

A GROUNDED STUDY ON LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES

**A Study on Leadership in Roman Catholic Primary
and Secondary Schools in Malta**

By

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**Refereed Paper presented for
The Fourth International Conference on
Catholic Educational Leadership**

***Directions for Catholic Educational
Leadership in the 21st Century***

The Vision, Challenges and Reality

Sydney Australia, July 2007.

Abstract No. 9565

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INTRODUCTION

Research-based knowledge is without doubt, dynamic, growing and changing as new inquiries, that expand both the empirical phenomenon that are studied and the theories and analyses used to explain those phenomenon, are undertaken (Leithwood and Riehl, 2003).

It is also important to state at the very beginning that there are aspects of educational leadership that are significantly crucial for the success of the organisation, yet some of which have not been extensively researched (Foster, 1989; Dillard, 1995; Keyes *et al.*, 1999). Among these are the moral and spiritual dimensions of effective school leadership, also the ability of the school leader to understand and assess how complex social forces impinge on schools.

Leaders embark on a series of things all aimed at influencing the technical processes within schools and school systems that hopefully result in the accomplishment of intended goals.

Although more attention is being given to leadership as an effective tool towards the solution to the problems that education is facing, In fact there is a lot that still needs to be understood about effective educational leadership (Leithwood and Riehl, 2003). The present growing focus on educational leadership is the result of several larger trends. Primarily the outcomes of schooling are being far more examined and scrutinised and consequently there is stronger interest in how, and to what extent, school leaders can influence these outcomes. Secondly the contexts for educational leadership both within schools as well as in the larger social political and economic environment, in which schools are enshrouded, are becoming more complex and thus presenting new challenges for educational leaders. Thirdly, research results and normative expectations

regarding leadership are perceived to provide more justification for putting more focus on, and giving leadership more awareness.

Schools are under increased pressure to perform and this is inevitably calling for more accountability. Pressure is being exerted at all levels, from students themselves to teachers and naturally to principals.

Educational leaders have always been regarded and held accountable for their school's health, including fiscal and political matters as well as the instructional programme. In such times of increasing regard for student learning and holistic development, educational leaders are being held accountable not solely for the structures and routes that they establish, but also for the performance of those under their charge, including students and teachers. It has not always been easy to measure student outcomes and moreover to attribute these outcomes to teacher or school performance. Yet now educational institutions have much greater technological capacity for assessing school outcomes and possibly tie them more directly to teachers' and school leaders' performance (Marsh, 2000).

The increased focus on student achievements has aroused the search for knowledge about the types of leadership that do help in improving teaching and learning, under the premise that academic success depends on the capacities of school leaders (Murphy and Datnow, 2002). The heightened importance to student outcomes is not only bringing about an interest in the technical aspect of leadership but is also eliciting attention to how school leaders provide moral, political and intellectual leadership to a system that may be going askew (Hallinger and Heck, 2002).

Consequently, there has lately been a voluminous and an ever-increasing research and knowledge on the nature and effects of leadership (Bass, 1990; Yukl, 1994). All this evidently concludes that leadership matters and is important. It also implies that the changing needs of educational systems can be met, at least partially, by improving leadership capacity and practice. Moreover, an ever-increasing evidence that links leadership to organisational performance and success (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Bennis and Nanus, 1985; De Pree, 1987; Kouzes and Posner, 1995), together with perceivably more disciplined normative theories about leadership (Sergiovanni and

Moore, 1989; Senge, 1990) seem to underscore its prominence. Many studies seem to intensify the search for valid and viable forms of leadership (Leithwood and Riehl, 2003).

Some scholars argue that being fascinated about leadership reveals the human desire to be in control of one's situation; or that it is a convenient way of explaining unexplainable events; or that leadership is a hoped-for "panacea" for problems that resist simple solutions (Pfeffer, 1977; Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich, 1985; Bass, 1990; Gardner, 1990; Maxcy, 1991). All these factors have generated a highly charged environment for practice, policy and research on educational leadership.

There are a number of ways how to look at and understand leadership, drawn from rationalist and non-rationalist paradigms, including complexity theory and chaos theory, institutional theory, political theory, or critical social theory (Scheerens, 1997; Wheatley, 1999) and I am aware of their valuable contribution in the study of leadership. Yet for various reasons that are clearly explained later on, for my research I decided to take a grounded approach.

