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CREATING INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS: A SUPPORTIVE LEARNING CLIMATE FOR CHILDREN AT THE SOCIETY OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE IN MALTA

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Abstract

This paper is part of a larger study aimed at exploring how instructors of catechism at informal learning centres of the Society of Christian Doctrine in Malta respond to the diversity of their learners (Mizzi, 2007). Using a qualitative research design, six catechists and three children from classes in six different centres responded to semi-structured interviews on how they responded to the individual needs of their learners. Each catechist was also observed teaching in three lessons. Data analysis yielded seven key themes. One of these was that they created a supportive learning environment in their classes. This was characterised by a feeling of a sense of community where involvement was expected from all and personal relationships, humour and affect were cultivated, and by a harmonious and 'safe' climate. This was described as being in contrast to what some catechists experienced in the formal situation of schools where four of them were also teachers.

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Introduction

Classrooms in Europe and the USA are getting increasingly diverse (Bartolo *et al.*, 2007; Humphrey *et al.,* 2006). And Malta is no exception. Furthermore, most children with individual educational needs in Malta are today mainstreamed into the regular classroom and society (Spiteri *et al.*, 2005). There is also the wider democratic concern that each learner is entitled to reach his or her potential (Bartolo *et al.*, 2005). We are also becoming increasingly more aware that learners have different interests, learning profiles, and readiness levels (Tomlinson, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2006).

This has given rise to the concept of differentiated teaching to meet the strengths and needs of all learners. While the differentiation of lesson content, process and product have been highlighted in Tomlinson's (2003) model, some researchers have given more importance to the creation of an inclusive learning environment (e.g. Bartolo et al., 2007; Gregory and Chapman, 2002; Humphrey *et al*., 2006).

Very few empirical studies of actual teachers and catechists were found. One of these studies was across a range of primary schools in Northern Ireland and used surveys, classroom observations and interviews with subject coordinators and teachers. Amongst others, it found that differentiated instruction was used to respond to mixed abilities, and that teachers were found to be mostly differentiating within "an interactive teaching style to support individuals during group tasks" (McGarvey *et al.*, 1998, p.150). Another relevant research study among primary school teachers from seven European countries (Bartolo *et al.*, 2005; Humphrey *et al.*, 2006) found that teachers gave importance also to creating an inclusive and caring attitude, which had to be shared by the whole school,

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and they deliberately tried to educate their children for a positive appreciation of difference.

These studies focus on differentiating instruction in a formal school context. Little research has ever been undertaken in non-formal educational settings such as voluntary organisations. One related study, Kenely (2004), analysed the attempts and adaptations made by members of the Society of Christian Doctrine in Malta to include children with a hearing loss between the ages of five and ten. The results indicated that there existed an attitude of acceptance amongst the members, which honoured diversity.

The Society of Christian Doctrine (commonly known in Malta as M.U.S.E.U.M.) gives regular religious and catechetical instruction to a large number of children and adolescents every evening. Because the M.U.S.E.U.M. centres are area (town or village) based, their classes contain a rich diversity of children and adolescents (Mizzi, 2007). It was founded by Saint George Preca in March 1907 for Catholic lay men and women who want to dedicate themselves fully to God and to help the Church in the faith formation of children, adolescents and adults. Nowadays, the men's section of the Society has a centre in almost every parish in Malta and Gozo. The activities of the Society extend to Australia, the United Kingdom, Albania, Sudan, Kenya and Peru. Every evening, after their normal day's work, the members of the Society open the centres for the catechetical formation of children and adolescents and occasionally for adults as well. This study was focused on classes for nine-year-olds attending their Confirmation class in which a total of 1667 children were enrolled in 2005. These attended four times a week for lessons of 30 minutes each.

Method

The research question of this study was, "What varied approaches to learning and teaching do catechists adopt in response to the reality of learner diversity in their classes?"

