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GENDER, ETHNICITY AND EDUCATION IN MALTA

Introduction

In the national report it prepared for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), the Maltese Commission for the Advancement of Women wrote that the main objective of the Maltese state is

> to promote education and instruction and to ensure the existence of a system of schools and institutions accessible to all Maltese citizens catering for the full development of the whole personality including the ability of every person to work (Commission, 1994, 32).

In the Maltese Islands, legal and institutional impediments have been legislatively removed, so to say, to enable equal access to educational resources. Wrench (1992), however, points out that practices which might be perceived as equal in their application often turn out to be discriminatory in their effect.

My objective in this paper is to find out how educational practices might be discriminatory, for whom and on what basis, within the Maltese Islands. My main concern is in finding out how girls and women, as well as individuals deriving from the Gozitan ethnic group, are faring within the Maltese educational system. My objective in analyzing Maltese educational policies and practices is to render visible those ideological conditions which both stimulate and legitimize discriminatory practices (Essed, 1991, 166).

My premise is that, in the drawing up and implementation of policies and practices, those social groups who have not been consulted end up experiencing

the myriad national formations and citizenship in different ways, as McClintock underlines (1995, 360). A state's position within the world order also has an impact on the kind of political, economic and cultural policies and practices it adopts and implements (Charlton, 1989, 28). In the first part of this paper I set out to locate the Maltese state within the world order.

In the second part of the paper I take a short look at the history of educational policies in the Maltese Islands, how these policies came to be implemented and with what effect for which social groups. My main preoccupation with state practices, structures and discourses is that these abstracted, extra-local relations are aimed at producing standardized local states of affairs or events corresponding to the standardized texts (Smith, 1999, 73). My concern here is whether abstract methods of ruling respond to the particular concerns and needs of different minority groups, or whether these needs are treated as extraneous to the well-being of the nation.

The Nation Within the Global and the Local Context

The excluding term 'Malta' refers to an archipelago lying in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, wedged between Sicily and Libya. Only three of the islands in this archipelago are inhabited, namely Malta, Gozo and Comino.

In this paper I will be continually differentiating between the Gozitans and the Maltese. Although both social groups share a similar political and socio-economic history on a national level, Gozo can be said to have its own specific "ethno-history, which although running chronologically parallel to that of Malta, articulates an identity of its own" (Marshall, 1994, 35). This specific identity might emanate from the fact that Gozitans have a tangential access to the so-called 'national' resources, as researchers such as Brigulgio (1993), Attard (1996), Galea (1998) and Darmanin (1999) have demonstrated. Essed (1991, 199) reiterates that patterns of collective adaptation to circumstances of social and economic deprivation often result in a social and cultural identity that is different from that of the majority group. The term 'minority ethnic group' in this paper will hence refer to a group of people in Malta, the Gozitans, whose sense of group identity has been derived in part from a state of oppression and exploitation (Etter-Lewis, 1996, 171).

According to Brigulgio (as cited by Tabone, 1994, 171), the Maltese Islands can be defined as an intermediately developed country. This location within the world order positions Malta in the zone between First and Third World. This liminal position is probably due to the fact that in the absence of natural resources, "the Maltese economy is characterized by a high degree of dependence on international trade for the creation of economic wealth" (*Economic Survey*. January-September 1996, 1997, 203). The Maltese Islands are especially dependent on trade conducted with West European countries (ibid., 1997, 253).

The economic well-being of Gozo, on the other hand, is dependent on the decisions of politicians, bureaucrats and capitalists who are mainly Maltese and who are managing institutions/enterprises/structures located in Malta. The political and socio-economic decisions taken at these levels often situate Gozo as a satellite of Malta, which consequentially has an impact on the access Gozitans have to the political and/or material resources available in the nation. My premise in this paper is that while Malta has a tangential position to the West, Gozo occupies a tangential position to Malta.

