



THE

PARENTS FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATION

Aims and Ideals

In any organisation clear objectives and fundamental principles are necessary to provide a consistent driving force with which to pursue goals. The following are some of the basic concepts which have motivated the creation of the Parents Foundation for Education (PFE) and will guide it in the future. These objectives were formulated during various discussions held among parents and educationalists prior to the creation of the Foundation. The PFE is a new institution. It however incorporates persons with many years of experience in various fields, particularly in education, and seeks to achieve aims which have been considered desirable for a long time. It has brought together persons from all age groups and with varied educational backgrounds all keenly pursuing ideals to apply in their children's education.

The PFE has provided the ideal medium for the achievement of ambitious goals. The following are a few basic principles which run throughout the structure.

1. PARENTAL CHOICE

The genesis of the PFE was the increasing need of choice in education in Malta. The state school system depended, at least at primary level, on the place of residence of the individual. The private school system, predominantly Church run, could practically no longer be "chosen" because from 1988 onwards entry into any Church school at primary level became dependent on the ballot exercise. The Church schools are too small to cater for all who choose to send their children to such schools and the Church authorities and the individual teaching orders excluded the possibility of expansion. Hence where your children will go to school is determined by factors outside your control.

The only option was therefore to establish a new school. This was obviously going to be an enormous task requiring tremendous effort. From the very outset there was great enthusiasm notwithstanding the challenge. Early in the day clear goals and ideals for the new school were identified. The

strengths and weaknesses of the present options were discussed. Throughout the discussions, ideas of reducing tension for children, avoiding crowding of classes, ensuring an education which would develop all the possible skills and the character of children and systems avoiding emargination of children who were reserved or shy or who were not maintaining the same speed as others were commonly expressed and widely accepted.

Notwithstanding that the initial motivation was a reaction of parents being left without a choice, the attitude positively changed to one of action where the parents involved were determined to establish an educational system which would respond to the needs of youngsters and of society, hoping that the innovations and improvements would benefit both the participants in the school as well as the wider educational system in Malta.

From a situation of being one's choice it seemed that the situation was now one of identifying the elements on which the parents' choice was based and ensuring that a school with those elements is created. The new school as we, first parents pioneering the Foundation, conceived it, would therefore be the school of the parents' choice. Once these ideas were discussed to the point of being somewhat defined into priorities we got in touch with qualified educationalists who quickly agreed to support the ideas expressed. The educationalists enthusiastically assisted us because our ideas fitted perfectly with their educational philosophy which aimed at the development of the full person and ensuring that the child will become a life long learner. Meetings were held between the educationalists and parents and the basic aims and ideals were finally incorporated into a document and have guided us in all our efforts so far.

The two schools of the Foundation, San Anton School and San Andrea School, fulfilled the aim of being a "choice" from the very outset for they were not an institution created simply to reproduce what was not otherwise available. They were the result of an extremely positive outlook towards creating something needed in Malta at the moment, something with which many agreed but had not till then established or managed to create within existing institutions. Parents were made to

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think about what their choice meant to them and what they really wanted to see in their child's education. The enthusiasm of those early days has grown stronger as the goals become clearer and experience is being gained.

The first fundamental principle is therefore that the Schools of the PFE must provide a choice for parents. This implies certain ancillary principles.

2. PARENTS MUST CHOOSE NOT BE CHOSEN

In a situation where demand is greater than supply a method of selecting those who would be able to attend a school was obviously of prime importance. The idea of a discretion on the part of someone or other to choose who will attend and who will not be accepted was immediately discarded. The idea of drawing lots was also discarded as it left everything to chance and certainly did not respect the humanity or intelligence of the children and the parents. We have therefore opted for an open and verifiable system of first come first served. This is the only logical system to adopt which cannot be circumvented and which respects the applicants.

Each applicant is allocated a number and so are the children. These are inserted in order in the PFE register and the applicant is immediately informed of the position. All parents are asked to sign against the entry. Only persons and children with lower numbers can precede them. The only exception is with brothers and sisters of children attending the school who may be given preference over those entered into the register earlier, but this rule is subject to early notification by the parent of the brother or sister so every one knows where one stands as early as possible. In these cases the child's registration number may be higher but the parent contribution number would always be lower.

Persons are encouraged to enrol their children as early as possible so that the actual situation can be known years in advance of the school commencement date. That is the only way one can plan ahead.

3. THE PFE MUST NOT BE EXCLUSIVE

The PFE must not be an institution which caters only for the first applicants but not for others. Hence it assumes that as long as parents organise themselves into groups, more than one school can exist. It is up to the parents. The PFE is a vehicle for parents and will never exclude anyone from developing a new choice as long as the school follows the aims of the PFE and a viable plan is proposed. Initially the plans for the first school of the Foundation were designed to cater for an intake of 60 students per year. On seeing that there was demand for more entrants and without prejudicing the idea of providing a personalised – as opposed to an anonymous – education the plans were totally redrawn to cater for an intake of 80 students per year. It was pressure from further demand which brought into existence San Andrea School.

