



Navigating Reform: Nurturing Professional Learning Communities in Malta

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to contextualise the notion of leadership for learning within the Maltese educational landscape, while highlighting the systemic challenges the country faces in enhancing professional learning among educators. It is argued that successful reform needs to start with looking at the notion of collaboration and so at the system and school level. Two main shifts are proposed. Firstly, a partnership between schools as networks and central leadership is proposed, one that is based on new forms of governance. A second shift is that of enhancing the professional capital of teachers and leaders. In this way, teachers' professionalism and professional identity are redefined. This paper explores how leadership and governance shape our perception of educational reform and the cultivation of professional learning in Maltese schools. It argues that meaningful change relies fundamentally on nurturing trust as a guiding principle across both systemic and institutional levels. Ultimately, without a genuine shift in mindset, reform efforts will fail to achieve a lasting impact where it matters most, student learning.

Keywords: school leaders, leadership, professional learning communities, agency, networked learning, governance

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to bring together a synthesis of various research studies carried out over the years in the area of educational reform in Malta, together with a review of the literature on leadership, governance, professional learning communities, and networked learning. The objective is to bring to light a number of pressing challenges within the Maltese educational landscape that have, to date, been overlooked by governing authorities. It is argued that if we engage with the notion of teacher agency (Farrugia, 2021) and human, social and decisional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) we can see new forms of learning amongst educators flourish that go beyond the single schools to embrace networked learning among school communities. This will lead to new forms of autonomy and accountability.

The paper is divided into five main areas. First, the context facing educational reform in Malta is presented to help us better understand the Maltese scenario. Then I move to present the challenges educators in Malta are

facing. After this, I present my understanding of the term leadership, which, in my opinion, determines our thoughts and actions. This leads to the fourth section that delves into the area of Transformational Leadership. This is first explored through the development of Professional Learning Communities, which can help to cultivate the human capacity needed to address the complexity facing educators today. This is then linked to the notion of Networked Learning Communities, which can bring with it a new form of autonomy and accountability. The intention is to look at new forms of engagement for the inspectorate as we engage with evaluation practices. The final section presents a number of proposals that build on the issues presented.

APPROACH

As noted in the Introduction, this paper aims to present a conceptual synthesis of Maltese policy literature and the international leadership literature to support the position that new forms of governance are needed to take our schools forward. The key theories underpinning the proposals are transformational leadership and Self-Determination Theory. Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1992) provides the central analytical framework for understanding development as a dynamic process shaped by interactions between individuals and others within their environment.

Schools in Malta have been used to working within a system which is hierarchical, centralised and bureaucratic (Bezzina, 2006; Polidano, 2002). Local research indicates a growing sense of disillusionment and stress among Maltese educators (Caruana & Borg, 2020; Mizzi, 2018). School leaders and teachers frequently find themselves caught between an ideological commitment to democratic participation and a daily reality stripped of the structures necessary for authentic decision-making. Consequently, Maltese schools have historically been afforded limited opportunities to evolve into dynamic places of learning, characterized by professional inquiry and reflective practice (Farrugia, 2021). Experience and research studies have shown us that moving from the shackles of dependency to one of autonomy is a daunting endeavour. Any attempt to drive such shifts requires a deep understanding of the established culture and climate that have shaped current practices and continue to govern how educators think and act (Fullan, 2003a). Indeed, traditional school structures often seem inherently antithetical to fostering environments centered on inquiry and continuous change. Any effort to enhance school effectiveness hinges on a deep understanding of organizational dynamics. This requires examining the complex interactions and distinct influences of teachers, students, education officials, parents, and community members, alongside the role of the curriculum and the systemic ways in which these variables intersect.

The history of local educational reform is replete with state-mandated directives that foster a culture of dependency and dictate a highly technicist approach to practice. This compliance-driven environment actively militates against visionary, inspirational, and strategic leadership (Bezzina, 2000, 2019; Farrugia, 2021). Research underscores that achieving genuine transformation requires a comprehensive reappraisal of how policies are formulated and implemented, how existing governance structures operate, how evaluation and review are perceived, and how school leaders are expected to function.

