

Chapter 4: Effective International and Multicultural Practices
in Schools and Society

Facing the Challenge of Preparing Maltese Schools and Students for a Multicultural Society: An Opportunity to Redefine Identity in the Light of "Otherness"

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Abstract

Collaboration between the Secretariat for Catholic Education (SfCE) and the production house Cam Productions International (CPI) in organizing multiculturalism seminars for Year 10 students in all Maltese schools aims at providing opportunities for discussing, sharing and reflecting upon experiences of multiculturalism, and listening to experiences of people coming from diverse cultures. This paper will report the results of a mixed-methods research that has been carried out over the past three years to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of such an educational project, and understand how its design can be improved. Interviews with students and teachers during and after the seminars, small group discussions during the event, and focus groups organized after, were all transcribed and analysed narratively and thematically. The results point towards the students' need to learn what multiculturalism really means and about the enriching challenges it offers, how these can be dealt with in ways that nurture self-growth in the light of "otherness", and fruitful dialogue that enhances holistic identity. These results also highlight the need for students' voices to be heard with respect to their experiences of multiculturalism, a first step towards the reduction of their prejudices and stereotypes. These voices could lead to increased acceptance of and greater respect for the "other" and the realization that conviviality of diverse cultures is both inevitable and necessary for holistic identity and wellbeing in today's demographic landscape. The paper's narrative literature review evaluates different models of multicultural education that adopt inclusive and democratic approaches, and are based on principles of democracy, equality and impartial justice. Such educational projects can increase students' open-mindedness and open-heartedness towards people from other cultures, facilitating the path towards responsible citizenship as students seek to use their positive energy and virtues for the common good of our multicultural society.

Keywords:

multiculturalism education, personal identity, collective identity, otherness, critical reflection, qualitative research

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Introduction

Only last year a very important and much awaited research study by educators like myself, about the health and wellbeing of foreign children in Malta, was published. It was commissioned by the Office of the Commissioner for Children and conducted by the centre for resilience and socio-emotional health within the University of Malta. The study, *A Passage to Malta: The Health and Wellbeing of Foreign Children in Malta*, focused on children under the age of 18 and had a sample of 2,332. It found that a quarter of Maltese students are still hesitant and resistant to multiculturalism, only half of them have non-Maltese friends, the social interactions of Maltese children with foreign children is quite limited overall, and most of the Maltese students prefer to spend their time with their native peers. Such results, which will be further discussed in this paper, indicate the crucial importance and relevance of multicultural education, or education for multiculturalism, in Maltese schools.

The need to address the increasingly multicultural reality of Maltese society has long been felt by many segments of the Maltese population, including politicians, parents of foreign students, and educators in different capacities and with different specializations. This need has been reflected, as will be later discussed at more length, in a number of important documents that have been published over this last decade or so, including educational policy documents and those related to or focused on the national curriculum. While it is true to say that there were some really good and commendable educational initiatives to modify and/or upgrade syllabi of various curricular subjects, and a few projects that tried to address the challenges of multiculturalism, it is also fair to say that much remained to be desired in this respect. This does not only represent my own humble opinion of the current situation of multicultural education, but also that of many of my colleagues: teachers, learning support educators, members of school/senior management teams, as well as politicians, including some whose responsibilities are directly related to the reality of multiculturalism. For example, on the 18th January 2017 the Minister for Social Dialogue, Consumer Affairs and Civil Liberties addressed a conference and stated that at a time in which diversity in Malta is increasing, intercultural dialogue

is the way forward. She stated that interculturalism should become part and parcel of Malta's national identity, with Malta becoming a more 'open space' where acceptance of diversity would lead to less stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, racism and xenophobia, and greater equality. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) draft document has been criticized for being too narrow and tending to limit diversity to multiculturalism. At the same time, under the cross-curricular theme 'Education for Diversity', the importance of the 2006 UNESCO document was acknowledged, namely respect for

the cultural identity of the learner through the provision of culturally appropriate and responsive quality education for all. It provides every learner with the cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to achieve active and full participation in society which enable them to respect, understand and show solidarity among individuals, ethnic, minority, social, cultural and religious groups and nations. (UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education 2016)

Unfortunately, according to *The Migrant Integration Policy Index* (MIPEX), Malta scored only 19 out of 100, thus sliding into the "unfavourable category" (MIPEX, 2015). While this same document had quoted Malta's National Curriculum Framework which claims that education must place "diversity as one of the core principles across the curriculum for all pupils to learn about minority groups, different languages and cultures" (section on Education), it also argued that Malta left a lot to be desired in policies on teacher training, especially in multicultural education; supporting schools and their multicultural reality; supporting migrant pupils to integrate especially through policies that address immigrant cultures, language and parental outreach (MIPEX, 2015).

Addressing the Maltese Context and Responding to its Needs

Only last year a very important and much awaited research Back in 1964, the year of Malta's Independence, Malta's Migration Microcosm states that Malta served as a stopping place, as well as a stepping stone for migrants throughout

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history (1964: 211). Geographically, its strategic position lured people towards it. Brown and Mayo (2016) and Briguglio and Brown (2016) discuss at length several reasons why so many migrants from different parts of the world reach our shores in both legal/regular and illegal/irregular ways.

