

*A VIEW FROM THE TOP:
A Study on Educational Leadership In Roman Catholic
Church Primary and Secondary Schools in Malta*

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Abstract:

This paper takes a view and discusses the author's current doctoral research on leadership in Roman Catholic primary and secondary schools in Malta. The study is taking a grounded approach in order to investigate what it is like to be a headteacher in a church-run school, through an exploration of attitudes, behaviours, leadership styles and managerial skills and approaches. The initial phase of the project involved interviews with 10 Roman Catholic school headteachers (5 primary and 5 secondary). On the basis of these interviews a questionnaire that focuses on what have been identified as key issues was constructed. This was then distributed to the headteachers of all Roman Catholic schools in Malta. The final findings of the study should give some privileged insights into the perceptions and experiences of church headteachers, providing information about positive and negative aspects of the job, indicating areas where organisational and / or administrative changes would be helpful and also highlighting areas for headteacher professional development.

Introduction

The dominant principle of an organisation has shifted, from supervision and management in order to control an enterprise, to leadership in order to bring out the best in people and to respond quickly to change.

(Naisbett and Aberdene, 1990, p. 20)

The notion of leadership in modern management is being given great prominence due to the belief that a good leader makes a great difference in any institution (Howell and Frost, 1989) and because high quality school leadership is crucial to school effectiveness (Trotter and Ellison, 1997). Managing is not enough: “what is needed is leadership to help people achieve what they are capable of, to establish a vision for the future, to encourage, to coach and to mentor, and to establish and maintain successful relationships” (Carnegie, 1995 pp. 15-16).

Over the last two decades, the concept of competent leadership has been central in human resource strategy (Wigfield, 1996). Whilst competence and competency are fundamental elements in any organisation at all levels, they are even more indispensable in people who are leading the organisation. Since leading entails increased levels of influence, impact and control, the cost of incompetence naturally becomes progressively greater, the more senior the individual is. Consequently, “it is critical that leaders are carefully selected and developed” (Wigfield, 1996, p. 101).

Importance of Topic

Over the past few years, 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 (Bezzina, 1999).
- In 1985, the first diploma programme in educational administration and management, was introduced by the Faculty of Education, 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 that will be 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 ballot, 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. When it comes to girls, no such opportunity exists. The only lucky ones are those whose school caters both for primary and secondary levels. Yet, as Grace (2002) points out, despite the profile of Catholic schooling, it is still relatively under-researched.

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 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 twelve secondary schools. There are also twelve 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.

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.

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 permanent teacher's warrant which is issued by the Education Division either to those who have a Bachelor Degree in Education, a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (after completion of a first degree), a Master Degree or Doctorate, or to those who have taught for at least fifteen years. Yet lay Heads are required to be in possession of either the University's diploma programme or else its equivalent.

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? This incorporates issues like:

- Styles of leadership
- Leading and managing an educational organisation
- Are there any specific motivating and satisfying aspects to being a Headteacher of a Maltese Roman Catholic church school?
- Are there any specific challenges to being a head of a Maltese Roman Catholic church school?
- What are the Heads' experiences of stress in leading such an organisation?
- What is the school's vision?

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.

Furthermore 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 *recognises* the different dilemmas being faced by Catholic education in an increasingly secularist, consumerist and market-driven milieu (Grace, 2002).

Literature Background

A coherent and comprehensive definition of educational leadership seems to be lacking (Ramsdale, 2000). Leithwood *et al.*, (1999) say that such a definition of

needs to be comprehensive and closely related to the school context to which it pertains.

Writings on leadership often reflect different authors' point of view (Trotter and Ellison, 1997), their philosophical standpoint (Busher, 1998), the research paradigm they are using (Clark and Clark, 1990), and the underlying ontological, epistemological, and methodological premises (Cohen *et al.*, 2001). These different perspectives give a multi-dimensional aspect to the study of educational leadership.

In looking at the issues that head teachers face, the literature suggests some salient key issues that were interestingly raised by my informants.

