

# RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN MALTA

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*Abstract – This paper aims at presenting an account of recent developments in inclusive education policy, discourse and practice in Malta. The inclusion initiative is placed within the opposite context of competitive and streaming practices prevalent in the Maltese education system. A brief account is given of how inclusive policy and practice have been influenced by the following: United Nations policies; local political developments; the setting up and activities of parent associations and a National Commission for Persons with Disability; and the action for persons with developmental disabilities of an effective Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO). The recent development of a National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) with a wide consensus intended to ensure a quality education for all is seen as a very hopeful context for the achievement of inclusive education in Malta. A critical account of current perceptions, practices, concerns and aspirations for inclusive education in Malta is provided through a review of the very recent report of the Working Group on Inclusive Education set up as part of the strategy for the implementation of the NMC over the next five years.*

## Introduction

‘Every child has a fundamental right to education.

Those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs.

Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all...’ (UNESCO, 1994, pp.viii-ix)

**T**he above inclusive education principles have been adopted by the Maltese community as in many other countries, but each country is at a different stage in their implementation (OECD, 1999). Within the past decade in Malta, there have been important developments towards inclusive education for students with disability, both at the discourse and practical levels. This paper gives an account of this process.

Terminology in the area of disability and education has been constantly changing, and it is useful to start off by defining briefly the main terms and concepts used in this paper. First of all, three levels of inclusive educational arrangements are distinguished, namely special education, mainstreaming (integration), and inclusion.

(a) The setting up of *special education facilities* has sometimes been seen as a retrograde step of segregation of children with disability from mainstream to special schools for the benefit of non-disabled students (Barton & Tomlinson, 1981). In the Maltese context, however, it is seen as a first step towards the recognition of the right and potential of every child, whatever his or her disability, to benefit from some form of educational provision.

(b) With the increase in special school provision, the segregation these imposed on students with disability became the new focus of educators. Since the 1970's, Malta shared the international concern about the *integration* of children with disability into mainstream schools. Though the term 'integration' is still sometimes used interchangeably with 'inclusion', it has been found useful in Malta as in the United States of America to apply it more specifically to the attempt to make students with disability fit into regular schools. Such a focus is better captured by the term *mainstreaming*, coined in the United States of America, and used in this paper to refer to the movement towards having more and more students with disability placed in mainstream rather than special schools (Steinback & Steinback, 1990). This process is termed integration in citations from the 1970's and 1980's.

(c) Current progressive thinking in the education of children with disability sees mainstreaming as a first step that needs to be followed by *inclusive education*. Inclusion, a term more widely used since the 1990's, does not focus on fitting students to regular schools but rather fitting regular schools to the needs of all students. Inclusion is about 'how to develop regular school and classroom communities that fit, nurture, and support the educational and social needs of every student in attendance' by making the regular school 'a place where everyone belongs, is accepted, supports, and is supported by his or her peers and other members of the school community' (Steinback & Steinback, 1990, pp.3-4).

A second issue of terminology in the field relevant to this paper is the way one refers to those students who require additional individual educational provisions to ensure their progress. The main two current terms are *students with disability* or *students with Special Educational Needs* (SEN). Up to a decade ago in Malta, it was common to refer to persons with disability as 'the handicapped'. However,

this is now regarded as denigrating the dignity of persons with disability who are first of all persons like everybody else with similar needs and human rights. This fact is better reflected in the phrase *persons with disability*: thus, in Malta, the 'National Commission for the *Handicapped*,' set up in 1987, changed its title to 'National Commission for *Persons with Disability*' in 1992. The term disability has been more widely used in the United States of America. Warnock (1978) in the United Kingdom coined another widely used term, children with *Special Educational Needs*. This term was intended to replace the medical focus on the deficits within students to the need for special provisions that schools had to make to ensure their progress (OECD, 2000). However, the term has been criticised as still associated with segregation (Barton & Tomlinson, 1981). This objection has been recently raised in Malta, also by the National Commission for Persons with Disability, because of its emphasis on 'special'. However, a recent committee found it convenient to still use the term but accompanied by a warning about its possible negative implications:

The working group recognises that the term 'Special' (in Special Educational Needs) may be construed as patronising, given that each child has his or her own unique needs, and therefore 'special' should not be equated with the individual with disability. 'Special' should be taken as referring to those individual educational needs which the school has to provide for.' (NMC – G02)

The concept of SEN raises another issue: it is applied not only to children with disabilities but also to those who are disadvantaged in their schooling through learning difficulties 'arising from the interaction of a variety of child and subculture characteristics such as temperament, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, religion, ability and disability' (NMC - G02, 2000, para. 1). These have been estimated to amount to around 20% of the whole school population (OECD, 1999). Inclusion is concerned with the acceptance and support for the learning of these children as well. In this paper, however, the terms SEN and disability are used interchangeably for those children who have significant learning difficulties arising from some form of within child impairment and which require extra provisions to enable the student's learning.

This paper focuses on current Maltese perceptions and practice of inclusive education through a critical review of the recent report of the Working Group on Inclusive Education (NMC – G02, 2000) drawn up within the widely debated development of a *National Minimum Curriculum (NMC)* (Ministry of Education, 1999) for a quality education for all Maltese students.