The Maltese Islands as a nation-state are also dependent on the West for the production and reproduction of knowledge. This dependency on external forces is due to historical as well as political and economic factors. The fact that the Maltese Islands were a British colony for almost two centuries prior to 1964 might explain why the Maltese still look to Western countries, especially English speaking ones, for their political and cultural self-definition. Frendo (1988, 210) maintains that with the departure of the British in 1964, the Maltese politicians and bureaucrats did not try to break their links with the past, but adopted and appropriated the political, social, cultural and economic structures and discourses instated in the Maltese Islands by the British. The Maltese educational system is a case in point.

At the same time, Malta's location within the political economic context together with its size—there are 378,132 people living on the Maltese Islands (Abela, 1998, 21) in an area of approximately 316 square kilometers (Malta Information, 1994, 2)—might explain why Malta cannot afford to produce and reproduce its own forms of knowledge/s, especially in areas such as technology, medicine, etc. The Maltese Islands' location within the world order also affects the cultural currency of knowledge that is produced. With regards to visual and audio texts, a limited market as well as limited financial and/or technological resources, make it less feasible for the Maltese to produce their own knowledge/s (Cutajar, 1995b, 333). Like a number of other ex-colonies, the Maltese Islands have hence adopted the West as their "primary referent point" (Mohanty, 1997, 258).

There is also a gender, class and an ethnic disparity when it comes to accessing these limited means of production and reproduction. The majority of informal means of education (television, radio, print, organizations) are found in Malta and are financed mainly by the state, the two main Maltese political parties, the Roman Catholic Church and/or private capital. Since certain social groups within the Maltese Islands are denied access to these means, the views and/or experiences of these social groups are rarely incorporated within the content (Cutajar, 1998, 9). The symbolic annihilation of certain social groups within texts is often explained as the product of their subordinate location within the political and socio-economic context. At the same time, their symbolic annihilation within the means of knowledge production is used to legitimize their unequal access to the material and political resources (see for

example Jakubowiez et al., 1994). As Marx and Engels (as cited by Stabile, 1997, 399) sustain, the class and/or country with the means of material and mental production at its disposal subordinates those who lack these means.

Exposure to 'foreign' derived knowledge/s and texts is initiated at an early age for both Maltese and Gozitans. Educational and media institutions play a major part in disseminating these texts among the population. Extra-locally derived texts help to enlighten both social groups on what is happening or has happened outside their geo-local location, but what effect does this dependence have on their self-perception as a nation?

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There is nowadays a growing number of texts produced by Maltese, and/or for Maltese. However, when Maltese educational and media institutions are not utilizing 'foreign' produced knowledge, they tend to promote the 'experience' and 'world views' of the Maltese, especially middle class, Maltese men (see Cutajar, 1995a, especially Chapter 4). Maltese, middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied men have managed to get hold of their own means of knowledge production and utilize these means to colonize the rest of the nation. Constant exposure to the texts produced and distributed through these means invalidates the experiences and world views of individuals from other social groups within the national context.

Therefore, politically, culturally and economically, both Maltese and Gozitans can be said to be "subordinate to an authority based elsewhere" (Said, 1994, 223). Both Gozitans and Maltese tend to depend heavily on epistemologies, discourses and research methods deriving from the West to make sense of who they are within the local, national and global contexts. This paper is a case in point.

Education in the Maltese Islands

Zammit Ciantar (1996, 4) maintains that some forms of state supported schooling existed in the Maltese Islands as far back as 1397 and that plans for a more universal access to elementary education were introduced by the British government in 1836. But even at this early date, one can note an ethnic and gender disparity in the way state educational resources were made available to the public in general. The first state schools were for male students only. Maltese female students were able to start attending primary schools two years later, in 1838; state secondary schools for Maltese girls came into being in 1856 (Callus, 1992, 80). Some of the religious orders on the Maltese Islands opened

their own schools for girls, although the curriculum they offered depended on the social background of the students concerned (Callus, 1992, 79). Prior to this date, elite Maltese families had always found the means of educating their male sons either in Malta or abroad.

State education for Gozitans came at a later date. The first boys' primary school was opened in 1841 in Gozo, according to Attard (1996, 11)—five years later than that for Maltese boys. The educational needs of Gozitan girls were attended to in 1842 when the first state elementary school for girls was opened (Attard, 1996, 11). The first secondary school for boys in Gozo was opened in 1851, while that for girls was inaugurated in 1866 (Attard, 1996, 11).

After World War II schooling was made compulsory for all children between the ages of six and fourteen (Zammit Ciantar, 1996, 4). Universal compulsory secondary education was introduced in 1970; the 1974 Education Act extended the compulsory age of schooling up to sixteen years (Commission, 1994, 32). Pre-primary education was introduced for four year olds in 1977, and extended to three year olds in 1988 (Inguanez et al., 1994, 22). State schools were once single-sex, but are nowadays co-educational except at secondary level (Commission, 1994, 32).

Students attending state schools start to be streamed on the basis of their 'performance' in nationally-set annual examinations in the last two years of their primary education (Zammit Ciantar, 1996, 18). Those who satisfy the requirements of a qualifying examination are admitted into Junior Lyceums, while those who fail or do not sit for this examination are allocated into the relevant area secondary schools (Zammit Ciantar, 1996, 19). Inguanez et al. (1996, 30) maintain that those students who do not do well in their examinations lose their entitlement to quality education at secondary and post-secondary level. Zammit Ciantar (1996, 19) maintains that there are no major differences in the curricula for Junior Lyceums and area secondary schools, but those who, like me, have taught in both sets of schools, might find this statement over stretched. The textbooks, teaching personnel and other teaching resources made available to secondary school students tend to be different and sometimes of a lesser quality than those utilized by Junior Lyceum students, even though the curriculum on paper might appear similar.

The objective of secondary education is to prepare students for their Secondary Education Certificate Examination of the University of Malta. For those who are not academically oriented, there used to be the option of transferring laterally to a trade school after the first two/three years of secondary education (Zammit Ciantar, 1996, 19). The first trade schools in Malta opened their doors in 1971 and provided a craft-level technical education for male students; crafts, hairdressing and home economics to female students (Zammit Ciantar, 1996, 4, 20). There are at present plans to radically transform the trade, technical and vocational sector. One should note, though, that trade,

technical, vocational schools as well as secondary schools have the tendency to trap students in narrow occupational paths, which restrict their chances of upward mobility (Inguanez et al., 1996, 31).

Post-secondary vocational education incorporates technical institutions, vocational schools and the Extended Skills Training Scheme, as well as the relevant university level courses, according to Zammit Ciantar (1996, 21). Eighty-five percent of the student body in these institutions is derived from families where the head of household has a manual occupation (Inguanez et al., 1996, 31). Sultana (1995, 55) notes that, in the Maltese Islands, skilled manual labor tends to be financially rewarding, in relation to unskilled manual labor and some forms of non-manual labor. However, female student enrolled in training courses for skilled labour has been low due to the technical orientation of the curriculum, according to Zammit Ciantar (1996, 22). However, cultural expectations are likely the main reason female students do not apply, and these expectations, then, are keeping female students from taking courses that could lead to lucrative occupations.

Education in all state institutions, from pre-kindergarten up to university level, is provided free of charge in the Maltese Islands, and students within compulsory school age benefit from free textbooks as well as free transport to and from their respective schools (Commission, 1994, 32). All courses at post-secondary (which includes pre-university and vocational education) and tertiary level are free, although students attending an academically-oriented institution are more likely to receive a state grant than those in vocational institutions (Zammit Ciantar, 1996, 21). Inguanez et al. (1996, 29) maintain that, in the last decade, governments have consistently given higher priority to post-secondary and tertiary level education to the detriment of the secondary and primary sectors, and generally have favored the academic over vocational. Since the bulk of students attending post-secondary vocational institutes derives from a working class, manual background, it could be said that these students are losing out.

Monetary incentives were introduced in 1971 to encourage more students, especially students deriving from a blue-collar social background, to continue with their education past the compulsory school age (Sultana, 1995, 53). All in all, 60% of each age cohort attend post-secondary institutes, a figure which Inguanez et al. (1996, 22) indicate is lower than the 80% benchmark attained by some European countries.

