

# Leading change amid unrest

Education

National

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In a context of having to face ongoing changes to address the failures of Malta's educational system, those in the teaching profession feel disillusioned, are less motivated and more and more sceptical about the real intents behind changes and reform proposals.

Those leading Malta's education sector seek to continue with their attempts to 'fix' the system; while those 'expected' to implement the changes are striving to cope because their practice-based challenges are not being addressed.

Practitioners passionate about education have to look at ways and means of maintaining a positive outlook towards school improvement. For there is no doubt that the existing climate of unrest unsettles even the most hardy, challenging their values, beliefs, practices, their reason for being.

Climate impacts on educators' motivation levels, on their personal and collective commitment. The current situation is exacerbated by an educational context that is becoming more and more challenging as each day goes by, with classrooms becoming more and more diverse, multicultural and multifaith in orientation.

The context we are in is overwhelmed by all the demands and pressures that are brought about by the drive for constant change. No wonder educators talk of reform fatigue; that teaching has become so unappealing teachers are leaving the profession; that the profession is also finding it hard to attract as many student teachers as one would hope for.

Yet, for us hardened educators we offer encouragement and constructive ways to deal with this situation. This encouragement, ironically enough, comes from our experiences in the

Privacy

field.

Schools that manage change best are those nurturing a sense of wellbeing for each and every individual, supported by a collaborative work culture. This culture is developed as the schools become professional learning communities (PLCs), when they go ‘wider’ by connecting with the external environment, and go ‘deeper’ by taking time to explore the fundamental values and purposes of education. PLCs flourish in a culture of sharing, trust and support.

Going ‘wider’ implies establishing connections with various stakeholders, be it parents, community agencies, NGOs and volunteers. We need to see how to engage with those agencies that provide professional support, such as tertiary and higher education institutions; how to use data from external reviews, and from our performance in international tests.

Going ‘deeper’ implies becoming a moral change agent. According to Fullan, anyone can become a moral change agent, which implies hard thinking and soul searching about making a difference in people’s lives.

The capacity to improve education for children derives from motivation for reform, skills in working for reform, and resources for reform. However, the capacity building we are talking of here is not one that is imposed from outside forces, it is the creation and development of new cultures from within. Relationships – which depend on sustained time and commitment to engage with others – are central to all this.

It is here that examples of good practice serve as a reminder that those who are passionate about what they do, do it well in spite of the chaos around them. It is within such contexts that the term ‘meaningful leadership’ takes shape and meaning.

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Honour is not brought about by a leadership title, but rather by a style of leadership characterised by idealism, intuition and integrity.

Idealism is what helps educators keep their focus on the learner – adult or child. According to Cile Chavez, to be idealistic is to possess ‘audacious hope’. For this to be nurtured, human growth and development have to be the centerpiece of our endeavours.

Becoming intuitive requires that we question our assumptions, making ourselves open to change. Letting go of old beliefs requires leaders to develop a trusting, intuitive spirit. For this to happen, leaders need to keep asking themselves: “What is possible in the realm of the ideal? What would it look like if...?” Innovative practices combined with true empowerment bring lasting results.

Examples of this will appear in a forthcoming article.

The third ingredient for meaningful leadership is that of integrity. The word integrity derives from the Latin noun integer, which means ‘whole’ or ‘complete’. It means to be honest, holding strong moral principles, to walk the talk, to be exemplary in demeanour.

We believe that regardless of the external forces at one’s place of work, one can manage and lead change by nurturing a sense of belonging and wellbeing for all community members.

Meaningful leadership values the wellbeing of both the human soul and spirit. It is soulful and empathetic; it seeks to motivate, build confidence and improve performance. In developing human potential this is the kind of leadership that is a source of inspiration.

Christopher Bezzina is deputy dean and head of the Department of Leadership for Learning & Innovation, Faculty of Education, University of Malta. James Calleja is an assistant lecturer at the same department.

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