Laying The Foundations For Cultures Of Teaching

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Introduction

The origins and development of Malta's system of elementary education is a legacy of its colonial past. For many years after it had become a British protectorate in 1800, the civil commissioners were indifferent to the educational needs of the masses and the first attempts at introducing elementary education were made by charitable individuals and groups like the Normal School Society which opened schools in the capital, Valletta, and the three cities in 1819 (Zammit Mangion, 1951). It was only after the recommendations made by the Royal Commission in 1838 (Austen/Lewis, 1839) that the State began to assume responsibility for the education of the masses of the poor.

Before the more determined efforts of Governor O'Ferrall in the late 1840's however, elementary schooling in Malta was still very much disorganized although, in terms of school provision, there had been a marked improvement since the initial steps that had been taken in the 1820's (1). The quality, however, was bad: the schools were organized according to the monitorial system of instruction, which appeared to be very inadequately operated; the teachers were uneducated and untrained; the monitors were unable to cope with the tasks assigned; and, the whole system was very inefficiently administered (Badger, 1838; A Maltese, 1847; Bonavia, 1849; Pullicino, 1850). In 1849, on the recommendations of the Council of Government, shortly after assuming office, O'Ferrall, the British Governor, chose Canon Pullicino, a university educated priest, as Director of the Elementary Schools on the Island. Pullicino was aware of the deficiencies in the rudimentary provision for elementary instruction before he was appointed Chief Director and, on his return from his European tour of elementary schools, he was resolved to make a clean slate before embarking on a reform programme of his own (Pullicino, 1850a, 1850b).

Pullicino presented his evaluation report to Governor O'Ferrall in July 1850 and it was immediately adopted as the basis for the reform of the elementary schools. As a first measure Pullicino kept the schools closed after the summer holidays of 1850. Instead he called all the teachers, including the new recruits, to the University in Valletta in October for a three month course aimed at preparing them adequately for the implementation of the reforms he had planned. This move was intended to convey to the teachers that the month of July did not only mark the end of a scholastic year but the abolition of a system which had fallen into disrepute and which needed to be replaced by a better one.

The time gap between the closing of the schools in July 1850 and their reopening in January 1851 placed the teachers in a mood of anticipation of a new beginning and a total break with the recent past. The monitorial system, which had come under heavy criticism during the 1840s, was abandoned for what was thought to be a more efficient system. New programmes were prescribed, textbooks adopted, a uniform time-table established and pupils organized in homogeneous groups for instruction. Arrangements for annual inspections and examinations were made and a Model School to prepare for and consolidate the innovations envisaged was set up.

Pullicino's acquaintance with the educational systems of Britain, Ireland, and a number of European countries, like France, Bavaria, Switzerland and Italy, as well as his reading in the educational writings of the period, were the source of the many ideas which helped him not only to plan an elementary educational system, but also to begin to articulate a rationale to underpin it. In this article I intend to discuss Pullicino's innovative measures in order to support my argument that they became the origins of cultures of teaching which survived a century and a half. Pullicino's single-handed efforts to set up an educational system place the issue of agency in bringing about changes in social systems to the fore. He was a true believer in the sense captured by Smith's et al. study (1986) of the innovative staff at Kensington's elementary school. Although it cannot be denied that, "individual careers are tied to wider political and economic events" (Goodson and Ball, 1985:11), and, therefore, the historical

context sets parameters for individual actions, a forceful personality like Pullicino, working with a broad remit from the British authorities, had the opportunity to determine to a significant degree the course of events. The innovations he introduced in Malta's fledgling system of education are illustrative of this. Let me start with the introduction of the classroom system first.

Schools into classrooms

As I have already pointed out, up to 1850 the elementary schools in Malta were organized on the monitorial system. It was invented separately by Bell and Lancaster in the last decade of the eighteenth century and was intended to teach efficiently and cheaply large numbers of children (Hamilton 1989). Pullicino gives a succinct description of it as practised in Malta's schools at the time in his "Summary of the Lessons on Method" (Pullicino, 1858:10):

"The school was divided into small circles under a monitor (a pupil from the next higher class) with the master, who did not teach, directing the movement of the circles. In these schools nothing could be taught but reading, writing and arithmetic; the other branches of instruction were beyond the capabilities of the monitor".

