
The Future is Now: Educators' Vision for Tomorrow

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Abstract

Education is never far from the news. It is intimately tied to the past, the present and the future. Some say that the past is where education has remained in terms of vision and practice. The more optimistic see education as taking stock of the past to create a present and a future. We are on the threshold of several important national milestones. The National Strategy for Education is up for review in the next two years as well as the National Curriculum. Then there is the collective agreement for educators, which is up for review in 2023. The future of educators hinges on the present and the future. This research, therefore, invited educators to reflect on the future of education and educators themselves. Nine focus groups were conducted, with 45 participants in total. Five key themes emerged from the data as influencing the future of education and educators, namely teaching and learning, leadership and climate, the education system itself, policy, and a changing society. The insights may serve as the basis for reflection and as a springboard for the generation of policy and practice on a national level.

Keywords

Malta, education, educator, future, consultation

Introduction

In the wake of the keynote speech delivered at the symposium "The Future is Now – Educators' Vision for Tomorrow", this article endeavours to delve into the diverse dimensions of educational theory and practice as experienced by educators in our present education system. Emphasising the imperative of listening to educators at all levels, it seeks to inform future practice and policymaking, recognizing the evolving landscape of careers in the next decade. Drawing on seminal works by Darling-Hammond (2006) and Fullan (2014), this paper strives to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the dynamic intersection of education and the future. The foundation for this exploration is rooted in a comprehensive consultation exercise conducted earlier this year,

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engaging educators across different levels of the education system; data which emerged from this exercise will be presented in this paper.

Background

The chosen theme for the Institute for Education's 4th annual national Symposium dealt with different aspects of educational theory and practice according to the current needs being felt by educators and academics in the field. Hence, the theme of this Symposium, which was "The Future is Now – Educators' Vision for Tomorrow", and its main objective of generating debate and reflection.

A different approach was adopted this year as the Institute for Education involved schools and educators directly from the start, as we reflected on educators and the future. With that in mind we undertook a consultation exercise earlier in the year with educators at all levels of education, the outcome of which was presented during the Symposium's keynote speech. We felt that this initiative needed to engage in a meaningful way with the people we have set out to serve: the communities of practice in schools, in order to provide a space for them to voice their opinion and experience, which in turn may lead to recommendations for policymakers at large.

We were keen to hear educators' insights and vision of the future, given that we are on the threshold of several important national milestones. The National Strategy for Education is up for review in the next two years. So is the National Curriculum. Then there is the collective agreement for educators which is up for review in 2023 and should reflect and address the vision which characterises the first two. The future of educators hinges on the present and the future itself.

Methodology

The methodology for the comprehensive consultation exercise involved a systematic approach to engage educators at all levels. Invitations were extended to educators nationwide to ensure inclusivity. Consultation meetings were organized, providing flexibility through both physical face-to-face sessions at the Institute for Education and virtual meetings conducted through the Microsoft Teams online platform. Each gathering featured designated mediators and rapporteurs facilitating structured discussions. The sessions were meticulously designed with thought-provoking questions to stimulate discussion. Notably, the methodology adopted a narrative inquiry stance, fostering an environment

conducive to open and candid expression. This narrative approach encouraged participants to share their experiences, insights, and concerns freely, allowing for a rich exploration of the diverse dimensions of educational theory and practice. The combination of in-person and virtual engagement, coupled with a narrative inquiry framework, aimed to capture a holistic understanding of the educators' perspectives, ensuring a nuanced and comprehensive analysis for informing future educational practices and policies.

The questions posed revolved around what makes them passionate about being an educator and what challenges, obstacles and enabling factors they witness in education today. Discussion also referred to Policy and Practice as vision, inquiring on whose voice and whose vision they refer to. With regards to the future, educators were asked to discuss which factors influence where education is heading to in the future, and what they feel should urgently be changed in the education system.

The scripted questions which were planned to serve as catalysts for meaningful discussions, prompting educators to reflect on and share their insights regarding the evolving landscape of educational theory and practice were the following:

- What makes you passionate about being an educator?
- What made you decide to become an educator?
- What are the challenges you witness in education today?
- What are the obstacles?
- What are enabling factors?
- Policy and practice as vision
 - Whose voice? Whose vision?
- The future
 - Which factors influence where education is going in the future?
- What do you feel should urgently be changed in the education system?