IMPORTANCE OF TOPIC

Over the past decade or so, the importance of administration in general and headship in particular, in Maltese schools, has been boosted for two salient reasons:

- a number of major developments are taking place in the educational field, which are affecting the way schools are organised, managed and run; consequently the role of the head, or any educational leader, has become increasingly complex and constrained (Fullan, 1998; Bezzina, 1999).
- In 1985, the first diploma programme in educational administration and management, was introduced at the University of Malta. This programme was targeted for those already occupying administrative posts and for those who wanted to be considered for such posts.

It is worth noting that research in the field of headship in Maltese schools has been considerably added to over the last decade. Yet the majority of these studies are based

in state schools and research in the field of headship in Maltese Catholic church schools is very scarce. I believe I can safely say that this is a virgin ground for research and at this time when education in Malta is going through such major reforms, I feel that this is a very opportune time to carry out this research. I also think that I am at an advantageous position to carry it out. This is because I myself work as a counsellor in church schools so I am very familiar with their ambience. My work involves seeing to students' emotional, social and academic problems. At times in my work I have to liaise with the Head of school concerned, the teacher and even the parents. Since I am employed by the Secretariat for Catholic Education, I have access to relevant information necessary for the research. Furthermore, since this research has the 'blessing' of the head of the secretariat, I am getting all the help that I need.

Catholic schools, in many societies, are oversubscribed with students (Grace, 2002). This fact is also true for Malta (Tabone, 1987). "The catholic church operates among the rank and file as a powerful cultural force by virtue of a multitude of organisations. Notable among these are the church schools" (Sultana and Baldacchino, 1994, p. 12). Educating near to thirty per cent of the total formal school age population, "access is keenly contested since these schools are popularly considered to provide a better education than the alternative state school" (*ibid*). At this stage it is worth noting that entry into Maltese Catholic primary church schools, is done by lots, since the demand is far greater than the supply. At secondary level, there is a competitive examination for boys who would have completed the last year of primary school. Again about two thousand boys sit for this exam and only around five hundred make it through because there is usually this amount of vacancies to be filled in. When it comes to girls, there is no such opportunity. The only lucky ones are those whose school caters both for primary and secondary levels. Yet despite the rising profile of Catholic schooling, it is still relatively under-researched (Grace, 2002).

Catholic Church schools in Malta date back to the 13th century (Vella, 1961). The church was in fact, the first institution to provide educational instruction to lay persons, although the idea may have been to draw people to join religious orders and communities. At the present, church schools in Malta cater for about one third of the entire Maltese student population.

The entire cohort in this study comprises sixteen primary schools and thirteen secondary schools. There are also eleven schools that are both primary and secondary. These forty schools cater for approximately fifteen thousand students ranging from five years to sixteen years.¹ This total includes three primary, one secondary, and a primary and secondary school in Gozo². This would be the entire population of church schools in Malta.

Catholic Church schools in Malta have to abide by the official Education Act and the National Minimum Curriculum. Yet they enjoy a considerable amount of autonomy. There is the Secretariat for Catholic Education that is part of the Maltese Roman Catholic Church organisation and administration. Although this entity, to a certain extent, monitors what goes on within church schools, the latter are still self-governing.

Different religious communities run one, or a number of schools. The trend is that each religious community that runs the school usually prefers to appoint one of its members as Head. Yet in the last few years, some church schools in Malta were compelled to appoint lay people as Heads, due to lack of suitable applicants within the community and also because the number of people in Maltese religious communities is on the decrease.

All Heads of schools must be approved by the Education Division. The salient difference is that Heads coming from within the religious community need not have any degrees in educational management (although this is encouraged). The choice is left at the discretion of the order. The only requirement is a teaching permanent warrant which is issued by the Malta Education Department either to those who have a Bachelor Degree in Education, a PGCE, or Master Degree, or to those who have taught for at least fifteen years. Yet lay Heads are required to be appropriately qualified in educational administration and management. Such a Diploma is organised and delivered by the University of Malta.

¹ There are also twenty-seven kindergarten schools catering for circa one thousand four hundred students and two post secondary schools catering for circa six hundred and fifty students (These numbers are quoted from the official statistics of the secretariat for Catholic Education).

