Chapter 3: Working in International and Multicultural Schools

Migrant Learners' Unit: Scaffolding a Learning Culture Without Silos

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to give an insight into the work of the Migrant Learners' Unit (MLU) within the Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE), an initiative with a commitment that goes beyond academic achievement. This paper will explain in detail the rationale of the Unit, while looking at how it operates at organisational and at education provision levels. Furthermore, it will expound on how the MLU works with various stakeholders to build an understanding of various factors which enable the migrant learner to achieve a socially just educational experience. It will give a brief recount of the events that have influenced this area of education in recent years and specifically illustrate how various policies have influenced the setting up and the work done by the MLU.

Keywords:

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Introduction

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) reported that in 2018 there were an estimated 164 million migrant workers worldwide, including 50 million children on the move. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2018) states that ever since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, over 11.8 million Syrians have fled the country. Approximately half of them are children. The effect of global events has affected our islands from time immemorial. In recent years, the political restlessness in the Middle East and North African region coincided with the attractive employment opportunities offered by the Maltese labour market and this has resulted in an increase in persons arriving in Malta. Both global and local happenings have consequently brought with them new challenges, including but not limited to evolving employment parameters, community settlement and service requests.

This increase has also left its imprint on state schools with the latter registering an increase in migrant students. This phenomenon has led to the setting up of the Migrant Learners' Unit (MLU), an initiative of the Ministry for Education and Employment. The work of this unit, which will be discussed further down, aims to implement efficient international and multicultural practices within the school community.

Internationalisation and Multicultural Educational Practices

A quality educational experience caters for the needs of all students and works towards ensuring that all learners reach their full potential. While over the last decade schools in Malta have experienced an increase in learners registering for schooling, educational institutions have also noted how the array of nationalities of these new registrants has changed and is becoming more and more diverse. Nationality is one aspect which can be identified from statistics. The richness of experiences which each learner brings, together with the way the newcomer learner is progressing both on a personal basis and as part of a community in the Maltese school, reveals a much more fluid and multi-levelled actuality. Such a dynamic reality can sometimes feel overwhelming for schools as they

try to understand their school community and its needs.

Nowadays, schools look at the need to address internationalisation and also employ multicultural and intercultural educational practices. Internationalisation requires educational institutions to give a global perspective to schooling, using a cross–curricular methodology and authentic learning experiences. They are striving to incorporate in their school ethos, and in the enactment of the curriculum knowledge, skills and attitudes that focus on the international context that we live in, so that future generations can be proactive global citizens who value the interconnection between the local and the global.

Students are encountering and acquiring international educational experiences in a variety of ways. The emphasis on foreign language learning, participation in exchange visits abroad and projects focusing on global citizenship are common in our schools and backed by local and international policy and funding mechanisms (Nuffic 2019). Technology has facilitated new pedagogic approaches, making it possible to participate in virtual educational experiences with learners in different countries simultaneously.

At the same time, the student population of most educational institutions is evolving in a way that requires these institutions to adopt multicultural educational practices. Education in a multicultural setting may be considered first and foremost as an opportunity for self–understanding, valuing self and others, and as a process of acquiring multiple perspectives. Further to accepting the multicultural setting is the adoption of an intercultural ethos such as creating an everyday cross–curricular space for exchange between different groups.

Hagenmeier and Mashau (2016) delineate multicultural education as "the way in which tolerance and appreciation of diversity, as a positive force, is imparted to learners who hail from different backgrounds" (103–116). Davidman and Davidman (1997) view multicultural education in a broader way, as working towards the goals of educational equity, empowering the learner and his family while focusing on the development of a culturally pluralistic society based on

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intercultural understanding. This goes way beyond tolerance, as it creates a deep understanding and respect for all cultures, through the mutual exchange of ideas and cultural norms and the development of relationships in which each individual is valued.

