

Chapter 2: Internationalisation and Multiculturalism in Schools

Internationalisation and Multiculturalism in Schools

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The increase in the population of foreigners residing in Malta and subsequently in ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity has had multiple implications, particularly with regard to the social composition of the community and its effect on social cohesion. The number of foreign minors has increased in the Maltese education system in the last few years, stressing the deep structural and socio-cultural changes in the Maltese society. This is a distinctively Maltese situation: this rate is not comparable with other countries where the "transformation" took a longer time. Another important aspect is the so-called polycentrism (i.e. the presence of a number of different nationalities within the classrooms). This is a peculiar element which intervenes in the daily life of schools, where managers and teachers have to develop strategies for managing a plethora of different socio-linguistic backgrounds in each classroom.

The school is one of the contexts that most reflects this diversity and can be identified as one of the privileged observatories to grasp, even if not in a complete and exhaustive manner, the changes a society is going through. Lack of guidance, knowledge and policy can be at the basis of the feeling of unease some teachers are experiencing while trying to accommodate differences or to develop inclusive practices. The centrality of the school in a debate on internationalization and multiculturalism is justified not only by its daily confrontation with foreign students, but also by its functions. In fact, the school, an important socialization agency, plays the role of transmitting cultural heritage, shaping and developing the human capital of the young generations. However, the expectations towards the scholastic institution and its capacity both as a trainer and promoter of equal opportunities are often disregarded.

In her article, **Debono** analyses how the increase in multiculturalism in schools in Malta has been experienced by pupils and teachers. She offers an interesting analysis of the term "multiculturalism" (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010; Kymlicka 2010) and of the implications of using it in the Maltese context. She presents multiculturalism in opposition to the assimilation model and highlights the differences between the terms 'multicultural society' that is a society that includes two or more cultural communities, and 'multiculturalism' or 'multiculturalist society' that implies a response to the

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cultural diversity found in a multicultural society (Parekh, 2006). As she mentions, “the term ‘multiculturalism’ in Malta is commonly used to refer to the increase in the number of people relocating to Malta from other countries, the so-called *żieda fil-multikulturaliżmu* (increase in multiculturalism)”. But around Europe the multiculturalist policies have shown their limits and failures, especially the increase of segregation of ethnic minorities and immigrants, forcing scholars to elaborate new reflections and politicians to adopt new policies and new models to promote social cohesion.

With ninety-seven different nationalities across the schooling levels in Malta, Malta’s National Curriculum Framework “places diversity as one of the core principles across the curriculum for all pupils to learn about minority groups, different languages and cultures” (Education section). But despite the intent, as shown by the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX 2015), Malta still lacks in terms of policies regarding “teacher training, support to schools in the face of the increasing phenomenon of multiculturalism, support to migrant pupils, such as no support for social integration, immigrant languages, cultures or parental outreach”. On the other side, as is happening in other countries, in Malta the increase in cultural diversity is bringing changes in the perception of the national identity, a process of rediscovery of some specific markers of identity like the local/national language, Maltese, and the religious affiliation, Catholic religion (Cassar 2001), and the creation of ethnic boundaries (Barth 1994) between ‘Maltese’ and ‘non-Maltese’. The process suggested to promote a more inclusive school and society is that of becoming co-creator of meaning, “not given but constantly redefined and reconstituted” (Parekh 2006: 153). But this is not a natural process and needs to be stimulated, and considered in a post-multiculturalism scenario that embraces diversity and citizenship, as Ms Debono suggests, through: extra-curricular activities aiming at dismantling the ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy and at improving inter-ethnic relations; multicultural syllabi that give more space to knowledge about different nationalities and ethnicities and ways how these cultural diversities can be expressed in the classroom; comprehensive religion lessons given to pupils according to their religious affiliation; multicultural training to teachers and converting ‘teacher training’ into ‘leader training’ which includes also Heads, Assistant Heads of Schools and Education Officers.

Ellul explores in his paper the importance of character education in a multicultural context. According to the author, "character education is a systematic approach that helps students improve their moral judgment and thinking. It helps students to acquire basic human values (...) to be inclusive and integrate different beliefs". As the research highlights, the school community together with family, peers, schools, society at large, and the media play an important role in character education, supporting every individual to explore one's values hierarchy, helping students to develop their character and flourish and fostering a culture of inclusion where everyone can feel safe and valued. As shown in the research results, a holistic and comprehensive character and values education, involving all the socialization agencies (family, school, the media) and using critical thinking and different narratives can promote empathy and respect towards others, no matter their nationality, culture or religion.

Schembri analyses in his article the process of reform, a "revolution" that the Maltese education system is experiencing since 2018 with the adoption of the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF) – a shift from a content-based to an outcomes-based teaching and learning. As he explains, the LOF has been 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). This curricular autonomy is extremely important in multicultural schools, like most of the schools in Malta nowadays. The article considers in particular the alignment of the LOF in the multicultural realities of primary schools in Malta, pointing out in the conclusion the need for a comprehensive strategy for a proper curricular alignment and rigorous training about multiculturalism and cultural diversity for teachers.