The study's exploratory research aim could best be achieved through qualitative research that would allow the participants to describe how, each in his own way, they approached the challenge of including all the children and how this was perceived by the different children in class (cf. Humphrey *et al.*, 2006).

Employing purposive sampling, six catechists were selected from six different M.U.S.E.U.M. centres on the basis of their being regarded by their superiors as actively trying to respond to learner diversity. Table 1 gives the characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1: Teaching experience and class taught by respondent catechists

Catechist	Teaching experience (years)	Occupation	No. of children in class	Number of lessons per week
C1	13	Teacher	18	4
C2	5	Teacher	42	4
C3	15	Teacher	18	2
C4	36	Manual labourer	21	4
C5	10	Skilled worker	19	6
C6	18	Teacher	17	4

NB: Please note:

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i) The three boys interviewed from each class in the sample will be referred to as B1, 2, 3 of 1-6: e.g. B3.5 = the third participant boy in C5's class.
ii) Ob = observation. Ob2.3 = second lesson observation at Centre3

Each catechist responded to a semi-structured interview aimed at eliciting a description of teacher experiences relevant to responsive teaching. Each interview took from an hour to an hour and a half. Each participant was observed for three lessons in order to examine directly how he responded to existing learner diversity. Lessons observed lasted around 30-40 minutes. Furthermore, three children from each class were interviewed in an attempt to explore to what extent lessons were meeting their needs and interests. Each interview took approximately half an hour.

All interview data was transcribed and lesson observations written up and ATLASti software was used for the qualitative and thematic analysis of the resulting data.

Various strategies were used to ensure that the data and its analysis reflected as truthfully as possible what was going on in M.U.S.E.U.M. classes as regards differentiated instruction. The use of multiple methods of data collection helped to capture the process of differentiation existing at these classes in a rigorous and valid manner (Cohen *et al*, 2001; Robson, 2005). The main author has also been a member of the Society for the last seventeen years and had first hand knowledge of similar situations. At the same time, during the course of the study, it was kept in mind that the research was as much about the researcher's own experience as it was about others (Vernon, 1999). An attempt was therefore made to avoid bias during the questioning and the writing up of the observation notes. Furthermore, an attempt was made to take note of all data including deviant cases (negative case analysis). This search

for negative cases was an important means of countering researcher bias (Robson, 2005).

Results

Seven main themes emerged from the data (Mizzi, 2007; See Figure 1). This paper forcuses on Theme 4, namely that the catechists strove to *create a supportive learning environment* in their classes. However, two other themes were closely related to this theme, namely themes 2 and 3 (see Figure 1): *Adoping caring and inclusive attitudes to all* and *Educating in values of solidarity* particularly towards children with individual educational needs (IEN).

