

“Let Me Dream”

Transforming educational futures:
some comments on the education of
Maltese background students in Australia

Dr RONALD SULTANA
Faculty of Education
University of Malta

Forum for Migration and Multicultural Issues
Faculty of Arts
Victoria University of Technology

Occasional Paper No. 1

The paper "Let Me Dream": Transforming Educational Futures' was presented to the **Forum for Migration and Multicultural Issues** in November 1993 at the Victoria University of Technology (VUT) by Dr Ronald Sultana from the University of Malta. In his presentation Dr Sultana responded to the report, 'To Learn More Than I Have': **The Educational Aspirations and Experiences of the Maltese in Melbourne** (Terry, Borland and Adams 1993). This latter report auspiced by the Maltese Community Council of Victoria, and researched by a team from the VUT, provided 'a fine grain' study of the relationship between students and parents of Maltese background and schools'. In his paper Ronald Sultana draws on his own experience, as well as recent theories, to make important points about ethnicity and schooling, with particular reference to the Maltese background community in Australia. His powerful and insightful presentation to a forum involving university staff, students and community members, confirmed the need for urgent action to support Maltese background students with their education. This paper is intended as the first in a series focusing on issues to do with social participation and difference to be produced by the **Forum for Migration and Multicultural Issues**.

Les Terry (series editor)
Forum for Migration and Multicultural Issues

**Published by the Faculty of Arts
Victoria University of Technology
P.O Box 14428, MMC, Melbourne
3000 Australia**

**Contact: Les Terry
Department of Social and Cultural Studies**



Setting the scene

The issue of under achievement in schooling has been a major concern for educators in recent decades. Yet, despite the work that has been done on this issue, there has been little progress made in addressing the problem, to the extent that significant groups of students still fail to flourish intellectually in school environments. Moreover, whether we are looking at the United States, Europe, or Australia, working class students, students of ethnic minority background and girls, are still over represented in the figures on early school leavers. Of course, we need to be careful about treating these groups as simple and homogenised categories. In looking at the issue of schooling, we also need to recognise the complex and dynamic relationships between class, gender and ethnicity and how these factors combine to determine life chances.

The report I will be critically engaging with in this paper, **'To Learn More than I Have': The Educational Aspirations and Experiences of the Maltese in Melbourne** (Terry, Borland & Adams, 1993) examines the issue of difference and schooling, as it applies to a particular group of students who under invest in education, namely children of Maltese background. What I will attempt to do in this paper is to weave a narrative, drawing on the Terry et al. study, as well as on my own research and experiences in education, to make sense of the lived realities of this group of people. Needless to say, this is my story, my interpretation, informed as it might be by my interaction with people and ideas. I cannot claim to represent the voices of the subjects we are considering, namely students and parents of Maltese background in Melbourne, but I think that it is important for researchers to support the claims of such groups for a better chance in education.

Consequently, I hope to offer some critical reflections to members of the Maltese-Australian community, in all its diversity, as it makes its claim for a just education. I propose to offer my thoughts in the following way. I will first introduce you to my own personal history. I do this in order to bridge the gap between the writer and readers; a gap which traditionally constructs me as an expert and you as a recipient of my knowledge. Of course, as a number of theorists have shown us, nothing can be further from the truth. Both you and I have a great deal of knowledge to share with one another that will allow us to critically confront the issues at hand. Clearly, such a confrontation will involve us in a struggle which has to do with better futures for ourselves and our children, in a context of social relations which are marked by injustices and imbalances in power between different groups. I refuse to construct our interaction as yet another instance of unequal relations. I therefore wish to engage with you in such a way that your voices, experiences and interpretations can emerge, so that finally, the story of what happens to these children in schools will be constructed democratically and co-operatively.

Once I have introduced myself to you, I will reflect on the issue of why Maltese-background students fail or under invest in schools. As we will discover, there are many possible answers to this question, and to the one which logically follows it, this being, what is to be done? Much in the field of the social sciences is tentative and exploratory in nature. Often results of research can be generalised only with great difficulty. At best, what I can offer, in conjunction with the study of the Victoria University team, is to illuminate the context in which the marginalisation of Maltese background students takes place. As well as this, it will be important to highlight progressive educational ideas and practices which activists have, with some degree of success, tried elsewhere.

