

Malta

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Overview

Due to its colonial past, Malta's state school sector drew its main inspiration from the British education system one could say up to the early 1990s. All children between the ages of five and sixteen are entitled to free education in all state schools regardless of age, sex, belief and economic means. The national minimum curriculum and the national minimum regulations for all schools are established by the state according to the rights given by the Education Act (1988) and the Amendment to the Education Act of 2006 and 2010.

The scale of current economic transformation; social changes; increased globalisation; and demographic changes leading to an ageing population; all require a future workforce with a different portfolio of knowledge and skills and a new approach to education policy as an integral part of medium to long term planning to respond to these changes.

In view of this the Government is currently focused on the following four key objectives:

- Raising the general qualification level, reducing the number of early school leavers, and attracting more students and adults into further and higher education within a lifelong learning context;
- Ensuring equitable and open access to all students seeking to further their studies;
- Sustaining public responsibility to secure an inclusive, qualitative and responsive education and training system;
- Making Malta a centre of excellence in education and research by developing quality assurance systems, the qualifications framework and mobility opportunities.

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The Education Act of 1988 is the main legal instrument governing educational provision in the Maltese Islands. It has introduced a number of major innovations over previous Acts, which are explained below.

In conformity with the Constitutional provisions, it is the State that is held responsible for educational provision required by the Act. In Section 2 of the Law, the duties of the State are explained as follows:
To promote education and instruction

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; and
To provide for such schools and institutions where these do not exist.

The Law acknowledges the right of the State to establish a minimum curriculum for all sectors of the educational system, irrespective of whether schools are administered by the State itself or by private individuals or organizations. Similarly, the State has the right to establish minimum conditions which both its own and private schools have to fulfill.

The Law also recognizes basic individual and parental rights:

It is the right of every citizen ... to receive proper education and instruction without any distinction of age, sex, belief or economic means (Article 1)

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It is the right of every parent of a minor to give his decision with regard to any matter concerning the education which the minor is to receive (Article 4)

Until 1987, education in Malta was compulsory between the ages of six and sixteen; the 1988 Act extends this provision in two important ways:

Education is now compulsory between the ages of five and sixteen.

The Minister of Education now has the power to extend the period of compulsory education for certain courses as he may prescribe by regulation.

The Structure of Schooling

Introduction

There are three types of schools: State, Church and Independent. The State provides free education, including free textbooks and school transport in the primary and secondary schools. It also provides study grants to practically all students in post-secondary education.

Church schools, which are almost entirely managed by the Religious Orders, currently charge no fees for primary and secondary education, and are subsidised by the State which covers all their teaching salaries. Parents contribute term 'donations' to cover other expenses. The Independent Sector is made up of a number of pre-primary, primary and secondary schools. These are fee-paying schools and are usually run by a Board of Governors. Parents are being provided with a tax rebate for some of the expenses incurred.

According to the Amended Education Act No. XIII of 2006 a person or institution wishing to establish a private school is given the right to apply for a license from the Minister of Education.

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Compulsory Education (5-16 years)

Education is compulsory for all children between the ages of five and sixteen. Compulsory education is sub-divided into a six-year primary cycle (five to ten years) and five years of secondary education (eleven to sixteen years). State secondary education is provided in the Junior Lyceums where students attend following a qualifying examination at the age of 11 and the secondary schools, where the curriculum is less demanding. With the new organisational College set-up, the two types of schools are being amalgamated and pupils from both streams attend the same school where they are study the core subjects. The government is also committed to a policy of inclusive education throughout the whole educational cycle. This ensures that children with special needs are integrated into the mainstream.

Primary Education

Primary education builds on early childhood education and facilitates the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in preparation for the secondary level. Primary education is free of charge and includes school transport and textbooks. Primary schools are co-educational. The primary cycle where classes are called 'years' can be broadly sub-divided in two cycles. The first cycle covers *Years One, Two and Three*. During these three years education emphasises the development of social skills, literacy and numeracy skills, gradually progressing to more formal academic skills. During the second cycle that covers *Years Four, Five and Six* there is more emphasis on the academic content.

Progressively as children move towards the end of primary education the amount of academic content increases in preparation for the Junior Lyceum Examination. This examination is coming to an end with the next scholastic year (2011-12) seeing all our primary classes will be of a mixed ability.