This requires a critical review of existing governance frameworks and their alignment with the core value of trust. From this foundation, it is essential to reframe the definition of leadership, examining how systemic shifts influence practice at the school level to ultimately foster both the cognitive and affective achievement of students.

Trust and Governance

The prevailing governance model has traditionally separated policymakers from the practitioners expected to implement their directives, despite varying levels of stakeholder engagement during the drafting process over recent decades. Although the 2006 Amendment to the Education Act was intended to enable schools - via the

College network system - to determine their own agendas with targeted support from central Directorates, this vision has largely failed to materialize. On the contrary, an increasing centralization of authority has occurred, precipitating a wave of professional disempowerment, disillusionment, and skepticism within the system (Bezzina, 2019; Cutajar et al., 2013; Mifsud, 2014).

Addressing these systemic issues requires a fundamental restructuring of governance through empowerment at all levels. Long-term sustainability hinges on a restructured framework predicated on robust checks and balances, where constituent parts embody transparency, honesty, and integrity as core organizational norms. In an era marked by crisis, uncertainty, and insecurity, trust becomes an essential catalyst for change. Breaking the prevailing cycle of distrust necessitates a deliberate commitment to respecting stakeholders proactively, thereby laying the groundwork to cultivate mutual trust and professional competence over time. For example, in both Finland and Singapore, teaching is a highly respected profession. However, achieving such a status required decades of hard work, a series of strategic policies passed by the respective governments to improve public education (Liu, 2023; Välimaa, 2021).

Developing the teaching profession is a critical strategy for comprehensive educational reform, particularly within a context characterized by low teacher self-efficacy and declining recruitment among young adults (Aquilina, 2023; Pulis, 2024). At the same time, school leaders and teachers navigate an increasingly volatile professional landscape. Accountability demands are rising exponentially, often penalizing educators for factors outside their jurisdiction, while an aggressive testing culture chips away at the core rewards of teaching. Ultimately, institutional support structures remain underdeveloped, leaving teachers without the necessary assistance to thrive in their classrooms.

Historically, the prevailing governance model has been characterized by transactional leadership. We need to move towards a leadership which is broader, more inclusive. The proposal is to move from transactional to transformational leadership/ governance (Bezzina, 2019).

We need a new language, new thinking, a new level of consciousness in the way we view the governance and leadership process. Over the years, various local studies (Cutajar, 2015; Mifsud, 2014, 2020) put forward concrete proposals of how to move away from the shackles of dependency that our system supports and nourishes, and from the rhetoric of shared governance. We need to ensure that we move to the principles of shared governance one that helps the evolution of governance that has specific principles being established, namely a climate of trust, meaningful participation, collective decision making, valuing and nurturing alternative perspectives, and redefining roles.

THE CHALLENGE

While education faces constant pressure to reinvent itself for a rapidly changing world, it often remains a conservative discipline. As a result, the profession can be hesitant to embrace shifting, sometimes conflicting, reform initiatives. As Scott (2024) argues *“most of our schools still reflect the structure and organisational approach of factories from the Industrial Revolution... We operate in 20th century schools, talking about 21st century outcomes as we hurtle towards the 22nd century”* (p.4).

International literature consistently demonstrates that contemporary leadership demands are multifarious, fragmented, relentless, and arguably chaotic (Day et al., 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020). Harris and Jones (2017) speak of “unprecedented and unpredictable challenges” (p.1). The World Economic Forum’s Global Risks Report (2024) points out the instability and hostility we are experiencing. It names risks including lethal geopolitical conflicts, displaced populations, societal discontent, misinformation and disinformation, rapidly accelerating technological change, cyber insecurity, record-breaking extreme weather events, cost of living pressures, and ongoing economic uncertainty.

In an age of such complexity, top-down strategies are inappropriate and so because they ignore the importance of the human variable, seeing teachers and leaders as merely sponges that absorb whatever comes their way. These approaches fail. As Munby and Fullan (2016) have argued, “*External accountability fails to motivate people; individualistic policies (standards and other methods to increase the quality of individuals) do not affect cultures; technology skims the surface; and ad hoc policies undercut coherence and focus*” (p. 3).