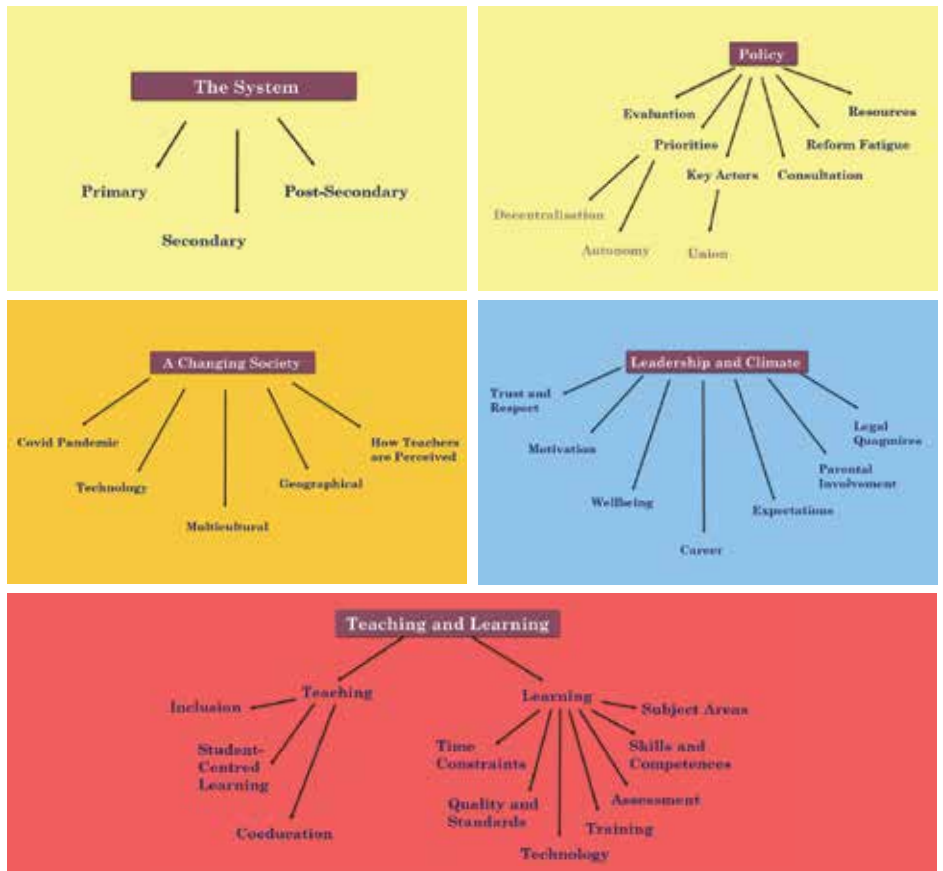
The data collected from the consultation meetings held with the educators who accepted our invitation were thematically analysed using the qualitative data software MAXQDA. Figure 1 presents an outline of the emerging themes and subthemes, which were:

- The system
- Policy

- A changing society
- Leadership and climate
- Teaching and learning

Figure 1

Emerging Themes and Subthemes from Consultation Exercise



Results and Discussion

The System... We Listened

The functioning of an education system has a profound impact on educators, influencing their ability to provide students with meaningful teaching and learning experiences. Ingersoll (2003) notes that organisational structures and policies within a system shape practices implemented by educators and teacher–student interactions. The systemic framework also plays a pivotal role in determining educators’ job satisfaction and overall wellbeing (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Hattie’s research (2009) emphasises that a supportive education system enhances educators’ capacity to create engaging learning environments, contributing to positive student outcomes. Conversely, challenges such as bureaucratic hurdles or resource deficiencies within a system can impede educators’ efforts, potentially compromising the quality of education (Darling–Hammond, 2017). Recognising and addressing systemic factors is essential for creating an environment that empowers educators and, consequently, enhances the overall educational experience for students.