Placing myself in the picture

At this point in my journey, I find myself as a lecturer at the University of Malta, with research, lecturing, and publications experience in Malta, the United Kingdom, France, the United States, Italy, New Zealand, and now Australia. I have received awards for my work, and I could be considered to be the fulfilment of the dream expressed by many parents interviewed in the Terry et al. study, who want to see their children succeed in education. My parents, both Maltese, are proud of me, and their dream of having one of their children 'make it' in the academic world has come true. But for many years, my parents and I had to grapple with the fact that my 'success' in education would always remain just a dream.

Let me explain, for I believe that some of my experiences connect with the way school life is lived by the under achieving students who constitute our present focus. The difficult moments I highlight from my own narrative have provided me with insights into the experiences that form part of the daily life of many of the students who participated in the Victoria University research. I particularly remember the painful transition between primary and secondary school; feeling lost and inadequate because Maltese was no longer used as the medium of instruction in the upper levels of our schooling system. Fields of knowledge, which I had previously grasped, now slipped away from me, as I tried with some difficulty to learn in and through English.

In the meantime, my school friends, sons (I attended an all boys school) of the professional managerial elite, whose home language was English, despite the fact they were also Maltese, moved rapidly ahead. Consequently, I was considered to be — and soon believed myself to be — 'slow', 'less intelligent' and 'a problem student'. I will never forget that the word used so often to describe me was 'distracted'. And of course, I was considered to be totally responsible for this failing of being unable to attentively participate in the long and arduous process of learning.

In my second year of secondary school, waiting for that magical birthday which was to transform me into a 'teenager', I felt great humiliation as a result of failing most of my test papers, and my parents being told that I should be transferred to another school. However, I got over this labelling and with the help of my parents who, incredibly enough believed in me and not in the Jesuit fathers, struggled to improve my English and gain success in the ruthless game of schooling.

When I became a student at university, I faced fresh challenges as I was 'apprenticed' to British academics who often looked down on, or perhaps worse, did not even acknowledge the dissonance between their world and mine. Reflecting on this moment in my life, it was apparent to me that these academics saw their cultural and linguistic frameworks as being the only ones of value. A form of 'cultural imperialism', Said would no doubt point out. This experience inhibited me from real participation in tutorials and other settings when I later went to study in England. Interestingly, I had obtained a First Class Honours in English in my final year of school in Malta, only to be told in Britain that my way of speaking English was quite incomprehensible, and that I needed to modify my accent.

Ironically, when I finally went to New Zealand, English speakers there were claiming that they spoke the 'correct' way! As a consequence of my experiences in school and also within the university systems, issues to do with the relationship between educational achievement and linguistic difference are important concerns for me. My interest in this area is a continuing one, as I watch my sons start their journey through school. In this process they are struggling with a linguistic legacy which is both enriching and challenging. This is because my wife is French and speaks her language to my two sons, while I speak English. They learn Maltese from me, my grandparents, and at school. They are becoming familiar with Italian through television. How they survive and do not give up on language, and on us, is beyond me at times. But their experience, and the personal narrative that I have drawn upon, are useful in considering the situation in which many students of Maltese background find themselves in schools in Australia today.

Why do Maltese-background children fail or under invest in schools?

Why do Maltese-background children fail or under invest in schools? As I indicated earlier, this is a complex question. The Victoria University research team has done well to emphasise that we cannot reduce the answer to a simplistic, reductionist one where 'Maltese culture', however that is conceived, can account for the empirical facts under consideration. The members of the research team have also been correct to insist on a qualitative research methodology which provides us with 'a fine grained picture' of the complex way in which class, gender and ethnic backgrounds and histories interact dynamically to determine life chances for different groups of people.

We do, however, need to know the boundaries of the problem and quantitative data will tell us the extent of the lack of representation of ethnic minority students in the upper levels of the schooling system. But we also require a picture of the terrain which we are exploring, and to do this, we have to cross borders by talking with students and parents, as they go about constructing their understandings of the different social sites, such as schools, in which they live and work.

The results of the research team coincide with those of many other studies carried out over the past three decades in a number of countries, which also suggest that there is nothing particularly or intrinsically 'wrong' or 'deficient' with students of Maltese background; even when this group features in great numbers in the low retention and participation rates in education.

