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SOCIAL DIFFERENCE, CULTURAL ARBITRARY AND IDENTITY: AN ANALYSIS OF A NATIONAL CURRICULUM DOCUMENT IN A NON-SECULAR ENVIRONMENT

Introduction: curriculum, identity and difference

This chapter will focus on the idea of the curriculum as a 'selection from the cultures of society'. It will focus more specifically on the degree to which Malta's National Curriculum document (henceforth NMC)[1] reflects the contestation over matters concerning identity and difference.

We adopt an approach, throughout this essay, which highlights the relationship between *education* and *power* and therefore the politics of knowledge. In this respect, we go along with several writers (Apple, 1996; Apple and Beane, 1999 ; Beyer and Apple, 1998; Dei *et al*, 1997; Feinberg, 1998; Giroux, 1997; Pinar, 1997, 1998; Pinar *et al*, 1995) who conceive of the curriculum as a site of contestation. The curriculum is strongly connected with a process whereby different cultures are engaged in a contest for legitimacy. Established curricula accord legitimacy to different kinds of knowledge at the expense of others. They establish what Michael W. Apple calls 'Official Knowledge' (Apple, 1993a, 1993b). They give legitimacy to particular forms of cultural production and are caught up in the politics of knowledge and representation. We feel that it is pertinent for us to ask: in whose interest has the 'selection from the cultures of society' been made? Whose voices and cultural preferences - cultural arbitrary - does the National Curriculum represent? It would also be appropriate to ask: Who participates in the process of curriculum development and who doesn't?

We feel that these questions are central to any critique that is inspired by a commitment to school knowledges which build upon the 'cultural resources' that schooling communities already possess. This entails "conversations between cultures" through which different cultural voices are engaged with critically (Quicke, 1999, p. 91). It also entails reaching out for knowledges from traditionally subordinated groups and therefore giving " voice to unrealized possibilities" (Giroux and Simon, 1989, p. 25). Slattery (1995) considers this urgent:

> If the curriculum ignores sedimented preceptors, identity formation, and social construction and suppresses individual visions and dreams in the content and context of education, and if individuals are constantly required to conform to someone else's worldview, then either dreams will be repressed, hope will be suppressed, people will incorporate the other's visions of themselves into their own self-understanding, and/or they will lash out in anger against those systems that exclude their voice (p. 135)

A National curriculum in Malta

The questions we posed, regarding the cultural arbitrary reflected in curricula, feature prominently in our evaluation of the National Curriculum document introduced in December 1999 and which replaced the old curriculum document brought into being as a result of the Education Act of 1988. The above concerns were at the heart of our critique of the old curriculum document (Borg *et al.*, 1995).

Our blend of social analyses focused, for the most part, on issues concerning difference and identity. It also focused on the process of development of the old curriculum document itself, examining the extent to which it was democratic. Our scathing criticism of this document was made on the grounds that the process was not participatory and entailed a top-to-bottom approach, which reflected the system of centralization that has, for years, been a characteristic of the Maltese educational system. These criticisms echoed other reactions to the 1989 NMC document (see Borg, 1991; Wain, 1991).

In May 1987, the Nationalist Party won the general elections in Malta. A year later, the government passed a comprehensive Education Act through parliament, remarkably coinciding with similar legislation in Britain, which provided the impetus to the development of a National Minimum Curriculum governing both state and non-state educational sectors in the country.

It was pointed out that a lot of the language in this document reflected an all pervasive New Right discourse in education, typical of other national curricula which had been introduced in such countries as Britain and the US. Reference was and continues to be made, in this context, to the literature dealing with such standardized curricula both at the provincial and national levels in a number of countries (cf. for example, Apple, 1993, 1996; Ball, 1990; Demaine, 1988; Edwards and Whitty, 1992; ; Harrison and Kachur, 1998; Lawton and Chitty, 1988; Roberts, 1997; Wayne Ross, 2000).

Class, 'race', gender and disability

Our critique centered, among other things, on the NMC's 'politics of absence' with respect to class, 'race',[2] gender and disability, a critique endorsed by Darmanin (1993, p. 154) with respect to an earlier draft of the paper.[3]

Regarding class, it was pointed out that the 1989 NMC document promoted the idea of a 'meritocratic' system, which, it was argued, served its purpose in making the individual place the blame for failure on herself or himself, "rather than on a selective process through which people are systematically channelled into the stratified slots within the labour market, by and large, on the basis of their social location (including gender and race)." (Borg *et al*, 1995, p. 347)

Much of the criticism of the old NMC document, in relation to class, focused on the language question, an important question in a number of postcolonial states. Reading through the primary section of the 1989 NMC document, one obtains the false impression that Maltese, the native language, and English, the language of the last colonizers, which is spoken freely in middle class homes, are given equal importance in our educational system. This may be the case on paper but our own experience as teachers within the Maltese state school system suggests otherwise. English remains the dominant medium of instruction and assessment throughout the entire educational system and therefore ensures the reproduction of that class of Maltese society which, using Bourdieu's term, has the required 'cultural capital' to make effective use of the language and, consequently, the educational system itself.

