

Voting at 16: Extending a Right, Creating Obligations.

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Voting at 16: Extending a Right, Creating an Obligation.

The government is proposing amendments to the electoral law to allow 16-year olds to vote in the Local Councils elections¹. This is in accordance with what it has pledged to do in its electoral programme. The party in Opposition has made substantially the same pledge and is supporting this initiative. The matter may be eventually taken one or even two steps further by allowing 16-year olds to vote in the parliamentary elections and perhaps also to contest these elections. Even if there are several countries that have lowered the voting age, some also for parliamentary elections, one cannot yet speak of a general trend. Taking the case in Britain, one notices that the campaign in favour of lowering the voting age has still not led to any changes in the law. In the meantime, however, attention has been shifting to studying the issue, including the preparatory measures that need to be taken before legislating.

The issue in the context of the UK debate does not seem to be centering so much on how to prepare a public that may not be altogether ready for this change. It is rather that of putting in place certain measures so that the country as well as the young people themselves could eventually benefit out of it as much as possible. In fact, the Youth Citizenship Commission was established in 2008 specifically to define what citizenship means to young people and to promote their active engagement in political affairs. The issue as to whether the voting age should be lowered to 16 remained an important and urgent matter on the public agenda. In fact, the Commission was requested also to lead a consultation on the subject with its remit remaining that of considering a broader set of related concerns (Youth Citizenship Commission, 2009).

In our case, at least at this stage, the proposal has not actually passed through a public consultation process and will be brought in Parliament for implementation as has been promised in the electoral programme of the party now in government. There is nothing wrong in this approach, especially given our political tradition of parties to identify in their respective electoral manifestos the things they intend to do once in government. The purpose of this short paper is to show that lowering the voting age creates several obligations that should be seriously taken into account to ensure that this initiative will have a positive outcome. After giving a general profile of the 16 year olds, including the

¹ This paper has been commissioned by Kummissjoni Djoċesana Żgħażaġh. The authors have looked at the issue of lowering the voting age for Local Councils from their own respective academic background, making use of already published material on certain empirical aspects.

number that would be eligible to vote, this paper will analyse briefly the local socio-cultural context and will look at voting in local and national elections as a fundamental right that implies a corresponding obligation to exercise it in a responsible manner. It will then proceed to examine how one can better tap the educational resources available in formal, non-formal and informal channels to prepare young people for active political participation. The concluding part will list a number of recommendations.

A National Youth Profile

If the law for 16 year olds to vote goes through, those born in 1998 (16-year olds) and 1999 (17-year olds) will be eligible to vote in the next local council elections of 2015. This means a possible maximum addition of 8796 voters for the next local council election in 2015 - we are here only considering those born in Malta.

Year	Boys	Girls	Total
1998	2,308	2,180	4,488
1999	2,183	2,125	4,308
2000	2,126	2,129	4,255
2001	1,992	1,867	3,859
2002	1,997	1,808	3,805
2003	1,956	1,946	3,902
2004	1,899	1,787	3,686
2005	1,850	1,748	3,598
2006	1,861	1,685	3,546
2007	1,854	1,682	3,536
2008	1,958	1,763	3,721

Table 1: Maltese Live Births: 1998 - 2008 (National Statistics Office (NSO), 2009a)

Youth researchers have identified how the transition to adulthood is commencing earlier than previous generations, with a significant number of 16 year olds making full entry into the labour market and/or into higher education. As they transition into adulthood, 16 year olds try to come to terms with emerging parts of themselves. They usually discover themselves as having new emotional needs and explore opportunities, which grant them more freedom and choice. They feel more autonomous and experience excitement in their new ventures. During this time, cognitive, emotional,

social and moral development, as well as the emergence and acquisition of new abilities and talents are regarded as important means of personal growth.

Maltese 16 year olds do not form a homogenous group. Social class, sexual orientation, moral and political beliefs, age and gender are some of the characteristics, which differentiate them. They pertain to different subcultures and experience different lifestyles. They have differing aspirations and needs. There are, however, a number of commonalities and general trends, which are shared amongst them and which are followed by numerous Maltese young people (Office of the Commissioner for Children & Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ, 2013; Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ, 2012; National Statistics Office, 2010a; National Statistics Office, 2009b).

