

The Comprehensive System of Education was introduced in Malta in 1972 and was abruptly discontinued in 1981. In this two-part article MICHAEL A. BUHAGIAR argues that the Maltese failure to make a system, practised with varying degrees of success in Western developed countries, work locally still carries a bitter price.

The Discontinuation of the Comprehensive System in Malta: Lasting Consequences

INTRODUCTION

An historical glance at Malta's educational system would reveal contradictory signals. Not only are the continual efforts to catch up with continental Europe bedeviled by fears of influential citizens to let go old privileges and 'proven strategies' developed under the colonial Anglo-Saxon model, but the policy making process in Malta is also imbued by ingrained deficiencies.

Calleja (1988), discussing local educational policies, sustains that these have over the years lacked political continuity and were often changed radically with reforms and counter-reforms emanating from political and ideological polarisation as opposed to national consensus. Calleja further argues that policies usually reflect subjective judgment, have no sound theoretical foundations and end up being seeds of discord which undermine the system's credibility.

Wain (1994) is equally pessimistic. He sustains that local educational reform has traditionally lacked a research base as well as broad-based and grass-roots consultations. Not surprisingly Farrugia's (1988, p.10) view that 'the system often operates on *ad hoc* or crisis strategies that cause stress and friction among its functionaries' is widely accepted. All these characteristics may be partly responsible for the local removal of the comprehensive system which was introduced in Malta in 1972.

The focus of this paper is however different. More than what may have led to the disenchantment with the comprehensive reform, present emphasis is on the enduring consequences Maltese education has to put up with because fears and egoism prevailed when courage, determination and a continued sense of social justice should have. After briefly recounting the Maltese fleeting experience with the comprehensive system the present paper examines closely what its abrupt discontinuation, way back in 1981, still implies in real terms for local education.

As shall be argued throughout, the Maltese failure to make a system practised with varying degrees of success in Western developed countries work locally still carries a bitter price. The general sense of doom which the Maltese general public has unabatedly associated with the comprehensivisation efforts of over 25 years ago is still likely to impede the true development of education. Gross

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injustices have for far too long been permitted to exist unchallenged and their elimination urgently needs to become the focus of major educational agenda.

THE COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM AS A COUNTER REFORM

The Compulsory Attendance Act (1924) enforced school attendance until the age of 12 (raised to 14 in 1928) on those students who were registered in state and private schools, and the Compulsory Education Ordinance (1946) made primary education compulsory for all Maltese children between the ages of 6 and 14 years. Until 1970 Maltese students could only gain access to secondary education after passing the 11+ admission examinations or by enrolling in a private school.

But in 1970 an important step towards equality of educational opportunities was made when Secondary Education for All was introduced locally. This effectively organised secondary education on a bipartite system still heavily based on selectivity. The more academically oriented children were channeled into the 'established' schools which pre-dated the reform (state grammar and secondary technical schools together with private secondary schools) while students failing the 11+ examinations (previously staying on in primary schools until they reached school leaving age) were now grouped in the newly established state general secondary schools. The curricula of these 'new' schools were effectively modeled on the needs of students likely to leave school as soon as they attain school leaving age.

IMPLEMENTING THE COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM

The 1970 secondary reform was criticised for discriminating against the lower and less advantaged classes of society. The 11+ examinations were seen as social rather than academic selection. Pressure started to build up from various sectors (e.g., The Malta Union of Teachers (MUT), progressive teachers and young members of parliament across party lines) in favour of a more egalitarian system which would guarantee that all students of the same age, irrespective of their home, social and economic backgrounds, receive their education in similar schools (Zammit Mangion, 1992).

Comprehensive Secondary Education, the much clamoured for reform, was finally introduced in the state system in 1972. The 11+ examinations were eliminated (as were all formal examinations in state schools) and all students started to proceed from their local primary school

to a secondary school in their area. Concurrently with the introduction of a non-selective and comprehensive secondary school system, the government also launched a new system of vocational education based on the teaching of trades in specially created Trade Schools. Originally developed only for students who had attained the age of 14 years (i.e., over compulsory school age) and who were unlikely to profit from secondary education studies, when the school leaving age was raised to 16 (Education Act, 1974) Trade Schools became a form of alternative secondary education of the vocational type which attracted the non-academically motivated and children with limited educational abilities.