It was, furthermore, pointed out that there was next to nothing in the NMC document which dealt with the issue of streaming and selectivity in our schooling system.   The issue of streaming remains a contentious one in the debate about Maltese education, as this chapter will show.

Furthermore, it was pointed out that the NMC document testifies to the inherently patriarchal and gender-biased nature of the Maltese educational system, adequate analysis of which, on gender grounds, is provided in a series of papers by Mary Darmanin (see, for example, Darmanin, 1991; 1992; 1997). This criticism is echoed and elaborated on in the NMC-follow up document on 'Gender in the NMC' (Mizzi et al, 2000, p. 3) where it is stated that "the curriculum currently in place (*the old curriculum* – our insertion), as in other countries about twenty years ago, makes girls and women invisible, derogates them or shows their insignificance when girls and women are included. The… male generic is used to account for human experience."

The 1989 NMC document was also criticized for suggesting nothing to change the situation whereby "active participation in the social life is still a male domain. This differentiation between Maltese men and women is reflected in the tracking of Maltese girls into traditionally 'female' options, such as foreign languages, secretarial skills, and 'needlework' (Darmanin, 1991)." (Borg *et al*, 1995, 348)

The 1995 paper also addressed the contentious issue of subject choice and the way such 'choices' are conditioned by educational structures that have traditionally operated against the interest of girls. This issue was raised once more in the recent reaction to the gender politics of the 1999 National Curriculum document (Mizzi et al, 2000, p.3), to which this chapter returns later.

Equally scathing was the criticism of the old NMC document on the grounds of 'race' and ethnic representation. The 1989 NMC document was denounced for being eurocentric. It was pointed out that the most revealing example of this eurocentrism was provided by the area of sixth form studies known as 'Systems of Knowledge', an area which was criticized for a selection which, remarkably in synch with the ideas of Alan Bloom and E. D. Hirsch, exalted the virtues of white male and eurocentric writers to the detriment of women , black and Arab writers. (Borg *et al*, 1995, p. 350).

The other section, in the discussion on social difference, which featured in the critique of the 1989 NMC document, focused on 'Disability' and the lack of visibility of disabled students. One of the harshest points of criticism of the 1989 NMC document was that one of its assumptions

> is that this curriculum does not apply to those students with mental disabilities.
> In the second section of the NMC, the author/s refer/s to 'the whole mass of
> students who are not mentally handicapped (*sic*.)' …as the students for whom the

curriculum was written. It is assumed that all students who have any mental disability, cannot benefit from any part of the NMC…We assume that, since they are not mentioned at all, they(disabled students) are being included with the rest of the students. That which is prescribed for able-bodied students is also applicable to students with physical disabilities. The text of the NMC simply renders people with physical disabilities invisible (Borg et al, 1995, pp. 351, 352).

The foregoing is intended to provide some indication (a very selective one) of the exclusive nature of the old curriculum document.

Equity and entitlement

Criticisms such as these, and many others which appeared in papers in policy sociology (Darmanin, 1993) as well as in the national press, reflected a widespread concern regarding the current state of the Maltese educational system. On the 19th August, 1994, a Consultative Committee on Education was set up by Minister of Education, Michael Falzon, to provide a review of and suggest ways of reforming the educational system (Wain *et al*, 1995, p. 4).

A 57 page report (Wain *et al*, 1995) was subsequently produced by the Commission. It focused on the issue of democratizing the educational system, bearing in mind the key issues of class, gender and disability, with next to no reference made to the issue of 'race' and ethnicity. The report placed emphasis on the need to "Reconceptualise education in terms of outcomes", the term 'outcomes' being explained as "the successful and effective learning by all students" of that to which they are "entitled." (Wain et al, 1995, p. 5). The four key principles (4Es) were those *of "Entitlement, Effectiveness, Equity and Economy".* 'Equity' was the one key term which embraced the paper's clear option for an education in favor of subaltern social groups.

By equity we are not referencing 'sameness', or even 'equal resourcing for all.' Students will bring different intellectual, cultural, social and financial resources to the school, and

when we ignore these differences hoping to conjure away distinctions, by treating all students equally, we inadvertently reinforce these same differences, and create new ones along the way. (Wain, et al, 1995, p. 9).

Revamping the 1989 curriculum: affirming social justice and solidarity

The publication of this document is officially recognized as the first step in the long process of reviewing, or more appropriately, revamping, the National Minimum Curriculum document. (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 13). In 1996, the Minister of Education called for this 'review' to begin and it was to entail a "broad process of consultation involving the social partners and the general public." (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 17).   A fourteen member Strategy Building Team was set up comprising representatives of a number of bodies (Ministry of Education, 1999, p.17). It is reported that the "Committee engaged in a broad and continuous process of consultation.[4] It sent out around 330 formal invitations for submissions and the invitation was subsequently extended to the general public at a press conference. The feedback received from around 300 individuals was very encouraging." (Ministry of Education 1999, p.18).