The onset of emerging adulthood for 16 years olds collides with their exposure to various forms of thoughts, lifestyles and rapid social changes. The absolute majority of Maltese young people are immersed in a digital culture and make use of the internet, as 95.3% claimed that they have a computer/laptop (Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ, 2012, p. 50). A significant part of their lifestyle revolves around digital technologies, which grant them the possibility to interact socially in a fast and consistent way, without restrictions of time or space. This gives them considerable control with whom to communicate. Through the social media, Maltese young people are influenced by globalization and they are witnessing the social, cultural, economic and political changes it brings about. This is constantly reshaping their personal lives in terms of their identities, emotions, aspirations and relationships.

Two-thirds of 400 Maltese adolescent and young adult participants in a study, aged between 13-30, did not find it generally difficult to comply with society's norms of behaviour and most considered adherence to the law as being either important or very important (Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ, 2012, p. 22). Three quarters of participants also felt satisfied in observing laws and regulations (Ibid.). By claiming that they are generally well behaved and law-abiding citizens, Maltese adolescents in general describe themselves as compliant and do not generally associate themselves with rebellion and resistance.

Study, work and religious faith are considered important influences in Maltese adolescents' lives (Ibid., p. 23). Although 85.3% of Maltese adolescents claimed that they were either satisfied or reasonably satisfied with how contemporary society operates (Ibid., p. 59), they stated that they held a low level of trust in the courts of justice, in members of parliament, politicians and the Archbishop's

Curia (p. 40). Only a small minority of participants (2.1%) indicated a strong level of commitment towards a particular political party (p. 44), whilst 89% claimed that they are not a member of a political party (Ibid., p.45). In general, young people in Malta have a low level of commitment in organizations and NGOs. Only 16.8% are members of a youth club/organization (Ibid., p. 58). Only 6.3% choose to spend their leisure time in youth organisations or engage themselves in volunteering (Office of the Commissioner for Children & Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ, 2013, p. 15). Yet Malta is one of the EU countries with the highest level of participation in NGOs with over 10 % (European Commission, 2012, p. 81). The *Survey on Income and Living Conditions* concludes that 14.3% of Maltese citizens who carried out voluntary work were young people aged 12-24 years (National Statistics Office, 2010b). Youth participation in voluntary work seems to be correlated with a healthy and positive lifestyle, with strong social capital, and with a sense of mental tranquility, that permits them to engage both with their own needs and with the needs of the wider Maltese community (Azzopardi, 2012, p. 32).

For a considerable number of 16 year old young people living in Malta, adolescence does not seem to be characterised mainly by crisis, emotional turbulence, pathology or deviance. This formative period of transition into adulthood provides a time for evaluation, decision making, commitment and finding their position in the social world. Independent decision making and the ability to prioritise were regarded as the most important features of emerging adulthood by Maltese adolescents (Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ, 2012, p. 33). This implies that they possess a satisfactory level of maturity. Evidence also suggests that the majority of Maltese adolescents are positive and optimistic about their future (Ibid., p. 60).

The Local Socio-cultural Context

The report on Youth Policy in Malta by the international panel of experts appointed by the Council of Europe in describing the social and cultural context characterises Malta as a traditional Roman Catholic society in which faith, family and community constitute the main points of reference for the great majority of the population. In describing the family it makes reference to the young people's delayed transition to independent living where both sides, parents and youths, do not see it as a problem. This picture is just one side of a complex scenario composed of a series of paradoxes and which characterize the Maltese society. Invoking the vote at 16 can be seen as a further extension of this line of interpretation. On the one hand one could be invoking an early autonomy as an adult citizen but at the same time continue to hold on to the benefits of an extended adolescence.

The parents' accommodation to this situation addresses not only the economic and logistical support needed for the youth's transition into work through advanced education, but oftentimes extends to other forms of more complex support such as that of newly formed unit within the same family and the birth of a child outside marriage. Despite its claim to be a highly religious country Malta has a high rate of extra marital births suggesting that a good number of young people not only put parenting before marriage, but that they take a very autonomous stand when it comes to sexual mores and to starting a family. This could also be a sign of a fake autonomy if it relies on state welfare or the support of the parents (or grandparents). Very often it is the latter who bear the brunt of babysitting, financing, and often housing the newly formed nuclear family. No wonder that the same report concludes by saying that establishing youth autonomy in a society still characterized by deeply paternalistic reflexes is no simple matter.