Participants distinguished the learning environment at the M.U.S.E.U.M. class as being in contrast with that at school. The former was described as characterized by a feeling of a sense of community where involvement was expected from all and relationships, humour and affect cultivated, and a harmonious and 'safe' climate developed (see Figure 2).
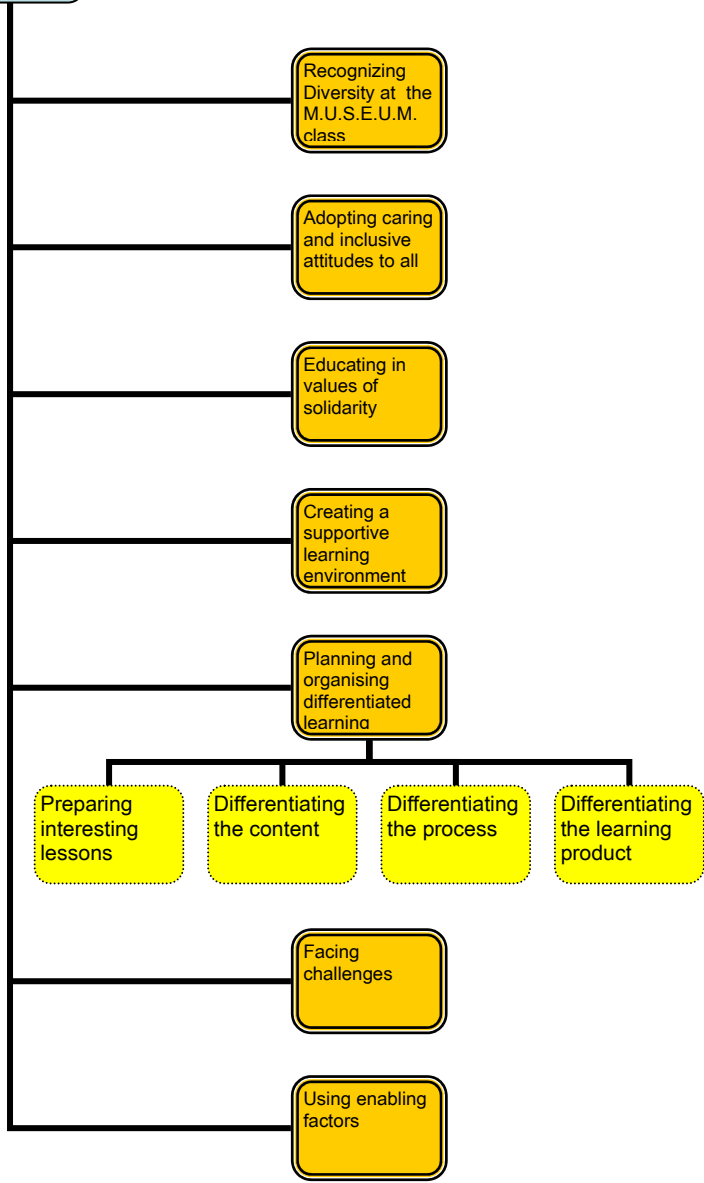
A learning environment in contrast with schooling

Table 2 gives a list of contrasts between the school and the MUSEUM environments. The catechists felt that: "There is a huge difference. Children certainly love M.U.S.E.U.M. more than school" (C6).

Three catechists (C1, C2 and C6), who were also school teachers, argued that at the M.U.S.E.U.M. class "we not only provide learning but also formation" (C2). "At school there is the pressure of the syllabus and of parents. You must teach for exams at school. At the M.U.S.E.U.M. you teach for life" (C6). Classes at the M.U.S.E.U.M. centres were not streamed by ability but were of mixed ability. Therefore, there were not the pressures of the parents who

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urged their child to study to pass to a better stream (C2 and C6).

Figure 1: Seven main themes

- Recognizing Diversity at the M.U.S.E.U.M. class
- Adopting caring and inclusive attitudes to all
- Educating in values of solidarity
- Creating a supportive learning environment
- Planning and organising differentiated learning
  - Preparing interesting lessons
  - Differentiating the content
  - Differentiating the process
  - Differentiating the learning product
- Facing challenges
- Using enabling factors

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Figure 2: Creating a supportive learning environment

An environment in contrast with schooling

Building a sense of community

- Striving for a sense of classroom community
- Expecting involvement from all
- Cultivating a personal relationship with each child
- Employing humour
- Cultivating a positive, affective atmosphere

Working for a harmonious and 'safe' climate

- Maintaining an organised physical environment
- Respecting classroom rules
- Cultivating a 'safe' climate
- Ensuring clear communication

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Table 2: Differences between a school class and the M.U.S.E.U.M. class

In a class at school	*In a M.U.S.E.U.M. class*
Classes (for 9-year-olds) are streamed by ability. Children of different religions may be present in class.	Classes are mixed in ability. But children have the same religion.
There is a curriculum with high stake exams.	There is a curriculum, but no formal exams.
Emphasis is on acquiring knowledge to pass exams.	Emphasis is on personal and social education and on forming Christian attitudes. Such formation is also pursued by catechists during leisure. They focus on establishing relationships with their learners.
A child attends for the whole day.	A child attended for a 30-minute lesson four times a week. There is less group work, but more extra-curricular activities, especially in summer. In contrast with school, one catechist, C3, felt that time was short so as to be able to diagnose particular disabilities.
Attendance is obligatory.	Attendance is also obligatory for the Confirmation class. However, the children seemed to perceive M.U.S.E.U.M. as more voluntary than school: they came with enthusiasm.
A teacher may regard teaching just as a job.	These catechists regarded their teaching as a vocation.