Moreover, over the last decade Malta's foreign population more than doubled, making up more than 12% of the entire Maltese population. In 2018, the number of non-EU nationals who were registered in Malta stood at 27,238. Most of these arrived from North and sub-Saharan African countries as well as from the Middle East, Russia, Eastern Europe, and the Philippines (NSO 2018a).

This fast-changing scenario brought multiple opportunities for this small Mediterranean island, especially a significant contribution to its economy. But it also created challenges, including "the welfare of children and young people who in many instances have little say in what is happening in their lives in such circumstances" (Cefai et al. 2019). As at 2018, foreign children comprised 9.7% of the whole student population in all Maltese schools, i.e. around 9,000 students (NSO 2018b). It has been long known through research that children living in a foreign country face more academic, emotional and social challenges, and while some may develop the necessary level of resilience to face them, the wellbeing and mental health of many others are negatively affected. Post-traumatic stress, depression and anxiety seem to be among the most common and prevalent consequences (OECD 2018). Some significant challenges that can lead to such undesired consequences are the lack of access to educational, psychological, social and medical services, difficulties in social inclusion, as well as cultural and linguistic barriers (Cefai et al. 2019).

Faced by such a critical scenario, over the years educational institutions have been active and proactive. The *National Minimum Curriculum* (NMC) (MoE 1999) had already dedicated one of its main foundational principles (Principle 2) to *Respect for Diversity*. It also acknowledged and addressed the reality of multiculturalism under other fundamental principles, such as *An Inclusive Education* (Principle 8) and *The Strengthening of Bilingualism in Schools* (Principle 10). The NCF (MoE 1999)

highlights Malta's

growing cultural diversity, ... It acknowledges and respects individual differences of age, gender, sexual orientation, beliefs, personal development, socio-cultural background, geographical location and ethnicity. (MoE 1999: 32)

It affirmed that diversity should be respected in all its forms, that an inclusive environment is to be promoted, and that the right policies should be in place.

The *Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and training* (NESSE) in 2008 focused on effective strategies to integrate migrant children in schools across Europe. It mainly showed that migrant children create a new normality in schools and thus, multicultural education must be addressed at three levels: the societal level (macro level), the school level (meso level), and the individual level (micro level). It started by making crucially important statements about the “*urgent need for more knowledge sharing on the nature and effectiveness of cultural and social integration processes*” (3), and raised questions on the real effectiveness of educational systems, policies and practices that promote the integration of migrant children.

In 2019, the Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) published *A Policy on Inclusive Education for schools: Route to Quality Inclusion*. It offered a definition of Inclusive Education that is holistic and all-embracing, providing common space for collaboration to all educators and practitioners, families and community members.

Education and Multicultural Education: Definition and Scope

In different times and ages various scholars have framed education as an essential aspect of the common good. In their view one of the main aims of education is not only to serve the individual learner but also the public who benefits from having well-educated citizens, professionals and leaders (Baldwin 1963; Dewey 1916; Giroux 2013). However, when one looks at

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the contemporary experiences of a diverse range of people, one can easily observe that education has frequently fallen short of such ideals (Bigelow 2008; Spring 2013; Zinn, 2003). For many people the school will always represent a significant place that produced numerous pleasant memories, intellectual safety for the exploration of identity issues, and a conducive space for holistic growth leading to a sense of wellbeing. On the other hand, unfortunately, for others it represents the pain that transpired from various forms of violence and negligence and/or boredom (Acuna 2014; Adams 1995; Anderson 1988; Gonzalez 1996; Lomawaima and McCarty 2006; Takaki 1989; Watkins 2001; Woodson 1933). Such significant discrepancies are indicative of and reflect those societal injustices that ought to be addressed by education and the curriculum, rather than caused by them.

One of the main aspects and facets of education which is significant for every democratic society, is multicultural education. A number of writers and researchers agree that it encompasses three distinct but interrelated dimensions, namely a country's ethnocultural demographic diversity, a political philosophy that recognizes and accommodates differences that result from such a diversity, as well as public policy means and measures that are instrumental in achieving objectives rooted in the above political philosophy (Berry 2013; Ng and Bloemraad 2015; Debono 2017). Multicultural education has come to be based on and inspired by Banks' threefold definition of multicultural education (Banks 2004):

a. as a philosophy that encompasses a set of values and beliefs representing cultural and ethnic influences on identities, experiences and lifestyles. Thus, such a concept embraces the values of educational equality, excellence and cultural pluralism;

b. as a process that approaches this facet of contemporary education as a systematic and continuous component within a more eclectic understanding of education;

c. as a catalyst for educational reform in terms of structure and procedure, that is reflective of the

changes that occur in the much broader context of society – changes that are related to racial, socio-cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity.

