



Education

Maltese schools seem to be experienced by many as 'fairly good schools'. Various persons acknowledged the progress already achieved in the local system, but many also kept insisting that there is still further progress to be made, especially in relation to the vision of becoming amongst the best countries in education, in Europe.

The first proposal received was to keep transforming the system further, to go beyond learning factual knowledge. An educational system which encourages students to develop their thinking skills and stimulates students to expand their creativity.

There was also a call towards more attention to detail in education and towards a wider perspective which goes beyond school doors. An educational system which 'reaches out' and starts off from the moment students leave their homes especially during school transport or while students wait for school to start (because various students arrive at the school gates or grounds well before school starts officially). A lot could happen during this transition time between home and school, experiences which could also leave an impact (positive and negative) on a student's life via informal education. Leaving such time spans unattended and/or without an educational strategy is not recommended.

Another proposal received was to allocate a social worker per school or college. It is a known fact in the educational arena that most educational challenges have their axe root which starts at home, the place where students receive the most powerful educational experience ever, from their 'primary educators' which refers to their parents or guardians. In many cases if we do not tackle educational difficulties from their source (especially with the most challenging students) most efforts by the school and teachers (known as secondary educators) will be futile. Therefore the proposal is that schools 'reach out' further from school doors and strategically target the places that matter i.e. home and parents – the primary and most influential educators. This could also be done by facilitating teachers or educational specialists to visit student's homes so as to assist parents so as to how to help their students with homework's etc. apart from social workers for the neediest students.

Apart from 'reaching out' another fundamental must in education is 'improving schools from within' via the words 'teacher empowerment' and the importance of 'teaching resources'. It is not the first time that we heard freshly graduated student teachers who claim that they spent over a thousand Euros from their personal funds and first wages



just to build up an adequate set of teaching resources due to the lack of support to be able to create interesting and innovative lessons. From a professional point of view this situation leaves much to be desired. Therefore our proposal is to equip teachers with the resources they require from the first days they enter the schooling system and most of all at such a crucial point in time when teachers would have the highest level of drive and enthusiasm to make a difference in student's life as true teaching professionals. Teacher empowerment in the beginning of teacher's careers is fundamental and can leave an impact on teacher's motivation for many years after. The impact can go either way – positively or negatively, the responsibility so as to which direction the impact goes, lies in the hands of school administrators and their 'empowerment skills' together with their 'empowering budgets'. As a movement our concrete proposal is to give every freshly graduated teacher a Euro 500/1,000 budget to spend on teaching resources as per his/her most recent university updates in education. The same resources purchased remain at the school, but at least such an initiative would empower new graduated students to feel that they are empowered owners and respected professionals within the system.

To further emphasise the importance of 'teacher empowerment' I will include a personal experience which happened nine years ago as a freshly graduated physical educator. At a time when I used to work (quite extremely) till midnight daily, planning lessons and thinking about what to do for students etc. as a truly dedicated and fully motivated teacher. I remember visiting an assistant head of school at his office after my first few weeks in school and explaining that we needed a more hygienic and better equipped first aid box rather than a number of 'used ice packs, as the one size fits all method of treatment given to all students for all sorts of injuries'. I had also mentioned the importance of being trained in first aid rather than having unqualified and untrained PE teachers offering this service to students. The reaction of this assistant head of school was one which I have never forgotten to date - I can hear his words with clarity, as if they were being said right now, in the present moment:

"We have always worked like that over here and we do not need your proposals, just go get your lessons done."

The message by the system was clear. The point being made through this example goes beyond the first aid box - it's from a motivational point of view. Because such messages leave can leave a negative impact on a teacher's professional status and perception for many years after. Demotivating administrators can scar the 'soul' of a highly motivated



and dedicated teacher right from the outset of a professional career. I am sure that this experience has been shared by many fellow professionals within the local educational system. Having said so, being a sports person and thus quite a natural fighter - I have never really given up and by time I have also learnt how 'change' in order to be more effective within the system itself and have managed to bring about changes just the same via a better strategy. But the message remains clear as a professional with nine year teaching experience in over eight local schools and does not retract from the need to have better trained and more empowering school administrators who are capable of intelligently empowering newly graduated teachers as well as motivating and supporting more experienced teachers. Beyond simply 'building new schools' if we want a 'finer' educational system, we need improve our levels of 'attention to detail'. One way is by making sure that school administrators are capable of handling enthusiastic teachers with attention, by assisting them to believe that they own the system and are treated and respected as true professionals, from the first day they enter school gates as graduated educators.

Linked to the above, there also seems to be a sense of disappointment among various educators who decide to pursue their studies further and take private interest in their vocation when compared to educators who stop at their first degree or simply satisfy the bare minimum requirements of their job description. The gist of the argument seems to be that there is little to motivate a teacher to go that extra mile within the present system. The proposal received was that dedicated educators who study or take up initiatives beyond their basic requirements should at least be rewarded via seniority points, especially if they also take up further studies such as at Masters or Doctorate level (at present these educators are awarded a slight increment in their salary on its own and this surely does not compensate for the efforts made). The government should thus motivate dedicated educators so that the educational system will have better trained and more competent educators in the interest of students and of the educational system itself.

On a different note, another recommendation received, is that Animal Welfare needs to be taught in schools – for ex. on the lines 'Dogs Trust' works, since they already run excellent workshops in schools. If we can educate the future generation about animal welfare then both students and pets at home and animals in general will benefit.

These last two proposals were received from a person who has justice at heart and this is the suggestion we received in her own words: May I suggest that the educational



authorities would consider the following: Every school would include a miniature courtroom installed in the school, complete with bar, jury box, witness chair, a plave for the prosecutor and defence council, and press box. Children would serve on juries to try playmates who have been fighting, climbing fences or otherwise committing breaches of playground peace, or even homework carelessness, and playing truant. Students can also appoint a fellow student lawyer to defend them. Those found guilty are sent to jail - maybe a wood closure for sentences from 10 to 60 minutes. The children would thus appreciate their responsibility in having law at their school instead of passing over the buck to the teachers and the head of school. To be honest I am fed up with the schools thinking that the Christmas play and other play on a stage is the most creative issue for students. It could be fun and not so much fun at the same time. Apart from the latter such an initiative could increase and empower the natural and God given sense of justice in children.

Linked to the latter model of schools as realistic miniature societies, one could also include a policeman or police woman (possibly retired) per college who works hand in hand with the prefect of discipline. This officer can be seen around in the school environment as a 'policing educator for children' possibly with an adapted uniform. This could also be an opportunity for police officers who have retired to be re-integrated into the work force as educators. Such posts could be given to individuals who take up formal education related training at tertiary level which then synergises the educational field with their experiences within the police force. Such a 'student friendly' presence in schools could also be a way of attracting students to possibly take up a career with the corps at a later stage in life. This proposal could also help as a deterrance programme for children/adolescents from committing offences at a later stage in their lives via the creation of mutual trust between the police and youths/children.

