

Exploring the Relationship Between School Autonomy and School Responsiveness as Perceived by Heads of Primary Schools in Malta

David Polidano

Abstract

This paper presents the outcomes of a research study on the perspective of Heads of primary schools in Malta about the relationship between school autonomy and school responsiveness. Knowing whether, and how, school autonomy is related to school responsiveness can provide a key to action for improvement in the Maltese education system. A mixed methods approach allowed the collection and analysis of data from a relatively large proportion of the target population and its interpretation through the participation of a sample from the same population. Most Heads were found to believe that greater school autonomy, especially in the curriculum and instruction domain, would help increase responsiveness. Most were also personally in favour of increased autonomy, especially in the mentioned domain. Acknowledging the complexity of the subject matter, the paper suggests an iterative approach to change that prioritises the professional autonomy of school-based educators as the guiding principle.

Keywords

School Autonomy, School Responsiveness, Professional Autonomy, Mixed Methods Research

Introduction

Over the years, in various countries, schools have been given greater control on the pretext that the people on the ground are better placed to understand the students' needs than higher authorities (OECD, 2016). The supposition is that staff in schools can adapt their organisation to their students' and the community's needs much better than national, regional, or local authorities outside the school (Caldwell & Spinks, 2013; OECD, 2020). After exploring the relationship, in the Maltese context, between school autonomy and the

Contact: David Polidano, david.polidano@ilearn.edu.mt

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ability of schools to be responsive, this paper proposes the prioritisation of the professional autonomy of school-based educators to increase school responsiveness.

Background of the Study

The idea of the dissertation research this paper refers to was conceived during the COVID-19 pandemic. This unprecedented event and the response it required from schools intrigued me. I started asking questions about which factors could contribute towards the ability of schools to respond effectively to the demands posed on them by the ever-changing environment they operate in. My observation of the diverse ways my children's schools (one from the state and the other from a non-state sector) responded to the first school closure fuelled my interest to examine the possible relationship between school autonomy and school responsiveness. Having myself ample first-hand experience of the different sectors, my common sense led me to suspect that these differences could be connected to the varying levels of autonomy enjoyed by schools.

Purpose and Limitations of the Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between school autonomy and school responsiveness in Malta. While the research problem concerns the different levels of the education system, early in the planning stage, given the time and resource restrictions, the decision was taken to limit the study to the primary level. It was also decided to limit the examination of the problem to the perspective of Heads of School, whose role is arguably pivotal.

Significance of the Study

Addressing a gap in academic research, the study contributes to the reflection in the local education sphere on the role of school autonomy for schools' effective responsiveness to the ever-changing demands imposed by the fast-paced transformations taking place in today's world. It serves also to indicate to policymakers what intervention on school autonomy may be needed to impact school responsiveness in a way that is conducive to school improvement for the sake of the common good.

Review of Literature

School Autonomy

The *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines autonomy as “the right or condition of self-government” and “freedom from external control or influence; independence” (Stevenson, 2010a, Kindle Location 35356). Applying this definition to schools, school autonomy refers to the right of schools to self-govern, including the freedom, authority, and responsibility, often within an established regulatory framework, to take and implement decisions, in the various areas related to their operation (Neeleman, 2019).

Internationally, school autonomy is more easily associated with private rather than public schools and system-wide school autonomy that includes public schools is a relatively recent phenomenon (OECD, 2012). In Malta, non-state (private) schools have historically enjoyed a high level of school autonomy. With regard to state (public) schools, the vision for a more decentralised education system in Malta was conceived towards the end of the 1980s (Bezzina & Cutajar, 2012). In 1995, a consultative committee on education called for the devolution to the schools of control over the curriculum, including the selection of textbooks and learning programmes (Wain et al., 1995). The committee advocated respect for the professional autonomy of the actors involved in providing education, coupled with the provision of the required professional development opportunities. The committee did not advocate complete decentralisation, but a better balance that would ensure equity and efficiency. Following this, a project envisaged to develop school autonomy was embarked upon. The project included the partial devolution of funds and the introduction of school-based development planning (MEYE, 2004).

However, by 2005, the policy document *For All Children To Succeed* (MEYE, 2005) could only claim state schools had “a taste of decentralization” and its “correlative increase in autonomy” (p. 25); operations remained generally centralised and networking between schools continued to be sporadic. The process was thus set in motion to reorganise the state school system into regional networks or clusters of schools, which became known as colleges. Greater responsibilities and decision-making authority were devolved to the colleges, with policy direction remaining the remit of central authorities. Nevertheless, it appears that at the school level the impact of the reform on

autonomy was rather limited (Bezzina & Cutajar, 2012). Mifsud (2015) remarks that “this new organisational setting is at times regarded as a more nuanced form of centralisation” (p. 60).

