

How is the Learning Outcomes Framework Responding to an Internationalised School Culture in Primary Schools in Malta?

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Abstract

The Maltese education system is experiencing a revolutionary reform in the way the teaching and learning process is designed at all levels, including primary schooling. As of 2018, the island has started shifting from a content-based to an outcomes-based system, referred to as the introduction, or better, the enactment of the Learning Outcomes Framework (2015). The LOF is being promoted as a way to decentralize teaching and give schools the autonomy to develop their own learning programmes. This structure is in line and has been assembled to support the National Curriculum Framework (2012). Since the LOF is the first curriculum framework to be introduced in Malta since its membership in the EU in 2004, it is also devised to reflect other policy documents issued by the EU. This paper explains how the LOF reflects such documents and determines ways how the LOF is responding to internationalisation present in primary schools in Malta. A literature review of the current field scenario is presented. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of recent local policy developments and current practices which reflect how the enactment of the LOF in Malta is contributing to multicultural climates. The results indicate that although objectives are set, many are still not understanding why the enactment of the LOF, and how this promotes internationalisation in Malta. Further provision of professional training to educators and other stakeholders in primary schools, further support to schools, and proper engagement of all students are recommended to reach the set objectives.

Keywords:

primary education, outcomes-based education, multicultural education, internationalisation, Malta



Chapter 2: Internationalisation and Multiculturalism in Schools

Introduction and Rationale

The Maltese education system is currently experiencing a 'revolutionary' reform in the way the teaching and learning process is designed in classrooms at all levels, including primary schooling. As of September 2018, the island has started shifting from a content-based to an outcomes-based teaching and learning and the move is referred to as the introduction, or better, the enactment of the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF). I refer to it as enactment, rather than an introduction, because it was incepted and devised way before its introduction. The LOF is being promoted by the Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) as a way to decentralize teaching and give schools the autonomy to develop their learning programmes according to the diverse abilities and needs of the learners (MEDE 2015) in a particular school or college (i.e. a cluster of primary, middle and secondary schools within a catchment area). This LOF structure is in line and has been assembled to support the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) which was translated into law in 2012. In fact, the NCF explains that as a legal document, it is to be supported by a Learning Outcomes Framework (MEDE 2012: 4). It, therefore, appears that what Maltese policymakers refer to in a Letter Circular (MEDE 2017) as a 'revolutionary' change recently introduced in Malta, has been long overdue. It is being referred to as *"qabza favur awtonomija akbar fit-tagħlim u programmi aktar rilevanti u addattati"* which would translate to "we are leaping towards greater autonomy in teaching and more relevant, better adapted programmes " (MEDE 2017), hence a 'revolution'. This curricular autonomy is being given so that schools are free to develop programmes that "fulfil the framework of knowledge, attitudes and skills-based outcomes that are considered national education entitlement of all learners in Malta" (MEDE 2015). This has a lot of implications since a multicultural dimension has become a norm in Malta and schools are now being faced with an internationalised reality. In this paper, I will be attempting to unpack the LOF to see where it stands in its alignment to multicultural realities in primary schools in Malta.

Research Aims and Questions

The overarching aims of this paper are, therefore, as follows. Firstly, to develop a deeper understanding of what is the LOF, how it is structured, what it is trying to establish and how it is doing so. Secondly, to examine how the LOF compares to other Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) systems worldwide, as well as how the LOF tries to reflect a number of EU policy changes and requirements. Thirdly, to see what lessons, if any, can be learned from the LOF when it comes to an ever-growing internationalised school culture in Malta and if the LOF is helping or hindering such multicultural climates in primary schools in Malta.

With this in mind, the following core research questions will guide my paper:

- 1. What are the roots, rationale and objectives of the LOF?*
- 2. How does the LOF compare to other OBE systems and reflect EU policies?*
- 3. How is the LOF responding to an internationalized climate in Maltese primary schools and what is the way forward?*

A Literature Review of OBE

1. Defining the Learning Outcomes Framework

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (2012) aims to promote collaboration among educators and learners to create an environment conducive to learning, where everyone learns from one another. It also aims at giving individual attention to all learners so that they are stretched to their highest potential, while supporting educational institutions to fulfil expectations both by the learners and their parents.

Chapter 2: Internationalisation and Multiculturalism in Schools

The NCF also claims to provide quality time for all learners to develop holistically, while promoting key values such as social justice and solidarity, on which to base Malta's future workforce (MEDE 2012).