In this respect we are speaking about education that is teaching **to** a diverse learner cohort. It is teaching **for** a diverse learner cohort which may be different from the existing cohorts of learners already in educational institutions. In this way education is engaging with differences and diversity and at the same time empowering members for diversity and equity. Thus, education is teaching about living together in a multicultural society. Having different ethnicities within schools may be viewed as an opportunity where school activities can become a fusion of understanding, involvement and learning which prepares the learners to approach life with skills, attitudes and knowledge to function in and across cultures and change (Liu 2017). What both internationalisation and multiculturalism have in common is the possibility of acquisition of intercultural competence.

One must note that the field of education in multicultural settings is complex. This field oscillates in such realities as transnationalism, hybrid identities and ever–changing cultures. It brings together various stakeholders who may also be interpreting the area in various ways. In its continual process of self–evaluation for the provision of quality education, the school itself may feel the need to engage in dialogues, which sometimes may be difficult, with different members of the school community, and to find ways of reaching agreement or socially just compromises.

Policy Background to the Setting Up of the Migrant Learners' Unit

> *Successful integration of immigrant populations is essential for ensuring social cohesion in immigrant receiving nations. Immigrants bring a wealth of human capital which, if nurtured carefully, can positively contribute to economic well–being and cultural diversity of the host country. Yet, tapping into this potential*

> *remains a major challenge for policy makers. (OECD PISA Report 2003: 12)*

Various local policy documents refer to notions of internationalisation and multiculturalism. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2012) recognises the evolving mandates of today's society and the need for education to work in this flux "driven by globalisation, ICT development, competition, shift of traditional values and new paradigms" (p. iii). It places emphasis on inclusivity, on respect, on valuing oneself and one's own culture while empathising with each other.

The Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014–2020's four pillars propose paths, through which education supports the achievement of learners *"through a value–oriented formation including equity, social justice, diversity, and inclusivity"* (3). This is further developed and enacted through the policy document My Journey: Achieving through different paths (MEDE 2016) which sustains the theme, 'Equitable quality education for all', with education as an entitlement for all with no one–size–fits–all arrangements.

The Respect for All Framework (2014)

> *acknowledges that schools are placed within different cultural environments but notes that [....] Both culture and climate require particular attention in policy development and even more so in its implementation. The climate which is required within schools for these policies to be fruitful, is one that is physically, emotionally, intellectually safe for all school community members. (Respect for All Framework 2014: 10)*

This is echoed in the Policy on Inclusive Education in schools: route to Quality Inclusion (2019) which aims at *"[nurturing] a collective culture among all educators, practitioners [....] to increase a sense of belonging in all colleges and schools"* (13). It notes that the learning environment needs to be flexible and responsive to the learner's needs. It recognises the four pillars of learning: those of learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, learning to be (UNESCO 1996).

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On the global level, the same themes are present in the United Nations' (2015) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets, amongst them Goal 4 to ensure "[....] inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all…" which Malta has vouched to respect.

The enactment of the NCF and the consultative process prior to the publishing of the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014–2024 enabled members of committees to come into constant contact with feedback from schools and draft proposals that fed into the Framework. It was a time when the influx of migrants was more concentrated on waves of arrivals of undocumented persons fleeing from conflict (NSO 2015). Some schools were receiving more newcomers than others. Some were inundated.

Further opportunities for review of the migrant education provision were garnered through the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) III (2015) report. Based on data which was gathered previous to the setting up of the MLU, the section on policy indicators and the educational system's responsiveness to the needs of migrant children, the MIPEX III report states that the NCF policy document provided a good foundation for the enactment of integration and intercultural education in schools with the field of diversity as one of the core principles across the curriculum. However, it found that schools received almost no other targeted support to address the specific needs and opportunities that immigrant pupils bring to the classroom, and that schools were missing out on the multilingualism and multiculturalism in their own classrooms, with no support for social integration, immigrant languages and cultures. Access to education was seen as problematic by the report since there were no formal structures which assess and support newcomer students to access the right level and school. The MIPEX III report noted that teachers received no other systematic support after their pre-service training. The report recognised MEDE's starting initiative in training parents to become bilingual mediators between migrant families and schools as a first step in the field of parental outreach.

