

**BUILDING SCHOOLS' CAPACITY AS LEARNING COMMUNITIES:
CHALLENGES FOR POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IN MALTA**

TEREZA CAMILLERI

Conference Paper

November 2008

ABSTRACT

BUILDING SCHOOLS' CAPACITY AS LEARNING COMMUNITIES: CHALLENGES FOR POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IN MALTA

The project seeks to look at school improvement in a Maltese context, through building the schools' capacity as learning communities, based on a model developed by the National College for School Leadership in England. The model is built on a framework containing five elements which, taken together contribute a better understanding of capacity: foundation conditions; the personal; the interpersonal; the organisational; and external opportunities. The aim is that the model serves as a tool to support school leaders in the process of improving and raising student achievement. A case study is undertaken whereby the present situation in a local post-secondary institution is analysed with the aim of exploring the possibility of building the capacity for improvement, thus creating a professional learning community, to enhance learning. A questionnaire distributed among all teaching staff of the post-secondary institution has the two fold aim of looking at prevailing professional orientation towards Learning Organisations, and to provide a profile of the post-secondary institution as a Learning Organisation. The questionnaire is based on the School Success Profile-Learning Organisation (SSP-LO), for which written permission has been obtained from Dr Gary L. Bowen. Interviews are carried out with school personnel according to specific roles, amongst them the Head Teacher. The students' voice is sought through a focus group.

Improving the Learning Experience for Students and Teachers

The ultimate aim behind this project entitled *Building the Schools' Capacity as Learning Communities: Challenges for Post-Secondary Education in Malta* is improving the learning experience for students. However one cannot truly evaluate the learning and achievement of the students without considering the learning experience of the 'educational professionals', that is 'those who work in schools and impact upon the lives and learning of children' (Jackson 2002:18). The concept of professional learning communities is intricately tied with ways of developing and sustaining such organisations.

The National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in Britain has developed such a model for professional learning communities, built on a framework containing five elements which, taken together contribute to a better understanding of capacity: foundation conditions; the personal; the interpersonal; the organisational; and external opportunities. The personal, the interpersonal and the organisational elements form the core of professional learning communities.

The Maltese Educational System has just introduced a system of networking, whereby all the state primary and secondary schools of Malta and Gozo form part of colleges. The state post-secondary schools are not yet part of the network. It is thus this learning environment that is explored, with the aim of building the school's capacity as a learning community, through the National College School Leadership model. Hopefully the model serves 'both [as] a representation of a complex reality and a tool to help schools with analysis, understanding, collaborative planning, alignment and purposeful action' (Hopkins & Jackson, 2005:92). The learning organisation concept has been researched in the Maltese secondary sector by Salafia (2003) and Muscat (2005). However none such research exists in a post-secondary school setting in the Maltese islands.

Building Schools' Capacity as Learning Communities: The NCSL Model

The underlying definition of a learning organisation, used in this project, is that put forward by Senge (2006:3). A learning organisation is one where

people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.

Within the same context, the NCSL definition of school capacity is 'the collective competency of the school as an entity to bring about effective change' (Hopkins and Jackson, 2005:84). Hopkins and Jackson argue that 'capacity is the key construct in creating the conditions within the school to enhance both leading and learning' (ibid.:85). This is emphasized since schools have become 'centres' of change and need to take control of their own development, which is unsustainable without a focus on capacity.

Hopkins and Jackson (ibid.:90), report that, with the aim of supporting 'school leaders with the process of improvement and raising student achievement' the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) has proposed the following model for building the capacity for leading and learning, built from a framework containing five elements:

1. foundation conditions;
2. the personal;
3. the interpersonal;
4. the organisational;
5. external opportunities.

They remark that 'the synergies, interconnections and the emotional and spiritual glue that arise from and surround these components is the heartland of *capacity*' (ibid.:90). Table 1 gives a brief description of each of the mentioned elements.

**Table 1: Brief Definitions of the Five Elements in the NCSL Model
(Hopkins & Jackson, 2005:90-91)**

Foundation conditions:	represent the infrastructural stability ...[and include] stable systems, a safe and secure working environment, an appropriate level of orderliness, managed pupil-learning behaviours and a clear sense of purpose and direction... [without which] capacity-building has no foothold.
Personal capacity:	relates not only to knowledge and skills, but also to the active and reflective construction of knowledge.
Interpersonal capacity:	involves working together on shared purposes and taking collective responsibility for each other's learning and well-being.
Organisational capacity:	is concerned with building, developing and redesigning structures that create and maintain sustainable organisational processes... entails creating a flexible system that is open to all sorts of new ideas... is about honouring diversity and about opening doors and breaking down walls... is about building a system that invests heavily in professional learning and relationship building.
External opportunities:	Outside forces... [with] positive potential to contribute towards improvement. As capacity develops within the organisation, a school develops greater confidence to work in creative and resourceful ways with external agencies and initiatives.