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In contrast with school, at the M.U.S.E.U.M. class there was very little writing and drawing (C6). This was liked by B3.5 (i.e. Boy Number 3 of the fifth class in the study), who had dyslexia: "At school we write but at the M.U.S.E.U.M. we do not."

Two catechists reported that the M.U.S.E.U.M. class was much less formal than school. For example, if a child came with a sleeveless shirt at the M.U.S.E.U.M., he would not be sent home the first time (C6). C1 argued that while at school there was a military type of discipline, "I see the M.U.S.E.U.M. class as a family, a group of friends", where everyone could feel safe, especially to make a mistake.

Two participants attempted to deliberately dissociate the M.U.S.E.U.M. class from schooling: C4 tried to show them that the workbook tasks were not homework: "Here is not school. Here is your home. Your second home." C2 and C6 believed that leisure time activities, particularly during the summer holidays, were crucial in helping the children realize that M.U.S.E.U.M. was different from school:

> As much as possible I try to remove the idea that M.U.S.E.U.M. is something obligatory, boring and routine, that needs to be done to receive the Sacraments. (C2)

One catechist, C2, reported that at the M.U.S.E.U.M. centre there was better access to ICT resources, both those of the centre and of many catechists who invested in their own personal resources. He believed that with regards to ICT at the M.U.S.E.U.M. there was "a better environment and a certain type of order."

Even though having less pressures of a standard curriculum and exams, the dilemma of teaching a specific curriculum versus adapting to children's needs was still an issue. One

catechist in fact reported that he expected his learners to fit into the curriculum. On the other hand, the more informal situation and lack of high stake exams at the M.U.S.E.U.M. class and the emphasis on character formation, led to more emphasis on personal and social education.

Building a sense of community

These catechists strived to build a **community spirit** in their classes:

> With children you are always building an environment of unity, tolerance and friendship in class. (C2)

> My measuring rod is always: what are we going to do so that everyone feels more together, that we are together….. (C3)

> If the group is united, they come for the group. They look for each other, they enjoy themselves. (C5)

They were indeed observed showing care for all children. For instance, they welcomed them individually as they entered the M.U.S.E.U.M. and inquired about those who were absent.

The M.U.S.E.U.M. class was a place where friends met. B1.3 enjoyed coming to this place because he met friends who attended different schools from his. B2.5 came happily to the M.U.S.E.U.M. "because I am with my friends." B1.2 reported: "After school I stop a bit from homework and meet my friends again." B1.6 liked the experience of praying together at the centre "because all of us children are united together." Both catechists and children mentioned the family feeling:

> We are like one family. (B3.2)

> The children feel like a family, one family. (C2)

> I see ourselves as a family, a group of friends. (C3)

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In this sense of community, **involvement was expected from all**:

> As much as possible, if there is an activity, everyone should participate. (C3)

For example, during Ob1.3 (i.e. the first observation in C3's class) a song was sung. The children clapped during the first stanza of the song, they stood up during the second, waved their hands during the third, and joined hands during the last stanza. All children were involved during the song, evidently in my feeling the odd one out. However, the catechist expected more involvement. Participation was excellent when at the end of the lesson the children were asked to put forward their prayers, again making me feel the odd one out.