The above-mentioned MEDE policy documents act as the backbone of the MLU's work and such reports as listed above

and others have provided opportunities for the MLU to look into areas of its work as can be seen in the next section.

The Migrant Learners' Unit

The Migrant Learners' Unit (MLU) was set up in 2014. Its mission statement states that:

> *[...] we seek to promote the inclusion of newly arrived learners into the education system. We value each learner's well-being through the provision of a holistic educational experience while focusing on the acquisition of linguistic and sociocultural competences. The unit recognises the need to value and involve all the stakeholders concerned for this educational experience to succeed. (MLU 2017)*

The statement is further condensed into three words: *Value, Include, Succeed!* One must note the positioning that the statement takes through its remit in 'seek[ing] to promote the inclusion' as a function but of a deeper emphasis on equity through the importance given to valuing each learner's wellbeing. The Unit's statement is recognizant of the fact that multiple factors and stakeholders shape the experiences of the learner and the need for the stakeholders to work together for the benefit of the learner. The translation of this statement into action is done in various ways and at different levels which we will illustrate throughout this paper.

The second sentence clearly defines the Unit's outlook of valuing the learner and his wellbeing, and looks at the provision that the unit is mainly tasked with in the educational field — that of supporting the newly arrived to gain the linguistic competences of the languages of schooling — Maltese and English — as well as to build sociocultural competences which will enable the learner to access, function and succeed in mainstream education and Maltese society at large.

The third sentence looks at the field that the learner and the Unit work within. The emphasis on valuing each contributor and striving to involve all the stakeholders also further supports the holistic multilateral outlook that the unit takes towards

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the field. Even at this level, the statement revolves around the learner – or better still, the aim of success of the learner in his educational trajectory in Malta.

In the following section we will discuss how this mission statement is currently being implemented.

1. The Functions of the Unit

The MLU can be said to have two main functions: organisational and educational. These functions operate on the administrative, pedagogical and socio–cultural levels and can be seen to move along with the journey of the newcomer learner from arrival and into schooling. This paper will be looking into some aspects of the work of the MLU in the coming sections.

1.1. Registering for Schooling

The first part of the journey involves the registration of the newcomer for compulsory schooling in Malta. The Migrant Learners' Unit is involved in this process with the registration of Third Country Nationals for compulsory state schooling (age 5 –16). The process includes collaboration with the One Stop Shop front offices at MEDE to register the client's appointment and set a date for a one–to–one registration meeting. During the actual meeting, the application is filled, necessary documentation is verified and signatures of parents/guardians are done in the presence of the officer in charge. The registration office is in contact with other national entities such as Identity Malta Agency (IMA), the Office of the Commissioner for Refugees, the Agency for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers (AWAS), other Ministries, and the state Colleges, in order for that part of the registration processes to be concluded. Once all documentation is submitted and verified, the registration office informs the College in the area where the family resides that a new application has been submitted and passes on the necessary details to the family. The College will then make contact with the family so that the registration process can be finalised and the learner is informed which school he/she will be attending.

Having a dedicated office for the registration process of newcomer Third Country National parents has proved beneficial in that the family has a personal point of referral who does not only process the application but can coordinate with other service providers to answer queries that the family may have. The uncertainty that a newcomer family feels in approaching an institution, sometimes with the fear of language barriers, may be put to rest through the professional approach of the officers as well as the availability of the Community Liaison Team (CLT) who may be called in to assist in interpretation. The role of the CLT will be discussed in section 6 below.

1.2. Identifying Learners for Induction

Once the family has completed the registration for schooling process and the learner has been assigned a school, a representative of the school's senior leadership team usually meets the family and the learner for an introductory meeting. The school may note that the learner cannot as yet communicate in both English and Maltese and therefore informs the parent of the possibility for the child to follow an induction programme in order to gain competence in basic communicative Maltese and English which are the two languages of schooling in Malta.