Certainly, there are the collective experiences and recollections that Maltese immigrants have brought with them from their homeland which influence their perceptions of education. One cannot, for instance, ignore the potential influence of the fact that secondary education for all was only introduced in Malta in 1970, and that tertiary education has always been exclusive and elitist (Sultana, 1991, 1992). These and other experiences, however, will not suffice to explain the statistics presented in the Terry et al. report. Let us look at the way low retention and participation rates have been explained in the past, and the political and educational implications of each of these positions.

Students as deficits

For a large part of this century, differential achievement in schools has been explained by pointing the finger at the monadic individual (Bisseret, 1979). From the point of view of such theories, students own intellectual deficiencies led to under achievement in education. Around this basic understanding of intelligence was constructed an educational edifice which distinguished between more and less able students. Intelligence tests, school exam results, teachers' reports, all legitimised the idea that failure in school was determined by 'brains' which some people just happened to have more of than others.

As the Australian sociologist Connell (1977) has pointed out some time ago, the 'brains ideology' dominated the thinking about educational achievement until researchers began to highlight the fact that there were curious, regular patterns, in the figures to do with success and failure in education. These researchers showed that it was students particularly from working class backgrounds that were leaving school at an early age (Jencks et al. 1973; Halsey, Heath & Ridge 1980). In a later period, race, ethnicity and gender also became important concerns for researchers, as they looked more closely at the broad patterns of educational retention and participation.

Nevertheless, despite the obvious class differences in educational attainment, some researchers still held the view that deficiencies in intelligence, genetic stock of a particular race or group, cultural environments, diets or parenting, could explain educational under achievement. We can easily understand how useful such theories were to those who sought to legitimise their colonial, imperial, class policies by referring to 'objective' and 'scientific' findings! Such constructions of the problem to explain differential achievement carried with them a logical 'solution',

namely compensatory programs, which sought to make up for the deficits of the child or its environment. The Head Start Program in the United States is one example of such programs, all of which, it can be argued, have generally failed. This failure is to be explained by the theory on which such programs were based, as I will explain later.

The Victoria University team explicitly contests aspects of this deficit view, and, in my opinion, does so quite correctly. While the team does not problematise the issue of 'race', they do question the way we think about the issue of ethnicity. The approach taken in the study lays the foundation for a more sophisticated and democratic understanding of culture, seen as an ensemble of tools of discourses that groups employ towards exchanging information, expressing states of consciousness, forming bonds of solidarity, and forging common strategies of action (Bowles and Gintis, 1988, p.22). Cultures, in this sense, cannot be deficient, except from a pretentious outlook of the dominant culture, which posits itself as an invisible norm by which other cultures and ways of knowing are judged.

Interestingly, as stated, the Victoria University research confirms studies carried out by many others, including my work with working class parents in Malta, which have also shown that parents, whatever their class location, are generally interested in their children's education, and make great efforts to support, or to use family and other networks to ensure the educational success of their children (Sultana, 1992; Wolfendale, 1992).

While, in some instances, working class, ethnic minority parents might not always know how to do this in effective ways, and their knowledge of the way the school works is not always complete, it is apparent that these deficits are socially constructed. This is because it is often the case that schools and teachers do little to familiarise such parents with the expectations of the system. Needless to say, few schools go out of their way to debate educational matters on parents' own terms and within contexts that would allow for a genuine exchange of views.

Modern psychology and the issue of intelligence

The ideology of meritocracy — that those who have intelligence and ability, and who make the effort, succeed at school, work and life generally — is so deeply entrenched in our societies that few people stop to really question this commonsense view of the world; with the result that parents and children often end up blaming themselves for their lack of success (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). While there is always a degree of agency that we have in determining our life patterns, it is as much apparent, as our sociological research suggests, that life opportunities are structured by powerful historical and social forces which favour certain groups and not others.

Some of you might still be asking: but surely it is the children's fault, or that of their parents, if students fail? If only they were more intelligent, or more motivated, or made more effort with their school work, they would become the 'best professors in Australia', to cite what one of the parents told the research team at Victoria University.

Let me then share with you a simple idea, though one with revolutionary implications, which should assist in dispelling these thoughts. Developments in what we know about human potential indicate that we barely develop a tenth of our intellectual ability, and that the unfolding of human capacity is limited mainly by external circumstances — such as social hierarchy and cultural attitudes — rather than by our 'brains'. Given the 'right' motivation which, Brown and Lauder (1991:15) for example argue, is socially determined, a university education is something which all can attain.