Pullicino was not happy with this teaching arrangement, mainly because he believed that the acquisition of the rudimentary skills of reading, writing and counting would be far worse than no teaching at all. He made this clear in the report of 1850:

"If the pupils are given only the means of teaching themselves, by teaching them only to read and write, they will be receiving nothing but a weapon which, often times, not knowing how to use, they could do harm to themselves and to others". (Pullicino, 1850a:8).

It was a belief which prompted his peremptory statement to the teachers who had assembled to hear his first lecture on method in October 1850: "If the children are not taught well", he told them, "it will be better not to teach them at all" (Pullicino, 1850b:20). And, for him, teaching them well meant making them learn what was morally and intellectually unobjectionable from a Roman Catholic point of view.

Pullicino's desire to change the quality of teaching in the schools compelled him to turn his back on the monitorial system, even though the alternative he adopted was costlier in terms of finance (Pullicino, 1852) and teaching power (Keenan, 1878). He needed more adequate schools and resources as well as teachers to implement what Hamilton (1977) calls "the classroom system". In this case, however, he waived the principles of administrative convenience (Hargreaves, 1986) in order to introduce an innovation in which he firmly believed. At the end of the second year of its implementation, Pullicino (1852:7) described it in approving terms as follows:

"According to this new method, every school is divided into two, three or more classes depending on the abilities of the pupils who attend it. The number of pupils in each class is limited to not more than fifty, with the larger classes separated into two or more divisions and entrusting each division to a teacher or his deputy so that it can be taught simultaneously".

This brief description encapsulates a pattern of school organization which was emerging at the time in the Anglo-Saxon world: the graded, multi-class, multi-teacher school (Hamilton, 1989). This system created the need to have permanent groups of children moving through the grades "as a cohort" (Payne and Hustler, 1980; Hamilton, 1989). During the first five years of Pullicino's directorship, although the schools had been organized into classrooms, the promotion of children to the next higher class was rather haphazardly done. In 1855 he visited educational institutions in Italy, Switzerland and Bavaria and was struck by the order with which public instruction was being conducted in those countries. He borrowed that pattern of class organization and prescribed its implementation in a circular sent to the teachers on 2nd January, 1856. Pullicino gave the following reasons for the introduction of this innovation in his annual report on the Education Department for that year:

"It was customary for the pupils in our elementary schools to be promoted from one class to the next at indeterminate intervals according to level of knowledge they had acquired. However, this rendered the classification of pupils difficult on the one hand, and the period of their education uncertain on the other. I felt it appropriate, therefore, to modify the organization of teaching and establish a fixed period of time for each part". (Pullicino, 1856:7).

The School worked according to a sequenced programme spanning over three or four years (2), tested annually and divided into lessons according to a prescribed time-table.

This system eventually evolved into what Lortie (1975) calls "an egg-crate" design of school-building with which we are so familiar (3): The enclosed space of the classroom with its traditional paraphernalia - desks, cupboards, blackboards, chalk, textbooks and copybooks - has provided for so long the structural context of

teaching. Westbury (1980:90) gives us a faithful description of it which is worth quoting at length:

> "When we look at schools we see, in traditional settings at least, row upon row of classrooms; and when we look inside these classrooms we see desks, a teacher's table up front and a chalkboard on the front wall of the room. Each such room has seating for thirty or so students and only a limited amount of floor space. When school is in session we usually see a teacher standing or sitting in his place up front and students sitting in their desks, listening to the teacher talk, interacting with him during question-answer exchanges and occasional discussions, or else "working", answering questions in workbooks or worksheets or writing laboriously".

