial components behind current educational reform practices in Malta. These are aimed at decentralising responsibilities to schools through a system of networking. This paper aims to present the education authorities with an introductory critique that contextualises the potential networking of schools within the nurturing of inclusive learning communities. It is argued that unless the principles of hope, faith, commitment, individual and collective worth are established, then networks will not on their own work to bring about desired change in the quality of education. The paper takes networking between schools beyond identified school activities to issues of management and leadership. The benefits are presented alongside the various tensions and concerns that need to be addressed.

Introduction

Educational reform networks are fast becoming an important alternative to conventional modes of teacher and school development. Networks mean a culture of dialogue, common rules and common purposes. Networking means cooperation and solidarity. Networks are becoming popular instruments for both professional development and school development. In Canada, Fullan (1991) describes networks as a school development instrument, using the term “learning consortium”. In Great Britain, educators use networks for professional development (Veugeler & Zijlstra, 1995). Tedesco (1995, in O’Neill, 1996, p. 72) sees ‘Networks mean a culture of dialogue, ease of use, common rules and common purposes. In other words, networking means cooperation and solidarity.’ In presenting an overall picture of experiences in the United States, Lieberman and McLaughlin (1992) suggest the following functions of a network: a new form of collegiality; a vehicle for broadening educational perspectives; an opportunity for teachers to be both learners and partners in the construction of knowledge; and legitimate professional voice for teachers. Hopkins (2005, cited in *For All Children to Succeed*, 2005, p. 37) describes networks as:

‘Purposeful social entities characterised by a commitment to quality, rigour, and a focus on standards and student learning. They are also an effective means of supporting innovation in times of change. In education, networks promote the dissemination and development of teachers, support capacity building in schools, mediate between centralised and decentralised structures, and assist in the process of re-structuring and re-culturing educational organisations and systems.’

This implies that the way we view leadership, power and governance is challenged. The hierarchical system we have been used to in the Maltese islands has helped develop various cultural tensions that cannot be ignored or eliminated through centralist policy initiatives alone (Bezzina, 2005). The process of networking has to be explored as a means to address such tensions which have determined the way we view things, our thoughts and practices.

Networks have been identified by the education ministry (Ministry of Education, Youth & Employment, 2005) as a way of bringing people together, allowing members in the same school, between schools, across boundaries, to come together. Within this context the challenge is that of creating an “intentional learning community” (Lieberman, 1996) in which educators discuss their work and tackle issues in an atmosphere of trust and support.

Networking, in the context of educational systems, entails elements of inter-school collaboration, interaction, connection, giving and receiving support, sharing resources and ideas. Many other terms can be used in its place such as, clusters, partnerships, joint planning..., however for the benefit of this paper, the author will use the term ‘networking’. Lunt, (1994, p.17), (although he uses the term clusters) provides an elaborate definition:

‘Clusters are a grouping of schools with a relatively stable and long term commitment to share some resources and decision making about an area of school activity. The arrangements are likely to involve a degree of formality such as regular meetings to plan and monitor this activity and some loss of autonomy through the need for negotiated decision-making.’

This definition puts into perspective what networking is all about – people who have a genuine commitment to a specific goal or objective. Networking implies a commitment over time and an understanding that people need to discuss, convince, respect diversity of opinion, share, reach consensus after working together. Coming together also implies that people learn how to move away from isolated practices to shared and collaborative forms of decision making.

The author proposes extending this definition further to take networking between schools *beyond* identified school activities to issues of management and leadership.

The practice of networking in education has been noted as beneficial in many settings, rural and city, economically disadvantaged and economically affluent. Lunt *et al.*, (1994, p.17) cites Bray (1987) who provides a list of purposes which answer the question ‘why network?’ Others presented in italics are the author’s.

ECONOMIC

- Sharing of facilities
- Sharing of staff
- Bulk order of materials
- Fostering community financial support
- *Links with the private sector.*

PEDAGOGIC

- Allowing schools to gain access to extra resources
- Encouraging teacher development *and reduce isolation*
- Promoting curriculum development
- Providing an environment for innovation
- Encouraging co-operation *and mutual support*
- Encouraging pupil competition
- Integration of different levels of schooling
- Integration of school with non-formal education
- *Focus on raising standards by developing the quality of learning and the effectiveness of teaching.*

ADMINISTRATIVE

- Acting as a focal point to which institutions from higher levels may be sent
- Acting as a centre for collecting information on enrollments, staffing etc
- Local decision making for example on teacher posting and leave arrangements
- Providing a better framework for teacher inspections.

POLITICAL

- Raising consciousness about the causes of under-development and of the actions that can be taken by individuals and communities
- Increased community participation in decision making; reduced regional and social inequalities.