4. IT IS A VOLUNTARY ORGANISATION

The educational vocation of parents is beyond doubt. The Parents' role extends to schooling and once we have undertaken this massive task of taking on the responsibility of establishing a new school it certainly had to be on a voluntary basis – and from the heart. Only this kind of dedication will ensure that the school will succeed. Whatever is expected of us we have to do voluntarily and happily because we are doing it for our children, and each others' children and the children of families who will join us in this venture in the future. The PFE will always be based on voluntary work.

Of course staff have to be recruited where the tasks are required on a full time basis but we must never abandon our voluntary participation and substitute it with salaried personnel as then certainly the PFE will lose that special commitment inherent in its structure.

Many sacrifices have been demanded of us to date. Some, we were unable to make but surely most aims have been achieved so far and will continue to be achieved although they become more onerous. As duties grow so do the number of voluntary participants. The Trustees are also acting voluntarily. If a job can be done voluntarily then the parents should do so. We believe this commitment is the best guarantee for the continuity of the Foundation.

5. THE PARENTS FOUNDATION IS AUTONOMOUS

The Parents Foundation is totally autonomous of any other organisation, both governmental and private. It is not owned by any one or more persons nor controlled by any interests. It is managed by Trustees with the help of an elected committee of parents. Although the Foundation has been established to set up schools which have a Catholic environment it is not run by the Church authorities. Catholic parents through and together with Catholic teachers run the school as a lay society of persons exercising their right and duty to give their children the education they believe best.

We believe that this autonomy guarantees objectivity and continuity in policies. The PFE is a **public institution** open to all on an equal opportunity basis.

6. THE PFE AND ITS SCHOOLS ARE TO BE NON-PROFIT MAKING

The Parents Foundation is a non-profit making organisation. All its income, whether of a current or capital nature, is invested directly in the fulfilment of its aims. Any excess of its income over its expenditure does not accrue to anyone but is directly re-invested.

The Schools of the Foundation are non-profit making. School fees are charged to cover running costs, and reflect

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the parents' share of the total expenses for the scholastic year. Although budgets are tight, fees are kept as low as possible.

It is intended that the school fees, while covering the expenses of the schools including maintenance, and a charge for the wear and tear of its assets, should be kept as low as possible to ensure that the PFE Schools will be accessible to most people. When one considers that there are 20 students in each class and that all staff are qualified warrant holders, employed full time under full time heads, the fees are reasonable as they could possibly be. The school fees are specifically designed NOT to fund any capital expenditure of the schools. Capital expenditure must come from other sources principally contributions and fundraising.

7. CAPITAL AND CURRENT INCOME

The Foundation must raise capital to fund the building of the schools from sources other than school fees. If school fees had to be used to fund capital requirements – or interest on borrowings – school fees would be so high that the school would become exclusive to a small group of persons who could afford to pay very high school fees. This is not the intention of the PFE. As parents from all income brackets are grouped together there is a sensitivity to financial abilities of all participants.

The schools have to be viable and so fees have to be charged – barring state subsidies – and have to be of a level high enough to ensure that the budget caters for a proper education, proper equipping and maintenance of the school. Efforts are specially made not to render the schools inaccessible to anyone.

To fund capital requirements the idea of a long term interest free “loan” by each parent was introduced. Each parent joining “lends” the PFE so that the PFE can invest this in the capital requirements of the schools. The contribution is refundable when the capital requirements of the schools are fulfilled. Repayment will be funded from new contributions and other capital income, such as donations, until contributions are totally phased out.

Contributions cover all children of a family independently of how many children attend the school.

It is important that the contribution – which is considered reasonable and comparable to many luxury items purchased by families – does not make the schools inaccessible to anyone who chooses the schools. We therefore negotiated a scheme with the Bank of Valletta Ltd whereby any parent could obtain a long term (5 years) unsecured loan. This would mean repayment at €25/€30 per month. Hence the capital contribution would pose little problem to anyone wishing to make the choice.

Due to the fact that each family has an average of more than 2 children, less than half the children in the school represent a contribution. It is calculated that it will take decades to fund the capital requirements of the PFE schools.

8. EDUCATIONAL AIMS

In whatever we do we must strive to do it as best we can. We must not take shortcuts or gamble with our children's future. We feel that the type of education chosen will be the best way of ensuring our children's proper and full development. We have taken the policy decision of engaging full time heads immediately. We have decided to engage teachers initially on a full time basis only so that they will be fully committed to pursuing the educational goals we seek to achieve.

