
Connecting the dots: Effective leadership to enhance parental engagement in a multicultural primary school in Malta

Janice Darmanin and Viviana Premazzi

Abstract

This study, conducted in a multicultural primary school in Malta, aimed to connect the dots between educators, students and parents who comprise a school community. The goal of this study was to recognize that parents should be an integral part of school leadership and to investigate how they can be involved in their children's education. The research used a mixed methodology, mainly focus groups with Maltese and non-Maltese parents, and aimed to understand how to assist educational leaders in enhancing parental engagement within a multicultural school whilst creating positive intercultural interactions. Interviews with educational experts in Malta were then used to validate the findings. The results showed that leaders play a critical role in promoting parental engagement by creating relationships with them based on effective communication, cultural awareness and cultural intelligence. In turn, this promotes the development of a positive multicultural community at school. Finally, this study suggests the need of designing policies to promote an intercultural education framework which will go beyond simply coexisting and onto developing equal educational opportunities for all students in a culturally-receptive school environment.

Keywords

Education, school, leadership, parents, multiculturalism

Introduction

The role of a leader in an educational organisation is extremely complex and critical. In fact, there is a "widespread belief that the quality of leadership makes a significant difference to school and student outcomes" (Bush, 2007, p. 391). An effective educational leader's main concern should be to prioritise the

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child's needs to add value and quality to their learning and their educational journey (Leithwood et al., 2004). Furthermore, the leadership style influences the intensity of the parent's engagement in their child's learning. In fact, Fullan (2001, p. 50) sustains that "a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community". Leithwood et al. (2004) argue that leaders need to understand the interconnection between schools and students' families in order to improve students' learning. Rowan (1996) concurs that leaders should play an important role in promoting learning within a school community. Essentially, schools must strive to integrate the family into the school community because they play a critical role in their child's education.

Due to a large influx of migrants in recent years, Malta has seen an increase in multiculturalism in schools, calling for a cultural shift. In this new context, migration and cultural diversity may present challenges and uncertainty for school leaders (Ababneh, 2016; Jogulu, 2010). This is where the element of cultural intelligence (Livermore, 2011) emerges, an element of educational leadership which may seem insignificant.

In an educational spectrum, cultural intelligence revolves around "a person's capability to adapt to new cultural contexts" (Earley & Ang, 2003, p. 59) and having the competence to "grasp, reason and behave effectively in situations characterized by cultural diversity" (Ang et al., 2007, p. 337). Earley and Peterson (2004, p. 105) sustain that this also reflects a person's skill "to gather, interpret and act upon these radically different cues to function effectively across cultural settings or in a multicultural situation".

Cultural intelligence supports leaders in helping school staff and students become aware of their own cultural prism (Offermann & Phan, 2008) as well as their cultural biases in order to remove them and promote effective interactions and communication. School leaders bear a responsibility in this because they have the ability to bring about positive transformative change by promoting an inclusive multicultural environment in which students thrive and parents are empowered. Non-national students would adjust more naturally in such an environment if school leaders are able to use cultural intelligence.

This study, conducted in a multicultural primary school in Malta, aimed to 'connect the dots' between educators, students and parents, who make up a school community. The purpose of the study was to understand which competencies, strategies and leadership styles are needed in order to improve parental engagement and create an inclusive community in a multicultural school. This study is based on one primary school in Malta where one of the authors (Ms Darmanin) has been the Assistant Head of School for the past nine years, observing its multicultural aspect grow and striving to create a culturally receptive school, primarily by establishing relationships with parents based on effective communication, trust, and respect.

As in many other educational contexts around the world, shared responsibility through parental engagement is still lacking from many frameworks. In fact, this engagement is considered "one of the most powerful but neglected supports for children's learning and development" (Weiss et al., 2009, p. 4). This study aims to show how effective communication with parents may reap many benefits for both parents, who understand their importance as part of the school community and their child's educational journey, and the school leadership, who can have a better awareness of the families and students' needs.

This article begins with a review of literature in the field of educational leadership, cultural intelligence and parental involvement. The research methodology used in this study is then explained. Consequently, the findings are presented along with a discussion that leads to recommendations based on the needs identified by the research.

