

Research Paper

From inspection of schools to quality assurance in schools? External quality assurance for school improvement in a post-colonial micro-state: Malta

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Contextualization

Malta is a micro-state archipelago in the middle of the Mediterranean with over 420,000 inhabitants and the population density is 1,562 per square kilometre (National Statistics Office, 2012), one of the highest in the world. It has a two-thousand-year-old history of colonialism, up to Independence in 1964. In comparison with most of Europe, Maltese society is still relatively culturally homogenous, with the Catholic Church still the dominant religious force in society, although now holding much less social and cultural sway than in its heyday up to the 19th century.

Abstract: *School inspection has been a feature of Maltese state education for 172 years, soon after the start of British colonial rule in Malta in 1800. It was an integral part of the uncritical educational policy transfer at the time, and was suffused with the colonial rhetoric of panoptic central control and paternalistic oversight. However, by the 1990s this panoptic paradigm of school inspection was increasingly being challenged. Malta's 2006 Education Act represents a watershed in Maltese education with its focus on quality education and quality assurance across all education sectors, including compulsory education. This paper discusses how and why this transformation was attempted, and its relationship to Malta's post-colonial micro-state reality.*

Introduction

State school inspection has been a feature of Maltese state education for 172 years (Zammit Mangion, 1992), soon after the start of British colonial rule in 1800. This article discusses the development of the school inspection paradigm during the British colonial period and examines the nexus between this colonial experience and Malta's "absolute conditions" (Friggieri, 1995) that derive from its micro-state reality, and to what extent these conditions have exacerbated this colonial experience yet have also provided scope for resilience. Finally, the article also explores why and how school inspection has been replaced by external quality assurance for school improvement in primary and secondary schools.

Framework & Methods

This paper is partly based on the author's professional experience in quality assurance since 2009, and partly on research of primary sources related to school inspection and external audit during the 19th and 20th centuries in Malta. Primary sources include inspection registers, school log books and visitors' books, classroom attendance registers, as well as teachers', schools' and national inspection reports, that are conserved in the National Archives of Malta and were examined for the first time for this type of analysis.

The four theoretical traditions and sensitizing concepts that form a composite conceptual framework that is used as a theoretical 'lens' with which to reflect critically on the development of school inspection and quality assurance in Malta include:

- the 'absolute conditions' and resilience of small island states;

- colonial and post-colonial studies including the concepts for subaltern agency and coloniality;
- the concept of paradigm and paradigm shift as adapted to the educational context, and
- two items from the Foucauldian toolkit of power and control, specifically the concepts of archaeological analysis and the Panopticon.

Malta's 'absolute conditions'

There are various definitions of state 'smallness' (Sultana, 2006; Bray, 2011), and Malta fits within even the most stringent of these, of not more than one million inhabitants. This physically constricting environment engenders: "the absolute conditions within which the Maltese mind has to operate" (Friggieri, op. cit. p.110), what Briguglio (2014) calls the inherent context of small island states. Amongst these are: *isolation* and *smallness*. Maltese are *isolated*, both literally and metaphorically, from mainland Europe and Africa. Its rocky shores form outer ramparts to the bastions that ring the island, from pre-historic walls to the High Renaissance behemoths that enclose the Grand Harbour.

Malta is *small*, forever being measured and measuring itself against much bigger, more powerful and influential nations. Malta has been in a continuous state of being-as-colony for almost all its recorded history of over two millennia, as the cumulative "invention by the global of the local as native" (Baldacchino, 1997 p.60) by some of the greatest empires in history, with its inevitable effect on national identity. Baldacchino (op. cit.) has a similar take on the constrictions of an island micro-state, two of which are *intimacy* and *monopoly*. Baldacchino's *intimacy* is a corollary to Friggieri's (op. cit.) *smallness*. In *intimacy* the healthy separation between public/professional and private is blurred and one's private space shrinks, also because of the effect of monopoly discussed later. This atmosphere breeds dissimulation, a guardedness that one can never be completely divested of without the fear of negative consequences. Sutton refers to the dangers of what he calls "exaggerated personalism" (Sutton, 2007 p.203). Mayo, Pace and Zammit (2008) discuss the limitations intimacy poses to adult education provision in small states. In my research as part of my educational doctorate I described how the multiple intermeshing levels of networking in a small island community – what Bray (op. cit. p.47) calls "multiplex relationships" – act as an inverse social panopticon, within which the inhabitants feel that they are 'already known' and have no real anonymity (Spiteri, 2014). *Monopoly*, which is equivalent to Sutton's "government pervasiveness" (Sutton, op. cit. p. 203), refers to the ubiquitousness of the state apparatus in everyday interactions, and therefore the shift in the balance of power that effects all spheres of life: "Small state government is characteristically weighty and omnipresent and, as a result, omnipotent." (Baldacchino, op. cit. p. 69).