Moreover, the NCF claims to be a reference, a living framework, a policy instrument and a response. The first three are straightforward and were already in the previous curriculum, the National Minimum Curriculum (MEDE 1999). As reference, the NCF is being perceived as an act which is based on the general agreement achieved by all stakeholders and others who have agreed on its enactment. As living framework, it is being seen as a flexible curriculum which can be adapted to new and ongoing changes and developments during its execution. As policy instrument, it is being perceived as a curricular framework which will help its execution, monitoring and evaluation. However, the most intriguing characteristic, and the one central to this paper, is that the NCF is a response to a changing Malta. The island has new demands, both on an individual and societal level, which need to be addressed, and such changes are also reflected in the education system. The NCF states such changes as "globalisation, ICT development, competition, shift of traditional values and new paradigms" (MEDE 2012: iii). These changes contribute towards an internationalized culture in Maltese schools, also due to the multicultural reality which has become a social norm. Attard Tonna and Bugeja (2016) explain how these new paradigms need to be addressed by moving away from a prescriptive curriculum and towards an OBE system.

This OBE system has been coined as the LOF and it is a "keystone for learning and assessment throughout the years of compulsory schooling" (Attard Tonna and Bugeja 2016: 3). This framework is built on Learning and Assessment Programmes spread over ten levels of achievement. It is based on 8 Learning Areas, 6 Cross-Curricular themes and 48 different subjects spread throughout compulsory schooling across the framework from the Early Years up to Year 11. This framework was "developed and verified by local and foreign curriculum experts, as part of a €3.6 million EU-funded ESF project" (Attard Tonna and Bugeja 2016: 2).

The LOF also promises to change the way things were/are being done in Malta. It promises to reduce the subject content and shift the importance to 21st-century skills, to smoothen the transition between the various stages of the curriculum, provide a wider selection of learning programmes and various recognized and certified learning pathways to meet the needs of all learners (Attard Tonna and Bugeja 2016). One way of doing so is by freeing schools from syllabi which are centrally-imposed and giving them a degree of flexibility to design their own learning programmes. Such an approach gives schools the right and responsibility to design and implement programmes which fulfil the framework of knowledge, attitudes and skills-based outcomes to give educational entitlement to *all* learners in Malta. In the light of this paper, this has various implications as by *all* learners, the LOF should also be addressing learners from a migrant background who contribute to a growing internationalized culture present in Maltese schools.

When implemented properly, the LOF is expected to allow for flexibility, lifelong learning and a new outlook on how assessment is devised in Malta. The latter requires “a change in the assessment regime and culture” (Attard Tonna and Bugeja 2016: 4), with different modes of assessment to complement it, such as adding 40% school-based ongoing continuous assessment to a 60% national summative assessment (MEDE 2019) to produce a global mark. While assessment of learning offers proof of achievement which helps in marking and reporting, such an addition of assessment for learning practices in OBE approaches offers plenty of information for the learners (and parents/guardians) to advise and facilitate future learning (Stiggins 2002 as cited in Davids 2017).

Apart from the teaching and learning process, the LOF focuses on being ‘student-centred’ and is described as progressive, holistic, respectful to the individual and diverse (MEDE 2015). This characteristic of learner-centeredness in OBE approaches where “the emphasis is not on what the teacher wants to achieve, but rather on what the learner should know, understand, demonstrate (do) and become” is central (Botha 2002: 5). This is done by establishing pre-set outcomes which need to be achieved by the end of a teaching and learning process. Such outcomes need to stem from real-

Chapter 2: Internationalisation and Multiculturalism in Schools

life needs and present a mixture of “knowledge, competence, and orientations needed by learners to become thinking, competent and responsible future citizens” (Botha 2002: 5).

The LOF is divided into four cycles that can be seen in Figure 1 – Early Childhood Education, Junior Years, Middle Years and Secondary Years. Primary education involves Levels 4, 5 and 6 and is comprised of the last 2 years of the Early Childhood Education cycle and the Junior Years cycle. Each cycle outlines what learners learn, framed in terms of outcomes they must reach.

Figure 1: An indicative table showing the LOF as used by MEDE

Attainment Level, Year Groups, Diverse Needs, School Cycle, Educational Institution and Age

Level of Attainment	Year	Diverse Needs		School Cycle	Educational Institution		Age	
1-3	Childcare Kinder 1 Kinder 2	Gifted and talented learners	Special Education Needs	Early Childhood Education	Childcare Centres		0-7	
					Kindergarten School			
Primary School				7, 8, 9				
Primary School				9, 10, 11				
4	1, 2			Learners with Special Education Needs	Junior Years	Primary School		11, 12
5	3, 4					Primary School		13, 14
6	5, 6				Middle Years	Middle School	Secondary School	15, 16
7	7, 8 (Form 1, 2)					Middle School		11, 12
8	9, 10 (Form 3, 4)				Secondary Years	Senior Secondary School	Secondary School	13, 14
9	11 (Form 5)							Secondary School
10		Lifelong						