This latter view is supported by comparative evidence which shows significant differences in the proportion of students across a number of advanced industrial societies participating in higher education. Such a situation needs to be explained in terms of social, cultural, and institutional arrangements between nation states.

This is because it is often ‘social hierarchy and the world views associated with such social arrangements, that restricts the unfolding of human capacity, and not the limitations of natural endowment’ (Sabel, 1982, p.244). With this in mind, for example, how are we to explain the fact that 40% of all Maltese background children enter Universities in neighbouring New Zealand? (Dalli, 1993, television interview), while a much smaller percentage enter higher education in Australia.

I am not arguing that there are no differences in intelligence, or in types of intelligence, or in learning styles. Some students will learn some things faster and more thoroughly than others through the use of one or another type of pedagogy. Rather, what I am arguing is that we know so little about intelligence that it would be foolish for us to continue to measure it (remember the Jesuit fathers who tried to do that to me, and, may I humbly point out, failed!). It would be equally foolish to underestimate children’s ability to learn. A student who fails to learn in one particular situation, with a teacher using a particular pedagogy, will ‘miraculously’ grasp the concept in another situation, within or outside of school. In other words, children progress in different ways, but all have it in them to achieve. That is the key lesson taught to us by Vygotsky who, unlike Piaget, taught of failures in learning as failures in pedagogy rather than deficits in learners.

Unfortunately, despite some very positive advances, school systems, whatever the rhetoric, are still generally organised on the premise that few are capable of significant practical and academic achievements, of creative thought and skill, and of taking responsibility for informed judgements. Rather than focusing on the individual’s attributes — intellectual, cultural or otherwise — to explain under achievement and under investment of specific groups, we need instead to look at the institutional and social contexts in which the learning process is taking place.

Institutional and social contexts of learning

Therefore, if we are to explain why Maltese background children in Melbourne are not doing as well as other groups in schools, we cannot, I have argued, talk about deficits in intelligence, in parents, or in ethnic cultures. Rather, we need to talk about deficits in the institutional contexts of learning, in the inability of monocultural schools to develop what Walker (1988), in his superlative study of similarly underachieving students in Sydney, refers to as ‘touchstone discourse’; that common ground of communicative openness where students’ class and ethnic experiences, language, lifestyle, values, and preferred learning styles are not only recognised and acknowledged, but valued and catered for.

I would like us to consider these issues not only rationally, but also to get angry and emotional about them. For schools which do not value their students, which fail to develop children’s potential, are guilty of one of the worst forms of violence, of what Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) have referred to as ‘symbolic violence’. This is the violence perpetrated by systems which unilaterally impose themselves, representing as they do the dominant frame of reference, on one and all. You either accept this curriculum, this pedagogy, this world view, this language, or else you are labelled a failure. It is violent because, so powerful are the people who do the labelling, that we end up internalising those labels, and become deeply convinced that we are, indeed, not capable of ever achieving anything in life. It is a powerful form of violence because the rules of the game are set by the system itself according to its own criteria, and thus it becomes difficult to resist.

I can easily get angry and emotional here about this situation because I too was a victim of this labelling. My five year old boy, who has to juggle four languages and who has to do a lot of integrating before he can handle reading and writing, has also been labelled a ‘slow learner’ by his caring, if misguided teacher. But it is not sufficient to get angry and emotional. It is important to channel these feelings constructively and strategically, so schools become places where our children can develop and fulfil their potential.

In this regard, our strategies for change have to be based on a thorough understanding of how schools work, for it is only then that we can find those cleavages that allow us to enter and make our voices heard. It is impossible,

of course, to make that kind of analysis in this context. I do think it is appropriate, however, to make a few suggestions for the development of democratic educational institutions and practices.

I suggest that we need to understand that schools are bureaucratic institutions, with all the good and bad associations that the word 'bureaucracy' can conjure up. They process people, often impersonally, and have set rules and procedures which have a tendency to fossilise over time, and which acquire a legitimacy and solidity that hardly ever seem to need justification. Like other bureaucracies, schools are organised hierarchically, and the bearers of the roles in this hierarchy often find themselves burdened by a ready-made 'script' of actions, values, judgements and so on. Innovations, creativity, spontaneity, responsiveness to new situations and groups are all limited by this fact.