Children who were in the lower streams at school "feel cosy and do not feel inferior to participate" (C2). A tool towards this aim was the skilful use of the questioning technique. Different questions were observed to be directed to different children. Higher order level questions were directed to the bright children, while questions requiring less effort were directed to children having lesser ability. When someone did not manage to answer, the catechist rephrased the question in a manner that he could answer.

These catechists regarded **a personal relationship** as vital in reaching out to all learners under their care and in setting a positive classroom environment:

> I love a personal relationship with the children. Rigidity bothers me. (C1)

> Building a relationship is of great importance. ….. That little relationship helps. It is that which gives life overall. And you feel it sometimes. (C5)

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> It is this personal contact that the children need so that I reach out to them. ….. To reach out to each child I need to talk to them all. … As they enter, I try to say a word to each of them. (C6)

The latter catechist was aware that during a lesson he might not have personal contact with each child. So he made it a point that in a week he talked to each one of them at least for some instances. C3's task after taking control of a larger class of children was that of developing a relationship with each child.

These catechists were observed striving to create and maintain personal contact with their children. For instance, when two children had to leave earlier, C3 attended to each of them, giving them their workbook, last lesson's corrected worksheets, and instructing them to ask their friends if they did not understand how to do next lesson's workbook task (Ob2.3). Another catechist, C4, was concerned that during a whole week he did not meet his children once in their class because they had the activities of the village/town feast. To maintain direct contact with them, he gathered them for some minutes in class after the activity was over.

Establishing a loving relationship with the children was regarded by these class catechists as an ingredient for an ideal catechist. When asked what was such an ingredient, C5 replied immediately:

> The relationship! The relationship! How you relate to them. Always. Always.

These participants believed that an aid to establishing such a relationship was playing time, during informal contact with the children. Similarly, the activities, like barbecues in summer, helped to reach out to them, provided there was direct contact with them:

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> If you are cooking and the children playing, there isn't that direct contact. It is that contact that the children need so that you reach them. The personal contact. (C6)

The observations confirmed the positive and joyful relationship this catechist had with the children.

These catechists cited four benefits of a caring relationship. They asserted that

> When you try to build a relationship with the children you come to know them. You come to know their character. (C5)

Then, during lessons, catechists could mention examples that were of relevance to the children's interests, such as regarding their pets, what happened at school, and what they did at home (C3). Such a relationship helped the catechist to learn about any individual educational needs the children might have (C1). Secondly, it made discipline easier:

> Even when you correct them, they accept it, because it has been done on the basis of love. Because of the good relationship. (C2)

Thirdly the children could find someone with whom they could open up:

> Because children do feel sad. They have things that concern them. Maybe they talk with me. But with the teacher who shouts at them they do not open up! (C1)

Finally, an important benefit and aim of establishing this personal relationship was that the catechist succeeded in the formation of the children:

> Here it is not only learning that we are imparting. Formation also. And formation is given through the relationship. (C5)

Establishing a personal relationship with each child was a source of satisfaction for these catechists. As one catechist, C3, who was also a teacher, put it:

> This is the thing I appreciate most. The personal relationship with each one. I am after this satisfaction everywhere, at school and with the other classes.

One boy, B3.2, confirmed that when the children behaved and the lesson progressed smoothly, his catechist visibly enjoyed himself and it was "the best day of his life. It shows … as he explains the lesson."

There was a striking agreement among the catechists that **a sense of humour** added to these close relationships. Four catechists reported that a sense of humour helped to get to know the children, to reach out to them, cultivated a "happy feeling" (C3) and a relaxed environment where "no one is tense" (C1) and everyone could participate and enjoy himself:

> I joke with the children now and then during the lessons. (C1)

> When I joke with them, then they open up. And I get to know them. (C3)

> Sometimes I tell them a joke. I keep them happy. … (The ideal catechist) should have a smile. Maybe sometimes this is missing, after a day's work. Children must see me with a smile.(C4)

> I think that even that smile and joke help to reach out to children. (C6)

They were in fact observed joking with the children. B1.3 said that during the first part of the lesson, his catechist loved to make them laugh a bit. B2.3 and B3.3 stated that, apart from learning, they enjoyed the jokes and humour that their catechist shared with them. B3.3 reported that at

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school joking on the part of the teacher was limited only to break times while "the catechist says a beautiful story … and starts to make us laugh …" B3.4 said his catechist "loved joking with them," both during leisure time and during the lesson.