The Early Years in the LOF is covered by Levels 1 to 4 and it encompasses childcare, Kindergarten and the first two years of primary education, Year 1 and Year 2. Concerning the Early Years, the LOF is being promoted as recognising and respecting the individual, as a developmental model for scaffolding learning and as relevant to the holistic wellbeing of the learner. It is also being promoted that learning outcomes (LOs) “should be conceptualised as a compass, not as a map: they point in possible directions that children can learn and grow, but do not lay down templates that all children must follow” (MEDE 2015). Moreover, a shift from subject-based curricula to a ‘highly integrated process’ is being encouraged, and canonical theorists such as Vygotsky (1962), Piaget (1969) and Bruner (1986) are quoted. The LOF documents continuously refer to these theorists, hinting to their work done

on Scaffolding, Constructivism and Spiral Curriculum (without labelling it).

The implementation of the LOF started in September 2018 with a rollout in the Kindergarten 1, Year 3 and Year 7 classes. Between March and June 2018 members of Senior Management Teams (SMTs – i.e. Heads and Assistant Heads of Schools) and all prospective Year 3 teachers for scholastic year 2018–2019 were trained on the introduction of the LOF, as well as on the Los, and on how to link continuous assessment strategies and reporting strategies to the equation (MEDE 2018). MEDE envisaged a gradual, year-by-year rollout over the following 4 years until all classes from Kindergarten 1 to Year 11 would be following the proposed ‘revolutionary’ approach to curriculum design, delivery and assessment. A similar staggered implementation happened in South Africa with the introduction of Curriculum 2005 (C2005) in 1998 (Aldridge, J.M. et al. 2000). This and similar OBE systems will be reviewed later on.

An initial investigation of the roots of the LOF reveals that it is a product of a collaboration between the Maltese Government (the client) and Institute of Education (IoE) subject specialists from the University College London (UCL) (MEDE 2015). This poses questions about the relevance of the expertise of UK academics in providing consultancy on the curriculum for the education system in Malta – which in turn is also meant to reflect several EU policies mentioned earlier. Botha (2002: 8) suggests that a curriculum “must be indigenous rather than imported,” as training the teachers to enact the new curriculum would be easier.

2. The Roots of the LOF

Outcomes-based education (OBE) presents the notion that the best way to learn is by first determining what needs to be achieved (learning outcomes or learning goals). Once this has been set, the strategies, processes and techniques can be put into place to achieve the outcomes or goals (Gandhi 2012). A firm believer and lead supporter of OBE, William Spady, defines LOs as “clear learning results that we want students to demonstrate at the end of significant learning experiences”

Chapter 2: Internationalisation and Multiculturalism in Schools

and "actions and performances that embody and reflect learner competence in using content, information, ideas, and tools successfully" (Spady 1994: 2).

Botha (2002) explains how the OBE system finds its origins in the USA at the beginning of the 1990s when the education system was characterised by low-performing and low-achieving learners (Watkins 1997). However, the roots of OBE can be traced way back some 500 years ago during the Middle Ages in Europe, when apprenticeship training models were used by crafts guilds (Spady 1996 as cited in Gandhi 2012). Fast forward to the 20th century and OBE can also be noted in 1949, when William Tyler identified educational objectives which were essential for systematic planning. He presented core elements such as purpose, content, organisation and evaluation which needed to be addressed when developing and planning to teach (Gandhi 2012). He argued that such elements helped to identify the required attitude by the learner to know the context in which the content was going to be implemented. This curriculum design, led by the importance of having learning objectives, is argued to be the philosophy underpinning OBE nowadays (Arjun 1998 as cited in Malan 2000). Tyler (1949) put forward four questions as the basis for such curriculum design:

What educational objectives should the school aim to achieve?

How does one select learning experiences that are likely to be useful in attaining these objectives?

How should learning experiences be organised for effective instruction?

How would the effectiveness of learning experiences be evaluated?

Such systematic planning might have helped in promoting the level of standardization which LOs usually promote and various curriculum practitioners use Tyler's rationale as a way to design their curricula. Allais (2012) explains and questions how OBE systems rely heavily on standardization especially

when it comes to LOs which capture a 'sameness', which is then believed to be able to 'cross boundaries' and travel from an OBE system in one country to another one in a different country. This rationale also formed the basis for Wheeler's well-known model of curriculum design (Malan 2002).