We need leaders who take time to reflect on the challenges they are facing and challenge existing leadership practices. This is no easy undertaking and this is reflected in the concerns facing many countries in attracting teachers and those willing to take on leadership positions (European Commission [EC], 2013a, 2013b; OECD, 2019, 2005). Now is the time to focus on high-impact strategies—approaches that, while not entirely new, prioritize investing directly in people, their growth, and their well-being. Ultimately, such human-centered development is best realized by cultivating professional learning communities and broader networked learning environments. This implies that learning is job-embedded and leads to varied collaborative and collegial approaches to learning.

The proposal is to take this further. A key developmental strategy involves forging strong partnerships with the inspectorate, positioning inspectors to play a critical role in supporting schools as they engage in networked learning. In this framework, inspectors serve as catalysts for network formation, enabling educators to collaborate on issues of mutual interest both within individual institutions and across broader networks. Ultimately, establishing these external links with bodies like the inspectorate transforms external accountability into an integral component of the professional learning experience.

This reinforces the concept of integrative leadership, which emphasizes cross-boundary collaboration to break down operational silos (Crosby & Bryson, 2010; Louis, 2015; Moos & Huber, 2007). Inspectors can serve as integrative leaders as they are in the ideal position to link elements within the school or between the school and other schools, education authorities, and community agencies, helping to bring people together to address issues of mutual interest. The intent is to bring participants who are focused on the same purpose and who see the benefits behind working with and for each other. This is often described as co-constructing leadership (Sisson et al., 2024). Inspectors are ideally placed to engage educators from different schools in such professional development initiatives.

DEFINING LEADERSHIP

I feel that in order to engage with issues of governance and how, therefore, the different stakeholders engage with each other, we need to look at our personal and collective definition of leadership. If you look up “*leadership*” in the dictionary, you will see references to ‘leader’ and ‘leading’ but no real description of the idea itself. Back in 1985, Bennis and Nanus (2003), in their book *Leaders*, asserted there are more than 850 definitions of the term floating around. Today, an AI or general web search one can technically cite hundreds of thousands of definitions for leadership. Yet, it seems that leadership is difficult to define in a single way. Leadership scholars, often note the lack of an agreed-upon definition of leadership. Leadership is recognised as a multifaceted construct which spans a variety of skills, behaviours and influences. It is argued that while there is no single definition, it is evident that effective leaders possess the ability to inspire, motivate, and guide others to shared goals (Bush, 2020; Percival, 2026). McCauley (2026) takes it a step further, arguing that whilst skills and behaviours are important, the true meaning of leadership is about what people do together.

At the same time, we can appreciate some working definitions that can help us to focus on the area and our own engagement with the term. The way we define leadership reflects our values, our beliefs and determines not just what we say but what we do. Schein and Schein (2018, p. 2) simply define leadership as “*wanting to do something new and better, and getting others to go along*”. The terms ‘new’ and ‘better’ underscore a fundamental truth about leadership: it involves both refining tasks to drive improvement and respecting the

collective values and culture that ultimately define what success looks like. Linked to this is the definition proposed by Gini and Green (2013):

Leadership, of every kind and at every level, is about offering others an ‘action guide,’ a plan, a challenge, a goal, a purpose that they are willing to embrace and carry on. Leadership is about motivating and mobilizing people to get ‘something’ done, be that extraordinary or otherwise. Leadership is a catalyst for action.

..... Leadership is also about the personality and character – the ethical substance – of a particular leader. (2013, p. 5)

The strength of Gini and Green’s leadership model lies in its integration of motivation, employee empowerment, and shared organizational purpose, underscored by an urgent call for ethical governance. As supported by extensive literature, leadership is fundamentally a value-based, power-laden, and ethically driven relationship between leaders and followers (Fullan, 2003a; Sergiovanni, 1992; Starratt, 2004). Within this framework, change is realized not through compliance, but through a collective vision aimed at fulfilling mutual objectives.

This perspective closely aligns with the moral imperative articulated by Michael Fullan (2003b), which underscores a profound personal commitment to educational practice. Consequently, understanding this dynamic requires an exploration of the core attributes of identity, passion, and meaning. Ultimately, leadership must be conceptualized not merely as a managerial role, but as a vehicle for personal, professional, and collective transformation. Leadership can be the binding force that brings people together to achieve specific goals.