The four core components of capacity are:

1. distributed leadership;
2. social capital and cohesion (and trust);
3. values coherence and moral agency;
4. intellectual capital – knowledge creation, transfer and utilisation.

The most important variable among the above is leadership (ibid.:92).

The Role of Networks in Supporting School Improvement and Building Capacity

Networks in education have ‘a key role to play in supporting innovation and school improvement and in building both school and system capacity’ (ibid.:94-95).

Jackson (2002:22) working with the National College for School Leadership delineates two important programmes built on learning principles. Collaboration, purposefulness, learning and knowledge transfer are the foundation stones of them both.

A Collaborative Leadership Learning Design (Jackson, 2002:19-20)

The collaborative leadership learning design has two main learning frames. The first includes three fields of knowledge mainly:

- The knowledge I bring – the professional knowledge of each and every person in the organisation
- Public knowledge – knowledge known from theory and research
- The knowledge we create together – knowledge obtained through ‘the interconnections of what the persons involved know, through enquiry and the study of practice’.

The other frame involves three notions related to the profundity of learning mainly:

- Shallow learning – ‘involves the receiving of information, passive listening, replication, imitating what people do, the decontextualised application of knowledge, the acceptance of passive modes’.
- Deep learning – ‘understanding, transferring knowledge, reflection, independence, syntheses’.
- Profound learning – ‘personal meaning, interpretation, intuition and wisdom, interdependence and connectivity (being able to connect with other learning), conceptual thinking, creativity, reinvention, and the creation of knowledge’.

A Collaborative School-to-School Learning Design (Jackson, 2002:21)

The collaborative school-to-school learning design includes five levels of learning (The Levels of Leadership Influence):

1. Pupil learning (a pedagogical focus);

2. Teacher learning (with professional learning communities as the goal);
3. Leadership learning (at all levels in the school);
4. Organisational learning;
5. School-to-school learning.

These are the levels for creating Networked Learning Communities, which are ‘groups of schools gathered purposefully together around a commitment to pupil learning, adult learning, leadership learning, organisational learning and school-to-school learning’.

Implications for Leadership – Distributed Leadership as Capacity Building

Networking demands distributed leadership, a core capacity component, central to capacity creation.

Improving schools invest in teacher leadership. They build the capacity for improvement by distributing leadership responsibilities to teachers. Teacher leadership contributes towards school effectiveness.

This notion of ‘Leadership for All’, comes from the fact that ‘We are all leaders at different times for different purposes ... no one person has all the knowledge or expertise, everyone has something to contribute towards the effectiveness of [the] school’ (Primary School Policy, cited in Gold, 2004:28).

Leadership... resides in the potential available to be released within an organisation... It is the intellectual capital of the organisation residing (sometimes dormant or unexpressed) within its members. The role of the leader is to harness, focus, liberate, empower and align that leadership towards common purposes and, by so doing, build and release capacity.
(Hopkins & Jackson, 2005:97)

School Success Profile - Learning Organisation Measure

The School Success Profile-Learning Organisation (Bowen et al, 2003) is an assessment instrument to measure the functioning of schools as learning organisations. Bowen et al. (2006:102) look at a social organisational process, rather than a structural one as a correlate of student achievement, in order to help account for differences in achievement between student groups.

The SSP-LO ‘resulted from a comprehensive literature review of the application of the learning organisation concept in public schools, which identified two domains of organisational learning: actions and sentiments’ (ibid.:98).

Learning organisation actions are purposive behaviours and patterns of interaction in organisational members’ approach to work that provide opportunities for learning and the demonstration of shared responsibility and collective competence in addressing organisational goals.

(ibid.:99)

Team orientation, innovation, involvement, information flow, tolerance for error, and results orientation are the dimensions used to picture the action component of organisational learning.

The sentiments of a learning organisation are the collective expressions of positive regard, emotions, and attitudes among organisational members that arise through their interactions and interpersonal connections and that encourage, support, and reinforce internal integration and social harmony.

(ibid.:99)

Sentiments include: common purpose, respect, cohesion, trust, mutual support, and optimism. Respect and trust are the most important aspects of this caring side of schools.

Table 2 gives the item analysis of each learning dimension as presented in the SSP-LO questionnaire.

