

INTRODUCTION

The word change features so frequently in almost all aspects of life that, in mentioning it, one has to be careful not to sound cliché. Yet, it is a reality that change, rapid change, is occurring everywhere and in all walks of life. The ability to make provision for change and to assimilate it into everyday practices has become an essential ingredient in the survival recipe of life in the 21st century.

Holistic education is supposed to educate the whole person for life, yet education is often criticised as being a conservative field. Teachers are accused of resisting change. The relevance of schools is challenged on the premise that they cannot possibly educate holistically for life if they do not keep pace with the rapid change taking place all around them (Hargreaves *et al* 1996).

The aim of this article is to examine the concept of transition leadership: the ability to lead during those first difficult stages in the process of change. I have conducted structured interviews with ten heads of school, in order to gain qualitative insight as regards the challenges faced by schools during periods of transition brought about by the introduction of new policies (Sciberras 2008). Banking on these school leaders' first hand experience, several related ideas are explored such as which strategies work best during transition and what leadership knowledge, which skills and which qualities facilitate leading during such times.

TRANSITION LEADERSHIP

The Collins Cobuild dictionary (p 1664) defines transition as “the process in which something changes from one state to another” while the Oxford dictionary (p 1659) explains it as “a passing or change from one place, state, condition etc... to another.” The key words provided by these definitions are: process, change, place, state and condition.

In the field of education, transition occurs at different levels and has different meanings and implications. Transition happens when pupils and students progress from one year to the next. Here the transition involves the physical change of a new classroom and environment as well as that of a new teacher or teachers. It may also entail new classmates. Then there is the transition involving a completely new school, for example from primary school to secondary school, or sometimes, from one primary to another. This time the transition brings with it changes in the structure of the school as well as in the curriculum, apart from the physical environment. In such cases students also experience a cultural transition since every school has its particular ethos.

Schools experience transition as they adapt to the changing needs and demands of their clients and the community in which they are located. Schools manage this process through the adoption of school based policies which often reflect the context in which they operate. On a larger scale schools experience transition periods when national policies concerning education are introduced and enforced.

In Malta the 1988 Education Act brought about changes in the field of education. These changes were prodded further with the publication of the NMC document *Creating the Future Together* (1999) and later by the amendment of the Education Act (2006) accompanied by the policy document *For All Children to Succeed*. Recently, the Directorate

for Quality and Standards in Education has launched the *National Policy and Strategy for the Attainment of Core Competences in Primary Education* (January 2009). These policy documents propose paradigm shifts in the focus of education in an attempt to meet the challenges of today's world.

The result is a shifting policy environment which produces a degree of uncertainty as those entrusted with education question their current practice and try to map the way forward. Transition periods are characterised by a high level of uncertainty and a degree of apprehension (Waks 2007). This is because change means leaving behind the well-trodden paths of tradition in order to try out new ones.

Understandably, transition periods also induce a state of anxiety in the various stakeholders. This is compounded by the fact that people react differently to uncertainty. It is the arduous task of leadership to map out an appropriate path inspired by the vision of the new policy. It is also up to the leader to enrol the stakeholders on the journey along this path, thus securing their commitment (Gunter 2005).

Transition periods are also periods of adjustment. Objectives, both long and short term, must be redefined. The way this discourse is carried out will have a direct impact on the future achievement of the school since this process affects the motivation and commitment of the stakeholders (Leithwood and Riehl 2003).

Another aspect of transition is that of continuity and discontinuity. A shifting policy environment implies that some practices are to be abandoned in order to be replaced by new ones. However, new policies rarely mean a clean break. The challenge lies in finding ways of synthesising what is left of the old with the new and forging them harmoniously.

Bridges (1991) defines transition as the state where one type of behaviour and attitude changes into another. He further asserts that this is a complex process encompassing both individual and organisational features. Goldring et al (2003) describe transition as the initial stages of change involving the unmaking of policy and procedure in order to rebuild them afresh. Above all, transition involves going from the known to the unknown thus generating a sense of loss, a need to hold on to the past, yet at the same time looking forward to a new and better future. It is this dichotomy which creates a particular tension characteristic of transition phases.

Such delicate periods need to be understood well contextually and consequently they need to be both led and managed well. The process of transition has to be ably guided and inspired by a leadership that is capable of bridging the old and the new thus facilitating adjustment and accommodation. The smoothness and effectiveness of this process directly affect both short and long term implications as regards the achievement of the proposed change.

Change has become too complex to describe in steps. Therefore, it is more opportune to describe it in terms of principles that facilitate and guide change. This is also because each context presents specific, apart from complex, challenges and needs. Hargreaves *et al* 1996 identify six principles for change.

The first principle is that education is for the benefit of students. The whole change discourse may be said to boil down to finding better ways of educating pupils. So, it is important to keep the students well in sight when making choices and decisions.

The second principle follows naturally: decisions should be taken as close as possible to the site of implementation. This has implications as regards the relevance of the decisions, their practicality as well as ownership by those who are eventually to translate them into reality.