Leadership Styles

Different leadership styles have been identified and discussions about these styles often refer to "The Tannenbaum-Schmidt Continuum of Behaviour" (Hersey *et al.*, 1996, p. 122) where the leader's behaviour is related to a continuum. At one extreme is the autocratic leader who dictates to a staff that has to abide by their word. At the other is the collaborative head, very democratic in style, sharing a good proportion of power and information with the staff who are treated as colleagues, and who play an important role in decision-making. In between are styles where the head of school shares different degrees of power, collegiality, consultation and support with staff.

Leadership and Management

One of the first areas that is being explored is the weight and meaning attributed to educational leadership and management by the leaders themselves and the organisation. There is a lack of agreed definitions of the words *leader* and *manager* (Busher, 1998) as sometimes they are perceived to intersect and this is particularly true in the educational field (Morrison, 1998) especially in the case of senior school managers where there is "considerable input into policy and strategy formation" (p. 206). "We can no longer rely on seeing heads of school administering their institution; they now have to adopt a managerial and leadership role" (Bezzina, 2003, p. 3) and "In the past heads have only been asked to administer their schools rather than manage or lead them forward" (Bezzina, 2003, p. 6).

In theory, a manager is perceived to be assigned an organisational role, whereas a leader is a role that can only be granted by one's subordinates (Collins and Porras, 1996). "Leaders live out of their imagination instead of their memory. They tie themselves to their infinite potential instead of their limiting past" (Whisenand and Rush, 1993, p. 56).

Mintzberg (1973) discusses the overlap and says that management may be mostly concerned with practical action, whereas leadership mainly concerns visioning, setting the tone and direction, establishing long-term objectives and thus propagating the right ethos. In the same tone, Kotter (1990) says that while "management is concerned with coping with complexity, leadership is concerned with coping with change" (p. 104).

The words 'leadership' and 'management' cannot be totally distinguished from each other in this respect. Since leadership may be defined as the ability to get things done under the right circumstances (Thibault *et al.*, 1995) the real challenge for most heads

would be to examine and understand the problems and theoretical parameters within which this can be done, and this is basically a management issue. Therefore a head of school is very often a leader and a manager, as there is the trend that educational leadership is moving away from a purely authoritative style of administration to a more collaborative style of management (Bezzina and Vidoni, 2006). Educational heads are inevitably managers and leaders who are willing to address a wide range of school issues (Bhindi and Duignan, 1997).

Leadership in Church Schools

Educational leadership has also to be observed in the light of the culture that prevails in every institution (Michiels, 1998). In this particular research, the notion of school culture bears a specific weight since church schools are believed to have their particular culture (Lombaerts, 1998) and Maltese Roman Catholic church schools are no exception.

Leadership and how it is defined and practised depends on the cultural conditions at micro and macro level (Covey, 1992), the field the leader is working in, the context in which it has developed over the years, the nature of its constituents, the issues involved, agendas, and the unique ambience and personalities that make up the organisation (Bezzina and Vidoni, 2006).

Education provided by church schools is envisaged “to give students access to a new and better Christian, social culture” (Lombaerts, 1998, p. 34). This is because a religious order is perceived to provide the “right atmosphere of regularity in the shape of an organised group of people working for a common goal” (*ibid.*). However, in a context where the number of lay teachers and leaders in Maltese Roman Catholic church schools is on the increase, each community tries to integrate lay persons into its tradition so that they would make its particular culture their own. In systematic terms, these measures are essential in order to guarantee the continuity of the organisation (Gallagher, 1997). But in actual fact there is a drifting away from the strong religious ways and methods that have been always been so strong.

Primary and Secondary Headship

Since my cohort includes both Primary and Secondary Heads of school, I feel that part of my literature review should concentrate on each level of education, separately. Different authors have focused their writings on these two different, but equally important stages of education.

Leadership in the Primary Sector

Although leadership in primary schools is not confined solely to head teachers, most of the literature concentrates upon them (Bell, 1988). Despite the growing belief that leadership in primary schools should be distributed over different levels, studies of leadership in the primary sector generally regard the Headteacher as the principal leader (Southworth, 2000).

Primary Heads are perceived to be very powerful figures inside the school that they lead (Coulson, 1980). They are seen to be possessive of ‘their’ schools (Nias *et al.*,

1992); are regarded as holding a “formidable concentration of power” (Alexander, 1984, p.161); they exercise nearly absolute control over the form and direction of development in their schools (Campbell, 1985); they dominate the schools they lead (Southworth, 1995) and are believed to be one of the main factors which determine the effectiveness and the success of the school (Southworth, 2000). Another factor that comes out from literature is that discussions about primary headteachers generally fail to take into account the differences in school size. Evidently this factor is bound to affect the Head’s behaviour and attitude.

