

## **Policy-mandated collegiality in the Maltese education scenario: The experience of the leaders**

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**Abstract:** In the unfolding Maltese education scenario of gradual decentralization and school networking, I explore the reception of policy-mandated collegiality among the Principal and the Heads of School within one Maltese college, and its subsequent effects on the unfolding network leadership dynamics. This is explored through the leaders' understanding of the collegiality concept; their reaction to the 'forced' implementation of policy-mandated networks through *'For All Children to Succeed'* [FACT] (2005); and the resulting 'effects' of this implementation. My study is framed within a postmodern paradigm and adopts a Foucauldian theoretical framework. Data are collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews; observation of a Council of Heads meeting; and a documentary analysis of FACT. Narrative is both the phenomenon under exploration and the method of analysis. The Heads experience the college as simultaneous individualization and totalization, acknowledging its benefits but criticizing their lack of autonomy, loss of individual school identity, and its imposition in the form of geographical clustering. The findings address a gap in educational leadership literature in terms of the effects of 'contrived collegiality' as they unfold within the top leadership hierarchies in the network. This research can serve as an inspiration for practising leaders; as well as aid policy makers in reviewing the way policies are initiated and enacted.

**Keywords:** collegiality; school networking; policy; school leadership; college principal; power dynamics.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the unfolding Maltese education scenario of gradual decentralization and school networking, suffused with entrenched power, with added layers of leadership and more subtle strata of accountability, I explore the reception of policy-mandated collegiality among the leaders concerned, namely one

Principal and the Heads of School of a Maltese College, and how it impinges on their leadership behaviour.

I examine the issue of how 'contrived collegiality' (Hargreaves, 1994) is performed within a Maltese college in the unfolding network leadership dynamics at similar and disparate hierarchical levels. This issue is investigated through the following research questions:

- 1) What is the leaders' understanding of the collegiality concept?
- 2) How did they react to the 'forced' implementation of the '*For All Children to Succeed*' policy?
- 3) What are the resulting 'effects' of this implementation?

This article attempts to address these research questions through an exploration of:

- a) the national policy context;
- b) a critical review of the literature revolving around the emergence of school-based networks, together with a Foucauldian theoretical framework; and
- c) a discussion of the methodological issues involved, a presentation of findings through the leaders' voices, as well as the conclusions reached, leading to implications for both research and practice.

### **The Maltese school scenario and policy context**

Within the last decade, the Maltese educational system has been undergoing a structured, gradual but steady change in terms of decentralization and school autonomy, with the main aim being that of renewal in line with global development. The document '*For All Children to Succeed*' (2005) [henceforth referred to as FACT, an acronym I adopt] set out the Government's strategy to transform the existing educational system into one that would foster new professional identities ready to embrace innovative changes that may be introduced, as well as *learning communities* that would provide the appropriate scenario to ensure a *quality education for all*. This document argues that through school networks, all children can be helped to succeed. School networks are considered as learning communities better equipped to meet the needs of the Maltese students through working in partnership with one another, joint problem-solving, resource-sharing, and the creation of new practices within the specific and particular context of a school cluster forming a single college.

Under the reform, Maltese state schools were organized into ten colleges. 'College' is the legal term chosen to denote the network of schools. The setting up of all the ten colleges followed a three-year foundation plan, with the colleges presently being at different stages of their development.

The decision taken by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment (2005) has been to network by region – schools have been organized into colleges mainly depending on their geographical position on the island, with primary schools feeding into secondary schools. This is meant to ensure that children will begin and finish their education in the same college, ensuring a smooth transition across levels through school-based examinations, control, and accountability.

The major reform happening in Maltese State schools necessitated the introduction of new roles of responsibility, amongst which was the deployment of a College Principal, designated to be the educational leader of a college as a whole. On the other hand, the Head of School is explicitly required “to collaborate with other Heads of College Schools ... in a manner that maximizes networking under the leadership of the Principal and according to the direction and guidelines established by ... other competent authorities” (FACT, 2005, p.74).