² The island of Gozo forms part of the Maltese Archipelago.

WHAT THE RESEARCH IS AFTER

Johnston and Pickersgill (2000) argue that successful school leaders have personal and professional determination, clarity of vision, courage and personal and interpersonal skills to interpret and use the considerable powers and duties of their office wisely. Bringing these qualities to the development of a management stance, successful Heads move their organisations in the direction of collegial structures and processes grounded in co-operative teamwork. The authors say that this involves the interaction of personality, experience, values, dispositions, attitudes and coping strategies.

In the light of this, the main research question that the study is trying to explore is: What does it mean to be the head of a Maltese Roman Catholic church school?

All this is being studied in the light of literature relating to Headship, specifically within the educational context and explicitly within the Catholic Church schools. This is all being done against a background of a strong Maltese culture where church schools still enjoy an excellent reputation, obtain high academic achievements, and are still in great demand among Maltese parents.

It is also being constantly borne in mind that the study is being conducted against a background of church schools culture which includes all the special qualities, ways of thinking and working, lifestyle, priorities, values and convictions emanating from the community that runs the school (Lombaerts, 1998).

The study also bears in mind the different dilemmas being faced by Catholic education in an increasingly secularist, consumerist and market-driven milieu (Grace, 2002).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Stenhouse (1975) defines research as “systematic inquiry made public” (p.142). Yet there is no single blueprint for planning and carrying out research. Research design is very often regulated by the notion of ‘fitness for purpose’ (Cohen *et al*, 2001). Yet it is possible to identify a set of issues that need to be addressed, regardless of the specifics of the research being undertaken so that the research can be designed to be practicable and feasible.

GROUNDED THEORY

This study concerns the attitudes, behaviour, management strategies and coping skills of Heads in **all** Maltese Roman Catholic Church Primary and Secondary Schools (forty in total). In my opinion, adopting a grounded approach in this research was an appropriate way to elicit the qualitative and subjective data needed to address these concerns.

Grounded theory, first devised by Glaser and Strauss (1967) is a methodology in which theory is derived from data that is systematically gathered and analysed. It emphasises the building, or discovery of theory, rather than its testing or verification. Thus Grounded Theory is based on the ‘logic of discovery’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

The application of grounded theory has recently gained more popularity among organisational researchers (Cassell and Symon, 2004). Organisational psychology and research have been marked by a shift from the individualistic point of view to a more collective view founded on social psychology, sociology and anthropology (Peiro’, 1990; Schein, 1996; Rousseau, 1997). For this reason grounded theory has achieved more popularity among organisational researchers. It has been employed in for example studies focusing on organisational culture (Lansisalmi *et al.*, 2000), organisational growth (Brytting, 1995), organisational change and innovation (Price, 1994; Lowe, 1995; Carrero *et al.*, 2000), work teams (Gersick, 1988), company survival (Lowe, 1995) and organisational leadership (Cooper, 1998). Grounded theory is highly recommended in organisational research because it produces descriptions of organisational reality that

may elicit positive discussions around important themes in an organisation (Cassell and Symon, 2004).

Studies that use grounded theory in organisational research are usually categorised into two groups:

- studies that focus on generating new hypotheses around a particular theme
- studies that try to show how social processes produce certain phenomena (Lansisalmi *et al.* 2004).

My study belongs to the first category because it strives to build a hypothesis around the perspectives of a specific group of Maltese educational leaders.

As for the ethical considerations of a grounded approach, issues of confidentiality may arise when collecting interview data. To avoid such issues it was important for me to communicate clearly to the participants of the study before data started to be collected. Additionally I described in detail how the research results were going to be presented and how it was not going to be possible to identify individuals' opinions and quotes in the reported research results. Given that I was investigating an entire yet small population, anonymity was guaranteed to be maintained throughout. Direct quotes would be put in such a way that it would not be possible to elicit whether the source is a male or female, lay or religious.

This approach was exercised through the initial phase of the project that involved interviews with ten (10) heads of schools (5 primary and 5 secondary). What people had to say provided the basis for the construction of a questionnaire that focused on what had been identified as the key issues that needed to be examined. The questionnaire was then distributed to the heads of all the Maltese Roman Catholic church schools.