Leadership in the Secondary Sector

Caldwell and Spinks (1988) say that cultural, strategic, educational and reflective leadership are important dimensions of the work of school leaders in secondary schools. These aspects of leadership are happening against a background of rapid change mostly concerned with improving the quality of learning for all students (Caldwell, 2000). This is due to the social, economic, academic, technological, psychological, moral and physical changes that are constantly happening, at such a quick pace, beyond the school walls. At this level, school leaders are perceived by researchers to be educational strategists, working with others to develop a capacity for state-of-the-art learning (Bolam, 1988; Bezzina, 2003). Secondary school principals like most primary Heads, are giving priority to improving standards of literacy, higher academic achievements and better social skills, and this role is changing to a more strategic one in every aspect (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2002).

The principal is spending more time on the ‘bigger picture’ in ways that reflect the contemporary view of transformational leadership (Gurr, 1996). For this reason the concept of educational strategist is pre-eminent as the educational leader has to take a macro view of things that concern the organisation. While this is happening and gathering momentum, there is evidence that secondary education is being reinvented and reformed. This certainly calls that a capacity for strategic management will become increasingly important for secondary school leadership (Caldwell, 2000).

Work Motivation and its Relevance to Leadership

Another aspect that I am studying in this research is job motivation among Heads.

The study of work motivation has two basic strands:

- why people behave in the way they do in the workplace
- how they can engage in work behaviours that are beneficial to the organisation, and themselves (Riches, 2000).

If the experience of work has a negative impact on school leaders, they cannot possibly give their best in that sphere of their lives. And it is a well-accepted fact that Heads have undeniably a great influence in their organisation and their attitude, be it negative or positive, has a ripple effect on the rest of the organisation (Riches and Morgan, 1989; Beare *et al.*, 2000; Cauchi, 2002).

Katz and Kahn (1978) argue that organisations need people who:

1. are interested in filling in a post and maintaining it
2. perform their task in a dependable and conscientious manner

3. go beyond this to engage in creative, spontaneous and innovative behaviour.

One of the difficulties regarding the study of motivation is that there is no overarching or single theoretical model that explains motivation (Rue and Byars, 1989). Against a wide theoretical background about the different notions applied to this concept by numerous authors, I am trying to elicit what the leaders themselves understand by motivation. I am also exploring how motivated these heads feel and how this is impinging on them and the rest of the organisation.

Motivation is not a neutral term sanitised from other positive and negative manifestations. There are other concepts that are clearly related to motivation and the study is also taking a close look at these concepts including job satisfaction and stress management.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is an attitudinal state associated with a personal feeling of achievement, either quantitative or qualitative (Riches, 2000). The evidence from research on job satisfaction conducted among educational leaders (e.g. Fullan, 1998; Johnston and Pickersgill, 2000; Day *et al.*, 2000) seems to suggest that achievement on task or in reaching specific standards of competence is significant (Vroom, 1964; Locke, 1965; Herzberg, 1966). Conversely, loss of autonomy (for example, trying to deal with problems over which leaders have no control) and powerlessness (for example the moving goalposts of government legislation) lead to job dissatisfaction (Tomlinson *et al.*, 1999; Sergiovanni, 2005).

With particular reference to headship, Nias (1981) in a study among primary school teachers found that job satisfaction arises out of factors that are intrinsic to the job like good relationships, purposeful leadership and a close fit between the ideologies of teachers and the ideologies of the school. But, she also identifies 'negative satisfiers' like poor conditions of work, which, if removed, would result in more job satisfaction, whereas contextual dissatisfiers like bad management and absence of a sense of purpose in the ethos of the school, would not. In my opinion, for this particular research this is a salient point that is to be constantly borne in mind.