The networking reform also involved restructuring the governing body of the education system (November 2007), with the ex-Education Division undergoing a complete transformation through the setting up of two directorates. The Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) regulates, generates policies, sets standards, and monitors the whole system, while the Directorate for Educational Services (DES) acts as operator and coordinates school resources management, human resources development, and student services. Each directorate is led by a Director General, with the subsequent departments falling under six Directors with their individual Assistant Directors.

This shift towards partnership working (where Heads collaborate with other Heads within the college) in the Maltese educational arena represents a defining trend in schools in the twenty-first century in various countries around the world (for example, the United Kingdom, Portugal, and the United States, among others), reflecting “a shift from competition to collaboration, from top-down control to organizational autonomy” (Hopkins, 2009, p.2). The founding of colleges is part of the government’s drive to implement system-wide educational reform in the Maltese islands, with change being embedded in this new networking system which in turn serves as a ‘cross-over’ structure (Hopkins, 2005) for all the other aspects of change – networks serve as the vehicle through which restructuring is driven.

The policy document FACT considered school networking as the main organizational reform which can bring about the process of transformation in the Maltese educational system, advocated for by the 1999 *National Minimum Curriculum*. Networks were regarded as an organizational structure that can replace the traditional top-down approach to reform previously used in the

Maltese educational system with a more lateral approach, where ideas do not emanate solely from above but also from the schools who would eventually have to implement those ideas.

The college has a number of statutory functions that are outlined in the Education Act (2006). Among these, it should ensure the “continuous and smooth process of education” to all children, as well as “the responsibility and the accountability of whosoever is involved in the schools”, in order to ensure “the improvement of the quality of the educational provision...by promoting, achieving and maintaining high results and standards”. It is also expected to “promote dialogue and a team culture among the Heads and school staff”, as well as to “ensure that the National Curriculum Framework is translated into an appropriate curriculum for college students”. It is also expected to ensure “the promotion and dissemination of a culture of evaluation...internal educational auditing and full participation in the external quality assurance processes”. The college also has the responsibility to ensure “the supply of resources, services and facilities”, as well as “the timely recruiting of human resources”, ensuring that the latter function effectively to promote “a healthy culture of good conduct and of discipline”. One of the most significant roles of the college is to “promote and encourage...a positive attitude towards change” (Art. 51, pp.617-619).

### **The emergence of school-based networks**

It is evident that in many educational systems, there has been a partial dissolution of the traditional single school model towards more flexible modes of organizational link-up, taking the form of increased collaboration among schools.

Chapman and Aspin (2005) suggest that within education, networks are regarded as one of the most promising levers for large-scale reform due to their potential to reculture both the environment and the system in which policy-makers operate through increased co-operation, interconnectedness, and multi-agency. Ainscow and West (2006) note that one of the main stated reasons behind the creation of school networks is that of school reform, the generation of equitable improvement. Chapman and Fullan (2007) illustrate that this occurs through the reduction of the polarization inherent in the education system. Recent policy directions have incorporated a shift to decentralize decision-making. This drive for reform through the rise of school networks is a policy mandate. For example, Clarke and Newman (1997) claim that local public services are caught up within a ‘cascade of change’ as global social shifts demand responses in policies – evident in the setting up of networks worldwide.

FACT acknowledges networks as “an increasingly important feature of contemporary life” while recognizing their adoption as “an organizational principle of *choice*” across all sectors (2005, p.37, emphasis added). According to FACT, the purpose of colleges in Malta are: the pooling of resources and sharing of experiences in order to facilitate decentralisation and empowerment; the provision of support to individual schools; the provision of professional educational leadership; the sharing of best practices; as well as the facilitation of horizontal and vertical linkages between and among schools. These purposes are given more weight through their inclusion in the Education Act Amendment as described in the preceding section.

*The attractions, benefits and attributes of school networks*

Despite there being no single blueprint for operation, consistent agreement seems to exist among various researchers (Bentley, 2005; Cole, 2001; Hopkins, 2000; Jackson & Burns, 2005; Lasater, 2007; Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996) who present the features of ‘desirable’ educational networks. These authors claim that networks foster innovation, providing a test bed for new ideas while offering a platform for gradual innovation, distributing the risks and the workloads among different schools. Most importantly of all, according to Atkinson *et al.* (2007), inter-school collaborations serve to raise achievement and enhance student outcomes through the sharing of resources and professional expertise. It is therefore claimed that networks enable schools to overcome their isolationism and move beyond to form community relationships. Chapman and Fullan (2007) argue that the crucial question is how school networks foster and further enhance the foundations of systemic reform, through ownership, coherence, capacity, and system presence.