Pullicino saw this system in operation in English elementary schools and immediately realised that it was far more advantageous than the monitorial system. The rationale he gave for it is a direct derivation from the writings of Stow, especially his "The Training System" (1836), which featured among the three hundred or so books available at the Model School (4). Stow's notion of simultaneous instruction as one in which "the mind of the child is at all times under the influence of the master" (quoted in Hamilton, 1989:103) is not dissimilar from Pullicino's who defined it in the following terms:

> "Teaching is called simultaneous when the attention of the pupils is focused contemporaneously on what the teacher says or does, as well as on what each one of the pupils says or does. It is a method which has the advantage of making it possible for the teacher to extend instruction and raise its intellectual level". (Pullicino, 1858:11).

Having created an arrangement for simultaneous teaching, Pullicino recommended in his lectures at the University and demonstrated in the Model School a teaching method which he called "the Dialogical Method" and which later came to be called "the recitation" (Rice, 1893). This is how he explained it to the teachers:

> "This is practised by posing questions to the pupils, sometimes individually, at other times to the whole class. In posing questions the teacher has to ensure that this is done in a way that the questions are addressed to the whole class. He must exact the attention of the whole class; otherwise the simultaneity of instruction will be lost" (Pullicino, 1858:26).

Very consciously, therefore, Pullicino selected the teaching method he considered suitable for the elementary classroom, gave demonstrations of it in the Model School, and oversaw its implementation in the schools. In his visits to the schools some twenty-eight years later, Keenan, the Commissioner appointed by the British Government to report on the Maltese educational system, (1878:13) witnessed the extent of Pullicino's success in implementing the recitation pedagogy:

> "Each teacher had the same set of questions, and each put the questions in the same phraseology as every other teacher. The pupils, in their turn, as might be naturally expected, rang out in school after school, a string of almost identical replies. It was all rote; there was no intelligence in it".

Keenan could not refrain from reiterating his disapproval of the practice in this emphatic comment later on in his report:

> "I would say that these lectures and conferences, whatever good they may accomplish, happen in another direction to do a certain amount of harm. As previously stated, the great blot upon the teaching of all the schools is the system of rote, a system which prevails to an enormous extent in the Model School. And the very *ipsissima verba* of the questions as they are delivered, and of the answers as - in a follow-the-leader chorus - they are received in the Model School, are heard in every school on the Island". (Keenan, 1878: 16-17).

Teacher-centred Instruction

Keenan's observations of the teaching in the schools carry the implication that the teacher was at the centre of the educational relationship. The classroom system, together with the recitation method which it generated, required the close and constant vigilance of the teacher. The teacher was the pivot around which all educational activity in the classroom revolved. As Grace (1978: 190) has perceptively observed, "a strongly teacher-directed pedagogy" was a conspicuous characteristic of elementary schools in the nineteenth century. And, as a nineteenth century educator very much aware of educational management and organization in foreign countries, Pullicino established what Cuban (1979) calls "teacher-centred instruction" as an overriding educational principle.

In his first lecture on pedagogy he asserted dogmatically:

> "For the reform of popular education one thing is needed: and that is the teachers. They must be efficient teachers, however, whose teaching skills will make good for any lack of books, equipment and even pupil motivation". (Pullicino, 1850a:25-26).

Placing all the emphasis on the teacher was not only a mechanism for the control of mass schooling, as Grace (1985) argues, but also a solution to the problems posed by insufficient resources. Elementary teachers in Malta became, for this reason, the only resource available for the transmission of knowledge.

Surprisingly, however, teacher-centred instruction adopted as a strategy to achieve pedagogical efficiency in a situation characterized by lack of adequate resources has proved "invulnerable to instructional reform" (Cuban, 1982:26). Cuban's (1982:27) research in the history of pedagogy as well as inside classrooms, is reflected in the description he gives of a teacher-centred environment:

> "... where the teacher generally teaches to the whole group of students in a class, shows high concern for whether students are listening, concentrates mostly on subject-matter and academic skills, and, in general controls what is taught, when, and under what conditions".