Table 2: Item Analysis of the 12 Organisational Learning Dimensions of the SSP-LO

		<i>Actions</i>
Team Orientation	a.	Work together as a team.
	g.	Turn to one another for consultation and advice.
	m.	Meet together to address challenges and solve problems.
Innovation	b.	Welcome and appreciate new ideas.
	h.	Keep an open mind about new ways of doing things.
	n.	Are willing to experiment with new practices.
Involvement	c.	Seek ideas and opinions from students.

	i.	Work with parents as partners in the educational process.
	o.	Engage and collaborate with community agencies and organisations.
Information Flow	d.	Share ideas and information with one another about how to make this school more effective.
	j.	Feel comfortable sharing our learning experiences with one another.
	p.	Maintain open lines of communication.
Tolerance for Error	e.	Agree that it is better to try new things and risk failure than not to try at all.
	k.	View mistakes as opportunities for learning.
	q.	Learn from those experiences where our results fall short of defined goals.
Results Orientation	f.	Plan with the intended results in mind.
	l.	Focus our efforts on achieving measurable results.
	r.	Evaluate results against previously defined goals.
<i>Sentiments</i>		
Common Purpose	s.	Share a high level of investment in what we are here to do.
	y.	Feel a strong sense of meaning and purpose in our work.
	ee.	Share a common belief in the importance of our work.
Respect	t.	Value and acknowledge one another as individuals.
	z.	Treat one another as competent professionals.
	ff.	Respect and appreciate individual differences.
Cohesion	u.	Feel a sense of connection and loyalty to one another.
	aa.	Celebrate special occasions, accomplishments, and milestones.
	gg.	Enjoy working together.
Trust	v.	Can count on one another for help and support.
	bb.	Trust one another.
	hh.	Demonstrate honesty and personal integrity in our work together.
Mutual Support	w.	Show kindness and thoughtfulness to one another.
	cc.	Offer care and support for one another in times of personal and family need.
	ii.	Treat one another as both colleagues and friends.
Optimism	x.	Feel confident that we can make a positive difference in students' lives.
	dd.	Approach our work with hopefulness and optimism.
	jj.	Believe we can make a positive difference in this school's ability to meet its performance goals.

It is important to note that actions and sentiments are interrelated. If *teamwork* is important for the change process, *cohesion* provides that power which keeps the team working together.

Method

The SSP-LO, a 44-item survey for all school employees, has two main sections: Learning Organisation Profile, and Personal and School Outcome Profile.

The learning organisation profile includes 36 items that assess 12 organisational learning dimensions – six action dimensions and six sentiment dimensions. Using a six-point Likert-type scale from one (strongly disagree) to six (strongly agree), employees evaluate the extent to which they agree that each characteristic is descriptive of the school at which they are employed. ‘The focus of assessment is on the functioning of the school as a learning system rather than on the individual learners in that system’ (ibid.:100).

The Personal and School Outcome Profile includes six items that assess employees’ overall state of health, their level of job satisfaction, their perceived control over results at their school, their perceptions about the actual and potential performance of the school in addressing the learning needs of students, and their plans to continue their careers at their respective schools.

SSP-LO and Organisational Change in Schools

When it comes to organisational change in schools, one cannot take into consideration the students only and aim to improve their achievements.

It is clear that efforts at school reform... require that school employees work together in new and different ways, ways which promote and reinforce inclusiveness, collaboration, innovation, and support for one another.

(Bowen et al., 2007:16)

Bowen et al. quote Woolley (2006) in suggesting that ignoring the work environment and the relationships among the staff is like treating the symptoms and ignoring the problem. One cannot aim for improvement and leave out ‘the institution in which the students are embedded’ (Rumberger, 2004, cited in ibid.:16).

The SSP-LO is proposed as the first step, through which one assesses and conceptualise the problem or issue in a school community. Once data is gathered, it is even suggested that focus groups are also formed so that employees add their own experiences to the data. The second step in the evidence-based practice planning sequence, and most probably the more challenging one, is indicated by the researchers as designing interventions to achieve desired outcomes.

The importance of looking beyond the school since a school is part of the larger community is also emphasised, and a focus on this fact is needed in order to build a learning organisation. ‘The nature of the interface between the school and the larger system must also be assessed, especially those exchanges that pose hurdles in the efforts by the school to function in new and creative ways’ (ibid.:17). Put otherwise, this demands networking with other learning organisations, including other schools.

Research Methodology

The research was conducted in one of the Maltese state post-secondary schools, catering for 16 to 18 year-old students, during the academic year 2007-2008. At the time of study, the teaching staff totalled 70. Students totalled 524.

This case study research of a post-secondary institute had two phases, namely: the literature review and generation of research question and propositions and the process of data collection, within-case analysis, between-case analysis, reporting findings and putting forward recommendations.

The research design of the study involved multiple data collection methods, including: one-to-one interviews, focus group, questionnaire survey, documentation, and field observations.

Questionnaire data were contextualised through documentary evidence and one-to-one interviews with the Head Teacher, Assistant Head, Heads of Department and other teaching staff members with specific roles and responsibilities. A focus group with the students was also used. Thus the view of most of the people involved in the school, regarding this subject was taken.

Teaching Staff Questionnaire

The questionnaire distributed among the teaching staff looked at their prevailing orientation towards learning organisations as it tried to elicit the profile of the post-secondary institution as a learning organisation. Three sections were drawn up with these aims in mind.

