

THE LEADERSHIP STYLES OF MALTESE SECONDARY SCHOOL HEADS

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ABSTRACT

This journal is a very concise resume of a dissertation submitted to the School of Education at the University of Leicester in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MSc in Educational Leadership. This study attempted to make a further contribution to the literature of Maltese educational leadership since local research on secondary school leadership styles is still in its infancy. The purpose of this research was to study the leadership styles adopted by Maltese secondary school headteachers in the state, church and independent sectors, to discover how they view their leadership role and how they carry it out. This was done mainly through an exploration of their qualities and skills; values promoted in their school; the leadership models and theories adopted, as well as leadership behaviour in terms of decision-making, their response to different situations on the work environment, as well as leadership distribution patterns. The investigation was carried out via a survey, using both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews as the main research tools.

INTRODUCTION

It is recognized that the role of the head is becoming increasingly diverse and complex (Fullan, 1992), which Evetts (1994) attributes to an expansion of managerial and executive tasks and a reduction in educational leadership aspects. The head's job involves an interlapping of leadership (vision and values) and management (processes and structures), consequently, the combination of 'leading professional' and 'chief executive' (Hughes, 1976:60) must be kneaded in the make-up of successful heads of school:

“The challenge of modern organisations requires the objective perspective of the manager as well as the flashes of vision and commitment wise leadership provides” (Bolman & Deal, 1997: xiii-xiv).

According to Bush (1995), the 1988 Education Reform Act has made it more difficult for heads to sustain this dual role – the 'chief executive' model has been accentuated, while that of the 'leading professional' has been ascribed to the deputy head. Maltese heads insist on having more time to play their role as educational leaders (Farrugia, 1994; Bezzina, 1998), especially in this post-era of decentralization. The Education Division seems to have redrafted the head's list of responsibilities with this in mind, listing one of the three main aims as:

“...to provide professional leadership in the implementation and development of the National Minimum Curriculum” (Education Circular, 1995).

The importance of leadership by secondary school heads has been instigated by rapid and far-reaching local changes in society, as well as the move towards decentralization and the need for greater accountability and transparency to the public, in terms of results and educational outcomes. School leadership has undergone a significant change following the 1988

Education Act, both locally and globally. Accountability in academic and disciplinary matters in front of the law is no longer the onus of the Director of Education, but has been devolved to the headteacher. The continuing decentralization process has produced positive results in terms of an increase in autonomy, identity and style by individual schools, even though the central system is in charge of curriculum development and teaching staff selection. Other important developments that have taken place in the educational field and brought about changes in the head's role are appointment criteria and procedures, qualifications, school development planning, staff appraisal and the launching of a new National Minimum Curriculum in 2000.

The most recent development has been the amalgamation of schools into networks in 2005, which is foreseen to distribute the leadership function. The success of a network is dependent on the vision, energy and effort of those who take on leadership roles – however, leadership may not necessarily come from the places traditionally found in the past. According to Fullan (2004), networks enable us to investigate new forms of leadership. Bezzina (2007) is of the opinion that in a Maltese context that has bred a dependency culture and supports isolation and balkanisation, creating the right tension between a centralized system and a decentralized one is critical and is exactly what networking aims to bring about. Traditional bureaucratic and hierarchical models of schools based on positional power are gradually being replaced by what Hall & Southworth (1997) refer to as 'shared leadership'.

BACKGROUND TO PRESENT STUDY

Leadership Qualities and Behaviour

Various researchers have come forward with desirable traits, skills, qualities and values heads should ideally possess to be considered good leaders. According to Stogdill (1981), an effective school leader should be characterized by a sense of responsibility, energy, persistence, risk-taking, originality, self-confidence, concern for task completion and the capacity to handle stress, to influence staff and co-ordinate their efforts. Leithwood & Montgomery (1985) identify the head as operating on the four levels of administrator, humanitarian, programme manager and problem-solver.

Smyth (1989) states that the head should not regard himself as the all-dominating leader, but as a facilitator and a change catalyst. Leaders in the twenty-first century perhaps need to take up what Badaracco (2002) terms as 'quiet' leadership, by hinging on the three virtues of restraint, modesty and tenacity.

A major component of leadership behaviour involves exercising influence through the exercise of power. Law & Glover (2000) identify five sources of power school leaders make use of:

1. resource/reward power
2. physical/coercive power
3. position/legitimate/legal power
4. expert power
5. personal/charisma/transformational power.

Handy (1993) stresses that power is only effective if the relationship between leader and follower is mutually understood. According to Leithwood *et al.* (1992), expert and personal

power are the best to lead to empowerment. Power of expertise enables the head to be ‘a leader of leaders’ (Leiberman & Miller, 1990) and to assist directly members of the school community to overcome the obstacles they face in striving for their vision of the school, while the use of personal power generates transformational leadership. The other sources of power are less available for school leaders and are certainly not desirable for twenty-first century leadership.

