

## Chapter 4: Effective International and Multicultural Practices in Schools and Society

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# Expanding Borders – A Study on Cultural Intelligence and Leadership Styles in a Maltese Primary School

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## **Abstract**

This short study entitled 'Expanding Borders' seeks to find the key to effectively create educational communities in the ever-growing multicultural settings which we, as educational leaders, are facing. It explores the main research question chosen: is Cultural Intelligence affecting the leadership styles in a Maltese primary school? Other questions which link to the main research question emerged: does having a variety of different cultures in a school affect the leadership styles of the School Leader? How does this happen? Do leaders shape culture, or are they shaped by it? How should leadership styles be adapted in the education sector? The research being carried out in this small-scale project is based on theoretical research. It is aimed at giving a picture of how a leader needs to use Cultural Intelligence in a multicultural school setting. Both quantitative and qualitative methods of inquiry have been used in this project. These include online surveys, unstructured questionnaires and interviews. This small-scale project showed that Cultural Intelligence should have a very important role in the leadership styles used in a multicultural setting. It is evident that there is a positive relationship between having Cultural Intelligence, knowing how to use it, and leadership styles which need to be adopted to enhance all this and reap the benefits. This study recommends that empowering and transformative leadership styles should be adopted to create a positive impact on learning and outcomes, and furthermore to sustain a positive and powerful learning community in our schools. This is particularly crucial as worldwide changes persist and different cultures continue to intertwine.

## **Keywords:**

multiculturalism, multicultural school, cultural intelligence, leadership styles, empowerment, transformative leadership, positive learning community

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### Introduction

*People fail to get along with each other because they fear each other. They fear each other because they don't know each other. They don't know each other because they have not properly communicated with each other.' (Martin Luther King 1958: 401)*

Educational Leadership is certainly a role which can have a positive impact on learning and outcomes, by creating a positive and powerful learning community. This is particularly crucial when nationwide changes start developing and different cultures start to intertwine. One would need to adapt leadership styles accordingly. If all leaders had to follow Martin Luther King's quote above and not fear each other but rather find means to properly communicate with each other, we would all feel we are truly part of this positive and powerful learning community. However, this also depends on the personality traits of the Educational Leader. To be an exceptional and effective leader, especially with regards to one's relationship with those you are leading, one must have a positive attitude, be honest, respectful and have a sense of empathy towards all stakeholders involved. Above all, the leader should be a good communicator. Without a doubt, being an effective communicator is a top attribute of being a strategic leader. These are all internal factors which determine how effective one's leadership style will be. Effective leadership is also determined by external factors, one of which is Culture. This is something which in our local context is developing rapidly. We are experiencing an increase of various culture shifts in our communities. This means we need more culturally intelligent leaders who will be able to adapt their leadership styles to the cultural changes we are facing.

### 1. The Research Question

Anthony Solomon and Renier Steyn (2017) argue that leaders need to adopt 'culturally attractive' leadership styles according to the cultures within the leadership context. Cultural Intelligence should assist leaders in adopting these leadership styles. In light of this, this short study will try to explore this main research question: is cultural intelligence affecting the

leadership styles in a Maltese primary school? This will involve issues such as: does having a variety of different cultures in a school affect the leadership styles of the School Leader? How does this happen? Do leaders shape culture, or are they shaped by it? How should leadership styles be adapted in the education sector? Does leading with Cultural Intelligence leave a positive effect in a school with students from different cultures? It is quite difficult to provide definitive answers to these questions from this small-scale project; however, the conclusion might provide enlightenment on the subject and suggest a discussion on the present situation in our local context.

## Literature Review

'Leadership today is a multicultural challenge.' (Livermore 2015). We are currently experiencing a change in the Maltese Educational Student Population. As a result, students from different cultures are enrolling in our schools. This is affecting some schools more than others. Adapting to this change is of crucial importance. One might argue if adapting to cultural change in an educational setting comes naturally to a leader or if it involves acquiring skills to be able to adapt to it. Every leader has a preferred leadership style. However, a leader is required to transform, recreate and maintain, in other words to manage a culture (Şişman 1994; Yıldırım 2001).