Table 1

Feedback from Participants Discussing the Education System in Malta – The System

“... as if we are catering for the Chamber of Commerce.”	“The ‘why’ needs to be evaluated too.”
“The gap between the top and the bottom...”	“Coeducation is also a problem ... It is creating struggles for teachers ... however, segregation is not an option.”
“The salary continues to be the main problem.”	“Not enough foresight for changes in demographics...”
“How many of these people in power have their children in state schools themselves?”	“There is a lot of promotion within the film industry...”
“I am presenting those in power...”	“The system has deactivated the mind.”
“There is a feeling of having some sort of capital if your child attends a church school when this should be felt from families who attend a state school too.”	

The data collected from the consultation exercise referred to three main sectors within the education system, namely the primary, secondary (including middle) and post-secondary sectors. With reference to 'The System' educators feel that especially in the secondary, the curriculum is still too content-based, leading to repetition, fragmentation and an under-emphasis on skills. This has a detrimental effect on young people's journey in post-secondary education. Cross-curricular undertakings, because of fragmentation, are being overlooked. Some subjects are being afforded more status to the detriment of others. Transition programmes between the different levels of the educational journey need to be developed and implemented. Information on students either as they progress from one level to another or from one school to another is still not seamless as it should be. Moreover, educators expressed their concern that the college system cannot reap its desired benefits with large schools, increased levels of bureaucracy, and a sense of unwieldy competition between colleges.

Policy... We Listened

Educators' capacity to provide students with meaningful teaching and learning experiences is intricately linked to the policies within the education system. Ingersoll and Strong (2011) emphasise that policies governing teacher induction and mentoring programs significantly influence the professional development and effectiveness of educators. Additionally, the work of Johnson and Birkeland (2003) underscores how educational policies shape classroom practices and the overall educational environment. Hattie's comprehensive meta-analysis (2009) further accentuates the importance of policies that support a positive and collaborative school culture, enhancing both teacher satisfaction and student outcomes. Conversely, poorly designed or inadequately implemented policies can pose challenges, impeding educators' autonomy (Jaquith et al., 2010) and hindering their capacity to create innovative and engaging learning environments. Recognising the pivotal role of policy in education is essential for fostering an environment conducive to meaningful teaching and learning.

Table 2*Feedback from Participants Discussing the Education System in Malta – Policy*

"I hope the student is always the focal point."	"Reassess our understanding of 'success'..."
"A bottom-up approach is required... Policies are developed top down."	"The NCF is beautifully written..."
"There is a detachment from reality."	"Small communities ... bigger schools?"
"Logistically a space for discussion and conversation is impossible to work out. Curriculum Time is not serving this purpose..."	"There is more focus on paperwork."
"New management ... new policy."	"The first thing I would do is remove SEC exams ... then I would be able to start to teach."
"A reflection is required on how many subjects we have."	"Logistics are always a problem or an excuse."
"Consultations between subject areas did not happen and subjects didn't become less prescriptive."	

Participating educators during the consultation exercise emphasised the need for a bottom-up approach, with research being conducted before taking on newer avenues. The introduction of new additional roles and positions within the system does not seem to have translated into tangible improvements. There was an emphasis on the lack of teachers, which is having a detrimental effect on standards and status, particularly due to the system's dependence on personnel engaged on a supply basis. Young people considering a career in education might be put off following experiences in Foundation for Education Services' (FES) summer programmes as a result of their lack of formation. With regards to the engagement of educators within the various sectors, the educators in discussion feel that non-native qualified teachers should be considered for employment. On a personal level most educators who participated explained how they feel stretched as a result of various struggles they face, leading to a greater risk of burnout. The effects of the pandemic cannot be overemphasised, with suggestions for psychosocial teams working within schools considered as a way to alleviate the issue. The issues of salaries and slow progression, together with reform fatigue and a warrant independent

of professional development, are affecting the status of the profession. Transfers and redeployment of personnel are also negatively affecting any feeling of ownership and stability.