Literature Review

Educational leadership and cultural intelligence

Caroline Oliver's (2016) research shows that student achievement is dependent on parental engagement rather than simply involvement, especially in the case of minority and migrant children (Harris and Goodall, 2008). Oliver (2016) discusses the barriers and disadvantages faced by migrant learners as a result of their limited educational experiences and perceptions. Moreover, "communication, fostering a supportive climate and philosophy (for example through parent cafes), overcoming problems of location and timing, and engaging with broader actors from the community and family all support

effective parental engagement" (Oliver, 2016, p. 7). Collaboration between parents and schools is also important for the student's education, especially at home (Campbell, 2011).

Leadership is critical to the success of any organisation (Hanges et al., 2016; Landis et al., 2014). For the purpose of this study, the preferred definition of leadership will refer to a process of influence. As explained clearly by Leithwood et al. (1999, p. 6) this " ... seems to be a necessary part of most conceptions of leadership". Most definitions of leadership assume that it "involves a social influence process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person [or group] over other people [or groups] to structure the activities and relationships in a group or organisation" (Yukl, 2002, p. 3), thereby initiating change. Kouzes and Posner's (2006, p. 73) five practices of exemplary leadership require a leader to: "model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart". A leader nowadays, in this uncertain and unstable world, should be able to lead an organisation through change, to be a transformative leader.

According to Livermore (2015, p. 3), "leadership today – in a globalized world – is a multicultural challenge"; being able to recognise cultural worth of all human activity as socially equalising might be quite difficult to attain. However, this is now essential in multicultural schools where the "we-they" distinction (Laosa, 2005) should be avoided and the cultural differences should be recognized and valued. Therefore, a student-centred parent-school partnership would be an ideal setting for better understanding of each other's cultures, communicating and improving learning efficacy. Furthermore, it would provide an opportunity for parents to be part of decision-making processes which occur in schools, encouraging democracy and the school's effectiveness in the long run (Yukl, 2006). Leaders should plan sustainable leadership strategies which consider the experience and knowledge of various people as resources of value that can be renewed rather than disposed of (Lynch, 2011). According to Göksoy (2016), culture includes tangible factors such as a community's norms, interactions, rituals, or rather traditions that are part of their daily lives. There are also intangible values such as emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and behavioural patterns. All cultures are valuable and should not be abandoned in order to "become" the culture of another (Livermore, 2015, p. 86). Multicultural organisations require the leader to evolve and adjust to changes (Eken et al., 2014), beginning by thinking on an intercultural level rather than a multicultural one. Only then

one can be referred to as a leader who has “acquired the cultural sensitivity necessary to bridge cultures” (Muna, 2011, p. 90).

The term ‘multicultural’ refers to a society that includes a variety of cultural groups or ethnicities. It does not relate to their interaction or behaviour (Schriefer, 2016). Within cross-cultural dialogue, the concept of interculturalism began to emerge as a more effective approach to social cohesion (Cantle, 2012; Council of Europe, 2008; Zapata-Barrero, 2016). Kymlicka (2016) states that “in both academic and public debates, one of the current fashions is to defend a (new, innovative, realistic) interculturalism against a (tired, discredited, naive) multiculturalism” (p. 158). Interculturalism appears to be more effective in fostering social cohesion in multicultural communities as it encourages dialogue and equality (Trento, 2013). Harney (2020, p. 4) refers to the Italian context and interculturalism in schools, “focusing mostly on culture and identity and emphasising mutual respect and dignity”. This scenario requires the development of cultural intelligence on a much deeper level. Göksoy’s research (2016, p. 993) revealed that “administrators believe that their cultural leadership roles increase when their cultural intelligence levels rise”. It is a self-aware intelligence that is based on four factors: metacognitive, cognitive, motivational and behavioural (Van Dyne et al, 2007; Earley and Ang, 2003; Şahin, 2011). Cultural intelligence could help leaders to perform effectively in culturally diverse conditions (Solomon, 2017). According to Livermore (2011), this is the variable that will determine whether or not you are a successful leader.