Maltese characteristics of isolation, smallness, intimacy and monopoly further exacerbated the effects of Malta's colonial heritage of paternalistic governance in and panoptic control through state educational inspection.

School inspection as clerico-colonial accommodation

Throughout most of the British colonial rule of Malta that lasted from 1800 to 1964, education was not simply caught up in the politics of the times but was part of its very fabric. Education – the language of instruction, the quality and extent of elementary and secondary education, the constitution of, access to and teaching in the University of Malta – was a key battleground for the soul of the nation. Education was where the irresistible force of the 'civilizing' project of the Empire met the immovable wall of resistance of the Catholic Church and the legal-nobility-ecclesiastical class that sheltered behind it – with unexpected results.

In 1800 the Maltese were not “colonized” but had “spontaneously placed themselves under the protection of the British Crown” (Savona, 1870. p.13). However, the Treaty of Paris of 1814 rode roughshod over the pleas of the Maltese representatives (Laspina, 1966), and the British from the outset viewed Malta primarily as a militaristic entity (Frendo, 1979), a sort of unsinkable battleship (Hull, 1993). The Maltese ruling classes felt betrayed and ignored (Frendo, *ibid.*), and found refuge and support around the two values that distinguished them from their new rulers: Catholic Religion and Italian culture (Brincat, 2000). They were rooted in a culture, in the widest sense of the word, that was so different from that of the British that the latter called Valletta, Malta’s capital city, “the most tranquil city in Italy” (Hull, *op. cit.* p.6). The British understood that their successful presence in Malta depended on respecting the rights and privileges of the dominant socio-political force in Malta, the Catholic Church:

(The Church) passed into the new century and the new regime virtually undisturbed by the Revolutionary crisis that had convulsed Catholic organization elsewhere, and emerged increasingly as the distinctive Maltese national institution, the one Maltese body which treated the British overlords on a basis of something like equality (Vella, 1969 p.73).

They knew that because of the fear of Protestant proselytism, the Catholic Church viewed the increased provision of education to the masses, and especially the teaching of English therein, with deep suspicion (Sultana, 1992 p.41, 42; Chircop, 2001). On the other hand, the Catholic Church in Malta had got a bitter taste of the French Republic’s revolutionary anti-clericalism during its occupation of Malta from 1798 to 1800, and by comparison could countenance the establishment of a wary *modus vivendi* with the High-Church Anglican land-owning politico-military establishment of the Imperial government and its representatives in Malta, with whom they could forge a “community of practical interest.” (Vella, *op. cit.* p.73).

Thus, the Maltese colonial government’s paramount need to co-exist and co-operate with the Catholic Church in Malta was met with the Church’s desire to re-establish its pre-eminent position. It was this *realpolitik* engendered by the “agency of the subaltern” (Carrim, 2009) that led to the colonial government taking a pragmatic, *laissez-faire* attitude to the development of education, whilst at the same time keeping a steely grip on Malta’s political, military and economic levers of power. It protected the Church from Protestant proselytism (Bezzina, 1988; Chircop, *op. cit.*), and in spite of the negative comments of the Royal Commission of 1836 and the Colonial government committee of 1865, up to the 1870s the British colonial government either took steps to actively prevent the spread of popular education (Bezzina, *op. cit.* p.49) or acted sluggishly to implement needed reforms.