The other area mentioned by the said report refers to the difficulty that young people in Malta seem to have in finding their autonomy on the parish level. It could be reasoned that the Church might be also accommodating these couples as many of these new family units seek to have their marriage blessed by the church, to have their babies baptized and to present them for the sacraments, etc. However, even here the situation is fraught with paradoxes as it becomes more difficult to distinguish between the traditions embedded in the Maltese culture at the parish (village) level, and the professed values ensuing from traditional Catholic culture, in a context where one can get married at the age of 16 with parental consent.

Furthermore one should not fail to mention that many of the traditional folk activities organized on the parish level, usually converging around the local village feast, such as bands, street decorations, fireworks, etc., are mostly manned and supported by young adults and adolescents.

In order to understand the nature of the Maltese youth in view of their participation in the local governance through their vote at a lower age it is important also to take into consideration the historical context which has led to the current situation. It can be stated that a constant in this long process has been the geo-social conditionings of the islands. These consist of having to live in a confined and overcrowded space, and in a context of insularity. According to social psychologists, conditions of crowding, within specific socio-economic and geo-political contexts are conducive to social strife (Reicher, 1984; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Looking at the Maltese history, the geo-historical context has definitely had an influence on the development of Maltese identity, nationhood, and citizenship.

One could say that competition and rivalry on the level of our local towns and villages is practically endemic. Very often this culture of competition has developed into bipolarity. This is seen reflected in the split between parishes created from the same large town, but also on the level of the smaller villages or parishes. Oftentimes such rivalry takes religious features, such as during the celebration of the feast in honour of a particular saint with the latter's statue acquiring totemic status. These are compounded with other cultural features found on the local level, such as in the rivalry between band clubs within the same village. Although the creation of band clubs is a result of the British military influence these have also been sucked into the local rivalries. However, bipolarity extends also to sports and to other activities especially between neighboring towns and villages and as far as the system of government both on the national level (Boissevain, 1965).

The inherited British bi-partisan system composed of Government and Opposition, ideally meant to deliver a mature form of democracy and as reflected in the design of the House of Representatives, could have unintentionally reinforced this division instead. Antecedents to bitter political strife do exist in the history of Malta. In the times of the Order of St John a very strong rivalry related to the issue of jurisdiction existed between the Grandmaster, who was also the ruler of the island, the Bishop heading the local Church, and the Inquisitor representing the Pope. Even within the church there was a rivalry between the diocesan and the religious clergy, as the old saying goes: "*tra tonaca e cotta c'e` sempre lotta*".

With the establishment of the local political parties under British rule, this division took different overtones with the two major parties representing specific cultural traditions under the guise of which language to adopt, whether English or Italian. It could be stated that these two major currents have practically evolved to constitute the present two major political parties, as well as the two major rivalries in football. No need to mention that these factions can become very emotionally charged especially as they find their culmination on the day of reckoning such as during the annual feast day, a general election or a World Cup competition.

Another point mentioned by the said report (Council of Europe, 2005) is that related to subcultures amongst the Maltese youth. Despite the attempts made to be given more participation rights, youth seem to be uncomfortable going against the grain of cultural tradition and instead opt to defer to traditional authority. This leads to some very important questions as to how young people, especially the 16 year olds, will behave at election time. Will they be able, more than their seniors, to

detach from the emotional highs reached during these periods? Will they be free from this traditional bipolarity? Will they prove to be more autonomous than their parents at least where their political opinion is concerned? Will they be able to stand their ground should they go against their family's sympathies? Will they be able to form a more critical judgment when it comes to electoral issues? Will they be strong enough not to be lured by vague or unrealistic promises and benefits? Will the age of technology and communication enable them to overcome this local myopic divide and think global?

One hopes that such answers be given in advance through appropriate research rather than having to wait for the real thing to watch it happen.