Following Tyler and Wheeler, Bloom (1956) discussed mastery learning and approaches to attain standards by producing a taxonomy for educational objectives. This helped to "determine whether learners had attained acceptable standards compared to desired learning outcomes" (Gandhi 2012: 6) and argued that with an appropriate learning environment which provides enough opportunities and support, learners would be successful in the assigned tasks.

This was followed by an approach in the 1960s in North America by the name of competence-based education. This was a response to criticism by many who put forward the argument that learners were being exposed to or taught knowledge and skills which were not essential after they left the education system. Malan (2000) explains how competence-based education was driven by explicit LOs linked to the skills which learners needed in the world of work. This was paired with adaptable learning programmes, which are very much reflected in the LOF's learning and assessment programmes.

Following competence-based education, Glaser (1963) put forward the notion of criterion-referenced instruction (learning) where testing occurs in terms of stated criterion (Gandhi 2012). This was characterised by a measurement system which uses specific LOs to position the behaviour of a student in a test on a scale ranging from 'no proficiency' to 'perfect performance'. Such an assessment is still the preferred mode of assessment in OBE (Gandhi 2012). This implies a paradigm shift from a traditional approach which explains how learners are meant to learn content to a more postmodern approach which focuses on whether learners learn something well (Botha 2002). This is also reflected in the LOF where teachers are meant to tick a number of Broad Learning Outcomes (BLOs). The latter are multiple core LOs per Learning Programme which the teachers in Malta tick for each learner against a set of criteria on a scale: started to be achieved, partially achieved, satisfactorily

Chapter 2: Internationalisation and Multiculturalism in Schools

achieved and fully achieved. This is very much aligned with Glaser's 1963 competence-based measurement system.

There are several theories and assumptions about the whole teaching and learning process, as well as about the systemic structures in which such an OBE process occurs (Gandhi 2012). Spady (1994) brings forward three assumptions: that learning and being successful can be achieved by all learners, that when there is a culture of success this will multiply into further successes, and that schools (and other institutions) can control the conditions for success to take place.

What was the predecessor of the LOF? The Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes within MEDE had/had some syllabi which were outlined by LOs. These are currently being phased out and replaced by the LOF during the rollout (e.g. during the scholastic year 2019–2020, the previous syllabi for Year 4 were phased out and replaced by the LOF). One may question why the need for such a 'revolutionary' reform if the previous syllabi were already based on LOs and had an OBE approach. The answer might lie in the fact that there are two basic types of outcomes (Killen 2000). The previous syllabi in the Maltese education system were aligned to the first type of outcomes: those which act as performance indicators to measure learners' performance in test results, completion rates and employment once the syllabi have been exhausted. Such an approach promotes the mastery of traditional subjects heavily related to academic content, with some cross-curricular outcomes which involve problem-solving or collaborative work (Gandhi 2012). This approach is also reflected in what Spady (1994) refers to as traditional/transactional (content-based) learning system. The LOF in the Maltese education system is aligned to the second type of outcomes as outlined by Killen; they are less tangible and are related to what the learners know, what they are capable of doing, and what results they can show at a specific point during their educational journey. Such an approach promotes long-term education based on cross-curricular outcomes which all relate to roles which the learner will take in due time as a responsible citizen or worker in the world of work and family (Gandhi 2012). This approach is also reflected in what Spady (1994) refers to as a transformational (outcomes-

based) learning system.

All these different (and similar) approaches to outcomes-based systems lead to present-day OBE which expects that the quality of an educational process must be judged by focusing on outcomes which the learners must reach. Hence OBE “is primarily concerned with focusing on what learners learn, and how well they learn it (measured academic results) and not on what learners are supposed to learn, particularly learner performance as measured in a chronologically oriented time frame against a “normative’ standard” (Botha 2002: 5). In an OBE approach, or better, OBE philosophy (Killen 2000), the teacher’s role shifts to one which facilitates learning rather than acting as an authoritarian and sole provider of knowledge. In this manner, the learners are stimulated to actively participate in their learning journey by using critical thinking (Davids 2017). Spady (1994) adds that OBE needs to be done consistently, systematically, creatively and simultaneously.

