

We want to have our say

ON MARCH 16 sixth form Sociology students at St Aloysius College, Birkirkara, held a seminar on the new national curriculum. The seminar was intended to give a voice to the students on the most pressing issues pertaining to their recent past as secondary and primary school students and how these would affect their future and that of their contemporaries, as citizens in a Maltese society.

The guest speakers were two members of the New National Curriculum Committee - Professor Kenneth Wain and Dr Carmel Borg, both members of the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta.

In her opening address and on behalf of her colleagues, a first-year Sociology student welcomed the revision of the national curriculum, but poignantly pointed out that the absence of participation was disappointingly evident. Although the educational system and its effects on individuals are clearly a recent experience to sixth formers, the students had in no way been consulted on the new national curriculum.

She looks forward to some consciousness raising among adult leaders and policymakers, who would, in future, appreciate listening to the students' personal experiences of schooling. The guest speakers were then asked to comment on specific issues in the curriculum particularly those related to gender equity, methods of assessment and language chosen as a

Sixth formers and the new national curriculum

by Frances Camilleri

medium of teaching.

It was stated that the national curriculum and therefore the future educational system is based on four main pillars - democracy, justice, solidarity and inclusion. It was suggested that, at this point, this is merely a vision upon which the educational system shall be directed. As a country we need to aspire and strengthen the culture of democracy, and values such as social justice and participation are comprised throughout the 50-page document.

Tying up with democracy, social justice and participation is also the

concept of solidarity. In the context of an educational system, solidarity means that the best of education and the best resources are made available to everyone without distinction, but especially to those most in need of it. Ultimately, the educational system incorporates the concept of inclusion. It is envisaged that the educational system includes all entities such as people with special needs, refugees, emigrants, etc. Gender equity rather than gender equality, is an important issue that

calls for strong structural and attitudinal reform. As an aside it was remarked that the fact that no Maltese terminology exists which accurately translates the word 'equity' reflects negatively on our society. It was added that every girl and boy attending school has the right of access to the core curriculum. Research seems to suggest that guidance teachers are often to blame for unconsciously reinforcing sex segregation among students. The teacher must be constantly aware of the subtle messages which may be transmitted to the students via the hidden curriculum and

which could possibly perpetuate gender diversity instead of eradicating it altogether.

Also, the resources used by the teachers need updating. The *Denfil* Maltese reader for primary school children, for example, portrays a society that existed 50 years ago. A change of teachers' attitude in the classroom, on the other hand, should encourage all students, irrespective of gender, to participate more actively at school. The curriculum calls for a structural change, a change in the attitude and methodology of teachers and the resources used by the school. In short, there is a need for a more egalitarian approach to access of opportunities within the schooling system.

Today, the evaluation of students is based on a traditional system of assessment (summative). This basically means that a final examination determines the type of future one is to have. Apart from the fact that the present system is unjust, as it ignores the development of the person as a whole, it only assesses the students' most basic and primitive intellectual level that is based on memorisation. The new national curriculum introduces a formative type of assessment (profiling) that will evaluate the students' holistic development throughout each scholastic year from kindergarten level onwards.

Finally, the 'language problem', the reality is that every school in Malta must be bilingual if we want to communicate and have access to the rest of the world. It is against the law for any school to decide to adopt a monolingual system. Clearly English as a medium of teaching is of utmost importance to some children whose only exposure to this foreign language is at school. It will, however, be left at each school's discretion to decide on the number of hours allotted to the teaching of English and Maltese.

A slight controversy arose over the number of lessons allotted for the teaching of Maltese and English, as outlined in the document. The students strongly feel that the hidden curriculum seems to attribute an inferior status to the Maltese language, as English lessons to be given per week outnumber those for Maltese. It was argued that many of their friends coming from private and/or Church schools and who are now preparing to sit for their A-level examination in Maltese, were unable to express themselves adequately in their own mother tongue. This, they emphasised, can be witnessed during their Maltese lectures at school.

A similar problem persists among students who, on the other hand, cannot speak English fluently. The students stressed that this attitude implicitly creates class distinction and should be rooted out altogether. They suggest that tomorrow's pedagogy employ the method of learning through discussion, which would encourage students to speak both languages confidently and comfortably.