Section 1 of the questionnaire dealt with the participant's orientation (or otherwise) towards learning organisations. It is the section that has been retained from Muscat's (2005) and Salafia's (2003) theses. The statements 'were based on Senge's core concepts about learning in learning organisations, on undesirable industrial-age assumptions about learning and the school, and on the model of the school as a living system' (Salafia, 2003:21). Five items 'intended to show the staff's orientation towards learning organisations', while another five were 'intended to show whether the staff was oriented towards industrial-age concepts about the school and learning' (Muscat, 2005:74).

Table 3 shows the rating system employed (Salafia, 2003:55; Muscat, 2005:75).

Table 3: Rating System (Salafia, 2003:55) for Section One of the Questionnaire

<i>Score</i>	<i>Level of Orientation towards Learning Organisations</i>
Below 4	The teaching staff had little or no orientation towards the concepts of a learning organisation.
4.0 – 6.0	The teaching staff had certain important concepts which showed orientation towards a learning organisation.
6.1 – 8.0	The teaching staff had a good grasp of the concepts of a learning organisation but need clarification on certain concepts.
8.1 – 10.0	The teaching staff had complete orientation towards the concepts of a learning

organisation.

Section 2 of the questionnaire sought to reveal to what extent the participant saw his/her school as a learning organisation. For this aim, the School Success Profile-Learning Organisation measure was used. A similar scoring system to the first part of the questionnaire was drafted.

Table 4: Rating System for SSP-LO Items

<i>Score</i>	<i>Level of Orientation towards Learning Organisations</i>
Below -36	The teaching staff viewed the school as having very few or no characteristics of a learning organisation profile.
-36.1 to 36	The teaching staff viewed the school as having certain important characteristics of a learning organisation profile.
36.1 to 72	The teaching staff viewed the school as having a good number of characteristics of a learning organisation profile.
72.1 to 108	The teaching staff viewed the school as having all the characteristics of a learning organisation profile.

Section 3 provided for any general comments the participant wished to make regarding matters arising from the questionnaire or about learning organisations in general.

Organisational Learning Approach at the Post-Secondary Institution

Limitations of the Research

At this point it is important to note some limitations of this study, which could be indicators for further research in this area, especially at post-secondary level. This research contributes to the field of knowledge regarding the SSP-LO assessment measure at post-secondary institutions (Bowen et al, 2007:15). However it would be interesting to explore the opinion of stakeholders, such as the parents, other non-teaching staff, organisations and communities with links to the institute, including those from the world of work, and the University of Malta, as the principal student intake holder of the institute. The view of the students could be more deeply investigated.

As regards the analyses of the results of the questionnaire, focus groups made up of the participants could be formed ‘allowing employees to give voice to the data with descriptions of their experiences’ (ibid.:16).

Also a different rating system could have been employed for section two of the questionnaire, which includes the 36 SSP-LO items of a Learning Organisational Profile. Nonetheless it must be clarified that the present more stringent measurement has been used to make results more reliable and factual.

Main Conclusions

An Orientation Towards LO and a School with Certain Important Characteristics of the LO Profile

Section one of the questionnaire demonstrates that the teaching staff have a positive orientation towards learning organisations, gaining 7.81 as an overall rate, which falls in the region of 6.1 – 8.0, thus indicating that the staff have a good grasp of the concepts of a learning organisation but need clarification on others. On the other hand, in section two of the questionnaire, the fact that the mean of 31.9 is in the range of -36.1 – 36, implies that staff view the school as having certain important characteristics of the learning organisation profile rather than a good number or all of the characteristics. Although one has to keep in mind that there was a different rating system for the two sections, while the former demonstrates that the teaching staff have an orientation towards learning organisations, the latter entails that the school has a weaker organisation profile in comparison with the teaching staff’s orientation.

Another limitation of the above conclusion could be that the statements in section one of the questionnaire were more indicative of what is socially acceptable, thus resulting in the staff having a better orientation towards learning organisations than the actual profile of the school as a learning organisation, as it was easier to choose the ‘right’ or ‘expected’ answers.

Orientations of the Teaching Staff

In section one, for every statement that shows an orientation towards learning organisations, there was at least 70% of the teaching staff who agreed. The highest statistics were 96% and 95% for *The school should be run as a community wherein students, teachers and administrators learn and work together* and *Learning takes place when the learner sees some form of connection*, respectively. These prove that the teaching staff believe in two important characteristics of learning organisations namely inclusion of all stakeholders within a cooperative environment and learning with meaning leading to assimilation and autonomy.