## The historical context

### *Educational developments*

Like most Mediterranean countries, Malta has a long cultural history with several prehistoric remains that go back to at least 5000BC. The University of Malta is 400 years old, dating back to the time when the islands were in the hands of the European Military Order of the Knights Hospitallers of St John. However, the opening of educational opportunities for all has been a relatively recent development, appearing here much later than in Britain. Malta was a British colony from 1800 to 1964, retaining the United Kingdom monarchy as head of state till 1974 when it became a republic. Compulsory education for all children was legally introduced in 1946 and fully implemented by the early 1950s. Secondary education for all was introduced in 1970. The compulsory school leaving age was raised from 14 to 16 in 1974. Kindergarten centres for 4-year-olds were opened in 1975, and extended to 3-year-olds in 1987 so that today the vast majority of 3- and 4-year-olds (over 95%) attend school regularly. The first Education Act was drawn up in 1974, and revised in 1988 when the right of every child to educational provision was established. Public special education provision started in 1956 (Burlò, undated) and today all children with special needs have a right to attend school and are served by some level of educational provision (Zammit Mangion, 1992).

The education system for the 80,000 student population (approximately) is generally structured like that of the United Kingdom. Children move from kindergarten (3-4 years), to primary (5 to 10 years), to secondary (11-15 years), to sixth form or post-secondary vocational courses (16-17 years), and finally to the only University of Malta. Indeed, the Maltese also shared with the United Kingdom, until 1993, the complete determination of its school certification system at 16 and 18 years through British General Certificate of Education (GCE) examination boards for 'Ordinary' and 'Advanced' level certificates.

Malta's educational system has however two important characteristics that contrast with those of the United Kingdom, and arise mostly out of the smallness of the Maltese isles. First of all, Malta has only one central Education Division that determines the funding, curriculum and employment of school personnel in all state schools: thus policy and practice decisions affect all state schools, rather than only any particular region. Secondly, British administrators and educators make reference generally to their own national policy and legislation regarding standards for educational development. It is however more usual for the Maltese to refer to the standards developed in other countries, i.e. during the colonial period to British standards, and since becoming a republic to standards set up by the United Nations, or more recently to European Union criteria.

### *Streaming mentality*

Maltese educators had tried to emulate United Kingdom developments towards comprehensive secondary education in the 1970's when national examinations, apart from the GCEs at the end of Secondary schooling, were abolished. However, it is widely understood that preparations for this transition had been inadequate and were partly responsible for an accelerated expansion of Church and private schools, which were not comprehensive. Consequently, by 1981, the comprehensive system had been aborted and there was a reversion to a rigid streaming system within schools. Ability was determined on the basis of national examinations from Year 2 primary (6-year olds). There was an 11+ entrance examination into grammar schools (called Junior Lyceums) at the end of primary school. Though streaming and national examinations have been gradually postponed to Year 4 primary, we now have streaming both within schools and across schools (see Sultana, 1992). There are about two-thirds of students in state schools organised as area schools, while the rest of the students from all over the islands attend several non-state schools, mostly Church schools funded by Government and a few private fee-paying schools. In the State schools, children are placed into rigidly streamed classes on the basis of their total score in written examinations in 5 subjects – Maltese, English, Mathematics, Social Studies and Religion – at the end of Year 4 (8 years of age). A similar examination at the end of Year 6 primary determines the streaming of all children into Junior Lyceums, Secondary schools, and 'Other' Secondary schools for the lowest achievers, each stream taking around 45%, 45% and 10% respectively. There is moreover a rigid syllabus for all students at each year-level for each subject, entrenched through the content of national examinations, and leading to the prevalence of whole-class teaching methods. Surveys of teachers and parents show that the majority are in favour of this streaming system. Current economic thinking trends in Malta highlight the importance of competition, and this competitive situation is often cited by those in favour of competition in the schools as a way of preparing students for real adult life.

Within this mentality, however, the rival discourse of the rights of each child for a quality education, and especially the right of access to education in regular schools for students with disability, has now taken root. It was fuelled by developments in Europe as well as local political and educational enterprise.

### *The development of an inclusive policy for persons with disability*

I have traced the development of special education in Malta in another context (Bartolo, 2001). Suffice it here to outline some of the most important landmarks.

The first major policy document in this direction was developed within the Health Service. Malta was one of the first members of the WHO Regional Office for Europe to embark on the development of a 'National Health for All Policy' (Asvall, 1986). The idea that persons with disability should be 'integrated' in regular settings was clearly stated in the 'Health Services Development Plan' for 1986-1990, developed by a Labour administration:

'The medical, educational, rehabilitative and social services aim at assisting the handicapped to remain integrated with his/her peer group and as such achieve full participation in the vocational and social life of the community. Even when some form of special educational treatment is given, this ought to be made available in a normal school setting, and when a handicapped person needs residential services, these should as far as possible be provided in small hostels rather than large institutions and in the community where he or she spends most of his/her life.' (p.103)

Meanwhile, voluntary associations for the various sections of disabled persons started putting on public pressure. While a 'Rehabilitation Fund for the Physically Handicapped' had been set up in 1946, two new associations set up in the 1970's and 1980's by parents of children with disability began to exert their political clout. These were the 'Commission for the Sick and Handicapped' set up in 1947, and the 'Society for the Blind' set up in 1958. The 'National Association of the Young Deaf', set up in 1972, was complimented in the 1980's by the self-help group of 'Parents of persons with hearing impairment,' while a 'Parents' Society for Handicapped Children' was formed among parents of children with physical disabilities in 1976. The early 1980's saw the setting up of the 'Malta Down's Children Association,' the 'Muscular Dystrophy Association,' and the 'Dyslexia Association'. Some of these associations were further grouped into the 'Federation of Organisations for the Disabled' in 1973. Some members of these associations were particularly active, especially parents of affected children.