Parental involvement and engagement

Having the students’ parents actively involved in the school life is imperative and essential for the students’ success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), and it is critical in any school’s efforts to create reforms for successful educational programmes (Cavanagh, 2012; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013), but as Riley (2009, p. 60) highlighted, “how schools and communities work in collaboration is unique to each context and based on intensely personal relationships”. According to Henderson and Mapp’s (2002) research, involving parents in their child’s education resulted in higher grades and outcomes than expected. Besides, schools that give importance to the child’s health, well-being and family provide a better service to their students’ academic needs (Epstein, 1995).

Schools need to be prepared to provide parents with the opportunity

to connect with the school (Stefanski et al., 2016) and contribute in their own unique way through mutual respect and understanding. According to McNedl's (2001) research, there are four strategies: parent–child discussion, monitoring, involvement in school and classroom activities, and participation in school organizations. Epstein (1995) proposes a similar framework involving intertwined factors. It describes parents' roles as volunteering at school, being a part of the learning process at home, participating in school's decision-making process, and collaborating with the community. Berla et al. (1989) advocate for a school–parent partnership in the form of working groups, as well as the organization of events where parents can meet, the settlement of a parent room at school, and collaboration with parents to elicit their needs and means of support. Becker and Epstein (1982) state that parent involvement does not only refer to when parents are brought into class; they can also be involved and engaged on educational tasks at home. Elias et al. (2007) point out that it seems unrealistic that parents participate actively when their child reaches the secondary level. Therefore, it is vital that primary schools set the foundations for parents to understand the significance of their engagement in their child's educational journey.

Hence, it is critical that parents and schools avoid misunderstandings about their respective roles, which may be the source of barriers to effective engagement (Ferguson et al., 2008). Unfortunately, misconceptions lead to mistrust and, in some cases, to a lack of parental engagement (Cutajar, 2016). Schaps (2003, p. 32) suggests four approaches to enhance a sense of community: to "actively cultivate respectful, supportive relationships among students, teachers, and parents ... emphasize common purposes and ideals ... provide regular opportunities for service and cooperation and provide developmentally appropriate opportunities for autonomy and influence". The difference between parental involvement and parental engagement is that the latter is defined by Head Start (2014, as cited in Stefanski et al., 2016, p. 139) as "goal-directed relationships between staff and families that are ongoing and culturally responsive: family and staff members share responsibility and mutually support what is best for children and families". According to Sylva et al. (2004), a positive result in cognitive achievement was observed, mostly in the child's early years of schooling, where parental engagement was prominent: "school–community partnerships have long been viewed as a promising way to help struggling students, families, and neighborhoods" (Stefanski et al., 2016, p. 136). Indeed, Raffaele and Knoff's (1999) research shows also that when

a student's family and school collaborate, underprivileged families benefit. Creating an intercultural community at school entails bringing all cultures together, and fostering an environment in which all children feel they are equally respected and celebrated. This requires overcoming prejudices and imbalances of power, as well as developing an understanding of the various perspectives the members might have, whilst engaging in active listening and motivating effective communication between educators and parents.

Though the COVID-19 pandemic presented various challenges, one positive element was that parents and schools were able to communicate more effectively through virtual means. According to Quinn (2020), even if COVID-19 created stressful factors for all, it has shed light on how to create effective relationships between the school and the parents in order to improve student learning outcomes. Sparks (2020) also remarks that the pandemic resulted in a positive shift in parental involvement in their child's education.

Research methodology

The research aims to delve into issues concerning parental engagement, particularly in a multicultural setting. The objective of the study was to show how parents can be more engaged in their child's learning by becoming an integral part of their educational journey through school leadership strategies, thereby creating a positive environment in a multicultural setting.

The analysis used a mixed methodology. Two focus groups were held in the school with parents of different nationalities,¹ also involving educators. The participants were chosen based on their willingness to participate in this research, general availability to participate, and ability to communicate easily in English or Maltese, while ensuring a diverse range of nationalities were represented, including both EU and non-EU nationals. Mostly, open-ended questions were used. The aim was to discuss topics such as what they expect from their child's education, how the school community works, the role of the educators, the barriers they face, and how they can get involved in the school leadership. The focus groups depicted social groups and situations in their real-life contexts (Arsenault & Anderson, 1998; Flick, 2004), in this case, parents in a school community. They also discussed the importance of cultural intelligence and effective communication in understanding and valuing different cultures.