Malta is not the sole country to introduce an OBE approach. Various countries worldwide have moved or are moving towards and giving more importance to LOs in their educational systems as well as in their qualifications structure (Cedefop 2008, 2009; Allais 2012; Gandhi 2012). Some of the countries which have favoured an OBE approach in the past are Canada, New Zealand, Qatar, South Africa, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom and United States (Malan 2000 as cited in Gandhi 2012). Australia and New Zealand implemented OBE in the early 1990s (Kilfoil 1999). In Australia, it kickstarted with a competency-based training approach in the world of work, which then moved into vocational education and later in compulsory schooling (Andrich 2002). On the other hand, in New Zealand, OBE was only operational in vocational education as secondary schools and universities refused to accept an OBE approach (Kelly 1998). Aldridge et al. (2006) explain how such an overhaul in an existing education system to gradually phase in an OBE approach happened in South Africa. They explain how such a move was done to align to the international trends of moving from content-based curricula which endorse examinations and result-achieving towards a system which promotes and facilitates lifelong learning. As with the Maltese scenario, South Africa too introduced its OBE

Chapter 2: Internationalisation and Multiculturalism in Schools

approach in a staggered manner. This was called Curriculum 2005 (C2005). It began its implementation in 1998 and by 2006 this curricular reform was implemented in primary education. However, C2005 was short-lived as there was an official rejection of the OBE curriculum in 2009 (Allais 2012).

3. The LOF and EU Policy

Both the NCF and the LOF are structured on the EU's eight Key Competences Framework (MEDE 2019) and are reflected in the Maltese policies and structures as Learning Areas. Since the LOF is the first curriculum framework to be introduced in Malta since its membership in the EU in 2004, it is also devised in a way to reflect other important policy-related documents issued by the EU Commission, namely: the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning – A European Reference Framework (2006); the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (2009), and Europe 2020 – A strategy for smart sustainable and inclusive growth (2010) which is the follow-up to the Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs (2006). Although it is based on so many different documents, the LOF is still being described as a unique model addressing Malta's needs; it is explained that the policymakers "looked at different models used in Europe and beyond and agreed with DQSE on creating a Malta model by adapting and enhancing various approaches" (MEDE 2015).

3.1. The Key Competences for Lifelong Learning – A European Reference Framework (2006)

The aim of this framework evolves from the notion that the EU is incessantly faced with a globalized reality which presents its member states with new challenges. All EU citizens need an array of key competences to survive and thrive within an interconnected reality which is continuously changing. One way of equipping EU citizens with such competences is by using education as a dual role: social and economic. The framework suggests 8 key competences which are built on the individual competences and needs of all learners. One of the learner groups highlighted in this framework is 'migrant' learners (although throughout this paper I will be using the term 'learners from a migrant background' to use a people-first

language). The 8 key competences are 1) Communication in the mother tongue; 2) Communication in foreign languages; 3) Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; 4) Digital competence; 5) Learning to learn; 6) Social and civic competences; 7) Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, and 8) Cultural awareness and expression. These key competences are being addressed through the LOF as eight Learning Areas and further as six Cross-Curricular Themes. These themes are embedded within the LOF in three ways: through the subject LOs, the pedagogy approach and the activities, events and policies of the schools. The 6 themes are: 1) Literacy, 2) Digital literacy, 3) Education for diversity, 4) Education for sustainable development, 5) Education for entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and 6) Learning to learn and cooperative learning.

3.2. The Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (2009)

This framework is based on four strategic objects: making lifelong learning and mobility a reality; improving the quality and efficiency of education and training; promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship; and enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training. When it comes to an internationalized culture in schools in Malta, this framework addresses various characteristics. This is reflected in pursuing work related to life-long learning, develop cooperation on expanding learning mobility, pursue work on language learning, address issues related to the professional development of teachers and trainers, develop cooperation on basic skills in reading, mathematics and science, and pursue work on early leavers from education and training. Another strategic objective is to address and develop cooperative work on migrants by developing mutual learning on best practices for the education of learners from migrant backgrounds.

3.3. Europe 2020 – A Strategy for Smart Sustainable and Inclusive Growth (2010)

This strategy puts forward three equally important priorities: smart growth, sustainable growth and inclusive growth.

Chapter 2: Internationalisation and Multiculturalism in Schools

Throughout the strategy, there are important characteristics which are reflected in the NCF and the LOF, as well as other practices happening in Malta. Member states are expected to develop a new agenda for migrants' integration to enable them to take full advantage of their potential. The NCF argues that "Malta has become a multi-cultural society and [...] all schools should be in a position to provide children and their parents with language support in Maltese and English so that they achieve a basic working knowledge of these languages at the earliest possible to allow them to integrate quickly" (MEDE 2012: 22). It also explains that, as a framework, it needs "... to address the needs of learners from diverse social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds including children of refugees and asylum seekers for whom the curriculum should include access to an educational programme which is embedded within an emotionally and psychologically supportive environment that respects their individual circumstances" (MEDE 2012: 4). This was addressed by MEDE by setting up a Migrant Learners' Unit in 2014 and will be discussed later on in this paper.