The students argued in favour of introducing Creative Expression at primary level. Children would then learn to express themselves at an early age and also learn to share their talents and ideas informally in a classroom set-up. Time spent in rote learning and repetitive topics such as factors and decimals (taught both at primary and secondary level) fills up the timetable unnecessarily and creates an extra burden on the students. In the long run, such time could be used more effectively and creatively.

Physical education, or the lack of it, is of utmost concern to the students who seem to have experienced a certain amount of apathy by the schooling system towards yet another activity that is outside academe. They lamented that in the very

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recent past, PE had meant a one-hour-a-week activity and in several instances, held in a small and confined courtyard with little room for freedom of movement. One student sees that the end result of PE indifference by the school authorities is a group of academically strong robots. They therefore called for a holistic education which would include more creative and artistic activities and a serious commitment towards sport.

Moreover, a weekly lesson in computer literacy as decided in the National Curriculum Committee is clearly not enough. In a constantly developing world, children should feel confident in the use of the computer. It was, however, confirmed by the guest speakers that within three years any student leaving the primary level of schooling would be computer-literate.

One student complained that no mention is made of music lessons in the new national curriculum. He suggested that a school of music should be set up wherein students would be able to simultaneously graduate in music as well as in the academic subjects listed, even up to sixth form level. This would prove to be a utopian experience to any young music lover indeed!

Other questions from the floor included: what is to be done with schools situated in or close to industrial estates such as Marsa, Corradino, etc. Is the Education Department prepared to settle for a 'tough luck' solution?

What does the National Curriculum Commission mean when it suggests that the same number of teaching hours be given both to girls and boys? Since such a distinction seem to have been identified, how have both sides (males and females) been affected by the old system so far? What approach is being taken to ensure that everyone will be channelled towards equal opportunities in the job market? The students strongly believe that any educational material (books, handouts, videos, etc.) particularly those used at primary level, are free of gender bias thus reinforcing what has already been stated in the document.

It was further suggested that compulsory seminars on the issue of gender awareness be organised for all teachers, while students should be constantly guided towards eliminating gender segregation altogether.

The participants seem to have a negative outlook towards streaming, which saw many of their schoolmates being unjustly discriminated against simply because they happened to be slow developers. The students were assured, however, that streaming is *passé* and now only exists in Malta. It is only the non-professional teacher who is out of touch with the latest methods of teaching who would ask for a continuation of streaming children. "We're either talking about an all-inclusive educational system or we're going to continue marginalising people."

Moreover, the existing tripartite system goes against social justice and an all-inclusive system. Parents too, are to blame for having believed in a myth. Every year they insist their children be placed in a class of high achievers. This mentality is outdated. Malta needs its human resources and cannot afford to lose an annual percentage of school leavers who finish their secondary level of education at 16 years of age as lifelong illiterates.

How do we know that all schools will abide by what is within the new national curriculum? If the words remain on paper, then the whole exercise was a waste of time. Therefore, a structure has to be set up to ensure that every school draw up a plan of action that defines the implementation, working and development of the new curriculum. Schools will be monitored regularly and an evaluation of each school will be drawn up for the respective authorities to know where they stand.

An interesting suggestion by one of the students was the setting up of



SOCIOLOGY students of St Aloysius College Sixth Form during the seminar

adult programmes aimed at stimulating parents' interest in their children's educational attainment. Parents coming from socially deprived areas in Malta do not seem

to provide educational support for their children either because of their own bleak childhood experience when at school, lack of time because of their daily routine of

work or simply because they lack the knowhow.

At the closing of the seminar, Professor Wain and Dr Borg were presented with a booklet which in-

cluded comments and suggestions made by the students. The students were congratulated on having taken the initiative to voice their opinion and asked to 'have a say'. The usual procedure in Malta is that everyone waits for the authorities to take action on any issue. The students, on the other hand, hope that the National Curriculum Committee would take time out to reflect on all that had been suggested by young individuals whose recollections of the schooling system may still be reliable, accurate and not too distant.

Ms Camilleri, MA (Soc. Stud.) BA (Hons) (Econ.), who is a Sociology lecturer, co-ordinated the seminar, which was conducted by first-year Sociology students at St Aloysius College Sixth Form. Thanks are due to the Headmaster, Fr Anthony Cilia, SJ, for his constant support and to the students whose unwavering enthusiasm turned the seminar into a stimulating experience for all present.

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