The process of analysis and vetting of each written submission by the Team led to the publication of a draft document in the Maltese language. On April 2, 1998, 8,000 copies of this document were distributed among the partners. It was the subject of much debate in political circles, the media and meetings involving the different stakeholders in education.

The tenor of the draft document was quite radical. The role of curriculum and education specialists, with an ethical commitment to traditionally subordinated groups, was key in the inclusion of contentious issues on the agenda for debate.

The steering Committee managed to include important proposals, for the democratization of education, in the first draft of the NMC. This draft was intended to serve as a working document to generate further debate prior to the publication of the final document. These proposals included: de-streaming at the primary level, the elimination of the 11+ exam and the comprehensivization of secondary education. (Vella et al, 1998, pp. 17, 18). This process, intended initially for the state school system, was to commence in the scholastic year 2002 - 2003 (Vella et al, 1998, p. 18). It was also stated that discussions, focusing on the impact of the proposed politics of inclusion on the entire Maltese educational system, should be held with the religious and private school authorities (Vella *et al*, 1998, p.18).

The 1998 draft also emphasized an acknowledgement of the broad range of sexual identities, an open attitude towards sexuality and respect for people of different sexual identity (Vella *et al*, 1998, pp. 42). It also called for a new assessment policy with greater emphasis placed on formative assessment. All these ideas are developed within the framework of a proposed inclusive educational system. It was a document which drew sustenance from the 1995 *Tomorrow's Schools* report, except for the fact that, with regard to gender, the term 'equality,' was surprisingly preferred to 'equity', a point to which this chapter returns since it remains one of the great lacunae of the present NMC document.

The final document

The 21-month long process of consultation leading to the final document of the NMC was marked by a fierce debate on some of the foregoing issues. The synthesis of the national debate was a final document that recognizes the importance of full

inclusion. It also adopts the concept of entitlement as the guiding principle for the

distribution of and access to resources:

> …the educational community must remain committed to social justice and invest most in those children who for different reasons, risk repeating the school year, being absent from school, becoming school 'drop-outs' or completing their schooling period lacking the necessary skills and with low self-esteem. (Ministry of Education, 1999, p.36).

Informed by a commitment to democracy and social justice, besides placing the

emphasis on outcomes, the new NMC document recognizes location, identity and

difference as fundamental principles. The document challenges the concept of the

"whole mass of students" of the old Curriculum document by recognizing the

importance of promoting a school culture characterized by "individual and social

differences [which] enables and requires a pedagogy based on respect for and celebration

of difference" (Ministry of Education, 1999, p.30). The 'politics of absence' that marked

the 1989 attempt at curriculum development, is replaced by an overt struggle to

foreground gender 'equality', critical citizenship, multiculturalism, sexuality education,

moral education and genuine inclusion.

Negotiation and compromise: de-streaming

Despite the fore-grounding of these important elements for the democratization

of education in Malta, several compromises had to be made with respect to some of the

issues raised in the *Tomorrow's Schools* and the Draft NMC documents. The term

'equity' was one of the major casualties. Although the idea of equity is reflected in such

statements as the one, just quoted (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 36), affirming the

NMC's commitment to social justice and to investing in those who are most 'at risk', the

gender issue is, alas, couched in terms of equality (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 54).

The follow up document, provided by the 'Gender in the NMC' Committee, criticizes the

use of the term 'equality' in the final document:

> The stronger principle of equity (rather than equality) is needed because this obliges educators to ensure that each young person is properly engaged in the curriculum and will learn to a degree where there will be sameness of outcome though not necessarily of process. (Mizzi et al, 2000, p. 372)

In its document, the 'Gender in the NMC' Committee provides important guidelines for the

promotion of gender equity in the Maltese educational system, grounded in a detailed critique

focusing on such issues as school uniforms (they criticize the 'policing of the girls' body' which

takes the form of misplaced regulation of girls' wearing of skirts when it is the harassing boys who

should be regulated), physical education and sport (important sites for the construction of different

masculinities and femininities, with one of the recommendations being that there should be an

inclusive co-education PE policy), sexual harassment (the Committee argues for greater sensitivity

to the effects of "hegemonic masculine school cultures" and for "a no-tolerance approach") and

funding and resources (the Committee calls for the Education Division to have a gender equitable

policy in this regard and for school council members and Heads to view their spending from an

equity perspective) (Mizzi et al, 2000, pp.378-380).