Additionally, at least 51% disagreed with every statement inclined towards industrial-age concepts about schools and learning. Of particular notice is the fact that 49% agreed with *Schools should be run by specialists (the head, teachers) whose main focus should be on control* while 45% agreed with *No matter how hard we try, there will always be smart kids and dumb kids*. In this respect it would be beneficial for the school if members of the teaching staff open up for other stakeholders, with whom further learning can take place and believe in the potential of each and every student. In this way the teachers' principle of learning for all can be strengthened.

Areas to be Worked on at the Post-Secondary School

The institute has certain areas that need to be developed in order to establish a learning community.

Table 5: SSP-LO Items for which more than 30% of the Respondents showed Disagreement

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>% Disagree</i>
<i>Actions</i>		
Team Orientation	Work together as a team.	38.6
Innovation	Are willing to experiment with new practices.	43.9
Involvement	Work with parents as partners in the educational process.	61.4
	Seek ideas and opinions from students.	46.5
	Engage and collaborate with community agencies and organisations.	33.3
Information Flow	Maintain open lines of communication.	33.3
Tolerance for Error	Agree that it is better to try new things and risk failure than not to try at all.	47.4
<i>Sentiments</i>		
Cohesion	Celebrate special occasions, accomplishments, and milestones.	35.1
Trust	Trust one another.	45.6
Mutual Support	Show kindness and thoughtfulness to one another.	30.4

Educators must believe in the innate abilities of all individuals and need to recognise how to help each and everyone reach his/her potential. It is up to the creative abilities of the educators to come up with innovations and experiment with new practices in order to maximise such results. The results from section two of the questionnaire reveal that innovation is not a strong characteristic of the school as a community. Many do not believe that it is better to try new things and risk failure than not to try at all. The same applies to the involvement of parents, students, community agencies and organisations. All these can be partners, contributing towards the realization of

the students' potential. There should be a combined effort to continuously enlarging the circle of school 'friends', reaching out for others, together establishing a community of learners.

Team work is another important feature for a learning community. Section two of the questionnaire indicates that this aspect is not that strong in the school under study. Besides working with the different school partners just mentioned, team work should exist at all levels in the school, be it formal or informal.

This entails open lines of communication, which again are not always that strong in the school. More than 30% of the teaching staff consider interpersonal relationships such as celebrating special occasions, accomplishments and milestones, showing kindness and thoughtfulness to one another, and trusting one another as lacking; even to the extent of having 45.6% indicating so.

Areas to be Upheld at the Post-Secondary School

The institute has certain strong characteristics as a learning community, with more than 70% of the staff agreeing on these points. All twelve SSP-LO dimensions are included except involvement. Of the 36 descriptive characteristics of a school listed by The Learning Organisation Profile, 26 are considered to portray the post-secondary school. These are the strong points of the school as a learning organisation.

Table 6: SSP-LO Items for which more than 70% of the Respondents showed Agreement

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>% Agree</i>
<i>Actions</i>		
Team Orientation	Turn to one another for consultation and advice.	84.2
	Meet together to address challenges and solve problems.	70.2
Innovation	Welcome and appreciate new ideas.	73.7
	Keep an open mind about new ways of doing things.	75.4
Information Flow	Share ideas and information with one another about how to make this school more effective.	78.9
	Feel comfortable sharing our learning experiences with one another.	75.4
Tolerance for Error	View mistakes as opportunities for learning.	77.2
	Learn from those experiences where our results fall short of defined goals.	80.7
Results Orientation	Plan with intended results in mind.	89.5
	Focus our efforts on achieving measurable results.	92.9
	Evaluate results against previously defined goals.	82.5
<i>Sentiments</i>		
Common Purpose	Share a high level of investment in what we are here to do.	80.7
	Feel a strong sense of meaning and purpose in our work.	89.5
	Share a common belief in the importance of our work.	89.5
Respect	Value and acknowledge one another as individuals.	82.5
	Treat one another as competent professionals.	71.9
	Respect and appreciate individual differences.	80.7
Cohesion	Feel a sense of connection and loyalty to one another.	73.7
	Enjoy working together.	75.4
Trust	Can count on one another for help and support.	78.9
	Demonstrate honesty and personal integrity in our work together.	71.9
Mutual Support	Offer care and support for one another in times of personal and family need.	87.7
	Treat one another as both colleagues and friends.	82.1

Optimism	Feel confident that we can make a positive difference in students' lives.	94.7
	Approach our work with hopefulness and optimism.	86.0
	Believe we can make a positive difference in this school's ability to meet its performance goals.	94.7

The strongest dimensions of the school as a learning community that emerged are results orientation (from the actions component), common purpose, respect and optimism (from the sentiments component) with the teaching staff agreeing on all three items of each dimension. Respect is one of the most important aspects of the caring side of schools. The other being trust which seems to be one of the weak points of the school. The interviews also support these findings, highlighting the academic orientation of the school, together with the holistic development of the students and the deep-rooted optimism regarding their impact on both the students' lives and the school's ability to meet its performance goals.

