



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

An educational system that throws out the baby with the bathwater

Like many other parents, I am driving around the island taking my son to his A-Level and Intermediate exams and my daughter to sit for her O-Levels.

This is the time when as a parent I realise that even though we have heard so much rhetoric about an educational system that should 'develop the person holistically', here we are confirming that our system is as exam-based as ever, placing huge pressure on students and essentially testing our children on what they don't know rather than what they do.

It is not all black and bleak, and we have seen some allusion to improvements.

Moreover, I do believe that Minister Evarist Bartolo is one of the best ministers we've had in education because he doesn't mince his words, is not one to be obsessed with political correctness and is resolute to see through the necessary transformations. Now if he doesn't manage to untangle the bedlam we have in our educational system - I really don't know who could.

As I said, there are some signs of recovery; the introduction of co-education, a number of changes in the curriculum, structural improvements, the teaching of ethics, the introduction of middle-school, the start of the youth guarantee, more investment in vocational training, new courses at the University of Malta and MCAST, re-vamping of the Foundation for Educational Services and a number of other patchy initiatives.

But I feel that the biggest flaw in our system is that it is still throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

We still have an educational system that is effective for children coming from particular social backgrounds, whilst the others are left to their own devices.

We still have too many students who dislike school, who feel it is stifling and muggy, does not hearten creativity and is completely lopsided on the 'written', overlooking the 'inventiveness' dimension of children's development. There is hardly any excitement of discovery. To compound this, another major concern is that boys' grades are in free fall.

We still have a teachers union that is almost completely focused on the rights of its members, which is understandable but its discourse, in my opinion, still gives away an 'us' (educators) versus 'them' (students) pitch.

We still have loads of teachers who feel that they are being burdened with every problem in this world rather than focusing on their core educational duties, namely that of teaching and supplementing the socialisation they get (or should get) from home.

Educators are now expected to replace parents. In a nutshell, our school communities whilst trying their best to cope are under duress.



As President Emeritus George Abela said during a forum on education I moderated, organised by Caritas, educators are continually having to cope with families that are expecting the ludicrous from our educators. He also reiterated that education in Malta is in a continuous state of volatility, with hardly any stability and all seems to start afresh every time we have a new government or a new Minister responsible for this sector. Professor Carmel Borg in this same forum claimed that the need to have a vision for this sector should be based within a context of social justice. He speaks about an education system that should be structured around the notion of fun and happiness, on self-discovery and appreciation of community. He describes our education system as one that has turned into a rapturous race and our comprehension of students is that they are seen as a problem needing repair.

Let's admit - our system is in a conundrum. There are issues that need to be addressed and without delay.

To begin with, I need to affirm that given the responsibility educators (teachers, LSAs, KGAs and Heads of Schools) have, they are grossly underpaid.

In addition, the concept of vocation in the profession is fading. This is a job that needs dedication and loyalty and all the money in the world will still not automatically make 'you' a good educator - we need people in this sector who are passionate, ardent and committed. Better screening of who gets to work with children needs to be more scrupulous. As a matter of fact, not anyone who gets a university degree makes a good educator.

Another weigh-down is the bureaucracy. It is draining the energy and time of the school system, with the consequence essentially being that there is less

time to dedicate to student matters. Educators are continually under scrutiny and hardly allowed to deal with the issues themselves. They are laden with procedures and memoranda. 'They can't do this, they can't do that', which is a contradiction in terms because the way I understand 'teaching as a profession' is that educators are allowed to make and take the decisions. Yet what we keep telling educators is that they must refer to this or that professional, with a good chance that the needs of the students, instead of being addressed at source, are placed on some phantom waiting list. This is an arrangement that has turned into a burdensome structure, which is interested in protecting and preserving itself first and foremost. The motto of our educational system should change to 'cover your backs first'!

How distressing!

Another problem I can put my fingers on is that politicians are overly involved in this sector. The way I see it, their role is to give direction, provide the vision and help allocate the resources. From then on, at an operational level, they should leave it in the hands of the experts, the practitioners, the researchers and the academics. A case in point on how political involvement messed it up is the Learning Support Assistants orderliness.

The way LSAs were allocated, at least in the past, was based on the ability of the parents to 'press their case', to try to influence and apply force with their vote. In fact the consequence of this is that our LSA support system is siphoning too many resources, has taken away the focus from other ways how we can support disabled students, a large segment of the LSAs come into this profession with the wrong attitude because the hours 'are convenient', not all of them are trained, most of them start

working with students without even knowing the basics on disability and we can't seem to find a way how to untangle this jumble.

An additional major challenge is that parents need to carry their responsibilities.

They need to realise that child rearing is their job and not that of the state. The school is there to support, the same way that the ballet teacher or coach or sports instructor is there to help build up character. But it seems that several parents have abdicated from these tasks.

We have a crisis on our hands.

Essentially we are still trying to understand what direction we want to take, compounded with the fact that educators are generally demoralised and confused and a top-heavy Directorate of Education that piles up the pressure with unrealistic demands and naïve timeframes.

Education should not be about politicians or bureaucrats.

Education should be about giving a sense to life for our students.

As my former mentor and Head of School, Horace Caruana used to harp on repeatedly; school is about community, it is about learning to live together. We should be there for the students and not vice-versa.

Regrettably, we have created an infrastructure that is not reaping dividends. We are spending money on education that is not taking us forward.

We are training teachers at university that are not able to apply what they learn when they find themselves in the classroom.

Let's stop making education sound more complicated than it is. Education is what Fr Hilary Tagliaferro said during the aforementioned forum. Education is about rules but also about

adapting these rules when necessary. It is about the narratives, the experiences and comprehending the roots of the pain that children tussle with.

The sad truth about all of this is that we have so many committed parents, carers, teachers, LSAs and heads of school who work tirelessly and who are completely committed but seem to be losing hope. We have a situation where children are still coming out of compulsory schooling illiterate, drop-outs galore and the way we seem to deal with this issue is that we keep inventing new programs to fill in the shortcomings in our system.

The road ahead is tricky. If only we allow the educators and the parents of good intention to lead the way.

Ghandi xi Nghid on Radju Malta, next Saturday 2 May will be discussing this issue in more depth.