During the first four years of primary education, children are grouped according to age while during the last two years they are streamed on the basis of national examination results. As part of the reform of primary education streaming has been phased out from the last two years of the primary cycle. At secondary level students are streamed on the basis of the type of school they attend (whether Junior Lyceum or Secondary School). This system of two types of schools at secondary level is, as a result of the College setup, also being phased out. Within the College system, students from feeder primary schools attend the same secondary school. Within the school students are grouped by ability (setting) for the core subjects (namely Maltese, English and Mathematics). Within the school pupils are more or less taught in mixed ability classes, although some classification may occur on the basis of the subjects chosen. At primary level, a class teacher is responsible for the teaching of all core subjects. Peripatetic teachers, who are attached to a group of schools and rotate among them, teach the more specialist subjects like art, music and drama, Physical Education, Science and IT. At secondary level, pupils are taught by subject specialists.

Secondary Education

This is an area that is going through major changes, especially in relation to entry requirements into the schools. At secondary level within the State sector the move over the past five years to introduce a College network system sees the gradual integration of Junior Lyceums (similar to Grammar schools in the UK) and the Area Secondary Schools that attracted less academically inclined students (i.e. those students below average in the qualifying entrance examination). The network system involves abolishment of this system and a move to mixed ability classrooms at primary and secondary level.

This major development has brought changes to the structures and set up of the majority of Church schools. Over the next few years a number of Church schools will be extending their provision. In some cases, some Catholic Orders will either introduce a Primary school or else a secondary one thus offering continuity to students who enter at age 3 or 5. This implies that there will no longer be the need for children to sit for 11+ entrance examinations.

The age group of children attending secondary level schools is between eleven and sixteen years. Most schools at this level are single-sex. The organisation of secondary schools is based on year groups called Forms, so the first year of secondary education would be Form 1, the second year Form II and so on. The classification and grouping of the students in the first two years is based upon the language they choose to study at this level and on the grades acquired in the Junior Lyceum entrance examination. Beyond Form II the basis for the students' classification and grouping is the subject options chosen.

A more determinative three-year cycle follows during which students elect to study a number of subjects alongside a compulsory core curriculum. In general, students are allowed to choose a range of subjects which will help them realise their vocational and higher education aspirations. Within the Amended Act of 2006 the College Network system allows Colleges to develop programmes that particularly address the identified needs of their cohort. At the same time this Amendment to the Education Act of 1988 states that Colleges need to develop a system of internal self evaluation so that the school community is directly involved in the way the school plans and develops.

The Legal Framework

The law regulating Education in Malta (Act XXIV of 1988) and subsequent amendments (2006 and 2010) defines the rights and obligations of students, parents, the State and Non-Governmental Organisations (foremost amongst which is the Catholic Church) in the sphere of education.

Two Education Directorates – the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education and the Directorate for Educational Services - within the Ministry, are responsible in terms of the amendment to the Education Act for the provision of an efficient and effective system of schools which, whilst ensuring education and training in areas relevant to the needs of Maltese society, affords the individual

without any distinction of age, sex, belief or economic means, the opportunity to develop his/her full cognitive, affective and operative potential. This mission is in fulfillment of a moral obligation on the part of society and a necessary investment in the continued development of the nation. The two Directorates are aimed at providing the support to the ten Colleges so that they can fulfill their mission, whilst the DQSE has the distinct responsibility of being the regulator of all schools in Malta and Gozo (state, church and independent) and is also responsible for developing and implementing an updated curriculum framework. In the emerging model of quality assurance, emphasis is being given to school self-evaluation based on the school development plans.

The Constitution of the Republic of Malta and the Education Act provide the constitutional and legal framework and the main aims and objectives of the Maltese educational system.

Under the section entitled “Declaration of Principles”, the Constitution states:

- Primary education shall be compulsory and in State schools shall be free of charge.
- Capable and deserving students, even without financial resources, are entitled to attain the highest grades of education.
- The State shall give effect to this principle by means of scholarships, of contributions to the families of students and other provisions on the basis of competitive examinations.
- The State shall provide for the professional or vocational training and advancement of workers.
- The State shall promote the development of culture and scientific and technical research.
- Disabled persons and persons incapable of work are entitled to education and vocational training.

