Introducing reform through prescribed policy discourse(s): a critique of policy rhetoric in Maltese education

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ABSTRACT:
A central issue in system improvement is the propagation of a common sense of purpose where individual institutions can simultaneously bond with the wider system while exercising autonomy in context – hence the centrality of networks and collaboration (Hopkins 2007). The Maltese state education system responded to this concomitant move towards ‘network governance’ through the introduction of school networks (legally termed ‘colleges’), mandated by the policy document For All Children to Succeed (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment 2005). I explore the implications of this move for the policy actors involved and the system within which this policy reception, translation and enactment unfold through a documentary analysis of the policy document FACTS, thus depicting how a relatively small state education system utilized multi-site school collaboratives to implement system-wide reform. Despite FACTS’ promise of autonomy, the state’s struggle for the retention of hegemony emerges very strongly – this has implications for policy and practice.

Keywords: accountability, autonomy, decentralization, networking, policy prescription, reform.

INTRODUCTION
Ideas for school effectiveness and improvement have changed their focus from an institutional basis to systems level developments, in the wake of national educational policy being subjected to global politics and performativity, subsequently adopting self-improvement strategies with inherent tensions between accountability and development, prescription and autonomy (Forde and McKinney 2015). A central issue in system improvement is the propagation of a common sense of purpose where individual institutions can simultaneously bond with the wider system while exercising autonomy in context – hence the centrality
of networks and collaboration (Hopkins 2007). The move towards networks, collaboratives and partnership working represents a defining global trend in schools in the twenty-first century, reflecting “a shift from competition to collaboration, from top-down control to organizational autonomy” (Hopkins 2009, p. 2). Keddie (2015) states that there has been “a proliferation and formalising of such collaboration in recent times … evident in the current concerted emphasis on school networks in education policy as a mechanism to support school improvement” (p. 8).

The Maltese state education system responded to this concomitant move towards ‘network governance’ through the introduction of school networks (legally termed ‘colleges’), mandated by the policy document *For All Children to Succeed* (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment 2005) [henceforth referred to as FACTS]. Contextualizing this structural/organisational reform within the globalised narrative of policy-prescribed networks, I explore the implications of this move for the policy actors/subjects (the latter distinction made by Ball 2015) involved and the system within which this policy reception, translation and enactment unfold. This is accomplished through an analysis of the policy document FACTS – an analysis with a particular focus on rationale, rhetoric, discourse(s), and conflicting issues. This policy analysis is thus depicted as a means of exploring how a relatively small state education system utilized multi-site school collaboratives to implement system-wide reform.

The first section presents the education system exposed in this article, by outlining the policy trajectory of the Maltese education scenario from post-independence up to 2005 – the year FACTS was published. This policy document mandating school networks is the main focus of this article, being the main medium through which I explore how a relatively small education system dealt with system-wide reform. The second section explores the move towards networks, collaboratives and partnership working as a defining global trend in twenty-first century schools, the rationale behind the adoption of this ‘travelling policy’ (Ozga and Jones 2006) and associated benefits. The following section zooms in on the Maltese education system, setting out the local response to this global policy move through the publication of FACTS, by outlining the main issues involved, namely: structural reform, conceptual choice, leadership roles and responsibilities, as well as autonomy and accountability tensions. The Methodology section outlines my approach to documentary analysis that follows Ball’s (1994) two-dimensional method, focusing on ‘policy as text’ and ‘policy as discourse’, also taking in elements from Scott’s (2000) critical policy reading proposal in combination with selections from Rizvi and Lingard’s (2010) comprehensive framework for policy analysis. The analysis of FACTS is then staged, with particular foci on the rationale behind the document and its origins; the rhetorical devices employed; prevalent discourses; and the presentation of the proposed college networks. The article concludes by giving the implications for theory, policy and practice.
EXPOSING THE ‘SMALL SYSTEM’: STATE EDUCATION IN MALTA

The ‘small system’ explored in this article is located in Malta, a relatively small island strategically situated in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea with a population of around 425,000. Malta gained independence in 1964, became a Republic in 1974 and joined the European Union in 2004. Education provision throughout the compulsory school years right up to the tertiary level, along with the examination system, closely follows the British model (Sultana 1997) due to our long years of colonization under their empire. It is a tripartite system of state, church and independent schools. Education is free of charge for those students who attend the state system, a section which constitutes sixty percent of the compulsory school age population. The church and independent sectors stand at thirty percent and ten percent respectively. Co-education is practised across the three sectors at primary level and in the independent sector at secondary level, the latter having also been introduced in state schools in 2013 as an ongoing pilot project.

The political change that took place in 1964, when Malta acquired independence from British rule, triggered a number of revolutionary reforms that the Maltese education sector has been experiencing ever since. The main educational milestones since independence are the provision of secondary education for all in 1970; increasing the school leaving age from 14 to 16 in 1974; the 1988 Education Act that established the provision of state compulsory education for all Maltese citizens; the recognition of the professional status of teachers, and the setting up of School Councils, among other initiatives; the creation of the first National Minimum Curriculum in 1989; as well as the new organizational structure of the Education Division in 1994 that saw the setting up of the Department of Curriculum Development, Implementation and Review. Notwithstanding, these last two decades have been extremely significant for the Maltese educational scenario due to several major measures and restructurings that have been implemented. These underline attempts to augment the country’s intellectual capital and provide improved quality education with the aim of enabling all Maltese children to succeed.

The Maltese educational system has been undergoing a structured, gradual but steady change in terms of decentralization and increased school autonomy, with the main aim being that of renewal – modernizing it in line with global policy development. This was initiated by the publication of Tomorrow’s Schools: Developing Effective Learning Cultures (Wain et al. 1995) – this document indicated a starting point for an examination of current policies and practices in light of the demands made by a fast-changing world as it established a set of agendas and strategies for future schools, aiming to develop a “new culture of learning and of effective learning environments”. This document paved the way for a revised National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) published in 1999, establishing compulsory schooling as the start of a lifelong process of education. This initiation of the decentralization process in the Maltese educational system was meant to provide schools with more flexibility and power to make decisions on matters related to educational aims, human resources, financial planning, and curriculum matters. Through greater school autonomy, it was hoped that schools would be in a better position to cater for the needs of their students through an enhanced
teaching and learning process. This inbred culture of dependency, rampant in other fields besides education, owes its origins to centuries of colonization under different rulers. Malta has been enjoying independent status for less than half a century, but the mental and psychological shackles are still hard to throw off.