*Tensions accompanying the setting up of school networks*

O’Brein *et al.* (2006, p.409) put forward some of the ambiguities surrounding the setting up of school networks. These focus on: network purpose; collaborative inertia; collaboration and accountability; conscription and volunteerism; and power inequality.

Day *et al.* (2003) warn against the possible danger of school networks becoming primarily a vehicle for government-driven school reform. This may happen when central education authorities make use of networks for the sole purpose of implementing policy issues in order to actualize the government’s agenda, without embracing the wider context. Huxham and Vangen (2005) describe their concept of ‘collaborative inertia’ – the potentially frustrating gap that can exist between policymakers who may view networking as a logical panacea to the myriad challenges faced, and the reality of networks on a day-to-day basis. Furthermore, policy-makers face the challenge of overcoming the obstacles posed by the former individual accountability framework for the development of a sense of collective accountability. Elkins

and Haydn (2004) detect a clear tension between collaboration and accountability.

Tensions may arise due to the constitution of school networks, more precisely involving the dilemma between what Hadfield and Chapman (2009) identify as conscription and volunteerism. Most successful networks are built on volunteerism – a weakness of this being that schools with potentially the most to gain may opt out of networking. Evans and Stone-Johnson (2010) state that some schools' involvement tends to be largely symbolic due to the Heads' frustration over the mandatory nature of networks. Conscription is problematic as although network membership can be mandated, meaningful participation cannot. Both Hargreaves (1994) and Jackson (2006) are of the opinion that fostering a sense of collaboration may prove to be a daunting task among schools and staff used to isolationism.

According to both Evans and Stone-Johnson (2010) and Jackson (2005), a major hurdle is identity maintenance – school leaders must interrogate their own preconceived notions about networking. Networking may even be regarded as a threat to the institutional success of individual schools who often implicitly strive to retain their autonomy – the reason given by Weiss *et al.* (2002) being that sharing and giving to other partners can appear high risk, creating insecurities, uncertainties, and unnecessary anxieties.

A more specific difficulty that may crop up in school networking is what Hadfield (2007) labels as 'leadership shearing'. This occurs when groups of leaders end up in antagonistic relationships because of differential rates in the development of their lateral agency, their shifting identification with the network and its aims, as well as the impact of the various political and cultural influences shaping the leader/follower dynamic. Lank (2006) hints at the potential power inequality that may exist in any partnership that can lead to one-sided relationships. Furthermore, Coleman (2011) explains that "the issue of power is an implicit yet under-explored issue within collaborative working and fundamental to the relative success or failure of partnership working" (p.299). Sullivan and Skelcher (2002) warn how in this context of power relations, partnership working can be viewed as a mechanism for increased surveillance, as partners act as a check and scrutinize each other's activities.

Evidence reveals a difficult point within education networks – that of education being part of a national policy that notwithstanding all discourses on autonomy, tries to regulate educational practices. It is within this discursive context that I explore the leaders' reception of network imposition through a policy mandate and its effects on the unfolding network leadership dynamics.

## The use of Foucauldian theory in exploring policy-mandated collegiality

Gillies (2013) demonstrates the value of Foucault's trident of scepticism, critique, and problematization to operate within educational discourse: "Given the scale of the educational leadership literature and the relatively small amount of questioning voices raised against it, it seems eminently timely to bring Foucault into the lists" (p.32).

### *Relations of power*

In Foucault's sense, power is a mechanism that works in and through institutions to produce particular kinds of subjects, knowledge and truth (Foucault, 1979, 1980). For Foucault (1980), power is a sinuous and insinuating mechanism that works its way in a 'capillary' fashion into the 'very grain' of individuals, inhabiting their bodies, their beliefs and their selfhood, and binding them together as institutional subjects (p.39). Power, in this sense, is both coercive and enabling, in that it is not imposed from 'outside' or 'above', but circulates within institutions and social bodies, producing subjects who exert a 'mutual hold' on one another. This is termed by Foucault as "a mutual and indefinite 'blackmail'", which binds superiors and subordinates in "a relationship of mutual support and conditioning" (p.159). This in turn leads to the "political 'double-bind' which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures" (Foucault, 2002b, p.336).

