

Facing challenging situations in educational assessment: the parents' vision

by Leonard Grech

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Merely having a vision in life does not guarantee a successful solution to the various challenges we have to face. Having no vision at all, however, puts the individual or even the nation at a great disadvantage, rendering it unprepared for the constant changes of society. Ideally the source of change should be the vision itself.



In 1812 the British Government sent a Royal Commission to Malta to make a



report on various aspects of life on the island. Following an invitation to air their views, some Maltese sent letters to the commissioners. One of these was Onorato Bres who suggested that the Civil Commissioner (Governor) should be Maltese. This idealistic vision of Onorato Bres did not materialize during his lifetime, but at least, like other Maltese, he had a vision.

The Maltese have kept alive their political aspirations throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, and this has given them a sense of direction, which in the end has led them not only to Independence and to the establishment of the Republic, but also to membership in the European Union. The diversity of opinion that accompanied such changes helped clarify our aspirations and allowed us to plan accordingly. Indeed, I believe that so far our story has been one of success that now simply needs to unfold further. And this is where educational reforms fit in. Politics and education go hand in hand, influencing each other for better or for worse. We have moved forward politically because we have not been scared to carry out educational reforms that strengthened our educational system. I believe that there cannot be political progress without educational progress. Stagnation in the latter sphere renders a country more prone to less democratic forms of government. It is education which helps citizens to make the right political choices. This very often involves the skill of detecting bias and avoiding to fall easy prey to propaganda attempts.

Within the realm of education one can never say that one has arrived and that all goals have been achieved because education is a reflection of society, and society is always changing. Challenging situations never cease to arise and whether we like it or not we must take action. We should never allow ourselves to be cornered and forced to adopt crisis management. We have to be on the attack rather than on the defence. In other words we have to be proactive. We have to fight the attitude: ‘Why mend a jar which is not broken’. Fear of change and of the unknown can make us, directly or indirectly, supporters of the status quo. This in itself is a challenge we have to face: how to persuade people of the need to foresee the future and plan ahead. Furthermore, when we plan we have to be bold enough to look at the wider picture

and if need be to move away from traditional frameworks. I believe that educators are attempting to do this (although admittedly not always fast enough), however parents as prime stakeholders, and also the general public, do not seem to be feeling the need to present their views regarding possible solutions to challenging educational situations. Due to space constraints I shall limit myself only to some educational issues facing learners up to the age of eleven.

We definitely need to focus on the question of assessment practices. Our NMC states that during the first three years of primary schooling we have to concentrate on formative assessment. It seems that we are not yet sure what we mean by 'formative assessment' which is often being wrongly used as a substitute term for 'continuous assessment'. The objective of formative assessment is to facilitate learning. In formative assessment (a) we refrain from resorting to regular summative assessment practices such as tests and examinations (b) we measure progress not for the sake of finding out how much the child has learnt but in order to help the individual make further progress (c) we do not compare children's achievements and therefore we eliminate old fashioned practices such as 'place in class' (d) we are only allowed to compare the child's present achievement with his or her own past performance.

These last two points may need some clarification particularly because many educators feel the need to compare children to an outside standard. They insist on benchmarking mainly for two reasons (a) to make sure that national standards do not fall and (b) to find out whether the child has reached a particular standard by a certain age. Without denying the advantages of benchmarking, I think we should emphasise

the notion of educating **individuals**. We have to constantly keep in mind the fact that each child has his or her own strengths and weaknesses that have to be developed **individually** and that therefore every child's work continuously creates the standard by which that same work should be judged. By having as a point of comparison the child's own past performance, brilliant children will be able to reach their potential without being hindered by the notion of their having already reached some form of standard. Similarly less gifted children will not constantly be viewed as not being good enough. Instead of pointing out how less good they are than others (which is negative), we can point out for example how much better they are doing than last year (which is positive).

This is the philosophy behind the concept of ipsative assessment which goes hand in hand with formative assessment. We help the child to reach his or her 'personal best', develop what is considered to be 'the potential'. This is in the best interest of the less and the more able child. We need to concentrate on learning, and not on tests and examinations. We need to emphasise formative assessment in Years Four, Five and Six of the primary. My hope is that one day this vision will be shared by other educators including parents.