The NMC Strategic Plan (Ministry of Education 2001) outlined the need to introduce new structures and fresh approaches, stressing that schools need to co-operate, pool and share experiences and ideas in a systemic way, that is, to network. Locally, the origins of the school networking concept can be traced back to the document *Tomorrow’s Schools: Developing Effective Learning Cultures* in which Wain *et al.* (1995) had recommended the abolishing of national examinations, streaming and the 11+ examinations, thus providing students with continuity through the principle of vertical and horizontal integration. Furthermore, Farrugia (1999) suggested structural and organizational changes – the most essential reform being a reorganization of state primary and secondary schools to form combined entities. The National Minimum Curriculum (Ministry of Education 1999) recognized the importance of creating a smooth transition: “a sense of continuity would enable students to realize that education is a process and not a series of disconnected episodes” (p. 33, emphasis added). All this paved the way for the basic principles underpinning *For All Children to Succeed* (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment 2005) – the policy document that instigated the reform explored in this article and which will be analysed in depth at a later stage.

The FACTS policy document led to further reform aspects, being closely followed by an amendment to the Education Act (House of Representatives 2006) and the recent agreement between the Government of Malta and the Malta Union of Teachers (July 2007), paving the way for the setting up of ten colleges. Furthermore, as a result of the schools college reform, in November 2008, the Ministry of Education published a policy document about the transition of students from primary to secondary schools under the college system, *Transition from Primary to Secondary Schools in Malta* (Ministry for Education, Youth and Employment 2008). This proposed mixed-ability classes throughout the primary school years, eliminating the hitherto streamed primary classes in the final two years, followed by the phasing out of the 11+ examination – thus enabling a smoother flow from one level of education to another. The networking reform also involved restructuring the governing body of the education system (November 2007), with the ex-Education Division undergoing a transformation into two distinct yet complementary juridical entities: the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) and the Directorate for Educational Services (DES), which were enhanced by the setting up of the Operations Directorate after a number of years.

An agreement on the synchronization of church compulsory schooling with state provision in 2009 led to the abolition of the 11+ examination two years later, thus providing a more level playing field and increasing student heterogeneity in all schools. Consequently, the new end-of-primary benchmark was launched. A review of the NMC, initiated in 2009 led to the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) that was translated into law in 2012. This is the first curriculum framework to be adopted since Malta joined the EU in 2004, with its proposal for universal
education entitlement espousing six general principles, and built around eight learning areas, inspired by the EU eight Key Competences Framework. One of the aims of the NCF is the introduction of additional equity and decentralization in the national system, particularly through its proposed Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF). This LOF, whose implementation is projected for the scholastic year 2017/2018, is intended to lead to more curricular autonomy of colleges and schools by addressing individual learning needs through the freedom from centrally-imposed knowledge-centric syllabi. Another recent landmark in compulsory education has been the launch of a Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024, based on the four values of equity, social justice, inclusivity and diversity, in order to provide generations with skills and talents for employability and citizenship in the twenty-first century, thus aiming to reduce the gaps in education outcomes, reduce the high incidence of early school-leavers, and increase participation in lifelong learning. This has been further complimented by the launch of MyJourney (Ministry for Education and Employment 2016), a major reform in the secondary school system to be available from 2019/2020 which will see the educational sector move from a ‘one-size-fits-all’ system to a more inclusive and equal programme through the choice of academic, vocational or applied subjects. Parallel to this reform is an ongoing consultation process on reforms to the Education Act. Thus, one can conclude that the general trend in education reform, irrespective of who is in government, is a move towards autonomy and potential individualization.

**TABLE 1: DOCUMENTS OUTLINING THE MAJOR REFORMS IN THE MALTESE STATE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tomorrow’s Schools: Developing Effective Learning Cultures</td>
<td>1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Minimum Curriculum</td>
<td>1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The National Minimum Curriculum Strategic Plan</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For All Children to Succeed: A New Network Organization for Quality</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education in Malta</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amendment to the Education Act</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement between the Government of Malta and the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT)</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition from Primary to Secondary Schools in Malta</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The National Curriculum Framework</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MyJourney: Achieving through different pathways</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EDUCATION REFORM THROUGH POLICY-PRESCRIBED NETWORKS

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, networks, networking and the ‘network society’ (Castells 2000) have become an increasingly dominant social and cultural paradigm. Castells (1996) thinks that the dominating societal processes are network-like, defining a network as “a set of interconnected nodes; a node being the point at which a curve intersects itself” (p. 470). Castells (2001) notes how networks have been classified as the organizational form of the information age, further considering the network as an opposing model to hierarchy, decentralizing execution and decision-making. Urry (2003) deems Castells’ network analysis to be very significant due to its moving away from the idea that the global is a finished and completed totality, thus emphasizing contingency, openness, and unpredictability. Castells’ (1996) network theory, with its emphasis on decentralization, fluidity, and lack of boundaries, helped me understand the discursive context in which school networking was set up. I do not try to criticize the Maltese network by drawing comparisons with Castells’ (1996) perfect conceptual notion – the differences in conceptualization between this very ‘academic’ theorization of a network and the policymakers’ views and assumptions emerges in the policy analysis section. I am merely trying to give a very brief outline of the emergence of Maltese networks in the surroundings where networking has become a global metaphor for our age.

Different forms of networks, collaboratives, and federations have become an established part of many educational landscapes and have arisen for a number of reasons. Hadfield and Chapman (2009) explain that some have been ‘imposed’ on schools, others have been ‘incentivised’ by the offer of external funding, but many have arisen because of the efforts of educational leaders who want to “make a difference’ in their locality, which assumes their essential ‘good’” (p. 1). It appears that the Maltese policy desire is that of a major organizational reform achieved through ‘contrived collegiality’ (Hargreaves 1994) in order to ensure the smooth transition of students across their mandatory school years, thus providing a quality education for ‘all’ children to succeed. Chapman (2008) makes the point that the principles behind the concept of school-based networks are largely borrowed from the North American business literature. Hopkins (2009) agrees and remarks that “the shift from competition to collaboration, from top-down control to organizational autonomy has been quite remarkable” (p. 2) in the twenty-first century. This has been taken up by schools and, Chrispeels and Harris (2006) claim that networking and collaborative school improvement programmes have emerged in diverse cultural contexts, ranging from Australasia to North America and Asia, as well as in Europe.