A survey was also distributed to all thirty-one educators of the primary

school in order to provide a background of the school as well as of its members' opinions and ideas. Questions were related to aspects of leadership and parental engagement in a multicultural school.

Five key informants, experts, and educational professionals were interviewed to validate the survey and focus group findings. They were chosen based on their relationship with the school and their role in the area of education which is related to parental engagement in a multicultural setting. Key Informant One is the Curriculum Education Officer within the College, Key Informant Two is the Assistant Director responsible for Education for Diversity, Key Informant Three is an Early Childhood Education Officer who has worked extensively within the College, and Key Informants Four and Five are Education Officers within the Migrant Learners Unit.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic mitigation measures, the interviews and focus groups had to be done by use of video-conferencing using Microsoft Teams.

The research context

The school

The school where the research was conducted is relatively small and situated in a dominant area for the settling of migrants, as listed in the last census of Population and Housing (NSO, 2014) held in Malta in 2011. At the time of the study, 36% of the school population, approximately one-third of all students, were of foreign origin. Out of these students, 33 had both foreign parents, whilst 18 had one parent who was a foreigner. The countries with the highest numbers of students were Syria and Pakistan. According to Watson (2019), the majority of asylum seekers granted protection in Malta in 2018 were also from Syria, whilst the increase of students from Pakistan could be due to the global phenomenon of nurse mobility (Schilgen et al., 2017), as they have integrated into the Maltese healthcare system. Buttigieg et al. (2018) state that most immigrant nurses in Malta are from Pakistan or the Philippines. According to another study conducted by Darmanin (2020), the same countries were already present in the same school in 2018. Since then, the number of Maltese students has decreased, whilst the percentage of students with foreign parents has increased by approximately 4.2% in three years.

Findings and discussion

The purpose of this part is to analyse how parents can be significantly engaged within a multicultural school community and evaluate how the school's leadership can implement strategies for this to be effective.

The educator's point of view

The majority of educators who replied to the survey agreed that their school is multicultural and this has an impact on leadership, confirming Livermore's (2015, p. 3) notion that leadership is a 'multicultural challenge' in today's globalised world. Nonetheless, seven educators believe that a leader should always strategize their leadership. Furthermore, all participants believe that a school leader must employ cultural intelligence in order to effectively lead a multi-cultural school. This is in line with Göksoy's research (2016) as referred to above. Twenty-seven educators believe that a multicultural school is beneficial because it provides students with a better understanding of cultural diversity, encourages stronger values of respect among peers, and allows students to be better future citizens. Those who responded that a multicultural environment may have a negative impact on the school stated that it can be stressful for educators and may result in social injustice. Educators, on the other hand, believe that students primarily feel welcomed by their peers and educators, like they are an integral part of the school, safe, connected to the school's community, and motivated to learn.

All of the educators agreed that parental involvement would encourage students to participate in their learning, supporting Henderson and Mapp's (2002) conviction that it is imperative and essential for parents to be actively involved in the school life for the student's success. They emphasized the importance of communicating fairly with all students' parents, equipping them with techniques and strategies for participating in their child's educational journey. Other initiatives chosen to increase parental engagement included having parents speak to students about their cultural background, improving communication between teachers and parents, forming action teams in which parents are active participants, forming parent volunteer groups at school, developing a parent engagement school policy, and organizing regular school days during which parents can participate.

The focus groups offering the parents' views

The focus group sessions provided a space for everyone to learn about each other's cultural backgrounds. Such discussions showed the relevance of uniqueness as also stressed by Livermore (2015). Several common factors emerged, including food, traditions, and values, but most importantly, the family and the happiness of their child.

Notwithstanding the barriers they encounter, such as the language, they all agree that having a multicultural community at school is still a positive experience for all, even though some Maltese may be resistant to the fact that the world is becoming a "global village" as Parent D described it. One suggestion made was to hold cultural discussions at school, involving parents. Parent D also suggested to introduce basic phrases in various languages in class. Parent G also suggested allocating time for children to discuss their cultural background during lessons or to invite guest speakers to share their experiences. Parent J described school as a place where children can become acquainted with people from other cultures. Indeed, Parent D suggested that this provides the children with a sense of belonging at school and forms their identity.