Additionally, during this same period the Catholic Church, which already had an almost monopolistic position in private elementary schooling, was allowed *de facto* exclusive control over the state elementary school sector, including its direction and inspection. In return, the Church ensured that these schools taught their pupils the advantages of belonging to, and deference towards, the Empire. The top civil servants who were in charge of elementary education for the first 80 years of the British period – except for one year – were all clerics. The purposive and systematic inspection of elementary schools started in 1843, with the setting up of the Department of Primary Schools.

The most influential Director or Chief Inspector, Canon Paolo Pullicino, served (although it may be more appropriate to say ‘ruled’) for thirty years from 1850 to 1880. He exerted complete control on every aspect of school life and learning, down to its smallest minutiae, including the physical posture that teachers had to have during teaching (NAM, 1860). Pullicino personally appointed and trained the teachers, examined the pupil-teachers who would go on to support the teaching in the Monitorial system, designed the syllabi and distributed resources, inspected schools, examined and promoted students (in the same format as Her Majesty’s Inspectorate, or HMI, during the Payment by Results period in the UK from 1862 to 1895). He was practically

a one-man department. He visited/inspected most schools at least twice a year, and sometimes three or four times. Canon Pullicino set the tone for a maximalist form of school inspection that was to remain fundamentally unchanged in its core orientation until the 1970s.

The Empire Strikes Back

The balance of opposing interests that led to the *laissez-faire* attitude of the colonial government with respect to the control of Maltese education in the first half of the 19th century was upset by the advent of the unification of Italy in the second half of the century and its attendant increase in Italian nationalism. During the unification struggle Malta hosted hundreds of Italian exiles; Garibaldi himself visited the Italian exiles in Malta (Frendo, op. cit. p.4). The Italian poet Giovanni Pascoli would later call Malta “the spiritual colony of Dante under the British flag” (Brincat, op. cit. p.143). This Italian nationalism had a galvanic effect on Maltese nationalist aspirations (Brincat, 2001). Concurrently, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the much more aggressive imperialism characterized by armed antagonism between the European colonial powers, that would ultimately lead to the Great War of 1914, meant that the colonial policy of the British Empire in Malta as from the 1870s became much more interventionist.

This new interventionist approach also directly affected educational policy and its implementation. It was now certainly in the best interests of the Empire, notwithstanding the continued objections of the Catholic Church, to ensure the effective Anglicization of Malta. Indeed, the Catholic Church was now blamed by leading imperialists and their Maltese proxies for being largely responsible for retarding the mental culture of the Maltese and the deplorable state of public schooling (Chircop, 2001). What was politically expedient in the first half of the 19th century was now unacceptable.

A complete overhaul of the education system was seen to be required, as well as a much more hands-on approach to its monitoring through inspection to ensure that the “colonial cultural project” (Chircop, op. cit. p.130) was fulfilled. In the report of the 1878 Royal Commission led by Sir Patrick Keenan, Pullicino was damned with faint praise for being a jack-of-all-trades: “the administrator, the inspector, the guide and the mainstay of the whole system of Primary Schools” (Keenan, 1879 p.47), however with little positive results. He was considered as an impediment to the new imperialist educational policy agenda, and in 1880 was replaced with the first of a series of anglophile (and secular) Directors of Education.

Post-Keenan educational provision and inspection were suffused with the rhetoric and practice of paternalistic oversight that, if anything, was even sharper than Pullicino’s way of proceeding, as a “hegemonic apparatus” (Mayo, 2012 p.96) of the Colonial state to ensure that the imperial cultural project was implemented. Under the new anglophile Directors of Education, textbooks, school events and even the classroom learning space itself were transformed to implement the imperialist cultural programme of the state. “What counted as knowledge was what worked in securing consent for domination” (Said, 2001 p.198). Multiple inspections from a variety of sources, as discussed later, ensured that the objectives of the imperial cultural project were achieved. In the “General Regulations relative to the Government Elementary Schools” of 1898 the first duty of the Director of Elementary Schools was: a) To inspect as often as possible the schools of elementary instruction; b) To carefully enquire into the progress of the instruction imparted and into the observance or otherwise of the regulations (Government of Malta, 1898).