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 et al. (2010) argue that the current climate of rapid technological change creates a need for collective knowledge creation and information sharing at classroom, school, and system level. Evidence suggests that this can be achieved through school-to-school networks and partnerships (Church et al. 2002). Collaboration and networking among schools have been actively promoted both in the United Kingdom and internationally as a means of promoting school
improvement and developing new types of service delivery. Chapman and Hadfield (2010) claim that this novel organizational structure is not simply regarded as “a strategy for change but as an end point of this particular wave of change … to become a truly networked education system” (p. 223).

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, considering this as proof of these governments’ commitment to a social justice agenda translated in education policy and legislation. Recent policy directions have incorporated a shift to decentralize decision-making. This is an illustration of the rationale behind the Maltese policy directive – that of decentralization through the organizational reform of networking in order for ‘all’ children to succeed, notwithstanding their ability, family background, and geographical origin. Fullan (2004) describes how this decentralization unfolds “by working together differently, with a goal of producing quality ideas and practices on an ongoing basis and inspiring collective effort to the extent that it becomes possible to achieve breakthroughs never before experienced” (p. 6). Ainscow and West (2006) explain that this facilitates innovation and change, while contributing to large-scale reform.

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. Chapman and Hadfield (2010) regard the setting up of networks across the globe as a complex mixture of threats and opportunities, pressures, and incentives – a forward-facing dynamic that has underpinned the central governments’ reform agenda in many educational systems. It seems that school leaders have to respond to centrally mandated changes in some aspects of their practice and work from the ‘bottom up’ to create uniquely ‘local’ responses on certain issues.

There are various ‘stated’ functions of education networks in literature dealing with school reform. According to Hopkins (2007), networks can aid the process of re-structuring and re-culturing in educational organizations, thus ensuring a sustainable progression of evolution and improvement. He further states that through networks, schools can provide a curriculum that is closer to individual students’ needs. Hargreaves (2003) describes how networks can accelerate improvement, as well as generate the stimulation of innovation by encouraging schools to foster curriculum diversity, extended services, as well as professional support. Hopkins (2007) proposes another ‘stated’ purpose of networking: the creation of new units of service delivery through the close collaboration of schools who take responsibility for all their children. Other ‘expected’ outcomes relate to the teaching profession. Hargreaves (2003) explores the sharing and rapid transfer of good practices among teachers, as well as their empowerment which
leads to enriched professional practice and better professional pride. As Lima (2010) states,

there is nothing inherently positive or negative about a network: it can be flexible and organic, or rigid and bureaucratic; it can be liberating and empowering, or stifling and inhibiting; it can be democratic, but it may also be dominated by particular interests (p. 2).

The move towards networks, collaboratives and partnership working represents a defining global trend in schools in the twenty-first century, reflecting “a shift from competition to collaboration, from top-down control to organizational autonomy” (Hopkins 2009, p. 2). Keddie (2015) states that there has been “a proliferation and formalising of such collaboration in recent times … evident in the current concerted emphasis on school networks in education policy as a mechanism to support school improvement” (p. 8). According to Niesche and Keddie (2016), “the burgeoning international policy emphasis on school-to-school collaborations” (p. 31) has underpinned the need for school success in the current heterarchical environment of high-stakes accountability. Decentralisation, autonomy and accountability (the proposed rationale behind the setting up of school networks) can therefore be regarded as mechanisms of neoliberal governance in disguise. The main characteristics of neoliberalism are State central control, the ‘empowerment’ agenda and the tension between autonomy and accountability. It is not my intention to explore the mechanisms of neoliberalism in detail due to word limit constraints. [For an exploration of the influence of neoliberalism on the enactment of policy-mandated collegiality, refer to Mifsud (2016a)]. The ‘effects’ of both the global and the local policy discourse of networks and networking on Maltese educational leaders, in addition to the subsequent inherent tensions among autonomy, centralisation, and decentralisation, both within the policy discourse and the unfolding network leadership dynamics, can be accessed in Mifsud (2016b).

Neoliberalism, “a particular social imaginary of globalization” (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, p. 184), has been at the root of recent policy shifts around the world, leading to the global trend of policy convergence in education around an education policy discourse shaped by a variety of international organizations including the OECD, the World Bank, and UNESCO. This has developed from viewing education through human capital theory, thus producing policies focusing on outcomes, what Mundy (2007, p. 348) calls “standard-setting multilateralism” through international education quality measures like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is one of the examples that demonstrate how OECD has managed to craft “a new form of global governance in education, as well as within nations” (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, p. 133), contributing to a global playing field of educational measurement.

MALTA’S RESPONSE TO THIS GLOBAL POLICY MOVE THROUGH FACTS

Malta responded to this global policy move towards networking through the publication of For All Children To Succeed in 2005 – a document that mandated collegiality among Maltese state primary and secondary schools. A very brief
outline of the document for readers who are unfamiliar with the Maltese education system is provided in the table below.

**TABLE 2: A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE POLICY DOCUMENT ‘FOR ALL CHILDREN TO SUCCEED’ (MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, YOUTH AND EMPLOYMENT 2005)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 1</th>
<th>Ten Achievements and Ten Challenges</th>
<th>This chapter presents a list of ‘ten major achievements’ (p. 23), which according to the document, pose the same number of challenges to be faced in the very near future, due to the ‘number of defects, weaknesses and deficiencies [that] grew around the system’ (p. 23).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>Central Education Entities</td>
<td>This chapter which focuses on the Central Education bodies, portrays the mission statement of the Ministry for Education in the transformation of the Maltese education system and the main functions of the two Directorates: the Directorate for Educational Services (DES), and the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td>Networking of Schools</td>
<td>This chapter addresses the proposed college networks. The areas dealt with include the relevance of networks in twenty-first century Maltese society, factors that play a role in successful networks, their child-centred focus, as well as the need for effective leaders and managers for the successful operationalization of networks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4</td>
<td>Creating a Shift: From Centralization to Decentralization</td>
<td>This chapter deals with the shift from centralization to decentralization, the benefits of networking envisaged for Maltese schools, as well as the proposed characteristics of Maltese colleges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
<td>School Networks Models</td>
<td>This chapter outlines seven school network models that are presented graphically, along with a very brief description.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The college reform in Malta: school networks and networking

The document FACTS 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 between 2006 and 2008, with the colleges presently being at different stages of their development. The first three colleges were founded in 2006, the following four colleges were established in 2007, while the remaining three colleges were set up in 2008. By February 2008, the remaining vacant post for College Principal was filled, raising the full complement to ten.

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 internal exams, control, and accountability.

FIGURE 1: OPERATIVE STRUCTURE OF THE STATE COLLEGE (ADAPTED FROM FABRI AND BEZZINA 2010, P. 31-2)
The policy document FACTS 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 NMC. 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.