THE PERCEIVED FAILURE OF THE COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM

The comprehensive experimentation in Malta came to an end with the sudden return of selectivity in state secondary schooling in 1981.¹ This return to selective practices, which undoubtedly heavily sidelined social justice in education, may still be erroneously perceived by some as the confirmation that the comprehensive system cannot work in Malta. Apparently the Maltese general public has so far failed to make a clear distinction between the implementation of the system and its actual potential. The local 'failure at implementation' has been transformed into 'an unequivocal condemnation of an entire system.' All hopes of educational advancements which could have materialised had the comprehensive system been allowed to continue functioning were dashed by this dramatic U-turn on the government's part. The system's teething problems were ferociously exposed by persons with vested interests. Ex-grammar school teachers, parents whose children would more likely have been in a grammar type school in the pre-comprehensive days and the opposition Nationalist Party were foremost amongst these. And the Labour government, in a vote catching move, instead of carrying out the necessary and long overdue fine tuning of its educational programme, chose to move the clock backwards.

Before anyone condemns the comprehensive experimentation in Malta, one ought to keep in mind that the local comprehensive model inherently lacked certain basic characteristics. For instance Zammit Mangion (1988, p. 22), speaking of the comprehensive reform, complains that 'the system retained its old values and rituals: a demanding curriculum steeped in traditional discipline, classical methods of teaching and an old fashioned school

set-up'. And while private schools were permitted to retain their selective entry criteria and 'grammar type' characteristics, students in the state sector were offered the chance to leave the mainstream comprehensive system to join the Trade Schools.

Again the private secondary sector's population, following the understandable uncertainty created by the introduction of comprehensive schooling, rocketed upwards by offering a lucrative alternative to many parents whose children would have probably been the ones to profit under the previous bipartite selective state system.² The ensuing heavy blow dealt to people's confidence in the state system in the 1970s (particularly due to the comprehensive experimentation [Cilia & Borg, 1997]) is still felt today when more than 30% of Maltese students³ in the compulsory age bracket opt for private schooling and successive governments keep promising to 'make state schools the best in the country'⁴ in reaction to the general perception that these still lag behind the private ones.

The state comprehensive system survived in Malta for only nine years. Continued parental dissatisfaction, at least of those who bothered to air their voice, finally won over educational considerations.⁵ Efforts had been however made over the years, before its eventual replacement, to sugarcoat the system. Foremost among these efforts one may mention the re-introduction of formal examinations (this time on a national basis) and streaming in 1975.

The sudden setting up of the Junior Lyceums in 1981 with their academically exacting curriculum heralded the return of selectivity at 11+ and the laying to rest of the comprehensive system. These Junior

Lyceums were paraded by the government as the state's answer to the selective private schools. Only successful students in highly selective 11+ examinations could join



2. Boys had more possibility than girls to transfer from the state to the private sector during the comprehensive years. With practically no private secondary schools accepting female students at the 11+ stage, less girls were 'creamed off' than boys from the state schools. On the contrary, a number of private church schools for boys start their intake at this level.

3. All present day education statistics in paper are based on the *Education Statistics 1995-1996* (Central Office of Statistics, 1997).

4. For instance the last Budget (*Diskors tal-Budget 1998, 1997*, p. 55) reaffirmed the government's electoral commitment to make the state schools the best schools on the island.

5. Zammit Mangion (1992) sustains that the government, with General Elections looming in the background, preferred to heed the parents' dissatisfaction by dismantling the system even though Malta's top people in the administration of education (including a number of teachers and heads) were committed to the comprehensive ideal.

1. The government announced the end of the comprehensive system in April 1981 and the first 11+ selective exams were held in the following July. Selective secondary schools, called Junior Lyceums, opened in September of the same year.

these new state secondary schools and all other state students had to content with the far less academic oriented Area Secondary Schools. The ensuing tripartite secondary system in the state sector (Junior Lyceums, Area Secondaries, and Trade Schools) survives to the present day albeit with changed emphases.

PROBLEMATIC FEATURES OF THE LOCAL EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Zammit Mangion (1992) prides himself that 'one of the chief characteristics of Maltese education is its high standards and the high standards it demands of its students' (p. 382). Such statements can however be very misleading. How are high standards to be defined? And does the Maltese system set high standards for 'all' students? Maybe some prefer to equate standards simply with high examination pass rates, and consider failing students as victims of their own ignorance.