Pullicino's endorsement of teacher-centredness went beyond this and led him to be prescriptive about the teacher's position in the classroom. In a circular he sent to the teachers on 22 March 1860, he rebuked all those teachers who were not conforming to his regulation prohibiting them from taking a seated position:

> "Teachers are reminded that they cannot deviate even slightly from the established norm: not to make use of chairs, if not when it is strictly necessary. They should always stick to the practice of giving all lessons in a standing position so that they will be able to imprint more effectively on the pupils' minds those ideas they have to communicate".

Streaming

The organization of pupils for instruction was a problem which educational planners in the nineteenth century began to face with the emergence of the classroom school; the graded curriculum and the recitation method of teaching. Although in the early stages of the introduction of mass schooling criteria for the grouping of pupils in classrooms remained undecided (Hamilton, 1989), by the 1860s, they began to take definite shape. The majority of education systems of countries on both sides of the Atlantic began to adopt homogeneous ability as the criterion for grouping pupils in classrooms. This was necessitated, as Hamilton (1989:128-9) suggested in his fascinating study of the history of schooling, by the "batch processing" model of school organization which assumed that:

> "children were to stay together in their class, were to be taught collectively to the required standard, and thereafter, were to be promoted as a class from grade to grade".

I find this a more plausible explanation than Simon's (1971:201) who argues that the rigid classification of pupils according to standards of attainment "arose directly from the school grant system known as payment-by-results brought in by the Revised Code of Regulations of 1862". This was further exacerbated first by the practice of selecting pupils for entry to the pupil-teacher centres and, subsequently, by the introduction of the scholarship class at the beginning of this century. I consider these were factors which reinforced streaming but were certainly not its direct cause (5).

For Pullicino the classification of pupils by ability formed part of the rationale of simultaneous instruction:

> "A school organized on the simultaneous system of teaching can be divided into as many classes as the different ability of the pupils demand. And there will be as many divisions in each class as the number of pupils requires". (Pullicino, 1858: 10).

A factor which rendered selection more rigid was created by the need to recruit pupil-teachers for the further training in the Model School. And it was in the Model School itself that streaming was rigidly practised. This led to two immediate and deleterious consequences. First was the enormous number of pupils who were compelled to repeat the classes even for five years in succession, especially the first class (6). This led to a pyramidal pattern of school organization marked by a heavily populated first class, taking 66% of the school population, and a sharply reduced fourth class with less than 4% (Keenan, 1878:8). Secondly, it led teachers to focus their attention on the high ability classes to the total neglect of the lower ones. Pullicino was very conscious of this, so much so that he had to warn them through a circular to refrain from focusing their energies solely on the examination class and begin to give equal attention to the repeater classes (Pullicino, 1861:43).

The teachers did not appear to have heeded Pullicino's admonition as Keenan (1878:18) was complaining of the same bad practice eighteen years later. The observation he made about the Model School in his report is telling enough. He put it in the form of an analogy:

> "This is a school in which there are what gardeners understand by the designation "Big gooseberries", to produce which, three fourths of the fruit are sacrificed. The comparatively small upper class are the big gooseberries".

Keenan was evidently impressed by the contrasting curricular experiences of pupils in the elementary schools. The implementation of selection policies entailed an extreme application of the Darwinian theory of "survival of the fittest" which was adopted as a regulating principle of

social affairs in the nineteenth century (Mathews, 1985). The way it was implemented in Malta's elementary schools offended Keenan's sensibilities.

Structuring Teachers' Work

The earlier sections of this chapter have shown that, to a very large extent, Pullicino defined the teachers' situation. He divided the school into separate classrooms, each with a maximum number of pupils to which he assigned a teacher or assistant, selected pupils according to grades obtained in end-of-year examinations he himself conducted, provided the resources, like blackboards, slates and writing materials for the pupils and imposed a teacher-centred pedagogy.

He went further than this, however. His obstinate concern for order led him to stipulate how the teachers' time inside classrooms was to be spent, by providing a uniform time-table to all the schools. Even a cursory glance at it will reveal the curricular structure characterized by fragmentation of time and subjects of instruction.