Additionally it resulted that 95% of staff respondents indicated some level of job satisfaction. 98% believe that they can make a difference in the ability of the school to meet its performance objectives for students. 97% rated the school's performance in addressing the educational needs of all students as average, above average and well above average. 98% rated the school's potential in addressing the educational needs of all students as average or above.

Indications from the Students

The students expressed three important proposals with regard to their learning at the post-secondary institution. Alongside their academic learning, they yearn for vocational and social learning, so that they develop holistically. They are very much aware that academic education is not enough in order to become fully realized human beings. Besides the students are greatly conscious of the tension they go through because of the large amount of syllabus content which does not enable them to have time to assimilate knowledge and enjoy learning it. They suggest an extension to the two year MATSEC course. It would also be beneficial to those students who need more time to learn. Additionally, the students talk about autonomous learning and its advantages, both to those who want to further their studies and to those looking for work prospects.

Building the Institute's Capacity as a Learning Community

What can be done to reach the higher potential of the post-secondary institute indicated by 60% of the teaching staff to be above average and well above average? The five elements of the NCSL model for building the capacity for leading and learning can offer an adequate solution. The aim is that the model serves as a tool able to support school leaders in the process of improvement and raising student achievement at post-secondary level.

Foundation Conditions

Effort should be maintained in building a “tranquil environment” as suggested by the Head of School, where “students and teachers can regularly talk to each other”. Teachers and students should feel safe and secure, working alongside each other. The physical environment gives an ethos to the school.

Common strategies are of paramount importance. These can be designed and continuously improved upon by the collective cooperation of all the members of the staff, to increase ownership and thus adherence to the school regulations. The proper instrument for this is the School Development Plan, which is actualised through departmental meetings and the brokering role of the teacher. Although the school seems to have a clear sense of purpose and direction, this vision has to be shared, continuously revised and enhanced, as times change and so do the needs of the students and the teachers.

Maintaining open lines of communication is essential. Senge (2006:309) talks about creating a space for the deeper conversations and reports that ‘when this is done, learning communities arise as a by-product’. Grun (2000:110) says that as soon as people discover that they cannot talk to one another effectively, although the organisation keeps going, ‘it no longer shapes its future’.

Another fundamental condition is modelling high standards of teaching and learning. Schools are there for students to learn and this is the principal aim.

The Personal

Day insists on ‘a focus upon the well-being of students and staff as a key indicator of successful school leadership’ (cited in Harris et al. 2005:172). An indication of this ‘well-being’ is given by

the releasing or liberating or drawing out of the rich inner resources
that reside within [the] person.

(Alphonso, 2006:65)

The school is the mother community embracing students, teachers and SMT members, as well as other stakeholders such as other school workers, and parents. It is the place of learning for all, as suggested by the collaborative school-to-school learning design put forward by Jackson (2002:21).

Continuous Professional Development

Ongoing formation is essential in today’s world for personal growth and development. It is the catalyst of innovation, experiment and new practices.

At school, a good number of teachers are already furthering their studies on their own initiative. A school-based accreditation scheme with the aim of continuous professional development would help to encourage other members of the staff to follow suite. This could be offered in conjunction with a tertiary institution, such as the University of Malta. Such a scheme is discussed by Holden (2002) and applied to a Maltese context by Bezzina (2004), who argues for putting the teachers at the centre of reform.

Pastoral Care

Almost half of the participants would not seek ideas and opinions from the students. More effective communication is needed if students' needs are to be fully met.

Although an efficient guidance service is offered at the school, only those students who seek help or who are referred to, get individual attention. Otherwise it seems that there is gap between the *pastoral* and the *academic* systems. In spite of a tutorial arrangement not all students are reached individually, at least not in all subjects. A regular programme of personal tutorials for all post-16 students in the school can be established. Holden (2002:12) gives an account of a Head Teacher who introduced such a scheme in her post-secondary school. The aim was to improve 'the learning culture' of the school through higher quality motivation, tutor and student involvement in academic monitoring, student target setting and review, and meaningful dialogue and relationships.

It could be that the tutorial system nurtures the students' voice, which is fundamental in a learning community. Opportunity should be given to the students to participate in school development planning and in the planning of their personal educational needs. For Jackson (2000:77) 'Students as a significant voice and as co-leaders of school improvement will be one of the ultimate objectives of school improvement work'.

Learner Autonomy

The schools' broad educational programme should aim to develop a life long commitment to learning together with a nurturing of personal maturity and social responsibility. Students should be encouraged to be creative, open minded, critical thinkers, proactive, independent learners.

Through the School Development Plan, administrators, curriculum managers and leaders, teachers, students and parents need to plan strategies to facilitate and promote learner autonomy, concretely in the classroom situation. It could be achieved through classroom methodology, sound relationships with students, provision of resources, especially technological ones and an updated library. It could be a change in the mentality of the teachers and the students at post-secondary level and even at secondary level in preparation for the transition to the post-secondary school.