The catechists strove to build a learning environment where **affect, prayerfulness, and motivation for learning** were cultivated. The centres were charged with positive learner affect:

> I think that the children feel at home at the M.U.S.E.U.M. Because they come with huge enthusiasm. (C2)

> I think that children enjoy coming. Also the fact that very often they come early. ….. The parents tell me, "He has a craze for coming to the M.U.S.E.U.M. (C4)

> They come willingly. The fact that they play and enjoy themselves. (C6)

The catechists attended to the emotional climate. For instance, B2.1 reported that his catechist knew from their expressions that they were not understanding, even if they did not raise their hands. The children reflected a positive affect: "I like everything that is said in class" (B2.4).

Prayer sessions were important in creating this atmosphere where children felt emotionally connected. There was a deliberate attempt to create a prayerful environment, as in this strategy for short prayer sessions held at the beginning of lessons during Lent and Advent:

> I prepare the class beforehand, I dim the light, with background music, so that when the children come they find the class ready. (C1)

The children referred specifically to these situations. B3.3 recalled a prayerful Pentecost celebration as an enjoyable

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lesson, particularly because of the affective atmosphere created.

There was also a deliberate focus on motivating the children. At Centre 1, everything that was mentioned by the catechist to sustain the lesson, tickled the children's imagination, and they researched it thoroughly. When they asked about something, the catechist used to tell them, "Try to discover yourselves!" Similarly, when asked a good question, C3 would reply, "I was expecting this question from you!" (B1.3)

Three catechists tried extrinsic motivators to make learning more enjoyable. C6 explained the rationale:

> If you want sweets you must pay attention. Therefore there is the motivation to love learning. He loves learning because he loves sweets, but one goes with the other.

He also made it a point to show them that such a prize was won fairly. One reason why B2.2 loved coming to M.U.S.E.U.M. was that some present was distributed now and then. Two catechists (C1 and C3) used a chart where marks were awarded for attendance, good behaviour, attending with the Society badge, and good workbook tasks. The first four children were rewarded. At Centre 1 children were responsible to operate the system - they had to see that no one cheated. The children were observed to want such a positive reinforcement. Six minutes from the start of the lesson, a child raised his hand and reminded the catechist to mark the chart (Ob2.3). And most children had come with the badge. B1.3 reported that the children strove to win this race. When asked what he liked most out of his lessons, B1.1 replied, "To move forward. The race. I am first now." Negative reinforcement was also used: "I am talking a lot and I am driven backwards in the race" (B2.1).

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Playing time was another important motivator: "Very often it is the football that encourages the children to come to M.U.S.E.U.M." (C6). Sometimes this privilege too was withdrawn for misbehaving children.

The findings of this section relate to the importance Tomlinson gives to the emotional aspect of learning - she adds knowing children's 'affect' in addition to their interests, readiness and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2003, 2006). For instance, catechists strove to create a sense of classroom community, where everyone was involved. And the positive affect existing between the catechists and the children helped the latter to be more fully engaged in their learning (Tomlinson, 2003). Catechists managed to enlist the children's interest by helping them to discover new interests by ensuring that what they encountered at the M.U.S.E.U.M. class was engaging and satisfying (Tomlinson, 2006). For example, C1 instigated them to do research, while at two other centres a new hobby, fretwork, was introduced and fostered.