A high-handed Socialist government in the early 1980's led to a highlighting of human rights as one of the slogans of the Nationalist opposition party: this created an opportunity for the societies for persons with disability. They put forward their aspirations during 'dialogue meetings' with the opposition party and were able to have their wishes explicitly included in the Nationalist Party's election manifesto of 1987. Interestingly, however, no reference was made to disability under the education section. Instead, the section dedicated to provisions for the 'handicapped' was included under Health and Social Policy with the title, 'The handicapped will be one hundred per cent citizens', and the following principles:

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Handicapped will be applied, especially to:

- The right to live as normal a life as possible
- The right to participate as much as possible in social life
- The right to be protected against all form of abuse. (NPIO, 1987, para. 6.6)

Consequently, a *National Commission for the Handicapped* was set up in 1987 with representatives from Welfare, Social Security, Labour, Education, Health and Homes and representatives from Non-Governmental Organisations. This commission was very active and also very effective in getting wide political support, holding national seminars and other activities that raised awareness of disability issues. The first Administrative Report (1987-1992) of the Commission listed briefly the areas it had started to address under the following subheadings:

- a national register for persons with disabilities;
- the participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making;
- the prevention of impairment, disability and handicap;
- rehabilitation services;
- equal opportunities - preparation of an equal opportunities act, ensuring physical accessibility, social security and financial income arrangements, education and training, employment, recreation-culture-religion-sports, information and community education, and staff training (KNPD, 1992).

In 1993, the Commission produced the important policy document, *Special Education in Malta: National Policy* (Bezzina, 1993), endorsed by the departments of Education, Health and Social Policy. This was built around, and included citations from, the *World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons* (UN, 1983). Its inclusive principles are reflected in the following articles:

- Children without a disability have a right for an opportunity to be educated with children with disabilities.
- Every child with a disability shall have the right for education in the least restrictive environment which can be defined as follows: ‘that to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities are educated with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.

- The education authorities have to provide a whole range of services to meet the range of special needs in our community... As a first measure, a comprehensive and graduated plan should be drawn up to start educating children who are at present attending special schools. (Bezzina, 1993, paras. C.2, 3 & 5)

The Commission also influenced the report of the ministerial Consultative Committee on Education (Wain *et al.*, 1995) which embraced the concept of teaching for diversity as well as the education of all students in regular schools:

'It is the responsibility of the school to acknowledge, understand and respond to the different learning needs of individuals and groups, and to cater for them effectively in order to provide what is the entitlement of all: a quality education.' (p.15)

'Like the Commission we do not accept any form of schooling where the learner with disabilities is segregated for a significant portion of learning time from non-disabled children.' (p.51)

#### *Development of inclusive practice*

While this development of inclusive policy created an important framework, action towards inclusive education came from an NGO for persons with developmental disability, namely the Eden Foundation, which was set up in 1992 (Bartolo, 2000). Eden was founded by the parent of a daughter with Down syndrome, Dr Josie Muscat, who was also a medical doctor, an entrepreneur and ex-politician and therefore had the skills to ensure fund-raising and political support. Eden adopted a two-pronged belief and action:

1. That each child had potential for growth as a full member of society:

'Eden will work to help each individual - from very early childhood to young adulthood - to realise a sense of pride and accomplishment in his/her strengths. ... so that they can hold jobs, live independently and enjoy recreational activities in their communities' (First Eden Foundation brochure, 1993).

2. That society should accept diversity and be organised in such a way as to welcome and include every child and adult, whatever his or her condition, within its regular activities:

'The Eden Foundation ... aims at preparing not only teachers, but also classmates and whole schools to understand and accept the



participation and integration of children with special educational needs' (First Eden Foundation brochure, 1993).

Both goals were pursued from the start of Eden services in 1993. Firstly, the Eden Foundation immediately started offering transdisciplinary early intervention services for the development of each child's potential (70 children in 1993 and now amounting to around 400); and within the same year started placing young people with mental disability into regular jobs (6 by 1993 and now amounting to 65). Secondly, Eden immediately also involved and trained families in supporting their children's learning (Bartolo, 1994), called for and initiated the training of personnel for inclusive education in association with the University of Malta. It started a public campaign for the appreciation of each child's right to a quality education and also the right to be in regular schooling and community settings. Eden's activities, together with the policy-making National Commission for Persons with Disability, led to a call for the closure of special schools in Malta, which were then regarded as serving only to segregate children from regular schooling without offering specialised training.

The Eden Foundation, moreover, linked its services to the University of Malta (two psychologists who were Eden Consultants and lecturers at the university - Paul Bartolo and Elena Tanti Burlò - were coopted on the Eden Board of Trustees from 1993 to 1996). This led to the setting up of training programmes for personnel to support the inclusion of children with disability in regular schooling. A 'Programme for Inclusive Education' was set up within the Department of Psychology of the Faculty of Education, leading to the adoption of an inclusive policy by the Faculty in 1998.

The main impact of the above policy and practice initiatives is clearly shown in two achievements. First of all a landmark Equal Opportunities (Persons with Disability) Act was passed by Parliament in January 2000, whose main impact on Education has been to launch an initiative to make all schools at least physically accessible to all children. It has also led to the setting up of a legal body within the National Commission Persons with Disability to study any issue of discrimination on the basis of disability that may occur in any service, including education.