A constitutional and historical perspective

In Britain, which tends to set the trends in constitutional questions, the franchise expanded gradually but steadily throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, until, at the end of the First World War, all adults were granted the vote in parliamentary elections. However, the voting age was NOT the primary consideration: rather, the question was whether the franchise could be extended to a particular group or groups on the grounds that they made a meaningful contribution to the country's welfare, and should therefore be admitted to public affairs through voting and representation. The most important extension of the franchise was made in the early part of the twentieth century, when property, income and gender restrictions were abolished, because (a) working men and (b) women had 'earned' the franchise, especially on account of their respective contributions to Britain's victory in World War I, and because working people were becoming politically organised through the Labour Party and trade unions.

Whatever we might think about the fairness of the social, educational and gender distinctions inherent in the extension of the franchise, Britain's experience underscores the vital importance attached to the idea of active citizenship. Citizenship does not arise only from membership of a nation, nor does it have exclusively political significance. A citizen contributes to a country more broadly by participating in economic life and in community affairs.

AN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON VOTING

Lowering the voting age implies an ethical aspect since the right to vote is a universal human right which may be restricted only for weighty reasons. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* declares that “universal and equal suffrage” is the way in which the will of the people, which is the basis of the authority of government, is periodically and genuinely expressed (art. 21. 3). The right to vote is an essential requirement for full citizenship, as it enables one to participate in the government of one's country. Historically, the evolution of equality to voting rights, even in Western democracies, passed through several critical stages. It is interesting to note, however, that early controversies about whether to extend the right to vote to everyone centered on 'who' is actually capable to exercise this right in a truly free and independent manner. Further, throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, voting rights were granted progressively to those who were generally recognised as having 'a stake' in public affairs – beginning with property holders and eventually those surpassing an income threshold – as well as those who 'earned' the right to vote for making a conspicuous contribution to national welfare -. Working men below the age of 30 and women following the First World War. In retrospect, one sees that exclusion on the basis of wealth or gender reflected a social and historical bias that has been fortunately overcome, as we have come to realize that gender and socio-economic inequalities are forms of social injustice that call for redress rather than serve as a pretext to exclude certain categories of the population from political participation. It is true that restriction of voting rights on the basis of age is not the same as restriction on the basis of gender. As long as men only are entitled to vote, women can never be in a position to vote since gender remains a distinguishing feature throughout one's life. Whether the cut-off line in the case of voting is drawn at eighteen rather than 16 may not seem to be a big social and political issue. The restriction would only be temporary. Nonetheless, it remains quite an important issue, because changes in social circumstances may not only permit but require lowering the voting age. Indeed, the universal right to vote is not an unqualified right but precisely because of its universal nature, restrictions to its exercise have to be kept under constant review.

In considering the case for extending the vote to 16 year olds, it is instructive to examine the norms in parallel social and economic institutions. As a rule persons below the age of 18 years are denied the right to enter contracts without parental consent; so too with regard to marriage. In both instances, the law admits adolescents to the market and to the institution of marriage, but places limits on their autonomy: in effect, the condition of parental consent acknowledges that an adolescent's judgment and decision-making capacity must be aided, tested and, if necessary, vetoed by an adult who can be presumed to have an intimate knowledge of the adolescent and to value his or her interests above others.

Would it be inconsistent to allow 16 year olds the vote and to stand for election - ie, the opportunity to help determine their country's or their community's future - while, at the same time, curtailing their economic and social autonomy on matters that affect their personal interests deeply? Would it signal that politics is worth less than a person's private affairs, thereby reinforcing the popular view of politics as a base activity?

In the context of the debate on voting rights it is necessary to make a firm distinction between voting in elections and standing as a candidate for representative institutions such as local councils and the House of Representatives. While a case could be made on sociological, psychological and legal grounds for according voting rights to 16 year olds, it is much harder to argue that they should also be permitted to stand as candidates or to represent the community in deliberative assemblies such as local councils or parliament. Standing for elections requires a degree of organisational, debating and networking skills. Since this entails exposure to pressures from a range of interests, including constituents, powerful corporations, this also requires a well-formed character and conscience.