> The Committee redefines Principle 11 as Gender Equity which entails:
>
> an equal chance for learning for females and males; equitable opportunities to learn subjects and prepare for future education, jobs, careers and civic/political involvement; no limits on expectations or outcomes due to gender; equal encouragement for both females and males to develop, achieve, earn and thrive; equitable treatment of male and female students; a process that builds peaceful and respectful relationships among females and males." (Mizzi, et al, 2000, p.373)

This, however, was not the only serious compromise made. The Draft document's advocacy of de-streaming at primary level, comprehensivization of secondary education and the elimination of the selective 11+ exam was obviously regarded as too radical. The fear of such changes could have possibly been caused by memories of the policy of comprehensivization, introduced, in the state school system, by the Labor Government in the 70s. The policy of general comprehensivization of the Maltese educational system had been advocated by the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT). Its implementation in the State sector was, however, decried by this same organization for the lack of preparation which characterized such a drastic change. The 1998 draft document, advocating the policies of de-streaming and comprehensivization, was signed by the MUT President, John Bencini. He commented, in a newspaper interview, that:

> The major change envisaged in the draft of the curriculum is a push towards what we call "comprehensive education." Another change would be the phasing out of streaming in the primary schools. These are radical but necessary changes (Delia, 1998, p.15)

The above comment is in keeping with the tradition of his union being against selectivity in education. The suspicion, though, is that this stance is rarely echoed by many teachers (see Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 36). As Sultana remarks: "…the MUT is held hostage by its own conservative membership base." (p. 421)

Such radical changes are equally detested by the majority of parents. In a research project, supervised by one of the authors, 1140 parents of children attending Year 1 - Year 3 primary classes and 1180 parents of children attending Year 4 - Year 6 primary classes answered a questionnaire which included a section on streaming. 80% and 79% respectively answered that streaming constitutes a just practice with primary school children (Duca, *et al*, 1999). Some of the

reasons put forward by parents, to justify their 'dismay and horror', are best exemplified in this

letter written to the local press by a group of vociferous parents:

> In Utopia, equality is possible, in reality it is not! The irony of the situation is that with the dismantling of the junior lyceums (*grammar schools*), it will be the children most in need of help who will be most adversely affected. Even though streaming does not exist in the first four years of primary education, even very dedicated and qualified teachers are often unable to cope with overcrowded (*usually there are 30 children in a class*) mixed ability classes. The result is that children who have not grasped even the basics merely lag further and further behind. Sadly streaming must always be a reality in state schools due to the tremendous difference in social and educational backgrounds of the children.[5]

Sensing a strong reaction to the draft document's proposed changes, the then Labor

Minister of Education, Evarist Bartolo, addressed the issue, in front of the press, to allay fears

concerning de-streaming and comprehensivization.[6] The politician had sensed the mood of the

electorate and acted swiftly. This action on the Minister's part is open to many interpretations.   In

response to a question concerning " the latest status on the new National Curriculum", the MUT

President stated:

> There was supposed to be a national debate about the draft. With all due respect to the Minister of Education, I feel that some comments he made during the press conference launching the draft might have pre-empted a healthy and open debate which one anticipated with interest. I have every respect for the Minister, but I must say that, because of pressure he might have been subjected to, he committed himself not to introduce a mixed ability system. He also disclosed that the government does not plan to go for a comprehensive system of education. I feel that these matters are at the heart of the draft. I wish that if the Minister had something to say, he should have waited until others had their say. (Delia, 1998, p. 15)

Others would go along with Minister Bartolo's official version that the process of de-

streaming should be introduced gradually and any drastic and sudden changes in this regard can

only undermine popular support for the curriculum document and the much-augured reforms it is

intended to introduce. In a speech given to participants at a seminar organized by the Association

of School Councils on 20, July, 1999, Evarist Bartolo, then Opposition spokesperson on education,

was reported, by the Labor press, as saying:

> *In education it is better to move slowly and on the basis of national agreement than purport to go fast without national consensus.[7]*

This position was also shared by the present Minister of Education, Louis Galea, when the

latter was Opposition Education spokesperson. An Editorial in a leading Maltese English

Language daily states:

> We already know that Dr. Galea, like Mr Bartolo before him, is opposed to the draft's recommendation that comprehensive schools be introduced…[and] it is heartening to see that on this same topic, at least, there appears to be agreement between the two main political parties. [8]

In its affirmation of its commitment to "An Inclusive Education", the final NMC document,

published under a Nationalist government, states:

> The reactions received by the Minister of Education, with respect to the draft Curriculum, clearly indicate that teachers do not feel sufficiently prepared and supported to address this great challenge. Therefore, while this document acknowledges the principle of inclusion as the one which should be followed throughout the Maltese educational system, the forthcoming years should be considered a transitional period. During this period, one should lay the necessary educational infrastructure, commence the necessary preparation of teachers for such a change and carry out an educational campaign among parents intended to bring about a change in the social perception of education. (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 36).

It was not only teachers and parents who expressed their opposition to de-streaming and

comprehensivization. The Maltese Episcopal Conference, through its Secretariat for Catholic

Education and Culture, argued against de-streaming. It stated that, given the NMC's

acknowledgement that students learn through different means, pass through different phases of

development and develop at different levels, " then we just cannot cater for all in one system of

education (comprehensive system). This would create, it seems to me, a great injustice."[9]

The position taken by this important body warrants serious consideration, given that the Church, although running non fee paying schools and casting lots for the selection of children into its primary school classes (exceptions are however made for those whose siblings already attend the school in question), still promotes a selective system, based on meritocracy, at the secondary and sixth form levels. The above quote indicates a reluctance, at least by the Secretariat, to dismantle this selective system. While proposing the elimination of the state school sector's 11+ exam, this draft document did not explicitly propose a similar move with respect to the Church's common entrance exam for its secondary schools.