MANAGERIAL

- *Identification of school personnel (individuals or teams) that can focus and give direction to specific targets*
- *Introduce new management structures to handle network development from **within** the schools and through regional/Education Division support.*
- *Introduce teams to handle concerns in and across schools.*
- *Employ new personnel (e.g. Administrators or Managers) to handle particular school affair's usually handled by heads of school (e.g. dealing with issues like school buildings, use of resources, links with the community).*
- *Heads of school to focus on their educational leadership role.*
- *Employ accountants to help school manage their funds and seek new funding arrangements (e.g. with links with the private sector)*
- *Introduce a system of self-evaluation and appraisal.*

Some of the main aims behind networking that the literature highlights include:

1. To support effective teaching and learning in schools.
2. To provide a broad and balanced curriculum to meet the needs of children in the schools.
3. To promote opportunities for collaborative management whilst retaining the individuality of each school.
4. To maintain a co-operative approach which will assist the implementation of developments and overcome a culture of isolation and dependency (Bezzina, 2005).
5. To minimize costs and maximize use of resources/facilities.
6. To share staff expertise to ensure curriculum continuity within and between phases.
7. To share information and disseminate good practice.
8. To facilitate and encourage professional development for all staff.
9. To communicate collective views.
10. To establish opportunities for liaison with other groups.

11. To ensure a smooth transition between phases, e.g. Kindergarten- Primary, and Primary to Secondary (Ministry of Education, 1999).
12. To nurture ownership and responsibility for everything that takes place in the network.
13. To promote, nurture and model human principles amongst all stakeholders.

These rewards will be varied in nature and intensity over time and context.

At the same time, we will need to address other concerns. Mainly, we need to organize the set-up at central/regional level so that they will be able to provide the necessary support when and where needed based on the specific needs of each network. Support needed will vary. In fact, as a comprehensive study brought out, support should vary 'according to the precise environment and conditions of each school' (NCC, 2004, p.35).

Another question needs answering – 'How do we go about networking?' One of the most obvious ways is to network by region. Whilst alternative methods do exist (see Bezzina, 2003) the decision taken by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment (Ministry of Education, Youth & Employment, 2005) has been to network by region. However, what the document fails to address are a number of issues/ questions which the author had identified as critical to this discourse (Bezzina, 2003). These include:

- How do we define 'networking' and what are its purposes?
- Do we want schools to work simply on specific targeted areas?
- Do we want to review management structures that help schools to manage resources (human, physical and financial) in a more efficient and cost effective manner?
- Do we want to create a culture of collaboration and collegiality that eliminates and eradicated the competitive elements within our educational system?
- Will networking by region lead to greater division between certain social groups?
- Do we want to create networks so that we can support disadvantaged pupils reduce exclusions through increased participation, and allow able students to achieve to the best of their abilities?
- Do we want to retain single-sex schools or should we start thinking of co-education schools at secondary level? (In Malta, state schools are still single sex at secondary level whereas church schools are single sex at both primary and secondary level)
- Do we want to introduce specialized programmes at secondary level to provide – to the best of our abilities – an education that really makes a difference to all pupils?
- Are we willing to give ourselves the time, put into it the necessary commitment to reap the benefits behind networking?
- Are we prepared to introduce a research component that will be based on longitudinal studies that will help us monitor and review progress?

Others will surely identify further questions that would need answering.

A recent conference organised by the Education Division, Learning Through Peer Collaboration – EXCEL Network National Conference (17th-18th May, 2005) brought out the benefits behind international networks and the learning that took place between a number of Maltese and English schools. The teamwork, the collegiality, the growth that has been experienced can serve as a catalyst so that such learning experiences can be created across Maltese schools, across districts. Only then can we truly say that we are creating and sustaining professional learning communities.

It is however, the author's opinion and concern that the local discourse on networking as expressed through the Ministry's document fails to see networks as potential professional learning communities. This may end up being a serious shortcoming.

At the same time, the experiences gained from this international network show that behind these efforts, behind the voices heard is an expression of hope, of hope within a context that at times is suffocating and frustrating. It is this hope that the author would like to cling to, to place at the core of the communities we work in.