Time-Table for the Elementary Schools - 1850

8.00	Maltese/Italian Reading
9.00	Writing
10.00	Arithmetic
11.00	Recess
2.00	Maltese/Italian/English Reading
2.45	Arithmetic
3.30	Religious Catechism
4.00	Dismissal

In his analysis of the work context of teachers, Denscombe (1980:285) argues that time, like materials, is a scarce resource and it is organized in such a way as to define to a significant degree the parameters within which teachers work:

> "It defines for teachers the nature of the group of pupils to be taught (age and perhaps ability); it defines what is to be taught (subject) and how much time is available for inculcating the desired knowledge and, although the teachers' working day is not restricted to lesson periods, the time-table does provide powerful parameters for their activity over the larger part of the working day".

Keenan realized the extent to which the elementary teachers were constrained and the educational consequences of Pullicino's strictures. His comment in the report is couched in a language which strikes a familiar note in the educational writings of today:

> "The teacher is a mere automaton. That of which he ought to be the best judge - the distribution of his own time and the judicious employment of the time of his pupils - is entirely determined for him by the Chief

Director. He might ere now have left the primary function of organization to the teachers themselves". (Keenan, 1878:7).

Pullicino's stance in this case marked a total lack of trust in the teachers which has continued to characterize the relationship between the Education Department at the centre and the schools at the peripheries.

In addition to structuring the teachers' time in a very rigid manner, Pullicino emphasized the need for the maintenance of discipline inside classrooms. His notion of discipline betrays a concern for what Goodlad (1975:13) called "the regularities of schooling" which he defined as "fixed, recurrent routines by means of which schools conduct their daily business". Regular, uninterrupted activity of both teachers and pupils indicated a well-managed school. In his lectures on Method he expressed himself on this subject clearly enough:

> "Discipline itself demands alacrity and regularity of movements required by the classroom tasks and teaching. It is the creature of habit, acquired through orderly, uninterrupted repetition of the same acts". (Pullicino, 1858:13).

This is not far different from what is understood nowadays by the ideology of "business" (Sharp and Green, 1975) which stipulates that the teacher must ensure that pupils are kept continuously occupied with classroom tasks. With the adoption of the classroom system, of course, it became increasingly incumbent on the individual teacher, isolated as he was in the classroom, to maintain order and control.

But, perhaps, what greatly contributed to Pullicino's definition of the teachers' world were the syllabus and textbooks he prescribed for the schools. Pullicino's periodic renewal of the syllabus written in 1850, together with either the compilation of textbooks or the adoption of foreign ones (7), established a tradition for curriculum development in Malta. This practice, of course, was not idiosyncratic to the local situation but was part of a more universal strategy to systematize mass schooling (Hamilton, 1989). In Malta's case, however, it became a permanent feature of its educational culture. This strategy constituted what Goodlad (1975) called "a meliorist" approach to curriculum renewal which entails the provision of new textbooks, syllabuses, training and advice so that teachers can perform their work better.

Besides the systematization of mass schooling textbook prescription was also the means

to establish uniformity of curricular experience. This was part of Pullicino's conscious design as the following comment in his first report indicates:

> "And for instruction to be determined in such a way as not to vary according to the whims of those who direct it (i.e. the teachers), and, therefore, be different in the various schools on the Island, it will be necessary to compile and prescribe textbooks appropriate to the various classes in the schools. These books, which we call "books for the classes", will contain all the rudiments of knowledge which teachers are expected to communicate to the pupils". (Pullicino, 1850:14).

Furthermore, through the compilation of textbooks, Pullicino exerted a control over subject-matter which he considered morally acceptable for pupils to learn. And, in Malta's case, given the extremely low level of education of the elementary teachers, textbooks were the best available means to assist them in acquiring the necessary knowledge to pass on to the pupils. As a mechanism to ensure that knowledge had, in fact, been effectively passed on, as well as to have some reliable basis for the promotion of pupils from one class to another, Pullicino devised examinations at the national level. His only criteria, therefore, for an evaluation of curricular provision in the schools and teacher effectiveness were the results obtained in the annual examinations as his circular to the teachers in 1856 amply demonstrates:

> "At the end of each scholastic year an examination will assess exactly the learning of the pupils in all the schools. Those who pass will be promoted; the others will repeat the year. The month reserved for examinations will be September". (Pullicino, 1861:23).