Agreeing with Bartolo *et al.* (2007), a key element of this caring and supportive learning community was a supportive relationship with the children. Catechists deliberately sought to cultivate a personal relationship with their learners, 'to connect' with them. This was also an important finding of Bartolo *et al.* (2005): teachers interviewed talked about how they strove towards establishing supportive relationships in their classrooms. And such a solid positive relationship together with knowledge of the students provided the basis for the differentiations in instruction (Bender, 2002; Mizzi, 2007). In line with Bartolo *et al.* (2005), such a personal relationship between the catechist and the learner was used as a motivation for more effort.

It is interesting that this study has also highlighted the role of humour on the part of the catechist in aiding in the generation of an environment characterized by a feeling of a sense of community.

Working for a harmonious and 'safe' climate

The participant catechists attempted to keep an organised physical classroom environment, foster respect for classroom rules, cultivate a 'safe' climate, and ensure clear communication.

These catechists believed that an **organised physical environment** helped to create and foster a positive atmosphere in class. Things were in fact observed to be organized. For example, desks were not cluttered with books, and rooms were adequately ventilated. Noticeboards were kept up to date, with suitable pictures and colourful posters.

Despite the informal atmosphere, the catechists felt the need to have **rules** to ensure harmony in the classroom:

> "You have now played. Now let me deliver the lesson." And they understand me. (C6)

They emphasized with the children that they should raise their hands before speaking, thus respecting others who were talking: "You say many good things, but you must learn to raise your hand!", C1 said to one boy (Ob2.1). Some minutes earlier the boy was given a nasty look for not raising his hand.

Five children reported that they expected an environment where rules were respected. When asked if they wanted something more out lessons, two children replied that they wanted their classmates, including themselves, to behave

well (B1.5 and B3.6). The idea that classroom rules should be negotiated with the children was put forward (B3.4).

At Centre 4 corrections were observed to be carried out in great harmony, without disturbing the flow of lessons. Use was made of non-verbal communication to attract wandering attention. B3.4 confirmed: "If someone talks, he doesn't shout a lot, but tells him, 'Be quiet', and he calms him down further."

Four catechists reported trying to create and foster a **psychologically safe environment,** especially a classroom climate where learners felt safe to speak up and make mistakes:

> The children must be raised in this climate: "Listen, here everyone can talk, can make a mistake. Even I make mistakes." (C1)

> Children should know that they are safe, have a certain security. That you show them that you love them, and you care for them. ….. If the children are relaxed, they are more spontaneous to speak up. Because they won't speak if they know that I would laugh at them or be angry with them. I am thus giving them the idea that, "We are here to learn ….. If you know everything, you do not need to keep learning." (C3)

When someone made a mistake which was worth laughing at, C3 explained that they "laughed because of the way it occurred but not at the person." During Ob1.3 he reprimanded a child: "We do not laugh when someone makes a mistake!" During Ob2.1, C1 drank coffee in a relaxed manner; he was sending the message that the children should be relaxed. B1.6 showed the need children had for a safe environment: the ideal catechist "does not get angry with the children and takes things calmly."

Catechists encouraged those learners who had made a mistake when answering to a question: "Good, you have tried! It is good that you try. I appreciate it" (Ob1.4). And to those who did not know the answers, C4 said: "Don't worry, tell me!" No ridicule existed. B3.4 reported that when they got a question wrong, he told them, "The best thing is that you have tried it out, and you have not given up." This approach was beneficial to a boy at Centre 1 who had a speech problem to express himself better.

Two catechists tried to provide a safe climate where everyone was up to the level of the activity. When devising groupwork, C3 reported that he took care that low-ability children were not put at 'risk', in the sense that they might not be up to the level of the work and ridiculed by their mates. When C5 tried to involve a withdrawn learner, his concern was that of not embarrassing the child:

> I try not to make him feel cornered. Because then I am concerned … knowing that he won't answer. Then I would not like to see him embarrassed in front of his peers.

He acknowledged their right to be withdrawn, and respected it. But he tried to involve them in lessons either by asking a simple question, or by continuing the story, or asking for their feedback, or by joking with them.