The Interpersonal

We become more and more deeply 'persons' precisely through the interpersonal relationships we establish. 'Person' and 'community' are not mutually exclusive terms: they are intimately correlative. A 'person' becomes a 'person' only within community; and a community is a true community only if it is made up of living responsible persons (where the members are making the community tasks and the community goals responsibly their own).

(Rogers, cited in Alphonso, 2006:68)

The interpersonal level involves all staff members ‘working together on shared purposes and taking collective responsibility for each other’s learning and well-being’ (Hopkins & Jackson, 2005:91).

Structured time for teamwork, such as departmental meetings, which enables genuine reflection, sharing and critical inquiry amongst teachers is vital, most especially when more than one third of the respondents did not consider teamwork as a characteristic of the school.

Collaboration calls for trust. ‘Openness in the climate of a school and healthy interpersonal relationships tend to foster a climate of trust (Hoy et al., Hoffman et al. Tarter et al., cited in Tschannen-Moran, 2001:314).

Of particular importance therefore is the notion of teacher leadership, where the head teacher distributes leadership among ‘those who are in the right place at the right time (situation) and among those who have the unique competence to get the job done correctly (ability) (Sergiovanni, 2006:184).

Sound interpersonal relations need also to be extended towards parents. Lack of trust towards parents could be the reason why the majority teaching staff claimed that working with parents as partners in the educational process is not a characteristic of the school. Contact with parents, gradually introducing them to school community life, giving them opportunities for greater genuine participation, would reveal that parents are a potential resource of information, insight, and possible solutions to problems and opportunities facing the school.

The Organisational

Organisational change in schools takes into consideration both the student and the teacher, seeking new and different ways whereby school employees work together collaboratively, with innovation, supporting each other and including everyone in the learning process. The following recommendations were brought forward by the students, teachers, HOD and SMT members.

Course Duration

The students are given the possibility of choosing between a two year course and a three year course. The three year course would offer the opportunity for the learners to assimilate their learning. Secondly it would allow for a slower pace of learning for those considered as not so talented students.

Complementary Studies

An educational institute needs to have a futuristic look, both as its means of survival in a highly competitive educational world and also to cater better for the needs of the 21st century student. Always it needs to attract students to its teaching and learning because of its unique identity, offering students something different from other institutions.

To improve the ethos of the sixth form, there needs to be a provision for complementary studies, other than those academic, for which students receive accreditation. Personal and social development of students should rank highly on the school's mission statement. In this respect links with other organisations, be they local or international and the help of outside school potential stakeholders and partners are highly recommended.

One can consider the use of online delivery and learning for the above mentioned programme. It could be a starting point for courses offered on-line by the institute.

Of utmost importance are the school based certificates that are awarded to the students who participate in the programme. These would help boost the college image as having a high degree of autonomy and thus gathers respect for the certificates it awards to the students. The list of modules offered should reflect the emerging issues of change.

In-House In-Service Training

Maltese teachers are currently being asked to attend three day in-service courses either at the end or the start of an academic year. This time could be used wisely by the institute to organise its own in-house in-service training for the teachers, to reach particular school aims, such as those leading 'to building, developing and redesigning structures that create and maintain sustainable organisational processes' (Hopkins & Jackson, 2005:91).

External Opportunities

'As capacity develops within the organisation, a school develops greater confidence to work in creative and resourceful ways with external agencies and initiatives' (ibid.:91). The previous recommendations would envisage the interaction of the school with other learning organisations such as other schools, organisations and agencies that could help bring improvement. Parents and the students themselves might be the immediate contributory stakeholders. Since a school is part of the larger community, looking beyond the school must be emphasised, in order to build a learning organisation. It is about increasing both internal and external diversities.

Challenges for Post-Secondary Education in Malta

Post-secondary education also implies pre-tertiary education. With this vision in mind, taking into consideration the emerging issues of change and the realities and needs of both the students and the teachers of the 21st century, strategies need to be put in place with the deliberate attempt to positively impact on students' learning and achievement. The way forward, as proposed in this project, is building the schools' capacities as learning communities.

It is from within an organisation that change can be brought about most effectively, for none know the organisation better than those within. None can impact it better. 'Understanding schools is the single most important precondition for improving them'

(Barth, cited in Stoll 1999:4). Schools are all different. What applies to one may not be what is needed by another. However 'developing the capacity to talk together in diverse groups, developing a collaborative network of people who are supportive of one another, and through this tapping peoples' deep caring for kids' (Omotani, cited in Senge 2006:308) may be the starting or the continuing point for development.

Surely at the pre-tertiary level, there is untapped potential for creating the future. Its 'exploitation' requires developing one's capacities, that is, learning (Senge, 2006:16).