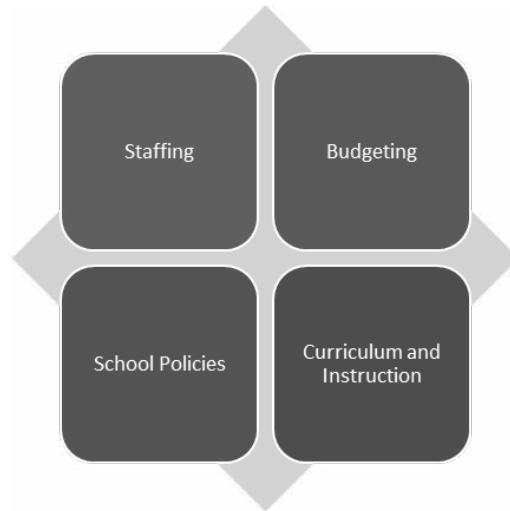
The Education Act (2019) recognises, in Article 5, the right of non-state schools to have their own autonomy and, in Article 33 (1), envisages the promotion of “the application of the principle of subsidiarity and self-governance in the management and administration of state schools.” Nevertheless, Malta is still one of the countries where “school autonomy is clearly limited ... and where education system reform has proceeded at a relatively slow pace compared to the rest of the European Union” (da Cruz Martins et al., 2019, p. 15).

As Neeleman (2019) remarks, the concept of school autonomy requires specification. School autonomy may refer to different domains in different countries. Even within the same education system, schools may enjoy different levels of autonomy in different domains (Cheng et al., 2016). It is, therefore, important to consider the different domains of school autonomy so that any assertions on the levels of school autonomy are specific.

The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) studies school leaders and teachers on their working conditions and the learning environments at their schools (OECD, 2020). Among the areas surveyed is school autonomy from the perspective of school leaders. School autonomy is measured by considering responsibility for staffing, budgeting, school policies, and curriculum and instruction (Figure 1).

Figure 1

The different domains of school autonomy



Note. TALIS asks school Heads about who enjoys significant responsibility for a series of tasks, which can be divided into the above four different groups or domains (OECD, 2020).

The concept of school autonomy also requires qualification (Neeleman, 2019). This study chooses to focus on the perspective of Heads regarding the level of authority or professional autonomy they enjoy as the leaders of their school. Although this choice of approach may well be criticised from a positivist perspective as being subjective, it is a conscious decision taken from a pragmatist standpoint. Unless what is written in policies manages to penetrate perception and becomes embedded in culture, it has little or no effect on practice. This approach is not dissimilar to that adopted by TALIS. However, one must note that, as remarked by Cheng et al. (2016), the perspective of Heads may not be fully representative of school autonomy in its complexity as experienced by other school stakeholders.

School Responsiveness

Responsiveness is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of English* as “the quality of reacting quickly and positively” (Stevenson, 2010b, Kindle Location 500122). School responsiveness, therefore, here refers to the ability of schools to respond quickly and positively, in the context of a fast-changing world, to the individual and collective needs of students and their families, as well as to the changing conditions in which they operate. The following paragraphs draw from recent literature the main characteristics expected from responsive schools.

In responsive organisations, leaders must put people first (Østergaard, 2018). Relationships are crucial for responsive organisations. Kim and Gonzales-Black (2018) claim that responsive leaders view communication as relational, not transactional. For communication to take place, information needs to create a connection with another person or persons. In a connected world, information-sharing promotes trust, enables collaboration, more accurate insights, and better decision-making.

Focus-on-purpose is another crucial characteristic of responsive organisations, including schools. Focusing on why we do what we do, rather than on what and how it is done, fosters understanding and motivation. This also increases the flexibility to adapt and change tactics, keeping purpose at the forefront (Østergaard, 2018). Closely related to purpose is the need for a clear shared vision that responds to the genuine needs of the organisation and the purpose for which it exists. Responsive leaders need to build this vision in a way that is shared by the people who will be working to meet those needs (Jenkins-Scott, 2020).

Kim and Gonzales-Black (2018) remark that focus-on-purpose helps avoid the risk of giving a plan value in and of itself. It is purpose that guides and gives direction, not the plans made to achieve that purpose. Responsive schools plan in an iterative way, evaluating and learning from emerging data on the go, and changing course as required to achieve the purpose behind the planning.

The mindset of a responsive leader needs to espouse a networking style of distributed leadership that enables everybody to take the lead, getting the best out of people (Østergaard, 2018). In responsive schools, the units of change are not autocratic leaders, but dynamic teams trusted to work autonomously (Kim

& Gonzales–Black, 2018). The responsive leader lets go of control and trusts others to lead, permitting authority to spread.

The decentralisation of authority within the school, and the flexibility and autonomy this allows teams and individuals, are a prerequisite for agile decision-making which responds quickly and effectively to changing contexts. Kim and Gonzales–Black (2018) insist that within responsive teams, unless there is conflict with the purpose of the team or there is known data indicating that a proposal is unsafe to try, it can be tried and learned from. The crux is making decisions smaller and simpler, so they are safe to try, and failures are small and easy to learn and move forward from.

