



David Sherlock's regular soundings from the learning and training frontline

The Miracle at Guzelyurt

“Which schools will volunteer to carry out a pilot self-assessment, with Nicky to keep them honest?” Wonderfully, almost all of them did and we chose the school at Guzelyurt.

Some say that Cyprus is Prospero's enchanted isle. If so, Caliban still lingers here and there. It has a dark side, not only in the stubborn lack of political progress that severs Greek from Turk but also in the poverty of Northern Cyprus. There are, of course, the usual charms in that. Walk down a street in Greek Nicosia and you could be in Surbiton, so suburban-familiar are the retail chains lining each side. Carry on down the same street, through the border crossing, and you are in old, Levantine, Cyprus. The fortifications squabbled over by Venetian, Ottoman and Briton impress their star-shaped tracery on the byways through the town. With help from UNESCO, an ancient *caravanserai* or *hummum* defies gravity with the help of a web of timber props, awaiting the money and skill for restoration. It ought to be a tourist honeypot; the exotic orient with the benefit of 'English spoken here'.

Starving the public realm

But Northern Cyprus has a corrupt heart which Turkish Cypriots fear may one day consume it. Taxation and regulation are slight, attracting some not-very-desirable residents. Public funds, such as they are, seem to depend heavily on the proceeds of gambling, which is illegal in both Greek Cyprus and mainland Turkey, and prostitution on an industrial scale. There have been scandals involving public officials trafficking women into the European Union across that fragile border between Turk and Greek.

The result is much as you would expect. The public realm is poor and the poor themselves suffer grievously from it. At the top of the educational

heap are some very glamorous private schools and universities. At the bottom are 13 public technical schools for 'other people's children'. Nicky and I first visited three of them a couple of years ago. We were appalled by the rain cascading through the roofs, the graffiti, the litter and the relatively well-paid teachers who showed up only when they felt like it. The close political networks of a small community made them immune from any attempt an enterprising principal might make at introducing some discipline. Indeed, our baptism of fire came at a conference at which a brave minister tried to shame the teachers' unions into a sense of their duty to the children, only to provoke barracking and posturing which went on for much of the rest of the day.

From first principles

This was the unpromising beginning from which we set out last year to introduce self-assessment and grading to the technical schools, with the support of the splendid British Council. We had previously made a favourable impression, it seems, on the inspectors who, as angered as we were by the state of these schools, became the allies we needed to make reality out of hopeless Utopia. I began with a week-long workshop for technical school heads, with the inspectors, developing a quality assurance framework starting from first principles. Every couple of hours we would reach an impasse at which someone would say "We can't do anything. The government should ...". And each time we'd talk it through, emphasising the value of self-assessment in clarifying problems and sorting out those you could do

something about yourself, perhaps using the leverage of parents rather than the perennial pedagogue-to-politician whinge. At the end of the week came the acid test. "Which schools will volunteer to carry out a pilot self-assessment, with Nicky to keep them honest?" Wonderfully, almost all of them did and we chose the school at Guzelyurt.

Into the wild west

To say that Guzelyurt is an unremarkable place is to pay it a compliment. It lies as a crossroads, north-west of Nicosia, out of sight from the capital and perhaps out of mind. Nicky's week with the school was an eye-opener. The head is a fine man and he had carried the best of his staff along with him in this worrying venture into the unknown. There was, at least, a willingness to suppose that we might be telling the truth when we said that recognising strengths and weaknesses (no milksop 'opportunities for improvement', thank you) was the first step in regaining a sense of power over your own destiny. Whether the head and some of his staff shared the same view of what that power might be, remained carefully unexplored.

Problems were not hard to find. Truancing was rife. Why? Because, as often as not, kids turned up to find no teacher waiting for them. First aid boxes contained nothing but a very suspect-looking bottle of water. Fire extinguishers had stood so long unattended that their contents had evaporated quite away. The lavatories were an unsanitary disgrace: "No sort of environment in which to teach children civilised habits", as Nicky forcefully told the newly-appointed minister over his lunch at the end of the week. The poor man went quite green.

Some careful instruction in writing bullet points saw to it that these things, and their significance to the children, were set down in blunt Turkish.

The miracle

And then, last month, Nicky went back to Cyprus to work again with the principals and the inspectors, and back to Guzelyurt. While she has not yet been granted the freedom of the municipality, she will be welcome whenever she visits. After the self-assessment, the principal posted up the attendance record of each teacher in the staffroom. While everyone denied its accuracy, none challenged and teachers now come to work, goaded if necessary by their peers. A phonecall to the parents of each truant within an hour or two of finding them absent revealed that mum and dad didn't know little Cenghiz was playing hooky but they'd tan his backside if he did it again. (He didn't.) The IT suite is full of parents learning when the kids aren't using it and they now contribute in a host of ways to the school. The teachers enjoy the change of working with adults. The fire extinguishers and the first-aid boxes are full once more. And new lavatories and a canteen have flowed from the minister's embarrassment.

There are occasions when it is easy to begin doubting whether the European orthodoxies of quality assurance, continuous improvement and lifelong learning travel well. "It won't work here" can drown out your personal conviction that people are much the same everywhere and vocational education the perennial bottom dog in need of cherishing. So much progress in a few short months at Guzelyurt, and the promise that flows from them of transformed young lives and a contribution to reclaiming the decencies of their country, should convince you otherwise.

Courage mes braves! Have a happy and successful New Year.

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