If the Maltese, or any other ethnic minority group is to make its voice heard in such a bureaucracy, they would be well advised to have a guide, preferably from among them — so that interests are truly represented and safeguarded. Such a person or persons would act as mediators with the state's department of education, the school's principal and teachers. These persons would know the language spoken by the bureaucracy, have an intimate knowledge of how the system works, and have status and power to be heard. These mediators would be path openers; ultimately, their role would be to make it easier for marginalised groups to acquire a 'voice'. Certainly, it will be necessary to carefully work out the relationships between 'representatives' and their constituents, so that all voices are able to take their rightful place in debates about schooling.

My understanding of schools is guided by another important factor. Schools are not only bureaucracies, they consciously and/or unconsciously, represent specific social and political interests. They are, as the authors of the Report 'To Learn More than I Have' (Terry et al 1983), represented them, selecting and stratifying mechanisms, inclusive of some groups and exclusive of others. Schools are communities that are socially constructed in specific ways, generally by the more powerful interests in the local and national community who thereby seek to satisfy their own agendas. These powerful interests are class-based over and above all else, although, as I have stated, class interacts in complex and dynamic ways with gender and ethnicity, so that most social institutions can be characterised as valuing white, male, middle class ways of knowing.

But, it is also important to remember that schools, like other social institutions, are sites of struggle and contestation over ideas and resources. They are places where different interests clash as each group tries to establish its own agendas and programs; to promote its understanding of the world. Of course, this struggle is a violent one because power is differentially distributed across different groups in a society. As the Victoria University research team quite rightly asks, why is it that the Maltese community has not succeeded in establishing their agendas in schools, despite its size and long-standing presence? Precisely because of this power imbalance. But also because of the lack of understanding as to where to direct frustration and anger. It is not the case of children failing in schools but, I suggest, schools failing children.

Therefore, rather than looking internally and guiltily at itself, where possible the Maltese community should use its ethnic ascription, as it has done back in its homeland, to generate cohesion and focus. If used capably and wisely such an identity position could, with the help of the kind of mediation I suggested earlier, penetrate a notoriously impenetrable institution. This will need to be done out of a sense of justice, using a language of rights that the state acknowledges, even if it so often betrays such sentiments.

A third point I would like to make about my understanding of schools, is that they are institutions which are connected to the wider social order. When young people attend schools, the larger context surrounding them makes its impact in a complex manner. If we are to understand why some students do not invest in schools, we have to think about the way they construct their understanding of the usefulness and relevance of that schooling. This is where their class, ethnic and gender identities play an overwhelmingly important part, and if we are to transform educational futures, we also have to work closely with these students and their parents — as Terry and his associates have attempted to do — in order to see what they value.

Nevertheless, one aspect which I felt the research team could have focused more upon, is the centrality of class over and above ethnicity, in the formation of educational and career aspirations. Students from working class backgrounds (and the majority of participants in the research project came from such an occupational group) use material from their close and extended family life, as well as from their experience of being Maltese in Australia, and of being male or female within that context, in order to make sense of their past, present, and possible futures.

In my research in Malta, and it may well be the case with Maltese background families in Australia, I have found that many working class students and parents consider formal schooling irrelevant as they prefer the apprenticeship route. This is because the kind of learning offered in acquiring a trade makes sense to them. Being on the job places them closer to the point where hiring is so often effected. Uncertainty about material resources, for instance, can lead working class students to grab the first employment opportunity that comes their way, especially when the labour market is tight and the economy is in recession (Sultana, 1989).

There is also plenty of evidence to suggest that working class attitudes to work and careers is based on the belief that it is best to gain access to a particular job and then, in the words of one of the students interviewed in the Terry et al. study, 'work my way up' (p.51). Long-term investment in a game called schooling appears even less enticing when credentials no longer guarantee jobs, let alone good jobs. As sociological research has shown, credentials are only a first step in the penetration of lucrative sectors in the labour market.

The importance of other qualities, such as class, gender, ethnicity, race, networks, increases in proportion to the burgeoning number of students with credentials. (Ashton and Maguire, 1980; Sultana, 1990). Australian society, as in most other countries, is after all, predicated on hierarchy, and if the vast majority of students are successful at school new social arrangements will be necessary. How then would society sort, mark, park and store this unlimited pool of talent? Indeed, Fine and Rosenberg (1983, p.259) argue that 'many adolescents who leave school are academically and intellectually above-average students, keenly aware of the contradictions between academic learning and lived experiences, critical of the meritocratic ideology promoted in their schools, and cognisant of race/class/gender discrimination both in school and in the labour force'.