FACTS acknowledges networks as “an increasingly important feature of contemporary life” while recognizing their adoption as “an organizational principle of choice” across all sectors (p. 37, emphasis added). Maltese policy-makers acknowledge the high degree of conceptual pluralism revolving around the network concept and the policy document clarifies that it adopts a working definition of networks in education as developed by Hopkins (2005):

Networks are purposeful social entities characterised by a commitment to quality, rigour, and a focus on standards and student learning. They are also an effective means of supporting innovation in times of change. In education, networks promote the dissemination development of teachers, support capacity building in schools, mediate between centralised and decentralised structures, and assist in the process of re-structuring and re-culturing educational organisations and systems (p. 37).

FACTS rationalizes the choice behind this working definition: “We are adopting here a working definition … for the type of network in education that has a chance of realizing the aspirations many have for them” [for the networks] (p. 37). According to FACTS, 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.

This major reform necessitated the introduction of new roles and new responsibilities, amongst which was the deployment of the College Principal, designated to be the educational leader of the college as a whole. Besides ensuring “an effective and efficient dialogue with all Heads of School and stakeholders”, s/he is also “expected generally to execute and implement efficiently the policies of the College” (p. 73). On the other hand, the Head of School who, according to the policy document FACTS, is expected to lead and manage, 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” (p. 74, emphasis added).

The overall purpose of the headship position is “to provide professional leadership and to ensure the implementation and development of the National Curriculum” (p. 74). The policy document fosters a strong belief in ‘shared or co-leadership’, which is important for the distribution of the leadership function across more than one school location, thus offering the potential of generating ‘healthy dialogue and debate’ while fostering a ‘satisfying and fruitful team spirit’. While advocating distributed leadership, FACTS justifies the need for senior leaders –
“Distributed leadership only thrives where there is effective senior leadership” (p. 39).

Article 57 of the Education Act (2006) makes provision for a certain degree of autonomy for the colleges, stating that,

The Minister and the Directorates shall promote the application of the principle of subsidiarity in the management and administration of the Colleges, within a framework of decentralization and autonomy of the educational operation and services given by the Colleges and their schools according to the priorities, targets and national strategies adopted by the Government (Art. 57, 1).

However, this is a limited form of ‘autonomy’ to be granted as long as the colleges work within the limits of the national targets and strategies as set out in the national policy. It is the Minister who “delegate[s] in a clear manner educational functions to the Colleges and establish[es] the parameters of the function and the effective accountability of every officer or employee involved in the exercise of the delegated function” (p. 2). The Education Act (2006) supports the interdependency of autonomy and regulation as depicted in FACTS which states that, “Autonomy is not to be confused with complete deregulation…autonomy and decentralization predicate a grasp by the Education Ministry and the central education entities” (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment 2005, p. 29). It further states that this school networking system “needs to have a firm and solid hub to hold together and prosper” (p. 30). This ‘firm and solid hub’ is to be found in the two Directorates (Directorate for Educational Services [DES] and Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education [DQSE], under the direction of the Minister.

I now proceed to discuss the methodology utilized in this paper, namely the approach I adopted to documentary analysis, followed by an analysis of FACTS: the policy document providing the fulcrum for the issue being explored in this article. This enables me to depict how a ‘small’ state education system utilized multi-site school collaboratives to implement system-wide reform.

**METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES: THE ANALYTICAL APPROACH ADOPTED**

The main research method utilized in this study is documentary analysis of the policy document FACTS that mandated this organizational reform of school networking. Documents offer a lens to interpret events in order to gain insights into the relationship between the written and unwritten, spoken and virtual, public and private, and past and present (Fitzgerald 2007). The policy document FACTS is both ‘contextual’ and ‘evidential’, offering a productive starting place by providing a strong indication of what should be happening at both school and college level (Burton et al. 2008).

“There is no recipe approach for doing policy analysis” (Taylor et al. 1997, p. 36) – this reflects the stance I adopt in my analysis of FACTS. I include both macro and micro-level analysis, which involves more than a narrow concern simply with the policy document, comprising background, context, historical antecedents, relations with other texts – “for any text a plurality of readers must necessarily produce a plurality of readings” (Codd 1988, p. 239). The framework adopted in my analysis follows Ball’s (1994) two-dimensional approach 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). Ball’s (1994) view of policy as ‘text’ raises the issue of power relations. He argues that policies posit a “restructuring, redistribution and disruption of power relations”, as with power being “multiplicitous, overlain, interactive, and complex, policy texts enter rather than simply change power relations” (p. 20). Ball’s approach thus provides a critique of the neoliberal turn in education policy by showing the effects of policy as primarily discursive. However, Foucault (2002a) sees an opportunity for opposing strategy: “The problem is not one of changing people’s ‘consciousness’ or what’s in their heads, but the political, economic, institutional regime of production of truth” (p. 47). Adams (2016) explicitly recognizes the agentic action at the heart of educational policy-making, thus both marking the extension of current theorizing while offering a new theoretical treatise through his tri-partite theory for the understanding of policy: ‘policy explaining’, ‘policy framing’, and ‘policy forming’. Adams (2016) propagates positioning theory, outlining how we are produced both by “discourse and the language of the ‘moment’ in discursive acts”, contending policy texts as “themselves forming policy … positioning policy explanation and policy framing within the bounds of the institution and so giving policy form” (p. 290).

Scott (2000) proposes a critical reading of a policy text to be aligned along a number of continua, to be understood as constructed by these devices and located within the policy process itself. The document was analysed to explore discourse, content, and text revolving around the following issues: intentions of the writers and linguistic devices used as tools of persuasion towards acceptance of their version of the truth; ideological underpinnings and negotiation of competing interests; positioning of the reader vis-à-vis the policy agenda; dominant discourses; actors who generate and shape policy; as well as the “structure/agency dichotomy” (Ball 1994, p. 15). Fazal and Rizvi (2010) present a comprehensive framework for policy analysis suggesting different foci around contextual issues; policy and textual issues; and implications and outcomes issues, drawing on their earlier framework for policy analysis of context, text and consequences (Taylor et al. 1997). My policy analysis focuses on contextual issues of historical, political and bureaucratic origins, as well as policy and textual issues in terms of the discursive formation of policy and policy problem, textual considerations, policy structuration, as well as resource issues.