The Panoptic Inspection Paradigm

Figure 1 below brings together the mechanisms for educational inspection and audit for elementary schools, or what in Foucauldian terms (Foucault, 1979) could be called the technology of inspectorial power, that were constructed and in operation during the British period. It indicates which inspection/audit mechanism reported on which entity, to whom the

<http://www.educatejournal.org>

report was made, and how the report was disseminated. It also indicates the hierarchy of inspection mechanisms, with the Director of Education inspecting the Head of school, while being himself (all Directors of Education were males until the 1970s) audited by the Commissions and Committees.

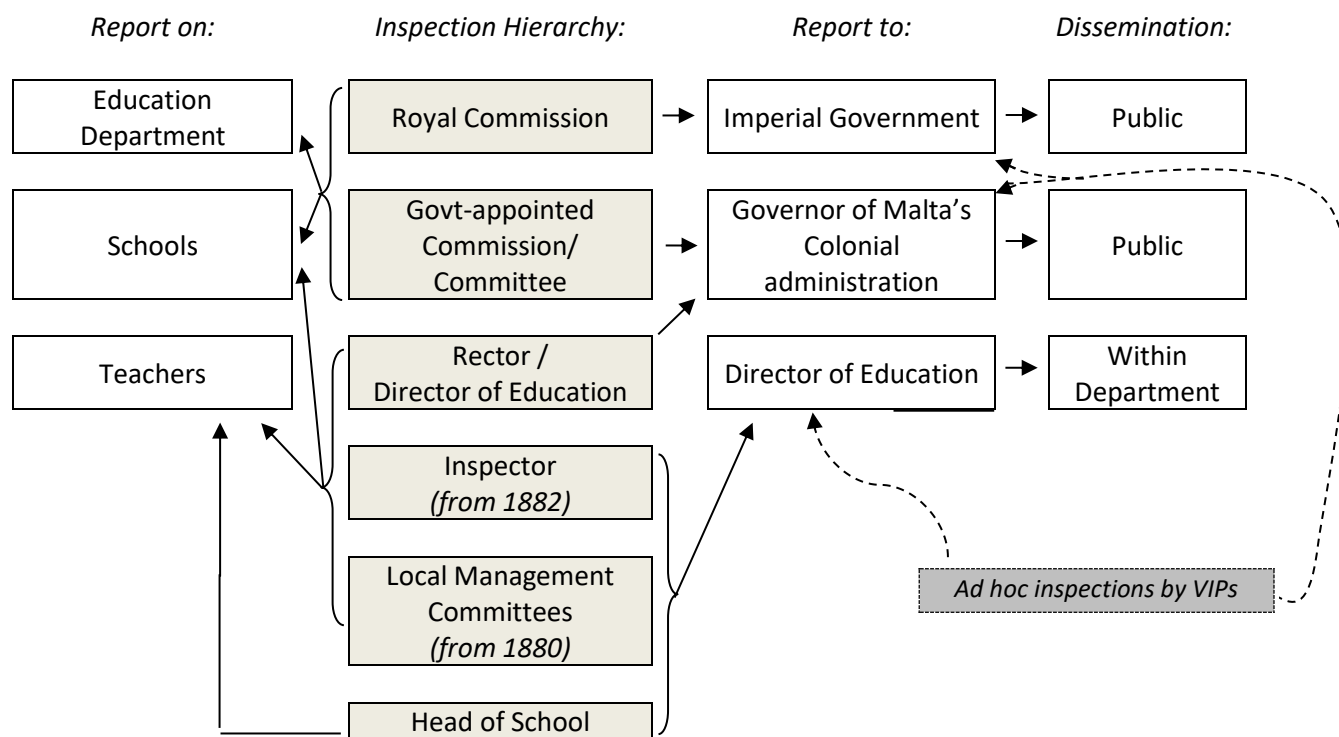


Figure 1. Educational inspection mechanisms for elementary schools during the British period

Not all the components of this mechanism were in place or operational all the time: the Local Management Committees proposed by the Royal Commission of 1878 and in place in 1880, which were mandated to make weekly inspections and regular reports, seem not to have survived much beyond 1887. An additional mechanism in dotted line has been included representing *ad hoc* informal inspections. These were English VIPs, top colonial administration officials and senior British Army or Navy officers, whose one-off visits were not less consequential in terms of their inspectorial potency for being informal. There can be little doubt that the perceptions and judgements of the high-ranking Maltese and English men who performed these 'informal' inspections percolated back, directly or indirectly, to the Director of Education, the Colonial government in Malta and even the Imperial Government in London. Schools were instructed to accept such visits, take note of comments made, inform the central authorities and take action within the school (see for example NAM, 1853).