Whereas in the last election there was a significant difference in the number of votes for the Labour Party to win the election (35, 197 voters) in the previous election the number of votes which elected the Nationalist government was only 1580. Therefore, one may anticipate that adding 16 years old to the electors' cohort may lead political parties to aggressively address this population. This has repercussions with regard to preparation and education for the voting experience, particularly with regard to informed decision making. Bekker, Thornton, Airey, Connelly, Hewison, Robinson, et al. (1999) define an informed decision as "one where a reasoned choice is made by a reasonable individual using relevant information about the advantages and disadvantages of all the possible courses of action, in accord with the individual's beliefs (p. iii). Informed decision making may be examined from a number of perspectives: from a psychological perspective, it is necessary to examine individual decisions in the context of needs, preferences and values; from a cognitive perspective, the decision making process must be regarded as a continuous process which takes into account the interplay between the individual and the environment; whilst from a normative perspective, the logic of decision making, the rationality and the invariant choices need to be taken into account (Kahneman, & Tversky, 2000).

The Rational Choice Theory regards informed decision making as a problem solving activity which concludes with satisfactory solutions or decisions. This means that informed decision involves both a cognitive (reasoning) and an emotional (feelings) process based on assumptions - alternatively based on beliefs and values - made. Ethically speaking, voting involves a serious decision given that it involves the exercise of one's right to participation in governance and should be based on the individual's moral convictions. In the case of voting, decisions are likely to be both voluntary and involuntary, and followed by an analysis of the cost and benefits of that decision (Kenji & Shadlen, 2012). A major part of informed decision making involves reflecting on and analyzing alternatives, to find the best alternative when all the criteria are considered simultaneously - multi-criteria decision analysis (MCDA) (Triantaphyllou, 2000). This is a skill as well as a way of living that needs to be embraced to address issues such as voting objectively and ethically, particularly in a context of a deeply partisan electorate.

A political decision to lower the voting age to 16, therefore, raises several issues that should not remain pending but should be addressed as soon as possible. They should be addressed primarily through education, be it formal, non-formal or informal. The following sections will elaborate this point. The list of recommendations at the end of this study includes media education in view of the importance of learning how to evaluate the source of the 'information' presented to the individual

Formal Education

On February 2010, retired education officer, Mr Joseph Sammut, who is historically responsible for the introduction of Personal and Social Development in local state schools (Falzon & Muscat, 2009) wrote:

"While watching recently the British Prime Minister speaking about his future plans, one proposal struck me. He is proposing to introduce "citizenship education" in the curriculum. I immediately reminded myself that Malta has had citizenship education in the curriculum for the last 50 years. It was introduced in the 1960s ...On many educational topics Malta stands head and shoulders with the best (Sammut, 2010). This immediately sets the scene for educational preparation and responsible citizenship, or, more specifically, preparing the adolescent to vote at the age of 16 years within the Maltese educational system.

In Malta, Personal and Social Development (PSD) has been a statutory subject locally since the eighties (Falzon & Muscat, 2009) and its mission and ethos states that:

“Personal and Social Development enables students to become healthy, independent and responsible members of society. Personal and Social Development embraces students' empowerment at every stage of learning, thus helping students to experience the process of democracy. Personal and Social Development also encourages students to play an active role in the school council and in the life of the school which is a reflection of what goes on in the wider community. In so doing students learn to appreciate what it means to be a positive member within a diverse society.” (Camilleri, Hamilton, Gatt & Galea Naudi, 2012, p. 8)

Two compulsory subjects of the secondary school curriculum focus specifically on Citizenship. The Form 4 PSD syllabus has a specific topic named Democratic Citizenship (Table 2). However, the topics tackled in PSD are all directly linked to democratic citizenship as noted in the PSD Mission statement and ethos quoted above (liberty with responsibility). Further, the Religion Syllabus also refers directly to Citizenship (Table 3 overleaf).

4.7 Citizenship Education - Learning Outcomes Notes

4.7.1. Democratic Citizenship

- To recognize the importance of being aware of what is going around you.
- To create an interest in social and political affairs.
- To recognize feelings towards national identity..

Table 2: PSD Form 4 Syllabus - Direct references to Citizenship (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005, p. 39)

This is the implementation of the vision of the National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012), where the: “The overarching principle upon which this framework has been constructed is that of giving children and young people an appropriate entitlement of learning that enables them to accomplish their full potential as individual persons and as citizens of a small State within the European Union” (p. xiii). The introduction of this document is peppered with reference to responsible citizenship:

“The underlying philosophy is to ensure that formal, informal and non-formal learning will serve as a means to secure a commitment towards social justice, personal growth, active citizenship and employability” (pp vii, viii).