**Analysing FACTS**

I now move on to present a documentary analysis of the policy document mandating school networks, focusing on the rationale behind this reform, the discourses prevalent in the document, in addition to other issues related to logistics generated by this novel organizational setup.

**The rationale behind FACTS and its origins**

Bacchi (2009) argues that policy works by creating a problematization of an existing phenomenon and providing a solution. The aim for the structural and organizational reform mandated by the policy is spelled out in the very title: *For*
All Children To Succeed: A New Network Organization For Quality Education in Malta. This policy centres around the main premise of a “quality education for all” and of “changing ‘whole systems’ radically”, with the main aim being that of “transformation” (p. xi). The policy presents the main rationale for networks and their function – having a structure to accommodate effective dissemination strategies:

In the twenty-first century, Nation-States and many other entities survive better through securing partnerships based on shared responsibilities. Schools are amongst such entities and can only prosper and flourish if they form and gain strengths through new alliances (p. xii).

And it is “the college [that] will ensure the emergence and the sharing of good practices” (p. 71). This political rationality can be regarded as a technology of government for easing in the State agenda through the pretense of solving the educational crisis (see Sonu 2011; Pinto 2012) of the immediate need for education reform. FACTS fails to provide specific definitions of ‘success’ or ‘quality’ in Maltese education other than overtly referring to them in the document title and to derivatives throughout the document. Notwithstanding, it is implied that the structural reform of colleges will bring this about through ‘new alliances’ and the ‘sharing of good practices’. The provision of ‘quality’ education comes across as the main purpose driving this structural reform:

Over the past fifty years we have been delivering education for all: Malta’s strong educational roots now seek a new space, freedom, and the tools to ensure quality education for all in the coming years. Only a quality leap forward guarantees to present and future generations a full and equitable participation in a healthy democracy and an economy replete of challenges and opportunities (p. xi, original emphasis)

The Maltese education system does place undue emphasis on outcomes and results in a heavily exam-oriented environment which was and still is highly prevalent at the time FACTS was being implemented and the new structural organization put into operation. Malta does regard international comparisons as important and has kept step with EU countries in practically all EU education benchmarks. Malta’s participation in the TIMSS, PIRLS and PISA international studies have revealed an unacceptably high level of low achievers, with the resulting EU2020 target to reduce that percentage of the student population drastically to less than fifteen percent. It is with the following statistics in mind that policymakers within the Ministry for Education and Employment developed the NCF, the Framework for the Education Strategy, the LOFs, and MyJourney, which are already in operation or projected for a definite timeframe in the near future.

FACTS places Maltese schools within the global discourse of networking by admitting to a superior existence through “partnerships based on shared responsibilities” (p. xii). This “big’ policy for a small world” (Ball 1998) became embedded in the local education scene, following the trend for policy convergence within the recognition of the contextual effects (Lingard 2000; Ozga 2005) of the Maltese education system. This indicates the differing degrees of local ‘policy inflection’ of this ‘travelling policy’ of networking found in ‘local’ spaces (Ozga and
Jones 2006), thus affecting the ‘conduct of conduct’ of Maltese educational leaders through a form of ‘global panopticism’ (as identified by Lingard et al. 2013).

The envisaged benefits presented in the text are commensurate with those described in international literature. FACTS mentions an aspirational purpose for the unity of all school communities, a focus on student learning, the creation of opportunities for adult learning, as well as “dedicated leadership and proper management” (p. 38), among the desired operational characteristics for the colleges, thus placing the ‘responsibilisation’ on the educational leaders, while at the same time romanticizing the leadership concept:

“The success of a network (particularly in its early stages) is almost uniquely dependent on the vision, energy and effort of those who take on leadership roles … As network structures are more fluid, the leadership of the network will start and shape the activity, guide reflection and adaptation and help refocus (p. 38)"

FACTS presents networking as the only ‘valid’ truth claim to be practised in the Maltese educational scenario within the globalized discourse of ‘networking’ and the ‘network society’. According to FACTS, “We believe that networks are the new essential units of organisation to replace the questionable dichotomy of ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approaches to educational change” (p. xi). This concomitant move towards ‘network governance’ is thus constructed, and eventually performed as a regulatory element of policy (Bailey 2013). Furthermore, FACTS states that,

“In the 21st century nation-states and many other entities survive better through securing partnerships based on shared responsibilities. Schools are amongst such entities and can only prosper and flourish if they form and gain strengths through new alliances (p. xii)."

Notwithstanding, it is Maltese state school students who emerge as the primary stakeholders of this child-centred policy imperative:

“Beyond the more effective and efficient work practice that will be inspired by the proposed college network, there is the effect on the client of the system – the “be all” of all our endeavours, the child. It is being posited that within a college network of schools each and every child will have a better claim to equity of provision within the educational ecology. No child who will be a “citizen” of a particular college network will be out of sight and out of mind. No child will be “somebody else’s responsibility” (p. xvi)"

The evidential basis for FACTS is the result of an “in-depth reflection on the workings of the present system and in the light of how schools network in other countries” (p. xii). Moreover,

“The intention is not to replicate any one particular form of organisation or network design. Rather, it is an opportunity to share learning that has already been generated in order that it can inform planning and implementation strategy (p. xii)."

It is a policy trajectory that is pre-occupied with the construction of a ‘knowledge economy’ and ‘learning society’.
Whilst retaining their individual identities, the schools within the network would be coordinated by a leading facilitator. In this way, ideal school networking should lead to the development of autonomous educational institutions, working within an agreed framework of performance, accountability and outcomes (p. 41).

The school leader is ultimately mobilized as the protagonist who will ‘transform’ and ‘deliver’ what is required for a successful outcome (Gunter 2012), with limited scope for improvisation. This transforms one into a regulatory tool of the State (Honan 2004; Ball et al. 2012), with an accompanied erosion of professional autonomy.

A lot of attention seems to have been focused on ‘structure’ rather than ‘agency’, an issue reiterating Ball’s (1994) call for a rethinking of the structure/agency dichotomy, a task which Harker and May (1993) identify as central to Bourdieu’s sociology: “to show how agency and structure are implicit in each other, rather than being the two poles of a continuum” (p. 177). In the policy document, it is the college structure that is emphasized rather than ways of fostering ‘networking’ itself. Evidence of this is Chapter 5 ‘School Networks Models’ that outlines graphical representations of school network models, taking up an entire chapter from the five chapters constituting the FACTS policy document. Emphasis is placed on outlining the roles of the Principal and the Head of School, and on the structural aspects of the reform and expected benefits. According to FACTS, “The Principal will support the schools within the college to grow together as effective providers of quality education” (p. 73). There is the underlying assumption of the adjustment of Heads of school and context to policy as the ‘regime of truth’, but not of policy to context – all this amounting to “a privileging of the policy maker’s reality” (Ball 1994, p. 19). The policy gives prominence to network morphology (structure) over network nodes (relationships) – it could be that local policymakers view ‘networks’ in terms of configuration as distinct from ‘networking’ – the process of collaboration and communication (A distinction identified by McCormick et al. 2011). These can be regarded as technologies of government that enable government steering at a distance (Ranson 2008), reinforced by FACTS’ reassurance that “The Principal will empower schools towards school improvement, effectiveness and growth” (p. 73).