The Figure indicates that teachers in state elementary schools during the British period were subject from time to time to between two and four separate and simultaneous formal inspection regimes, that ranged in intensity from once a week to once a term. The elementary schools were subject to formal inspection or auditing by between three and four different roles or entities. The Education Department was subject to several external audits at Colonial or Imperial government level throughout the British period.

By today's standards, this cacophony of overlapping high-stakes inspection mechanisms would be considered a case of educational strangulation by inspection. These mechanisms had different foci, audiences and stated objectives, and the pre-Keenan inspections entailed a much greater involvement of the Catholic Church than in the post-Keenan period. But all these

inspections and audits were high-stakes affairs for all their recipients and significantly affected their future. They directly impacted job retention, pay increases, promotion prospects, and whether schools were opened or shut, and heads of school and even Directors retained or removed. They all had a common understanding of the role of inspection that emanated from a shared set of beliefs about the nature of society, Empire, Church, and learning.

Nineteenth century Maltese society was highly stratified in terms of rigid class structures and feudal demarcations (Sultana, 1992 Chapter 2). And in spite of the influence of illuminism (Ciappara, 2014; Montebello, 2013) and nationalism (Frendo, 1979; Mallia-Milanes, 1988) on some exponents of the ruling classes and groups (Bluet, 1989 p.164), these demarcations were still largely operant up to the beginning of the 20th century. The well-known contemporary Anglican hymn 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' was applicable just as well to Catholic Malta:

*The rich man in his castle
The poor man at his gate
God made them high and lowly,
And ordered their estate.*

A key function of schooling was the reproduction of this stratification (Sultana 1992 and Johnson 2000). In this stratified world-view, it was the Roman Catholic Church and the Empire, as the twin summits of Maltese 19th century political, cultural and social life, that had the power to select and validate the knowledge to be taught and even teaching methods to be used in schools. And if the Empire's self-justification was its 'civilising mission' towards the 'natives' in the colonies as discussed previously, that of the Catholic Church had an even higher calling: the saving of souls by the safeguarding and inculcation of Truth in the education of the young. Indeed, the 1929 Papal encyclical "Divini Illius Magistri" stated that: "For in this work the teacher, whether public or private, has no absolute right of his (sic.) own, but only such as has been communicated to him by others. Besides every Christian child or youth has a strict right to instruction in harmony with the teaching of the Church" (Divini Illius Magistri, clause 57).

This set of core beliefs can be considered the 'inner core' of the educational paradigm (Lakatos, 1970; Wain, 1987) within which both the Catholic Church and the British Empire were operating in the 19th and early 20th century in Malta. We can conclude that in terms of the implications of this inner core for the inspection of government schools and the University during the 19th century, there was no difference in practice whether the dominant force was the Catholic Church, the British Empire, or the Empire through its Maltese Civil Service Catholic proxies, loyal to both the Church and the Empire.

Within this paradigm, the function of educational inspection was primarily to ensure comprehensive surveillance, control and enforcement over every aspect of educational endeavour, and complete compliance to externally mandated norms, procedures and expectations over which teachers and schools had neither influence nor control. The audit aspect of the mechanism of educational inspection, which was carried out by the various Commissions and Committees, had an overt political function. These audits or inspections were justified not simply by the state of educational provision and the duty of the Colonial government to improve it, but especially from 1880 onwards by the Government's politico-cultural agenda. Conversely, these audits often led to reforms the impact of which went well beyond the strictly educational and touched upon issues of Imperial acculturation and political power.