The interviewees were chosen at random from the list of schools that was provided by the Secretariat for Catholic Education. I contacted each interviewee and an appointment was fixed. My intention was to conduct a semi-structured interview, thus giving the interviewees as much leeway as possible to answer the particular questions I was seeking answers to. There were instances where I had to change the order of the

questions according to how the interview was developing. Different individuals put different emphasis on particular topics: an interviewee dismissed the issue of stress because he alleged that he can cope with it and then talked for a long while on the type of leadership that he uses. Another interviewee put great weight on the notion of experience in leading an educational organisation, while fulfilling parents' expectations was the main theme of another interviewee. Another two important concepts were the charisma of the school's patron saint and religious order, and school culture.

In this way I could identify several potential and predominant issues on which I could then formulate the questionnaire. During this process I resorted to literature on the different topics so that in this way, my questions would be substantiated.

The issues that emerged mainly concerned:

- style of leadership
- work motivation, satisfaction and stress
- role of a head of school
- school culture
- vision

I decided to try to study all these factors as omitting any of them would have left a gap in the study and maybe even create a bias. Each issue was dealt with by means of a number of questions, all providing some information that led to the construction of an overall picture as Borg and Gall (1979) suggest.

DESIGN OF RESEARCH

Oppenheim (1966) says that the "function of research design is to help us to obtain clear answers to meaningful problems" (p.7). It moves the research from simply an expression of interest, into a series of issues that lend themselves to being investigated in concrete terms (Cohen *et al.*, 2001). This makes it possible not only to formulate the specific questions to be posed, but also to choose the most appropriate instruments to gather data, thus making a general concept amenable to investigation (Rose and

Sullivan, 1993). There are tensions and differences of opinions about which methods are appropriate for doing research (Campbell *et al.*, 2004). “Justifying methodology and methods is an extremely important part of any research account” (Wellington *et al.*, 2005, p. 96) because the credibility of any findings, conclusions and claims depends on the combination between the methodology and methods adopted and the research focus. For this reason, choosing the right methodology and methods is very crucial and this is considered as a reflective and philosophical endeavour (*ibid.*)

It is up to the researcher to decide which are the best methods to be used to collect and interpret the valid data needed for the project. Choices and decisions have then to be justified. This is because researchers should be able to contend that the methods adopted, elicit the data that “legitimately and validly answers the questions they have posed” (Wellington *et al.*, 2005, p. 101).

This particular project involves people in a social setting and inevitably this may, as Wellington *et al.*, (2005) say, involve a “range of potential contributory causal factors and multiple perspectives and interpretations” (p. 96). Naturally I bore this in mind when I chose my research methodology and methods.

At the same time, I was careful not to take anything for granted and to question all my fundamental assumptions about how things work, how people think and react and ultimately what makes sense. For this reason, questioning throughout the process of the research was of utmost importance. As Wellington *et al.* (2005) say, “a reflective and reflexive approach” (p.96) is very important, trying to go beyond what is perceived to be simple or obvious.

Research that involves human beings is not easy and simple because it “is always on / for/ with other people – and getting knowledge on / for / with other people is a complex matter. It is complex for three main reasons: human agency; social relations, especially the effects of power; and ethics” (Griffiths, 1998, p. 35-36). In my research, these three elements are very prominent: the human aspect is the basic element on which the entire research is founded; social relations play a very important role between Heads of school and the rest of the staff, and incidentally, Griffiths pinpoints exclusively *the effects of power*, a quality directly associated with headship; and ethics which should be the

backbone of every research project, in particular of a project conducted within the educational field. No educational research can discard issues relating to legal and ethical considerations in particular relating to confidentiality, ownership and management of data, copyright and intellectual rights (Campbell *et al.*, 2004). These issues can be tricky to negotiate and research participants may have potential concerns relating to them. This might have been truer in my situation that involved a close-knit community of schools. Albeit all have their autonomy and style of leadership, they all form part of a corpus namely Maltese Roman Catholic Church schools.

To add to this, qualitative methodologies are concerned with authenticity, voice and interpretation of situations and behaviour (Campbell *et al.*, 2004). Furthermore, the grounded approach that is being adopted in this research should make the two methods even more reliable where theory would emerge from and is grounded in data (Le Compte and Preissle, 1993).