In fact, as shown later, the State provides much more than this entitlement to ensure adequate and free educational provision at all levels from kindergarten to the University. The Education Act of 1988 states that it is the duty of the State to:

1. promote education and instruction;
2. ensure the existence of a system of schools and institutions accessible to all Maltese citizens for the full development of the whole personality including the ability of every person to work, and
3. provide for such schools and institutions where these do not exist.

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It is the right of the State:

1. to establish the national minimum curriculum of studies for all schools;
2. to establish the national minimum conditions (regulations) for all schools;
3. to secure compliance with the national minimum curriculum of studies and the national minimum conditions for all schools

The law enunciates the conditions for the establishment of private schools and the powers and constraints imposed on the Minister in issuing the relevant licence.

The 1988 Education Act recognised teaching as a profession for the first time. It states that no person may exercise the profession of a teacher in a school and receive remuneration without a warrant from the Minister. A teacher may be entitled to a warrant or a temporary warrant according to his/her qualifications and the law sets the parameters within which a temporary or permanent warrant is issued.

The Act notes that the State has to provide schools for the primary education of children of compulsory school age and special schools for the children having special educational needs. The State may provide schools for infants who are under compulsory school age. The State has the duty to provide for the secondary education of all children who have completed their primary education.

The Act recognises the duty of the State, having provided for the education of Maltese citizens, to enable them to form their own independent judgment. The State must establish such educational facilities which it may deem necessary to provide those citizens with the opportunity to qualify in trades, skills, artisan or technical or commercial activities, and in the professions, in order to prepare, instruct and instill discipline in those citizens for work in the community.

The Act established School Councils to administer the funds and all other assets of the school while the Head of School and the teaching staff remain responsible for matters of curriculum and discipline.

Freedom to establish non-state schools

A section of the Law (Article 6) provides any person with the right to apply to the Minister of Education for the grant of a license to establish and operate a school. In turn, the Minister is obliged by the law to grant a license where the applicant is either the Catholic Church (which represents the official religion of the country and which operates a large number of schools) or where the applicant is a voluntary society of a non-profit making character. In both cases, of course, the applicant has to ensure that the school conforms with the national minimum conditions and the established policy. Historically, the Catholic Church has always had a particular position in education on the Island because of its pioneering work on a large scale and of its continuing interest in the field. Church schools are heavily subsidised by the State following a formal agreement with the Catholic Church which provides its own buildings and facilities.

The Education Act empowers the education authorities to inspect and to supervise the administration of every school, including private schools, and to ensure that the National Minimum Curriculum to which students are entitled is being delivered while the National Minimum Conditions (Regulations) are observed. This work is now being done by the Quality Assurance Department within the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education in 2008.

Most pupils attending private primary schools proceed to private secondary schools. However, private primary school pupils can transfer to a State secondary school. Pupils in private schools which cater only for the primary level have to compete to obtain a placing in another private secondary school or to qualify for admission into a Junior Lyceum; otherwise they attend State secondary schools. Some pupils from State primary schools sit for a still highly competitive admission examination to join a private secondary school. A number of fee-paying private secondary schools accept students without an admission examination.

Non-State schools for girls generally cater for both the primary and the secondary levels. Hence, the number of vacant places available for newly admitted female students into secondary schools is very small, especially in Church secondary schools. More places are available for male students in Non-State secondary schools especially since a number of these schools do not have a primary level.

In Malta, two thirds of the school age population attend the State (Public) sector, whereas the remaining one third are in the Church and Independent (Private) sector. The steady growth of the school population within the Independent sector noted over the past fifteen years has stopped. The demand for a private education has been affected by the financial pressures facing parents in general and the growing expenses that the Independent schools have to face to operate. It is also to be noted that the infrastructural developments taking place within the State sector is making these schools once again attractive. At the same time, with the new reform the Church school population will grow given the expected increase in school population as they expand their provision and facilities over the next few years.

Home schooling

The Law recognizes basic individual and parental rights:

It is the right of every citizen ... to receive proper education and instruction without any distinction of age, sex, belief or economic means (Article 1)

It is the right of every parent of a minor to give his decision with regard to any matter concerning the education which the minor is to receive (Article 4)

Until 1987, education in Malta was compulsory between the ages of six and sixteen; the 1988 Act extends this provision in two important ways:

Education is now compulsory between the ages of five and sixteen.