If the Draft's proposals were realized, we could have faced, certainly in the short term, the possible co-existence of a comprehensive state school system alongside the Church's and private sector's selective systems (a meritocratic secondary school system in the Church's case and a fee paying system in the case of private schools). A similar co-existence, introduced in the 70s and terminated, through the introduction of state-run Junior Lyceums in the early 80s, is often judged to have sparked off an exodus of pupils towards the Church-private sectors (church schools were fee paying schools at the time), thus undermining the development of a national socially inclusive educational system. One can only surmise whether these concerns weighed heavily on the Labor Minister of Education's decision, in 1998, to address the press and allay parents' and teachers' fears regarding the draft NMC document's proposed introduction of comprehensivization in the state sector.

Language and social differentiation

One of the most contentious issues, with respect to social differentiation on the basis of class and ethnic identity (including the identity of returned migrants), is certainly that of language, as

indicated in the critique of the old 1989 NMC document. The present NMC document calls for the

implementation of a "policy of bilingualism"

> With regard to the official languages, all schools must adopt the policy of using
> two languages. Through its development plan, every school must specify the
> linguistic strategy which it will adopt over a period of time. (Ministry of
> Education, 1999, p. 79)

While leaving the choice of language policy in the hands of schools, the NMC document

encourages, rather arbitrarily, teachers at primary level to use English when teaching English,

Mathematics, Science and Technology. Code switching is also encouraged especially when the use

of English poses difficulties. (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 79).

Issues concerning language in postcolonial contexts are highly complex. Nevertheless, these

language issues are central to the process of social selection which occurs through the filter of the

public education system.   The issue of language in such contexts brings to mind the situation

concerning a large number of working class pupils in Maltese state schools who fail their Math

exams, at primary level, not because they are weak at Math but simply because of their lack of

proficiency in the English language. One must remember that these exams often determine what type

of secondary schooling pupils will follow in the still highly selective Maltese educational system.

One of us has had first hand experience of teaching working class pupils in a primary school.   This

experience indicates that these pupils often do well at Math in the classroom when concepts are

explained to them in Maltese, or possibly through the process of "code switching" encouraged by

the new National Curriculum document. They however falter when faced with test papers written in

the English Language. The NMC document addresses the issue of language with respect to the

teaching-learning classroom process. It does not, however, address the language question within the

context of assessment, although the new NMC's insistence on greater formative assessment can

prove beneficial in this regard.

A non-secular environment

There are other points, concerning social difference, that are raised by the new NMC

document. While there are sections which deal with religious education, in a country where

Catholicism is the dominant religion and is entrenched in the constitution, there is constant

recognition of the interests and needs of those who do not profess this religion. In fact, the headings

concerning religious education in the Catholic faith come with the proviso : "(for those who

believe)," although there is some inconsistency regarding the inclusion of this proviso in different

parts of the curriculum. There is also emphasis placed on the need to provide pupils, who do not

profess the Catholic faith, with meaningful and productive activities during the time allotted to

religious education:

> Those children of parents who object to their receiving teaching and education in the
> Catholic Religion should be given a formation in universal moral values which provide the
> foundation for civil conviviality. The time devoted to the teaching of Religion or the
> celebration of a religious event should be used by these pupils for other educational work.
> (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 83)

There is, however, a glaring contradictory statement, in this regard, to be found elsewhere in

the document, given this document's commitment to an inclusive education and a "celebration of

difference." In the section on 'Educational Objectives', in the first part of the document, we come

across the totalizing statement that students are to "acquire knowledge and information" in "the

religion of the Maltese people". (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 50). The Maltese people are here,

and elsewhere, conceived of as an undifferentiated mass, a unitary subject, with one belief system.

Similar contradictory statements concern the concept of parenthood found in the NMC document.

In the section on 'socialisation and values' we come across the assertion that

> From its early stages, education should affirm the value of the Maltese family that is adapting itself to different ways of life…One of the important aims of education should be the preparation and sound formation for marriage and family life. The National Minimum Curriculum recognises that knowledge of Religion is in itself essential for the moral and spiritual development of a society around values that lie at the heart o f social conviviality and understanding." (Ministry of Education, 1999,p. 24).

Such a definition of the family as "the core social unit" (adapted from Apple, 2000, p. 66), with its implications for parenthood, is a conventional one that reflects the hegemonic Catholic worldview. This definition excludes single parents and guardians, although there is one reference to 'guardian' in the document (see p. 31), and affirms the normalizing discourse of heterosexuality.

> These totalizing statements contradict such bold affirmations as:

> In a democratic society, all voices are not only heard but also respected. The educational community must ensure equality of access to the educational system without discrimination on the grounds of ability, gender, religion, race or socio-cultural and economic background. The educational process should cultivate within students a sense of social justice and solidarity. (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 25).