Although it was intended for the elementary schools, Pullicino's curriculum followed a European pattern based, as it was, on the traditional academic disciplines. Through it Pullicino laid the groundwork for what Connel (1985:87) called "the competitive academic curriculum". This is a curriculum which is structured around hierarchically arranged, university-based disciplines consisting of bodies of facts and information to be transferred to passive pupils and tested at regular intervals.

Conclusion

This article took a particular, as well as a highly significant, point in Malta's educational development, when, through the efforts of one man, a national educational system was changed.

This involved the abolition of the schoolhouse and mutual instruction and the adoption of a format of schooling characterized by the classroom school and simultaneous instruction.

This transition was legitimated by a carefully articulated rationale addressed not only to the elementary schoolteachers, who were expected to make the system work, but also to the Maltese upper class as well as the British authorities represented by the Governor. Undoubtedly, it was the effort of one man, Canon Pullicino, the Chief Director of the Elementary Schools.

"Laying the foundations of cultures of Teaching", the title of this chapter, needs some explanation. First of all, Pullicino, the agent of this revolutionary change in Malta's educational system, succeeded, within his thirty year tenure, in giving rise to structures within which present-day schooling processes are conducted. Secondly, it wants to make the point that attention to the context of education will lead to enhanced understanding of educational practice. Finally, it implies that curriculum and pedagogical practice involve the sharing of beliefs, norms and values among those who engage in it.

Hamilton (1989) points out that for a long stretch in the middle of the nineteenth century, pedagogical practice was marked by stability. This coincided with Pullicino's tenure (1850-80). Besides, for many years, Pullicino had no rivals to contend with and the British authorities had placed their trust in him (8). Furthermore, his appointment occurred at a time of complete consensus at the national level about the need to promote the elementary schooling of the population. Such a favourable situation reduced the constraints within which, Pullicino, the agent of educational change, could operate.

Notes

1. Between 1820 and 1850 the number of elementary schools on the Island increased from three to twenty-eight.

2. Schools in the big towns and suburbs offered a four-year course while the programme of the schools in the villages and rural areas spanned over three years.

3. With the exception of two schools, one in a suburb of Valletta and one in Gozo, there were no purpose-built schools in Pullicino's time. Pullicino's repeated recommendations to the British authorities remained unheeded for many years, until he lost all hope of ever obtaining a favourable response. (Keenan, 1878).

4. According to Keenan (1878) the holdings in the Teachers' Library at the Model School were very suitable. Keenan writes about it in eulogous terms:

> "There is scarcely a book that a primary school teacher in pursuit of the studies of his profession could desire to consult which is not found on its shelves. Indeed, were there a Training College in the place, this

books, aids and appliances would amply be sufficient for its wants". (p. 21).

5. In America, for instance, W.A. Wells, the superintendent of Chicago public schools in the middle of the nineteenth century, classified children very strictly according to attainment. His ideas on the organization of pupils for teaching are contained in his book "The Graded School: A Graded Course of Instruction for Public Schools", New York, 1862, quoted in Hamilton (1989).

6. Keenan (1878:8) gives the following statistics:
    First Class: 5162
    Second Class: 1592
    Third Class: 799
    Fourth Class: 193
    He refers to the first class as "a formidable deadweight upon the schools".

7. Pullicino in fact adopted the textbooks prepared for the Irish National Schools for the teaching of English, Arithmetic and Geography.

8. Towards the end of the 1870s this trust began to dissolve when the British authorities gave their full support to those who were calling for Pullicino's removal and the replacement of Italian language and culture with that of Britain. Eventually, this came about with the implementation of Keenan's recommendations in the 1880s.

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