According to Jenkins–Scott (2020), responsive leaders need the curiosity to keep on learning and growing professionally, and the resilience to recover and keep going in the face of difficulties. In a responsive organisation, innovation needs to become part of the mindset of all its members (Østergaard, 2018). Innovation requires overcoming the fear of failure by creating in the organisation a sense of safety where experimentation is encouraged, and one can explore and try out new things. In the words of Galés & Gallon (2019), “failure is a great teacher when we validate the effort made and study what we can do the next time to make things better” (p. 100).

According to the OECD report on responsive school systems, schools must “respond to new and evolving needs, in part due to international migration and increasing student heterogeneity” (OECD, 2018, p. 35). Schools need to develop an inclusive culture which values diversity and promotes the active participation of all students, eliminating any barriers that hinder their contribution and achievement (MEDE, 2019). This applies not only to differences arising from cultural backgrounds but to all forms of diversity.

Methodology

Philosophical Background

The philosophy behind the research is classical pragmatism, as represented especially by John Dewey. Ever since René Descartes, epistemology has been characterised by the dualism between mind (the knowing subject) and matter (objects to be known) and, consequently, by the dualism between subjectivity and objectivity. Biesta (2015) explains how Dewey's theory of knowing breaks with this dualism by offering an understanding of knowing that is not premised on this dualistic scheme. Instead, it starts with interactions or transactions, which for living organisms are rooted in the way they experience their environments, affecting and being affected by those same environments. When transactions with their environments are interrupted, living organisms, including humans, learn how to restore coordination by finding an appropriate response (Biesta, 2007).

According to Morgan (2014), classical pragmatism offers an alternative middle road to the traditionally mutually exclusive paradigms, that is, realism or positivism (which typically characterises the quantitative approach to research) and constructivism (associated with the qualitative approach). In classical pragmatism, the world is both real and socially constructed. The pragmatic approach to inquiry sidesteps the divisive debates on the nature of reality (ontology) and what can be known about that reality (epistemology), and instead "starts with the research question, leading to a research design, followed by a choice among available methods" (Morgan, 2014, p. 41). In pragmatism, there is no intrinsic need to favour any method or type of method, and decision about the mix of methods rests with the requirements of the research question (Saunders et al., 2019).

Research Design

The specific mixed methods research approach adopted in this study is the “explanatory sequential mixed methods research design” (Creswell & Creswell, 2020, p. 304). The research was designed to consist of two sequential phases. First, the survey tool was used to collect quantitative data about Heads’ perspectives on school autonomy, school responsiveness, and the relationship between the two. The survey was administered online via Microsoft Forms during the last week of October and the first two weeks of November 2021. All 106 Heads of primary schools in Malta hailing from the different sectors, namely state, church, and independent, were invited to participate. Sixty-six Heads replied by the set deadline. This results in an overall response rate of 62.3%.

The phase focusing on qualitative data collection and analysis followed the first phase and consisted of semi-structured individual interviews with volunteer Heads, in line with a pre-set quota sampling configuration of four Heads from the state sector, two from the church sector, and one from the independent sector. The interviews were conducted towards the end of November and the start of December 2021. The interview questions were informed by the outcomes of the first phase of the research. This second part of the study served to triangulate and clarify the findings, as well as develop further their interpretation.

Results and Discussion

School Autonomy in the Different Domains

The first subsidiary research question asked: In which aspects do Heads of primary schools in Malta report their schools to enjoy school autonomy?

To measure school autonomy, the survey used a multi-item scale covering the four different domains. For each item, respondents could indicate the level of authority they enjoy on a scale from 1 to 5 (1=no authority, 2=minor authority, 3=shared equal authority, 4=major authority, and 5=full authority). Table 1 shows the median and the mean for each of the domains and corresponding aspects of autonomy, as well as their range and standard deviation by sector.

International research recognises that different school sectors enjoy different levels of autonomy. According to OECD (2016), for example, “in almost all education systems, private schools exercise greater autonomy than public schools” (p. 27). Reporting on TALIS 2018, which in the case of Malta studied the secondary school level, OECD (2020) includes Malta among the five countries where the difference in the overall responsibilities of Heads between the state and the non-state sectors “is particularly pronounced” (p. 191). The present study confirms the gap in school autonomy between the state and the non-state sectors overall and in each of the four domains. As evident in Figure 2, while in the state sector, overall, Heads of primary school feel they have just above minor authority, their counterparts in non-state schools deem they have between shared equal authority and major authority. The school sector rendered a highly significant (*sig.* <.001) and large between-subjects effect (partial eta squared .738) on autonomy. Statistically, therefore, belonging to the non-state sectors implies a much stronger sense of school autonomy than belonging to the state sector. This was corroborated by the interviewed Heads hailing from the different sectors, who also provided a level of nuance according to the domains of autonomy in focus.

