

Attard Primary School

a living example of a grassroots initiated school development strategy

Paul Pace

Schools have traditionally been considered important socialising agencies within the community, but they have also been regularly criticised for their inability to keep up with the demands made by the same society that they are trying to 'serve'. Years upon years of centralised management, both on a macro and on a micro level, systematically isolated schools from the reality outside their walls. Learning experiences offered in schools have become archaic and alien to the learners' world, and rather than being proactive forces within society, schools tended to become inactive, or at best reactive.

“Attard’s primary school community initiated a bottom-up grassroots’ initiative to improve the school’s role as an educational institution”



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Preparing learners for life has, nowadays, achieved a much wider interpretation that the traditional transmission of 'school-knowledge' cannot satisfy. Although schools have effectively resisted change for quite some time, ever-mounting pressure from the community is forcing them to change. Schools are now expected to be sensitive to interpersonal relationships (within and outside the school) and to become promoters of learning rather than sites for information transfer. Attard's primary school, is one of the schools that have boldly taken up the challenge.

Taking the initiative

Encouraged by the Education Division's decision to decentralise management, Attard's primary school community (head teacher, assistant heads, teachers, parents and children) endeavoured to meet this top-down initiative half way by initiating a concurrent bottom-up grassroots' initiative to improve the school's role as an educational institution. This development strategy, primarily orchestrated by Mr Emmanuel Debono - the school's head teacher, was structured around two major underlying principles: (a) the gradual introduction of innovation - giving the school community time to assimilate and internalise the innovation itself and its implications, and (b) the institutionalisation of the innovation by generating support from within (i.e., the schools' management team and teachers) and from outside (i.e., parents, education authorities and agencies within the community) the school. These principles ensured a chain reaction of initiatives that made good quality education part of the everyday praxis of this school.

Named after the master-craftsman Tumas Dingli, Attard's primary school caters for 560 children (140 of which are in Kindergarten). An ever increasing student population is one of the major concerns that the primary school

of a village with a growing population nearing 10,000 has to respond to every year. This concern has been manifested throughout the years by the building of a new kindergarten block with all the appropriate facilities to promote valid learning experiences in early childhood education and plans to build a multi-functional school hall.

Intimately tied with the need to create a welcoming and functional physical school environment was the strategy to develop a specific school identity that would develop a sense of belonging and ownership in the school community. This strategy was initiated on three fronts: (a) the design and introduction of a new school uniform, (b) the publication of an annual school magazine which celebrates the achievements of the school children, and (c) the drawing up and publicising of a meaningful teaching policy that seeks to provide a holistic educational experience.

Banking on the professional commitment of the school teachers, the school community identified key areas of concern within the curriculum and built up an ongoing strategy that consistently focused on them during each scholastic year.

Development of literacy programmes

One of these key areas was the development of literacy. Students attending Attard primary school are continuously encouraged to read and to discover the benefits of literacy.

Long before literacy became a national The





The need to create a welcoming and functional physical school environment – Attard Primary’s adventure playground

The school’s development strategy has been primarily orchestrated by Mr Emmanuel Debono - the school’s head teacher



school developed a programme by which funds were generated to equip every class with a well stocked library containing reading materials matched to the children’s reading abilities. During the book fair, organised annually in the school grounds, children are also taught how to choose and purchase books that are suited for their development.

However, making books available is just the beginning. Efforts were then channelled on inducing children to read. This has been done by intimately integrating reading with the work done in class. Currently the school is investigating the negative effects too much homework might have on quality reading time at home. Hand in hand with this form of literacy, the school is also committed towards developing IT literacy. Emphasis is made on the full integration of IT within the everyday teaching of those classrooms in which computers have been installed.