FACTS exhibits “intertextual compatibility” (Ball 1994, p. 19) with the previous policies and texts in circulation, in that its enactment does not inhibit, contradict or marginalize others. Although there is no direct citation to other policy texts, it does not suggest that the truth of the matter resides wholly within the document itself. FACTS implies knowledge of the preceding policy texts, the past education scenario in schools, as well as the discourses of globalization, partnership, and networking in the twenty-first century. It is assumed that the reader (that is, the educational leader) has a thorough awareness of these matters. The way this policy is based on previous developments, following a similar ideology and basic line of thought is a clear example of what Taylor et al. (1997, p. 46) label as “incrementalism” in policy production. The proposals in FACTS may be considered as a natural extension of the decade-long reformation process – education restructuring did not take place suddenly but was a gradual process whose idea was born in 1995 with the publication of Tomorrow’s Schools:
Developing Effective Learning Cultures, and put into action more than a decade later.

This process of ‘apparent decentralisation’ had been present in the Maltese education policy discourse for a decade – this ‘decentralised centralism’ (Karlsen 2000) was just covertly strengthened through the appearance of devolution. In fact,

Autonomy is not to be confused with complete deregulation. On the contrary, autonomy and decentralization predicate a grasp by the Education Ministry and the central education entities. Autonomy and, therefore a greater say by schools in determining their own management, can only be effective in delivering the relative results and outcomes if there is in place a strong central guiding and monitoring authority (p. 25).

The rhetorical devices in the policy

Policy texts are characterized as official texts which operate to influence public perception of a policy agenda. They thus seek to change the specific setting of a practical action and in the process change the way policy is received by practitioners (Scott 2000, p. 18).

This is done through the use of various semantic, grammatical and positional devices to suggest to the reader that they are authoritative – devices including the ascription of their evidential base as incontrovertible, the concealment of their ideological framework, and the attempt to convince the reader that the policy text is the careful sifting of evidence compelling the writer to develop one set of policy prescriptions over others – an intricate weaving of the educational leaders into the policy discourse.

Ball (1994) suggests that although authors cannot control the meanings of their texts they do make concerted efforts to “assert such control ... to achieve a ‘correct’ reading” (p. 16). According to Scott (2000), the reader is not just presented with an argument, but “positioned within a discourse”, which if it becomes “common sense” (p. 27) constrains the reader from understanding the world in any other way – this is done to persuade the reader of the truthfulness and credibility of the arguments being deployed. FACTS works at the discursive level by persuading its readership that it offers a solution, indeed the only solution, to the shortcomings in the Maltese education system:

One thing is clear – individual schools cannot achieve this alone. They can no longer be regarded as the unit of integration. Networks of schools offer more hope. Networks of schools, together with other service providers, will respond creatively and collaboratively to serve each ‘whole’ learner. No single school can hope to provide diversity, flexibility or an economy of service this entails. Networks can (p. 62).

The use of the future tense ‘will’, in addition to the rampant usage of modal verbs, renders the text very ‘readerly’ and prescriptive, presenting the various proposals as a ‘fait-accompli’. A typical example is the following quote seeming to challenge change,
Each and every one of us must engage in a conscious, untiring effort and commitment to this change process. I know that change will not be easy. However, if we do not embark on this journey with an open mind and a well-defined strategy, the repercussions will be regrettable (p. xiii).

It is a very commanding language, sort of putting the reader under certain obligations – “it is imperative to stop and take stock of progress” (p. 44). The same applies to the frequent repetition of the verb phrase ‘will be expected’ – this is commensurate with the high level of accountability throughout. It can be regarded as a taken-for-granted assumption in order to make the reader accept the foregone conclusion – that the policy is sure of its successful outcomes. Rhetorical questions are even included in the document, which seem pointless when the answer is already a foregone conclusion. They are constructed in such a way to set the mind-set of the reader into blind acceptance of what is being proposed. A typical example would be: “Is it wise to devolve all educational services and operations that are currently being handled, at the centre, by the Education Division?” (p. 29). The wording and structure of the question convinces the reader that devolution would be an ‘unwise’ move. Use of the conditional tense implies a cause and effect situation – the education system will only be successful if networks are put in operation – “schools will only be able to meet the needs of all learners if they work in partnership” (p. 37). Use of the verb ‘to assume’ reveals both doubt and taking things for granted on the part of the policy authors. A lot of assumptions are made – that all school leaders want to join a college, that they all want to improve student experience...without their opinions ever having been sought. The policy makes use of the collective pronoun throughout, “each and every one of us”, “we all want to give”, “let us all together” (p. xiii) – issuing a call for a concerted effort, for involvement, perhaps, or to give a sense of ownership. FACTS thus emerges as a neoliberal policy that is centrally conceived, imposed and reproduced (Pinto 2015), with the school leaders ending up as mere local implementers of the reform (Forrester and Gunter 2009). Their leadership thus unfolds as tactical interpretation rather than genuine stage-managing (Hartley 2007) – they lack agency as leaders in a neoliberal democracy. FACTS attempts to justify this:

Is it wise to devolve all educational services and operations that are currently being handled, at the Centre, by the Education Division? Common sense suggests that decentralising all current services to each and every school, or groups of schools, may prove wasteful both from a financial and human resources point of view (p. 25).

The document ends on a very definite and assertive tone, “One thing is clear – individual schools cannot achieve this alone” (p. 62). On its own, this statement is convincing enough to make readers believe that networks are a must rather than an alternative. These linguistic devices may be considered as an example of Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) notion of ‘magisterial discourse’, which Rizvi and Kemmis (1987, p. 277) describe as a style in which the speaker’s authority is “unidirectional” in nature, as “it commands and instructs”, requiring the reader to take note of what is being said.
Discourses prevalent in the policy document

The policy document FACTS is constructed around more than one strand of discourse. The policy stresses the need to “build new professional identities and new professional learning communities that are oriented towards adaptation and bring about radical innovation” (p. xi). The whole text is embedded within the discourse of transformation, of “radical innovation”, “educational reform” (p. xi), and the need for changing, with claims being made for an urgent renewal of the education system in order to retain its relevance. However, this whole empowerment agenda merely serves as a front for neoliberal logics (Wright 2012), constructing the Maltese leaders as powerful actors while simultaneously concealing their subordination to the State.