They all are in agreement that children do not notice any differences between each other. Parent E and Parent F expressed their concern that some parents maybe be indoctrinating their children in ways that are contrary to what is expected in a multicultural community, either that others are not accepted or that their culture is supreme. The parents explained that their role should be to teach their children how to be good citizens. They observe that some parents find it difficult to approach non-Maltese parents outside of school. Parent D proposed creating parent groups to enhance a sense of community among parents.

The majority of parents demonstrated an understanding of the term multicultural, which refers to a group of different cultures coming together as one. They all agreed that multiculturalism can be positive depending on how parents raise their children. African families appear to face more challenges than others. A parent-buddy system and more multicultural activities involving parents were proposed to assist new families in settling into the school community. Parents A and F suggested that cultural diversity should be included in the education

offered to all students because it is an important part of their identity. Parent J noted it would be effective if one focuses more on what is similar between them.

Parent I and Parent K suggested adding more activities that they had previously participated in, such as student presentations, which they thought were so “easy-going” and natural. Parent F also mentioned a previous school multicultural day and how excited her child had been to learn new experiences. Other proposals included students conducting research, celebrating important festivities of different countries, including traditional food, sports and games, parent-school meetings to learn more about their cultural background, exhibitions related to different cultures, presentation sessions in class, online sessions with students abroad, creating videos with their family at home and parent focus groups rather than solely having parents in the school council. All the participants would prefer that parents be given more weight in school leadership. Even though this was not possible due to enforced COVID-19 pandemic mitigations, which limited physical meetings with parents to minimal amounts of time or to virtual means due to social distance issues, something as simple as the open-door policy was beneficial for parents to feel more at home at the school.

According to some parents, effective two-way communication with all members of the School Leadership Team is critical in making them feel like valued members of the school community. They believe that a multicultural school leader should be approachable, creative, and innovative, as well as a good listener and communicator. Above all, a leader must be “open” and “welcoming”. This supports the findings of authors such as Solomon (2017) and Livermore (2011), who found that such variables related also to cultural intelligence are what makes all the difference between being a successful leader or not.

The parents demonstrated that they want to be an integral part of the school community rather than simply bystanders, and that that will give them a sense of belonging that will help them face barriers, such as language and prejudices that still exist in any community. They believe that their participation, involvement, and engagement in various suggested events can enrich the school community. These findings, together with the suggestions on how to improve communication and parent engagement, show the major importance of the element of communication as suggested by Epstein (1995) and Berla et

al. (1989). Such strategies, such as that of creating action teams with parents, can be cultivated by the leader through the use of cultural intelligence, allowing a culturally responsive environment to thrive. As a result, the best conditions for students to develop within their educational journey will be created.

Views from external Key Informants

All the Key Informants agreed that Maltese schools are becoming increasingly multicultural. Key Informant 3 referred to multicultural schools as "something that we had to face but we were not prepared for" (Key Informant 3, personal interview), adding that some teachers might have even considered this as an added burden due to a lack of training on how to cater for their students. A positive observation remarked by Key Informant 4 was that even though non-Maltese families are spreading around the country, "schools are very much aware, and are taking action, to some extent, and some more than others, because they have been in this situation for a longer time, so they have developed, they are over the initial shock" (Key Informant 4, personal interview).

With regards to school leadership, it was noted that we need to redefine what leadership is in today's schools. All Key Informants agreed that cultural intelligence should be an integral part of this. A consensus was observed that some leaders may require additional training in cultural intelligence and its implementation in their leadership strategies. One reason these key informants believe school leaders need to improve in this area is the lack of a national policy related to intercultural education.

All Key Informants agreed on the importance of involving parents in their children's education, particularly through the establishment of working groups: "If the parents are not kept continuously on board, the final success of the student wouldn't be as good as it should be" (Key Informant 2, personal interview). Various effective parent involvement initiatives were suggested; however, above all, the (first) step is "to reach out to the parents" (Key Informant 4, personal interview). This implies what is suggested by Schaps (2003, p. 32): to "actively cultivate respectful, supportive relationships among students, teachers, and parents".