> With regard to the NMC document's objectives, listed under 'Religious

Education' (Ministry of Education, 1999, pp. 52 - 54), one can follow Slattery's matrix in describing the religious program in question as *pre-modern*. Within the pre-modern paradigm, the theological text is perceived as " the primary curriculum for schooling and cultural initiation" (Slattery, 1995, p. 83).

Anti-racist education and multi-ethnic conviviality

The sections on religious education emphasize the need for the provision of knowledge of other religions, a point stressed throughout the document (see Ministry of Education, 1999, pp. 50

and 52). The need to learn about different religions, especially the three great monotheistic

religions of the Mediterranean, is being stressed nowadays in the literature on multi-ethnic relations

in this part of the world (see Pampanini, 2000

 The issue of multi-ethnic relations is increasingly become a very important one in the

country, as this book's final two chapters will underscore. Very urgent is the need for an anti-racist

agenda in education (Dei, 1997) in Malta, comprising knowledge of and respect for the traditions,

religious and non-religious, of those who have traditionally constituted the 'other'; we will discuss

this issue in the last two chapters.

It is heartening to note that the NMC acknowledges this in several parts of the

published document. This is in fact regarded as central to its inclusive politics:

> In a society that is increasingly becoming multi-cultural, the educational system
> should enable students to develop a sense of respect, co-operation and solidarity
> among cultures (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 24).

Even the sections on religious education stress the need for " accepting, understanding, and

making dialogue with those who profess a different faith or adopt a different lifestyle.*"* (Ministry of

Education, 1999, p. 53). Perhaps for the first time in Malta's educational history, we come across

two documents (the draft NMC and the final version) which place on the agenda the issue of multi-

ethnic solidarity and conviviality, although the reference to 'different lifestyle' has ramifications

also for sexual orientation. This is quite a development in a country that has hitherto discussed the

issue of social difference and education primarily in terms of class, gender and disability.

Evidence of this is provided by the fact that the issue of ' race' and ethnicity rarely features in

anthologies of education in Malta. The lack of importance given to 'race' and ethnicity issues in

Maltese education can be seen from the fact that, despite the new Curriculum document's references

to an inclusive society, characterized by social (including ethnic) difference, there was no group

focusing on these issues among the working groups set up to start the process of implementing the

new NMC document. There were follow up papers on 'gender' and 'disability' but not on race and

ethnicity.

The politics of representation

The written text of this document is to be applauded for placing this issue and that of sexual

orientation on the agenda (the text on sexuality, provided in the draft document, has practically

remained intact in the final version). And yet the laudable efforts involved are somewhat

undermined by the politics of visual representation that one comes across in this document. The

illustrations are hardly in synch with the politics of much of the text. The only times we are

presented with illustrations of an ethnically mixed group of pupils are on pages 24, 25 and 30 where

the issues of 'Respect for Diversity' and 'Multiculturalism'[10] are dealt with. The rest of the

illustrations do not share the same ethnic mix. The present reality of a society which is increasingly

becoming multi-ethnic is given only a *token* representation. Furthermore, the illustration on the front

cover, depicting a girl with fair features, projects the colonial and idealized Northern image of

blonde white femininity (hooks, 1994, p. 19).

Inclusive education and disability

A similar emphasis on the politics of representation would be important when

discussing the issue of disability. Once again, the illustrations provided, especially those

concerning classroom settings, are hardly inclusive in this respect. Children with visible

disabilities are invisible in the majority of the illustrations involved, except for the one

page where there is a reference to alternative forms of communication (Ministry of

Education, 1999, p. 67) - another form of *tokenism*. The lack of representation of visibly

disabled students elsewhere is surprising, given their rightful presence in many of our

classrooms as a result of the politics of 'inclusion' that has been in place for quite some

time, supported by the availability of trained and untrained facilitators.   The term

'inclusive' has a more restricted meaning in this context than that intended by the

present NMC document. 'Inclusive' is used here in the restricted sense of students with

Special Educational Needs. As a matter of fact, there are 490 students attending state

schools under this 'Inclusive System'. In 2000, there were 124 students attending Church

schools under this system, while the number of students who attended special schools

was gradually diminishing, amounting to 275 at the time. (Bartolo, P et al, 2000, p.2).

The illustrations therefore continue to contradict the politics of the NMC document,

especially the following principle around which the Working Group on 'Inclusive

Education' developed their follow up implementation document (Bartolo, P et al, 2000,

p. 1):

> Society has a moral responsibility to affirm diversity, if it believes in the
> broadening of democratic boundaries, in the fostering of a participatory culture,
> in the defence of the basic rights of children, in the constant struggle against all
> those factors that prevent the students' different abilities from being brought to
> fruition and in the safeguarding and strengthening of our country's achievements
> in the social and cultural fields. (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 36)

Because of the importance being attached to the issue of disability in the Maltese

educational system, it is somewhat surprising to find that the present NMC document's

provision in this regard does not extend beyond generalized principles concerning

inclusion and different forms of communication. It is unfortunate that it did not provide

more specific guidelines for policy in this regard. These guidelines could have been on

the lines of the more explicit ones provided with respect to the gender issue. The

Document refers to different sites which can be availed of for educational purposes (eg.

museums, archaeological sites, cultural centers, sport centers) and yet one should bear in

mind that many of these sites are inaccessible or partially accessible to the mobility

impaired (Borg and Mayo, 2000; see chapter 5 in this volume).