The Minister of Education now has the power to extend the period of compulsory education for certain courses as he may prescribe by regulation.

It is the duty of every parent of a minor

1. to register the child in a school for the first scholastic year starting when he or she is of compulsory school age;
2. to ensure that the child continues to attend school up to the end of the scholastic year during which he or she ceases to be of compulsory school age, or up to the end of such further period as the Minister may prescribe by regulations, and
3. to ensure that the child attends school regularly on each scholastic day, unless he or she has a good and sufficient cause to be absent from school.

The 1988 Education Act states that any parent of a minor who:

(a) fails to register that minor in a State school, or in a school licensed under this Act, for the first scholastic year starting when he/she is of compulsory school age or fails to ensure that the minor is so registered at all times for every scholastic year during the whole period that the minor is of compulsory school age or fails to cause that minor to continue to be so registered up to the end of the scholastic year during which the minor ceases to be of compulsory school age or up to the end of such further period as the Minister may by regulations prescribe; or

(b) fails to ensure, without a good and sufficient cause, that the minor attends school regularly on each scholastic day during such period that the minor is of compulsory school age and up to the end of the scholastic year during which the minor ceases to be of compulsory school age and up to the end of such further period as the Minister may by regulations prescribe; shall be guilty of an offence and shall, on conviction, be liable to the punishments established for contraventions and to a fine not exceeding one lira for each day during which the offence continues in the case of a continuing offence.

Home schooling in Malta is rare because there is the concept of inclusive education. An inclusive education is based on a commitment, on the part of the learning community, to fully acknowledge individual differences and to profess as well as implement inclusionary politics. This concept recognizes the full range of educational interests, potential, and needs of students.

School choice not limited by family income

The 1988 Educational Act states that in State schools all teaching shall be given to Maltese citizens without any fee being charged. So as to ensure the full exercise of choice of school by parents, the State shall, through agreements to subsidize non-State schools, when such are of a non profit-making character, in accordance with the availability of public funds, provide gradually for the same gratuity of teaching in such schools as is afforded to students in State schools. The Minister may by regulations order that no fees shall be charged for the teaching of Maltese citizens in schools other than State schools and of a non profit-making character provided that in such a case the Minister shall before making such an order ensure that the schools to which the order applies shall be in a position to continue to provide their services and shall supplement from public funds the financial means of those schools where, following investigations conducted together with those schools, such necessity arises.

The Minister may by regulations determine the maximum fees which may be charged for the teaching of Maltese citizens in schools other than State schools and the maximum fees so determined may be different for different schools or for different levels or sectors of schools other than State schools:

Provided that in making such regulations the Minister shall ensure on the basis of an objective assessment of the schools to which the regulations apply that these shall be in a position to continue to provide their services and for this purpose the Minister shall, if necessary, supplement the financial means of those schools through public funds.

School distinctiveness protected by law and policy

The Ministry covers capital and recurrent expenditure for the administration of State educational institutions and allocates a substantial grant towards the running of Church schools.

The Government contributes nearly 14,000,000 euros annually towards the financing of (Catholic) Church schools according to the State-Church agreement. These funds cover all salaries of school employees, mainly, of course, teachers. The Catholic Church provides school buildings and funds to cover other expenses that are not provided for by the Government grant. However, parents of students attending Church schools may be asked to make voluntary contributions towards their children's schools. Planned projects, expansions and additional facilities in Church schools are often funded by parents. Both Church and Independent (private) Schools can make use of some student services provided to State schools.

Independent schools have to fund their own operations, generally through school fees and donations paid by parents. There are schools run by non-profit making Parents' Foundations and there are others run on a commercial basis. The Church and the Independent Schools do not make their accounts public.

The traditional frontal teaching, chalk and talk methods and the use of standard textbooks which are often used on a national basis are still prevalent in Maltese schools. Teachers also produce their own teaching and learning materials, including authentic materials. However, over the years, the use of audio-visual equipment and facilities has increased. The introduction of Information Technology and the use of computers, interactive whiteboards and electronic equipment as teaching and learning tools on a large scale is bound to bring about significant changes in pedagogy in the coming years.