My contention is that young people from the margins are aware of this, even though they do not articulate such processes in the same way as I and other educational theorists might. They note that the odds are heavily stacked against them and prefer to 'drop out' before they are in fact dropped by the schooling system.

The following reminiscence from my school days illustrates some of the processes of exclusion that working class and ethnic minority students experience. There was a word which cropped up in a reading lesson during the first year of secondary school at the Jesuit college. The word was 'sponge', and I read it as 'spaunje', which is the way my mother used to refer to it. Everyone laughed! I never again volunteered a piece of knowledge from home which, I learnt quickly, was at every level and in every subject, the 'wrong knowledge' from the 'wrong culture'. If I wanted to make it, to become somebody in that school, I had to renounce my home, my roots, myself.

Indeed, the observation of classroom processes, which could be a next step in solving the puzzle as to why Maltese background students under achieve at school, does tend to demonstrate the extent to which students from working class and ethnic minority backgrounds find their realities, languages and dignities undermined. This is not simply a question of the professional quality of teachers present, but the relation between teachers and the dominant classes and cultures in the larger community. It is these kinds of experiences which lead students to develop educational and occupational career dispositions and career strategies. As Harvey (1985, p.275) has pointed out for the Australian context, such experiences force students to,

... initiate a process of differentiation and to choose early school leaving in order to retain control over their future. Some of these students continue to strive for academic success but become early school leavers in order to avoid even more demanding courses which would further undermine their sense of dignity. Others develop a deep alienation from school and adopt resistance and withdrawal modes of accommodation while waiting for the end of compulsory schooling to come.

What is to be done?

The challenge of changing the situation reported in the Terry, Borland and Adams study is not easy. On the plus side, Victoria is a place where languages education is on the agenda and where there have been some serious attempts to cater for minority ethnic groups in schools. Of course, there is always an assimilationist agenda in much multicultural discourse, which means that we must start talking of critical or resistant multiculturalism, and of the right for 'difference' rather than 'diversity' in schools (McLaren, 1992). In today's global climate of conservatism and 'new right' resurgence, every effort must be made to consolidate and extend such politics of difference. The Terry et al. report notes that such politics have been more successful with some ethnic groups, and less with others, including with the numerically strong community of Maltese in Melbourne. This, rightly, gives us all cause for concern. While the Maltese share with other ethnic groups the marginality that class and minority ethnic status impose, we still need to inquire more deeply into the specificity of their situation.

Language is only one of the starting points, and I would caution the community about the bewitching effect of language, in the sense that it generally subsumes other important issues, and can even distract from more central problems to do with identity and participation in education (Corson, 1992, p.65). The link between language, identity, and educational achievement is an important, though complex and messy one. Much has been written about this issue, and we have moved away from a view of bilingualism as detrimental to the child's cognitive and educational development, to one which sees it as generally advantageous, as long as certain conditions are met.

Up until recently, mother tongue maintenance was considered to be an obstacle to learning. However, today we are insisting on the importance of consolidating the first language of ethnic minority students. Indeed, there is a growing consensus that the child's early education should take place through the medium of its mother tongue, and that the dominant language should not be introduced before the age of eight or nine. This, it is argued, helps build the child's academic self-confidence and identity, besides laying a language foundation which cannot otherwise be guaranteed.

Reviewing a large number of research reports on the subject, Corson has argued that it is 'very important that the minority child's first language is given maximum attention up to the stage of middle school so that skill in using it to manipulate abstractions develops and so that it can be used to perform the cognitive operations necessary for acquiring a second language' (1992, p.58). Unless we do this, an unjust situation could arise where we expect minority children 'to perform equally well in an educational setting without the linguistic wherewithal necessary for competing on an equal footing with others' whose first language is the dominant language (Corson, 1992, p.50).

The language situation for the Maltese in Melbourne seems to be rather complex, with different groups claiming quite different things about their sense of identity, and their ability to handle both Maltese and English. It would be foolhardy of me to try to ignore such differences and to suggest a language policy for the whole Maltese community. But perhaps the time is ripe for this community to come up with a policy of language use for itself. If that is going to happen, the community must be guided by a sophisticated understanding of the way language interacts with education. For instance, it appears clear from the report that Maltese is used only, or predominantly, in the home.