### 1. What is culture?

Göksoy (2017) determines culture as a sum of tangible and intangible values of a society which are passed on from one generation to another. Culture is the ideas, customs and social behaviour of a group of people or a society. Many find interest in getting to know more about different cultures and find it intriguing and beautiful that so many different cultures exist in this world of ours. However, problems and conflicts may surface when these cultures become intertwined or rather when they come together. This may cause a sense of frustration as one learns to live in a community in which there are a variety of cultures. Raymond Williams' assertion that culture is 'a whole way of life' formed the basis of his 1958 work *Culture and Society*. This is a reality which many communities in Malta are

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facing, maybe in some communities more than others. One of the places where this situation will be most present is in the school of a community in which people from different cultures are living. Raymond Williams (1958) recognises cultural worth of all human activity as socially equalising. This is very difficult to reach and it all depends on the leadership styles used and how accepting a community is.

### 2. What is Cultural Intelligence?

Cultural Intelligence is described as

*'being skilled and flexible about understanding a culture, learning more about it from your on-going interactions with it, and gradually reshaping your thinking to be more sympathetic to the culture and your behaviors to be more skilled and appropriate when interacting with others from the culture.'* (Thomas and Inkson 2003: 14)

For example, not everyone likes changing the restaurant they usually visit or the item on the menu they usually order. Many of us prefer to stick to what we know. Mai Moua (2012) describes Cultural Intelligence as one's ability to successfully adapt to unfamiliar cultural settings. Therefore, one's level of Cultural Intelligence is based upon how capable one is to reset or tune oneself to adapt to new situations involving changes in culture.

Mai Moua (2012) states that there are three areas to be emphasised when referring to Cultural Intelligence. These are metacognition and cognition, motivation, and behaviour. Metacognition and cognition involve the ability to think, to learn, and to strategize. Motivation incorporates personality traits which are vital to be able to have Cultural Intelligence. These are one's self-efficacy, confidence, persistence, and personal values. Behaviour, on the other hand, is one's ability to adapt one's behaviour and having a repertoire of skills in this regard. Mai Moua (2012) created the Cultural Intelligence Model. Her visual interpretation of this is quite interesting. She describes them as the ABCs of Cultural Intelligence. This model implies that one needs to go through different stages to have Cultural Intelligence. *Acquire* represents the process of acquiring information and knowledge about the culture/s

involved. This entails acquiring information about how cultures are created, interpreted, and shared. Furthermore, it involves evaluating how cultural interpretations, meaning, and symbols can impact behaviours and attitudes. The term *Build* refers to having an awareness of one's surroundings through preparation and planning. Therefore, one would need to use the knowledge and information acquired in planning actions. The word *Contemplate* refers to self-reflection or self-evaluation on how one is using motivation to work through, and with, cultural interactions. This entails that one stays alert and remains aware of one's cultural surroundings. The term *Do* represents adaptability and ability to perform new strategies based on new cultural influences.

One might confuse Cultural Intelligence with other approaches such as Emotional and Social Intelligences. However, research proves that having Emotional and Social Intelligence doesn't necessarily mean that one has Cultural Intelligence. Thomas and Inkson (2003) wrote that with difference to emotional and social intelligence, cultural intelligence refers to the influence of cultural factors and their impact in intercultural interactions. Let's consider empathy as an example. It is critical to have empathy to be able to have Cultural Intelligence. However, it is also critical to have cultural awareness to make the connection between the two.

### 3. Leading with Cultural Intelligence

Do leaders shape culture, or are they shaped by it (Bolman and Deal 2008)? Research in general gives evidence that it works both ways. What is sure is that leaders who lead with cultural intelligence are more effective in today's multicultural society as culture influences leadership styles (Bass and Bass 2008). What inhibits this are internal obstacles such as fear, preconceived ideas and ego, which create an environment which is resistant to change. In turn, this results in a leader hiding behind procedures to fight the change rather than embracing it. As Offermann and Phan (2008) argue, an obstacle leaders face is that they are often oblivious to their own cultural prism through which they perceive others.

As stated by David Livermore (2015), Cultural Intelligence is an

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approach which can be learned by almost anyone. However, having certain personality traits ingrained makes a big difference. A leader who is a visionary and a strategic thinker, demonstrates values through actions, and empowers others will certainly be more capable to lead with Cultural Intelligence. Most studies about the relationship between leadership styles and leading with Cultural Intelligence concentrate on the best leadership style being transformational leadership (Ismail, Reza and Mahdi 2012; Keung and Rockinson-Szapkiw 2013; Lee Veasna and Wu 2013). This would be beneficial for both educators and students in a multicultural school.

### Research Methodology

Bassey (1999) gives an extensive and detailed definition of educational research, which he later simplified.

*Educational research is critical enquiry aimed at informing educational judgements and decisions in order to improve educational action. (Bassey 1999: 39)*

Specific emphasis should be put on the phrase Bassey uses, which is to 'improve educational action'. The main aim of educational research should be to make improvements to actions leaders and educators carry out to provide a better educational experience for our students. The research being carried out in this small-scale project is based on theoretical research as it is not intended to induce change. It is linked to theoretical ideas which have been discussed in the literature review. Furthermore, in relation to the purpose of this study, it is aimed at giving a picture of how a leader needs to use cultural intelligence in a multicultural school setting. A blend of quantitative and qualitative methods of inquiry have been used in this project.

*A quantitative piece of research will be able to use analytical and inferential statistics, while a qualitative piece of research will be able to target those groups in institutions or clusters of participants who will be able to be approached to participate in the research. (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007: 112)*

In fact, I used a mixed method using both quantitative and qualitative methods to benefit different aspects of my research. Quantitative methods of inquiry were used to gather information from teachers related to their observations from their experience in the school where the study was carried out. On the other hand, qualitative methods of inquiry were used. More insightful information was acquired from the Head of School through a questionnaire with open-ended questions, and from parents through interviews.

## **1. The Surveys, the Questionnaire and the Interviews**

The survey which was sent to all educators in the school in question was done online. These included the school's Class Teachers, Learning Support Educators, Kindergarten Educators, the Nurture Room Teacher and the Complementary Teacher. These educators could all give valid insights as they all interact daily with students of different cultures in the school. Furthermore, they all form part of the team led by the Head of School. Therefore, they could all provide the information needed. Questions chosen were elicited from the Literature Review. The survey comprised of two questions to obtain relevant demographic data and four structured questions with multiple-choice answers. The objective was to establish concepts and their measurement. In this study the concept focused on cultural intelligence and related leadership skills. The survey questions represented points around which this research was conducted and therefore provided categories for the organization of observations and ideas (Bulmer 1984). In fact, questions were designed to relate to what the educators observe and ideas they have related to the research questions.

An unstructured questionnaire was given to the Head of School. This questionnaire included two questions to obtain demographic data and four open-ended questions for the Head of School to answer on his own terms (Cohen et al. 2007) and therefore no dichotomous questions were used in this case.

I felt it was crucial to involve parents too in this research project. However, it was impossible to involve all parents since this was



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a small-scale project. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 3 parents from different cultures: one parent from Malta, one from an Arabic country and one from a European country. This offered a more flexible approach. These parents were chosen as they could all communicate easily without the need of a translator. Mothers were chosen as they participate more in the daily life at school of their children, and hence are able to give more valid answers.

The intention for including interviews in this study was to have a particular medium for enacting or displaying people's knowledge of cultural forms, to indicate how people make sense of their social world and of each other (Barker and Johnson 1998). The two foreign parents were asked the same questions. The Maltese parent was also asked the same questions; however, some questions were adapted as her perspective was obviously different than that of interviewees who were not born in Malta. The objective was to discuss the parents' interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007). This was done for the interviewees to tell their own story, being that they would understand the questions asked in probably varying subjective ways. Interviews were carried out in the month of February. Ethical issues were also considered. The procedure for the interview was explained well. I made sure the interviewees were happy with the location of the interview. Permission was requested to record the interviews for later reference. For the sake of confidentiality, no names were used in this research.

### **2. Triangulation**

The triangulation was ensured by acquiring information from different stakeholders by use of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. This provided a deeper understanding of possible different interpretations and validation on the concept of cultural intelligence in leadership. Therefore, as Gorard and Taylor (2004) demonstrate, the value of combining qualitative and quantitative methods is that it provides a more comprehensive picture of the findings.

### 3. Positionality

It is of high importance to consider one's positionality when conducting a research project. The researcher's view of the world or 'where the researcher is coming from' concerns ontological assumptions (the nature of social reality), epistemological assumptions (the nature of knowledge) and assumptions about human nature and agency (Sikes 2004). It can also lead to self-reflection and a learning journey for the researcher. My position in this research study relates perfectly to the literature review, in the sense that it is essential that a leader in an educational setting leads with cultural intelligence. This is ever so relevant to me, especially because I was brought up in Australia and attended a multicultural school myself.

Our school has evolved into a multicultural community. Out of the 170 students in the school, there are 54 students who were either born abroad or have a foreign parent/s. This amounts to 31.8% of the school population. This situation brings along a mixture of cultures all under the same roof, especially because there is a mixture of cultures in every class from Kinder 1 to Year 6. In our school there are approximately 14 prominent cultures from different countries namely: Italy, Nigeria, Eritrea, Ghana, United Kingdom, Romania, Estonia, Syria, Tunisia, Morocco, Vietnam, Philippines, Pakistan and obviously Malta.

I profoundly believe that a leader in this situation needs to have personality traits which are conducive of Cultural Intelligence. This will enhance the creation of a positive learning environment in which everyone feels welcome. Furthermore, the educational institution will become one that celebrates cultural diversity.

### 4. Piloting

The survey, questionnaire and interviews were piloted to ensure reliability, validity and practicability (Oppenheim 1992). The survey was piloted with a primary school teacher employed at another government primary school. The questionnaire was piloted with another Head of Primary School from a similar

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catchment area to our school. The interview was piloted with a parent of both Maltese and foreign background to provide feedback from both Maltese and foreign points of view. After evaluating the process and results during the piloting, only one minor change needed to be made to the interview questions.

### Findings and Discussion

#### 1. The Educators' Point of View

The online survey was sent by email to 24 educators at our school. Twenty-one educators answered the questions and submitted the survey. The questions were chosen to acquire some knowledge about their point of view of the need of Cultural Intelligence in the leadership styles in a school which is becoming multicultural.

More than half of the respondents have been educators at our school for more than four years and are equally distributed from Kinder 1 to Year 6. Having 85% of the respondents answering from a point of view of someone who has seen the school change gradually into a multicultural school is beneficial as it makes the results more substantial. Every class in our school has students from more than one culture, some more than others. When asked about their view of our school being multicultural, 90% of the respondents answered that they strongly agree that due to the many students from different cultures enrolled we can describe our school as a multicultural school. The educator who answered in disagreement approached me after submitting the survey to explain herself. She felt that she had to disagree as her understanding of a multicultural school was that certain differences would be defined between students and she perceives our school as such a united family that it is as if there are no differences between cultures.

When asked if the increase of different cultures has affected positively the leadership style of the Head of School, 67% answered maybe, meaning they are not sure if the Head of School's leadership style has been affected positively by the

increase of students from different cultures. On the other hand, 14% of the respondents think that it has, whilst 19% think that it has not. This might relate to the fact that it is not that easy to understand certain cultural differences. In fact, this point also emerged from a question which was asked to the Head of School in the questionnaire he answered, which I will refer to later on. Notwithstanding all this, 100% of the respondents believe that leading with Cultural Intelligence is important for a leader to be more effective in a multicultural school. This is a very encouraging result.