An area of improvement in education is the equalization of access for women at the post-secondary and university levels (Inguanez et al., 1996, 28). Measures to promote the equal access of girls in Maltese state schools have included ensuring a common curriculum for male and female students, as well as the phasing out of gender discriminating textual material (Commission, 1994, 32). These measures have borne fruit in the last five years. The number

of female students attending post-secondary academically oriented institutions has reached that of their male counterparts. The Department of Women's Rights 1998 Annual Report (1998, 32) points out that after 1995 the female population at the university level surpassed 50%.

Camilleri (1997, 25) and Cauchi (1998, 70) both underscore the fact that male and female students at the post-secondary and tertiary educational levels still make sex-stereotyped subject choices. Both researchers found that female students were more likely to be concentrated within teaching, arts (including behavioral and social sciences) and health care disciplines, while their male counterparts were more positively represented within the medical, scientific and technical sectors (Camilleri, 1997, 28). The Malta Human Development Report maintains that

> women's choices are often based on a *realistic* appraisal of their best chances of employment, together with their chances of combining work with home responsibilities, which, in reality, they bear almost exclusively [my italics] (Inguanez et al., 1996, 65).

This report refrains from indicating that these choices will lead female students into pink-collar occupations, which tend to be lower paid.

On the whole, the measures adopted by the Maltese educational authorities have helped augment the presence of students from subordinate groups. The increase of female students, despite their subject choices, tends to be encouraging. The measures taken to encourage students from manual social backgrounds have also had some success, as Sultana grudgingly admits (1995, 53). At the same time, between 1982-1994,

> less than 25 per cent of university students [came] from what can be broadly referred to as working class backgrounds, even though this sector constitutes 55.5% of the Maltese occupational map (Sultana, 1995, p. 54).

Inguanez et al. (1996, 29) maintain that in 1994, 68% of the students attending university had fathers primarily from the three top occupational groups, namely administrative, professional and clerical. Sultana (1995, 52) adds that students from subordinate social groups are more likely to be found in less prestigious courses and institutions. From the research cited by Sultana (1995, 53), these students were more likely to be following an engineering or education course, rather than law, medicine or architecture.

The Gozitan Educational Scene

Darmanin (1998, 57) argues that Maltese social scientists should give due attention to the differences between Malta and Gozo. Differences between the educational sectors exist, although few researchers have attempted to analyze the situation.

First of all, Gozitan students are more likely than Maltese to depend on the

services provided by state schools. There are seventy private schools on the Maltese Islands, only eight of which are found on Gozo (Zammit Ciantar, 1996, 85-89). Seven of these cater mainly to students from the ages of three to the eleven and the only private secondary school on the island, the Sacred Heart Minor Seminary (Zammit Ciantar, 1996, 87), accepts male students only. This means that the majority of students, especially female students, depend on the educational provisions of the state, as Galea points out (1998, 70).

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Gozitan students can avail themselves of ethno-specific educational institutions until post-secondary level. Students who want to continue beyond this level can attend either of two campuses of the University of Malta: in Malta, or at Gozo Centre which has a more limited range of degree courses. At the primary and secondary level, Gozitan and Maltese students are supposed to have equal access to resources but nobody has made any attempt to find out if this is the case. In interviews I conducted in 1997 for a paper I was researching at that time, several individuals employed at different levels of the education sector in Gozo (see Cutajar, 1999) raised a number of issues.

Gozitan personnel teaching at secondary and post-secondary (vocational and academic) levels maintained that Gozitan students were disadvantaged by limited subject options. This was due either to lack of personnel, lack of finances, or both. The education authorities either could not find qualified Gozitan personnel to teach particular subjects and/or could not find the money to provide the teaching equipment necessary. Gozitan teachers and administrators also complained of the lack of adequately equipped laboratories, workshops and libraries. Certain resources, such as language laboratories, were not even available on the island. Reitz (1995, 28) argues that lack of resources is a problem for minority ethnic structures in all countries.