Foucault (1979), however, is very critical of what he terms the 'repressive hypothesis', in turn trying to move the conception of power away from this negative model towards a framework extolling its productive nature, "If power was never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really believe that we should manage to obey it?" (p.36). Foucault (2002c) spells out power as "a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise [it] just as much as those over whom it is exercised". Foucauldian power is thus an 'exercised' strategy, not a possession; it is both 'local' (never global) and simultaneously 'not local' (diffuse); it has no essence, being operational; and it is not an attribute, but a relation, passing through both the dominated and the dominating.

Foucault (2002b) rarely uses the term "power" on its own, as he argues that it exists only within relationships, "(t)he term 'power' designates relationships between partners ..." (p.337). Foucault (1980) conceives of power dynamically, by proposing a model in which power relations dissipate through all relational structures of the society. However, he then affirms that consensus remains "a critical idea to maintain at all times" (p.96). This seems to be echoing the democratic ideal of negotiation.

Foucault's (1978/2002) concept of *'gouvernementalite'*, consisting of methods of shaping others' behaviour, implies that power is subject to negotiation, with each individual having his/her place in the hierarchy. Therefore, the 'conduct of conduct' encompasses forms of activity to affect the conduct of others, as well as the relation between self and self. This concept allows me to explore the extent to which the leaders' behaviour is shaped by the FACT policy and the Principal's discourse.

Foucault (2002a) describes 'discourses' as 'practices that systematically form the object of which they speak' (p.49). These 'regimes of truth' enable an exploration of how the subject is produced 'as an effect' through and within discourse and within specific discursive formations - how they are positioned by the leadership policy discourse, and how they, in turn, position themselves according to their distributed leadership performance.

Foucault's (2002b) concept of 'subjectification' - dealing with the 'way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject' (p. 327), with a focus on those processes of self-formation in which the person is active - helps me explore the ways in which educational leaders are 'subjectified' in a college, in the changes that occur in their leadership conduct due to the creation of new roles as set out in the policy document FACT. Through the multiple 'practices of the self', Foucault draws my attention to the contingency of self-formation processes, therefore, the multiple subjectivities of educational leaders being shaped by both global and local forces.

### **Research design and methodological concerns <sup>[1]</sup>**

Within the framework of a qualitative approach, my research is framed as a case study, due to its interest "in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation" (Merriam, 1998, p.19). I adopt the paradigmatic lens of postmodernism as it favours multiple voices and local politics over the power of grand narratives.

The selection of one case study was determined through a criterion-based sampling procedure (Mason, 2002; Patton, 2002), with the defining criterion of my choice from the available sample frame of ten being the College Principal. The Research Ethics Approval Form was submitted to the University and official permission to carry out research was requested to the Education Directorates. The Principal accepted my invitation to participate, as well as all the Heads, after introducing myself and my study at a Council of Heads[CoH] meeting (These day-long meetings are held every month where the school leaders meet the Principal to discuss issues pertaining to the college).

*The College* was set up in 2008, during the last tri-partite phase of school networking. It is composed of a number of secondary schools and primary schools. Despite the fact that since undertaking the fieldwork, both the Principal and the network composition have changed, I cannot give any more specific information about the individual schools and their leaders due to the sensitive nature of the data involved and the bounded nature of the Maltese educational community. The participants are all given the female gender and referred to numerically ('P' indicating primary school Heads, with 'S' referring to those at secondary level), except for the Principal who has to be identified due to the purposes of my research. The college is given a fictitious name. I am well aware of the fact that my case study constitutes what Damianakis and Woodford (2012) have identified as a "small connected community" where "unintentional identity disclosure" may occur due to tensions regarding the issues of anonymity, privacy, confidentiality, and betrayal. The participants were informed of the limits of confidentiality and the possible risks involved, but they all opted to continue with their participation. Transparency about my personal and theoretical attitudes and research purposes enabled me to maintain good research relationships. Furthermore, engaging in reflexivity throughout the research process helped me focus my attention and awareness on ethical nuances that according to Guillemin and Gillam (2004) might arise during the research process beyond initial perceptions.