Thus, multicultural education must transpire from a political commitment that first and foremost seeks to engage and develop “new models of democratic citizenship, grounded in human rights ideals, to replace earlier uncivil and undemocratic relations of hierarchy and exclusion” (Kymlicka 2010: 101). If Maltese society opts to move toward an understanding of itself as characterized by cultural diversity that is integral to its national identity and enriches it, as the above documents have revealed, then it must be fully committed to end every form of racism and oppression. These include those related to gender, disabilities, class, age, and sexual orientation. Only in this way would it be doing its utmost effort to abolish any structural element in society that generates or strengthens socio-economic inequalities (Bennett 2011; Naiditch 2013).

Thus, multicultural education must lead to the idea that differences in the classroom must be embraced and pedagogical practices developed to reflect the affirmation of differences in how students learn, communicate, and relate to each other (Fortuin 2014; Naiditch 2013; Thijs et al. 2014).

The Project: An Opportune Challenge

It was for this reason that the project was initiated, precisely to address a lacuna in our curriculum that teachers had long been complaining about.

1. Project History and Details

In its first year (scholastic year 2015–2016) the project took the form of school-day seminars for Year 10 (Form 4) students. The target audience was limited to only Church schools. The project was intended to be ‘informally piloted’ in its year of inception, and after its analysis and assessment, it was to be decided whether it was to be kept. This project remained a yearly appointment in the calendar of the schools which participated in it. Feedback initially collected was informal. From its second year, it was decided that it would be offered to

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all Maltese schools: State, Church and Private.

Table 1: Seminar programme

X'NISTA' NAGHMEL JIEN? WHAT IS MY ROLE? Edukazzjoni fil-Multikulturalizmu 2019 – 2020	
9.00 am	Video Clip 1 (FACES + Quotes for Reflection)
9.05 am	Introduction by Fr.Louis and Edward (AIMS of seminar)
9.20 am	Ice-Breaker (PHOTOETHNICITY)
9.30 am	Drama Part 1 (X'NISTA' NAGHMEL JIEN?)
9.45 am	Small Group Discussions
10.30 am	BREAK
11.00 am	Video Clip 2 (FACES + Quotes for Reflection)
11.05 am	Drama Part 2 (X'NISTA' NAGHMEL JIEN?)
11.35 am	Student sharing and discussion on Drama
11.45 am	PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF A REFUGEE (in the form of an INTERVIEW)
12.20 pm	QUESTIONS, REACTIONS AND CONCLUSION

2. Designing the Seminar

The seminar activities, resources and pedagogy were decided upon by the organizational team, and the project was launched first to educators, learning support educators (LSEs), senior/school management team members, Education Officers, directors, assistant directors from the Directorate for Lifelong Learning (DLLL) and service managers from the SfCE, as well as the then-President of Malta Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca.

Designing the Short Drama

A dramatic script entitled *X'NISTA' NAGHMEL JIEN? (WHAT IS MY ROLE?)* was produced specifically for the seminar. It was written and acted out in Maltese, with English subtitles. It was based on everyday life social situations that many 14 and 15-year-old students encounter, and written in an ordinary kind of language that they can relate to. Feedback was sought

from two groups of Year 10 (Form 4) students prior to writing and after finalizing the script it was well received.

Designing Suitable and Adaptable Pedagogical Activities

The two short video clips showing the faces of people of different nationalities, races, and ethnicities, manifesting their diverse cultural characteristics, were produced for the photoethnicity ice-breaking activity. These were projected on a slide and students had to match each face with its corresponding nationality.

Creating a Resource Pack for Educators

A resource pack was also prepared for the educators who attended the seminar with their students. This included all the resources used in the educational multiculturalism seminar, that is, a compact disc with the short drama, the photoethnicity ice-breaking activity, and the two short audio-visual clips featuring faces of people of different cultures, religions, races and ethnicities, as well as the seminar poster and programme. A list of questions that educators could use to facilitate the small group discussions, and to process the drama and the students' personal experiences in these spaces were also included.

3. Participation

The table below shows the number of schools and students who attended this seminar over the past six years since its inception.

Table 2: Details for seminar attendance

Scholastic Year	Schools	Church Schools	State Schools	Private Schools	Boys	Girls
2015-2016	10	10	0	0	164	145
2016-2017	16	9	5	2	280	236
2017-2018	18	10	6	2	296	248
2018-2019	21	12	7	2	324	240
2019-2020	12	8	4	0	176	138
TOTAL number of students					1240	1007

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Assessing Success Through a Mixed-Method Research Methodology Embedded in Professional Practice

After the successful running of these multiculturalism seminars for two consecutive scholastic years (2015–2016, 2016–2017), it was decided to collect feedback more systematically and extensively. By publishing the results, the project would become more attractive to schools. The research was to be practice-based. Inspired by the seminal book *The Reflective Practitioner* by Donald A. Schon (1984), who in turn was influenced by Dewey's book *How We Think* (1933), Schon's basic notion is that through reflection-in-action "our knowing is in our action, we can gain verifiable insight into our thought processes" (Schon 1984:49).