The last question was asked to find what the educators think about personality traits a School Leader would need to have to be better at leading a multicultural school. The respondents were given the opportunity to choose more than one personality trait from a list presented to them which included a mixture of traits which are needed to have Cultural Intelligence as found in the literature review, besides a couple of traits which would hinder having Cultural Intelligence. It was interesting to see that the findings show a majority chose personality traits that are conducive to having Cultural Intelligence. Seventeen out of twenty-one respondents think that being an inspirational leader who is a strategic thinker enhances being a better leader in this scenario. Twelve out of twenty-one respondents think that the leader should be one who empowers others, whilst eleven out of twenty-one respondents think that being a visionary and having strong personal values are important for a School leader to be better at leading a multicultural school. It is not clear why one respondent chose the traits 'fearful' and 'egocentric'. The results from these findings show that the educators in our school feel that there should be a significant positive relationship between Cultural Intelligence and transformational leadership. In fact, the positive personality traits included are some of the main descriptors of a transformational leader. Leaders who have a higher level of Cultural Intelligence exhibit a higher level of transformational leadership style, which suggests that individuals with high Cultural Intelligence are able to lead and to manage more effectively in multicultural environments (Keung and Rockinson-Szapkiw 2013).

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### 2. The Head of School's Point of View

The Head of School was provided with an unstructured questionnaire. He identified himself as male and that he has been a Head of School at our school for no less than eight years. His understanding of the meaning of culture revolves around the music and the arts, whilst also encompassing language, religion and social habits of people of different nationalities. With regards to constraints, challenges and benefits, he described the main constraints as accepting different cultures in their entirety, especially social habits, whilst benefits include the exposure of Maltese students to different cultures to enhance their social and educational experience, developing a positive and healthy attitude towards each other. When asked if he needed to change his leadership style to adapt to these cultural changes, he said that he made it a point not to be prejudiced or show lack of courtesy with foreign families; however, he admitted it was not always easy as it was sometimes overwhelming. Upon being asked about Cultural Intelligence and Leadership, The Head of School referred to the importance of becoming knowledgeable about other cultures, whilst showing empathy, providing a sense of community at school, fairness and confidence.

Evaluating these answers takes me back to the literature review. Adapting to cultural change might come naturally to a leader; however, leaders should be provided with training for the acquiring of skills needed to be able to adapt to it if this is not the case. If a school leader had to use Moua's (2012) Cultural Intelligence Model and go through the ABC process: *Acquire, Build, Contemplate* and *Do*, then it would be easier for the leader to lead a multicultural school and not need to feel they had to 'accept' different cultures as stated by the Head of School in his answer to question four of the questionnaire.

### 3. The Parents' Point of View

Three parents were chosen to be interviewed for this small-scale project. Three different mothers were chosen from different cultural backgrounds. The interviewees will be named Mother A, Mother B and Mother C. Mother A is Romanian, Mother B is Tunisian, whilst Mother C is Maltese. I chose these

three cultures to represent the point of view of someone from a European country, an African country and our own country, to compare and contrast between the three.

The answers from the survey and the questionnaire with the Head of School provided a basis for the choice of questions to be used for these interviews. The set of open-ended questions which were asked were the same for Mother A and Mother B. The questions for Mother A and B were asked in Maltese to facilitate understanding and their answers were also given in Maltese. However, I then translated the transcripts to English. The first two questions were of a demographic nature and were the same for all three mothers. They were first asked how they would describe their ethnicity, during which they answered by giving some information about their culture. The descriptions given evidenced how proud they all are of their ethnicity and also how highly and positively they think of their culture. When asked how long their children have attended the school in question, one of the mothers stated that her child has attended for less than a year, whilst the other two parents have had their children attend the school since Kinder 1.

Mother A and B were asked to talk about their concerns or worries, if any, when they were applying for their children to start attending a Maltese School. It is meaningful to know at this point that the son of Mother A has autism and hence why she referred to the fact that she appreciates that her son is not discriminated against at school, after he had been through negative experiences in his previous school. Mother B gave a lot of importance to values and reciprocating respect. On the other hand, Mother C was asked to talk about her concerns upon observing an increase of students from different cultures attending our school. She emphasised that as long as no changes were made to her way of life, all was well. At the same time, she did not want to create judgemental conclusions of what will happen before she experienced the cultural changes. All three mothers felt that there is a strong element of respect between different cultures. This reflects very well on what the school is doing to create an atmosphere of wellbeing for all.