RESEARCH METHODS

INTERVIEWS

The first research tool used was Interviewing. Kvale (1996) says that interviews are a step towards regarding knowledge as generated between humans. Thus the social situatedness of research data would be more emphasised (Cohen *et al.*, 2001). Interviews are inter-subjective because they allow participants, both interviewers and interviewees, to discuss their conceptions of the world from their different points of view (Laing, 1967; Barker and Johnson, 1998). Interviews can go deep into the motivations, reasons and perspectives of respondents (Kerlinger, 1970).

In the initial phase of the study I conducted ten semi-structured interviews (five with Secondary Heads and five with Primary Heads) worked in proportion to the total number of schools involved in the study. Sample size “often plagues researchers” (Cohen *et al.*, 2001, p. 93) but in my opinion ten were representative enough, as they constitute twenty five per cent of the whole school cohort. Enlarging the number would have made my work less feasible and practical.

Semi-structured interviews may include some predetermined questions, yet the order in which these are asked can be modified according to the interviewer's perception of what seems most appropriate (Robson, 2002). Wording can be changed and explanations given. Questions that may seem inappropriate with a particular interviewee can be omitted, or additional ones included (Robson, 2002). In fact during the process of interviewing I was very flexible and let the interview flow in a natural manner.

Interviews are "a two-person conversation.... for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information" (Cannell and Kaahn, 1968, p.527). In this case, through direct verbal interaction, interviews served to elicit the main issues that needed to be explored in this exploratory study.

Initial interview questions need to be easy, non-demanding and not threatening, in order to put respondents at ease (Patton, 1980). I asked respondents whether they had any problems regarding audio taping the interview. The majority of the interviewees (n = 7) did not object to this. Yet the other respondents (n = 3) found some difficulty with this. Therefore I had to use the other option of taking notes and comments. It was a matter of a trade-off between the "need to catch as much data as possible and yet to avoid having so threatening an environment that it impedes the potential of the interview situation" (Cohen *et al.*, 2001, p.281).

Cohen *et al.*, allege that it is often after the cassette recorder or video camera has been switched off that the "gems" of the interview are revealed, or people may wish to say something 'off the record'" (p.279).

During the interview I noted details like where and when the interview was conducted together with particular characteristics and behaviours of the interviewee, before, during and after the interview.

During the interviews that I recorded in the form of handwritten notes I felt it was vital to write down the dialogue, as much as possible, verbatim.

When it came to transcribing the interviews it was important for me to be discriminating in the selection of excerpts that were to be transcribed (Campbell *et al.*, 2004). It was not practical, and anyway futile, to transcribe the entire interviews. There was also another problem that I had to solve: in Malta the official language is Maltese. Yet a lot of people, especially those who belong to middle class (and upwards) and people of a certain educational level, tend to use a lot of English while conversing. As a result a lot of these interviews were a concoction of Maltese and English. Yet when transcribing, I had to translate everything into the English language, trying to give the closest and most faithful interpretation.

Cohen *et al.*, (2001) say that transcribing is a crucial step because there is a potential chance of losing data, of distortion and of reduction of complexity. Transcriptions inevitably lose data from the original encounter. This problem is compounded, because a transcription is a translation from one set of rule systems (oral and interpersonal) to another very remote rule system (written language) (Kvale, 1996). As the prefix indicates, in a transcription there is a change in form, therefore it is a selective transformation. As Cohen *et al.*, (2001) state, there can be no single correct transcription: "rather the issue becomes whether, to what extent, and how a transcription is useful for the research". In my case, interviews were explicitly aimed at eliciting the main issues that were to be further explored in this study. For this reason, I had to be ever more selective.

As I said earlier on, the interview is also a social encounter, not just a tool for collecting data. The possible problem of transcribing is that it makes the interview simply a mass of data rather than a record of a social encounter. That is why extra attention has to be taken even if the interview is being recorded. To minimise this problem as much as possible, in my journal, after each interview, I noted as many contextual factors as possible, paying special attention to the visual and non-verbal aspects of the interview as suggested by Mishler (1986).