Table 1

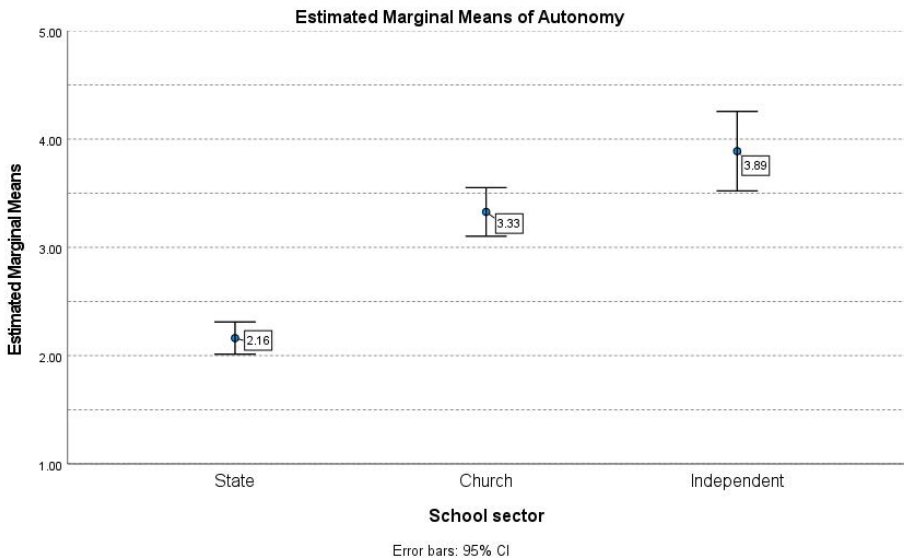
The four domains of autonomy by sector

School sector	Staffing				Budgeting				Policies				Curriculum					
	S1	S2	S3	All	B1	B2	B3	All	P1	P2	P3	All	C1	C2	C3	All		
State	<i>n</i>	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	43	
	Median	1	1	1	1	1	4	3	2.67	3	2	2	2.33	3	2	2	2	
	Mean	1.05	1.3	1.07	1.14	1.58	3.4	2.95	2.64	3.14	2.37	2.09	2.53	2.6	1.84	2.05	2.16	
	Range	1	2	1	1	3	4	4	3.33	4	4	3	3.33	4	4	4	4	4
	Std. Dev.	0.21	0.51	0.26	0.25	0.96	1.12	1.19	0.75	0.92	1	0.97	0.71	0.76	0.84	0.9	0.68	
Church	<i>n</i>	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	
	Median	4	4	1	3.33	4	4	4	3.67	4	4	2	3.33	4	3	3	3.33	
	Mean	4.24	3.71	1.35	3.1	3.41	3.94	3.53	3.63	4	3.82	2	3.27	3.82	3.24	3.12	3.39	
	Range	2	3	2	2	4	3	3	3	2	2	3	1.67	2	2	3	2	
	Std. Dev.	0.75	1.16	0.7	0.65	1.18	1.03	1.13	0.95	0.71	0.73	1.06	0.44	0.73	0.56	0.78	0.57	
Independent	<i>n</i>	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	
	Median	5	5	2.5	4	3.5	3.5	3	3.33	5	5	4	4.33	5	4	4.5	4.16	
	Mean	4.5	4	2.83	3.78	3.33	3.5	3.33	3.39	4.67	4.5	3.83	4.33	4.33	3.83	4	4.06	
	Range	2	4	4	3	4	3	3	3	1	2	3	1.67	2	3	3	2	
	Std. Dev.	0.84	1.67	1.47	1.11	1.63	1.05	1.37	1.16	0.52	0.84	1.17	0.63	1.03	1.33	1.27	1.04	

Note: S1=hiring of educators; S2=firing; S3=salaries; B1=acquiring funds through fees/donations; B2=acquiring funds through fund-raisers/sponsors; B3=budget allocation; P1=disciplinary policies; P2=assessment policies; P3=admissions; C1=learning materials; C2=curriculum content; C3=time allocation. For each domain, the column "All" reports the overall scores for the domain.

Figure 2

Estimated marginal means of autonomy – school sector



Note: The y-axis represents the level of authority Heads of School perceive they have (1=no authority, 2=minor authority, 3=shared equal authority, 4=major authority and 5=full authority).

The answer to the first subsidiary research question is not straightforward. When discussing school autonomy, it depends on which sector a school belongs to. The non-state sectors enjoy greater autonomy than the state sector in all the different domains. But even within sectors, there are differences between individual schools.