The inspection mechanism also had a less overt economic function. It was far cheaper for the authorities to cover the costs of the Director and his few inspectors, than to provide the appropriate level of both capital and recurrent expenditure to properly address educational needs for the 'masses'. This mechanism "responsabilised" teachers (Ball and JuneMann, 2012) in the sense that it placed the overt responsibility of the outcomes of schooling on them,

without however allowing them the resources and empowerment to fulfil such a task. The constant refrain of the Directors and their inspectors in the Inspection Registers and the yearly reports was that more and better school space was required, more resources for teachers and teacher training, and better pay to retain good teachers. Perhaps the cruellest irony was that the Directors and inspectors who constantly complained about lack of funds were themselves the primary instrument of the surveillance, control and enforcement mechanism that provided justification for and perpetuated this state of affairs.

The technology of educational inspection during the British colonial period in the 19th and early 20th century can be seen as a panoptic apparatus of power, all the more powerful because of Malta's 'absolute conditions' discussed previously. This technology can be seen as operating within the Panoptic Inspection Paradigm. In spite of the dissolution of the British Empire and the repudiation of the Imperial cultural project with the end of the Second World War, the living legacy of colonialism in Malta's educational structures, including inspection, persisted even after Malta's independence in 1964. The evidence comes from the teacher and school inspection reports up to the 1970s held by the Maltese National Archives. Quijano (2008) terms this perpetuation of the colonial mind-set the "coloniality of power". This refers to the reproduction and naturalisation of the colonial logic of power and its attendant social asymmetries beyond the formal severance of political ties of a newly sovereign state and into its post-colonial period. Coloniality represents the ultimate Stockholm syndrome.

The role of the colonial master was taken up by the centralized bureaucracy of an all-pervasive national state, exacerbated by Malta's micro-state characteristics as discussed in the next section. The concept of school inspection was enshrined in law in the Education Act of 1974 and retained in the 1988 Education Act. The Minister had the right to approve school licences, impose regulations and inspect both state and non-state schools. The National Minimum Conditions of 1994 established the obligation of a three-year school inspection cycle for all state and non-state schools. This inspection was almost wholly intended to monitor regulatory compliance; the Conditions included just a single reference to inspections also reviewing non-specified "standards of education imparted" (Ministry of Education, 1994 Regulation 10.2).

By the 1990s, however, this panoptic paradigm of education inspection was already in decline. In practice few school inspections as mandated by the 1994 regulations were actually done, and they did not have the scope and 'bite' of the old inspections – they were little more than advisory visits. In the state sector teacher inspections continued, but had hardly any consequence. The last-ditch attempt to re-assert the panoptic paradigm of education inspection was made in 2005 when a school inspection programme was set up based on industrial total quality management models. It ran for two years and 24 inspections, until the increasing resentment in schools led to industrial action that blocked any further inspections since they were seen as intrusive, demeaning and unhelpful (MUT, 2008).

Small-state resilience as anamorphic thinking

Any attempt to transform the panoptic inspection paradigm discussed in the previous sections faced a three-fold challenge:

- Any sort of state educational oversight would be seen as a vestige and marker of colonial legacy and interpreted as state panoptic control;
- A history of heavy-handed state experimental intervention in compulsory educational provision as a result of monopoly;
- The lack of anonymity and psychological 'distance' between a prospective external reviewer and the reviewed institution due to the intimacy of Malta's social networking.

What was required was a new way of looking at Malta's 'absolute conditions'. These are certainly not unique to Malta; they are a characteristic shared by many similar states across

continents and regions. Both UNESCO and the Commonwealth Secretariat have been active since the 1980s in highlighting the situation of small island states. Baldacchino and Farrugia (2002), Sultana (2006), Mayo (2010), Crossley, Bray and Packer (2011), Crossley and Sprague (2012) and Jules (2012), amongst others, have explored the “predicament” engendered by the small island status and, increasingly in the 21st century, also the opportunities therein. Jules calls this the anamorphic perspective, since head-on the situation of small island states may look distorted and deficit-based (Sultana, 2006; Baldacchino, 2012) and thus requiring external support, but if perceived from a different angle reveals hidden harmonies and potential.

