This special issue on educational management and leadership explores work that has been carried out or is currently being undertaken within the Maltese context. However, the themes explored are of relevance not only within the local context but resonate issues and challenges raised in other countries.

Mario Cutajar’s paper *Educational Reform in the Maltese Islands* presents a study in progress. This paper serves as an introduction to his doctoral studies on the system of networking. The paper presents an historical overview of educational reform in the Maltese Islands and highlights the main developments over the last two decades. It also addresses the kind of leadership that has helped to sustain the transition in Maltese education from a hierarchical system of authority to one devolving greater responsibilities to the schools and in particular the establishment of school networks, so that schools will provide improved quality education in Malta. This should serve as an interesting backdrop for anyone, researchers and educators both locally and abroad, who are interested in understanding what has led to the latest Education Act (2006) and initiatives to devolve greater responsibilities to the school site.

Mario Cutajar’s paper helps to contextualise a number of studies also appearing in this issue, namely the following three – one on school-based evaluation, and two on headship. The first paper by Rose Privitelli and Christopher Bezzina highlight’s the critical area of self-evaluation. In a context where accountability to external bodies is being seen as a reality, this paper helps us to realize that what is critical to reform in Malta needs to be based, first and foremost, on the internal capacity of all educators within the schools. No forms of external accountability can bring that about. Self-evaluation calls for people who truly believe in their worth, who genuinely believe that they can work with others to make a difference. If we manage to take on board this principle then the internal evaluation processes and procedures would allow for growth and development in the way we think, the way we act and grow. Self-critical and self-confident schools grow through deliberate attempts to address improvement issues. Once schools learn and know how to tell their story, to coin a term used by MacBeath, they welcome the external account as another source of evidence. Within such a context, external evaluation will flourish as another means of developing within our schools. This paper helps us to see how one particular school took a bold step in introducing a ‘learning journey’ which will engage them in various facets of school life in the years to come.

The paper entitled *A View from the Top: a study on educational leadership in Roman Catholic Church Primary and Secondary Schools in Malta* by Rose Anne Cauchi Cuscheri investigates what it is like to be a headteacher in a church school through an exploration of attitudes, behaviours, leadership styles and managerial skills and approaches. This paper explores work still in progress and provides the background to her doctoral study. It presents some of the initial findings.
The paper *The Making of Secondary School Heads: some perspectives from the Island of Malta* by Christopher Bezzina presents the findings of part of an study on headship in four island states, namely Cyprus, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malta. The views and perspectives that a small group of secondary school heads brings to their life and work are outlined. The study adopts a biographical/portrait-based approach to understanding headship and, thus, provides us with new insights into the growing literature in the field. It is aimed at contributing to our understanding of how heads are made and make themselves.

As such the paper briefly explores the career paths of a small group of eight heads interviewed and focuses on the first two stages of their personal and professional lives – formation and accession. The views of heads are represented and the issues and concerns identified with leading schools in times of change are outlined. The study shows that family, family experiences and the community have an important part to play in influencing the lives of prospective leaders. One critical issue that surfaces in this study is the link between vicarious learning, continuous professional development and personal reflection. A greater understanding and awareness of the potential behind vicarious learning in preparing people to lead provides food for thought for anyone interested in leadership.

The last contribution by Claudia Caruana Anastasio on *Growing Leadership Potential in Primary School Teachers: the Route to Sustainability*, although not presenting the findings of a study conducted in Malta, is relevant to a context where distributed forms of leadership need to be nurtured. This paper argues for teacher leadership. It helps us to appreciate that leadership – in all its forms – depend on human potential; how we view our role within the school and beyond; how we approach our work and work with and through people. In this respect this paper helps us to appreciate some of the challenges that we need to embrace if we are to take reculturing and restructuring seriously.

As special editor to this issue dedicated to management and leadership aspects that are directly relevant to us in Malta I sincerely hope that the readers will gain insights into various aspects that are being researched by local educators. The challenges that devolution of authority to the school site brings with it have been articulated in a number of the papers. We do appreciate that whilst devolution of responsibilities where it matters does help us to become more focused and effective in addressing the needs of our students, we learn that with it the main challenge is a human one. We need to learn to appreciate that behind the success of any endeavour lies how we nurture the leadership capacity of individuals by sharing and nurturing various principles, values and beliefs. Whilst some of the papers shared in this volume go a long way to touch upon them, there is also the need for more research as the education authorities embark on the challenge of networking our schools. Definitely the land is fertile and the prospects encouraging.

Christopher Bezzina
Guest editor