Recommendations

A policy for parental engagement

According to Abela (2019), the school should have a structure to refer to if a strong policy aimed at parental involvement was in place. This would enhance a stronger sense of community at school, enriched by parental engagement, which would motivate students to learn as they see their parents invested in their educational journey. The National Curriculum Framework (2012) encourages parents to be engaged in their child's educational journey, but it does not provide a structure for schools.

This study highly recommends the development of a national policy for parental involvement, including working groups to facilitate communication between the school and interested parents. The successful experience of focus groups in this study shows how this could be implemented in all schools. Parent representation could reflect the schools' cultural backgrounds and focus on discussions to gather parents' opinions, ideas, or proposals, assisting the School Leadership Team to lead effectively.

Such a policy would reinforce the reality that all parents, regardless of background, want their children to succeed by participating in their educational journey. This could be triggered by focus groups or action teams.

Schools need to formulate programmes aimed at upskilling parents throughout all phases and processes of their child's education and in accordance with their needs. In addition, outreach programmes relating to family social support need to be established and supported by the government. Educators and school leaders, too, require professional development opportunities to continue learning about improving communication and relationships with the children's parents and developing strategies to maintain parental engagement through trust-based parent-school partnerships. Besides all this, initiatives related to informal activities within the school community, as many schools already do, should continue in order to establish a family-like atmosphere at school where everyone feels welcome.

A policy for intercultural education in schools

This study also suggests the need to improve the multicultural aspect of the schools. One of Malta's latest policies regarding inclusive education defines it as:

the valuing and acceptance of diversity, to its value and the rights of learners to not only attend mainstream schools, but also to belong as valued members through active participation and the elimination of the barriers limiting the participation and achievement of all learners, respect diverse needs, abilities and characteristics. (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2019, p. 8)

Within the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014–2024 (MEDE, 2014), there are already some policies in place that promote the inclusion of specific groups such as the *Trans, Gender Variant and Intersex Students in Schools Policy* (2015). This suggests that such an important factor as having responsive schools should also require the creation of a separate policy focusing solely on intercultural education to fit a transformative approach.

As a result, this policy should first and foremost focus on the school leadership styles that are being adopted, by inspiring leaders and educators alike through training programmes to encourage the effective adoption of intercultural education and cultural intelligence. The same focus groups mentioned above could also offer leaders an opportunity to give parents a voice and contribute to their child's learning. Other policy recommendations include the need for more psycho-social services and human resources to help students and their families to overcome language barriers and communicate effectively at all levels of their engagement.

In general, as suggested by the parents in this study's focus groups, there are many strategies that the policy could outline and schools could implement to enhance intercultural education and ensure that everyone is an integral part of the school community,

Without doubt, it would be vital that every school is also bound to practice continuous critical reflexivity. This could be part of an action research process adopted by schools to seek transformative change, in which all educators and the school leadership engage in self-reflective inquiry to improve the school community's dynamics.

Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to provide research-based strategies and practices that can lead to making parental engagement a priority in our local context. As in many other educational contexts around the world this shared responsibility is still lacking from many frameworks. Indeed, this engagement is considered as “one of the most powerful but neglected supports for children’s learning and development” (Weiss et al., 2009, p. 4). What is most needed is a paradigm shift in mentality in terms of parental engagement and intercultural education. It is important to begin viewing multicultural communities as what Oliver (2016) refers to as the “diversity advantage”, rather than a burden. Indeed, school leaders play an important role in “fostering and sustaining such a culture change towards parental engagement” (Cutajar, 2016, p. 66). Only in this way we can connect the dots and see the bigger picture, one in which our schools turn into sustainable communities with long-term benefits for ALL children.

Notes

1. Each parent within the focus group was given a letter to replace their name to protect their anonymity:

Parent A – Maltese Mother and Educator

Parent B – Romanian Mother

Parent C – Syrian Mother

Parent D – Ghanaian Mother

Parent E – Pakistani Father

Parent F – Maltese Mother

Parent G – Romanian Mother

Parent H – Maltese Mother and Educator

Parent I – Romanian Mother

Parent J – Gozitan Mother

Parent K – Nigerian Mother

Parent L – British Mother

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