This study employs a number of different data collection methods, namely in-depth interviews, observation, and documentary analysis – a multi-method approach involving an engagement with crystallization, what Richardson (2000) thinks of as "a postmodernist deconstruction of triangulation" (p.934). In the in-depth, open-ended interviews, I employed Tomlinson's (1989) concept of 'hierarchical focusing' – a strategy attempting to elicit responses using only a minimum of framing, raising topics in order of generality, with questions from the agenda being brought in when spontaneous coverage seems to have been fully exhausted. The leaders were asked about the significance of the college and their reaction to the FACT policy, as well as about the effects of policy-mandated networking. Participant observation, on the other hand, aids to consolidate interviews and to discover things that participants may not freely talk about – it allows me to observe the effects of 'contrived collegiality' (Hargreaves, 1994). I observed the interaction of the leaders during Council of Heads meetings, taking field notes before, during and after the sessions as well as recording the actual meetings on audio. Documentary analysis of FACT (2005) – the policy mandating the setting up of school networks locally was also carried out in order to be able to explore the positions leaders adapt or choose not to take up constructed for them within the policy. I adopted Ball's (1994) two-dimensional framework for policy analysis emphasizing policy as both product and process: "policy as text" – its presentation and interpretation, and "policy as discourse" – its

framing and discourse development, the latter giving rise as to “who can speak, when, where, and with what authority” (p.21).

The interview exchanges and observed meetings were digitally recorded (after obtaining written consent from all the participants) and transcribed from the original language. After shelving my initial idea of a simultaneous transcription and translation, due to the sheer impossibility of the task, I decided on translating only those extracts from my digitally-recorded data to be used as testimonials in my writing. Despite being a bilingual researcher, with the interviewees resorting to code-switching, word and concept choice turned out to be very difficult. The transcribed data was then explored using narrative analysis. Narrative is both the phenomenon under exploration and the methodological approach adopted for analysis. The perspectives of “both narrator and analyst” (Riessman, 2001) come into view as I attempt to switch from the role of researcher to “storyteller” (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 20), to construct “another narrative” (Watson, 2012, p.463) out of the original, paying special attention to how leaders *construct* and *perform* collegiality within the network. Analysis is based on meaning, structure, and interactional context for a revelation of how narratives are produced, recounted, and consumed.

All the interviews and observation sessions were individually analyzed, with the most salient quotes (*as personally chosen by me*) related to the themes emerging from the research questions selected to be presented as the findings. I remain as faithful as possible to the original ‘voice’ (which has already undergone a double-layer of translation: transcription from speech to written text, and translation from Maltese to English) in order for my findings to have the same effect on the reader as they had on me as researcher, interpreter, analyst, and practitioner. These quotes originate from both the interviews and the various discussions unfolding during the CoH meeting. The interview question addressing policy-mandated collegiality is presented below:

**Can you tell me what the term ‘college’ means to you? What are your ideas on the way Maltese state schools have been networked?** [Back in 2005, what were your reactions to FACT and ‘contrived collegiality’? / Did this networking result in adaptations to your leadership role?]

Narrative being the phenomenon under investigation, the main purpose of the interview question was to incite narrative. The main question is followed by subsidiary questions in square brackets, which were only resorted to if the issue under examination was not ‘exhausted’ by the interviewee.

## **Findings and discussion** <sup>[iii]</sup>

### *The leaders’ response to the imposed nature of FACT*

The college is regarded by the Heads as a form of imposition, although there is an element of ambivalence in their response to it. As P1 says, *One has to*