A Changing Society... We Listened

As our society undergoes dynamic changes, the education system must adapt to reflect these shifts within its frameworks, curriculum, syllabi, and the overall educational journey of students. Darling-Hammond (2017) underscores the necessity of aligning educational practices with the evolving needs of a changing world. The disconnect between educational frameworks and the realities of a transforming society can pose challenges for educators. Fullan (2014) highlights that educators may encounter difficulties teaching within a system that fails to grasp the complexities of the modern world. This misalignment can hinder educators from effectively preparing students for the demands of a rapidly evolving global landscape. Zhao (2012) argues that educational systems should focus on fostering creativity and adaptability, essential skills in a changing society. Furthermore, the work of Prensky (2001) emphasizes the importance of integrating technology in education to better prepare students for a digitally driven future. Recognizing the imperative to integrate contemporary societal changes into educational structures is crucial for fostering an environment where educators can successfully navigate and guide students through the challenges and opportunities presented by a changing world.

Throughout the discussions taking place as part of the consultation exercise, educators maintained that they are passionate about their vocation in education. They feel they thrive in collaborative working environments in which supporting actors are included. However, they explained that they feel as if they are preparing learners for the workforce rather than focusing on the holistic development of the learner which includes the acquisition of skills and competences. Educators feel there is a lack of foresight regarding changes in demographics which affect the teaching and learning occurring in schools. There was a varied response related to psychosocial support offered to schools. Some expressed a sense of relief that they can rely on this support, whilst others spoke of a lack of human resources in this sector leaving them struggling to face situations related to a changing society which also affect the daily running of a school. Educators strongly feel that we need to give a voice to diversity and a true sense to the meaning of inclusion. They also referred to

technology, which may be viewed as an obstacle, yet as educators they feel they should strive to consider it as an opportunity. The COVID-19 pandemic was also referred to as a learning experience as they had to resort to technology-enhanced teaching and learning as an integral part of their pedagogy.

Table 3

Feedback from Participants Discussing the Education System in Malta – A Changing Society

"Social mobility in Malta is one of the least in Europe."	"I find it difficult to project our future in education..."
"They came to Malta and their previous learning is completely kept aside."	"We need citizens who are critical thinkers."
"Curriculum needs to reflect diversity."	"Education must be provided on a deep sense of social justice."
"Too much focus on individuality."	"Standard of living does not only refer to the amount of money one has but also [to] the quality of skills one acquires."
"We feel that we are competing with social media and technology."	"A need for change in teacher mindset."
"The human being is evolving but our education system is not..."	

Leadership and Climate... We Listened

The impact of the education system on school leadership and the overall climate within schools is a critical aspect that influences the effectiveness of educational institutions. Sergiovanni's work (2005) posits that school leadership is intricately connected to the broader educational system, with systemic policies shaping the role of school leaders. School climate, as defined by Hoy and Tarter (1997), is affected by leadership practices, and both are influenced by the broader educational context. When school communities face challenges, such as resource deficiencies or inadequate support, the leadership within schools may struggle to foster a positive climate. Leithwood and Jantzi's research (2008) emphasises the importance of distributed leadership in addressing systemic challenges and enhancing the overall effectiveness of

school leadership. Understanding and addressing the impact of the education system on school leadership is crucial for promoting effective leadership practices and cultivating a healthy and supportive school climate.

Effective functioning school communities play a pivotal role in shaping the future of education, and school leaders are at the forefront of steering these communities toward success. As argued by Leithwood et al. (2017), the success of educational innovations depends on the collective efficacy within a school community, emphasizing the need for strong leadership. School leaders, equipped with the ability to navigate and adapt to the evolving landscape of education, contribute to the overall resilience of school communities in the face of change (Spillane, 2012). Building on the work of Fullan (2014), it becomes evident that successful school leaders are not only adept at managing immediate challenges but are also forward-thinking, envisioning and implementing strategies that align with the future needs of education. The support systems and professional development opportunities provided to school leaders are essential elements in ensuring their ability to lead effectively and to foster thriving school communities that are responsive to the demands of the future.

A specific factor which emerged from the consultation exercise was the need for critical engagement. Decisions need to be taken in schools rather than elsewhere, with an adequate quality assurance mechanism in place. Administrative issues and what was described as 'musical chairs' due to frequent changes in Senior Leadership Teams (SLT) were described as undermining effective leadership. Further training in legal issues was also emphasized.