This is where the link between leadership and school self-evaluation can be established. John MacBeath (1999) in his book entitled *Schools Must Speak for Themselves*, presents his views about the learning school:

Schools speak for themselves. They sometimes do so unconsciously, conveying implicit messages about their priorities and values. Some schools are able to speak for themselves with a high degree of self-awareness and self-assurance. They know their strengths and are secure enough to acknowledge their weaknesses. ... There is an emerging consensus and body of wisdom about what a healthy system of school evaluation looks like. Its primary goal is to help schools to maintain and improve through critical self-reflection. It is concerned to equip teachers with the know-how to evaluate the quality of learning in the classrooms so that they do not have to rely on an external view, yet welcome such a perspective because it can enhance and strengthen good practice. (MacBeath, 1999, p.1)

Such a perspective highlights the importance behind a reflective school made up of individuals who engage in reflective practices personally and collectively. This is challenging to execute as schools, and the people inside them, work within set patterns and boundaries, and the latitude to operate is highly constrained by contextual variables. As Netolicky and Duignan (2024) point out “*many of the structures and processes, as well as the time limitations on learning in our schools, continue to inhibit open inquiry, critique, and the making of personal meaning so necessary for challenging traditionally accepted assumptions and taken-for-granted behaviours and practices*” (p.10).

Overall, school systems need to review existing models of governance and restructure them by moving towards a leadership which is broader and more inclusive, one that ensures that people are motivated and empowered. A number of local studies have consistently shown the desire to move from transactional to transformational leadership (Bezzina, 2006; Debono, 2018; Farrugia, 2021).

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

This model of leadership is traditionally characterized by its capacity to set direction, restructure organizations, cultivate personnel, and foster meaningful connections with the external community (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Ultimately, the effectiveness of transformational leadership resides in its relational emphasis, where building trust and collaboration among stakeholders serves as the primary mechanism for change (Robinson et al., 2009). Transformational leaders “*motivate followers by raising their consciousness about the importance of organizational goals and by inspiring them to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the organization*” (Marks & Printy, 2003, p. 375). The focus is on building relationships and people, and developing the organisations to support desired practices (Leithwood et al., 2020). This is the move that will help educators engage with their own culture and lead to the reorganisation of existing school structures.

Three initiatives are presented in this paper which I believe can make a difference to the way reform is undertaken. Central to these initiatives is motivation, empowerment, and building collective responsibility at the school level. The first initiative focuses on nurturing schools as professional learning communities. The second develops further the notion of learning with a focus on developing school networks or networked learning communities (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016; Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001). The third proposal explores the area of evaluation as an opportunity to help schools engage in a more direct manner with school development practices within and across schools (Gatt, 2025; Ólafsdóttir et al., 2022).

These three proposals will require a lot of hard work, commitment and drive at all levels. It calls for a new mindset, one that is consciously focused on viewing and introducing educational reform in a different manner. Linear approaches as against hierarchical ones to leading and managing need to be considered. This implies nurturing collective responsibility and accountability. Such a perspective is based on social relationships, on developing professional capital (Abele, 2011; Farrugia, 2021; Sisson et al., 2024). This move also sees a shift in the way decentralised management reforms are addressed and builds on the lessons learnt through the College network system. Rather than looking at individual schools and how they address school improvement, the focus is on clusters/ networks coming together. In this way there is a greater opportunity for enhanced school capacity (Bezzina, 2020; Wohlstetter et al., 2023).

THE WAY FORWARD

Building upon the preceding arguments, this section outlines three strategic proposals designed to nurture sustainable leadership both within individual institutions and across broader school networks. This approach hinges on devolving authority, granting schools the autonomy needed to direct, execute, and sustain their own development initiatives (McMahon, 2017). Such an approach will help educators focus on building longer-term capacity within the school, one that nurtures deep learning. This helps to counter a shallow approach to doing things, what Davies describes as short-termism (Davies, 2007, p.4).

Because sustainable leadership matters, spreads, and lasts, it must operate as a collective endeavour. It demands an activist engagement with the systemic forces affecting education, thereby constructing an environment that actively champions mutual responsibility, accountability, and collaborative professionalism. Behind all this is the creation of a culture of leadership, a corporate culture that permeates all levels, where educators value strong leadership and strive to create it. The leadership required calls for more challenging educational goals and flexible change strategies that schools, individually or through networks, design and take forward. This will take us back to MacBeath’s argument that schools can tell their own story. Hence the self-reflective school has an inner purpose that is supported externally so that schools can learn to know themselves better.

The ‘story’ is powerful because it is crucial to recognise that schools have a history, a unique cast of characters and a narrative that unfolds over time in unanticipated directions. That is how evaluation works – a continuing and continually revealing process. This is where school improvement takes root. (MacBeath, 1999, p.2)

The three proposals being presented in this paper need to be embraced within a context of greater College/school autonomy, which sees a drive for more shared governance amongst the different stakeholders. Addressing these needs demands that central authorities guarantee greater involvement in policy formulation and systemic reform. Furthermore, it underscores the pivotal role of both internal and external review mechanisms, demonstrating how a highly engaged, reflective environment can be deliberately cultivated and sustained over time. The three proposals focus on job-embedded learning within schools and networked learning across schools, and school self-evaluation.

Teacher-Driven Continuing Professional Development and Learning

Educational reforms in Malta have tended to ignore the importance behind the human dimension (e.g., Debono, 2018; Farrugia, 2021), the importance behind creating a culture that nurtures the social and professional capital of educators (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Various studies have highlighted the need for a more proactive and systematic approach to leading our schools. This can be achieved through the nurturing of professional learning communities (PLCs) (e.g., Bezzina & Paletta, 2020; Brazer et al., 2019; Eaker & Marzano, 2020; Wenger et al., 2002).

A PLC operates as a continuous process wherein educators collaborate through iterative cycles of collective inquiry and action research, explicitly aiming to optimize outcomes for their students. PLCs, as DuFour et al. argue, “operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators” (2017, p. 10). A hallmark of teacher-driven CPD is its capacity to empower educators by capitalizing on their existing expertise while facilitating collaborative inquiry with peers (Grimm, 2024; Prenger et al., 2018; Sammons et al., 2007). This peer-supported learning paradigm extends within and across institutions, offering a scalable and robust structure for continuous improvement. As depicted in **Figure 1**, this synergy illustrates the intersection where practice, research, and policy merge to restructure teacher

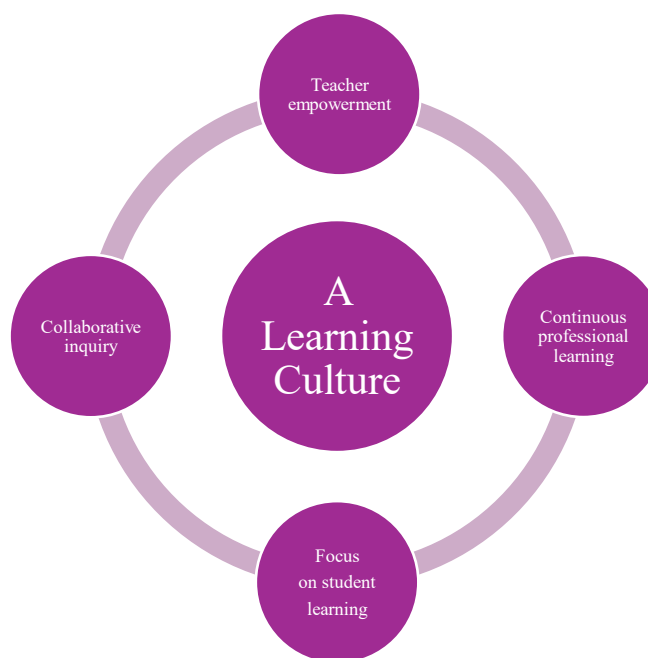


Figure 1. A Learning Culture (Source: The Author)

and student learning experiences. This dynamic is sustained by bringing together a diverse spectrum of educators—spanning classroom teachers, administrative leaders, and university faculty—to co-construct knowledge through professional dialogue.

This aligns with evidence from international assessments like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which demonstrate that top-performing nations consistently prioritize developing teacher expertise—both before educators enter the classroom and throughout their careers. This understanding of professional learning highlights the need for greater school autonomy and a focus on networked learning. Contexts like ours in Malta that are built round networks can be encouraged and supported to develop the relational and structural practices needed (Blankstein, 2004; Foord, 2004; Hord, 2004).

Transforming a school and more so a College network can pose significant challenges for educators. Establishing a vibrant learning community depends on both structural and relational supports—specifically, dedicated collaboration time, access to relevant information, sustained leadership backing, and rich networks of internal peers and external experts (DuFour et al., 2017; Vescio et al., 2008). The intent is to develop *leadership circles and spaces*, as people focus on interconnectedness and synergy. As Matthew Syed put it:

“Give people autonomy to create their own spaces, and they come up with something better than almost anything else you can give them.” (2019, p. 236)

Networked Learning

The second proposal sees learning being addressed at another level – learning across schools. Over the past three decades, networks have increasingly gained the attention of the education sector – researchers and practitioners alike – for their promise as “*vehicles for innovation and improvement in educational systems*” (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016, p.6). Networks allow educators to collaborate within and across schools.

The model of the isolated, standalone school must give way to a network of schools and community organizations operating through structured partnerships, clusters, and collaboratives (Chapman & Mujis, 2014; Elmore, 2007; Hannon, 2005). Learning networks aim to foster collaboration, support learning at all levels, promote practitioner enquiry, engage with theory and research, co-construct knowledge, and advance approaches to continuing professional development (Cordingley & Temperley, 2006). The OECD (2000) highlights that such initiatives actively support capacity building in schools and drive the restructuring and reculturing of educational organizational systems. As a result, new forms of leadership are developed (Frost, 2012; Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015).

School Self-Evaluation

The step beyond the PLC sees educators across a number of schools coming together to address issues of mutual interest. Learning is thus addressed at a deeper level. If the seeds of collaboration have been sown, then this may be another step for further engagement. This can lead to discussions about self-evaluation that cuts across schools, given a focus on collaborative endeavour (Katz & Earl, 2010).

School inspectors operating at the district or central level can play a pivotal role across two distinct dimensions. First, they can directly support internal school learning networks, thereby building the capacity of educators to sustain continuous professional development and institutional improvement. Second, their systemic positioning facilitates broader, system-wide approaches that can expand existing school networks to incorporate new links with other institutions. When educational reforms are approached through this dual framework, they can successfully cultivate what Hargreaves (2012) terms “disciplined innovation” within individual schools while simultaneously spreading these innovations laterally across the wider system.

Here, one will also need to explore how internal and external forms of evaluation come together to support school improvement. This drive to see internal and external evaluation as complementary processes can be an exciting opportunity for the Maltese authorities. This is an area that needs to be researched within the local context.

Studies (e.g. Gustafsson et al., 2015) have shown how inspectors can serve as catalysts for “*sustainable school improvement*” (O’Doherty et al., 2025, p.1) when high levels of trust exist between inspectors and the school community and that they build on the school’s self-evaluation (Gardezi et al., 2023; Paletta et al., 2019). This is the alignment proposed in this paper. It reinforces the findings that low-stakes models of inspection “*seem to promote the schools’ capacity for self-assessment*” (Choi, 2019, p. 11). At the same time, one has to acknowledge that other models have a role to play. It is not one model or the other. Actually, a healthy relationship between internal and external evaluation can benefit both mechanisms and that both should work towards focusing on effectively guiding schools towards the promotion of school improvement (EC, 2018), as has been the case promoted in Ireland (Department for Education and Youth, 2019) and Scotland (His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education in Scotland, 2025).

The model proposed here is based on local research that shows that schools in Malta still regard external reviews as an imposition, something that has to be done (Cutajar, 2015). It reflects the socio-political and educational context we are used to. This approach calls for a paradigm shift away from the passive, compliant role characteristic of centralized systems toward an active role where teachers gain professional autonomy, serving as the main protagonists of their own individual, collective, and continuous professional development (Gatt, 2025). Of course, much more research is required to support this approach/strategy.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has argued that current educational reform practices in Malta have ignored local and international studies that show that adopting a centralised, top-down approach to reforms has not worked. Studies conducted over the years have invariably shown that focusing on the human dimension, on motivating and empowering leaders and educators at the school level to take on a more engaged role, can lead to fostering a learning culture being institutionalised (e.g. Day et al., 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020).