A second characteristic of this strategy is to ensure efficient investment in education and training systems at all levels. This is problematic with the rollout of the LOF as most of the teachers who are teaching Migrant Learners classes in primary schools are supply teachers, with little or no training (Times of Malta 2019). A third characteristic directly related to the LOF is to improve educational outcomes in each section of the structure, including the primary years. These outcomes need to be improved through an integrated approach (as promoted by the LOF) by encompassing key competences, reflected in the Cross-Curricular Themes.

The Maltese Scenario

1. Primary Schools in Malta

Malta was a British colony and this is reflected in the way the educational system is organised and functions nowadays. All learners in Malta between the ages of 4 and 16 have the right to free education, irrespective of their age, sex and belief. There are state and non-state schools in Malta which can be placed in three categories: state schools, church schools and

independent schools. State schools are free to all learners and can be found in nearly every town and village in Malta. The state also pays for transport to and from the school, books and other material; however, school uniforms have to be paid by the parents themselves. Those who opt for church-run schools pay annual donations to help with the school costs. On the other hand, those opting for independent schools have to pay for school fees, school supplies, uniforms and transport (Government of Malta, undated).

During the scholastic year 2017–2018, there were 47,289 enrolled learners in compulsory education as follows; 58.1 per cent in state schools, 28.7 per cent in church schools and 13.2 per cent in independent schools. Out of the total enrolled learners, 26,532 attended primary schools distributed as follows; 15,153 in state schools, 7,813 in church schools and 3,566 in independent schools. Out of the total amount of learners in compulsory education in Malta during 2017–2018, 11 per cent were learners from a migrant background as follows: 3,499 from EU countries, 2,767 from non-EU countries and 7 were unspecified. Amongst learners from EU countries, there were 920 Italian, 813 British, 344 Bulgarian, 167 Romanian and 155 Swedish. Amongst learners from non-EU countries, there were 571 Libyan, 336 Serbian, 306 Syrian, 200 Russian and 116 Ukrainian (NSO 2020).

The compulsory primary education cycle lasts for 6 years, from when the learners are aged 5, up to when they are 10 years old and they are placed in classes ranging from Year 1 to Year 6. As for curricular matters, primary schools started to adopt the LOF as follows: the LOF was introduced in Year 3 during the scholastic year 2018/2019 and it was introduced in Year 4 during the following scholastic year of 2019/2020. It will then be introduced in Year 1 and Year 5 during the scholastic year 2020/2021 and will eventually be introduced in Year 2 and Year 6 during the following year. By the end of scholastic year 2021/2022, the whole primary education cycle will be running on the LOF. Since the framework works with levels and not just year groups, learners in Year 1 and Year 2 are meant to be working at Level 4, those in Year 3 and Year 4 are meant to be working at Level 5 and those in Year 5 and Year 6 are meant to be working at Level 6.

Chapter 2: Internationalisation and Multiculturalism in Schools

2. The Migrant Learners' Unit

An influential report titled 'Integrating Students from Migrant Backgrounds into Schools in Europe: National Policies and Measures' explains how "a student who is well-integrated into the education system both academically and socially has more chance of reaching their potential" (Eurydice 2019: 11). It then outlines several challenges which are faced by learners from a migrant background and which affect their learning and development. The three types of challenges are related to the actual migration process, the general socio-economic and political context and the learners' participation in education. The report also explains general trends happening within the EU: that learners from a migrant background are lagging behind their native-born peers and that learners in the primary education cycle who are not able to speak the language in which they are being taught are experiencing a lack of sense of belonging and are exposed to more bullying at school (Eurydice 2019).

In 2014, MEDE set up a Migrant Learners Unit (MLU) to cultivate and devise a structure which promotes and helps the provision of education for learners who are coming from a migrant background. In 2017, around 10% of learners in state schools in Malta were non-Maltese, deriving from 55 different nationalities. The unit is responsible for both operational and business plans to ensure such a provision. This encompasses the setting up of teaching spaces, human resources recruitment, provision of resources for administration of service, development of learning and curricular programmes based on pre-set schemes of work, liaising with parents of learners from migrant background, collaboration with other Ministries and participation in local and international collaborations including those with NGOs in migrant-related initiatives (MEDE, MLU, undated). The MLU offers an Induction Course to all learners from migrant backgrounds who cannot communicate in Maltese and English and this is done because these learners would not be able to cope with the mainstream curriculum, so such an Induction Course promotes and ensures the emotional wellbeing of the learners. The Course, which usually lasts one scholastic year, also equips learners with