Comparing the mean scores for autonomy in state schools in the different domains, Heads reported most authority in the budgeting domain (close to shared equal authority), and the least in the staffing domain (barely above no authority). Their overall mean score for school policies lies just above the mid-point between minor and shared equal authority, while in the curriculum and

instruction domain the mean score indicates minor authority. Within the state sector, the extent to which a Head makes use of school autonomy, however limited, varies and depends on the outlook of the Head and on the context of the school.

In the non-state sectors, among church schools the highest level of autonomy was registered in the budgeting domain, close to major authority. The overall mean for the other three domains were quite similar, indicating shared equal authority. Independent school Heads, on average, reported major authority in staffing, school policies, and curriculum and instruction, and shared equal authority in the budgeting domain. In the non-state sectors, different realities also impact the way a Head can exercise authority, and although trends are identifiable, how autonomy works in the individual school in the different domains depends on many variables.

The indications are that, if the need is established to increase school autonomy, special focus on the state sector will be required. However, the situation in the non-state sectors should not be neglected, especially in view of the perception expressed during interviews that some of their autonomy is being eroded.

The Characteristics of Responsiveness

Subsidiary research question 2 had two parts. Part 2a asked: How do Heads of primary schools feel about the different characteristics typical of responsive schools? while part 2b focused on: Do Heads of primary schools implement the different characteristics typical of responsive schools?

To address subsidiary research questions 2a and 2b, the survey used two multi-item scale questions to measure Heads' agreement in theory with characteristics typical of school responsiveness and the implementation in their schools of the same characteristics, respectively. As indicated in Table 2, in theory, Heads were most strongly in agreement with the characteristic of relational communication – that the school community, including its leaders, should be on an ongoing learning journey and that communication should be relational (two-way), not just a one-way transfer of information. They least agreed with the characteristic of purpose and meaningfulness – that purpose should be more important than method. One of the interviewees claimed that

educators are not being treated as professionals, “so how can you expect people to reply that the why is more important than the how?” Another Head linked the loss of a sense of purpose with the lack of autonomy and the undermining of Heads’ authority resulting from the tandem of excessive centralisation and union militancy: “You end up asking, ‘What is our purpose? Managing by crisis?’ And, yes, we ended up focusing on how we do things not why we do them.”

As regards implementation of characteristics typical of school responsiveness, Heads most agreed that their school community, including its leaders, is on an ongoing learning journey and that the shared vision for their school responds to its genuine needs. They least agreed that in their school, educators take professional decisions without much delay. The latter characteristic, referred to in Table 2 as agile decision-making, was the one for which the greatest gap between what Heads believe in and what according to them happens in their school was registered. The difficulty for educators to feel empowered to be agile decision-makers was corroborated in the interviews and linked to excessive centralisation. In the words of one of the state school Heads, “autonomy has been taken so far away from us that our educators are scared to do something because then they will be reprimanded for taking action.” According to another, “certain decisions which have to be taken by the class teacher are not being taken by the class teacher at all”, and teachers depend too much on the support of the SMT or external staff. An interviewee mentioned the need for a paradigm shift away from the hierarchical decision-taking model. Another emphasised the need to empower educators “to feel that they are professionals, and they can decide, and their decisions are worthy”.

Both the conviction in the primacy of purpose over method and the implementation of agile decision-making at the school and classroom level would benefit if excessive centralisation were to be addressed. Given the importance of the role of the Head in the school (Caldwell, 2016; OECD, 2016), any plans to increase school autonomy for increased school responsiveness need to ensure that Heads espouse more wholeheartedly the focus-on-purpose principle and are capable of adopting an approach that empowers school educators to exercise their professional autonomy.

Table 2*The difference between responsiveness in theory and in practice*

Characteristics of Responsiveness	Responsiveness in Theory	Responsiveness in Practice	Difference between Practice and Theory
People first	4.06	3.77	-0.29
Shared vision	4.61	4.09	-0.52
Learning	4.80	4.17	-0.64
Purpose and meaningfulness	3.73	3.47	-0.26
Innovation	4.36	3.79	-0.58
Distributed leadership	4.36	3.86	-0.50
Inclusive culture	4.68	3.95	-0.73
Iterative planning	4.70	3.95	-0.74
Agile decision-making	4.52	3.26	-1.26
Relational communication	4.77	4.05	-0.73
Overall means	4.46	3.84	-0.62

Note: The table is based on the mean scores for each of the characteristics of responsive schools outlined above. For each characteristic, respondents were given two statements (one to measure agreement in theory and another to consider implementation), with which they were asked to show their level of agreement (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree).

The Relationship Between School Autonomy and School Responsiveness

The third subsidiary research question was closely related to the main research question and asked: *Is there a relationship between school autonomy and responsiveness in practice?* The Pearson correlation test confirms a statistically significant ($sig.=.008$) positive relationship ($r=.324$) between school autonomy and school responsiveness in practice, which can be considered of medium magnitude (Gordon & Courtney, 2018). In the context of this study, this means

that the stronger the school autonomy perceived by a Head, it is somewhat more likely that characteristics of school responsiveness are said to be implemented in the school. This does not imply a cause-effect relationship, but rather “an indication of the predictability of one variable given the other: it is an indication of covariation” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 531).