One also needs to stress the differences between the 'quantitative' (e.g., number of university courses and students; number of students enrolled at pre-primary level; number of students in post-16 level; etc.) and the 'qualitative' (e.g., quality of teaching staff; the school buildings; equality of outcomes; etc.) elements of education. While Malta, in spite of relatively not such a high expenditure on education, compares relatively well to similar small island states with intermediately developed economies on the quantitative level, there are qualitative elements in the

system which have remained intensely problematic (Sultana, 1997).

Education in Malta is governed by the Education Act (1988) which lays down that all Maltese citizens are entitled to receive education and instruction which caters for the full development of their whole personality regardless of all imaginable distinctions, and that schools and institutions are to be accessible to all. Fine words indeed one may think; reality however points towards a different picture.

Behind the fine facade of rhetoric projecting the local system as one promoting equality of opportunity (even if efforts towards 'equality of outcomes' would be more appreciated⁶), the darker side of the local system remains entrenched in a sterile duality between the state and the private schools, and highly selective practices. Today's educational system remains hampered by repressive policies and practices, namely:

- (a) the overreliance on formal examinations at the expense of other assessment procedures,
- (b) an education which refuses to cater for 'all' students,
- (c) the resulting misguided classroom practices, and
- (d) a strong private educational sector which can play havoc with intended reforms in the public sector.

6. Equality of educational outcomes (together with equality of opportunities) is however emphasised in the mission statement for state education (*Estimates 1998, 1997, p. 119*).

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All of these grave concerns owe their continuation with reinforced emphasis, if not their origins, to the unsuccessful implementation of one of Malta's foremost efforts towards promoting justice in education.

[A] TEACHING WITH EXAMINATIONS IN MIND

There is ample research (e.g., Farrugia, 1988; Darmanin, 1991; Wain, 1991; Zammit Mangion, 1992) which documents the highly centralised and bureaucratic characteristics of the Maltese state educational system. The Ministry of Education and the Education Division exert almost total administrative and curricular control over state schools. This control is imposed 'top-down' by means of detailed curricula and syllabi, set textbooks, binding regulations covering all aspects of schooling and, above all, by the national end-of-year examinations.

On the other hand the impact of examinations on the private schooling system is to some extent less drastic. Having their own school based exams, teachers can pace their teaching more at the stride of their students and both students and teachers are not consistently assailed by perceptions of 'being caught napping' by examination questions prepared by some unknown individual at the Head Office. However private schools still have to deal with external 16+ and 18+ examinations in much the same way as state schools do. And some primary private schools do not differ much from the state ones. Teaching in private schools with no secondary classes, at least towards the end of the primary cycle, gets equally caught up in the 11+ exams preparation mania.

The report *Tomorrow's Schools* (1995), commissioned by the Ministry of Education to examine Maltese educational policies and practices, concludes that the local system suffers from a 'culture of competitive achievement' resulting from an inordinate emphasis on examinations which, apart from harming the emotional well-being of students, distorts learning and eventually leads to a 'diploma disease.'

Examinations, discarded during the first phase of the comprehensive experiment, made a vengeful comeback in 1975 as part of the efforts to improve the system, and definitely gained in their importance with the return to selectivity. Since then they have consistently played a central part in the system. In the state sector students' particular stream in school and their vertical channeling from one educational level to the next largely depends, if not exclusively, on their performance on the national end-of-year external examinations. One must however commend every effort aimed at downplaying the ill-effects of formal examinations (e.g., school assessments in certain subjects as part of the 16+ Secondary Education Certificate [SEC] examinations of the University of Malta). But these remain rare occasions which do not set, at least yet, a trend.

All over the system students' efforts throughout the year and their teachers' assessments are still given little consideration. Calling this situation a socio-cultural and educational malaise effecting Maltese families, Calleja (1988, p. 32) describes the system as one in which 'both students and their families live under continuous psychological tension - a failure in exams is almost always judged as a failure of the family.'

'There exists within the Maltese system an evident "unhealthy" inter-relation between the overemphasis on examinations, the streaming practices and the heavy reliance on private tuition. The desire to excel and to hoard qualifications produces a piecemeal attitude towards study.'

In a system which has sadly neglected alternative forms of assessment (e.g., cumulative assessments and portfolios) which really carry weight (unlike teachers' assessments), formal examinations have gained a hugely disproportionate importance emanating from the unfounded belief that such exams are by and large reliable and valid. The price the system has to pay for its lack of trust vis-à-vis school autonomy and teachers' expertise is not negligible. Teachers are teaching with examinations in mind, hurrying through the vast syllabi and applying methods of teaching more conducive to rote learning than understanding (*Tomorrow's Schools*, 1995).