Currently in Malta, the pre-tertiary sector is fragmented, even in the state sector, for there is no system of networking. As Bezzina (2006) reports, an introduced system of networking leading to inclusive learning communities is needed.

To educate is to 'draw out the riches and resources that lie within' (Alphonso, 2006:65). The process of building the schools' capacity as learning communities is such a process and is being proposed for the post-secondary sector, for the well-being of all the members of the school community.

Bibliography

- Alphonso H., (2006) *The Personal Vocation*. Rome: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana.
- Bezzina C., (2004) 'Towards the Learning Community: a Maltese Experience', *International Journal of Educational Management*, Vol. 18, No. 7, pp.446-454.
- Bezzina C., (2006). 'Inclusive Learning Communities: the Real Challenges Facing Reform in Malta', *International Journal of Educational Management*, Vol. 20, No. 6, pp.453-465.
- Bowen G. L. & Powers J. D., (2003) *The School Success Profile Learning Organisation (SSP-LO)*, Chapel Hill, NC: Jordan Institute for Families, School of Social Work, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- Bowen G. L., Rose R. A. & Ware W. B., (2006) 'The Reliability and Validity of the School Success Profile Learning Organisation Measure', *Evaluation and Program Planning*, Vol. 29, pp. 97-104.
- Bowen G. L., Ware W. B., Rose R. A. & Powers J. D., (2007) 'Assessing the Functioning of Schools as Learning Organisations', *Children & Schools*.
- Day C., (2007) 'Sustaining the Turnaround: What Capacity Building Means in Practice', *International Studies in Educational Administration*, Vol. 35, No. 3, pp.39-48.
- Gold J., (2004) 'The teacher as Leader', *Managing Schools*, July/August.
- Grun A., (2000) *The Spirit of Self-Esteem*, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Hadfield M., (2005) 'Capacity-building, School Improvement and School Leaders', in Harris A. et al., *Effective Leadership for School Improvement*, London: Routledge Falmer.
- Harris A., (2002) *School Improvement: What's in it for schools?* London: Routledge Falmer.
- Harris A., Day C., Hopkins D., Hadfield M., Hargreaves A. & Chapman C., (2005) *Effective Leadership for School Improvement*, London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Harris A. & Muijs D., (2003) 'Teacher Leadership: Principles and Practice', National College for School Leadership, paper available at www.ncsl.org.uk
- Holden G., (2002) 'Towards a Learning Community', *Professional Development Today*, Spring 2002, pp.7-15.

- Hopkins D. & Jackson D., (2003) 'Networked Learning Communities – Capacity Building, Networking and Leadership for Learning', National College for School Leadership, paper available at <http://networkedlearning.ncsl.org.uk/knowledge-base/think-pieces/capacity-building-2003.pdf>.
- Hopkins D. & Jackson D., (2005) 'Building the Capacity for Leading and Learning', in Harris A. et al., *Effective Leadership for School Improvement*, London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Jackson D., (2000) 'The School Improvement Journey: Perspectives on Leadership', *School Leadership and Management*, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp.61-78.
- Jackson D., (2002) 'Building Schools' Capacity as Learning Communities', *Professional Development Today*, Autumn 2002, pp.17-24.
- Lambert L., (2002) 'A Framework for Shared Leadership', *Educational Leadership*, May 2002, pp.37-40.
- Ministry of Education, (1999) *Creating the Future Together: National Minimum Curriculum*, Malta: Ministry of Education.
- Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, (2005) *For All Children to Succeed*. Malta: Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment.
- Muscat N., (2005) *Schools as Professional Learning Communities: Challenges for Small Island States with Special Reference to Malta*, Unpublished thesis Master of Arts in Islands and Small States Studies, Islands and Small States Institute, University of Malta, Malta.
- National Commission for Higher Education, (2007) *A Quality Assurance Framework for Further and Higher Education in Malta*, Malta: Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment.
- Niel J.O., (1995) 'On Schools as Learning Organisations: A Conversation with Peter Senge', *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 52, No. 7, pp.20-23.
- Salafia T., (2003) *Moving Towards a Learning Organisation? A Study at a Local Secondary School*, Unpublished thesis Master in Education, University of Malta, Malta.
- Senge P., (2006) *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of Learning Organisations*, Sydney: Random House.
- Sergiovanni T.J., (2005) *Leadership: What's in it for schools?* London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Sergiovanni T.J., (2006) *The Principalship: A Reflective Practice Perspective*, New York: Pearson.

Stoll L., (1999) 'Enhancing Internal Capacity: Leadership for Learning', National College for School Leadership, paper available at www.ncsl.org.uk/media/604/DF/enhancing-internal-capacity.pdf.

Stoll L. & Fink D., (2003) *Changing Our Schools*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Tschannen-Moran M., (2001) 'Collaboration and the Need for Trust', *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 39, No. 4, pp.308-331.