

Well-managed schools

Carlo Diacono Girls' Junior Lyceum, Żejtun

*Maria Ciappara, Head of School,
interviewed by Paul A Attard*

In the series on Well-Managed Schools we feature an interview by Paul A. Attard with Maria Ciappara, a dynamic head of school. Past issues of the journal have featured reports on the Xghajra and Attard Primary Schools.

Between 1970 and 1986, this school was a Girls' Secondary School. It became a Junior Lyceum in 1987, catering mainly for students from the south of the island. The school has a Head of School, four Assistant Heads, ninety-five teachers, 1,250 students and support staff. The school has five blocks, enjoys spacious grounds and gardens and sports facilities



Maria Ciappara B.A. (Hons.), Dip. Admin. & Man. in Educ taught Maltese in Secondary Schools for 8 years, was Asst. Head of Higher Secondary, Msida and Zabbar Primary. Was Head of Maria Teresa Nuzzo Girls School. Is at present Head of Carlo Diacono Girls Junior Lyceum.

Paul A. Attard is Assistant Director of Education, Planning and Research.

PAA: *How long have you been Head of Carlo Diacono Girls' Junior Lyceum, Żejtun?*

MC: Since September 1995.

PAA: *Which do you consider to be the major achievements of your school?*

MC: Major achievements ... good relationships: management team and teachers, students, parents, ancillary staff; a mature school ethos; young enthusiastic staff (average age 39 years); well-disciplined students; very adequate equipment and resources, a healthy educational environment.

PAA: *How did you initiate and develop the School Development Plan?*

MC: I first reported to the Assistant Heads what Heads of School had discussed during the seminars organised about School Development Planning by the Education Division. We shared a number of ideas about how to go about School Development Planning in our school. We met again about fifteen days later and decided on two important points as major targets:

- the development of the school ethos;
- the improvement of English teaching and learning.

I held another meeting with the Subject Co-ordinators when we discussed what we were about to initiate. The next step was a staff meeting where we held a brainstorming session. We held a number of workshops in order to discuss possible strategies. Then followed a one-day seminar to discuss priorities, to set the ball rolling on a larger scale and to decide on possible courses of action. I tried to involve as many members of the staff as possible, firm in the belief that, unless they own the plan, they would not commit themselves fully to any future related action and the whole project would be a futile paper exercise.

PAA: *What is the staff's vision for the school?*

MC: I believe they actually want to contribute to make the school a better place to work and be in, so that teaching and learning would be easier and more fruitful. They are enthusiastic to contribute in every possible way

because, I feel, they believe that the school is theirs and they are proud that they belong to it.

PAA: *How do you formulate the mission statement for the school and for the various sections within it?*

MC: By consulting and discussing with the Assistant Heads and staff what we want our students to achieve during the five years they spend in our school.

PAA: *Could you list major objectives for the coming years?*

MC: We want to give our students a higher self-esteem, fluency in languages, greater participation in sports activities at all levels, and higher academic results. We want to make learning more enjoyable.

I wish my staff find it easier to face challenges and changes. Hence, staff development is very high on our agenda.

I must find more time to spend with my staff, my students and parents ... I must know their expectations. I have to find more time to discuss what is happening at school so that we can continue to work as a compact team.

PAA: *What kind of leadership style do you prefer?*

MC: I prefer to listen to whatever everybody has to say, discuss issues and initiatives with my Assistant Heads and then decide. I do not only do this with my teaching staff but also with my students. They seem to appreciate my approach because they feel they form part of one big team.

PAA: *How far has a collegial approach developed in your school?*

MC: Even though I know that there are a few who tend to be critical, I think the vast majority form the school team ... whenever an





Drama is given great importance in the curriculum

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activity comes up, they come forward to make a contribution and to give their share and support. I am always supporting and ready to introduce new ideas and take initiatives.

PAA: Do your teachers actually feel they have a very important role to play in

school development?

MC: I think they'd rather participate informally than referring to the Development Plan. We do things because we believe in them, rather than because they form part of a formal plan.

PAA: What was the response of your school to the new national curriculum? Have you studied its implications?

MC: I asked for the reactions of every teacher to the new curriculum. I wanted to represent their views whenever I was asked for my opinions. We organised workshops on the different sections. The Subject Co-ordinators were the chairpersons. A frank discussion followed and suggestions were formulated and forwarded to Head Office.

PAA: Which major initiatives have been taken during the last few years to enrich the school's curriculum?

MC: Before we take any new initiatives I discuss things with members of my staff and with Education Officers who visit our school. I hold subject meetings at least once a term to listen to teachers' opinions and to try to implement ideas they suggest. Last year, a University lecturer delivered seminars to our teachers of French before introducing a new textbook. I take initiatives mostly during teaching practice when some teachers can be released from class. I intend to adopt this initiative with other subject teachers.

I wish to hold discussion groups in English between students of different classes, perhaps also with students from other schools. We must work harder on oracy, self-expression and self-confidence in facing an audience. I wish that modern technology, cassettes, computers, television, videos, will be given much more importance than whiteboard and felt pen ... after discarding the blackboard and chalk!

Things that we have already done include new equipment and visual aids to help teachers in their job; an enormous facelift to the school building itself, including the transformation of an area so called 'wilderness' into a sports area

... a dream come true. Here I found the support of the Education Division and Ministry.