Models of Leadership

The vast literature on leadership has generated a number of alternative, and competing models, whose perspectives overlap in several respects. The best known of these typologies is that by Leithwood *et al.* (1999), who drew on a review of a representative sample of contemporary international literature concerning leadership in schools to identify six broad categories, referred to subsequently as ‘models’. Bush & Glover (2002) extended this typology to nine models which are presented below:

1. Managerial
2. Participative
3. Transformational
4. Interpersonal
5. Transactional
6. Post-modern
7. Contingency
8. Moral
9. Instructional

It is rare for a single theory to capture the reality of leadership in any particular school. Rather, aspects of several perspectives are present in different proportions within each institution. The applicability of each leadership approach may vary with the event, situation and participants. Most educational institutions display features from most or all of the models. Leaders need to develop ‘conceptual pluralism’ (Bolman & Deal, 1984:4) in order to be able to select the most appropriate approach and avoid a unidimensional stance:

“To be locked in a single path is likely to produce error and self-imprisonment”
(Bolman & Deal, 1984:4).

Bush (2003) suggests that the head should adopt the concept of ‘reflective practitioner’, incorporating both ‘good experience and a distillation of theoretical models’ (p.196). This combination of theory and practice enables the head to lead with this ‘helicopter’ quality in mind.

Leadership Styles

Whichever theory or theories one accepts, leadership is characterized by a style or styles. There is a virtually unlimited universe of leadership practices. Leithwood *et al.* (1999) state that leaders choose or invent those patterns of practice that appear to make most sense to them in response to the challenges they are addressing. The style a headteacher adopts should take into consideration the school’s culture and ethos; the needs of the school; and the professional needs of the staff. The functions of the headteacher include initiating structure,

exercising consideration and expanding decision-decentralization, in line with Yukl's (1975) three-dimensional theory of leadership behaviour. This decision-decentralization function is fairly new for Maltese headteachers due to the limitations previously existing in Malta when there was a greater degree of central control and heads could just carry out 'orders' given from 'above'.

Surveying the literature about organizational behaviour and educational leadership and management, the researcher has come across a wide variety of different, or better still, slight twists, of leadership styles. Although all these styles are the result of different criteria, the great majority of them are fashioned out on grids or continuums having as their common denominator the extent to which power is devolved from the leaders to the subordinates. This distributed leadership due to the devolution of power is a recent development in Maltese schools – the head was, and in some cases still is, regarded as the ultimate authority of the school.

The following continuum of styles by Southworth (1993) has been adopted for the present work. This section is a five-point adaptation of the seven-point Tannenbaum & Schmidt (1973) continuum of leadership styles. Method 1 is arbitrary decision-making, while Method 5 is high on decision-decentralization and therefore most power- (but not necessarily control) divesting.

Method	Style (Southworth)
1	dictatorial
2	paternalistic
3	administrative
4	democratic
5	servant

Perhaps the best known discussion of styles of leadership centres on the division of leaders into two groups: 'task' or 'results' orientated and 'people' or 'relationship' orientated. Lloyd (1985) presents a typology of six headship types based on a study of Yukl's (1975) three-dimensional theory of leader behaviour, encompassing the three dimensions of 'consideration', 'initiating structure' and 'decision-decentralization'. The six styles are: nominal, coercive, paternal, familiar, passive and extended professional. The 'nominal' head is a leader in name only, as he is unwilling to allow staff any involvement in decision-making, as well as showing insecurity and lack of trust in his relationship with them. The 'coercive' head emphasizes a supervisory as opposed to an innovatory role and shows little concern for the professional development of staff. The 'paternal' head perceives himself as a friendly and approachable figure, showing great concern for the teachers' personal welfare, however is only prepared to accept outcomes matching his own strongly-held views. The 'familiar' head's aim is to maintain a happy, family atmosphere with a minimum of conflict and stress. The 'passive' head, although similar to the 'familiar' head in being a 'non-initiator', is remote and isolated from staff, with no involvement at all in initiatives for change or development. The 'extended professional' head, who is likely to prove the most effective of the six types, reconciles the task and social-emotional aspects of leadership successfully.

In their study of school micropolitics, Blasé & Aderson (1995) came up with a micropolitical leadership matrix, representing the open-closed continuum of leadership style and the transactional-transformative distinction within leadership theory. The four styles they project

are: adversarial, democratic/empowering, authoritarian and facilitative. The authoritarian head attempts to avoid, disable or ignore teachers, suppress dialogue, and exercise control through formal structures and the enforcement of policies and rules. Adversarial heads, although fundamentally authoritarian in style, tend to be more proactive and engage in politics more publicly and with a greater appearance of openness. Facilitative leadership encompasses both a control and empowerment orientation – it appropriates a discourse of change and participation while engaging in bureaucratic manipulation towards pre-established goals. A democratic/empowering leadership style emphasizes a ‘power-with’ approach to decision-making and a fundamental concern with goals of equity and justice, turning school micropolitics into a genuine exchange of opinions.

A variety of styles of school leadership exist, Dunford *et al.* (2000) state that it is the ability of the leader to use a range of styles and match the style to the occasion which determines success. Moving from one leadership style to another involves risk-taking:

“Effective leaders draw upon a wide range of personalized leadership strategies ... They know how and when to utilize professional judgement, when to ‘push’, when to ‘support’ and when to give others opportunities to lead ...” (Law & Glover, 2000: 8).

The ideal leadership style would be democratic and empowering, although current examples of this in practice are difficult to find. However, Blasé & Aderson (1995) are of the opinion that:

“... this approach to leadership is not a utopian dream ... because democracy is process-oriented, each school must forge its own approach to democratic, empowering leadership ...” (p.130).

METHOD

Participants

A questionnaire was distributed to all 56 heads of state, church and independent schools. 32 out of 56 replied, which denotes a 57.1% return. Thus, the respondents provided a representative sample of the relevant headteacher population in Malta, allowing the researcher to be reasonably confident about the validity of whatever generalizations are made. Semi-structured interviews were further conducted with 22 heads who volunteered themselves, 68.8% of the research population denoting a positive response. The interviewees represented state, church and independent schools from various geographical locations, with varying populations and ‘difficulty’ levels. Both male and female heads participated, thus providing a gendered perspective. Thus, the main research method employed was the survey, through the instrumentation of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Questionnaires were considered as an option for use due to their efficient and practical nature and the fact that they allow for the use of a larger sample (Ary *et al.*, 1979). According to Wilson & MacLean (1994), they are easy to administer and often comparatively straightforward to analyze. They may create more trust in the anonymity of the respondent’s answer, are not affected by interviewer bias and create less pressure for an immediate reply.

The questionnaire was formulated taking the findings in the literature review into account. It consists of a variety of items, namely: ranking scales, multiple-choice, dichotomous, closed-ended and open-ended questions, to allow for both quantitative and qualitative data collection. The sequence of questions moved from objective facts regarding demographic data to subjective attitudes and opinions about leadership styles. The first two sections: 'Personal and Professional Background' and 'The School', generated demographic data about the respondents and their respective schools, providing the independent variables. The questions in the final section, 'School Leadership', provided the dependent variables of the study and tried to shed light on the various factors constituting a head's leadership style.

Due to the need for the provision of relevant, detailed and qualitative evidence, as well as the requirement for in-depth research providing an insight into heads' understanding of leadership styles and deeper probing into how these styles are practised, the researcher decided that semi-structured interviews will be conducted to gather data. The open-ended interview questions delved deeply into the heads' skills and qualities; leadership style; decision-making; distribution of leadership; decentralization; and the effect of networking on leadership style.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained was analyzed along Watling & James' (2007) 6 stages: defining and identifying data; collecting and storing data; data reduction; structuring and coding data; theory building; reporting and writing up research. The analysis was therefore guided by the research questions of the study and the conceptual framework explored in the literature review. The questionnaires generated both qualitative and quantitative data, since they contained open-ended questions besides closed-ended ones. The quantitative data generated was analyzed using simple statistical techniques.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study has highlighted the leadership styles of Maltese secondary school headteachers, through an exploration of their leadership role perception and how it is executed. The main findings are presented below:

- The skills, qualities and values deemed necessary for present-day headship can categorize Maltese heads as what Cheng (2002) termed 'Total Quality Leaders'.
- Maltese heads try to exercise Bush & Glover's (2002) moral leadership by trying to promote respect and caring for others and fulfilling the potential of both staff and students.
- Although heads admit that they must be multi-skilled, they give most importance to humanitarian and educational skills. They wish to be 'leading professionals' more than 'chief executives' (Hughes, 1976) – however, Leithwood *et al.*'s (1999) concept of managerial leadership plays a vital part in their role.
- Through the values promoted, and skills and qualities possessed, Maltese heads adopt the following leadership models: interpersonal (West-Burnham, 2001), instructional

(Bush & Glover, 2002), and participative/transformational/contingent/managerial (Leithwood *et al.*, 1999).