The limited range of subject options has a concomitant effect on the range of career options these students can choose from. Debono, the present Minister for Gozo, argues that the career choices for Gozitans are influenced by the limited job opportunities available in Gozo (as quoted in Galea, 1998, 70). I would add that the limited range of subject options available at the secondary and post-secondary level narrows the range of occupational and career options students have.

Galea (1998, 89) and Attard (1996, 31) found that these limitations also apply to adult education provisions in Gozo. Writing about the University of

Malta Gozo Centre, an institution that provides a number of certificate, diploma and degree courses in Gozo, Attard (1996, 31) maintains that the lack of personnel and teaching equipment demands drastic measures to ensure their availability, and has had a negative impact on the range of courses offered. Galea's (1998, 89) research on courses available at the Employment and Training Corporation in Gozo found that, in spite of the fact that Gozitan unemployment has always been higher than that found in Malta (Brigulgio, 1993, 8), fewer courses are offered at this institution, again due to lack of human and non-human resources.

When it comes to tertiary education, the bulk of the Gozitan students choose to migrate to Malta where the main campus of the University of Malta is found. There they have a wider range of courses and more resources to further their education. However, between 1990 and 1997, the intake of Gozo students by the University of Malta was lower than students from Malta except in two years, 1992 and 1996, when Gozo Centre was admitting students (Falzon, 1999, 22). Galea (1998, 70) argues that this overall lower participation rate might be due to the quality and quantity of labor market opportunities on Gozo, as well as the physical and monetary logistics of geographical mobility.

Another point I want to make here regards the course choices of Gozitan students. In the 1997/98 figures given by Cauchi (1998, 67), the majority of Gozitan students, both male and female, were more likely to be taking business, education and arts courses. The number of Gozitan female students in nursing and legal courses was double that of their male counterparts, while the opposite was true in courses with a technical and scientific component. With the high concentration of Gozitan male students in education and arts courses, my concern is that the male population might be encroaching onto what have traditionally been 'feminine occupations'. This is even more problematic given that the teriarisation of the economy in Gozo, which entails the enlargement of the service sector, has not increased the number of job opportunities for women as it has in other contexts (Darmanin, 1999, 10). If this is the case, are we seeing the 'feminization' of the male Gozitan workforce—a feminization which might legitimize their exclusion from "the social, political, and symbolically favored economic domains" (Williams, 1996, 22)?

Conclusion

As we have seen in the arguments put forth in this paper, the Maltese educational system

> rather than leading to human well-being, ... [is] directly involved in selecting and stratifying people—often on criteria that have more to do with class, race, and gender than 'objective' ability—and then channeling particular categories of students towards specific locations in a segmented labor market. ... Schools are, thus, directly involved in the 'cooling out' of groups of students who are thus channeled towards the less lucrative and

fulfilling sectors in the economy (Inguanez et al., 1996, p 21).

More research needs to be carried out on the quality of education offered to Gozitan students and to girls and women living in the Maltese Islands. No research has, for example, been conducted on the content of textbooks and curricula produced and utilized in Maltese state schools in order to find out how individuals from different minority groups are portrayed. There has been little or no work to find out if and how curricula, hiring and promotion practices, staff development, classroom and extracurricular activities discriminate against certain social groups. Little has been done to produce teaching material or develop in-service programs to sensitize staff and students to experiences of discrimination whether due to ethnicity, race, physical or mental ability, sexuality, religion, family background, gender, or social class. There are no course units dealing with race and equity studies at the primary, secondary, post-secondary or tertiary level. Other countries regard such measures as essential in redressing the institutionalized ignorance regarding minority groups (Stasiulis, 1990, 227).

These are some of the issues I wanted to touch on in this paper. There is more to be said, but I hope that the ideas offered here act as seeds for an on-going discussion on the nature and content of education. When the relevant authorities fail to supply the specific needs of minority groups, they are choosing to forget that education is a right and not a privilege.

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