1. Data Collection Through Mixed Methodology

Mixed methodology was chosen as the data collection method. Before the seminar teachers from the participating schools were asked to gather some of the students' expectations of the seminar, and to gauge from their class discussion, the students' understanding of multiculturalism and their attitudes towards various aspects and facets of this ever-stronger Maltese reality. Following the seminar a short questionnaire was distributed to students and teachers to fill in, at home or at school. In-depth interviews were conducted with 8 teachers, 3 LSEs and 15 students over these last three years. Following their experience of the seminar, two of the students interviewed were Maltese nationals with African origins, while another two were foreigners who had been in Malta for no more than three years. In some schools there were follow-ups of the seminar and students were asked to produce creative artefacts that demonstrated what they had learned and reflected upon. Moreover, towards the end of scholastic year 2018–2019, two focus group discussions were held, one for students and the other for educators. The following table summarizes all our sources of data collection:

Table 3: Sources for data collection

No	Source of feedback	Feedback collected
1.	Teachers' feedback from students before seminar	135 students from 2 Church and 1 State school
2.	Feedback from short group discussions during seminar	Taken from the notes taken by one of the two facilitating educators
3.	Questionnaires to teachers and students and educators after seminar	255 distributed, 186 collected
4.	In-depth interviews after seminar Teachers Learning support educators Students	Convenient and purposive sample <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 8 teachers ○ 3 Learning support educators ○ 15 students (9 girls and 6 boys from schools (3 Church, 1 State and 1 Private))
5.	Observations and informal feedback during seminar	Taken by myself
7.	Two focus groups, one with STUDENTS and one with EDUCATORS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Focus group 1 – 8 students (5 boys and 3 girls from 2 Church schools) ○ Focus group 2 – 5 educators (3 teachers and 2 LSE from the same 2 Church schools)
6.	Charts, storyboards, and other created objects made by and exhibited by students	4 schools: 3 Church and 1 State.

2. Thematic and Narrative Analysis for Data Analysis and Interpretation

All the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with the consent of all participants. In the case of the students, we requested both their parents' consent and their own signed assent forms, after sending all these forms with information sheets to their parents through the schools. The organizational group then met several times to read through, analyse and discuss the

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findings in the spirit of Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR), and through the use of NVivo. Apart from these transcripts, we also had available all the material mentioned in the table above. Throughout this process the team came up with a number of broad general categories and related themes that emerged from the data, and then reached a consensus on the most prevalent ones that we had to start focusing on. Each one of these (outlined and discussed below) was further sub-divided into themes that came across clearly through words, phrases and/or expressions that were used frequently and/or interpreted by the participants in similar ways, to imply the same or similar meaning/s. This thematic analysis was combined with a narrative analysis of the participants' life experiences that also followed Paul Ricoeur's stages of interpretation, namely: *distancing*, *appropriation*, *explanation* and *interpretation* (Ricoeur 1981). These increasingly deeper levels of interpretation and understanding occurred over four two-hour sessions that the team held at St. Joseph's Home.

Results and Discussion

This section will report the main results of this study and discuss their significance and relevance to achieve its aims.

1. Unfounded Fear of the Young Generation: The Main Causes of Cultural Negative Attitudes and Stereotypes

Many of the students' comments before they actually attended the multiculturalism seminar clearly expressed their fear of foreigners, especially Arabs ("Arab") and Africans ("Afrikani"), especially the dark-skinned ("is-suwed") and those who come to our island by boat ("dawk li jiġu bid-dgħajsa"). When asked for the reasons for such fear, many comments linked foreigners, especially the above-specified categories, to terror, fundamentalism, deviant activities, crime, and jobs that otherwise could be held by Maltese people ("jiegħdu/jisirqu xogħol il-Maltin"). Many comments even associated these foreigners with the imposition of Islam in every territory they land on ("ixerrdu l-Iżlam kulfejn imorru"), and a strong effort to take over the country ("jehdulna over lil pajjiżna"). Some comments even revealed that when students were asked how

they could feel so sure of such ideas, they asserted that these were “undeniable facts” (“dawn fatti”), and for a few of them they should not even be discussed but simply acted upon (“kif tista’ tmerihom?”) by the respective authorities. These negative attitudes, false perceptions and misconceptions, as well as negative attitudes and stereotypes were also very evident from the students’ comments during the seminar, and from what some students said during the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with reference to their previous (before seminar) or current (after seminar) attitudes and beliefs.

Jiġu hawn biex jehdulna xogħolna... għalfejn ma jnehħux lill-gvernijiet korrotti tagħhom u jiehdu pajjiżhom f’idejhom? (Student comment before seminar)

Jiena nibża’ minnhom u ma nafdahomx ... għax...jista’ jkun hemm min hu tajjeb ... imma jkun hemm ħafna ħżiena u kriminali u terroristi li jiġu hawn ukoll bis-saħħa tat-tajbin! (Student comment before seminar)

2. The Causes of Fear: Lack of Correct Information, Fake News in the Media and Family Influences

From all the above-mentioned sources of data, it comes out very clearly that for the great majority of students the main sources of information about foreigners and immigration, legal and illegal, are family members, the various media (especially the news bulletins on the local stations, and the social media, especially Facebook), peers they encounter in different social contexts, and school (especially PSCD and Social/Environmental Studies). Some students even referred to one or more family members as racist, or at least manifesting some xenophobic beliefs and attitudes. Many students even admitted during the seminar and/or in-depth interviews and/or focus group discussions that they never or rarely check their sources when they read news on the media, and they tend to take as true what they listen to at home and/or when they are with their closest and most trusted friends.