communication skills which will help them to integrate with the community. The learning programme used during the Induction course is based on the primary school curriculum (the older syllabi and not necessarily the LOF) and includes subjects such as Mathematics and Art. However, these subjects are taught to learn languages. Apart from the MLU Induction Course (which is an in-class type of support), there are other services such as pull-outs, paste-ons and follow-ups. This contrasts with other countries such as Czech Republic, Latvia, Slovakia, Scotland and Montenegro where all learners coming from a migrant background are directly placed in mainstream classes and follow a mainstream curriculum (Eurydice 2019). Several other initiatives are taken on by the MLU, amongst which the LLAPSI+ project which addresses language learning and parental support for integration, a Making Friends Bringing Friends after-school club, and summer courses titled Language To Go. The MLU within MEDE forged a collaborative nature with The Human Rights and Integration Directorate (HRID) which was set up in 2015 as part of the Ministry for Social Dialogue, Consumer Affairs and Civil Liberties. The Integration = Belonging – Migrant Integration Strategy and Action Plan Vision 2020 has a number of implications through the recommendations about the education provision of learners in Malta deriving from a migrant background (MEAE 2020).

3. An inclusion policy in Malta

The MLU seeks to promote the inclusion of newly-arrived learners into the Maltese education system – this is also reflected in the Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools Route to Quality Inclusion (MEDE 2019) which in turn is drawn on policies deriving from an international dimension such as The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and United Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). This policy aims to create more transparency on what constitutes inclusion and to widen the spectrum in a way to include all possible forms of diversity. It also argues how schools need to foster safe spaces to motivate and safeguard all learners in Malta and to celebrate the strengths and individuality of all learners. The Inclusive Education policy

Chapter 2: Internationalisation and Multiculturalism in Schools

explains the need for regular review of the national syllabi and LOs (i.e. the LOF) to ensure “that content is sensitive, flexible and representative to the diversity of the Maltese society in its coverage” (MEDE 2019: 18). It also puts forward the need for assessment approaches to be aligned to an equitable approach to all education for all learners. Both needs have serious implications on the LOF, its structure and its desired outcomes.

The policy also provides a Diversity Wheel which has two direct sections related to learners coming from a migrant background. These are the Multiculturalism Language Diversity and the Religion & Beliefs Diversity sections. The former relates to learners who are coming from ethnic minorities, are asylum seekers, or have difficulties and need support to learn English and/or Maltese as an additional language. The latter relates to learners who have various religious beliefs or are committed to different religions.

Reflections – The LOF vis-à-vis a Multicultural Malta

In this section, I will present some reflections and suggestions for the way forward with regards to the LOF and multicultural climates in primary schools in Malta.

1. The Need for a Strategy

Dauids (2017) explains how one of the challenges with the way things are being done in the education system is the new ‘language of learning’. This changes the process of education into one which has economic transactions (Biesta 2005). If learners are only seen as consumers and if they only approach education with set needs in mind, then the roles of the teacher and the learners are jeopardized. This ‘language of needs’, as explained by Biesta (2005), changes education into a commodity without giving much importance to who the learners are and what they bring to the education system itself – in turn, to prepare them for an unknown future with encounters which are still yet to be experienced and known (Dauids 2017). In this light, it is suggested that a clear strategy and an aligned policy would be introduced in Malta

with regards to learners from a migrant background. In such policy, the LOF would be central to what content, knowledge, skills and attitudes learners from a migrant background in Malta need to be provided with, set against the ones which they have already acquired. The strategy would also need to address curricular alignment between what is being taught to learners from a migrant background and what is expected to be covered once they transit to mainstream education. Such a strategy would fulfil not only “the efficiency and effectiveness of the educational process” but also “the content and purpose of education and its role in society” (Davids 2017: 3). Another aspect which the strategy would need to address is the teaching of home languages, since, as Eurydice (2019) reports, it is a rare occurrence that learners from a migrant background study their home language at school.

This proposed strategy would also need to assess the LOF in terms of how culturally-responsive it is (Banks 1993; Gay 2010). Is there space in the LOF for recognition and provision of opportunities to strengthen the native languages and cultural practices of learners from a migrant background? Are there discourses of bicultural perspectives over perspectives which serve the dominant culture in the LOF? Does the LOF allow for teachers to be/become culturally responsive?