Stress in Leadership

Perhaps the other side of the coin of job motivation and satisfaction is job stress. Whilst the vast majority of studies in educational organisations have focused on the classroom teacher, some studies have looked at the particular sources of stress faced by those in managerial positions (Dunham, 1992; Cooper and Kelly, 1993; Ostell and Oakland, 1995). Such studies have served to highlight the acute stress than can be generated in trying to deal with demands coming from **superiors**, when one feels that one has very limited power and resources to influence those people below in agreeing to and being able to deliver these demands.

Often leaders feel unsafe, as if they are under a microscope, their every action scrutinised by those around them. Knowing that others are watching with a critical eye, may provoke educational leaders to judge their own progress too soon, to curtail experimentation, and decrease risk taking (Goleman *et al.*, 2002).

Smilansky (1994) argues that work stress has special meaning in the educational field in that only in education is an individual required to play so many roles such as supportive parent, disciplining taskmaster, stimulating actor and information resource person. The special affective characteristics of the profession exert pressure towards presenting an understanding, supportive and optimistic appearance.

According to Everard and Morris (1996) the study of stress in education has to be tackled from 3 different angles: causes, symptoms, and remedies and coping strategies.

It is the aim of this research to elicit causes and symptoms of stress and delve into the coping strategies adopted by these leaders. Symptoms of stress may have adverse effects upon professionalism as they sap energy and increasingly divert from the core professional task of managing an educational institution.

Vision

The leader of an organisation must have a mental image, a vision, of a possible and desirable future state of the organisation. This vision can be as vague as a dream, or as precise as a goal or mission (Carnegie, 1995). The leader's role is to create the necessary structures and climate for this vision to take root (Everard and Morris, 1996).

Research on leadership extols the centrality of vision as one of the main ingredients of effective school leadership (Buell, 1992; Champy, 1995; Fullan, 1995).

Vision designs new synergies. Vision challenges everyday, taken-for-granted assumptions by offering new directions and articulating what people feel but lack words to say. Vision speaks the unspeakable, challenges the unchallengeable, and defends the undefendable.

(Terry, 1993, p. 38)

The leader of the organisation should communicate this vision to the staff (Carnall, 1995). Yet in the process of communicating it, one has to bear in mind that this is a vulnerable process (Morrison, 1998; Biott and Rauch, 2000). In this context Morphet *et al.*, (1982) caution against either "the flagrant manipulation of the process of consultation" or the more tactful "pseudodemocratic cooperation" by which decisions are at times subtly conditioned" (p. 149). Bennis (1989) insists that a good network of communication is thus indivisible from effective leadership.

These are some of the many facets of leadership and how they impinge on the individual himself/ herself, and how this ripples over the entire organisation.

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.

For this reason, leadership in an organisation should be given its due prominence.

Design of Research

There is no single blueprint for planning and carrying out research as research design is very often regulated by the notion of ‘fitness for purpose’ (Cohen *et al.*, 2001, p. 93).

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). “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.*)

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) state, “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, pp. 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.

As I explained this study concerns the attitudes, behaviour, management strategies and coping skills of Heads in all Maltese Roman Catholic Church Primary and Secondary Schools (thirty nine in all). In my opinion, adopting a grounded approach in this research was an appropriate way to elicit the qualitative and subjective data needed that would allow me to address these concerns.

The application of grounded theory has recently gained more popularity among organisational researchers (Cassell and Symon, 2004) because it produces descriptions of organisational reality that may elicit positive discussions around important themes in an organisation.

The initial phase of the project, involved interviews with ten heads of schools. 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). Through direct verbal interaction, interviews served to elicit the main issues that needed to be explored in this exploratory study. I carried out 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 of the whole cohort. What interviewees had to say provided the basis for the construction of a questionnaire that focused on what had been identified as the key issues, which needed to be examined.

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.

The questionnaire was then distributed to the heads of all the Maltese Roman Catholic church schools.

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).

At the same time, Cohen *et al* (2001) argue that 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” (p. 245). Consequently ethical issues are being constantly borne in mind and considered throughout the research. The human aspect must not be forgotten or overlooked at any point (Borg and Gall, 1979).

Some Initial Findings

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 to fulfil a multifunctional 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 (Calvert *et al.*, 2000; 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 face 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 is just the top of the iceberg as the major findings are still under way.

Conclusion

Evidently educational leaders carry a lot of weight on their shoulders and their influence on any educational organisation cannot be overlooked. 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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