accept that it is something that is COMING FROM ABOVE. Heads rationalize this imposition in various ways. S2 is of the opinion that, *When there is a policy, you are either part of a club or you're out. You cannot make choices yourself. In life, certain things have to be imposed in order to be initiated.* The declaration made by S3 comes out more strongly, *I very much agree with imposition from the top to the bottom in this case...So, yes, I believe that DEMOCRACY IS IN DICTATORSHIP!* On the other hand, P3 narrates herself as Head as the locus of power at the receiving end – the point of application of power exercised by higher leadership hierarchies: *Nowadays, everybody has authority, so everybody orders. The Principal orders, the Director General orders, the other Director orders, the Minister orders...And everybody is just giving us, giving us, giving us! And we just receive, receive, receive...all this is putting undue pressure on us!* This Head narrates herself as the 'vehicle of power' (Foucault, 1980, p.98) – a channel for the asymmetrical and uni-directional flow of power from the Principal, the Directors General and the Minister to the various stakeholders below. Networking has created a 'discursive field' (Foucault, 1991b, p.63), limiting, or rather, delineating what the Heads can do and say. Heads are subjects of the policy discourse, therefore, have to carry out the reform as set out within the policy's discursive framework and boundaries.

On the other hand, 'contrived collegiality' (Hargreaves, 1994), experienced as a beneficial 'imposition' by P1, is regarded as a positive effect of power, thus bringing Foucault's (1979) reversal of the repressive hypothesis of power in operation. *Perhaps this imposition did have its benefits. I'm speaking for myself now. I feel lucky enough to have been appointed Head when colleges were in existence, so not having any other choice helped (P1).*

Collegiality is experienced in different ways. This is revealed in the use of the metonymy of the 'shoulder' by two of the Heads. P2 declares that: *For me, the college is a shoulder as I am no longer alone in leading a school, but I am part of a wider circle as all the seven schools, in their own different way, are led by one direction.* The collegial experience is different for S2, however: *I don't feel part of this college at all. I feel that there is a lack of attention to my school by the Principal. Every school should be given the same attention, the same service, the same priority. It's not fair for schools, or their Heads, to be given the cold shoulder.* The 'shoulder' metaphor is used in a contradictory way by these two Heads whose adaptation to *The College* and its reception is very diverse – the 'shoulder' metaphor 'includes' P2, while 'excluding' S2.

#### *The issue of autonomy within the network*

The college lacks the autonomy it was 'promised', still being directed by the 'Higher Authorities' who have raised expectations, becoming more demanding. The Principal's declaration regarding the retention of individual school autonomy is eventually contradicted by the Heads: *I worked a lot on maintaining respect for autonomy, ethos, school culture...those are still going to be kept...you still have them. The fact that we have become a college does not mean that*

*you have to divest yourself and become how someone else wants you to be. Every school had to remain autonomous and that's how I believe you all are. This apparently 'false' premise is revealed in the words of two Heads: Autonomy? I still have to see it being born! I cannot even organize Prize Day the way I like – it has to conform to the Principal's standards and be similar to that of the other college schools (P1). The schools are not autonomous; I would not want to say that they are NEVER AUTONOMOUS! When it comes to the SDP [iii], I'm supposed to cater for the individual needs of my school. But if the Principal imposes the inclusion of healthy eating, of eco-school, of literacy, of AfL [iv]...how many items can be included? I then end up not catering for my school's basic needs! (P3). Furthermore, FACT declares that schools will "retain their individual identities" within the subsequent development of "autonomous educational institutions" (p.41, emphasis added). The issue of autonomy thus remains a bone of contention at both school and college level.*

It seems that the Principal has a different understanding of "*degrees of autonomy*" than what is understood by the Heads. There is a clash between how educational leadership discourse is 'performed' in schools, and how the schools are 'positioned' by the educational leadership discourse in the FACT policy. An example in point is that the agenda of the School Development Plan is dictated by the Principal. The Heads are subject to the Principal's 'normalizing judgement' (Foucault, 1991a, p.177) which aims at conformity, thus generating more homogeneity within the college. At policy level, FACT has not maintained its promise of decentralization, as although school leaders respect the different levels of leadership present, there is an expressed wish for more school autonomy. Due to the interference by the Principal, belonging to the college may be regarded as 'a mechanism for increased surveillance' (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002). The FACT policy made false promises as rather than giving more autonomy gradually, the Heads complain about having none at all! The Principal embraces the discourse of autonomy. Her exercise of leadership as narrated by the Heads (P1 and P3), however, is an open contradiction of the FACT discursive framework which is the Principal's 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 2002c, p.132).