Table 4*Feedback from Participants Discussing the Education System in Malta – Leadership and Climate*

"Schools are a safe place."	"There is a problem with ownership."
"I have sometimes needed to send teachers home to rest due to burnout."	"Transfers between schools disrupt belonging."
"I found a community of educators by coincidence."	"A sense of identity."
"It was very difficult when our previous head of school left."	"Schools need to decide themselves ... autonomy with accountability."
"Literacy assessments ... used to compare results between schools."	"Are we depending on home support?"
"Territorial thinking."	"The gaming industry invests in their employees' wellbeing..."

Leadership has a considerable effect on school climate. Educators should be trusted to a greater degree, so that through relative autonomy they can work towards a stronger school ethos. This can come about through the creation of more spaces for educators for critical engagement to learn from each other and through tailor-made continuous professional development to their specific needs. A strong ethos, based on tenets of democracy and social justice can come about even more through smaller school communities with less turnover of staff. Critical engagement of the community should focus on issues such as ways to address reliance on the home for educational progress, the validation of the cultural diversity children bring with them to school, increased relevance of the curriculum, and addressing the socio-economic gaps that privilege some over others. A stronger ethos will generate more motivation and a greater sense of wellbeing. Aspects affecting wellbeing were also identified and they included teacher shortage, student motivation, the focus on content, and adequate compensation for work, among others. Some felt that the feedback they give seems to have no impact and consultation is limited. This feels to them like not being respected and valued enough.

Teaching and Learning... We Listened

The influence of the education system on teaching and learning within schools is profound, shaping the educational experiences of both students and teachers. Darling-Hammond (2006) argues that the design and policies of the education system significantly impact teaching practices and, consequently, student outcomes. Additionally, the work of Bickmore et al. (2017) emphasises the importance of a supportive education system in fostering effective teaching and enhancing student learning experiences. However, when school communities face challenges, such as inadequate resources or systemic issues, the teaching and learning process may be significantly hindered.

It was interesting that during our discussions with educators, most spoke of their struggle to motivate disenchanted and disengaged learners. They related this to the lack of opportunity to incorporate a student-centred approach in all levels of education due to the vast syllabi which need to be covered, especially at secondary and post-secondary levels, in the learner's pursuit to acquire their MATSEC qualifications. They feel that the teacher's mindset needs to continue to develop towards that which focuses on a growth mindset, integrating the acquisition of 21st-century skills, lifelong learning skills and competences, discussions related to current issues which induce critical thinking, and fostering a cross-curricular approach. However, teachers also feel that for this to occur more time needs to be allocated to the possibility of professional learning communities, whereby educators can collaborate, besides revising the curriculum and syllabi for integration to be possible. At present, they feel the focus still lies on that which is academic, with the final destination of learners being exams they need to sit for. In relation to this, assessment was referred to as one which is still very much exam-oriented, some doubting how much the formative assessment aspect is actually being carried out as it was intended. Particular reference was made to the multicultural aspect of today's schools in Malta, many stating that whilst they care for all learners, they feel that our education system and the curriculum within are not designed to cater for a culturally diverse community. Adapting to regular changes within the system is also a struggle educators face, with some participants stating that we need to stop and reflect before new implementations or changes occur. Finally, and also in relation to this, emphasis was placed on how important the students' voice is, reiterating that whatever we do needs to be a reflection of this.

Table 5*Feedback from Participants Discussing the Education System in Malta – Teaching and Learning*

"I don't see myself as extinct."	"Various jobs ... but none gave satisfaction like teaching."
"A lot of fragmentation in secondary level between subjects."	"State school educators don't feel respected."
"Techers cannot settle down."	"Repetition of content is a very big problem at post-secondary level..."
"Just having the idea of choice does not mean it is a good choice."	"There is a feeling that as an educator if I do my job diligently and effectively or I do not care and go for traditional teaching, I am still going to get the same pay..."
"Lesson time is too short."	"I would be told to make do."
"We are partly to blame because we accept everything."	"Teaching ... not my first choice."
"Less content ... more skills."	