PAA: How far are you - management, teachers, students and parents - concerned with the academic achievement of students?

MC: Very concerned... We try to make the school environment as pleasant as possible, we try to encourage extra-curricular activities as much as we can. I work hard to have each and every student participate in extra-curricular activities because I believe so much in them ... BUT ... not to the detriment of academic achievements ... in today's world they are so very important. A student in our school cannot afford to be excellent in drama and then obtain just two subjects at MATSEC level ... In my opinion, as administrator, we would have failed with this student.

PAA: Do students themselves participate actively in school life and development?

MC: You always find a small number of students who need some encouragement but during the mid-day break I feel elated to see that each and every corner of the school hall is crowded with students ... dancing, playing some instrument, practising gymnastics, participating in Scoops, rehearsing drama parts, learning their Carnival dance, playing darts and a host of other activities. Others, in the recently refurbished sports areas, play volleyball, basketball, and other physical activities. Of course, none of this could happen without the full support and participation of the dedicated teachers.

PAA: What is the role of the School Council in the administration of the school?

MC: The School Council advises, consults, shares, is informed and supports all that is going on in the school.

PAA: Have parents themselves an important part to play in the life of the school?

MC: Yes, very important. We give them a lot of importance ... because they are our customers also ... they have to support from home what we do with the students at school. If I get a parent phoning on anything, I *never* leave school without having first contacted him/her to see what the problem is. This helps me know my students better and my relationship with the parents grows stronger.

Whenever parents attend some activity, I leave all my work and spend the whole morning with them ... With the help of the Guidance team we prepare tea or coffee for them and it is over a cup of coffee that we share their complaints, their worries, ... they appreciate immensely the time we spend with them.

PAA: How do you communicate with parents?

MC: Usually through circulars, over the

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phone, during activities we organise specifically for them, and during meetings we hold for them.

PAA: Which are the more important functions you organise during the year?

MC: In September we invite Form V students of the previous school year to come to school to speak about their experiences during their years at school. This serves both as a reunion and an encouragement to the new Form V students who are invited to listen! We organise a special parents' day for Form V students. The Christmas Concert and, especially, the Christmas Pantomime are really big occasions for us. The Evacuation Drill and Fire Hazard Day have established themselves in our school calendar. We have an Open Day, Sports Day (we give a lot of importance to sports in our school). Spiritual exercises are well organised. We also hold the Form V Farewell Play and Farewell Party. Prize Day is to some extent a show window for us. We hold Mothers' Day and even Grandmas' Day. Perhaps we'll organise something special for fathers in the near future.

PAA: Does pastoral care feature prominently on your agenda?

MC: Yes, very much, even though I wish to have much more help in the office (I need an efficient and bigger clerical team who can deal with a host of chores, who can act as School Secretaries), so that I will be more in the classrooms, in the staff rooms, and nearer to the staff and the students. They actually want *the Head of School* around, but sometimes very unwillingly I have to refer them to other members of the staff. Nevertheless, when I get certain notes in my suggestion boxes (found around the school) saying they want to speak to *me*, I treat them as very urgent, I leave everything behind and give all my time to the particular member of the staff / students / parents.

PAA: Do you feel there are any threats to real education in your school?

MC: The staff need support ... I have to

give it to them ... but other things in the office sometimes keep me back. They want me around but sometimes I am somewhere else and it takes me longer, then to explain and show them that I appreciate what they do. I support them all the time but sometimes I feel that I do not have enough energy to dedicate to them because ... *I myself* also need support ... I treat everybody as an individual and not a number ... but I feel treated as a number myself! I feel I still have a lot to give, I feel full of enthusiasm, I feel as if each day is the first day of work, funnily enough. However, there are times when *I myself* feel discouraged, helpless, ignored by people higher up, or from people who are not in my boots. What I feel I transcend ... the same for the teachers ... once we build a healthy atmosphere, everybody will be happy, eager to work, communicating in the right way ... ready to face problems, sympathise with our students ... Once we are treated as a number, we start doing the same to others and lose the human element that is so important in life. Parents often feel the same when their children go back home ... it's a vicious circle ... so once we are enthusiastic and supported, we work, the students are happier, they learn more and so threats disappear!

PAA: Could you tell me something about your school's projects for the physical and educational environment of your school?

MC: We are doing whatever I can to have a clean, well-equipped school so that the teaching staff and students feel healthier in such an environment. We are trying to furnish every block with a video, small library, study room, a computer, so that every minute will be used by the students to learn more. We want to make learning enjoyable... students need to look forward to coming to school, they have to work as a team, they have to appreciate the fact that this environment is not found in all places of work, so they have to work hard to keep it the way it is, at all times. We wish that in our school we have all modern visual aids, and equipment to make us compete with other students, in Malta and abroad, and help us to face the next millennium

PAA: Carlo Diacono Girls' Junior Lyceum has been successful. To what do you ascribe the school's success over the years?

MC: Good Heads of School (modesty apart!). Discipline, good communication and understanding, teamwork rather than giving orders, a give-and-take attitude, parents' strong support, qualified staff, resources, mutual support, extra curricular activities, financial support from the Education Division, good management, dedicated staff, a sense of belonging, being considered as an individual and not a number ...

PAA: I wish you, your staff, students and parents, greater success in the future.

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Sports activities form part of the daily curriculum of the school