#### *Problematizing the college setup of geographical clustering*

The participants give quasi-identical responses when asked to give their opinion on the geographical clustering setup adopted locally. P1 says: *We can consider ourselves lucky since we are just a stone's throw away from each other, within walking distance almost. However, what I see is that geographically, the way they were clustered, I don't know what the idea behind this is. Why and how did they decide on this geographical clustering?* P2 also questions the setup: *I feel comfortable within our college as it is balanced – all the schools are on the same level. But I cannot say the same for the colleges composed of schools in depressed areas. What benefits are they reaping?* This seems to be echoed in the response given by P3: *I still have a bit of a question mark about how healthy it is for our students to spend their primary years together and then move on to secondary school.* These

three Heads unanimously problematize 'geographical clustering' despite *The College* having benefited from this setup – with the students in the Maltese state system being their main concern. These Heads thus emerge as 'divided selv[es]' (Foucault, 1992), as they position themselves in favour of the reform but against the way it was enacted. Having been subjectified by the global discourse of networking, decentralization, and collaboration, pervasive in the realm of educational leadership, they exercise scepticism and problematization. Their opinions are subjectified by the global discourse of networking which they are in favour of, while rejecting the local discursive framework of the network setup.

The Principal herself disagrees with the college setup being a system of 'contrived collegiality' (Hargreaves, 1994) which is a form of subtle coercion, of Foucault's (1998) notion of 'masked power' exercised by the policy discourse over school leaders, revealing her partial acceptance of the policy discourse. The Principal is thus also subjectified by the global discourse of networking even while rejecting the local framework of the network setup. This comes out very clearly in her response: *I did not like the fact that someone decided how the colleges were going to be composed, that things were just presented as given, that there was no option. I would have preferred clustering by specialization rather than geographically – it makes more sense academically although it would be very difficult to carry out logistically.* FACT itself does acknowledge the *problems* surrounding the implementation of 'geographical clustering', yet it *was* put into practice. "A school network would ideally be built around a secondary school that serves as a receiver from primary 'feeder' schools. The existing stock of secondary school buildings in Malta makes the application of this ideal school network logistically difficult to implement on a national level" (FACT, p.44).

#### *The gains and losses of networking*

Networking is narrated and performed by the various leaders at diverse hierarchical levels in different ways. Through her use of the plural pronoun 'we', the Principal narrates network leadership as a collective effort: *This is how I see it...There is the atmosphere of a family, almost. WE have managed to build this really well.* Indeed, she does try to have power relations which dissipate through all relational structures of this 'networked' college. The power she divulges to the Heads is both coercive and enabling, constructing the Heads' identities as powerful within the network – powerful to the extent that she allows. She can therefore be regarded as both the 'keeper' and 'distributor' of power. While this 'familial' atmosphere is consolidated by the words of P4: *I feel that there is so much energy among us and we really look forward to meeting in the CoH;* it is openly contradicted by the response of P3: *There needs to be a strong sense of belonging, which is entirely lacking on my part! To feel that I belong, I feel the need to be involved in ideas, that one listens to what I have to say, even if things are decided in a different manner then.*

School identity seems to be a bone of contention among the Heads. Two of the Heads state that contrary to losing school identity, power can be generated positively by the networked stakeholders in fostering a positive reputation. *For me, a college means networking, working together, you are not alone as a Head of School – it means an identity (P1). I don't believe that the idea of the college has lost school identity (P2).*

But this is not the same for P3 who speaks about a loss of school identity. The 'discursive boundaries' (Britzman, 2000, p.36) as imposed on the schools through the college uniform and loss of the pre-college school name serve as a 'strategy' for homogeneity, disciplining the Heads to lead within the discursive boundaries of FACT. *I liked it better when my students had their pink and grey uniform rather than the blue one which is standard for all the schools in the college. I also liked our name 'Freedom Heights Primary School' much better than the anonymous 'Primary A, The College' (P3).*

There is still doubt among leaders as to the introduction of colleges: *Maybe it was not the right moment for colleges to be introduced. We were not mature enough for this reform, and still are not perhaps. We should have been given more information about it (S2).* This is however overshadowed by the positive features experienced by P1: *Upon being networked, I realized that I could benefit from shared problem-solving and decision-making in good relationships with other Heads. WE found strength in unity!*