Video-recording would have solved a great degree of this problem but apart from being more time-consuming to analyse (Cohen *et al.*, 2001) it would have probably been more threatening in the sense that it is more self-revealing. And bearing in mind that 3 of my interviewees objected to being audio-taped, how about being video-taped.

QUESTIONNAIRES

The other research method that I used was questionnaires. These were distributed personally to every participant and in the process I introduced myself and explained the whole motive of the research.

Questionnaires are useful tools for descriptive purposes because they seek detailed intimate reflection from the respondent they can provide information about people characteristics and the relationship between such characteristics (Wilson and McLean, 1994). Therefore in this particular research, they were envisaged to be an adequate research tool.

The questionnaire is an effective and widely used research instrument adopted to gather survey data (Cohen *et al.*, 2001). This is because questionnaires can be designed in order to provide structured data that is very frequently comparatively straightforward to be analysed (Wilson and McLean, 1994; Cohen *et al.*, 2001). They are also easy to administer and analyse, and they are consistent across subjects (Silvester, 2004). Yet they are also perceived to have some important limitations: attention is focused on topics that the researcher considers to be significant and salient. Thus the respondent may have little or no freedom to negotiate the meaning or relevance of the attribution with the researcher (Antaki, 1994).

As Campbell *et al.* (2004) suggest, in formulating the questionnaire I had to strike a balance between the response rate on one hand, and the length, complexity, density and covering on the other. I was aware all the time that every question I include in the questionnaire is at the expense of another, and some questions lead to others. So it was important for me to prioritise the data that I really needed to collect.

In order for the questionnaire to be as refined as possible, it was piloted, because this “is crucial to its success” (Cohen *et al.*, 2001, p.260). Piloting increases reliability, validity

and practicability (Oppenheim, 1992; Morrison, 1998; Wilson and McLean, 1994) because it checks clarity and helps to eliminate ambiguities and difficulties in working, layout, length and time taken to complete (Borg and Gall, 1979; Cohen *et al.*, 2001).

Questionnaires and interviews are an intrusion into the life of respondents because the latter “are not passive data providers for researchers; they are subjects not objects of research” (Cohen *et al.*, 2001, p. 245). Consequently some ethical issues had to be borne in mind and considered when carrying out the research. Such issues included:

- not feeling coerced to take part (Cohen and Manion, 1994): Although participants were encouraged and urged to take part in the research, because their participation was crucial for the study, they were in no way compelled to participate.
- guaranteeing as far as possible issues of confidentiality, anonymity and non-traceability (Cohen *et al.*, 2001): since the research population was specific and relatively small, this may have been perceived to be very difficult. Therefore every precaution had to be taken so that responses and /or respondents would not be distinguishable.
- no sensitive or threatening questions that may lead to over-report or under-report (Sudman and Bradburn, 1982): I paid extra attention when wording the questions so none would be perceived to be self-incriminating, hence participants would not feel endangered or unsafe. Importance was also given to the layout of the questionnaire so that it would look flowing and straightforward.
- the right to withdraw from the research and / or not answer particular questions (Borg and Gall, 1979): participants were specifically told that they are free to refrain from the research, omit any questions that may be perceived as self-incriminating, or even not take part at all.
- assurance of methodological rigour and fairness, validity and reliability, through the avoidance of bias (Morrison, 1998): participants were guaranteed both verbally and in writing that findings would be analysed and presented in the most professional and procedural manner.

I felt that these ethical points were important because the human aspect must not be forgotten or overlooked at any point during my research (Borg and Gall, 1979).

PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

Out of the forty questionnaires that were sent out, thirty questionnaires (75%) were returned.

Ages of participants vary between 36 to 74 years. Experience in the post of headship is also very wide: 4 respondents have been in the post for a few months whereas there are others who have held the post for decades, the longest period of headship being thirty-five years.

Female respondents are in the majority (n = 20). Obviously the remaining are males (n = 10). This is in perfect ratio to the actual number of female heads as opposed to male heads as in actual fact there are thirty female heads and ten male heads.

The vast majority of heads are members of the religious order that runs the school (n = 22) while the other leaders (n = 8) are laypersons.

The study covers headship in twelve church primary schools, twelve church secondary schools, and six other schools that cater for both levels of education.