Other survey and interview data suggest that most Heads do believe the two variables are related. Of the 59% of respondents who agreed outrightly that school responsiveness is being hindered and the 29% who considered it a possibility, more than three in five related the source of hindrance to centralisation. This can be interpreted in terms of the relationship between school autonomy (or lack thereof) and school responsiveness, as indicated by the thematic analysis conducted on the data from the interviews.

Briefly, the interview data shows that excessive centralisation tends to ignore the specific needs and context of individual schools, weakens the sense of professional autonomy within the school, and contributes to a sense of frustration when one must implement decisions judged not to be the best in response to the real needs in the school. In contrast, increased school autonomy shifts the decision-making towards school educators who are much more familiar with the context and can therefore be more responsive. School leaders feel the need to be trusted to take decisions, especially in the curriculum and instruction domain, for the benefit of their school community. They are also aware that responsiveness requires respecting the professional autonomy of classroom educators.

This, together with further data from the research, provides the basis to answer the main research question, which is the aim of the next section.

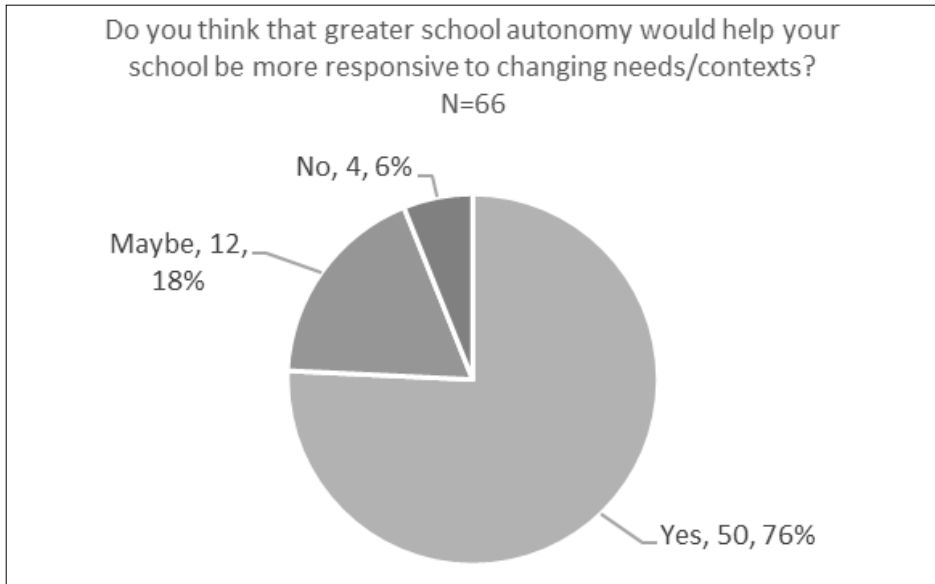
Answering the Main Research Question

The main research question asked: *From the perspective of Heads of primary schools in Malta, are school autonomy and school responsiveness related? How?* The results indicate that there is a relationship between school autonomy and responsiveness in practice as measured in this study. However, statistically, this has not been ascertained to be strong. The answer to the main research question is not simple and requires further discussion.

The Opinion of Heads. As can be seen in Figure 3, in the reply to the question directly targeting the main research question, the survey results showed that 76% of respondents believe greater school autonomy would help increase their school's responsiveness and another 18% think this may be the case. When these respondents were asked to identify the aspect/s in which this could happen (see Figure 4), most of them (74%) referred to curriculum content. Nevertheless, curricular autonomy cannot be achieved in a vacuum and many respondents referred to other aspects, including not only those pertaining to the curriculum and instruction domain, but also the staffing domain (especially hiring and firing), budgeting (especially budget allocations), and school policies (especially student assessment policies). According to an interviewee, "all is related: the curriculum, the choice of teachers ..., the assessment policies to be adopted in the school."