All this is a far cry from the type of education which the National Minimum Curricula (NMC) recommend. The Primary Level NMC (1989) endorses teaching methods which not only promote understanding but also militate against cramming and sheer memorisation for examinations. Examinations, one is informed, should provide students the opportunity to show what they have learned. And the Secondary level NMC (1990) is equally demanding. It speaks of the need for students to be trained in the process of self-learning and self-education, and that they are helped to arrive at conclusions through research methods and problem solving. Cumulative assessments are also encouraged at this stage to play down the negative aspects of examinations. Surely the dichotomy between what is recommended and what is actually happening cannot be further apart.

Unfortunately examinations have over time inbred with other equally dangerous elements within the Maltese system. One may easily say there exists an evident 'unhealthy' interrelation in Malta between the overemphasis on examinations, the streaming practices and the heavy reliance on private tuition. The desire to excel and to hoard qualifications produces a piecemeal attitude towards study. Various sources (e.g., Sammut, 1994; Camilleri, 1995; and Sammut, 1996) refer to the extent to which students resort to private tuition, traditionally in order to pace their studies by sitting for 'early' exams. Not only does the holistic approach to education suffer by such practices (students abandoning passed subjects and momentarily neglecting others which will be taken later on), but schools' administration and discipline is equally likely to suffer with students turning up for school at their convenience parading easily obtainable medical certificates to cover their absences.

The introduction of the local University examinations at

16+ and 18+ which makes it impossible for students to sit for exams before completing their educational cycle was certainly a step in the right direction, even if some are now complaining that it is too hard on students to sit for all the exams at one go. And there is no evidence, as yet, to suggest that students are making more judicious use of private tuition.

Much has been written about the injustices incurred by Maltese students due to streaming from the very early years of schooling (e.g., Sultana, 1989, 1991a; Darmanin, 1992) which serves purposes other than educational ones (for instance, administrative efficiency). Some tangible improvement has been made in this regard. The postponement of streaming in the state primary schools till after the end of Year 4 when students sit for their first formal examinations guarantees four years (or a maximum of six if kindergarten classes are included) of mixed-ability education.

Not much, but one has to keep in mind that official efforts at eliminating or restricting streaming practices are hampered by the knowledge that streaming is supported by a huge majority of the parents and the teachers themselves.⁷ Such official sensitivity to the public's desires, which at face value may seem perfectly desirable, goes a long way to show another negative lasting effect of the comprehensive experience.

No Maltese government, knowing how well parents can offer good resistance when they feel that their children's interests are being endangered, is likely to embark on policies, however fair and politically correct, which would probably result in general dissatisfaction. The days of confrontation which epitomised the 'old' Labour Party's

educational policies are apparently over; it is not necessarily a positive development.⁸ The irony of it all is that even though 'today to admit to a hankering after streaming is almost the kind of heresy which no right-thinking educator would like to be caught committing' (Mercieca, 1997, p. 6), the policy to stream students persists in Malta to the present day without showing any serious signs of abating.

[To be concluded]

7. Mercieca (1997) refers to data of an unpublicised 1990 survey by the Education Division on streaming in Malta amongst primary teachers (79%), headteachers (72%) and parents (81%). Figures inside parentheses refer to each category's percentage in favour of streaming.

8. The Labour government of the 1970s and early 1980s used to embark on a number of 'progressive' educational policies (e.g., Comprehensive System and Trade Schools [1972]; the Student-Worker scheme at University [1978]; and the fight for free education in Church Schools [1984]) in spite of their apparent unpopularity. The comprehensive experimentation, discontinued only a few months before the 1981 General Elections, is likely to have contributed to the Labour Party's loss of its electoral vote majority in the same elections. In comparison the present Labour government is definitely less aggressive and more patient. For instance the Labour Minister of Education, Evarist Bartolo, in a recent speech during a book launching activity (at the Old University Building, Valletta, 12 December 1997) spoke in favour of piecemeal arrangements. Bartolo opined that, unlike grand reforms, the outcomes of such arrangements would never be able to cause irreparable damage to the system. And as much as he would like to implement changes, he expressed his desire not to impose his ideas on unwilling others. Bartolo's consensus seeking approach is a far cry from past Labour Party tactics.





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