The way forward through hope and faith

The evidence suggests that hope can be a powerful force. We know that sick people who belong to groups that provide encouragement, prayer, or other forms of support get healthier and stay healthier than do sick people who lack the benefit of this hopeful support. According to Roset,

‘Medical researchers find that a sense of hopefulness, from an increased sense of control is connected with biological changes that enhance physical, as well as mental, health.’ (1999, p.7)

Hope is indeed a powerful force. However, it is often overlooked or misunderstood. Modern management theory talks of results that can be seen and computed, not felt. Educators can be both hopeful and realistic as long as the possibilities for change remain open. As Sergiovanni points out:

‘Being realistic differs from facing reality in important ways. Facing reality means accepting the inevitability of a situation or circumstance; being realistic means calculating the odds with an eye towards optimism.’ (2004, p.34)

Hope is grounded in realism, and not, as may be argued, in wishful thinking. Menninger, Mayman and Pruyser write about *realistic hope*, which they define as:

‘The attempt to understand the concrete conditions of reality, to see one's own role in it realistically, and to engage in such efforts of thoughtful action as might be expected to bring about the hoped-for change.’ (1963, p.385)

The activating effect of hope makes the difference. Some education communities engage in wishful thinking but take no deliberate action to make their wishes come true. Hopeful education communities, in contrast, take action to turn their hopes into reality.

Hope and faith go together. Faith comes from commitment to a cause and belief in a set of values. It is these values that bring people together in order to address quality and the educational challenges they may be facing at any particular time.

This is what 'community' is all about. Like the aspen tree propagates by putting out underground runners and springing up as one massive, interconnected, living tree, so does life organize itself round networks. As Wheatley points out:

Life always organizes as networks - always. Do you run your family –
Do you run your life – like an organizational chart?...It doesn't work.
What works is realizing that for us to do our work well, we must be in
relationships with a lot of different people. We are interdependent
....Pioneering species never forget that we're connected at the roots
and that it's natural to be together. (in Scherer, 2004, p.5)

Building a community of learners is essential to any school reform effort. Only by involving all stakeholders and respecting differences can we give birth to new ideas. Only by reclaiming time to think together can we slow the frantic pace that so often leaves us spinning into powerlessness. And lest 'community' be seen as a soft extra that would be nice if we were not so busy teaching students, it is clear that community involvement - both the professional kind (DuFour, 2004; Marzano, 2003) and the family and community kind (eg. Epstein, 2001) – is the only route to lasting student learning. What is being called for is a personal and collective commitment towards particular principles, what DuFour describes as a 'pledge' to 'big ideas' (2004, p.8) which are then translated into a 'set of assumptions' (Sergiovanni, 2004) which when articulated can stir people to action.

Nurturing an inclusive learning community

The literature shows us that there are a number of components that can help us to develop schools into inclusive learning communities (ILC). Figure 1 presents the salient ones. Whether or not we succeed to nurture these components very much depends on the commitment that each member brings to the organization.

Components of ILC	Traditional	Inclusive Learning Community
Shared Norms	Individual ideas about how the school should operate	Shared norms and values around key areas.
Focus on learning	No clear focus on standards to guide decisions	Common focus on student learning and expectations
Collaboration	Staff are isolated or in competing groups	Staff are cooperative / collaborative. Leadership distributed.
Public Practice	Classrooms are closed	Practice in public
Reflective Dialogue	Teachers inquire and problem-solve on their own	Ongoing discussions. Learning from others
Collective Responsibility	Private: my pupils, my class, this year.	All staff feel responsibility for all students (and each other)

Figure 1

These six components in themselves can lead to interesting discussion and debate between school members. Such debate will help to nurture a *common purpose*, one in which people agree on issues which are essential for quality improvement to take place. Hence school members develop a common understanding on issues such as inclusion; parental/community involvement; professional development, on the values that will determine the way they relate. They will hold firm on these principles.

Focus on learning

A recurring theme throughout the literature is that school leadership is essentially concerned with high quality learning and teaching. Hopkins' vision for authentic school improvement is of 'students engaged in compelling learning situations, created by skilful teachers in school settings designed to promote learning for both of them (2001, p.90). This would ideally result in what Bowring Carr and West-Burnham (1997) describe as reaching 'the summit of the mountain' when the school becomes a 'learning community'. In their words:

'Learning will be seen to have very definite outcomes, not merely in the form of tests or examination results which can have no relationship at all to true learning, but in ways which deeply influence the life of the learner. Learning will be seen as enabling the individual to be free and to have choice.' (1997, p.162)

The centrality of teaching and learning to the school improvement process is further reinforced by Brighouse and Woods (1999, p.83) who contend that:

‘The quality of teaching and learning is at the heart of school improvement and real, lasting change can only come from what teachers and learning assistants do consistently in classrooms and other learning areas in the school.’