Figure 3

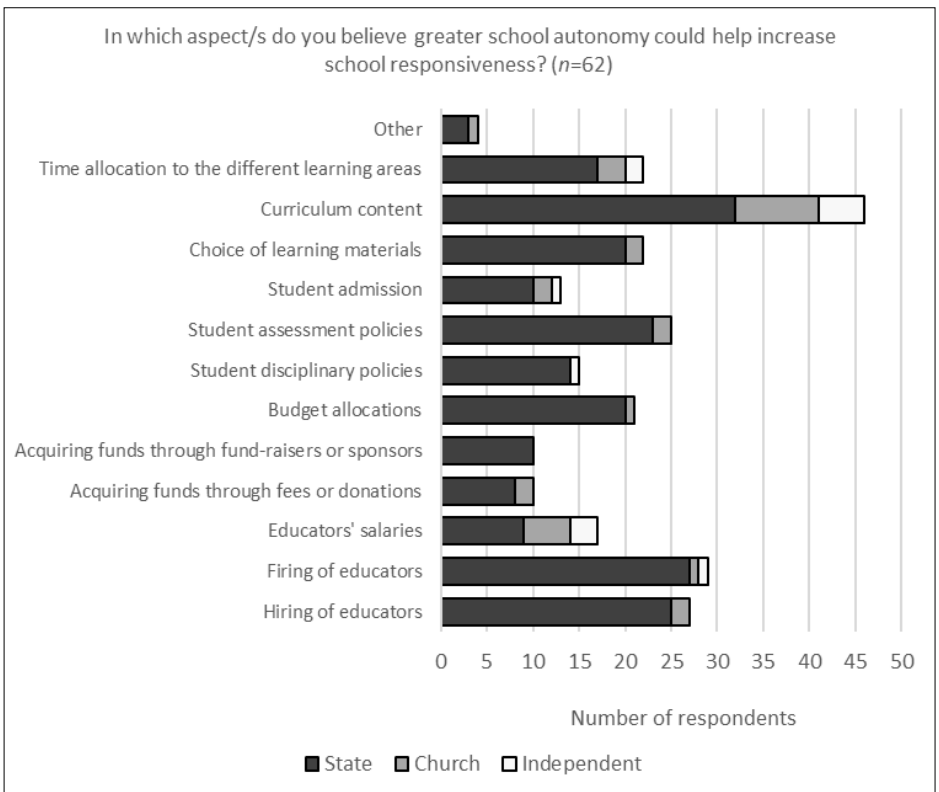
Heads' views on the effect of greater school autonomy on responsiveness



The prevalent need identified for increased curricular autonomy suggests that, while the “paradigm shift away from a prescriptive curriculum towards a framework ... which allows for internal flexibility” envisaged by the NCF (MEDE, 2012, p. 31) may have established its roots in the minds and expectations of Heads of School, there is still way to go to see it fully implemented in practice.

Figure 4

Heads' views on the effect of greater autonomy on responsiveness (which aspects)



The research study confirms most Heads' belief that with greater autonomy, especially in the curriculum and instruction domain, schools can be more responsive. In the light of the OECD (2010) finding that high levels of school responsibility for what is taught and how assessment is carried out characterises successful school systems when accompanied by low levels of school competition, action in this sphere appears to be appealing for Malta. Nevertheless, a comprehensive answer to the main research question requires consideration of other variables that attest to the complexity of the argument.

The Complexity of the Subject Matter. Being a human service that relies on people, schools are organisations characterised by complexity (Morrison, 2002). Unsurprisingly, the survey results show that school autonomy is not the only variable correlated to school responsiveness.

Heads' Outlook on the Characteristics Typical of Responsive Schools. Factoring out two outliers, the correlation between the Heads' agreement in theory with characteristics typical of responsive schools and their implementation is statistically significant ($sig.<.001$) and medium positive ($r=.464$). The more convinced of the worthiness of the characteristics typical of school responsiveness, to some extent, the more likely is a Head to see these characteristics implemented in the school.

Other Variables in Play. The thematic analysis of the interview data reveals that other variables contribute to the complexity of the topic. The background of the students and their families, the level and quality of parental collaboration, the professionalism of the staff and the relationship the Head manages to build with them, the effects on staff of ongoing change in the education field, and union militancy are among the factors which play a role in the school's capacity to be responsive.

Union Militancy. Arguably, being identified in the survey as the second factor most hindering school responsiveness, a variable that deserves special attention is the influence of union militancy. As Adamowski et al. (2007) note, quite often School Heads are unable to manoeuvre within the circumscribed parameters of school autonomy due to union directives. According to interviewed Heads, union directives often hinder school development initiatives being taken in the interest of the learners. Some Heads operate in the constant worry of being struck by a union directive. Two interviewees claimed that unions hinder responsiveness even when concerned school educators are on board. According to one of the open-ended remarks in the survey, unions have "a one-size-fits-all mentality which considers all schools to be identical ... there seems to be the feeling that a lowest common denominator is applied across the board, at times awarding mediocrity." Both the survey and the interviews indicate that union directives are having their toll on the enthusiasm of Heads and on the ability of schools to be responsive to the learners' needs.

Heads' Disposition. Another factor to consider is Heads' disposition to take on the added responsibilities that go with increased school autonomy. Imposing broader autonomy on reluctant or unprepared Heads is due to backfire (Dou et al., 2017; Nicolaidou Solomou & Pashiardis, 2016). In this research, 86% of respondents stated that they are in favour of increased school autonomy, and another 9% declared that they may be in favour, indicating a high level of willingness. Again, Heads most frequently identified curriculum and instruction as the domain in which they would want increased autonomy, particularly in the aspect of curriculum content. The thematic analysis of the interview data shows that there are Heads who would resist, but the survey data suggests that these are likely to be few, especially if any increase in autonomy targets the curriculum and instruction domain and related aspects in the other domains.