The recommended framework is built upon the principles of trust, belief, collegiality, collaboration, and mutual responsibility - values essential for empowering educators, instilling confidence, and creating meaning within demanding school contexts. This strategy demonstrates a resolute commitment to working alongside practitioners. By uniting stakeholders from diverse institutional backgrounds and roles into multidisciplinary teams, this collaborative model directly addresses the complex demands educators face in delivering a high-quality education for all. It helps to align purpose across levels and creates meaning where it matters. The involvement of inspectors portrayed here may provide an interesting opportunity for learning and sharing of good practices.

It places leadership as the fulcrum for development as we strive to address the growing and complex needs facing educators. The main development that this paper calls for is a leadership that is co-constructed (Sisson et al., 2024), giving prominence to transformational leadership that is focused on the sharing of power, in creating agency across different levels of education. Transformational leadership, as discussed in this paper, holds potential for deep and meaningful change at the personal, professional, and organisational levels. The approach to co-construct leadership offers a challenge but also provides an opportunity for a leadership that is developed organically and shared within the learning community.

Roberts and Pruitt (2009) argue that:

it takes at least as much thought and effort to sustain a professional learning community as it does to create it. If we want to have a long-lasting, positive impact on student achievement, then we must think about maintenance even as we plan school reform. There must be ongoing, daily attention to the elements that support the learning community: a focus on student outcomes, collaborative learning, shared leadership, and commitment to a common vision. The importance of establishing processes to sustain learning opportunities for members of the school community cannot be overemphasized. (p. 230)

Ultimately, the beneficiaries of these collaborative endeavours will be the students. As Vescio et al. (2008) have pointed out, the key features of collaboration for learning is ultimately to enhance student learning. This can be achieved as educators learn to critically interrogate their practice and use evidence of student learning to explore new ideas and improve teaching. Coming together, in the ways proposed in this paper, implies that we all have a stake in student learning.

LIMITATIONS

Whilst the research carried out in Malta shows a deep-seated desire for more collaborative approaches to address school improvement we need to appreciate the challenges and pitfalls that need to be tackled. The main pitfall is that there are insufficient structural conditions within our schools that promote time for collaboration. Current systems that mandate collaboration can become symbolic and superficial, rather than developmental. If time is added without redesigning how it is used, collaboration may increase workload but not learning.

The Maltese education system is one governed by collective agreements between teacher trade unions and government. Often, the focus is on conditions of work, salary and other benefits with limited focus on professional learning of educators. Often, the latter does not delve into the cultural and structural aspects needed for learning to take place amongst educators. Whilst formal structures may give rise to contrived collegiality (Hargreaves, 1995) this can also function as an initial step towards developing more authentic collaborative relationships (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). The move from contrived or forced collegiality to authentic forms of collaboration requires a genuine commitment to foster mutual flourishing based on the strong belief in people and that deep down the majority of educators wish to contribute towards a shared sense of purpose (Datnow, 2011).

Experience has also shown us that structures will not sustain themselves. There is often a gap between organisation and enactment, leading to what Fullan (2016) describes as a 'compliance culture' rather than a learning culture. Unless leaders are directly involved in the work being carried out, monitoring and supporting development, it will lead to an erosion of purpose. Local studies have shown that when school leaders respond to the hierarchical models of educational change and take a more active and direct role in setting clear directions and expectations, things can happen (Camilleri et al., 2024).

Another potential pitfall is that overcoming the silo mentality that permeates our system will take time, hard work, and perseverance. Collaboration and collaborative inquiry mean a move towards the deprivatisation of practice, one that encourages teachers to share ideas, share good practices, and learn from and with each other.

Whilst acknowledging the challenges/pitfalls that face the Maltese education system, it presents the education authorities with an opportunity to look at governance and school improvement through more collegial and collaborative ventures that may lead to significant changes in our educational reform landscape.

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