“This document outlines the core components that should govern our curriculum so that we continue to sustain personal growth and inclusivity, responsible citizenship and employability” (p. ix).

“... range of experiences in compulsory education provides students with key competences necessary for lifelong learning, employability and responsible citizenship... Inclusivity, the values of social justice and responsible citizenship and employability are our desired goals” (p. x).

Form 3: Lezzjoni 6 - Se jmegħruni!

1. L-Ewkaristija tqarribna lejn Ġesù.

2. Is-sejha tan-Nisrani hi li bħalma kienu l-profeti u nies oħra matul l-istorja tal-Knisja, ikun lapes f'idejn Alla. B'hekk ikunu sagrament fil-kultura tagħhom, fil-ħajja tax-xogħol tagħhom, fis-soċjetà li qed jgħixu fiha.

3. Aħna lkoll ċittadini f'din is-soċjetà imma fuq kollox aħna ċittadini Nsara.

4. Mal-medda tas-snin, l-Insara kontinwament affaċċjaw l-isfidi li kellhom kontriehom mill-kultura ta' madwarhom u ma beżgħux imorru kontra l-kurrent. Fost dawn in-nies nistgħu nsemmu lil San Tumas More u lill-fundaturi tal-Unjoni Ewropea.

L-Attitudni Nisranija: Nuru li aħna Nsara avolja dan jista' jiswielna ħafna! Ma nibzgħux inkunu differenti minn dawk li jdawruni, sakemm inkunu qegħdin nagħmlu dak li Alla jrid minnha.

Form 4: Lezzjoni 9: Għall-bini ta' dinja ġdida

a) Esperjenza Impenn għal-“liberazzjoni” fid-dinja ta' żmienna: X'jaħsbu ż-żgħażaġħ dwar kif l-Insara jaqisu s-salvazzjoni: salvazzjoni “tar-ruħ” biss? Ta' l-individwu għalih waħdu? Jew salvazzjoni tal-bniedem sħiħ u

tal-istrutturi tas-soċjetà?

b) Id-dawl tal-messaġġ: Il-ħidma ta' Kristu favur il-bniedem sħiħ: L-impenn tiegħu biex ifejjaq il-firdiet soċjali, politiċi u razzjali. Rabta bejn limħabba lejn Alla u l-imħabba lejn il-proxxmu, bejn il-ġid tar-ruħ u l-ġid tal-ġisem; Dan l-impenn jissokta matul iż-żminijiet fil-ħajja u t-tagħlim tal-Knisja: il-ħidma favur il-fqar u prinċipji tat-tagħlim soċjali tal-Knisja.

ċ) It-tweġiba tagħna: L-impenn u s-sehem taż-żgħażaġħ fil-bini tas-soċjeta' ta' l-imħabba; L-impenn tagħna għall-ħarsien u l-promozzjoni tad-drittijiet u d-dmirijiet tal-bniedem; Is-sehem tagħna bħala ċittadini ta' pajjiżna u tad-dinja. Ħidma għall-paċi. Impenn fil-volontarjat.

Table 3: The Religion Syllabus - Direct references to Citizenship (Curriculum Management & e-Learning Dept)

The National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012) then specifies subjects which will focus on democracy:

“Education for Democracy will replace the Citizenship Education Learning Area and will be directed towards developing responsible citizens. The Working Group recommends that aspects of Environmental Studies, Social Studies, Personal and Social Development and Home Economics related to Consumer Education are placed within this learning area. The Working Group acknowledges elements of overlap between this Learning Area and the Humanities Learning Area” (p. 9).

In spite of the present inclusion of Citizenship in the Subject Religion, the National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012) fails to include this subject within the Section Education for Democracy, in spite of stating that in Religious and Ethics Education.

“The teaching of religion in schools is seen as an important element in the integral formation of the person. It should lead to a process of self-discovery, developing the moral and spiritual dimensions and contributing towards children’s capacity to value, appreciate, perceive and interpret the world they live in.” (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012, p. 35).