Decisions about admitting pupils

The Government believes that values education and ethics should form the basis of the education of its citizens. It provides a system of education that is open to all, without any discrimination on grounds of sex, religious or political creed or financial means. It aims at providing free quality education at all levels from pre-primary to University and during adulthood. Government works towards the provision of a wide educational and cultural provision to all its citizens to enhance their personal development, to have knowledgeable and responsible citizens, and qualified and flexible workers capable of changing career as and if necessary. It provides and supports inclusive education as far as possible within the mainstream, for children with special needs.

Within the state sector, a primary school is found in practically every town and village. Parents living in a locality send their children to the local primary school. At the end of their primary education pupils move on to secondary schools. Entry into the Junior Lyceums is based on the students' achievement of academic competence following a qualifying national examination in five main areas, including Maltese, English and Mathematics. Schools at secondary level get their intake on the basis of catchment areas made up of a group of feeder primary schools within their College. This system will change as the 11+ examinations are being phased out.

Decisions about staff

Government recognizes teaching as a profession and provides for the related status of teachers. The working and employment conditions for the teaching grades are negotiated between the Government and the Trade Unions. The main trade union representing the teaching grades is known as the Malta Union of Teachers. Other unions normally reach agreements regarding their members after an agreement has been concluded by the Malta Union of Teachers. Generally the agreement reached regarding Government teaching grades is similarly concluded with Non-State educational institutions.

The 1994 Agreement between the Government and the Malta Union of Teachers on the Classification, Regrading and Assimilation of the Education Class establishes the various teaching grades, the entry requirements and career progression of teachers, their salaries and allowances for qualifications, responsibilities and voluntary extra work, considers particular situations, defines the school year, school hours, school holidays, examination periods, the in-service training periods, class size, teaching loads, special leave, supervision duties, and the complement of teaching grades above that of Teacher.

The 1988 Education Act officially established Teaching as a Profession. No person may exercise the profession of teacher in a school and receive remuneration without an appropriate Warrant from the Minister. A teacher qualifies for a Permanent Warrant if she/he graduated as a Bachelor of Education or obtained a doctor's or master's degree from the University; or obtained a first degree and a Post Graduate Certificate of Education from the University; or followed a full course at the former Training Colleges for Teachers or at the former Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology; or completed a course of study in Malta or in a University or a recognized Institute outside Malta, which, in the opinion of the Minister, is equivalent to any teacher course offered in Malta; or taught in schools in Malta or outside Malta for a period of not less than 15 years. and is. in the opinion of the Minister, of the required academic ability.

The Government - Malta Union of Teachers Agreement of 1989 awarded significant salary increases in support of the newly acquired professional status and raised the salaries of the teaching grades to those of corresponding professionals in the Civil Service.

Accountability for school quality

The 1988 Education Act empowers the Minister of Education to set and monitor the National Minimum Curriculum. The National Minimum Curricula for the Pre-Primary, Primary and Secondary levels bind all schools, both State and Non-State. A National Curriculum Framework has been drafted that allows the education authorities and the Colleges to map out what children should be receiving throughout their years in all schools in Malta. It will present the various developments, policy formulation, and implementation that need to be undergone at different levels and explores the dimensions that will lead to improved teaching and learning.

The National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) projects the vision, the principles, the main objectives and values and establishes the framework of the curricular aspects of Maltese education. The current NMC is up for review and this will be one of the first major tasks of the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education. The review process was launched in January 2008. The NMC covers three levels of education, kindergarten, primary and the first five years of secondary education. Within the framework of this national document a syllabus for each subject at the different levels is provided but each school is empowered to develop education programmes that meet the specific curricular needs of its pupils.

All subjects at primary level are compulsory and are the same for all pupils. These include Maltese, English, Mathematics, Religious Knowledge, Social Studies, Personal and Social Education, expressive arts, Physical Education. At secondary level pupils are taught a set of core compulsory subjects. These are Maltese, English, Mathematics, Science/Physics, Religious Knowledge, Science, IT, Art, Physical Education, Geography, History, expressive arts, Personal and Social Education, computer awareness and a modern foreign language or two. Pupils may also choose a compulsory elective subject from among

technical design, craft/technology education, home economics and textiles studies, during their first two years of secondary education. After two years pupils choose a further one/two elective(s). English is a compulsory subject throughout compulsory education. The Education Officer in consultation with the subject teachers selects the textbooks. Textbooks are given free to all students at the beginning of the school year and they are returned when it ends. The teachers adopt the teaching methods according to the class ability and subject content.

