

# TEACHER EMPOWERMENT: THE WAY FORWARD FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

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## Introduction

**T**he articles in the first issue of *Education 2000* are a refreshing confirmation that: a. There is a lot of good practice taking place in our schools (unfortunately often left untapped or not shared with others); b. Teachers believe and desire to improve practice; and c. Teacher empowerment (i.e. staff involvement) is indeed the way forward for quality improvement to take place.

Through this article I would like to share with the readers seven resolutions that can help empower them to take charge of educational reform at the school level.

## Which way ahead?

**M**alta is entrenched in a highly centralised and bureaucratic system (although a wind of change is blowing in the opposite direction) which has never allowed teachers access to decision making. Malta has also attempted to induce change by adopting centralist policies which have largely excluded teachers from the decision making process. A National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) was introduced in Malta in 1988 adopting a purely prescriptive approach to change at school level. Again, another example of an opportunity being missed for teachers to be involved in curriculum design and development. This approach to induce curriculum by centralist strategies helped to perpetuate a dependency culture already deeply embedded in our profession.

The introduction of the NMC has ignored the changes required to modernise the vehicle of reform. Schools, up to now, are not places "characterised by dialogue, critical thinking, decision making, action, analysis and evaluation which in the end determine educational changes" (Bezzina, 1991, p.10). Involvement in the design and construction process, as the literature highlights, is much more likely to empower teachers and make a difference where it matters most - in the classroom. Allowing teachers access to the lofty towers of power requires the building of what Gene Maeroff calls "psychological ladders" that they may climb to escape their isolation. It also requires connecting teachers with one another and with senior management, building collegiality and a process of shared

decision making that has been all too rare in our schools (Sellars & Francis, 1995; Dimmock, (ed.), 1993).

In Malta I sense that the need is for increased involvement by the profession in policy making, for decentralisation to be more manifest, for schools to play a greater part in curriculum and staff development. Such features, it is argued, will heighten professionalism and raise levels of commitment at the level of the individual school.

## Empowerment: the way forward

**S**taff empowerment is one indicator of an effective school. For the purposes of this article I am interpreting empowerment in the following way:

Empowerment can be understood as the exchange of one kind of power for another - the exchange of *power over* for *power to*. Value added leaders ... are less concerned with controlling what people do, when they do it, and how; and more concerned with controlling accomplishments - the likelihood that shared values will be expressed and goals achieved.

(Sergiovanni, 1990)

How do teachers respond to the notion of empowerment? Some are reluctant, particularly in schools led by 'heroic' leaders who find it difficult to delegate, or in circumstances where they feel that they have been marginalised and de-professionalised by centralist policy. Others believe that they can exert a remarkable influence on school reform - and think that its high time that policy makers valued their opinions and involved them more in the decision-making process. Like most of us who must try to pin down an abstraction, few teachers are confident that they as individuals have any power at all to influence school reform.

Towards that end I offer seven resolutions that teachers can make to empower themselves and to influence the course of educational reform at school and systems level.

## Routes to empowerment

1. Do not give up your birthright.

**“Teacher empowerment (i.e. staff involvement) is indeed the way forward for quality improvement to take place”**



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We really do not need a redefinition of the teaching profession as much as we need individual teachers to define what it means to be a teacher. Your future role in tomorrow's schools depends on how you define your role today and in school life in general. In every action think about what a teacher *ought* to do. Take the lead professionally. Let your experiences speak to you. You not only have a right to play a determining role but also a moral obligation to actively participate in your school's future. Teaching is a moral act.

## 2. Have a clear vision and know what you are good at.

Schools need to know where they are now, where they want to go, why and how to get there. Our vision is one which sees schools engaging in the construction of a shared vision. To construct an image of the future implies working through a critique of the present. Your school needs to know your version of its future. Spend time working this through and share your views with colleagues (Bennis & Nanus, 1985).

## 3. Be an active listener.

We all have a tendency to believe that what we say and do is "right", and this often causes us to be defensive and fail to listen and learn from others. The more strongly we are attached to particular values the less we may be capable of actively listening to other points of view. It takes conscious effort to adopt a new stance and stop preempting the contributions of others. You can't learn if you can't listen.

## 4. Engage in the process of reflection and encourage feedback.

Engage in self-evaluation of your practice. Invite a colleague to observe you in the classroom using a particular focus and set of criteria that you have identified. Actively listen to the feedback bearing in mind that the purpose is developmental. Encourage evidentially-based dialogue with colleagues and identify methods to help strengthen each other's repertoire. We know very little about much that is central to the teaching-learning process. An action-research stance towards matters of practice is often more productive than one which is prematurely evaluative.

## 5. It only takes a few waves to start a sea change.

If you are faced with a problem at school do not wait for an act of God to resolve it. Transform a problem into a challenge. Work together to assess and improve the situation. Do not take things lightly. Do not accept the dictum that "anything goes" or "things can't be improved". They can and you can play your part in making them come about.

## 6. School-based development: a renewing process.

Each school needs to accept responsibility (within national guidelines) for identifying

where it wants to go, and how to get there. It will be necessary to identify what forms of organisational structure are appropriate to achieve agreed goals. Schools should not be places where teachers teach and pupils learn, they should become, by encouraging empowerment at all levels within the school, learning communities in which both pupils and adults learn.

## 7. Marketing your profession.

Make the general public aware of what you do and why you are doing it, and why it is important that they understand it. Accept, or cultivate, an invitation to be a guest speaker in a local council activity. Appear on TV, or take part on a radio programme. Cultivate the local newspapers. Invite newspaper, television, or radio personalities to school. Share ideas with other schools. Undertake joint activities, collaboratively explore the learning process, involve pupils, teachers and parents in the enterprise. Who is better qualified to speak out on education than you?

## Concluding Remarks

I am confident that you could add to this list or create your own. What is central to these resolutions, and I believe, to school reform, is the need for teachers to believe in themselves, to believe in the role they have to play, in the need to change existing attitudes and mental frameworks (including their own) if need be and to share responsibility for success and failure. The ultimate power to improve schools is, as has always been, in the heads, hands and hearts of the educators who work in them. This is where we need to search and build empowerment.

## Further reading

- Bennis, W.G. & Nanus, G. (1985) *Leaders: the strategies for taking charge* New York: Harper Row.
- Bezzina, C. (1991) 'The policy-practice dilemma facing reform in Malta'. Paper presented at the *M.U.T. Forum on the Primary School Curriculum*, Valletta, Malta.
- Dimmock, C. [ed] (1993) *School-Based Management and School Effectiveness*, London: Routledge.
- Goodlad, J. I. (1994) *What Schools are For*, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa.
- Reynolds, D. & Cuttance, P. [eds] (1992) *School Effectiveness: Research, Policy and Practice*. London: Cassell.
- Sellars, N. & Francis, D. (1995) Collaborative Professional Development, *British Journal of In-Service Education*, Vol. 21, No.1, pp.15-35.
- Sergiovanni, T.J. (1990) *Value added leadership - how to get extraordinary performance in schools*. New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovic.

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