A third principle is that of collaboration. Collaboration means working together, sharing practice and helping out. During transition periods the need for collaboration becomes acute. However, collaboration cannot simply be switched on. It needs to be bred and nurtured as a way of working during stable periods in order to benefit from it during acute phases when support becomes a life-line.

A culture of collaboration is founded on a solid structure. Therefore, a fourth principle in times of change is that of a sturdy structural framework based on time and space management and clear relationships, roles and responsibilities. Such a structure will provide balance and stability during transition. If your bearings are clear within the structure you are better equipped to face the uncertainty ahead than if you have to face it from an already uncertain stance.

A fifth principle which oils the change process is that of organisational learning. The learning organisation is in a better position to weather the change period and this for several reasons. The most important of these is the fact that the learning school where staff members learn in order to improve their students' learning, has accepted the concept that one has to learn to live with uncertainty in order to move forward (Southworth 2004). Learning to live with uncertainty, and better still, harnessing and managing uncertainty is surely a key factor in managing transition.

Politics constitute the sixth principle for the effective management of change. This involves understanding the micro-politics of the school and then acting in a politically positive manner to secure consensus. This will ensure the maximum support from the stakeholders. A supportive climate will undoubtedly make transition and change easier.

These six principles are umbrella principles and as such provide useful guidelines and tools during complex transition periods. On one hand, making small isolated changes is like making no change at all. On the other hand, changing too much is likely to create chaos. These principles provide comprehensive coverage and enable leaders to orchestrate the change, knowing that one decision will affect several others. It is imperative that leaders take charge of this orchestration right from the start since transition (the initial stages of change) is of critical importance. This awareness by leaders promotes action that is cohesive and makes sense.

In some ways educational change may appear to be a paradox in that it has to be both fast and slow. By making small changes one step after another "through the accumulation of small but significant initiatives informed by multi-dimensional thinking significant, on going improvements" will be achieved (Hargreaves et al 1996 p177). This is basically what transition leadership is about. It is being aware of all these aspects and dimensions. It is reflecting about them and adopting leadership tools and strategies that empower all the stakeholders not merely to survive the transition but to harness it in the right direction, ultimately for the learning benefit of all concerned.

I conclude this discussion right where I began, that is, by considering the phenomenon of change. Although we live with change, it is evident from the interviews carried out with ten Heads of School at the Gozo College that the

introduction of new national policies brings about periods (at times quite prolonged periods) of transition.

Another point that emerges is that transition periods are characterised by turbulence. This is mainly because what worked in the past will not necessarily carry the schools into the future as proposed by the new policies. All ten Heads referred to the fact that the new policies involve new concepts. This means that schools have to let go of 'old' ways of thinking, embrace the 'new' and re-think their modus operandi both in pedagogical and organisational terms. That is indeed a tall order. It is no wonder that schools go through what may be described as a 'bereavement period'. This sense of loss affects the relationships within the school and shakes the sense of community as the school queries its direction.

Murphy et al (2006) claim unequivocally that:

In periods of significant organisational transition, leadership is the major controllable factor in explaining organisational performance.

p2

They maintain that, in general, education is going through a major transition as it attempts to shift from the industrial perspective to a post-industrial world. Shifting policy environments such as the current local one are to be expected.

Goldring et al (2003) identify three broad aspects that are typical of schools during transition periods. These three aspects also reflect issues that the Heads of School identified during the interviews. However, the order of priority attached to them is different because the policies in question are of a different nature than the policy in the Goldring study. The three aspects are:

- 1. Changing conceptual boundaries.** The idea of new concepts is perhaps the greatest challenge posed by the new policies in the local context. In this sense, the NMC posed challenges in a number of curricular areas as identified by the Heads. Here the leaders have to deal with the simultaneous changing of multiple conceptual boundaries. One Head of School defined this as the super tanker syndrome, implying that schools are suddenly required to change course following the delineation of new conceptual boundaries.
- 2. Maintaining a sense of direction.** A context in which the conceptual boundaries are changing is bound to be fraught with uncertainty. The uncertainty shakes the stability of the school and causes the stake holders to become disorientated. The role of the leader becomes that of maintaining a sense of direction. However, when the concepts change, this direction needs to be re-routed to encompass the new vision. As the Heads of School pointed out this is by no means a simple feat and has to be tackled from various angles. The leadership knowledge, skills and qualities which the interviewed Heads consider to be important testifies to the multi-faceted nature of this aspect (Sciberras 2008). It is here that the ability of bridging old and new has the potential of making or breaking the transition.
- 3. Adjusting the culture.** The above two aspects will bring about changes in the school's philosophy, in its vision, mission and practice. This implies an inevitable change in culture. Transition leadership is also about facilitating

such a challenge. Leaders do this by holding on to what is still valid from the 'old' while simultaneously introducing the 'new'. In fact during the interviews the Heads of School underlined the fact that not everything in the policies is new. By focusing on the school culture leaders provide a backdrop for strengthening the sense of community in which good relationships and practices can be fostered.