Formal formative assessment is being introduced from the first year of pre-primary education. This assessment will be carried out by teachers throughout the school year. The formative assessment is supplemented by a mid-yearly and an annual examination. The former is school based while the latter is set at the national level. Pupils sit for their first examination at the end of the fourth year of primary education. As part of the reform process the streaming during the last two years of primary education and the Junior Lyceum Admission examination have been phased out over the past few years. Throughout lower secondary education students will now follow the same pattern of assessment as that of the primary cycle; formative assessment and two examinations. At the end of compulsory education and the end of the fifth year of secondary education, students generally sit for the secondary education certificate (SEC) examination set by the Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC) Board of the University of Malta, and/or the General Certificate of Education examination, ordinary level, set by British examining boards. Students are awarded a secondary school leaving certificate based on the end of final year examination results and continuous assessment.

The management within the Education Directorates has so far fulfilled the major functions associated with managing a school, except for the actual day-to-day running of the school. To date the Directorates have been responsible for the following functions:

- Recruitment, promotion and deployment of staff
- Curriculum design and development and prescription
- Selection, procurement and deployment of learning materials
- Design of assessment procedures
- Setting of annual examination papers
- Allocation of students to schools
- Preparation of specifications, procurement of equipment, etc. and its deployment
- Maintenance of premises and equipment
- Organization of national student activities
- Organization and running of in-service programs
- Provision of school support services.

The move to devolve greater responsibilities to the College/ school level allows for each to identify their own aims and objectives in line with the school development plans. So, whilst, for example, in-service courses are organized and run by the education authorities' schools or within a College framework they can develop their own professional development programmes.

Primary Education (5 -11 year olds)

At this level, teaching starts to be formal and aimed at achieving five principal aims:

1. good behaviour and character formation;
2. acquisition of the tools of knowledge and expression by the teaching of Maltese and English, and of the value of numbers and mathematics;
3. an introduction to the culture of contemporary Malta;
4. an introduction to scientific knowledge, to include elements of physics, chemistry, and biology, geography and environmental science, elementary notions about the human body; and elementary technological concepts; and
5. training in activity, creativity of thought and action.

The teacher exposes pupils to all five areas, ensuring as far as possible that the teaching in one area should be integrated with the other areas. Latitude is allowed in the allocation of time to each area. However, a higher proportion of the time-table is to be allocated to the teaching of Maltese, English, and Mathematics. The best teaching methods are those that stimulate reactions from the child, lead to problem solving, and make the learning process satisfying through achievement. Consequently, pupils should participate actively in the lesson. Homework is essential to develop the habit in children to working on their own and so that children practise what they learn, but it should not occupy too much of the children's free time.

The role of tests and examinations is constantly being reviewed so that it does not lead to memorisation and cramming, but to indicate children's understanding and attainment. Maltese is, in most cases, the first language used in teaching but the teacher should speak English also to accustom children to understand and speak the language. When children participate in common activities with an element of competition, they learn to accept success and failure, to play fair, and to act as a team.

The Primary School course should be considered as one process. Primary education should lead to self control, self-confidence and self-reliance.

Secondary Education (11 - 16 year olds)

There is no real break between the Primary and the Secondary level of Education. Education at this level should not be considered terminal or complete but an important transitional phase in the whole process of formal education.

The higher age bracket and the different phase of psychological development of the students at the secondary level, point to a difference in aims, functions and methods.

174 The aims of Secondary Education, according to the National Minimum Curriculum, are threefold:

1. the further development within widened dimensions of each student's intellectual, affective and physical abilities and potentialities;
2. the training of the young mind in the pursuit of knowledge and reason, and the provision of a sufficient body of notions which would form each individual's basis for right of judgement and proper value formation;
3. the initiation into the process of qualification at a later stage for a working life.

During the secondary education phase, a wide range of abilities and needs has to be catered for, but its function should not merely be that of quickening the pace of the individual's development and formation, but also that of molding the nation, and establishing the desired new cultural and technological profile for the whole country.