2. Curricular Alignment

Although there are suggestive schemes of work for teachers working within the MLU, there needs to be more curricular alignment between what is being taught during the Induction Course at the MLU and the LOF. Teachers within the MLU are urged to make use of different teaching methodologies and approaches with their learners so that the targets would be met. They are also given leeway to choose other activities and resources than the ones which are suggested in the schemes of work, as the latter are only generic and need to be adapted according to the needs of the learners. The suggestive schemes of work tackle foundational approaches to content, covering mostly languages (English and Maltese) and just a hint of other subjects (PSCD, Drama, Art, Music, Cultural Awareness and Digital Literacy). It is also noticed that Mathematics is given little importance in these suggestive schemes of work when

Chapter 2: Internationalisation and Multiculturalism in Schools

in reality most learners from a migrant background would have already mastered Mathematical skills elsewhere in their home/deriving country. This has serious implications on the preparation for mainstream education when learners would then be fully immersed in all the subjects from LOF-driven teaching and learning, without proper preparation to do so.

3. Initial Training to MLU Teachers

There needs to be a systematic initial training provided to all teachers who would be teaching at the MLU. This training should also explain the LOF structure, its aims and objectives and how learners progress from one level to the other. This has serious implications since learners from a migrant background in Malta who are following the Induction Course have the most supply teachers. One in every ten supply teachers recruited in Malta is being assigned to teach the Induction Course (Times of Malta 2019) and during March 2019, 27 supply teachers were offering their service at the MLU. This has been noted as the highest number of supply teachers within all Maltese schools by an extensive margin. While the Induction Course is commendable and the recruitment of supply teachers is unavoidable, there needs to be proper initial training for teachers to understand how to align the Induction Course to the LOF, since when the learners are ready from the one-year Induction Course, they will be transferred into mainstream education.

4. Further Training to Mainstream Teachers

Systematic rigorous CPD training is also suggested to be given to all teachers in mainstream education. These teachers have already started to implement or will be implementing the LOF in their primary classrooms, and all mainstream education will be stemming from the LOF as of September 2022, when the LOF rollout will be completed. Teachers in mainstream education need to be informed of the curricular doings in MLU classes so that they are better equipped with receiving these learners. There is also the need for general ongoing CPD training about OBE and the LOF itself. Some teachers have limited access or resources to the LOF itself and so have a lack of understanding of what OBE is and what it is trying

to achieve. Here it is suggested that primary school teachers in Malta need to be better equipped regarding the LOF through (further) CoPE sessions, ongoing CPD courses and in-school support during Curriculum Time sessions. Research by Chisholm et al. (2000) as cited by Aldridge (2006) explains that two of the challenges of implementing a new curriculum could be related to schools which have a lack of resources and teachers who are poorly or defectively trained for the shift. These were also outlined by Chisholm and Peterson (2003) together with the fact that teachers were not familiar with the terminology used in OBE. Allais (2012) also outlines that one of the problems with the implementation of the previously mentioned C2005 was that South African teachers were not sufficiently professionally equipped to do the work demanded by an outcomes-based curriculum (Jansen 2002). A long-term strategy for implementing the LOF is recommended as with any other OBE approach, and several smaller steps need to be planned, as this will give more time for teachers to get accustomed and trained on the new approach (Botha 2002).

Conclusion

This paper aimed to define the roots, rationale and objectives of the LOF by examining OBE approaches worldwide and how the LOF is reflecting a number of EU policies. It has also attempted to unpack how the LOF is responding to an internationalised climate in Maltese primary schools and offered suggestions for the way forward.

Davids (2017) draws on the work of Jansen (1998) who presents three criticisms of OBE and categorizes them as political, epistemological and philosophical challenges. The first challenge explains how numerous teachers have limited access to information and resources related to the OBE approach and subsequently, they have a lack of understanding of what OBE is, what are its aims and what it is trying to achieve. The second challenge is a philosophical one and questions the justification of OBE in light of a schooling system which needs to be democratic. It is contradictory that learners are provided with content which they are expected to use creatively, and then later informed that the “desired learning outcomes are already specified” (Jansen 1998: 6). The third challenge of OBE

Chapter 2: Internationalisation and Multiculturalism in Schools

is that learners demonstrate what they have learnt in relation to predetermined LOs and this “eluded not only the important issue of values in the curriculum, but eludes (still today), what education is for” (Jansen 1998: 6). At the core of these challenges presented by Jansen there is an echoing of Biesta’s (2005) concerns regarding the language of learning, and “what it actually is that schools are doing when their only concern is meeting the perceived needs of learners” (Davids 2017: 4)

These three challenges can be related to the Maltese scenario and I pose the following questions: do teachers understand what the LOF is trying to achieve, is there more to the LOF than merely learning outcomes which have already been specified, and is the LOF echoing what education really is in contemporary multicultural Malta? The need for a strategy, proper curricular alignment, rigorous initial training to MLU teachers and continuous further training to teachers in mainstream education are central for the future development of Maltese education within such multicultural climates.

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