Of course, the lack of specific consideration of this issue is more than

compensated for by a very detailed document on the issue of disability provided by the

working group which produced the follow up implementation document (Bartolo et al,

2000). It is a document which advocates, among other things, replacing the streaming

mentality with more inclusive attitudes and practices; partnerships for decision making

which involve teachers, facilitators and parents; the need for teachers to understand the

impact of disability and how barriers can be surmounted; educational programs for

educators in inclusive principles, attitudes, knowledge and practice. (Bartolo et al, 2000,

pp. 6- 13).

 Lessons from Malta's NMC document

The foregoing indicates that matters concerning the most important forms of

social difference are accorded due importance in the present NMC document. There are

early signs that they will continue to be given such importance in the process of

implementation. The 2000 National Conference (Giordmaina, 2001), comprising the

many different 'follow up' papers intended to provide guidelines for the NMC's

implementation process, attested to this. One must also tread with caution here given

that we are focusing on what is, at present, simply a document. Much depends on the

process of actual realization, 'reinvention' - hence not a 'curriculum of fact' (Young,

1998, pp. 24 - 27) - and development of this document within schools and other

educational sites. Much will depend, in this respect, on the planned 'training'

workshops, in-service courses and the much recommended school based curriculum

development process. Much also depends on the extent to which all these help develop

what Michael F. D. Young (1998) calls " 'communities of practice' consisting of

teachers and academics "(p. 32) and, we would add, educational administrators and other

stakeholders in education.

 The overriding concept at this conference, which best captures the main theme of

the present NMC document, was that of an inclusive education, based, in a number of

instances, on what Feinberg (1998) would regard as 'robust recognition' of different

forms of social difference (p. 169). One notices an attempt, in the Draft version, to take

on board some of the standpoints of those who have traditionally been subordinated

(Connell, 1992) and some of these standpoints have had a bearing on the final document.

 Of course, the contradictory statements that abound throughout the present NMC

document, particularly the glaring examples of totalizing discourse pointed out earlier

and which were absent from the draft document, underline the problematic nature of the

liberal notion of 'consensus politics' predicated on a specific notion of 'inclusion.' The

term is, of course, used, here, in the specific sense of including different and

contradictory ideological perspectives.

One also notes that, as far as the participation of different interest groups is concerned, the process of visible, representative involvement in curricular development was limited to 'constituted bodies' (eg. the Malta Union of Teachers, the Commission for the Advancement of Women, the Commission of Persons with a Disability), in short those bodies which operate within the State corporatist framework. It would be interesting to see whether other organizations, representing the voices of traditionally subaltern groups, who do not operate within this framework, would be allowed to participate formally in the process of national curriculum reform. We would mention, as an example, here, the Gay Rights Movement. Would such an organisation be formally invited to participate in this process? Questions that arise from the Maltese case study include: who participates in State initiated processes of educational reform attempting to be inclusive in terms of 'race', gender, class and disability? Does formal participation occur only within the context of corporatist strategy? Should the move to call for a nation-wide response to the Draft, made during a press conference, be regarded as a recognition of the limitations of such a process?

Given its importance in this country, the issue of religion warrants much comment. It is obvious that the new NMC document as well as some of the criticisms leveled at the old one draw on international experiences and literature in the area of 'learning, identity and difference.' It would, however, be worth recalling Freire's dictum, reproduced in the book's introduction, that experiments cannot be transplanted but must be reinvented. The process of reinvention is conditioned by the context in which it takes place. This chapter is intended to shed some light on the nature of curricular reform being advocated in a specific context. It is concerned with showing

the way this process of reform was conditioned by the historically contingent

characteristics of the context in question.

The context in which this process of change is being advocated is one

characterized by a non-secular environment, typical of the part of the world in which we

both live, and by the hegemony of a particular belief system which is entrenched in the

Maltese constitution - the Roman Catholic faith. This inevitably has a bearing on the

Maltese curriculum (see Borg, 1995). As Foucault would argue, however, there can be

no power without resistance. The Catholic Church's hegemonic presence has been

contested and continues to be contested in the process of curriculum reform, as evinced

by the different provisos added to the sections on religious education, in the present

NMC document, and the replacement of religious education by moral development in

the draft document.   The present Minister of Education, Louis Galea, however, provides

us with an indication of the strength of this particular hegemonic presence. He is

reported to have stated, during a parliamentary debate on the National Curriculum, that:

> … the original draft did not include anything about the teaching of religion and
> this has now been corrected. The majority of the Maltese are practising Catholics
> and there are constitutional and contractual obligations on the government to
> respect Malta's Catholic identity. Anyone who wants to get to know Malta's
> identity must also understand that the Catholic faith is an essential component of
> this identity.[11]

It is more likely that one discovers greater opportunities for the affirmation of

different identities in settings which are characterized by a spirit of secularization than

in settings wherein, for instance, a particular religious culture is hegemonic (ex.