As already noted, massive changes are being undertaken as the College system settles. Naturally, we need to be optimistic about developments but with our feet firmly on the ground and a reform marked by evaluation and assessment as developments unfold. Only in this we can we be truly aware of what is happening and how the reform is affecting the different levels of the education system (see Fabri and Bezzina, 2010).

At this stage, the diversity of sources of knowledge, the exercise of options in certain subjects or group of subjects of learning, and the differentiation of approach required by the different disciplines, stimulate inquisitiveness, pluralism, tolerance of diversity and independence.

The National Minimum Curriculum for the secondary schools is divided within a framework of five divisions:

1. Normative
2. Communicative
3. Cognitive - scientific
4. Cultural accretion, and
5. Action - work-oriented

As part of the reform, every effort is being made to introduce cumulative assessments and to play down the negative aspects of examinations. Most assessments and examinations include an oral element in languages and the normative core subjects, and a component of practical testing in the sciences and action-work oriented options. Furthermore, in a number of subjects, the portfolio approach to learning has been introduced.

Non-State schools, from Kindergartens to Sixth Forms, are expected to satisfy the requirements of the National Minimum Curriculum and lesson allocation to subjects is generally similar to that provided in State schools. Non-State secondary schools have traditionally concentrated on academic education, including commercial subjects. There are no private technical or special education schools on the Island. Church schools have their own particular identity, generally depending on the aims of the Order of Nuns or Friars running them or of their founders, even though the number of religious personnel teaching in or running these schools is becoming smaller and smaller. Non-Church schools, originally very few in number, were developing and flourishing during the late 1980s and 1990s, enriching the whole educational spectrum. Demand for such schooling has not kept its upward trend. At secondary level, State and Church schools are single-sex schools while some independent secondary schools cater for both sexes. Education at kindergarten, primary and post-secondary level is provided in schools for both sexes.

Teaching of values

The value of the educational experience in general and more specifically the curricular one can be judged from the extent to which the educational system succeeds in responding to the realities and challenges that have emerged in Maltese society, in a world that is becoming ever more complex, global and interdependent. Thanks to the process of consultation that has now become part and parcel of reforms in the education sector there is agreement among the educational community regarding what should be the parameters of an educational system that prepares students to live and work in a world that is changing rapidly. The educational community generally agrees that a dynamic curriculum should provide an educational experience which:

- i. promotes fundamental values among students;
- ii. facilitates their holistic development;
- iii. motivates and prepares them to be lifelong learners;
- iv. enables them to live a full and productive life in a shrinking global village; and
- v. prepares them for the world of work, where change is a fact of life.

The fundamental values of love, family, respect, inclusion, social justice, solidarity, democracy, commitment and responsibility should constitute the foundations of the compulsory educational process (Ministry of Education, 1999). These values should be woven into every aspect of this process. Several studies have shown that the family is a key feature of the Maltese identity. From its early stages, education should affirm the value of the Maltese family that is adapting itself to different ways of life.

The school should help children and youngsters understand the impact that information technology is having on the organisation of work, an impact that affects Maltese family life. The family lies at the heart of the process of solidarity. The National Minimum Curriculum recognises that knowledge of Religion is in itself essential for the moral and spiritual development of a society around values that lie at the heart of social conviviality and understanding.

The schools should serve as a testing ground for democracy in keeping with the declarations and treaties signed by Malta in the past, and with the constitutional obligations of the country. As key institutions within civil society, schools should foster among their students respect for others, and for the right of other people to enjoy freedom, peace, security and the benefits of a society governed by law and order.

In a society that is increasingly becoming multi-cultural, the educational system should enable students to develop a sense of respect, co-operation, and solidarity among cultures. This is an area that still needs to be addressed as our schools are reflecting communities that are becoming more and more diverse as people from different parts of the world settle on our islands. In this respect, different entities and not just the education Directorates need to come together to explore, study and develop programs that help such families/ communities not only settle but also be provided with a program that respects their racial, religious and cultural backgrounds. Of particular relevance has to be teacher education programs in our University that needs to see that novice teachers are adequately prepared for such realities. Malta is indeed becoming more cosmopolitan.

Security and peace in the region depend on the ability of people to co-exist despite their differences. The educational system is there to help students better understand individual, local and regional differences and thus enable them to live a productive and meaningful life in a context characterised by socio-cultural diversity.