These three aspects of transition periods are inextricably intertwined. They cannot be tackled independently but as a single effort with several fronts.

By looking at the aspects of transition and analysing the information provided by the heads of School five transition leadership focus points emerged:

1. **Understand the vision of the policy.** During transition periods the leaders have to be conversant with, and fully understand, the knowledge underlying the policy. Unless leaders are conversant with the theory behind the policy they will not be able to transmit this knowledge to the stakeholders, let alone map the road for eventual implementation. One can go beyond this and make a claim for involving those who are to implement the policies in the actual policy planning stage. Although this issue is beyond the scope of this essay it is interesting to note that the Heads did mention top-down policies and this does raise the issue of ownership and commitment during transition phases (Hopkins 2001). This focus point also has implications for the professional development and training of leaders (Bush and Glover 2003). Current knowledge of educational theory was actually mentioned by the Heads together with the fact that opportunities for leadership development are few.
2. **Know the school context.** The context includes the history of the school, the geographical location, the school building, the human context meaning all the stakeholders including the community and the capacity for change (Hollingsworth 2004). The school is a complex entity. Reading the school context accurately is never as important as during transition periods when uncertainty complicates the innate complexity. All these context components emerged clearly from the interviews in issues regarding school identity, parents, staff and staff development, resources and maintenance of buildings. The Heads are very much aware that they lead transitions in complex contexts and that this has an impact on the transition.
3. **Translate the vision into the mission.** This core task of leadership becomes an essential task when shifting policy environments prevail. It also legitimises the first two focus points. An understanding of vision coupled with accurate contextual knowledge will equip leaders better to translate the policies into a language that is meaningful to their schools (Leithwood *et al* 2006, Yukl 2002). This point was highlighted by the Heads in several ways. They referred to discussions with staff and parents, the School Development Plan and the Performance Management Programme as tools for translation. Encouraging experimentation and piloting were also mentioned as strategies for finding new ways of implementing the vision of the policies. Sharing and cooperation were also perceived to be useful in carrying out this focus point (West *et al* 2003). Above all, the Heads insisted on communication. Their preoccupation with communication stems from the perceived need to translate concepts and thought into tangible action.
4. **Bridge the old and the new.** The sense of loss which is experienced during transition phases is often unacknowledged, if not completely ignored. Because of this, uncertainty is not perceived as a natural consequence of the initial stages of

change, but rather as a sign of failure and an inability to meet the proposed challenges. Transition leaders weather this turbulence by building bridges between 'from' and 'to'. They retain valid strands of what 'was' and harness them with the future tendencies. In doing so, leaders maintain stability and allow time for 'bereavement' and letting go (Bridges 1991). The Heads referred to this process either explicitly or else indirectly by referring to strategies that calm people down, encouraging small changes and adopting what works in an attempt to foster gradual change.

5. **Empower and build capacity.** An empowered school is more capable of effecting change and is less disturbed by transitions. Empowerment means enabling the stakeholders to the full of their potential while capacity building means stretching that potential (Hadfield *et al* 2002, Liethwood & Riehl 2003). The importance of this focus point was particularly evident during the interviews. The Heads referred to the need of their own development as leaders as well as to the necessity of continuing staff development and the development of other stakeholders, mainly parents. Training and development are perceived by Heads as a primary requisite for empowerment and capacity building. Achieving this would encourage more delegation and participative decision making. The Heads also see this focus point as a means of facilitating culture change or re-culturing (Fullan 2001), a primary aspect which demands particular attention during transition.

CONCLUSION

A final question that needs to be tackled is what kind of leadership makes sense during transition. Fink and Stoll (2005) underline the difficulty of determining what kind of leadership works best in contexts of great complexity and change.

The five focus points which were discussed above indicate that no single type of leadership makes complete sense on its own. It appears to be more sensible to adopt an integrated approach to deal with the complexities, and complications, of transition (Leithwood *et al* 1999, Kouzes and Posner 2007). Thus, for example, a transformational approach would encourage empowerment and capacity building. An instructional approach (in the broad sense) would cater for the learning needs of all the stakeholders. A managerial approach would ensure the much needed stability for the school and balance the uncertainty of transition. A participative approach would promote ownership of action plans and would secure commitment towards the realisation of objectives and the implementation of change. Above all, an integrated approach provides leaders with different tools to tackle diverse aspects of complex realities (Bush and Glover 2003).

However, transition leadership involving an integrated approach does not begin, or simply switch on, when a shifting policy environment materialises. This approach needs to be nurtured during periods of relative stability. Only so, will it come to full fruition during transition periods. Considering the way the change agenda is going, and keeping in mind the picture that emerged from the interviews with the ten Heads of School practising in a shifting policy environment, transition leadership development appears to be a worthwhile investment. Due to the critical nature of transition periods, transition leaders need to bring together the best of leadership into sharp focus in order to navigate the school through the difficult initial steps of change. The development of the notion of transition leadership, its

aspects and focus points, will provide invaluable help and support to Heads of School in the often underestimated enterprise of leading during transition periods.

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