Secondly, the proportion of children identified as having special educational needs attending mainstream schools increased from 33% in 1992 (Bezzina, 1993) to 69% in 2000 (NMC - G02, 2000 - see Table 1). Note also that the development has not been restricted to state schools: 20% of all students identified as having SEN in mainstream attend church schools. There are also a number of other students with SEN in private schools. This has been achieved within the current streaming system through the employment of 488 special classroom assistants (an 11 times increase from the 40 of 1992 - Bezzina, 1993; NMC - G02, 2000; see

Table 2). There is thus now a student-with-SEN/support-staff ratio of 1.2:1 in the mainstream, which is significantly larger than the 2:1 in special schools (see Table 2).

*TABLE 1: Proportion of students with identified SEN in regular and special schools (derived from NMC - G02, 2000, para. 2.1)*

Type of placement		Number in each category <i>f</i>	Proportion in mainstream vs special schools %	Proportion in mainstream vs Church schools %
<b>Mainstreamed</b>	In State regular Schools	490	69	80
	In Church regular Schools	124		20
<b>Segregated</b>	In Special Schools*	275	31	
<b>Totals</b>		889	100	

\* There are currently seven special schools in Malta: two schools for children with moderate learning difficulties, one school for children with severe learning difficulties, one for children with physical and multiple disabilities, one for emotional and behavioural difficulties, one for children with hearing impairment, and one for children with visual impairment.

Despite these achievements, there is a lot of concern among educators that what has been achieved is largely 'mainstreaming' - the placement of children with SEN in regular schooling -rather than 'inclusion' which implies a change in the school curriculum, organisation and ethos to ensure all children belong to the school and classroom. At the same time Government is concerned about the cost of mainstreaming. These issues, however, are being addressed within an important development in Maltese education focused on the establishment of a National Minimum Curriculum (NMC).

## **Current concerns**

### *The National Minimum Curriculum (NMC)*

The future for the increasing inclusive arrangements for children with disability in regular education looks better now because of another important

TABLE 2: Extra staff in regular schools and teaching staff in special schools  
(derived from NMC – GO2, 2000, para.2.2)

	Totals		Student/ Staff ratio
<b>STATE SCHOOLS</b>			
Fully trained facilitators (2 years part-time)	33		
Kindergarten trained teachers (Assistants)	148		
Casual (untrained) assistants	197		
Peripatetic teachers of the hearing impaired	12		
Peripatetic teachers of the visually impaired	2		
<b>Total in state schools</b>		392	
<b>CHURCH SCHOOLS</b>			
Trained facilitators and untrained assistants	110	110	
<b>Total in regular education</b>		502	1.2:1
<b>SPECIAL SCHOOLS</b>			
Teachers	52		
Kindergarten teachers (Assistants)	80		
Nurses	6		
<b>Total in state schools</b>		138	2:1

development in Maltese education. The 1988 Education Act had vested the Minister of Education with the power to set National Minimum Curricula (NMC) for all schools. Brief NMC's had thus been developed for Kindergarten (1989), Primary (1989) and Secondary (1990). These were criticised harshly mainly because they were documents produced and owned only by the Education administration and hardly affecting the practice in the schools (Wain *et al.*, 1995). Thus, when these were due for review in 1996 the Minister of Education called for 'a broad process of consultation involving the social partners and the general public'. Moreover, one document from kindergarten to secondary levels was to be produced 'to drive the point that education from 3 to 16 years is a continuous experience' (NMC, 1999, p.17).

This process is taking longer than envisaged, and has been carried on through three administrations: the review was put in motion in 1996 by a Nationalist

Government, the first meeting of the NMC Steering Committee was held in 1997 under a Labour Government, and the final legislative document was published in 1999 under the current Nationalist Government, with its review and implementation envisaged to take at least 5 years. The new document is expected to have a wider impact, given that national consensus is being sought along the way. Moreover, this is good news for inclusive education because the idea of 'a quality education for all' permeates the whole document. Four of its 15 principles concern inclusive education directly: Principle 1 – A quality education for all; Principle 2 – Respect for diversity; Principle 8 – Inclusive education; and Principle 9 – A more formative assessment.

Wide consensus is also being achieved because of the composition of the NMC Steering Committee. Chaired by the Assistant Director for Curriculum, the committee included representatives from the Education Division within the Ministry of Education, the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta, the Malta Union of Teachers, state schools, the Association of Private Schools, the Association of School Councils and the National Youth Council. Moreover, continuous consultation was held with all stakeholders including a meeting with the members of all School Councils. At least two widely watched lengthy television discussions of its implications have been held. Moreover, after the publication of the legislative document in 1999, 18 working groups consisting of representatives from the Education Division and the University, as well as the schools, were set up to develop a strategy for the implementation of the various aspects of the curriculum. Some of these groups cut across stages of schooling and were particularly relevant to inclusive education, such as those on Inclusive Education itself (NMC - G02, 2000), on Assessment Policy, on Personal and Social Development, Differentiated Teaching, and Democracy in Schools. Each Working Group had to address four questions relevant to its theme: (1) Relevant current practice in the light of the NMC; (2) Challenges faced by schools and teachers in implementing the NMC; (3) Areas where support is required; and (4) A plan of action with long-, medium- and short-term goals. A 3-day National Conference was then held in June 2000, attended by 600 educators and parents, to discuss the documents that were consequently further modified.