Briguglio (op. cit.) has developed the concept of resilience in the context of the economic well-being of small states. It is defined as “the extent to which an economy can withstand or bounce back from the negative effects of external shocks. As such, it can be considered as the obverse of economic vulnerability.” (Briguglio, op. cit. p.14). Resilience in this discourse relates to the policy action that a small state may choose to take to address its inherent vulnerability due to increased exposure to external events. During the Peoples’ Forum that was part of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Malta in November 2015, the concept of resilience was widened beyond its economic origins:

While dominant and hegemonic interpretations and narratives of resilience present it as the capacity to respond to shocks and vulnerability, a more compelling narrative is to consider “resilience as life” – an inherent capacity in all living organisms to adapt to contextual changes without collapsing, and to advance to the next stage of life with the capacity to self-organise and repair the root-causes of vulnerability. (Commonwealth Foundation, 2015)

Resilience is therefore about continuous adaptation; in the colonial and post-colonial context, it is a function of the agency of the subaltern. For, as Carrim points out, “(the) subaltern condition is not fixed, but is always in a state of flux, presenting the potential of counter-hegemonic ideas.” (Carrim, 2009 p.768).

The concepts of resilience and anamorphic perspective allow us to perceive that small island states can have the capacity to use ‘their lemons to make lemonade’. So, while as we have seen Baldacchino (op. cit.) refers to intimacy, Lowenthal refers to managed intimacy: “Small-state inhabitants learn to get along, like it or not, with folk they will know in myriad contexts over their whole lives. To enable the social mechanism to function without due stress, they minimise or mitigate overt conflict.” (Lowenthal, 1987 p.39). Sutton refers to the potential positive effects of what he calls “concerted social harmony” (Sutton, op. cit. p.204). Bray also observes that: “The multiplex characteristics and need for managed intimacy in small states may be forces for conservatism, but they may also provide social cohesion and links that promote innovation.” (Bray, op. cit. p.56). As Sultana (2010 p.140) pithily puts it: “Small *can* be beautiful.”

The final part of this paper discusses how Malta has attempted to “think outside the small-state box”, to come up with anamorphic solutions with respect to the legacy of school inspection and the need to ensure quality in education provision.

From inspection to quality assurance – a paradigm shift?

A main reason for the decline of the old panoptic inspection paradigm can be found in the ideological challenge that the old paradigm started to be subjected to, at first just notionally but then with increasing force, by the emerging school improvement paradigm of teacher professional status and the role of the school community as the primary site for reflective practice and development (Consultative Committee on Education 1995). This emerging

paradigm challenged the old notion of teachers and schools being limited to the mindless and disempowering reproduction of centrally mandated, and outdated, practices.

Furlong, Barton, Miles, Whiting and Whitty (2000), amongst others, identify specialized training as one of the distinguishing components of professionalism. Indeed, the slow rise in the status of Maltese teachers beginning from the first quarter of the 20th century to the granting of professional status through the 1988 Education Act, matches ever-increasing pre-service training requirements. In 1978 teacher pre-service training was elevated to undergraduate level, and as from 2016 it has risen again to masters level. As teachers' status and their ownership of the educational process and its outcomes increased, so did their impatience with centralised control and disempowering inspections.

The 2006 Education (Amendments) Act (Government of Malta, 2006) represents a watershed in Maltese education, from primary schooling to further education and tertiary provision. It restructured state compulsory education into primary and secondary school networks, called Colleges, with the aim of increasing school autonomy and improving standards. As a corollary to the setting up of the Colleges, the Act replaced the old monolithic state education authority with two central state entities, the Directorate for Educational Services (DES) and the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE). The DQSE has mainly an educational policy development and quality assurance role, and includes the new Education Inspectorate (Government of Malta, op. cit. Part IV), which I led from 2009 to 2012, when a new external quality assurance mechanism for schools was developed and implemented.

A running theme and innovation in all the amendments of the 2006 Act was the focus on quality education and quality assurance. The Act can therefore be seen as the starting point for the development of a quality culture across Maltese educational provision. The setting up of the Colleges was part of a chain of reforms in compulsory education intended to develop a comprehensive ecosystem for school improvement. This included the removal of streaming and 11+ exams and the replacement of a tripartite secondary education system with new inclusive secondary schools (Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sports, 2007), a new National Curriculum Framework (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2012) and a new national Learning Outcomes Framework (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2015). Quality assurance is now embedded in the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014).