The Future Is Now

The voices of educators as represented above provide us with the opportunity to look into the rear-view mirror with the intention of deconstructing current practices and ideas that should propel us into the future. As we try to envision the future trajectory for the future of education within our unpredictable world, the indispensable significance of both students' and educators' voices emerges as a guiding force. The student's perspective, often an overlooked aspect, carries substantial weight in shaping educational practices. Mitra's study (2001) makes the point that students, as active participants in the learning process, possess unique insights into their educational experiences, preferences, and aspirations. Acknowledging and incorporating these voices in educational planning enriches the decision-making process, ensuring a more student-centred and responsive system as is recommended in our National Curriculum Framework itself (Ministry of Education & Employment, 2012).

Simultaneously, educators, as central stakeholders in the educational landscape, provide a critical lens through which to understand effective pedagogy and the evolving needs of diverse learners. Hargreaves and Fullan (2015) argue that the expertise of educators is an invaluable asset in crafting educational policies and practices. By considering the challenges and opportunities voiced by educators, educational planners can create a more nuanced and adaptive system. This dynamic interplay between student and educator voices not only validates their experiences but also lays the foundation for a collaborative and inclusive educational journey.

Cook-Sather et al. (2014) underscore the transformative potential of engaging students as partners in the learning and teaching process. This collaborative approach, where student and educator voices coalesce, fosters a shared responsibility for education. In the face of an unpredictable world, such collaborative planning becomes essential for creating an education system that is not only responsive to the current needs of students and educators but also anticipates and adapts to the unforeseen challenges of the future. In essence, the joint validity of student and educator voices is pivotal for steering the trajectory of education toward a more inclusive, flexible, and resilient future.

Table 6

Feedback from Participants Discussing the Education System in Malta

"We do not have the luxury to give up."	"Sowing a seed ..."
"Teacher agency."	"Give learners freedom, creativity and autonomy."
"The student is not a product."	"Education should push boundaries."
"We need to stop."	"Success is resilience."
"Schools should be built not by walls but by spaces."	"At least we should be having happy children."

Conclusion

In conclusion, crafting the future of education necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives of both educators and students. Engaging in consultation exercises, such as those advocated by Cook-Sather et al. (2014), and that which was carried out by the Institute for Education and is being referred to in this paper, becomes paramount. These exercises should actively seek voices, allowing experiences to directly inform policymaking.

Moreover, the dynamic interplay between student and educator voices, as discussed by Hargreaves and Fullan (2015), creates a collaborative environment essential for crafting an education system that is both responsive and anticipatory in the face of an unpredictable world. Such collaboration ensures that the educational journey provided to students extends beyond the academic realm. As Darling-Hammond (2006) emphasises, it should encompass the development of skills and competences that prepare students for the uncertainties of the future. The integration of both academic knowledge and practical skills is vital in equipping students with the tools needed to navigate the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

In this holistic approach to educational planning, meaningful engagement with the experiences and perspectives of both educators and students is pivotal. This collaborative effort, informed by direct information from those immersed in the educational process, lays the foundation for a resilient and adaptive education system capable of preparing students for the multifaceted demands of the future.

Notes on Contributors

Janice Darmanin was born in Australia. Her primary education was mostly at an Australian church school. She continued her education in Malta and graduated from the University of Malta with a Bachelor's degree in Maltese and Early & Middle Years. Her career in education includes being a primary school class teacher, teaching Personal and Social Development in the primary sector, and being appointed Assistant Head of School. She holds a Master's degree in Applied Educational Leadership with the Institute of Education, and is currently holding the role of Manager Research Analyst within the Institute for Education.

Mario Mallia is currently a full-time lecturer at the Institute for Education, focusing on critical pedagogy, gender, and science education. He was Head of a primary and secondary school for sixteen years, a Deputy Head, and a teacher of science. He holds

a Master's degree in Education, a postgraduate diploma in School Administration and Management, and a Bachelor in Education (Hons) degree from the University of Malta. He served, *inter alia*, as a board member of the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality and the Foundation of Educational Services for many years, besides, to date, being active in the political and social fields.

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