Researching what is happening abroad is commendable, but we cannot import a system lock, stock and barrel. Such a 'quick fix' does not work, because a foreign system may not be appropriate for the local context. What we need to do is to continue to develop and fine-tune our own educational set-up. But before decisions are taken we need to share, discuss, and clarify ideas. We should approach such discussions with an open mind and be ready to evaluate innovative measures. Perhaps

the situation is more difficult for parents than for other stakeholders because they tend to support models that they **perceive** to be to the best advantage of their **own** child. Probably we need to be more objective in our attitude and have the courage to support ideas that guarantee the common good and that are in the best interest of **all** the children regardless of ability. There still are parents and some educators who maintain that schools are there primarily to cater for the 'able' pupils. After all, some argue, if everyone becomes 'educated' who is going to perform the menial jobs! This is the kind of philosophy that consciously or not makes us adopt and stick to traditional



Thyne, J.M., (1974), *Principles of Examining*, University of London Press, London

methods of teaching even though we know that these are failing to help a substantial number of pupils. Moreover we attempt to design a curriculum which we impose on one and all - one dress fits all. Then, to add insult to injury, we wonder why a number of pupils do not register any progress. We have to cater for the low achiever as well as for the specially gifted. Sometimes I wonder whether our educational system is merely reaching the average student, and ignoring almost completely those

at the extreme ends of the scale. Many educators including parents present streaming as an easy solution to this problem. But is it?

We've been discussing for a very long time issues such as streaming, setting (a possible alternative to streaming which brings together for particular lessons students of the same ability in specific subjects) as well as the Junior Lyceum Entrance Examination into Form 1. It seems that we are stuck. Perhaps we are not yet sure which is the best way forward. A total abolishment of the method of streaming and the Junior Lyceum Examination would probably seem outrageous to many. Would parents support such a courageous change? Would it be wise to take such a drastic measure when we know that the Common Entrance Examination is still in place? Most probably the answer is a big NO to both questions. But fortunately there are other options. If we succeed in solving the logistical problems involved, the government could have its own schools or colleges set up on the same lines as a number of Church Schools in which primary and secondary school children are under the same roof. We could start, perhaps with Karwija College. The first intake could be, for example, one hundred and eighty students in Form 1 (these would have passed the Junior Lyceum Entrance Examination) and three hundred and sixty students (drawn by lot after a call for applications) to make up three classes each in Years 1 to 4. This would mean that during the first year there would be one hundred and eighty vacant places in the Junior Lyceums. Such empty places could be replaced by Year 4 classes within the Junior Lyceums themselves which would be filled by pupils again drawn by lot after a call for applications. I suggest Year 4 and not Year 6 pupils so that the first intake into the present Junior Lyceums will have three full years to settle down in this set-up before starting secondary education. Over a number of years the

government would have its own colleges while the Junior Lyceum Examination would still be held. Of course, gradually it would be phased out. One wonders how parents would react to such ideas!

At one time the government had the idea of “grouping primary and secondary schools together by region to form single entities” (*The Times*, 6 June, 2003). This could have been a step forward but the project had to be altered. There is now the idea of ‘clustering’ and ‘networking’ particular schools (for example a network of the ex-opportunity centres, and another network of schools in Gozo). Although remaining semi-independent such schools would collaborate with each other, share good practice, and move forward together under the leadership of an able and charismatic co-ordinator. I am sure that this can have some advantages over the present system although one has to constantly keep in mind that we are **not** strong on collegiality or team building. Moreover such a measure would not in any way solve the issue of the Junior Lyceum Entrance Examination. We have to find ways and means (as explained above) of rendering this examination less and less important, until hopefully, one day, it becomes extinct. But that day will never arrive until agreement is reached with the Church authorities regarding the Common Entrance Examination which is in reality a means of selecting the crème de la crème of eleven-year-old boys. I believe it is high time that the Church tackles this delicate situation. Perhaps one day the church will set up even more all-age schools and colleges.

I believe this should be our common vision. Let parents exercise their right and their duty to express their informed opinion. Let us as a unified community have the courage to move forward in the creation of a sound and just educational system

that gives a chance to one and all. This would guarantee a successful future for our country. Let us always keep in mind that education, which includes attitudes and values, is the heart and soul of every other aspect of society. This is my vision. Perhaps one day, just like the vision of Onorato Bres, it will materialise.