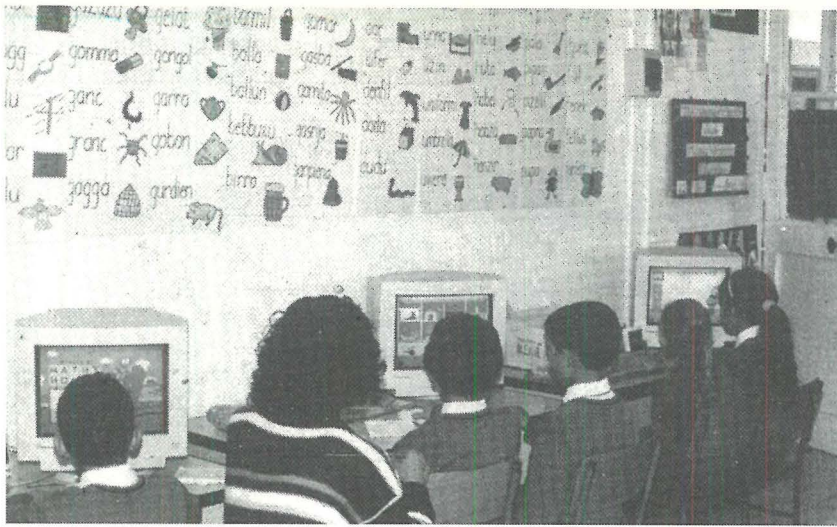
Another ongoing quest is the procurement of state-of-the-art teaching aids and reference materials. Various fund raising activities enabled the school to establish contacts with foreign and local suppliers of school equipment. As a result a large number of teaching resources are now available for the school’s teachers who are willing to make use of them. Currently the problem concerning teaching resources is one of space, since the old Resource Room has become too small to

accommodate and adequately display the available materials.

Assessment and evaluation

Assessment and evaluation is also another area of concern for the school community. Various research results and surveys have consistently shown that the national frenzy on achievement based on examination grades is counter productive to the educational process. Moreover, examination grades are a form of summative assessment that provides little feedback regarding a child’s overall abilities.

Parents are constantly sounded out on school policy. One of the 100’s of data sheets collated from questionnaire research



The Year One classroom environment

**“The school
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Attard primary school responded by initiating an experiment, with the first three years of primary, aimed at providing a formative type of assessment that evaluates the child’s academic progress throughout the year. The results have been quite encouraging and plans are being drawn up to extend the scheme to include all the primary school years and to introduce an evaluation system based on profiling.

The forum during which most of these strategies are planned, discussed and implemented is the school council. Currently chaired by Mr Anthony Tabone, the school council is made up of three parents, three teachers and the head teacher. It is the functional hub of the school and the place where the interests of the various stake holders in the school are distilled. Its major contribution has been the development of a good interface with parents, who are sincerely considered by the school as equal partners in the educational process of children.

Concrete efforts are taken to actively involve parents and children in decision making. To date, besides the gathering of feedback from children, three questionnaires have been sent to parents requesting their opinions regarding school development initiatives and what assistance they can offer to the school. As a result parental involvement in the school has been abundant and varied: ranging from organising school activities to

helping teachers produce teaching materials, or from decorating school corridors to the building of an adventure playground in the school grounds. Although parents are always welcomed to discuss their child’s performance with the class teacher, plans are now being considered to strengthen these parents - class teacher bonds by providing more opportunities for them to meet and by possibly developing some form of teaching support service.

A reaching out exercise

Tumas Dingli primary school is now engaging in a reaching out exercise. Prior to the March 1998 local council elections, the school council sent a memorandum, entitled “*Building Stronger School-Community Links*”, to all the prospective candidates. While explaining the school’s vision about the role it should play within the community, the document also makes practical suggestions of how school - community links could be developed and strengthened.

The school has also twinned with Kercem Primary School. Children from both schools are encouraged to write letters to each other and maintain an information network about daily events in their respective communities. On a wider level and as an initial step towards participation in COMENIUS projects, the school’s head initiated contacts with Armando Diaz primary school in Catania and arranged for an exchange visit during May 1998. The aim of this visit is help school children develop a wider perspective of education and to expose them to a different culture.

Head teachers and teachers sometimes complain that whatever they try to build at school is ‘dismantled’ the minute the child returns home. This surely does not apply to Tumas Dingli primary school. Years of dedication and commitment from the school community have developed an ethos that views a child’s education as spanning the whole time spent in school and at home and consequently the child’s parents as equal partners in this educational enterprise. With such an attitude, the school community feels confident about the future and is not afraid to chart new ground in its quest for providing a meaningful education.

Prior to the March 1998 local council elections, the school council sent a memorandum, entitled “Building Stronger School-Community Links”, to all the prospective candidates. In the photo can be seen an example of a joint initiative between the school and the previous Attard Local Council: the inauguration of the upgrading of the gardens next to the school