- The majority of Maltese heads make themselves available to their staff; are highly visible in the school, presumably ‘leading by walking’; and try to encourage teachers’ professional development.
- Maltese heads make use of expert and personal power when trying to exert influence on followers – in line with Leithwood *et al.*’s (1992) findings. However, in contrast with the latter, Maltese heads still make use of position, resource and even physical power – although to a much lesser extent.
- In the exercise of their leadership style, Maltese heads, regardless of gender, demonstrate both ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ traits from Gray’s (1993) paradigms. This supports Ferrario’s (1994) claim of effective leaders being ‘androgynous’.
- Most of the styles mentioned in the leadership literature are practised by Maltese secondary school heads to a certain extent. They have developed Bolman & Deal’s (1984) ‘conceptual pluralism’ in selecting the most appropriate style according to the situation, stakeholders involved and stage of the process.
- Maltese heads practise Southworth’s (1993) democratic leadership style to varying degrees, but they behave like Blasé & Aderson’s (1995) ‘authoritarian’ leaders when necessary.
- Maltese heads tend to practise shared decision-making to ensure widespread ownership, in line with Bush’s (1995) collegial model of leadership. Heads mostly involve the SMT through delegation, but teachers, and even students are involved. In empowering others through wide leadership distribution, Maltese heads embody Bass’ (1985) transformational leadership. Solo decisions are taken on limited occasions.
- Maltese heads are high on both the ‘initiating structure’ and ‘consideration’ dimensions of leadership, and slightly more so on the latter. Being high or low on these two dimensions differs according to age, sex, leadership training, size and type of school.
- Maltese heads scored highly on Lloyd’s (1985) ‘decision-decentralization’ variable and the methods of decision-making mostly resorted to are the following: Method 4 (democratic), Method 3 (administrative), and Method 1 (dictatorial).
- Sex, specialized training, school type and size affect the style of leadership along Southworth’s (1993) continuum, adopted by Maltese school heads.
- According to Lloyd’s (1985) headship typology, questionnaire results showed 34.4% of the participating heads to be of the paternal type, 18.8% of the leading professional type, and the same percentage of the familiar type.
- State school heads responded positively to decentralization – this autonomy working hand-in-hand with a democratic culture. However, this has created more demands on schools.

- Despite this very positive step, Maltese heads do not regard ‘financial autonomy’ as ‘full autonomy’. They want to fulfil their role as ‘leading professionals’ in a more complete manner, by having a greater say in curricular matters. This is in line with what Bezzina (1999) argued.
- State school heads whose school belongs to a network claim that they will benefit from sharing, support and the widening of vision – consultation and collaboration will be fostered – creating space for Fullan’s (2004) ‘new forms of leadership’.
- However, there is still a lot of uncertainty over the benefits of networks. Maltese heads are worried about their loss of autonomy and increased demands – maybe Bezzina’s (2007) prediction about networking has not borne fruit yet. It is still too early to say whether networking poses a real threat to decentralization.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

- Transformational leadership can be better practised if more leeway would be given from Head Office through a greater degree of decentralization: it is still too early to judge whether the setting up of colleges will answer this need.
- Additional manpower could be provided in terms of personnel, somewhere in between the head and the SMT, to deal with administrative matters and immediate maintenance problems, enabling heads to have more time to ‘lead’ rather than manage, enabling them to stay closer to the chalkface and focus more on instructional leadership and perhaps pastoral work.
- There could be space for more leadership roles within the school and more initiatives by different stakeholders can be taken up, thus widening the scope for leadership distribution.
- Maltese heads could be given more opportunities to enhance leadership skills and keep abreast with modern developments by attending international conferences as part of EU programmes. They would benefit from training in the following areas: finance; time management; human resource management; a head’s legal responsibility; data protection; information technology; health and safety; and inclusive education.
- Maltese heads should have sessions allocated to sharing leadership experiences with their counterparts – there is no supervisor regarding the needs and pitfalls of headship to provide moral support. Maltese heads would certainly benefit from the role of the ‘trainee head’, where six months are spent shadowing an experienced head prior to being appointed to headship. A ‘critical friend’ – a retired headteacher who is there to give advice as well as positive and negative feedback would be a worthwhile idea.

SHORT BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ABOUT AUTHOR

Ms. Denise Mifsud graduated Bachelor of Education with First Class Honours from the University of Malta in 1999. She further graduated with a Master of Science in Educational Leadership from the University of Leicester in July 2008. Ms. Mifsud currently teaches English language and literature at the Ninu Cremona Lyceum Complex, Victoria, Gozo. Her very special thanks go to all those heads who participated in this study despite their very hectic schedules. For further details about this exhaustive study, Ms. Mifsud can be contacted at the following e-mail address: josmif@maltanet.net.

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