Intellectual freedom is an important feature of a healthy democracy. Political, ethical, social and religious discussions between students and teachers should reflect this particular feature of democratic life. This does not imply that all voices should be celebrated uncritically. Intellectual freedom is fostered in a context governed by specific values.

In a democratic society, all voices are not only heard but also respected. The educational community must ensure equality of access to the educational system without discrimination on the grounds of ability, gender, religion, race or socio-cultural and economic background. The educational process should cultivate within students a sense of social justice and solidarity. The educational community should actively oppose all forms of discrimination by promoting the corresponding attitudes and readiness to act.

The democratic spirit is enhanced by the school's ability to arouse curiosity and stimulate critical and creative thinking among children. This curriculum is intended to develop citizens who are independent, creative and critical thinkers. The vehicles for the development of critical and independent thinking are: questions, systematic investigation and the exchange of ideas with others.

This is a critical point. It is essential that our future generations are able to handle personally and collectively issues that may be contentious and where disagreement abounds. It is in moments like these that the maturity of a community/ society is truly tested.

Technology has to be made into a democratic tool, a force that generates social change and creates new forms of knowledge. Both locally and internationally, those who have no access to technology cannot develop their socio-economic potential, as a result of which the international socio-economic gap is taking on a technological dimension. It is imperative, therefore, that the educational system ensures that all students, including children of different abilities, gain access to and training in technology and the new means of communication. In this way, citizens will be equipped to live in a technological, electronic and cybernetic society, and will be capable of making intelligent use of this technology for the benefit of everyone.

The country has also developed what is called an e-learning strategy. This strategy forms part of the national Smart Island strategy which has three main aspects:

- a) infrastructure;
- b) training and skills; and
- c) the development of resources.

This strategy aims to provide students and educators with the necessary IT skills expected in future occupations. To date, all teachers in state schools have been provided with a laptop, and the ratio of computers to students is being upgraded to 1:4. Training for all teachers is being provided by the eLearning Centre within the Directorate for Educational Services as well as in-class support for primary school teachers. European funds are also tapped to bring parents and teachers together in learning ICT skills. This is being done so that there would be a significant influence on the IT literacy skills parents and educators can impart on students.

Aesthetic experience, as expressed through forms of art and drama, has been given greater importance in the educational agenda. Whilst on a national level there are various private organizations that provide and expose children to the performing arts most of these are fee paying and therefore puts either a lot of financial constraints on parents or else prohibits them from such exposure. Schools, through a variety of ways, provide children with opportunities to learn more about local, regional, continental and world cultural traditions and experiences. It also encourages them to express themselves creatively in different situations and contexts. Most Colleges participate actively in national, European competitions and events (e.g. twinning with other European schools) thus extending such learning opportunities.

Finally, change causes doubts, instability and stress. The educational system is also there to prepare students to believe in themselves, and to manage stress. It should empower them to take risks and to respond, in a constructive manner, to social, cultural and economic change.

The concept of the holistic development of the person places the student at the centre of the system. Holistic education acknowledges the interdependence of psychomotor, intellectual, affective, social and cultural learning. Underlying the concept of the holistic development of students are humanistic principles. The basic tenets of this model are:

- i. human beings are capable of attaining maximum development when placed in an appropriate and stimulating environment which conveys a strong sense of love;
- ii. although small children require continuous adult support, they will, in future, be capable of learning on their own;
- iii. self esteem is crucial to learning.

In this respect:

- i. the teacher's main contribution is to facilitate the child's development at all levels;
- ii. the knowledge, experiences, needs, interests, emotions, fears and errors of the students are to be considered important factors in an effective learning process, and
- iii. self-criticism, reflection and co-operative effort are tools for human development.

The National Minimum Curriculum adopted in 1999 propounded various principles that placed the child at the centre of our educational discourse. Major developments such as policies and training have kept the child at the centre of all initiatives. Provision to support the academic, personal, social, cognitive, artistic and physical aspects are constantly being updated.

An effective educational system provides society with persons who are aware of their own potential and are keen to develop further. Within this perspective the areas of lifelong learning, global perspectives, and orientation to the world of work have been a special concern of educators and the Government.

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