## Conclusions

### *The introduction of collegiality in the Maltese state school system*

Riles (2001) makes claim to the 'institutionalized utopianism' of the network – and this is how it is presented in FACT. There is an unproblematized, almost-blind belief in the ability of education networks to solve the problems being faced by schools. Nevertheless, there is a simultaneous recognition, acknowledgement, and problematization by the State of that same 'blind belief' that led to the generation of FACT in 2005 and the 'birth' of colleges in 2006. The Maltese college is, at other times, utilized as a 'vehicle for government-driven school reform' (Day *et al.*, 2003; O'Brein *et al.*, 2006) as neither the Principal nor the Heads have any say over State-issued directives.

The Maltese college thus exhibits 'collaborative inertia' (Huxham & Vangen, 2005) as an evident gap exists between the policymakers' view of networking and how it unfolds on a day-to-day basis. Networks were 'imposed' on the Maltese state school educational landscape, rather than having been 'incentivised' (Hadfield & Chapman, 2009). They can thus be regarded as 'a mechanism for increased surveillance' (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002) by both the Principal and the Heads due to higher levels of accountability and monitoring measures. However, the leaders accept the college as incontestable despite voicing their disagreement.

Collegiality is regarded as a 'straitjacket' (Jarvis, 2012) by some of the leaders, as an imposition by the State through a policy mandate. However, when it comes to the issue of conscription and volunteerism (Hadfield & Chapman, 2009), all the leaders in my study unanimously agree that conscription was the only way forward for the Maltese state schools.

#### *The concomitants of 'networking'*

Various issues were generated as an effect of this school networking. College setup is problematized by the leaders on two main issues: geographical clustering and college streaming. The reasons behind geographical clustering as the setup of choice for Maltese colleges as to *how*, *why*, and *who* decided remain mysterious and anonymous. School networking by district leads to the isolation of students who are 'entrenched' in the same geographical area – this accords with the concerns of Bezzina and Grima (2003) over the 'stagnation of ideas and limited exposure to educational experiences', leading to a 'lack of cross-fertilization' which somehow contradicts the concept of networking. This also results in 'college streaming' as schools from deprived areas are networked together, while those from 'affluent' areas are clustered together, resulting in social injustice and educational inequality.

Joining a college also brings forward the issue of identity maintenance (as explored by Evans & Stone-Johnson, 2010; Jackson, 2005) which emerges in two contradictory ways in the research the author is undertaking. Joining *The College* is regarded as a loss of individual school identity, leading to homogeneity and loss of autonomy. However, empowerment is generated through the acquisition of a new college identity which enhances one's individuality.

#### **Implications for further research and practice**

Network leadership in a policy-mandated context as an area of research is as yet under-explored, and therefore, under-theorized. Lima (2010) highlights network dynamics as the least well-known aspect of networks. A lot of ambiguity revolves around the reception to networking which is simultaneously accepted and eventually problematized by both the State and the leaders on issues of accountability, support, college setup, and identity.

This paper also demonstrates the usefulness of Foucault's work in educational leadership. His themes are still relevant today, in fact, May (2005) argues that if we need to question the relevance of Foucault's work for today, then we must become *more* Foucauldian rather than less. Thus, the findings of my research can also serve as an inspiration for practising leaders in present-day educational institutions in terms of the generation of reflexivity on their leadership experiences and identities, on how they are 'subjected' by both

local and global forces, and how they, in turn, subjectify others, all the while moving down the leadership hierarchy.

My findings could aid policy makers in future revisions of the FACT policy, and in the possible future organizational restructuring of the college system, in light of the issues brought forward by the leaders, especially in terms of geographical structuring and college streaming. This 'enacted' feedback regarding college setup in Malta can help policy makers review the manner in which policies are initiated and actually unfold.

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<sup>i</sup> The empirical data used in this article emanates from an ongoing doctoral research.

<sup>ii</sup> All the text in bold within this section comprises the verbatim quotes of the leaders involved in the research, directly taken from the interview and observation transcripts.

<sup>iii</sup> The 'School Development Plan' is drawn up by the Head of each individual school together with the other SMT (School Management Team) members, according to the needs of their school.

<sup>iv</sup> AfL stands for 'Assessment for Learning'.