Of course, the concept of a quality culture in education is not a new one. The 2015 Eurydice report "Assuring Quality in Education" highlighted the policies and approaches to school evaluation in countries around Europe that, amongst other things, are intended to develop a culture of self-evaluation in schools: "quality assurance systems need to be based on principles that go beyond a mere 'checklist' approach: we need to foster a culture that strives to constantly improve the quality of teaching and learning" (Eurydice European Unit, 2015 p.3).

The quality culture heralded by the 2006 Act had a coherent ideology across sectors. In compulsory education, the Education Inspectorate was empowered to operate in function of the primary objective to do so "in support of the evaluation and the internal audit of every school" (Government of Malta, 2006 Article 9(2)(e)). The onus of ensuring quality in teaching and learning was on the providers through their internal developmental processes; the external oversight through inspections and audits was justified inasmuch as it supported these internal processes.

The implementation of the 2006 Education Act quality assurance agenda with respect to compulsory education was carried out in a number of stages. Work on the structures and systems with respect to compulsory education were started in 2008 with the strengthening of school development planning so as to foster the capacity of school communities to reflect on

the way forward and take action accordingly. External quality assurance (EQA) came in later, with a pilot held in May 2010.

The visits of the Inspectorate are called *external reviews*, not *audits* or *inspections*, to underline that the intention was to 'see again' what the school development processes were already focussing on. To emphasise the educational focus of the reviews, they purposely by-pass administrative and regulatory compliance matters, which are addressed with separate mechanisms, and target teaching and learning, the learning environment as well as school and teacher leadership. Schools are alerted well in advance of the coming of the review, and from one month before the actual event a number of meetings are held with all stakeholders to explain the process and to answer queries. The review report does not give judgements, but highlights areas of good practice and recommendations for improvement. These recommendations may lead to a short-cycle follow-up review if the situation in the school warrants it.

Schools are allowed a preview of the draft review report to point out any factual errors, and the final report is circulated to the school governance structures, administration and teachers. The report is not available publicly because of limitations in Malta's Data Protection Act. The school is bound to develop an action plan to address issues raised by the report, and to inform parents of the outcomes of the review and what steps are being taken by the school. Finally, up to one year after the review the Inspectorate holds an unannounced one-day visit to check on work to implement the recommendations made.

Conclusion

This paper argued that the discourse and practice of the new quality assurance paradigm that animates the external review mechanism since Malta's schools since 2006 has arisen partly in response to the folk memory and negative connotations of the old-style colonially-rooted inspections that informed the panoptic inspection paradigm. Whereas the old paradigm was bounded by Malta's 'absolute' characteristics, the new paradigm emerges from the anamorphic reconceptualization of these 'deficits' – colonial heritage, smallness, intimacy and monopoly. Malta has attempted to transform the school inspection process from something that is 'done to' schools to something that supports schools and their ongoing improvement.

Of course, attempting a paradigm shift does not mean that such a shift has actually occurred. There is growing public concern that the 2006 reform did not sufficiently impact teaching and learning and that it needs to be reviewed (see, for example, Sunday Times of Malta, 2016; Caruana, 2016; Micallef, 2016). This has prompted government to propose sweeping changes to the Education Act (socialdialogue.gov.mt 2016), including a restructuring of the regulatory framework. Under the proposed law schools will have a much greater degree of autonomy from their Colleges. The proposals have retained the legal text related to the developmental focus of the inspection function of the 2006 Education Act. But it is not at all clear that the increased autonomy of the schools will not trigger a more rigorous accountability regime that would rely on performance targets, changing the nature of school internal QA mechanisms and external inspection.

As has happened time and again in Maltese educational development, we may be facing a disconnect between the overt discourse of the proposed legal amendments and the subtext, which in this case may well have a neoliberal flavour. The policy/political metabolism of small island states resembles the metabolism of small mammals: things can get done quickly, but they can also be undone quickly and have a short time-span. Malta's 2006 attempt to transform school inspection into an enhancement-focussed external review of the school's own developmental processes may yet take new twists and turns.

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