This discourse of transformation and change is embedded within one of efficiency, accountability and subtle centralization. References to ‘frameworks’, ‘efficiency’, ‘performance’, ‘accountability’, ‘outcomes’, ‘standards’ allude to a conditioning, regulatory discourse and an achievement-oriented system, where everything has to unfold within a framework of liability, seemingly leaving no space for autonomy, steering more towards centralization rather than the decentralized system this whole reform process is supposed to work towards. Autonomy is defined in the policy as “a greater say by schools in determining their own management” (p. 25). There is an interplay of autonomy and accountability, where schools will become “more autonomous operating within a stipulated, agreed framework which also ensures accountability” (p. xix). Although school leaders are not expected to be given full autonomy, it also depends on how much freedom remains within that “stipulated, agreed framework”. Perhaps, it only translates into ‘autonomy around the edges’ (Higham & Earley 2013, p704) with performativity unfolding as a mode of State regulation (Ball 2003). This problematic relationship between autonomy and accountability, where the State strives for the retention of hegemony, may lead to the “expansion of neoliberal hegemony” (Wright 2012, p. 292) within the FACTS policy discourse, although there are attempts to present it otherwise:

As we move into a new phase of educational reform, more creative and responsive structures for supporting the work of students, schools and parents are needed. We believe that networks are the new essential units of organisation to replace the questionable dichotomy of ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approaches to educational change (p. xi).

The policy authors hint at an economic discourse, especially in the chapters directly related to the colleges, making education sound like a business transaction, with words and phrases such as “marketplace of knowledge exchange”, “traded, refined and verified” (p. 38), a “top management mindset” (p. 71), “business plan”, “estimated budget”, “customer care”, “complaint handling mechanisms”, “relevant returns”, “auditing” (p. 72) – all echoing managerial discourse, leading to a service-oriented view of education. The text goes so far as to label the College Principal as the “Chief Executive Officer” of the college.
Presenting the proposed college networks and leadership issues

FACTS locates school networks within the macro context, revealing educational needs based on the wider society, school demands mirroring the outside world.

The network is being accepted as the main organisational form which can give depth and scale to this process of transformation. The education system, like all other societal systems, faces the challenge of having to change the way it functions – from a hierarchical, apex-governed structure to a new network organisation that can achieve quality education in Malta (p. xix)

Furthermore, “The proposals put forward in this document have been drawn as a result of an in-depth reflection on the workings of the present system and in the light of how schools network in other countries” (p. xii). While there is a widening of the micro focus of the school context, an emphasis on personalization and individuality persists:

The start up of school networks is an exciting opportunity for our schools to develop local solutions. It will provide us with the capacity to re-invent structures and practices in ways that are appropriate for our children today and in the foreseeable future (p. 62).

The policy concludes that the success of networks in the outside world provide the rationale for the trajectory to school networks, stating that networks are becoming “an organizational principle of choice” (p. 37) across all sectors. The notion of freedom is utilized as a government rationality (Dean 1999), depicting government as the community constituted by quasi-autonomous individuals (as outlined by Peters 2001), giving a pretence of freedom to offer a guise for coercion (Joseph 2007). This is aptly illustrated in FACTS,

In fact, one of the most important things to acknowledge as schools begin their journey together as a network, is that schools, staff and children will be their guides. Their context, their histories, their strengths and needs, their aspirations and the ways of working in their schools, will all influence the design of their network and its activities (p. 37).

The school is placed at the forefront of this reform:

Personalised learning can only be developed school by school. This is truer of Malta and Gozo where small can be so smart and feasible. Personalised learning cannot be imposed from above ... The new relationship with schools will bring a sharper focus of our work at national level, will strip out clutter and will release greater local initiative and energy. The desire to free schools so that they can focus on what really matters, on building from and in their strengths, on providing more help in identifying their weaknesses and offering more tailored and coherent support, should bind us all together in this exciting journey (p. 62)

This reform is presented through the metaphor of a journey with the document providing “clear signposts and directions” (p. 62) that will help education stakeholders in Malta and Gozo on their way, with the allusion to non-rigidity which is inconsistent with the prescriptive framework presented throughout the text. It simultaneously acknowledges that “It can be a complex journey”, with “a
detailed map for that journey [being] premature to expect” (ibid). The complexity of the reform is however present: “This will not be a simple or straightforward journey. We know there are issues to solve. This is a process that involves collective commitment, discipline and the evolvement of effective network leadership” (p. 62). The journey is “complex” and “exciting” being neither “simple” nor “straightforward” (ibid). It is definitely a gradual journey that involves a multi-tiered trajectory: “It is not the intention to take a big bang approach in implementing the proposed reforms. Precautions will be taken to phase-in the reforms and the widest possible consensus will be sought” (p. xii). FACTS is presented to the educational leaders as an attractive reform to be embraced and discursively practised as the norm in schools, leading Heads into believing that a contingent application of the policy is possible and desirable, when the discursive framework proves otherwise, as ‘leadership’ is directed ‘from above’. Emphasis is placed on the predictable and the practical rather than on creative preparation for the unforeseen and the unknown.

In FACTS, leaders and leadership are discursively situated as the solution to everyday organizational and professional problems (Gunter 2001). The performance of leadership is expected to take place within a setting in which there is a specific public purpose and a deliberate casting to ensure agreed outcomes are met through careful adherence to the policy script – “ideal school networking should lead to the development of autonomous educational institutions, working within an agreed framework of performance, accountability and outcomes” (p. 41). Politicians find educational leadership an attractive concept because it places responsibility for success or failure largely in the hands of professionals (Humes 2000). Heads are promised a sole focus on the provision of “professional educational leadership” (p. 42), with other issues to be handled by appropriate and qualified personnel. Qualifying leadership in these ways may serve to make it more palatable to the potential leaders and deflect attention from its directive aspects. It is simply a shift from ‘government to governance’ (Harvey 2005) where government has become more ‘distributed’ but also more ‘punitive’ (Dean 1999). This networked governance can thus be interpreted as an example of what Foucault (2002b) described as a “plurality of forms of government” and their subsequent “immanence” to the State (p. 205-6). Power and control remain centralized – a fact that had previously been noted in literature in Strain (2009) and Smyth (2011). Additionally, the tactics of decentralization have co-opted leaders to act for and on behalf of the State - government–driven reform that requires leaders to enact policies at school level is no less than the downward delegation of the managerialist project, where leaders become the deliverers of reform (Gunter 2001, 2012). According to FACTS,