Such exclusion necessitates the reflection that Citizenship Education must not only be specified in particular subjects, but must also be a whole school approach which starts at the primary school level, such that this becomes part and parcel of the children’s lives. This means that one needs to go beyond the curriculum and syllabus and address the school’s way of life. There are presently a lot of school experiences where this is already put in action. Appendix A presents a case study of a local state primary school, where the voting process was directly experienced by the pupils from campaigning to the setup up of the Pupils’ Council (Pupil Council, 2013). This school also has a newsletter run by the pupils as well as an Eko Skola Council.

Non-formal and Informal education

Non-formal and informal education contributes significantly towards young people's holistic development and in facilitating their role as active citizens. The education of young people is regarded as an investment and as an important tool to guarantee a better future, in terms of national economic development and in terms of their overall wellbeing. This necessitates lifelong learning and the establishment of a learning society to sustain and develop the life chances and prospects of young people, particularly in response to contemporary social realities. The education for responsible citizenship amongst 16 year olds can be facilitated through youth ministry and through youth work. Non-formal and informal education promotes a participatory outlook to active citizenship, which includes the involvement of young people in decision making processes that concerns them. The notion of responsible citizenship moves away from the notion of regulating young people, in order to solely produce obedient future adult citizens. It also affirms that entitlements and obligations pertain to both the state and to adolescent citizens. Through youth ministry and youth work, young people can engage critically with what is portrayed in the media and critically examine the diversity and contradictions of political perspectives, decisions and actions. Youth work provides effective means through which polarised ways of thinking could be dismantled and explores ways of transcending the destructive political sectarianism that pervades Maltese society. It also promotes political and media literacy which are both pivotal to ensure responsible and reflective citizenship while also promoting and providing avenues for wider community participation to develop stronger community ties.

Recommendations

The following recommendations identify measures to be taken in preparation for voting at the age of 16:

1. It is recommended that citizenship education is implemented as a whole school cross-curricular approach and not merely addressed separately in a number of subjects. It is important that all subjects specifically addressing this topic be included in all documents.
2. Training of all educators needs to be organized in order to implement a whole school approach. Further, a cross curricular approach requires an environment, which continuously promotes the responsibility of voting.
3. Voting for school councils and school initiatives should be promoted and encouraged as this would help young people approach local and national elections with experiences of voting and participating in school, as well as gain knowledge of the consequences of voting effectively.

4. Given the continuous use of the media and its presence in children's lives, and in a context where media is already addressed in the PSD syllabus (Form 1 Form 2, Form 4 syllabus), media education should be given more importance both in PSD as well as through a whole school approach, where it can also be tackled across subjects. This is highly important to address the possibility of manipulation and the vulnerability of Youth voting at such a formative age.
5. Media personnel (Journalists, Presenters...) need to be trained to address the relevant issues as well as the ethical responsibilities their roles and professions embrace.
6. Children and adolescents do not only live in schools and it is therefore very important to address personnel in contact with children during and after school activities, whilst informal or non-formal education takes place. In collaboration with the Office of the Commissioner for Voluntary Organisations (<http://www.voluntaryorganisations.gov.mt>), training for all non-formal and informal educators, be they volunteers or paid staff, also needs to be organized.
7. Young people need to acquire analytical skills to understand and question why on many occasions key national debates have proven to be a deeply divisive, controversial and disturbing experience in Maltese society.
8. The acknowledgement of the absence of a language for adolescents, with which to talk about politics in formal school settings, should lead to the disruption of taboos surrounding political talk, which are creating disturbing silences and reproducing hurtful feelings.
9. Youth work and youth ministry can frame politics in positive ways and not as an aspect of life, which has to be feared and repressed.
10. Youth work and youth ministry can challenge discursive spaces which frame political debates as obscene and divisive.
11. The persistent colonial mentality in Malta and its disabling consequences, which create the discourse of 'us' and 'them' could be deconstructed through youth work and youth ministry.
12. Youth work and youth ministry can support young people in acknowledging the multiplicity of opinions and viewpoints surrounding political issues.
13. Youth work and youth ministry can assist young people in exploring their own political values in debating environments that are ethical, caring, supportive and non-threatening.
14. Youth work and youth ministry can encourage dialogue with and respect for people of differing political beliefs and practices. This involves supporting young people to clarify their thoughts and be articulate.
15. Youth work and youth ministry can promote a critical understanding of contradictory discourses about politics emanating from lived realities, educational institutions, popular culture, friends and family.