Fullan (1991, p. 117) seems to sum up these notions when he states that ‘educational change depends on what teachers do and think – it’s as simple and complex as that.’ Understandable as these statements may appear, what happens in schools does not always follow this logic. All too easily other pressing issues take over, which is why some leaders feel that they spend too much time on administration, budget or school site and plant problems. The urgent takes priority over the truly important (Southworth, 2003, p. 14). Brighouse & Woods (1999, p. 83) argues that:

‘In successful schools, the staff have thought together what constitutes effective teaching and learning in their particular context, based on a set of core values and beliefs, and they continue to speculate how they might improve their practice, involving pupils, parents and governors in the debate. They are aware that their central purpose and the focus of all their endeavours is raising the achievements of pupils and they engage in collaborative activity to ensure this.’

DuFour (2004, p.8) further reinforces this point and its implications for schools:

‘The professional learning community model flows from the assumption that the core mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn. This simple shift – from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning – has profound implications for schools.’

There is a personal and collective commitment to see and ensure that all children learn. We are all familiar with comments, genuine comments raised by colleagues such as “I know that John has problem but I just do not have the time”; “The syllabus is just too demanding.”

The time has come for educators to become more critical. As professional educators we must engage in the ongoing exploration of at least the following three questions that should serve as the driving force within an inclusive learning community:

- What do we want each student to learn?
- How will we know when each student has learned it?
- How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?

A collaborative approach will help to address this sense of helplessness that many feel. When a school begins to function as an ILC, teachers become aware of the incongruity between their commitment to ensure learning for all students and their lack of

coordinated strategy to respond when some students do not learn. The staff addresses this discrepancy by designing strategies to ensure that struggling students receive additional time and support, no matter who their teacher is. In addition to being systematic and schoolwide, the professional learning community's response to students who experience difficulty is:

- *Timely*. The school quickly identifies students who need additional time and support.
- *Based on intervention rather than remediation*. The plan provides students with help as soon as they experience difficulty rather than relying on summer school, retention, and remedial courses.
- *Directive*. Instead of inviting students to seek additional help, the systematic plan requires students to devote extra time and receive additional assistance until they have mastered the necessary concepts.

When teachers come together, when a school is lead by a person or a group of people with a strong vision, a strong character and a will to succeed, improvements, even within a short span of time, do take place. Various initiatives at the school level in Malta go a long way to show that such developments can take place (Bezzina, 2004; Bezzina & Testa, 2005).

Collaboration, Public Practice, Reflective Dialogue and Collective Responsibility

We need a *constructive* community, one that develops responsive structures that helps schools to address learning. The children can learn, rather than just being taught, in a context of *learning* and one *dedicated to learning* in which educators replace prescription and compliance with involvement in problem posing, sharing and solving. What is being recommended is for educators, occupying different positions, not necessarily prescribed or hierarchical, who encourage inquiry, reflection and risk taking. It is within this context that we are talking of shared leadership, distributed leadership, or teacher leadership.

In such a climate education becomes a moral act, one which promotes a democratic voice. The moral agency as described by Fullan (1993) demands that educators challenge themselves, they become culturally adept. Moral agency is a two-way street. What we need is a professional re-orientation towards inter-professional collaboration and school-based and community-based change. Professionals exercise their role as 'agents of change' only insofar as they can recognize the agency of others.

However, in spite of the random experiences that we create we are working in a context that is fraught with uncertainty. The tensions are heavily influenced by an educational reform process that lacks a clear vision (of where we want to go) and the mission (what we represent) we want to pursue. Initiatives are many, often unconnected, uncoordinated and short-term in nature and effect.

Networks in themselves will not solve all of our existing problems. In fact we will face new ones. This is natural and we need to acknowledge the recurring tensions in networks. The dynamics inherent in the attempts to resolve these tensions – which involve personal

conflict and organizational disequilibrium – appear to be central to the process of how networks organize, build new structures, learn to collaborate, and develop a sense of community.

There are a number of contextual tensions that mitigate against us. The main tensions include:

- A dependency culture
- Isolated practices
- An insular mentality
- A focus on administrivia
- Weak internal capacity
- Weak governance structure

A healthy, inclusive community does not just happen. It will require a lot of hard work and commitment, ongoing commitment. Tensions that need to be addressed will include:

- *Negotiating between network purpose and the dailiness of activities.*

By their very nature, networks imply growth of relationships and a focus on activities and it is this commitment to identified activities that keeps them going. A tension may develop between short-term activities and long-term purposes. Activities create meaning and can generate new activities. If addressed properly these activities help to take educators beyond the isolated practices we are used to, together with the isolation teachers are used to, to a context which offers purpose and hence a reason for being. This will help all educators, possibly working at different levels to come together to talk, discuss, explore and conduct research on matters that relate to teaching and learning.