The present author was the rapporteur for the Working Group on Inclusive Education (NMC - G02, 2000). The working group functioned like a focus group made up of 13 members drawn from different agencies concerned with inclusive education: the Assistant Director and the Education Officer for Inclusion and Special Educational Needs, Michael King (chair) and Frank Mallia; the Chairperson of the National Commission Persons with Disability, Joe Camilleri; a parent of a child with Down Syndrome, Louisa Grech; two lecturers from the Department of Psychology, University of Malta, Paul Bartolo (Rapporteur) and

Elena Tanti Burlo; three Heads of Special schools, George Borg, Carmen Cascun, and Pauline Sammut; a teacher in a special school, Judith Torre; a trainee facilitator in a primary school, Teresa Bugeja; and the Church Curia representative on matters concerning disability issues in Church Schools, Rev. Dominic Scerri. Three meetings totalling seven hours were held in addition to the 1-hour workshop attended by 60 persons at the National Conference.

The issues raised by the Working Group's report will be reviewed under five main headings: mainstreaming versus inclusive education, the role of special education facilities, the training of personnel for inclusive education, parent participation, and procedural concerns. Rather long extracts will be cited to allow the reader to get a feel for the discourse of the actual document.

### *Mainstreaming vs inclusive education*

The Working Group has first of all highlighted the contrast between the statements of principles of inclusive education that permeate the whole NMC document and the failure of this document to address the contrasting streaming set up. Thus the NMC document calls for respect for student diversity as 'a moral responsibility' of a society that

'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.' (NMC, 1999, Principle 8)

'Each school is endowed with a vast repertoire of skills, experiences and needs. This diversity, allied with the individual and social differences evident in the student population, enables and requires a pedagogy based on respect for and the celebration of difference.' (NMC, 1999, Principle 2)

However, the Working Group pointed out how these principles were not consistently addressed in the NMC document:

'While the above principles of democracy in the schools, inclusive education, respect for diversity and differentiated teaching

permeate the NMC document, this falls short of specifically addressing the issue of streaming which is the antithesis of those same principles.' (NMC - G02, 2000, para. 1)

This failure was not in fact a slip of the pen. The NMC steering committee had initially advocated the establishment of a time frame for the removal of streaming from Maltese schools. But this had to be subsequently given up under pressure from education and parent groups involved in the discussion of earlier NMC drafts. The acceptance of inclusion as the politically correct view of education, accompanied by a strong opposition among educators and parents to the removal of the streaming system in Malta, is a very clear indication that the inclusion philosophy has not yet been really accepted, as was observed by one of our curriculum specialists, Dr Carmel Borg, in a television debate. The issue had arisen also at the closing session of the NMC conference in June 2000, and two different strategies for addressing the problem were proposed.

There are those who advocate the removal of streaming in the short term. The NMC - G02 working group appeared to suggest this position in categorically denouncing the streaming system:

'The present policy whereby the upper primary school classes in state schools are streamed academically goes squarely against the whole philosophy of Inclusive Education; indeed, these practices seriously contradict the very cornerstone of the inclusion process. Streaming goes against all concepts of individualised teaching ... The current early selective system of streaming based on one-shoe-fits-all national examination system, with its backwash effect on whole-class unilevel teaching is regarded as directly opposed to inclusion. ... Inclusion of all children can only be realised through multilevel teaching and assessment that enables the registration of progress by each and every student along progressive and multifaceted standards rather than mere success or failure on a single, static instrument' (NMC - G02, 2000, para. 3.1).

The other view suggests that inclusive practice be established gradually alongside current streaming arrangements which would then give way smoothly to the new practices. This seems to be the position favoured by our politicians. The Labour Party spokesperson for Education has made this view explicit:

'Fundamentalist holy crusades might help you to feel self-righteous but are you being effective?

Generate short term wins through step by step changes, making sure that changes are well planned, implemented carefully and adequately resourced.

Instead of utopian reforms on a grand scale go for piecemeal engineering which is less risky and less controversial.

Look for the possibility of reaching reasonable compromises, improving the situation by democratic methods.

No ultimate and irreversible victory is guaranteed. The struggle continues.' (Bartolo, 2000, pp.119-120)

Though the Working Group gave the impression that they wanted a quick abolition of streaming, their concrete suggestions in fact reflected the above gradual promotion of inclusive practice:

- a. In order to gradually diminish the need for streaming and the normative examinations that feed it, all personnel in inclusive education must work at producing innovative teaching and learning and assessment materials and curriculum and lesson organisation that respects the diversity and individual needs of children. The production and pooling of educational material for diversity should be one of the specific roles of agencies responsible for inclusive education in the Education Division. In this regard also, there should be an explicit structure to encourage and enable the full use and sharing of existing resources found in different special centres, such as the hydro therapy pool, the multi-sensory room, occupational therapy and physiotherapy services, I.T. equipment.
- b. The assessment of children with SEN should provide a model for formative assessment, that is: (i) it should consist of a profiling system that is not limited to cognitive matters but also the profiling of wider aspects of children's development and activities; and (ii) it should be criterion referenced: showing what the child can do at any particular point in time and what is the next step for progress (NMC - G02, 2000, para. 4.2.2).

This is the situation we are currently experiencing in Malta. It is interesting to note how current inclusive moves within a streaming context sometimes lead to plainly inconsistent practices. Thus students with disability who cannot make the required grade in the entrance examinations have been given the right to still opt to attend Junior Lyceums with an individual assistant when that right is not allowed to non-disabled students (Bartolo *et al.*, 1999). Similarly, while fighting against streaming and examinations, the Working Group reflected the concern of

parents to obtain any possible special examination arrangement to ensure their children with disability are not hindered from showing their abilities and acquiring a place in the top streams of their schools. Such inconsistent practices may indeed be a feature of pluralistic societies (Norwich, 1996). The problem in Maltese educational practice is more pronounced because of the centralised education system described in the introduction, which has not so far allowed for different regional or school-based policies and practices. This allows little room for even thoughtful partial experimentation with innovative practices.

### *Conditionally 'admitted' rather than 'included'*

Contrasting policies and practices have had an impact on the actual experience of children with disability in mainstream schools. The mainstreaming of a larger proportion of children with SEN (69% - see Table 1) has been achieved through what has now been popularised in Malta as the *facilitator* system. Children with SEN have been admitted into regular schools, also with the approval of the Teachers' Union, on the condition that they have an assistant to facilitate their inclusion in classroom activities. In this way it has been assured that the mainstreaming of these children does not interfere with the whole class teaching in the preparation of non-disabled students for the streaming system. However, this has led to a very high use of individual assistants (see Table 2) while raising concerns about how far the mainstreaming of these students has indeed gone into their inclusion in regular classroom activities. The NMC - G02 report spells out these very practical concerns very strongly:

- a. *First of all this high ratio of facilitators to students with SEN has been the source of serious financial concern in the Education Division.* It needs to be stated, however, that the *overall* cost of educating children with SEN in regular schools may still not be higher than if they were educated in special schools. Moreover, inclusion should not be seen primarily as a cost-reducing exercise in education, but as a more effective way of respecting basic human rights. However, inclusion is also regarded as the most cost-effective educational system if planned and implemented properly. The Education Division is trying to address the financial concern by assigning facilitators (through a Statementing Board set up in 1997) to more than one child with SEN who are now deemed to have a 'shared facilitator'. This is a partial solution that requires a re-framing of the facilitation system as is stated below.
- b. *Secondly, the facilitator system has sometimes led to discrimination against students with SEN:*



- There have been a number of students with SEN who were not allowed to start their schooling at three years because of the lack of provision of a facilitator, or who were forced to stay at home because they lost their current facilitator who could not be immediately replaced for one reason or another.
  - Moreover, this has led to an intolerable situation where children with SEN are literally sent back home if their facilitator fails to attend school.
- c. Thirdly, *the facilitation system has raised important questions about how far the facilitator is in fact promoting the inclusion rather than the mainstreaming of the child with SEN.* In a substantial number of instances, it has been observed that the facilitator is given full responsibility for the child with SEN. This inhibits interaction between the child and the teacher and often leads to the facilitator being engaged in separate individual activity with the child rather than promoting the child's engagement in the regular activities of the classroom peers (e.g. Galea, 1999). In this regard, it is significant that in at least one case, a student in Form I secondary refused to have the support of an extra assistant because he preferred to have instead the support of his peers (Bartolo, 1997). On the other hand, there are also a number of instances, especially where the facilitator has been trained for the post (Abela, 1998; Galea, 1999) where the facilitator has promoted the acceptance of the child by the teacher and by peers for successful inclusion.
- In this regard, the Working Group was informed that a number of schools were organising activities for students that were not in the true spirit of Inclusive Education. For example, disabled students were being sent regularly for 'activities' at places such as the *Razzett tal-Ħbiberija* (a facility with swimming pool, horse riding and other provisions for persons with disability) while the rest of their peers carried on with regular school activities. Experiences at the *Razzett tal-Ħbiberija* could be equally shared by all students. Such segregationist practices infringe on the disabled child's educational entitlement and go directly against the spirit of the National Minimum Curriculum's holistic approach.
- d. Fourthly, *from the school's side, there is often a lack of 'ownership' and responsibility for facilitators and children with SEN.* They are both perceived as being out of the mainstream organisation of education and only marginally and conditionally 'admitted' rather than 'included' (NMC – G02, 2000, para. 2.2).

Two further illustrations of discrimination reported in para. b. above, were pointed out in the report concerning the way schools deal with medication and incontinence needs of students with disability:

- b. It is also reported that teachers' union directives regulate that medication cannot be administered to a pupil by any member of the school staff. This results in a number of pupils who are still at home and cannot attend school because no proper decision has yet been taken on such a matter. It is only in instances where the parents agree to administer the medication themselves that pupils are allowed to attend school. Correct regulations and procedures regarding the dispensing of medicine to students in schools are still not clear. This state of affairs is unacceptable.
- c. At present there are no clear procedures on who should take on the task of changing incontinence pads in the case of students who are incontinent. The nomenclatures '*to support children with disabilities during school sessions, meals, toileting, dressing and undressing*' which is found in the list of duties in the call for application for kindergarten assistants, and also '*to assist children under his/her care during toileting, ambulating and feeding*' as stated in Appendix B of the agreement reached between the Government and the Malta Union of Teachers, are still being debated for their correct interpretation (NMC - G02, 2000, para. 2.3).

Though the teacher's shedding of responsibility for the child with SEN on to the child's assistant is reported in other countries as well (e.g. in Italy: Piazza, 1996), in Malta the problem has been larger due to the rapid pace of mainstreaming without adequate teacher preparation.

### *The role of special facilities*

Another issue addressed by the Working Group on inclusive education is the role of special schools. Despite the discourse about the closure of special schools in the 1990s, there is now a general understanding that some form of segregated special education facilities for children with more severe learning difficulties will be maintained. The report itself suggests that:

'Within the spirit of the Salamanca Statement on special needs education, the existing special schools can form a valuable and integral part of the inclusive system by assuming a more supportive role. They should therefore be developed into centres of human and material resources, where professional advice could be sought and specialised equipment made available. They should provide specialised support for teachers and students in inclusive settings and act as standard bearers in the introduction of innovative

approaches to the education of children with special educational needs. These centres should be a reference point for assessment and teaching processes.’ (NMC - G02, 2000, para. 3.5)

This suggestion, however, presents difficulties in the Maltese situation. Maltese special education had not yet become specialised before the development of mainstreaming. Thus, the heads of special schools on the working committee lamented that:

‘Even in special schools, however, there is a lack of specialised staff since professional training has not been adequately addressed by the Education Division. Training in these schools is being organised by the individual school administrators and carried out according to the needs of each particular school; however, there is still a lot to be done. For instance, these schools lack the regular services of some professionals, such as psychologists, physiotherapists and social workers and others. The services of occupational therapists are non-existent and sorely missed. This makes the use of a transdisciplinary team approach in the development of an IEP for students more difficult to practice. In fact there is as yet insufficient formal and informal methods of assessment and programming for children in special schools.’ (NMC - G02, 2000, para. 2.1; see Borg, 2000).

The Education Division is thus faced with a situation where, while intending to play down the role of special schools, it needs to invest in the training of special school personnel and facilities if these are indeed to serve as support for inclusive schooling. In fact, it is the NGO Eden Foundation which has been at the forefront providing expert support services for children who are in schools and also attend its centre (e.g. Bartolo, 2000). This is recognised by the Education Division which partly funds the Eden programmes, but the Education Division is faced with the need to provide training to the staff of its own special schools.

We also have an interesting arrangement, termed *reverse integration* in one of our schools, whereby non-disabled children regularly join those with disability in a special unit. This arose in Gozo, the smaller of the two Maltese islands which has a population of 25,000. There is no special school on this island, but rather one special unit located inside the building of a primary school. This has allowed for the possibility of children from the unit joining in the regular classes for some lessons and vice versa (Sultana, 1995).

### *Training of personnel for inclusion and special educational needs*

The Working Group pointed out the need for training personnel in inclusion and special educational needs. This has been provided at two levels: for qualified teachers and for facilitators. The first evening two-year Diploma for teachers in special educational needs started in 1989. By the end of 2001, around 60 teachers will have been trained. The first two-year evening training course for facilitators of inclusive education started in 1994. By the end of 2001 around 200 facilitators will have been fully trained.

The Faculty of Education has produced a comprehensive programme of training and is committed to provide courses relevant to the needs of our schools. The continuing development of this training programme is regarded as essential for meeting the needs of children with disability.

### *Parental involvement*

Another important issue raised by the Working Group is the level of parental involvement in the education of children with SEN. This is described as an essential ingredient for success in inclusive education:

'Inclusive Education can only work effectively if parents and educators work in partnership forming a healthy dynamic based on mutual synergy. To this end a healthier approach should be sought to encourage better communication between the education team and the parents. Parents' participation in the education of their child should be accepted as a civil right. Parents' lifelong commitment to their children's quality of life, their intensive and extensive relationship and interaction with their children, should be fully appreciated. Since children with SEN, especially at younger ages, are unable to assert their own needs and rights, parents should be regarded as their primary advocates (NMC - G02, 2000, para. 3.3).

On the other hand, the Working Group noted parents are not yet sufficiently encouraged to participate:

While parents are becoming more vociferous advocates for their children, as is their right, the Working Group felt that there is still not enough recognition of the parents' right for advocacy for and potential contribution to their children's education. Currently, parents feel that they have to struggle to get the necessary support for their child's education. Moreover, there is concern among

educators that there is a lack of a supportive network to support the parents as early as possible to understand and engage constructively with their child. It was noted that information and services to parents are too much dependent on the particular parent's persistence, assertiveness and other personal qualities.' (NMC – G02, 2000, para. 2.5; Bartolo, 1997).

It is to be noted again that an increase in parental involvement has been greatly influenced by the setting up of the parent groups mentioned earlier, as well as by the positive experience offered to parents at the Eden Foundation (Bartolo, 1994). From the very opening of Eden services in 1993, the parents were present at the multiprofessional case conferences about their children – a new experience also for professionals who had to learn to adapt their thinking and discourse to the new dynamics created by parental presence. The parents were also asked to share in early intervention work which occurred in their homes. Moreover, all reports were given to the parents and any information in their children's files was available on demand. Parents now are also asked to join tutors for a day to get to know more closely how their children are being supported (Mercieca, 2000).

## **Planning the future**

### *Developing school-based inclusive practice*

Given the above situation, the Working Group saw the main future need as that of developing schools that take responsibility for the quality education of all their students. The following suggestions were made:

'Since inclusive education involves radical changes in attitudes and practice, training of all personnel involved is an essential prerequisite to the implementation of a successful inclusive education policy. Training should ideally be carried out by the University of Malta through direct and active consultation with the Education Division, The National Commission of Persons with Disability, The Federation of Organisations for Persons with Disabilities, voluntary organisations dealing with disability issues, heads of school and teachers working in the field, relevant professionals and pre-eminently disabled persons and their families. Substantial gains could be made if such training programmes also made use of distance learning methods and the use of distance learning programmes from overseas universities.

In order to ensure school and classroom based responsibility and support for children with SEN, it is recommended that:

- a. Seminars and on-going in-service courses on issues essential for the implementation of inclusive pedagogical methods are required, besides specialised training in specific areas. There must also be the exposition of good practice for schools to follow which would promote and enhance more effective teaching and learning.
- b. A well planned programme of training for decision makers at the school level should be devised. This would provide opportunities for heads and assistant heads of school and school councils to understand the issues of disability and inclusive education.
- c. In tandem with (b) there should be a programme of training for the regular teachers – both those currently in training through the B.Ed. programme, and also for those already teaching through in-service training. Moreover, both teachers and facilitators need to be trained to work collaboratively together. It is recommended that there should be a structure that establishes the provision of at least a brief induction period of training for each teacher in preparation for the child with SEN who is joining his or her class the following year.
- d. Our aim should be that support for inclusion should be first through the regular teacher and then through regular teachers who have specialised in education for children with particular types of SEN. Thus the training of qualified teachers in support work at post-graduate level should be ensured.
- e. Training at the level of facilitators who will be mostly engaged in one-to-one support needs to be continued and accelerated as much as possible (see Tanti Burlò, 1997). Training needs to ensure:
  - Appropriate commitment to inclusive education: the selection of candidates should ensure that they have appropriate attitudes, and the training system should allow for candidates to leave the system if found to be inappropriate;
  - Appropriate attitudes for and knowledge of the principles and skills in the practice of inclusion;
  - Creative problem solving in supporting the child with SEN, but also based on sound knowledge and skills in supporting children with particular types of disability;
  - Ability to collaborate in the development and implementation of IEPs and in the reporting of children's progress;

- Ability to communicate and collaborate with other professionals and parents.
- f. Steps should be immediately taken for the development of liaison between special schools and regular schools so that existing human and material resources in special schools should become available as resources for training, equipment and other support for inclusive schooling. In this regard, also, specialised training should be provided to staff working in specialist centres who need to be clearly committed to provide very specialised support.’ (NMC – G02, 2000, para. 4.2.1)

‘Regular schools and teachers need to have more knowledge and skills in understanding and meeting the learning needs of the diversity of students. Various disabilities often require specific teaching approaches and technologies, such as alternative and augmentative means of communication.’ (NMC - G02, 2000, para. 3.4)

While the above are measures to be taken by central agencies, the Working Group made another important suggestion that is much more congruent with its recommendation for school ownership of all children, and is indeed necessary for the above measures to be effective:

‘There is a need for the whole school together with its school council to make a written commitment to and assure formal responsibility for fostering the school’s Inclusive Education programme. This concern should be reflected in the school development plan as well as the school ethos.’ (NMC - G02, 2000, para. 3.1)

### *More parent partnership*

An important institutional recommendation of the Working group is expected to have important consequences for strengthening the voice of the parents:

‘It is recommended that the parents’ participation in their children’s education should be statutorily established. For instance, it should become established practice that:

- a. Parent representatives should have a place on all policy making and decision-making boards about children with SEN.

- b. There should be an early system of screening both in pre-school and on entry to school that ensures support for and involvement by the parents in their child's education. Because each parent is often faced with the challenge of a child with SEN for the first time, it is essential that an information system be provided to support parents as soon as they suspect or are told that their child has SEN. This may include both leaflets or booklets by particular schools or the education division as well as relevant contacts such as self-help groups and other institutions.
- c. It is recommended that the University takes more direct action to ensure that the training of all professionals who work with children, both medical and educational or otherwise, includes opportunities for understanding the importance and potential of parent involvement in their children's education.' (NMC – G02, 2000, para. 4.3.5).

*More planning, collaboration, accessibility and accountability*

Four important procedural aspects in developing inclusive practice were highlighted by the Working Group: (a) the need for planning for transitions of children with disability from home to school, one school year to the next, kindergarten to primary, to secondary, to post-secondary and work situations; (b) the need for collaboration within schools and among professionals and parents to achieve the supportive networks which are an essential feature of inclusive schooling (Steinback & Steinback, 1990); (c) the need for accessibility of information about inclusion through leaflets, booklets and other information material in alternative media including an Inclusion Website – this is already available as the webpage of the National Commission Persons with Disability on [www.knpd.org](http://www.knpd.org); and (d) the need for accountability of assessment and educational practices. With regards to this fourth need, the following specific recommendations were made:

- a. A structure need be provided for accountability of inclusive practice through a support structure within the school as well as at Division of Education and national levels.
- b. Provisions must be made for the appointment of Co-ordinators for Inclusion Support Services. These co-ordinators should be responsible for the provision of Resources in schools and the execution of correct procedures within the Inclusive Education Programme.



- c. Schools should have guidelines for ensuring that inclusion is managed appropriately for a quality education for the child with SEN. Such guidelines would ensure support for parents, proper procedures for assessments and provisions, adequate inclusion of the students in classroom activities, and adequate accountability.
- d. Such guidelines have to establish particularly the regular development and review of transdisciplinary Individual Educational Programmes for each child, with clear indication of responsibilities and time-frames for ensuring the child's progress.
- e. Provision need be made for ongoing monitoring of all education practices through qualitative and quantitative audit since continual evaluation of practice is necessary for effective improvement (NMC – G02, 2000, para. 4.3.4).

## **Conclusion**

The development of inclusive schools is a long-term process, which has to be maintained through training and commitment at the school level supported by the political and educational system. In Malta, even though the process has gathered momentum only over the past decade, it has picked an ever increasing wider network of players from the political and educational field, and is leading to the development of structures that sustain inclusive practice. It is also very useful for practitioners to have in hand a nationally shared vision promoted by the NMC for a quality education for all:

'The ultimate aim of the National Minimum Curriculum is to develop an educational ethos that stimulates the development of students' potential without undermining the principles of solidarity and co-operation.' (NMC, 1999, Principle 1)

'To this end the educational community must develop a system that identifies, from an early stage, the potential and needs of all students. As a result, programmes can be developed that maintain students on course to continuously achieve progress.' (NMC, 1999, Principle 2)

There is thus a strong and wide enough impetus to give hope to many that we can turn our islands into a centre of excellence in inclusive education training and practice.

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