Hekk iġhidu l-media u l-aħbarijiet....il-hin kollu...

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li x-xoghol tal-bini u hafna xoghlijiet ohra f'idejn il-barranin.... (Student 8 – In-depth interviews)

Fil-familja tiegħi hemm min bata' minhabba dawn in-nies ... allura li jingħad huwa minhabba esperjenzi veri... (Student 4 – Focus group)

3. Need of Students to Engage in Intercultural and Multicultural Dialogue in Educational Contexts

When students were asked about their previous opportunities for intercultural and multicultural encounters and dialogue, formal and informal, many of them said that they had very few such opportunities, or none at all. Moreover, the few opportunities that they actually mentioned occurred through encounters with classmates at school, through informal encounters and functional relationships in various social contexts, both in Malta and abroad, and especially through the media. Interesting to observe, only those who had opportunities for meaningful personal encounters expressed why they feel lucky and/or transformed in their attitude and/or persuaded to think and act otherwise.

Meta sirt naf lil Charlene jiena bdejt inhares differenti ... lejn dawn in-nies I mean ... suwed u persuni ta' razza differenti...qabel vera kienu jbeżżghuni ... (very emotional) ... imma mbagħad bdejt iktar nithassarhom ... (Student 3 – In-depth Interviews, repeated from seminar)

Meta titkellem magħhom ... u speċi ta (thinking) ... issir tafhom iktar...tinduna li huma vera orrajt u tal-ġenn ... u tista' anki titgħallem minnhom...jien hekk ġrali (Student 6 – Focus group, repeated from seminar)

4. Need for Cross- and Extra-Curricular Initiatives in Multicultural Education

It was very significant and equally important to observe that many students as well as educators (teachers and LSEs) acknowledged that much remains to be desired in

multicultural education, despite all genuine efforts made in recent years to address multicultural issues through various curricular subjects. Many students of those interviewed and in the focus groups expressed their satisfaction with the fact that this seminar gave them an opportunity to listen to the voices of real people who had suffered so much racism, xenophobic comments and attitudes “hurled towards them”, as well as lack of respect and entitlement to their basic rights. However, they were equally disappointed at the fact that they had never experienced multicultural education before in this way, despite the repeated “homilies” they are obliged to listen to every day on the values of solidarity, altruism, empathy, acceptance, brotherly love, fruitful dialogue, compassion, and many more. All of them agreed that the interview with Sunday or Happy, Nigerian refugees who had arrived in Malta after a very long painful journey, only to meet more pain in the various forms that racism takes, was the most effective part of the seminar. The large majority of them also said they really liked the drama, and more importantly that it managed to provoke their critical reflection. Some even said that the ice-breaking exercise and the drama could not have been better activities to stimulate a good discussion in the small groups.

5. Need for Multicultural Education Addressed at Parents and Families

In answering the questions ‘Do you ever fact-check what you listen to in your home environment?’, and ‘Have you ever disagreed with your parent/s and/or other family members about issues related to multiculturalism?’, these were a few responses provided by three different students:

*Dak li niddiskutu d-dar huwa l-opinjoni taghna ... mhux kulhadd ghandu dritt ikollu opinjoni fuq dawn l-affarijiet?
(Student during seminar)*

Jiena nahseb li missieri ghandu ragun fuq hafna affarijiet ... missieri jahdem ix-xatt u jiltaqa’ ma’ hafna minnhom u allura jaf x’ikun qed ighid (Student during seminar)

U tghid mhux ser nitkellem hekk id-dar? Kieku jtajjarni missier! (Student 2 – In-depth interview, Student 7 – Focus group)

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This clearly shows that students don't critically reflect, or fact check what is being discussed at home, highlighting the importance to engage parents and families in the discussion on multiculturalism as the data clearly shows that certain opinions, preconceptions and misconceptions held by the students prior to the seminars may have been strongly influenced also by their families. Teachers and learning support educators were especially emphatic on the need for parents to be educated in their understanding of and perspective towards multiculturalism. One comment by a teacher with more than 30 years in the profession sums up nicely what educators feel and believe:

Aħjar nibdew mill-ġenituri...għax hafna velenu li għandhom (referring to students) minnhom jiġi ... (Teacher 2 – In-depth interview, Teacher 1 – Focus group)

U inti jekk id-dar ħlief mibgħeda u razzizmu ma jisimgħux, x'tistenna? (LSE 1 – In-depth interview, LSE 2 – Focus group)

6. Need for Multicultural Education Addressed to Teachers and Educators

Most of the teachers and LSEs acknowledged there have been positive attempts over these last few years to make amendments and modifications in the curriculum to provide space and opportunities for multicultural education, but much remains to be desired. They described these efforts as 'sporadic' and 'too little' and 'not always so effective'. They also acknowledged that a greater lacuna in the educational system is the lack of knowledge and pedagogical training that educators have in multicultural education, and they expressed their concern that such a lack of professional preparation and formation may sometimes lead to more harm than good when addressing issues related to multiculturalism.