In the case of primary school–age learners, the school informs the MLU that a learner would benefit from induction. It is then the MLU's remit to identify possible induction provision. In most cases, induction is held in the school where the learner is registered, what is referred to as the mother/home school. In some cases, the programme is held in a nearby school which houses induction classes and which then is referred to as a Hub.

1.3. The Induction Programme

The overarching aim of the Induction Programme is for the learner to receive the academic and social support necessary in order to access mainstream education. Primarily, such support aims at building the learner's proficiency of the languages of schooling, i.e. Maltese and English. It looks at sustaining the learner's efficacy to access and benefit from

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educational settings in Malta. It is a time-limited intervention where learners follow the programme which spans one scholastic year but are admitted to the programme at any time of the year. The programme is held at primary, middle and secondary level. The curriculum and frameworks for the programme are designed by curricular experts within the Directorate for Language and Assessment Programmes in collaboration with the MLU. The programmes are further supported with resources supplied by the MLU and other entities. Teacher training on the programmes is given regularly, usually at the start of each scholastic year.

Improving each learner's achievement is one of the aims of education. However, in such life-changing situations such as migration, and with the compounding risk factors that such a situation brings with it, the support for the wellbeing of the learner becomes paramount. It is thus that the MLU works with schools in their effort to build flexible and responsive learning environments in which the learner can feel safe, valued and respected. This is more evident in the MLU hubs which have children who are ethnically and linguistically diverse, coming from different localities and schools and entering schooling at all times of the year.

Staff of the MLU hold regular meetings with schools to discuss induction provision and progress. The MLU meets parents of the newcomer learners starting induction both in formal school-led meetings, as well as in one-to-one meetings where induction processes and progression is discussed and queries clarified.

These meetings serve not only as informative sessions for parents but also as an occasion to build bridges with the main stakeholders – the school and the family. They are an opportunity where each member can discuss, understand and learn more about experiences, insights, positioning, expectations and targets that both the school and the family have with regard to the educational experience of the child. Such meetings which are held throughout the scholastic year may also involve the MLU Community Liaison Staff and the Social Worker, who themselves come from a migrant background and who can build stronger bridges of understanding between

the school and the family for the benefit of the learner. The MLU links with existing services provided by the Colleges as necessary, especially the psycho–social team of professionals as well as the Student Services Directorate, amongst others.

Such collaboration has a healthy and sustainable effect both at organisation level within the school, as well as in school–community relations. School leaders refer to the MLU during the planning, executing and reporting of actions. The MLU shares its experiences and insights and supports school–led actions. This support is given both at college and school level. The MLU seeks to garner further training opportunities for schools in order to support the building of more inclusive practices.

2. Classroom Level

One can say that multicultural education is a multifaceted field with education for diversity at the heart of each action. At classroom level, the dimensions of curriculum, pedagogy and specific support will be discussed.

2.1. Curriculum

The emphasis on the learner's wellbeing has been aptly mentioned before. However, the induction processes enacted in class focus academically on the learning of both Maltese and English in a communicative style and methodology. A theme–based approach is enacted, which is related to activities and situations that the learner can use to communicate daily. All curricular areas which are taught in induction support the learning of Maltese and English which are the languages of schooling in Malta. Without mastering such languages, the learner would not be able to make it in the mainstream class nor would he be able to participate fully in social interaction with other peers who do not speak his home language. Thus, he would be at risk of social exclusion at a time when he is building new bonds of acquaintances, friendship and trust in the new setting he has found himself in and which he needs to navigate.

As an educator, the teacher in induction groups finds that

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the class is usually made up of learners coming from different nationalities. Some might have had prior schooling experiences while for others this is the first time they are in school and so lack the knowledge of norms, set-ups and procedures. The teacher may realise that learners may still be illiterate or else that their mother tongue tradition was more oriented towards oral traditions of learning. In both instances the learners are actually learning to read and write, sometimes in a different script to their home language, in a foreign language, in a new school here in Malta.

Navigating this milieu necessitates a flexible and responsive approach in teaching and learning. It necessitates flexible frameworks which can be adapted to each learner's needs, ways of thinking and methods of learning in different contexts. It necessitates first and foremost the understanding of where the learner is, as well as good planning and reflection on the side of the teacher. Educators teaching induction classes often find themselves challenged to reflect on their positioning and conceptualization, both on a personal and curricular level. They often become points of reference within the schools they are working in with regard to migrant learners. The MLU strives to support educators to acquire the necessary skills, competences and attitudes and looks at how both schools and families are viewing, working and benefitting from its services.

3. Social Life in School

Various researchers have noted the positive impact education has on the learner's social and emotional wellbeing (UNDP 2010; AIHW 2012). Social and emotional wellbeing has been defined by the AIHW as "the way a person thinks and feels about……" (8). Although one needs to state that education does not happen only in school and expectations and aspirations affect uptake, living through such dramatic changes as migration may have an impact on learning as well.

The learner may be trying to make sense of an 'alien' social life at school due to the lack of cultural understanding (Kang 2010). He may be using any of his prior experiences to understand his surroundings. The learner's actions during this phase may at times be seen as ambiguous by the school, if these actions are

not understood. Limited resources or time, language barriers and lack of trust may hinder stakeholders in becoming truly conscious of the aspirations and dreams that the learner and the family have and which would be a pity for educators not to learn about and interact with.

The induction classes present an opportunity where the learner finds stability and safety in such times of change. Educators help to build an environment of respect, trust and space where the children can work on their language skills but also communicate their feelings, ideas, worries and goals. They work on manners and empathy as ways of polishing communication skills. Promoting communication through play, and using different languages amongst others help the children feel understood by their peers and their educators. Learning about different perspectives, agreeing to disagree, and acquiring skills on how to resolve misunderstandings helps to build competences and aptitudes in learners which they will carry throughout their lives.

The induction programme helps the learners to maintain a positive self–image and negotiate school life well. Moreover, the induction process benefits from resources found in colleges which further support the learner should there be the need for further referral.

Training

The MLU looks at providing its teacher cohort with multiple ongoing opportunities for reflection, training and professional development. Some of the opportunities focus on teaching languages or academic subjects as in the case of Content and Language Integrated Learning approach (CLIL) training. Others focus on building respectful, safe and caring class communities and yet there are other opportunities where teachers can observe the field, reflect, try out and build resources on different aspects of the curriculum enacted.

The multidimensional aspect of the induction process necessitates that the MLU be in constant contact with classes in the different colleges in order to continually understand, identify needs and activate effective responses to them.

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Such response may involve training for educators. Most of the training that the MLU holds is open not only for school leaders and teachers who are in direct contact with learners in induction, but also to leadership members and educators in mainstream schools. The MLU shares such experiences as it looks at supporting all schools in relation to diversity and inclusion. It is fully aware that the induction is a focused support but it is also a process which enables the migrant learner to transition smoothly into mainstream education, benefit from it and achieve in his educational trajectory in Malta.

Nowadays Maltese state schools are more ethnically rich and it would be a disservice to an individual, class, school and community level not to recognise and work with this potential. Sometimes it is the fear of the 'unknown' or lack of understanding which undermines the trust which is needed for interactions to happen.

The Community Liaison Team

The Community Liaison Team (CLT) recruited within the MLU through the EU co-funded LLAPSI+ Project[8] works in a multidimensional way. The small team can be said to be "cultural brokers" (Jezewski 1990). Members of the CLT are themselves migrants, speak the languages of the parents they seek to engage with and know the backgrounds, beliefs and norms of newcomers coming from their country of origin well.

The CLT helps the parents/families to access information and opportunities in the education sector. The team helps the unit and the schools in their outreach initiatives and in understanding the families and the community. One may say that their work focuses on building relational trust on different levels:

> a. *Trust by the Unit and the schools in the parent/family which comes through better understanding;*
>
> b. *Trust by the family in the Unit/School because of better understanding and knowledge which may result in better access to educational opportunities for the family and so better empowerment of the family to act for the benefit of the child (Ishimaru 2016).*

[8] The Language Learning and Parental Support for Integration (LLAPSI +) Project is an EU co-funded project under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund.

The CLT helps the families to understand the norms and notions of roles and responsibilities within the Maltese education system. In engaging with families especially through their home language, they are directly linking to the parent as an adult. Thus, they avoid upsetting family dynamics and roles as in cases when either the child or another member of the family intervenes to translate or mediate (Orellana 2006).

The CLT meets families at registration stage where basic information is given and contacts established. Then the CLT is also invited by schools and colleges for activities such as parents' evenings, open school days, information sessions led by the school and training courses. The team also works on MLU–led activities which usually emanate from recommendations by newcomer parents, learners or schools.

The Unit also has a Facebook page through which the parents and schools can see the latest activities and events held in the different schools where the induction teachers are present. Through feedback gathered from the page, migrant families have noted that they feel part of what is happening in school. The page gives the opportunity for parents to comment and ask for further information.

A Word about Terminology

During this paper terms such as 'learner', 'families', and 'school' have been used. One must be aware that such terms may present a 'normalised' view of individuals and do not unveil the actual complexities within. In what Dyrness (2009) calls the era of good intentions, such terms may also be framing individuals and cohorts in a deficit light and so needing support. Our intention is not this. Although we are aware that we are not neutral, we see the induction process as a way for the learners to gain the required knowledge in order to be able to act. For us, it is an educational opportunity to build understanding of the factors and conditions surrounding the journey the learner will be making in Malta. On the side of the schools, our actions help to bring to the fore understanding for schools to evaluate actions before moving on to "support". The support given by MLU aims at reducing achievement gaps which may be present due to lack of understanding. It is supporting learners

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at risk of early school leaving since we believe that without a good understanding of the necessary skills and norms, the migrant learner will be disadvantaged. We believe that schools and society will be losing out if migrant learners do not achieve.

Conclusion

Much of the activities termed as multicultural are often thought of as addressing the needs of the migrant community with little or no emphasis on the role of and benefits to the hosting community. Most actions pander to the tune of social integration but in fact may avoid actions which discuss uneasy situations. Building a sense of belonging which comes from looking at how we welcome each other, what efforts are put in to gain understanding of each other, cannot be stressed enough. Without them, we may all be paying lip service to respect and care that is needed in order for each member to feel safe and enable everyone to collaborate and benefit.

Support for diversity in itself looks at individualised approaches and resources as more effective in certain circumstances. Ensuring that we understand the field well and safeguarding the learner not only within the host community but also vis–a–vis his/her family and cultures can be done by ensuring that sound bridging is done between the school and the home. Viewing the teaching and learning of languages and about cultures as important positive aspects especially in today's globalized world will enable each and every one of us to own the processes. It will enable us to build a dynamic, internationally–minded responsive community in an ever–changing world. On an individual level this can be seen in learners possessing 21st century skills. However, unless the field is seen as relevant by the stakeholders, little effect of true educational and social justice benefit can be harnessed.

In effect, when we are speaking about multicultural education, we are looking at both education that takes into account minorities, as well as education for all. Mutually understanding, inclusive education enables all learners to participate fully and actively. It enables all learners to view themselves positively and develop sound relationships with each other where the 'my' becomes the 'ours'. It should not be afraid to do away with

being 'politically correct' if this limits true inclusive actions. The confusion about labelling and single nationality identity can be resolved when one looks at the richness of each individual through multiculturalism that looks for points of interaction, and which values equity rather than equality (McLaren 1994). It is to be seen as a call for social justice through education.

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