- *Negotiating between ‘inside knowledge’ and ‘outside knowledge’.*

It is important to build the internal capacity of each school and within each network. This capacity very much depends on the expertise that individuals and group members possess or develop. At the same time, networks need to identify opportunities where input also comes from outside. What is essential is that the agenda emerges from questions of practice.

- *Negotiating the centralization ~ decentralization tension.*

In Malta we are slowly moving from a centralized system to a more decentralized one. The document *For All Children to Succeed* articulates the way forward. The Education Division (similar to an education authority in the UK) will be restructured into two distinct complementary juridical entities. The Malta Education Directorate (MED) will regulate, generate policies, set standards, and monitor the whole system to assure quality in all State and non-State schools. The Educational Services Directorate (ESD) will act as operator and will coordinate those services which can be more effectively and economically rendered centrally (2005, p. xix). How

authority and control will be negotiated is still to be seen. What forms of accountability will be introduced are still at the drawing board. Within this context of uncertainty quite a number of initiatives are taking place. They can provide us with examples as to what needs to be addressed as negotiations are undertaken abroad. It is clear that it is not a question of either one or the other. We cannot have or retain a centralized system, nor should we move to a totally decentralized one. (as argued elsewhere, Bezzina, 2003). We need a strong centre that sets the vision, presents clear strategic intents, establishes networks and support schools as they address their own goals. At the same time they need to monitor practices in order to see that national goals are being adequately addressed. Decentralised systems encourage participants directly in governance and leadership. Within such a context educational leaders need to design mechanisms, roles and structures that achieve a greater degree of decentralization. Networks will encourage teachers and school leaders to take on new roles and responsibilities; they enhance curriculum design, development and review; they address student learning; they address their own teaching methods and approaches; they focus on their own professional development which the network is interested in and keen to support.

■ *Negotiating between informal/flexible and formal/rigid.*

Often, within an informal setting, things happen. A 'voluntary' atmosphere is based on personal energy, initiative, peer support and eventually trust. The more the groups or networks try to collaborate and possibly explore other areas of work, the more pressure they feel to coordinate the work and expand the bureaucracy. As Lieberman (1996) points out, protecting what makes the network special becomes more difficult as it grows, requiring time, effort and creative solutions to the problems associated with success. The key to the initiative being undertaken in Malta may very well be on starting on small initiatives and building on each step of the way.

■ *Negotiating the tensions between inclusivity and exclusivity.*

This is linked to the previous point. What sort of networks within each respective network will be established? Will they be open to a restricted group of educators within the network? Will we start small and expand gradually? These are important questions that will have a bearing on the structure, the roles and activities that the network addresses.

The inclusive learning community is one that mobilizes the capacity of teachers to strengthen student performance and develop real collaboration within the school (Harvey, 2003). School leaders who value and support their staff in developing their skills recognize that school goals can only be accomplished if one has a committed cadre of teachers. School leaders need to be assertive in their leadership to involve teachers (and other community members) to address and resolve issues related to teaching and learning (Hadfield et al., 2002). School leaders take professional development seriously, they provide others (and themselves) with opportunities to strengthen their skills and aptitudes. They create a learning environment that

encourages inquiry, reflection and risk taking (MacBeath, 1988; Costa & Kellick, 2000).

School leaders who demonstrate trust and respect for others will make strides in developing resilience and commitment. As DuFour (2004, p.11) states:

‘The rise or fall of the professional learning community concept depends not on the merits of the concept itself, but on the most important element in the improvement of any school – the commitment and persistence of the educators within it.’

Conclusion

Hannon (2004) states that ‘Networks are now the most important organizational form of our time, reshaping the activities of families, governments and businesses. They are increasingly fundamental to successful enterprise and they challenge our notions of leadership.’ (cited in Ministry of Education, Youth & Employment, 2005, p.24). The system of networks introduced in our educational system and currently in their first year aims to challenge the existing concept of leadership, power and governance. This paper has highlighted the need to express concern that networks, or a system of networking, on its own does not necessarily bring about change in the way we view leadership, power or governance, unless we work towards developing such networks into inclusive learning communities. ILCs bring people together to develop a learning culture that believes in specific norms and values, that believes in change and risk taking. It emphasizes the need to view the importance of hope and faith, a hope that serves as a beacon for one and all, an ensuring faith in what we stand for and is committed to.

Whilst highlighting six components that need to be nurtured for us to develop ILCs within our networks there is no blueprint for success. What stands out is the need for commitment and persistence by one and all, for sustained leadership at the school, network and systems level that respects individual and collective worth.

This is the challenge that needs to be addressed. Time will tell how far networks succeed in turning into ILCs that truly bring about quality improvement in our educational system.

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