What we seek is a personalised education, as opposed to the anonymous education received where the number of children in classrooms is excessive, in a Catholic environment and in a physical environment which is healthy and conducive to the above. We seek a tension free system with less emphasis on competition and exams and more emphasis on developing all round skills. Exposure to many experiences especially in the early years when characters are forming is high on the agenda. We want to produce imaginative democratic citizens who have learnt the values of social cooperation and mutual tolerance and who have assimilated the skills needed to make them life-long learners.

As parents it is obvious that we want our children to sit for and pass public exams in order to qualify for higher education or employment. Consequently any system we create has to lead to the ability to pass public exams in a competitive environment and the skills created must open the doors to job opportunities.

Hence there must be a balance between ideals and realism and among the elements envisaged to achieve this balance not necessarily in order of importance are:–

1. Not more than 20 children per class. This is a statutory rule.
2. No streaming of pupils. As there are only 20 in each class, each child can be individually tutored. In this way the strengths of each child can be encouraged and his or her weaknesses identified and attended to.
3. Individual assessment on a very detailed basis including not only academic subjects but also character analysis.
4. Tests inserted as a method of assessment without warning.
5. Assessments are not used to grade children vis-à-vis each other and no class positions are given to children. A child will always be encouraged to do his or her very best and compete against himself/herself for better results.
6. Subjects such as music, art, drama, etc., are integrated in the school curriculum and are not treated as “extra curricular”. Hours of school attendance will reflect the increased work load.
7. Group projects and evaluation to encourage collegiality and co-operation. Open areas are used outside classrooms to promote more group work and projects.
8. Oral skills are being emphasised.
9. Homework is reduced. More work at school and reasonable work load for home.

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9. THE FOUNDATION HAS A DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURE

The PFE is a democratic institution where parent contributors have a say in everything that happens and are free to express themselves. Each family has a vote in any elections to committees and majorities can change statutes, nominate trustees, etc. In all matters the feelings of parents are greatly respected. In this we differ radically from all other educational institutions. In our case we can make things happen.

10. A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

The educational aims which prompted us in the establishment of the school are by no means exclusive. Many have been praising the aim of reducing competition between children or the aim of developing the full character of children by “extra curricular” activities. However little is done to put the ideals into practice.

Among the aims of the Parents Foundation for Education are:

- to sponsor and encourage the study of systems and methods of education
- to encourage the implementation of modern systems of education of the highest standards on a broad basis and through the use of modern technology.

We are sure that through the implementation of these ideas we will promote change in the Maltese educational system.

We shall certainly be observing educational developments inside and outside Malta for all the positive influences we can extract for the benefit of our children. We know of several other parent foundations and parent run schools in Europe and we are trying to forge links with them.

Research into education and educational methods is considered essential and staff engaged will always show full commitment.

Teachers will have to be highly competent and qualified and will be expected to keep abreast of current practice and educational developments.

We are also the first group of parents to be so predominantly involved in all that concerns the establishment, financing and continuing operation of an educational foundation and a school. This is also a great challenge and we hope that, through the structure we adopt and implement, we will influence local institutions in the type of parent participation they will foster. We must be ever conscious of the positive and negative aspects of parent involvement in the school so that we will strengthen the good and control the influence of the negative. A balanced relationship between the parents and teachers is fundamental to the healthy environment of mutual co-operation and respect

we seek to establish between these two important groups independent but accountable teachers and parents who respect the independence and professionalism of the teachers while fully participating in all affairs of the PFE and the Schools.

11. THE PFE IS OUTWARD LOOKING

The PFE is one institutional mechanism through which educational ideals can be achieved. Together with the State, the Church, other educational Foundations and secular private schools, it is helping to fulfil the educational requirements of Maltese children. The PFE will emphasise systems which do not hinder character development on a broad base at early stages by premature formal education. It will also strive to ensure that its schools are stepping stones to higher educational institutions and the world of work. The PFE will not operate in a vacuum but will continually seek co-operation with all other existing institutions.

Parents will be encouraged to participate in discussions and activities with parents in other schools and associations. The schools will participate in activities of other schools, and in local or national events and the schools’ facilities, will be made available to other institutions which share common educational ideals.

12. SCHOLARSHIPS

Even before the Foundation was launched, parents had seen the importance of scholarships for those who are unable, through personal misfortune and difficult circumstances, afford the contribution and the school fees which fund the school. It was therefore decided to establish a scholarship scheme. Persons may donate funds to the Foundation to be used for scholarships and if accepted as such the Trustees will be bound to use the funds only for that purpose.

13. ECUMENICAL

Although the schools will be inspired by the Roman Catholic faith, children with different faiths will be most welcome. Their beliefs will be fully respected in all school activities. This we believe is in line with the ecumenical efforts being done today.

For more information about the PFE, San Anton and San Andrea Schools, parents are invited to visit the schools at L-Imselliet after making arrangements with the respective Heads of School.

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