Conclusion

The Main Findings

First, the research referred to in this paper reaffirmed what has already been established by international research (OECD, 2020), that in Malta there is a marked difference between the state and the non-state sectors in the levels of school autonomy. The study has confirmed that this divide exists across the four domains of school autonomy, that is, staffing, budgeting, school policies, and curriculum and instruction. It has also found that, while the difference between the state and the non-state sectors is pronounced, differences also exist within the sectors themselves.

Secondly, primary school Heads showed high levels of agreement with most of the main characteristics of school responsiveness. Agreement was weakest on the primacy of purpose over method. When measuring the difference between Heads' agreement in theory with the characteristics of responsiveness and how much they manage to implement them in practice, the greatest gap concerned the ability of school educators to take professional decisions in an agile manner.

Finally, the statistical correlation between school autonomy and school responsiveness in practice, as measured in this research, was found to be of medium magnitude. Additionally, more than three quarters of Heads believe that school autonomy and school responsiveness are related, as they agree that strengthening the former would help increase the latter. Almost another fifth of Heads consider this a possibility. Moreover, Heads across sectors have been found to be overwhelmingly in favour of increased autonomy, with only 5% declaring themselves unequivocally against.

Zooming in, the research has indicated that curriculum and instruction is the domain in which greater autonomy is most frequently identified as required for increased responsiveness, especially in the aspect of curriculum content. This is also the domain for which Heads are personally most in favour of increased autonomy.

Increasing school autonomy is no magic wand solution. The education system and individual schools are complex realities and data has suggested that there are multiple factors that affect the ability of schools to profit from the autonomy they are allowed, and to act responsively. The outlook of Heads on the characteristics typical of school responsiveness, their professional leadership capacity, as well as their personal disposition to take on the responsibilities that go with increased autonomy, are key factors to consider. The cooperation, or lack thereof, of educators' unions is another crucial variable.

Practical Recommendations

Taking action to give schools more autonomy, especially in the curriculum and instruction domain, and with respect to other aspects that sustain autonomy in this domain, can increase school responsiveness and is, therefore, recommended. While special focus on the state sector is required, the non-state sectors should not be overlooked, especially given a perceived decrease in their school autonomy.

School autonomy in the curriculum and instruction domain requires increased trust in the professionalism of school leaders and classroom educators. The professional autonomy of school-based educators is essential to their ability to take professional decisions in a responsive and agile manner and should be given priority. Prioritising professional autonomy can also present an opportunity for central education authorities and educators' unions to work together more closely as social partners rather than perpetuate an endless tug-of-war that hinders school responsiveness.

As Snyder (2013) points out, education is frequently approached without due regard to its complexity. Policies often target specific elements, expecting results in a predictable and replicable linear fashion. Education policy in Malta should move away "from one-size-fits-all solutions to iterative processes derived from constant feedback between all stakeholders" (Snyder, 2013, p. 11). Rather than seeking to provide a failproof recipe, this paper proposes the promotion of professional autonomy as a guiding principle in the context of an environment that maximises the feedback flow amongst different stakeholders. Action is then to be taken on a needs basis to provide the necessary professional learning opportunities and support to school-based educators to exercise their professional autonomy in an effective way.

If the major stakeholders, including educators' unions, are on board with prioritising professional autonomy, a culture of professional accountability can gradually develop. That culture can inspire educators to collaborate in improving the quality of what they do for the sake of their profession and its *raison d'être*: offering the best possible educational experience to the students, impacting individuals and society at large in the process.

Concluding Remark

While the research study referred to has its limitations and there is scope for further research in this field, it is evident that the participating Heads of primary schools are showing signs of frustration with how things stand and, at the same time, a positive disposition towards increased school autonomy. The time may be ripe to implement more effectually the autonomy envisioned in the Education Act (2019) and the NCF (MEDE, 2012), especially in the curriculum and instruction domain. The crux is to do this in a way that enables school responsiveness. Adopting the promotion of educators' professional autonomy as the guiding principle may be the way forward in this respect.

Notes on contributor

David Polidano graduated in theology and acquired his Postgraduate Certificate in Education. He started his career in education as teacher of Religious Education at the Archbishop's Seminary in 1996. In 2002, he graduated as Master of Arts in Theology and Human Studies. In 2006, David became Head of Department for Religious Education in Church Schools. After five years in the post, he moved to the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education as Education Officer, Quality Assurance, where he also occupied the role of Assistant Director of Education. Since 2021, David is Director, Quality Assurance, within the National Literacy Agency. He completed a Master's degree in Applied Educational Leadership in 2022.

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