Catholicism in Malta, Islam in a number of Arab countries, Pakistan, Turkey etc.,

Orthodoxy in Greece). In non-secularized contexts, there are severe limits to the degree

of inclusionary politics that can occur. Granted, discrimination, in the form of racism ,

homophobia and sexism, is also a feature of secularized contexts, including Western

contexts. It is common knowledge and indeed a truism, however, that certain countries

lag behind others with respect to the acquisition, by traditionally marginalized groups, of

what would generally be regarded, in other countries, as 'taken for granted' rights. It is

against the background of a non-secularized environment that the process of curricular

change is taking place. As the contrast with the 1989 Maltese NMC document would

have shown, the present NMC document, and the follow up documents on disability and

gender, provide a significant development in terms of policy guidelines for the

democratization of the Maltese educational system. It is a development conditioned by

the degree of 'intellectual and moral reform', to use Gramsci's phrase, that has hitherto

been achieved in Malta. It is also conditioned by the cultural infrastructure in place as

different subjectivities engage in a contestation over agendas.

Both aspects of curriculum reform are dependent on the quality and quantity of

organic intellectuals in operation. The fact that, for example, de-streaming and the

introduction of the comprehensive system at the secondary level did not take off,

indicates that, while intellectuals with an ethical commitment to subaltern groups were

adequately represented at the decision making level (the Steering Committee), there was

a lack of similar intellectuals strategically placed at different sites within the public

sphere. As a result, the struggle for real inclusion was popularly interpreted as another

"utopian" idea. In the final analysis, the NMC has confirmed once more that

'democracy' does not always work in the interest of subaltern groups. Cultural Capital,

hegemonic status (this includes the ability to articulate specific interests as general

interests), having a strong lobby within the corporatist set up and the forging of alliances

with equally influential groups, remain key determinants in the process of curriculum

reform.

Notes

[1] The process involving the development of the new NMC was a long one spanning three ministerial terms of office. The process started under Minister Michael Falzon (1994 - 1996) when the Nationalist Party was in power. Minister Falzon had replaced Ugo Mifsud Bonnici who had just been appointed President of the Republic. The draft new NMC was produced when Evarist Bartolo served as Minister of Education during the Labour Party's two year rule (1996 - 1998). The final document was produced when the present Minister of Education, Louis Galea, was in office. He assumed the post soon after the Nationalist Party regained power by winning the premature elections of September 1998.

[2] We consider 'race' to be a somewhat problematic term and hence place it in single quotation marks. For, as Robert Miles has argued, "….*owing to interbreeding and large-scale migrations, the distinctions between 'races', identified as dominant gene frequencies, are often blurred*." (as reproduced in Virdee and Cole, 2000, pp. 53, 54).

[3] For rich discussions on 'race', class and gender, within the context of "historically oriented, open models of social and cultural reproduction" and a "critical modernist social science" (Morrow & Torres, 1998, p. 37) see the work of Raymond A. Morrow and Carlos Alberto Torres (1995, 1998).

[4] Included among the groups which were consulted are Education Division officials, the Faculty of Education, the Association of Private Schools, the National Council of Youth, the University Students' Council, the Employment & Training Corporation, the Federation of Industries, the General Retailers & Traders Union, the Malta Union of Teachers, the General Workers' Union, all schools in Malta, the Association of School Councils, the National Commission for Persons with a Disability, the Commission for the Advancement of Women, Sedqa (the National Agency against Alcohol and Drug Abuse), the Department for Consumer Affairs, the Maltese Chamber of Scientists. (Vella et al, 1998, pp. 6, 7).

[5] Vella et al, *The Times* (Malta), 10/3/99, p.15.

[6] As reported in the daily newspaper, *L-Orizzont*, 5/6/98, under the heading: "*M'hu se jsir l-ebda terremot fis-sistema edukattiva ta' pajjizna"* (There will be no earthquake in our country's educational system). See also the Minister's column in the Sunday newspaper, *Kullhadd*, 7/6/1998, under the heading: '*Morna Ahjar L-Iskola'* (We have done better at School).

[7] Literal translation from the original in Maltese which reads: "*fl-edukazzjoni ahjar nimxu 'ftit' u bi qbil nazzjonali milli taparsi nimxu 'hafna' b'dizgwid nazzjonali*." *Kullhadd*, 28/3/99.

[8] Editorial entitled 'Draft national curriculum,' *The Times* (Malta), 2/12/98.

[9] Submissions to the Hon. Dr Louis Galea, Minister of Education, by the Secretariat for Catholic Education and Culture of the Maltese Episcopal Conference, dated December 14, 1998.

[10] We would much prefer the term 'multi-ethnicity' since we accord 'multiculturalism' a broader meaning See McLaren (1997), Giroux (1997) and Torres (1998).

[11] As reported in 'National Curriculum revision announced in parliament. Religion, contraception issues raised' in *The Malta Independent*, 7/10/1999, p. 6.