It was also important to inquire if the families of Mother A and B had to make any personal changes to adapt to the

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Maltese culture. Both Mother A and Mother B did not feel they needed to change. In fact, Mother A stated that she has been mistaken for being a Maltese. It was interesting to see that at first Mother B thought that she was being treated differently due to disagreements; however, she realised that this is part of being human. On the other hand, Mother C was asked how she thinks people from other cultures should adapt to the Maltese culture. It is her opinion that foreigners should adapt to the Maltese culture even though, according to her, it seems as though some do not feel the need to adapt.

Finally, I felt I needed to ask all three mothers if there was anything they would change in our school for it to adapt better to cultural changes. The same question was asked as I wanted to see what their different points of view would be. An interesting suggestion was given by Mother B regarding the support needed for the school to have a better awareness of other languages besides English for communication reasons. All three mothers stated that they are very satisfied with how the school is adapting to being multicultural. Various activities and events which were organised at school were mentioned. They felt these activities and events enhanced a sense of unity, bringing different cultures together as one.

The parental interviews also showed that parents and their children feel a sense of belonging at school. It is evident that the information given by the parents shows that the school's ethos and strategies have effectively created a learning environment in which everyone feels they have a special place. These findings all show that managing an organisation is not merely a series of mechanical tasks, but also a set of human interactions (Bell and Harrison 1998; DuFour 2004).

The fact the school used in the project is small and a small number of parents were used to gain insight on this subject might have been a limitation to this study. However, its purpose was that of a small-scale project.

### Recommendations and Conclusion

It is without doubt that this small-scale project has shown that Cultural Intelligence (referred to below as CQ) should

have a very important role in the leadership styles used in a multicultural setting.

*Leadership style is a function of leader CQ; however, the nature and magnitude of the role played by leader CQ varies considerably between leadership styles in general and, particularly, in terms of both the statistical and practical significance thereof. (Solomon and Steyn 2017)*

Therefore, there is a positive relationship between having Cultural Intelligence and knowing how to use it, and leadership styles which need to be adopted to enhance all this and reap the benefits. When considering the information gathered from teachers and parents, it is evident that adopting empowering and transformative leadership is crucial to create a community at school in which justice prevails.

For all this to be effective, the transformative leadership should be carried out using both behavioural cultural intelligence and cognitive cultural intelligence. Due to this, many School Leaders might need more training in this regard, especially in how to enhance one's Cultural Intelligence. Having a Senior Leadership Team in a school consisting of at least some members who are already adept at using their cultural intelligence helps to create a feeling of unity at school. However, some members of the Senior Leadership Team might need more support in dealing with multiculturalism. Therefore, training and professional development for Heads of Schools needs to be effected.

A difference should also be noted between what is experienced inside the school and what is experienced outside of the school environment. In their interviews, the parents showed concern that certain situations in their community create conflict between cultures outside of the school. What is mostly important, in my opinion, is that this does not affect what happens inside the school. The school ethos would be strong enough that it celebrates multiculturalism in every way and no one would feel different.

If one had to go back to the research question and other issues



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which were mentioned in relation to it and the literature review provided, one can conclude that Cultural Intelligence should be a factor of effective leadership styles in Maltese primary schools, in which multiculturalism is growing. Leaders should seek to use their Cultural Intelligence to be more effective in our schools, which are becoming or have become multicultural and are therefore creating the need for change in leadership styles. If a leader has a personal difficulty in accepting various cultures in the school, then this will create a ripple effect, causing even greater problems and conflicts.

The aim of any school leader should surely be to create a positive learning environment for all students. Therefore, leading with Cultural Intelligence would definitely leave a positive effect in a school with students from different cultures.

*To lead and manage people effectively requires more than just power and pressure. It requires a range of personal qualities and interpersonal skills. The effective deployment of these qualities and skills in a genuinely supportive and congruent way generates an ethos and culture that fosters learning. It can promote the intrinsic motivation in people at all levels in a school which is the only sure way of securing continuous improvement. (Johnston, 1999: 8)*

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