This means that since Maltese is not a language of wider communication, Maltese background students may arrive in schools with their first language relatively under-developed in certain school-linked contexts, styles and functions of use. At the same time, their knowledge of English could be limited to a small range of functions, often related to passive activities such as television viewing and the like. These and other similar complexities need to be addressed seriously and systematically as the Maltese community tries to look for answers and formulate a language policy.

But a language policy has to connect not only with schools, but also with the status of the Maltese, as an ethnic minority group within the larger Australian community. A strong sense of identity does not only grow from a

recognition and affirmation of linguistic cultures, but also develops from a commonly articulated vision of a community's rightful place in the body politic. Bilingual teachers can be eventually placed in schools; students can, in time, be offered a schooling which connects with their language and cultural experiences; schools can, as a result of struggle, open up to the participation of ethnic minority parents.

But while these will improve the situation, they are only battles to be won in a larger war to be fought for general emancipation. Indeed, these battles are milestones along the way towards a more equitable distribution of power and resources in Australian society. If our visions are not wide enough for this, we could discover that our activities are doomed to failure. Our adolescents, for instance, will be less motivated to use Maltese if they, as Maltese-Australians, do not feel a sense of pride. Social pressures will pull them towards the dominant language to the extent that they can use it, and these pressures may frustrate schools' attempts to use the minority language for instruction (Corson, 1992, p.59).

I therefore conclude my paper, by reaffirming my belief that it is the Maltese community which needs to generate internal cohesion, alliances with other ethnic minority groups, and organised grass roots activism in order to become more in charge of the schooling process. In this process, Maltese-Australians will have a leading role, since they are the experts about their own situation. The Terry, Borland and Adams study provides some of the understandings and ammunition required to engage in political mobilisation in earnest. I hope that my response to their excellent study will similarly go some way in further empowering the Maltese background community to transform its educational and civic futures in this country.

References

- Ashton, D.N. & McGuire, M.J. (1980) 'The function of academic and non-academic criteria in employers' selection strategies', *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, Vol. 8 (2)
- Bisseret, N. (1979) *Education, Class Language and Ideology*, Boston, Routledge & Kegan Paul
- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J.C. (1977) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, London, Sage
- Bowles, S. & Gintis, H. (1988) 'A reply to our critics', in M. Cole (ed.) *Bowles and Gintis Revisited*, Sussex, Falmer.
- Brown, P. & Lauder, H. (1991) 'Education, Economy and Social Change', *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, Vol.1.
- Connell, R.W (1977) *Ruling Class Ruling Culture*, London, Cambridge University Press
- Corson, D. (1992) 'Bilingual education policy and social justice', *Journal of Education Policy*, Vol. 7(1)
- Fine, M. & Rosenberg, P. (1983) 'Dropping out of high school: the ideology of school and work', *Journal of Education*, Vol. 165(3)
- Halsey, A., Heath, A. & Ridge, J. (1980) *Origins and Destinations*, Oxford, Clarendon Press
- Harvey, M.J. (1985) 'Leaving or staying on at high school as a career decision-making process', *Australian Journal of Education*, Vol. 29(3)
- Jencks, C. et al. (1973) *Inequality*, London, Allen Lane
- McLaren, P. (1992) 'Multiculturalism and the postmodern critique: Towards a pedagogy of resistance and transformation', *Cultural Studies*.
- Sabel, C. (1982) *Work and Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Sultana, R.G. (1989) 'Transition education, student contestation and the production of meaning: possibilities and limitations of resistance theories', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 10(3).
- Sultana, R.G. (1990) "It's who you know, not what you know": Penetrating the credentialing ideology, *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, Vol. 18(1).
- Sultana, R.G. (1991) 'Social class and educational achievement in Malta', in R.G. Sultana (ed.) *Themes in Education: A Maltese Reader*, Msida, Mireva Publications
- Sultana, R.G. (1992) *Education and National Development: Historical and Critical Perspectives on Vocational Schooling in Malta*, Msida, Mireva Publications.
- Terry, L., Borland, H. & Adams, R. (1993) "To Learn more than I have": *The Educational Aspirations and Experiences of the Maltese in Melbourne*, Victoria, Victoria University of Technology
- Walker, J.C. (1988) *Louts and Legends: Male Youth Culture in an Inner City School*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin