

Culturally Responsive Education in Malta

Over the past few years Maltese society has been challenged by the increasing presence of persons from different cultural groups in the community. People of diverse cultures have always been present in Malta and the response to these cultures varied from their wholesale rejection to an uninformed and uneducated “welcoming” of these people. In local schools the situation is similar. It is common to encounter discriminatory attitudes by students, parents, educators and the general public where the education of diverse others is concerned. On the other hand those who acknowledge the right of culturally different people to a quality education, do not realize that an add-and-mix approach to educational provision is neither effective nor just “for all children to succeed”. Furthermore at post secondary and tertiary levels, the number of foreign students of a wider spectrum of cultures has also increased. Although these students have usually been welcome because of the financial contribution they make to the institutions, the way they influence our higher education as culturally different students has not been analysed to ascertain how this can ensure a better quality of education for themselves as well as Maltese students. It is clear that a successful future of our university includes the educational provision for culturally different others. These socio-educational challenges call for a thorough understanding of the issues involved in educating the culturally different and a deeper study of the knowledge, attitudes and skills that are needed to develop enriching and just educational environments.

This educational concern is not unique to Malta. For instance, the EU, Canada and the US have been dedicating research and development resources to addressing the need for intercultural education and culturally responsive education and services. A EURYDICE report on ‘The teaching Profession in Europe’ (2002) highlighted this new multicultural challenge for educators:

Immigration has altered the working conditions of teachers in many European countries, and had a direct impact on the composition of classes. Teachers may be confronted with different cultures, religions and languages in a single learning environment ... Attention is therefore increasingly devoted to the acquisition of methods involving cross-cultural approaches to teaching as well as psychological and sociological aspects of handling situations that arise in a multicultural context. (p. 48)

In order to address this challenge educators have developed the idea of a ‘Culturally Responsive Education’. This notion is based on the principle that culture is central to student learning. When the curriculum and approach to learning is seen as alien by students, they end up disengaging from the learning situation and often become drop outs. A Culturally Responsive Education uses “the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them” (Gay, 2000), and thus enables students to connect to schools, reduce behaviour problems and enhance learning. It can empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically.

This can be done by building cultural bridges through an education that transforms mainstream culture to give more value and respect to students' particular cultures.

This perspective has already been recognised in the National Minimum Curriculum (MOED, 1999) which highlights the importance of the value of diversity in holistic and lifelong education within a globalised world. Principle 2 of the NMC specifically emphasises the respect and celebration of difference and the role of education in the lifelong commitment to acknowledge and address cultural diversity so that co-operative and critical active engagement between cultures takes place. The NMC raises the need of developing an educational praxis that is committed to the proliferation of relationships between cultures and the development of one's own cultural identity through learning about and with others.

It is therefore very appropriate that our Faculty should develop a focus on Culturally Responsive Education in order "to equip teachers with the multicultural competencies required to function effectively in culturally diverse environments" (New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 1: Immigration and Cross-Cultural Teacher Training, 2002).

Within such contexts the importance of developing research and knowledge and practice of Culturally Responsive Education cannot be underestimated. It requires a change in mentality for educators that needs proactive endeavour. There have already been small beginnings in this direction, but these attempts to bring about change in the way cultural differences are dealt with in educational institutions are fragmented and so cannot bring about the deeper and wider changes required in education.

This situation stimulated the setting up of the *Programme for Culturally Responsive Education* in the Department of Education Studies of the Faculty of Education in 2006. The programme aims to co-ordinate and develop clearer understandings and meanings of education through cultural differences. It also aims to initiate and co-ordinate activities where these are lacking. At the same time the programme aims towards the development of "pedagogies of difference" through a focus on the diversity of cultures, learning approaches and power positions that enrich and complicate the dynamics of difference within educational environments. The emancipatory aspects of these pedagogies include the use of power by the students and teachers, the experimentation with collaborative environments and the voicing and symbolisation of differing positions.

The more specific aims of the programme are:

1. To establish culturally responsive education as an interdisciplinary teaching and research area at the Faculty of Education.
2. To organise activities within the Faculty and the wider education community to raise awareness of the importance of recognising, understanding and engaging with culturally diverse others.
3. To apply for European and other funding for research and development activities in this area.
4. To generate and disseminate new knowledge and publications in relation to culturally responsive teaching.
5. To develop a network of international links on culturally responsive education.

6. To develop teacher education curricula and educational materials that respond to the interests and needs of culturally diverse students.

The first activity of the programme was the organization of a seminar on Culturally Responsive Education in March 2007 (Galea, Bartolo & Azzopardi, 2007). The interest shown at that seminar led to the idea of a special issue of JMER on culturally responsive education. The response from contributors shows that there is a growing awareness, also among researchers, for the need to address the challenges raised by an increasing appreciation of human diversity within a framework of social justice.

The papers in this special issue, while including papers specifically on the challenges faced by immigrants in Malta, frames this concern within the deeper issue of social justice and democracy through education. In this way it takes on the broad conception of democracy that articulates the importance of the active involvement of minorities especially those that are still underrepresented in educational policies, practices and curricula. Thus, it can be seen to address the three questions (out of a total of eight concerns for reform in education) raised by the EU Commission consultation on 'Schools for the 21st century' that address diversity issues:

- How can school systems best respond to the need to promote equity, to respond to cultural diversity and to reduce early school leaving?
- If schools are to respond to each pupil's individual learning needs, what can be done as regards curricula, school organization and the roles of teachers?
- How can school communities help to prepare young people to be responsible citizens, in line with fundamental values such as peace and tolerance of diversity? (CEC, 2007)

The first three papers are addressed at university lecturers themselves

We start off with a paper by Dr Paul A. Bartolo, an Educational Psychologist and co-founder of the Programme for Culturally Responsive Education, on the challenge faced by University lecturers themselves as they attempt to prepare teachers to respond to student diversity. Dr Bartolo has previously struggled for the inclusion of children with Individual Educational Needs in mainstream education. Here he widens the perspective to aim for the active participation of all students, whatever their characteristics. The view is also widened by taking on an international perspective as the paper is based on the experience of coordinating a three-year Comenius 2.1 project among seven teacher education institutions from seven EU countries aimed at producing materials for differentiated and inclusive education (www.dtmp.org). He reports the learning of this diverse group on the process of producing a truly multicultural perspective and materials for teacher education, pointing out the need for a reflective stance among both teachers and teacher educators.

Dr Simone Galea, a co-founder of the CRE programme, draws from her main research area of philosophy of education and particularly her feminist philosophical background to address some important political and ethical responsibilities of educational researchers in representing the other through their knowledge constructions. Intrigued by the emancipatory interest in making the "other" speak, she explores ways through which the migrant's voice be heard escaping his/her usual identification as "other". As Spivak suggests, researchers are challenged by their

contradictory obligations of speaking and not speaking. In her search for research methodologies that respect cultural diversities, Dr Galea draws on the short story, 'The Mute,' by Walid Nabhan, to highlight that voice of a Palestinian who migrated to Malta some years ago and to point out that paradoxically it is the migrating subject who suggests ways out of the elsewhere, academics sometimes confine themselves into. She concludes that the way towards the migrant is to become a migrant oneself, and researchers should have the courage to risk abandoning the safe and usual lands in response to "different" voices.

A concrete example of ethnocentric – and indeed androcentric - thinking at the University of Malta is provided in the next paper by Dr Raphael Vella, co-ordinator of the teaching of Art in the Faculty of Education. His paper is focused on the choice of artistic works to be studied by students as part of the syllabus for the Malta Matriculation examination, but it really raises fundamental questions about academic openness to diversity. He demonstrates how the choice of art works that are assumed to represent the world of art is instead based on very limited and particular perspectives that assume a universal dimension. He is very strongly critical of how, without any qualms, this choice leaves out completely women artists, excludes more recent contemporary artists, and is very ethno- (euro- and Christian-) centric.

The next five papers *refer* to society at large and education in particular

The paper by Dr Marie Alexander raises one of the main issues for culturally responsive education, namely the use of language. Dr Alexander is the Director of the Institute of Linguistics and also a long-time member of the University ACCESS committee with a particular interest in the education of the deaf. She brings home to the reader the importance of the choice of language for instruction through the specific example of the challenges faced by Deaf people and students whose need for sign language as a first language is not recognized. She first of all makes a very strong case for enabling Deaf children to acquire sign language as early as possible linking this also to success in acquiring literacy skills. Secondly, she shows how, when this is not recognized and included in the education system, these students suffer discrimination and have the experience of being foreigners in their own communities.

This experience of not being able to speak any of the languages used in one's community is also experienced by the irregular immigrants in Malta that cannot speak Maltese or English or Italian. Juan Camilleri who completed a dissertation on this topic for his MPsy professional training course, together with Dr Katrine Camilleri, winner of the 2006 UNHCR Nansen Refugee award for her work as human rights consultant for refugees in Malta, give us an opportunity to hear the voices of immigrants: rather than being invaders as often pictured by Maltese in general, they are here presented as people going through a sequence of traumatic movements in order to survive. And the picture in the schools is mixed. It calls for more preparation of staff for the new challenges.

Brian Vassallo is also politically committed to voice non-Maltese children's experiences in the schools in Malta. He was sensitized to the situation through his teaching at one of the few avowedly multicultural schools in Malta, and gives an account from his Masters' dissertation on how Maltese and non-Maltese students perceive classroom climate. The fact emerging from his research findings, that 6% of

10-year-old students in a stratified random sample were children who had been in Malta for less than two years already shows the significance of the phenomenon. His paper raises a lot of questions rather than answers, but does provide evidence that non-Maltese children, for various reasons feel less comfortable in our schools. Vassallo ends with a suggestions for teachers to be enabled to develop multicultural competencies such as those suggested earlier by Gay (2000):

- Acknowledge the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum.
- Build bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived socio-cultural realities.
- Use a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different approaches to learning.
- Teach students to know and praise their own and each others' cultural heritages.
- Incorporate multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools.

Foreigners in Malta – and also non-Maltese students in our schools - are not only made up of asylum seekers and irregular immigrants. We have a substantial and increasing foreign community including many from the EU. Dr Sandro Caruana and Prof Dr Gabriella Klein, using data from their Grundvig SPICES project, show how ‘foreigners’ are perceived and interacted with differently in Malta and Italy. Their conversational analysis of intercultural encounters again make us sensitive to how ‘foreigners’ can be confused by native situations and language and how such confusion can also be mitigated.

Finally, Dr Andrew Azzopardi, makes a case for welcoming the new situation of ethnically diverse minorities in Malta not as a problem but an opportunity to sensitize Maltese educators and students and society to the diversity of human cultures. He calls for more research on the experiences of this new phenomenon in our schools, which he is indeed studying together with Dr Simone Galea, but here makes use mostly of research from the US.

We hope that these papers will contribute towards a greater appreciation of the challenges and opportunities that the increasing diversity of our students is offering to all educators. One of the impacts might be that in appreciating such diversities, we also begin to respect more widely the diversities that are also prevalent among Maltese students and thus move further along the development of a more democratic and inclusive society.

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