During most of the classroom observations, a peaceful atmosphere existed. On particular occasions even the sounds of the birds on nearby trees were captured by the recorder.

At Centre 3 the children were educated to play in a harmonious and safe environment in the playground. The message communicated to them was:

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> You cannot make noise here. You cannot shout. There is no need to play roughly here because we can get hurt. Because we do not enjoy ourselves. Because we cause damage. (C3)

This catechist reported, "We have a generation of children who have been raised in this climate. And therefore it's bearing fruit." Because of the physical limitations of the playground, rules existed during playing time with the purpose of safeguarding their safety. C3 also insisted with the children that they must care for each other when going to their class upstairs so that no one was hurt. Children were observed proceeding from the ground to their class in silence. C3 was aware that during the Christmas Eve procession the children felt lost and scared. So he organised one for his class at the centre. During this procession all children were involved and felt a sense of community.

In this supportive environment, three catechists ensured **clarity in communication**: "I feel that we need to have this quality of communication: that of sending and receiving feedback all the time" (C1).

Two catechists reported choosing their words to be understood by the children. C3 believed that a quality of an ideal catechist was that of

> being able to communicate with the children. In the sense that they understand what you are telling them. We say that you have gone down to their own level.

C4 reported that he asked a lot of questions to make sure that everyone was understanding (he was observed doing so):

> Sometimes I get into the habit of saying some word. And I would be thinking that I am being understood, when I wouldn't be.

C3 argued that besides speaking at a level at which the children understood, "even you must understand them, knowing what they are saying." He tried to frequently ask the children, "Listen, is it this that are you trying to say? Please repeat because I am not understanding you!" Clear communication skills on the part of this catechist were observed. For instance, he spoke clearly and slowly, repeating the key words. This was how the catechist could help the children understand better (B3.5). When he assigned a workbook task, he wanted everyone to be clear about what they were going to do (Ob2.3). So he was observed dedicating the last five minutes of the lesson to explain in detail the assigned activities. In a spontaneous play with one boy, the latter was urged to speak out loudly and clearly.

As argued in the literature (Tomlinson, 2006), the findings illustrate that supportive classroom environments where learning takes place are ones that are safe and consistently affirm that the learner is accepted and acceptable as he or she is. The educator ensures clear communication, shows respect for and believes in each individual, and strives to get to know each person.

The results also confirm that since order is necessary for the learner-centred flexibility needed to meet the needs of the diverse learners, positive learning environments are orderly and efficient. Such environments are enhanced when learners are educated to feel a sense of ownership for the success of the classroom (Tomlinson, 2006), especially in respecting classroom rules.

Conclusion

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This study explored the strategies catechists in an informal learning environment use to reach out to all children. It has served, however, to raise challenges about the practice of inclusion in schools. It has demonstrated, for instance, that inclusion is first of all a social issue. For instance, for students to feel included it seems that one of the priorities has to be the creation of a learning community where personal relationships between the teacher and the students and among students are valued. Examples are given of how these catechists sought to know their children and their background also by using interaction during their leisure activities (Mizzi, 2007). It was within this caring relationship that the catechists then also adapted their questions and work expectations to enable each one to participate actively and successfully. The deliberate use of humour for creating a relaxed atmosphere is also a striking finding not reported in the literature on differentiation.

Another important principle that was highlighted was the importance of making learning relevant to the children's lives (Mizzi, 2007). This concern seems to have acted as a differentiating principle as the catechists thought of different examples that were linked to the learners' different backgrounds.

Catechists who were also teachers in the schools felt that the school culture, based on examinations, did not effectively allow the application of the above principles: "You must teach for exams at school. At the M.U.S.E.U.M. you teach for life" (C6). Maybe, then, we should seriously rethink the use of examinations in our educational systems.

There is also scope for more comparative research of informal and formal education settings to discover more systemic elements that impact on the culture and behaviour

of both educators and learners towards more exclusive or inclusive practice.

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