16. Youth work and youth ministry can inform young people about political motives and forces, which affect their life and those of others.

17. Youth work and youth ministry can enable young people to affect agency and responsibility in political debates and actions.

18. Youth work and youth ministry can support young people to interrogate the effects of power relations related to political issues, both within interpersonal relationships and in society.

CONCLUSION

Voting amongst young people, aged 18-30 years, is particularly high in Malta - at 76% (European Commission, 2013, p.12). Moreover, 75% of Maltese young people show positive intentions towards voting in the next European elections (Ibid., p.22). Even at age 16, young people are bound to have some political interests and they also have "diverse perceptions of how best to influence the lives of their political system" (EACEA, 2013, p.6). Granting the right to vote at 16 implies that the state acknowledges and legitimises young people's views. This also grants 16 year olds some agency to communicate their knowledge. Voting at 16 positions young people as democratic agents. At the same time, 16 year old young people still need to grasp political education and understand the complex implications involved in participating in democratic life. Moreover, young people need to experience positive accounts of political interactions and interventions. This requires contexts in which healthy and human relatedness can occur and established through mutual understanding and collaboration, characterised by compassion, integrity, intent and solidarity.

Young people are stakeholders in the European democratic system. They express ideas and preferences, and defend diverse interests. This is true even before they reach voting age. Young people articulate preferences and interests, and some of them are even more active than a majority of adults, notably through volunteering. Moreover, a clear majority of young people ask for more – and not less – opportunity to have a say in the way their political systems are governed (Ibid., p.6).

This paper presented some experiences of civic education and voting experiences amongst young people, but one should not get the impression that everything is in place in this field. Experiences such as the annual 'Mini-European Assembly' reach only a small proportion of the cohort, and are subject to intensive coaching by adults. Still more needs to be done for young adults to have a sound and sufficient foundation for the autonomous exercise of voting rights in local or parliamentary elections.

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APPENDIX A

Experiencing the voting process – Siggiewi Primary State School

(http://siggiewiprimary.wordpress.com/pupil_council/)

A new pupil council was set up on 24th January 2013. All pupils in Year 3 to 6 were eligible to contest the election and also to vote. The PSD teachers worked closely with Link teacher, Ms C Chircop in organising everything. Lessons about self esteem, good communication skills, diversity, assertiveness, leadership and conflict solving skills were held. A child friendly powerpoint presentation describing the election process was shown and discussed with the children prior to the elections that included the Year 3 pupils. A total of 77 candidates presented their nomination for this election. An electoral campaign was held and candidates made use of manifestos, complete with photographs and posters to proclaim why they would like to be elected and what they would do to make sure that they represent everyone in their class. All candidates were given a chance to voice their ideas in a special assembly held on 23rd January. On the same day all candidates witnessed the sealing of the ballot boxes. (http://siggiewiprimary.wordpress.com/pupil_council/) Ballot papers were prepared by Ms Borg Vella Assistant Head and Ms Claudine Chircop Link Teacher. On Election Day all classes made it to the school hall, one by one according to a preset timetable to cast their votes. Crista Mangion greeted voters one by one and with the help of Ms Privitera and Ms Delia led the students to the Electoral Commission's Table where Sheridan checked names and marked each pupils, Kyle and Kristina stamped the ballot papers before handing them to the voters. Secret ballot was exercised in four cubicles by writing number 1 and 2 near the name and photo according to their preference. Finally the ballot boxes were re-sealed and votes were counted by the members of the electoral commission. Votes were sorted according to class and validity was checked. Mr Decelis, Head of School, Ms Privitera and Ms Delia, PSD teachers, Ms Claudine Chircop Link Teacher and Ms Borg Vella Assistant Head were all present during this process. Turnout for Year 6 was 96%, in Year 5 it was 100%, in Year 4 it was 96% and in Year 3 the turnout was 93.5%.