Lastly, **Gauci Sciberras** shifts the focus on adult learning and adult education, considering in particular adult learners of Chinese Mandarin language. If the first three papers focus more on the role of the school and the teachers, Ms Gauci Sciberras considers the point of view of the students and the factors that facilitate the process of learning a foreign language like Chinese. Motivation is key in the learning process, and motivation can have various reasons including the fact that

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knowing a foreign language like Chinese is perceived as a tool to have more and better international business opportunities. An interesting reflection considering multicultural schools could be to promote also multilingualism, and so valuing the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Maltese schools. In fact, language represents an important factor influencing educational outcomes. Language proficiency is of key importance for immigrant children, particularly if they want to succeed in their educational career. The language skills of their parents, especially of the mothers, influence the language knowledge of their children. Teachers more aware of the multilingualism and the linguistic background of the children can also help to provide the support they may need.

A common feature of educational policy in European immigration countries in the 1980s was their slow adaptation to the changing realities of education for immigrant pupils. Piecemeal engineering was the rule, and coherent sets of policy responses materialized only slowly. The life chances and future careers of immigrant youth are shaped both by resources from within their own families and communities, and by the opportunities the educational institutions in which they are enrolled offer. Educational institutions in particular determine to a large extent these opportunities. In day-to-day practice, the sharply contrasting national integration policies were confronted everywhere with the same basic needs of migrant children. In essence, this meant that all countries (at national policy-making level) launched language programs, compensatory programs and preparatory programs for both primary and secondary school.

The differences between countries lay more in the specific methods the authorities applied to deal with these issues and in the relative priority assigned to various aspects (facets). In some countries, for example, compensatory programs were integrated into school curricula, while other countries opted for separate programs and classes for migrant children.

To fight against this risk of school failure relevant policies and significant actions have always been observed at subnational levels. Local authorities involving schools, associations, NGOs and immigrants' communities to improve education and training of migrant youth have developed projects, initiatives and policies (Allemann-Ghionda 1997). This sector of policies

deals with the more general context of local integration policies. Some cities and districts may have been instituting action programmes for local integration policies in recent years, including the organisation of special integration offices within the municipal administration or the establishment of working groups and councils.

Despite the progress that has been made in the field of integration, policies in this area still contain contradictions, mostly with regards to a discrepancy between theory and practice. Regardless, a great number of projects and activities have been designed to favour the integration of foreign children and adolescents, especially at school.

Precisely in order to make effective the right to education and make the integration of migrant pupils easier, National, Regional and Local Authorities should establish programmes aimed at promoting and facilitating the reception and integration in the different social contexts, as well as to protect the pupils' original culture and language.

As the papers show, when we speak about multiculturalism in school and how to promote an inclusive school and society, we have to consider all the stakeholders involved:

- 1) the family, studies of which continue to detect its influence on school career opportunities (and subsequently work), analysing the resources that parents can make available to their children: economic, cultural and social;
- 2) the scholastic context, from its technical-structural characteristics to the qualification and training available for the teaching staff, and of the technical-administrative staff in multicultural contexts;
- 3) the students, of which not only the biographical characteristics are noted, but also the conditions and the problems that they live through, the consumption patterns, the lifestyles that are intertwined in the ways in which they face the scholastic experience.

Analysis and discussions of the difficulties students may encounter in their schooling and in school integration have long called for a multi-factorial analysis of the causes

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that contribute to defining failures up to situations of real abandonment and early school leaving. The influence of the context, as well as of the integration policies on the sense of belonging to the school as well as the society, is confirmed by the results of numerous studies (Eve and Ricucci 2009; Fravega and Queirola Palmas 2003; Natale et al. 2008; Ravecca 2009; Crul et al. 2012). Looking at the relationship between school and immigrant pupils, the most important lesson emerging from the European cases is the importance of supporting youth integration programmes concentrating on the following core areas: language acquisition, education, integration into the labour market, social counselling and social integration. Attention to migrant pupils, or those belonging to an ethnic minority, especially at lower secondary school level, has been acknowledged as crucial for the definition of integration paths. In fact, it is exactly at this level that the bases for subsequent schooling are built: without language support, an educational basis, etc. foreign minors arriving from abroad when 11 to 14 years old risk pursuing exclusively vocational education. Also, low educational and low economic capital of the parents have a negative effect on school careers.

It is important that the schools feel they are not alone in dealing with multiculturalism, diversity and integration, and with legislations and policies they are put in the condition to develop effective inclusive strategies, starting from the needs of the students and their family, the training of the school staff and teachers, and the creation of long-term plans and projects to develop meaningful and effective interventions.

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