With the right leadership and governance, the formation of networks, driven by collaborative and competitive endeavour, can play a vital role in creating a first class system of education and of schools. This makes knowledge-based networks an essential component, not the alternative for the way we provide public education. Rather than being represented by a new government agency or a single policy lever, transformation becomes an ‘emergent property’ of the whole education system as it begins to generate, incorporate and adapt to the best new ideas and practices that develop around it (p. xi).
FACTS works at the discursive level through various rhetorical devices, by persuading its readers that it offers the only solution to the shortcomings in the Maltese education system – networks are presented as the ‘normative truth’ that can bring about social justice and quality:

The challenge is to focus this new relationship to achieve both equity and excellence. The solution is to build on what the most successful teachers do best, to create an education system with personalised learning at its heart, a system where every child matters, where careful attention is paid to individual learning styles, motivations and needs (p. 62).

Furthermore, there is an inherent tension between autonomy and regulation, where “autonomy is not to be confused with complete deregulation” (p. 29), as power and control remain centralized within the Education Ministry and the central education entities: the Directorate for Educational Services and the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY RECEPTION, TRANSLATION AND ENACTMENT

I now conclude the article by posing some rhetorical questions about the main issues that emerged from the policy analysis of FACTS that can be used as points of reflection by both policy makers as well as educational leaders as the policy actors/subjects. These are anchored within Ball’s (1998) ‘big policies/small world’ theory, as well as his reflections on ‘policy actors/policy subjects’ (Ball 2015). These implications affecting both policy and practice, are relevant for all those engendering education reform as well as those having to make sense of this education reform through enactment, with particular relevance to other ‘small’ education systems similar to Malta who attempt to make their voice heard in the global education policyscape.

National policy making is inevitably a process of bricolage: a matter of borrowing and copying bits and pieces of ideas from elsewhere, drawing upon and amending locally tried and tested approaches, cannibalising theories, research, trends and fashions and not infrequently flailing around for anything at all that looks as though it might work. Most policies are ramshackle, compromise, hit and miss affairs, that are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through complex processes of influence, text production, dissemination and, ultimately, re-creation in contexts of practice (Ball 1994, cited in Ball 1998, p. 126).

Does this statement about policy-making reflect the policy-to-practice trajectory in the Maltese context? Education reform in Malta in general, and more specifically, the setting up of school networks that are the subject of the policy under inquiry, can be undoubtedly regarded as the local response to the global neoliberal policy proliferation of networking – one of the strategies through which potential school improvement and effectiveness were geared to occur. Despite FACTS’ promise of autonomy, the state’s struggle for the retention of hegemony emerges very strongly in the policy document, with rippling repercussions on the level of individual school autonomy allowed to the educational leaders in the transition from policy reception to enactment at local institutional level.
Ball (1998) questions the ‘solutions’ available to policy-makers in a context of global reform replete with problems and challenges for education and social policy – post-modernity, global economy, marketization, devolution, targets, knowledge economy, school improvement, uncertainty … Did Malta choose networking as its response to do away with centralisation and colonisation, with this reform only serving as a mask for re-centralisation under the guise of ‘apparent’ and ‘measured’ freedom and autonomy for school effectiveness in the promise of a ‘quality education for all’?

One of the tensions which runs through all varieties of policy analysis is that between the need to attend to the local particularities of policy making and policy enactment and the need to be aware of general patterns and apparent commonalities or convergence across localities (Ball 1998, p. 119)

Was this tension taken into account in the formulation of FACTS, especially when considering the apparently ‘small’ system in which implementation was to occur? One must demonstrate a wariness of “globaloney” (Harvey 1996, cited in Ball 1998, p. 120), as well as the ubiquity of the “globalisation thesis” (Ball 1998, p. 120) which is dangerously presented as an explanation of “almost anything and everything” (ibid).

“Policy analysis requires an understanding that is based not on the generic or local, macro- or micro-constraint or agency but on the changing relationships between them and their inter-penetration” (Ball 1998, p. 127). What are the key elements that must be taken into account in the policy analysis of FACTS, and subsequent enactment of this policy narrative in ‘small’ education systems like Malta? Would it be the inter-relationship among local and global culture; pre- and post-colonisation and independence values; paradigm shifts; the mentality and philosophy of the policy makers and the policy actors at various levels?

Policy research is often done with a focus on texts, principles and practices, and little attention is given to the formative role of actors in the policy process … Policy gets done and re-done in many places and many ways by many different people. As it moves through these places, it changes and those subject to it are changed. We speak policy and at the same time policy speaks us; it creates positions from which we are able to act and think. Accountability policies in particular produce new and sometimes distorted possibilities for action and identity and self-worth (Ball 2015, p. 467).

In this article, I attempted to focus on the ‘text’ in order to highlight potential implications for its reception, translation and enactment by actors who are simultaneously the ‘objects’ and ‘subjects’ of policy. By capturing local specificities, I hope to illustrate how global trends in education policy are adapted by relatively ‘small’ systems in the “big policies/small world” (Ball 1998, p. 119) scenario, while drawing the reader’s attention to the fact that such ‘travelling’ policies take on a vernacular form in specific contexts, in this case, Malta. This could lead to the creation of critical spaces in which particular policies may be rejected or negotiated.

One can conclude by saying that:
While globalization has certainly not made nation states either irrelevant or obsolete it has affected both the content and form of at least some of the policy making procedures and outcomes of all states … However, states have not been rendered impotent in the face of an overwhelming challenge, much less replaced by it; rather, while they have all retained their formal territorial sovereignty more or less intact, they have all … lost some of their capacity to make national policy independently (Dale 1999, p. 1-2).

FACTS can be regarded as a form of ‘vernacular globalisation’ (Appadurai 1996) due to the way in which the local policyscape facilitated the consequences of what Rizvi and Lingard (2010) term as “top-down globalisation” (p. 65) via their histories, cultures, politics and pedagogies. Consequently, present-day society is portrayed as “simultaneously local, national, regional and global in terms of experience, politics, effects and imaginaries” (ibid, p. 64), thus constituting policy spaces rampant with unequal power relationships.

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