Jiena kieku nkun nixtieq nagħmel iktar ...imma mhux faċli...u kultant tikkonfondi x'taqbad tgħid u tagħmel ... (Teacher 7 – In-depth Interview)

7. Need for Leaders to Commit More to Action and Implement Policies

All the teachers and learning support educators who were interviewed expressed the view that more ('much more' for some) could be done on the part of leaders to implement policies and act in ways that promote more positive and open attitudes towards people of other cultures and races. While documents and policy papers are important, there must be more commitment to action, which could only be manifested in clear plans and projects that enmesh and animate the ideas and ideals in the documents. The educators were referring to official political and educational documents, white papers and position papers. Some educators even vented their frustration at the fact that so much money is spent in launching these documents and project a positive image of the country, and then so little is invested in supporting educational projects and initiatives in multicultural education. Some of those interviewed were frustrated that even to attend this seminar proved to be so difficult due reasons that they described as "easy excuses" that could be easily sorted out. One teacher even said that it had become a "nightmare" to make arrangements for such important extra-curricular activities that complement the syllabi content, and even address this content in student-friendly language and student-centred pedagogies. Furthermore, some expressed great disappointment at the fact that we still have educational administrators and school leaders who do not see any value:

L-ewwel hafna bla bla bla u omelji fuq valuri ... u mbaghad biex taghmel xi haġa trid titkarrbilhom ... l-importanti hu biss li l-iskola tidher sabiha u li taghmel xi haġa ... (Teacher 5 – In-depth interview, Teacher 3 – Focus group)

Two LSEs also stated clearly that they expect the authorities to be more sensitive to issues related to language and religion when it comes to foreign students. They need to make sure that the appropriate structures are in place, and the necessary measures are taken so that LSEs and teachers could use code switching effectively, be more sensitive to religious differences, apply more effective and inclusive classroom pedagogies,

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know how to provide opportunities to foreigners to voice their stories in a safe environment, and lead by example in demonstrating empathy and offering compassion to such voices.

Aħjar jaraw (referring to people in authority, in politics and education) kif jistgħu l-ghalliema u l-LSEs jittgħallmu jikkomunikaw b'lingwi differenti u jirrispettaw u jittkellmu fuq ir-reliġjonijiet differenti, l-iktar l-Islam ... (LSE 4 – In-depth interview, LSE 2 – Focus group)

Hemm bżonn ikunu ċerti li l-istejjer ta' studenti bħal dawn li jbatu ħafna... joħorġu...imma l-iktar li l-ghalliema kapaċi johlqu l-klima ... u jkunu komdi huma ... (LSE 2 – In-depth interview, LSE 3 – Focus group)

Recommendations

1. Pressure on Political and Educational Authorities to 'Walk the Talk'

A recent local study (Debono 2017) has shown that the shifts in Maltese demographics due to increasing multiculturalism have brought about a significant level of contestation of identity markers, especially religion and language. Foreign students attending Maltese schools are asking questions related to culture and identity, thus provoking serious reflection on citizenship. Thus, the stronger multicultural reality in schools is pointing towards the increasing need for Maltese authorities, in both politics and education, to deal urgently with issues related to national identity markers, especially those that centre around rights, duties, and equality. This reality also needs to be framed in the broader geo-historical context of increasing global migration and multiculturalism that inevitably redefine the notion of citizenship. This has come to be understood as based on rights and duties that transpire from a sense of belonging to a particular territory to one that stretches beyond territorial boundaries. In fact, a number of scholars argue that the time is ripe to develop universal rights and duties as well as a shared civic vision for the peaceful conviviality of people coming from different cultures. Such logic ensues from the fact that more people are having legal

rights of residence in different countries, including Malta, but then their political rights and access to welfare services are limited (Merry 2012; Revi 2014; Turner 2016). The growing number of such 'partial citizens', even referred to as 'denizens' (Turner 2016), brought about by increasing globalization and international migration, calls urgently for a new way of defining citizenship. Consequently, this has multiple implications on how to cultivate citizenship in schools in relation to all the values that constitute true democracy. It is in fact the opinion of a number of educators that political and education authorities need to show more determination, creativity and commitment in the implementation of the values set out in official documents. In the words of one of the teachers interviewed, they need to "walk the talk."

2. The Professional Formation of Educators in Multiculturalism

Teachers' behaviours and perceptions are crucially important in multicultural education provided by schools. Many scholars, such as Banks (1998), Blum (2014) and Marry (2012) emphasize the significantly critical role that teachers play to foster an inclusive environment in the school, through which the different identities of pupils are respected. Such scholars even see this role as one of the major challenges that teachers will face in the twenty-first century.

Most educators in this small-scale study expressed their feelings of helplessness and lack of confidence when faced with situations in which students felt excluded from the education process and for which the teachers were not prepared. Moreover, they believe that this situation could only get worse as multiculturalism increases. The teachers' comments and my own long experience as an educator show that educators do instinctively develop coping methods to be as inclusive as possible. However, such methods are not adequate, and at times even ineffective. On the other hand, this study revealed the educators' will and determination to learn more about cultural diversity and multicultural education, provided they are given the opportunities. This was very encouraging. However, they do not automatically translate into inclusive behaviour. In the same way that mere contact between students of

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different national and ethnic backgrounds does not translate automatically into meaningful contact, teacher contact with pupil difference, by itself, does not automatically translate into an inclusive teaching and learning experience. Moreover, professional formation needs to aim more at providing all educators with opportunities for exposure to cultural diversity, inclusive education and competence in multilingualism. Through these, educators must have opportunities to explore and work on their own stereotypes, biases, prejudices, fears and anxieties. Following such a crucial stage, it must be prioritized that educators develop competences to facilitate linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms, and support students who have experienced trauma and manifest emotional and behaviour difficulties (Cefai et al. 2019).

Educators also need access to a variety of multimedia resources, that are tailor-made to the needs of Maltese society, to feel more empowered to address topics and issues related to multiculturalism. They even acknowledge the need for professional training in this regard. In fact, all of those interviewed showed a strong sense of gratitude for the resource pack that was provided with all the resources used in the seminar. As one teacher explicitly stated,

tassew grazzi ta' dan il-pack ... ghax ftit ghandna rizorsi tajbin hekk ... li huma bil-Malti u bl-Ingliż ... u tailor-made ghas-sitwazzjoni taghna. (Teacher 8 – In-depth interview, Teacher 3 – Focus group)

3. Addressing Real Needs Through the Educational Curriculum

It came out very clearly from the in-depth interviews and the focus groups that there are several aspects of the educational curriculum that need to be addressed in relation to multiculturalism. Among these, the aspects that seem to be most urgent and perceived as crucially important, are related to language (a language policy), religion (especially multicultural religious education), flexibility of syllabi of various subjects to adapt to the Maltese multicultural reality, and the promotion of more openness to multicultural/intercultural encounter, both within the confines of the school as well as

outside its physical space. The last of these aspects will be specifically explained in the next sub-section.

With regard to language and religion, the foreign students interviewed were very clear in emphasizing the importance of both these cultural aspects to their sense and level of integration in the school and wider community:

When my friends speak to me in English, even though they don't feel so comfortable, I really feel their respect, and that they want to be their friend...it makes me really happy, feeling wanted... (Foreign Student 1)

The 2008 NESSE Report had already acknowledged the importance of language in the process of integrating migrant children, especially in its relation to the educational process. It had explicitly asserted that

... education as a core element of integration happens largely through the medium of language. Language is not only a precondition for participating successfully in core societal institutions of the receiving society, but also for developing private relations with members of the native population" (NESSE 2008: 75)

One of the two foreign students interviewed had a Christian mother and a Muslim father. With respect to religion she sincerely shared her belief that:

Religion should never be a barrier ... I feel lucky enough to appreciate both Christianity and Islam as my mum is a Christian and my dad a Muslim ... I go to both Catholic churches and to the mosque ... I only wish that more Maltese students learn about all religions so they appreciate them more ... and feel more respect ... (Foreign Student 2)

In *A Passage to Malta: The Health and Wellbeing of Foreign Children in Malta*, it is strongly recommended that "schools with a high number of foreign students, particularly asylum seeking ones would benefit from additional resources to address language issues ..." (Cefai et al. 2019: 19) and that

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“multilingualism for all” as a resource for all students in the classroom” (ibid. 22) should be introduced. This would require that “all teachers will have an adequate knowledge of language and language learning and support within a school culture which embraces multilingualism and values the multilingual resources of foreign children” (ibid. 22).

4. More Cross-cultural and Extra-Curricular Initiatives for Pupils and Educators

It has been very evident in this ‘research through practice’ project that both educators (teachers and LSEs) and students feel the need to participate in more educational activities that promote multicultural dialogue and intercultural personal encounters. All students interviewed individually and in the focus groups, as well as teachers and LSEs, had words of praise for the multiculturalism seminar. When asked specifically what they most liked about it, they mentioned:

- *the opportunity to get out of school and mix with students from other schools in a different environment that is well adapted to the educational activity;*
- *the fact that they could mix with foreign students and listen to their voices and stories, especially those marked by suffering and anxieties;*
- *the fact that the seminar was conducted in English when there were foreign students, and the drama had English subtitles. This, they said, showed concrete respect, sensitivity, and a genuine effort and commitment for inclusion;*
- *the safe space they experienced in which they could voice themselves irrespective of what their prior opinions and ideas and prejudices were. As one student expressed it, “we could just be ourselves for some time, without fear of judgement.”*

All such requests are on the same wavelength as the recommendations made in *A Passage to Malta: The Health and Wellbeing of Foreign Children in Malta*:

More school related initiatives and projects organised together by Maltese and foreign students, projects with other schools and with schools in other countries, particularly those countries perceived negatively, as well as peer mentoring and befriending schemes, would be useful in this regard. (Cefai et al. 2019: 23)

5. Multicultural Education for Parents

The 2008 NESSE report had clearly indicated the effect of the interplay between educational policies and the pupils' family background. It also states clearly that this fact must always have a direct and strong bearing on both teacher training and the initiatives taken by school and educational leaders and authorities. Vassallo (2018) argues that the more initiatives taken for the multicultural formation and education of parents of native students, and the more involvement of all parents, especially foreign ones, in school activities, the faster and smoother the process of multicultural integration becomes. This research ascertains the importance of having school educators who are very sensitive and attuned to the potential offered by diverse family cultures which can be nurtured through initiatives and projects that create effective home-school partnerships and recognize the multitude of advantages that such an endeavour generates in schools. Schools are ideal spaces for the encounter of families from diverse cultures. This puts great responsibility on schools to foster a positive, warm and welcoming environment to all families. This must always include the consideration of the multiple cultures, languages, socio-economic backgrounds, beliefs, race and religious practices of all the parents (Van Wyk and Lemmer 2009; Vassallo 2018). Cefai et al. (2019) call schools and local communities to come up with activities that

encourage Maltese parents and families to value diversity and appreciate its benefits, including activities for and by Maltese and foreign parents in schools and intercultural community hubs, where Maltese and foreign families, children and young people can come together and spend quality time together. (Cefai et al. 2019: 23)

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6. Taking the Media by the Horns and Promoting Media Literacy Education

Very interestingly, while reflecting on why they liked the drama and believed it was effective to stimulate thinking and motivate discussion, some students specifically mentioned the facts that they could relate to the plot and the language used, and also that all the characters were adolescents like them. In fact, two of these students suggested that multicultural education can be really effective if combined with initiatives in media education that includes media production, for young people like them.

Student: Jiena l-media vera n'hobbha ... u kieku jkollni cans li jien u shabi niktbu script u naghmlu film fuq razzizmu ... il-ostra kieku...nifqghu l-iskreen

Interviewer: Ghalfejn?

Student: Ghax ghandna hafna esperjenzi ta' razzizmu ... niltaqghu ma' hafna suwed u barranin ... uhud minnhom hbieb taghna ... u naraw hafna jghajjruhom u jabbuzawhom...

Interviewer: Le ... imma ma niddejjax niffilmja u nirreçta ... u anki shabi ... anki dawn il-barranin li nafu ... (Student 7 – In-depth interview)

Through Media Literacy Education (MLE) as a curricular subject, and also as an empowering tool that can be employed by other subjects in the school curriculum, underrepresented populations can be empowered to voice their stories, perspectives and beliefs. Through MLE they have the possibility of expressing their critiques of dominant media messages and simultaneously produce multimedia texts through which they challenge stereotypical representations of themselves as they are disseminated by the various mass and social media that mark their lives significantly. Intrinsic in such an analysis is the recognition of, and a will to resist, the power differential between marginalized communities and mainstream media (Legrande and Vargas 2001; Naiditch 2013). Media tools for educational purposes have powerful potential to promote and

enhance diversity, as well as its many facets and meanings. In addition, given the context of diversity that characterizes schools across the country, one would think that digital media would be used almost as an organic response to our current societal needs (Page 2008).

MLE is an optional subject in schools and should become compulsory in line with the urgency that the media-saturated world we live in calls for, as well as the culture we inhabit. Through synergizing content and process, through inquiry and creativity, MLE can really help young people become more literate on issues of diversity, especially in interpreting and responding to the messages through which the media represent and portray different aspects of social diversity. The urgency for media literacy is in today's world felt even more due to the vast generation of information that students are immersed in, fake news and conflicting messages they are bombarded with, and the new forms of media that are constantly being developed and inhibit (Naiditch 2013; Race 2015).

Conclusion

The primary aim of this small-scale research study was to serve as a valuable source of feedback for the multiculturalism seminars for Year 10 students in all Maltese schools, that have been ongoing since the scholastic year 2015–2016. Moreover, the threefold scope of this paper was to give visibility to this project, to do our little but crucially important share to address the needs of an increasing multicultural society through education that promotes comfortable encounter and dialogue with 'otherness', and finally but not the least, to increase the enthusiasm for more initiatives in multicultural education that are constantly inspired by, embedded in, and leading to further critical reflection. However, it must be made emphatically clear that such a project, like other similar ones that we genuinely hope will be created in the near future, is only meant to be a catalyst for structural, pedagogical and procedural changes in education that continuously reflect larger changes in society and address them adequately: formally, non-formally and informally. All research in this regard shows that truly effective multicultural education should never be understood as a

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method or program, but as a progressive course of ideas that lead to actions.

It is our firm belief that the more practice-based research projects there are in multiculturalism and media education, that are shared in the true spirit of a truly democratic society, the more we would all together be contributing for the formation of a society based on justice, equity, inclusion and active citizenship.

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