Student population also comprises a wide range of figures with the smallest school cohort comprising of 147 students and the largest cohort being of 900 students.

At the very onset of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to describe what it feels like to be the Head of a Roman Catholic school in Malta. This was meant to elicit first reactions of the respondents and thus be able to obtain an overall impression of how the respondents perceive their job. Certain common themes emerge with *a huge sense of responsibility* and *challenge* being the most predominant. Practically all heads feel that they have a multiple role as heads, while the majority feel a great sense of fulfilment being given by their job.

As I have said, the most dominant feature was *a sense of responsibility*. In fact sixty per cent of the respondents (n = 18) talk mostly about the great responsibility that their post carries. Responsibility enhances the importance and significance of work and tends to provide a tangible basis for recognising success (Sergiovanni, 2005), yet perceiving having too much responsibility can tarnish one's performance at work and can also be a demotivator (Rue and Byars, 1989).

Heads are maintained responsible for making a difference in their organisation (Stall and Fink, 2001). Yet this responsibility is also tied to personal sense of accountability and is made more powerful by the collegial belief of 'being in it together', thus leading to collective responsibility (Louis *et al.*, 1995).

Responsibility and recognition are both perceived as key job motivators because they both appeal to the person's intrinsic needs related directly to work (Bush and Middlewood, 2005). Where the job is regarded as having no point, the eventual aftermaths can be very negative.

This strong feeling of being responsible for their schools, might be due to lack of willingness to move away from the notion that schools are hierarchical organisations requiring a top-down approach to management and leadership (Johnston and Pickersgill, 2000). This would mean that the head would discard the idea of assuming sole responsibility, and adopt the notion of collective responsibility that results from membership of a team of professional colleagues. The school's accountability will then be derived from ownership and professional accountability by each member of the team, rather than be the burden of the head alone. For this reason the head should seek to develop and maintain collective responsibility. This has to be done through practice which is designed to elicit acceptance (*ibid*).

On the other hand, to achieve this scenario, there has to be good will from all parties involved. The school staff team is "only as strong as its weakest interpersonal relationship" (Johnston and Pickersgill, 2000,p. 148), and heads of school may inevitably find themselves having to fact the music:

“Ultimately, I am responsible in the eyes of the education department and the secretariat. I won't take any risks that might jeopardise my school and even myself” (female interviewee).

The next most common feature that comes across from the heads' initial response is *challenge*. Tremendous energies are needed to develop the human side of leadership (Cauchi, 2002). Many tend to downplay the human element in leading an institution (Teal, 1996). Managing an organisation is not merely a series of mechanical tasks, but a set of human interactions (Bell and Harrason, 1998; DuFour, 2004).

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

This research is still in process and findings are still emerging.

CONCLUSION

Educational leadership is a dynamic discipline full of paradoxes, contradictions and contested notions (Calvert *et al.*, 2000). It is highly problematical and far from value-free (Bottery, 1992), and every aspect of leadership cannot be divorced from values and attitudes whether these be explicit or implicit.

“A leader's results will be measured beyond the workplace, and the story will be told in the changed lives of others.”

(Pollard in Hesselbein *et al.*, 1996, p. 248)

In the leadership world, making sense of things is at least as important as seeking what works (Atkinson, 2000; Levacic and Glatter, 2001; Wallace, 2001; Sanderson, 2003; Simkins, 2005). Such authors contend that ideas about leadership, that are predicated upon the premise that what works can be elicited, prescribed and repeated, are an inadequate way of conceiving the concept. In a world which seems to be dominated by

the idea that leadership is one of the major factors that are likely to determine whether an educational organisation, be it a school, college or a university, will succeed or fail, conceptualisation of leadership has to be studied and perceived both from traditional and emerging approaches.

Albeit there has lately been an explosion of leadership literature, and research, leadership in education remains a stubbornly difficult activity (Gronn, 1999). Moreover, there is evidence that those who work in education hold less than sanguine views about much of the leadership they experience (Simkins, 2005).

At the turn of the 21st century, it is evident that in the public sector in general, and in education in particular, the dominant discourse echoes the idea, presented by Bolman and Deal more than ten years ago that “an unquestioned, widely shared canon of common sense holds that leadership is a very good thing and that we need more of it – at least, more of the right kind” (1991, p.404).

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