

MICHAEL A. BUHAGIAR concludes his two-part article on Comprehensive Education in Malta. He lists further repressive policies and practices which have hampered our educational system, and argues that it has become unsustainable. Nonetheless there have been encouraging recent developments which promise a brighter future.

The Discontinuation of the Comprehensive System in Malta: Lasting Consequences [2]

[B] EDUCATION AS A SIFTING PROCESS

Sultana (1997) lists the local features of selection and channeling among areas of concern in the local educational system. The system has traditionally been one which promotes the 'talented' few while discarding the rest (Darmanin, 1992) and is characterised by 'the constant closure of opportunities from the very early years of primary schooling' (Sultana, p.106). Local research evidences how students are continually 'weeded out' of the system on criteria which have nothing to do with their real 'talent.'

For instance Trade School students are very much more likely to come from a disadvantaged working class background (Sultana, 1991a). Again the younger students at primary level have more chance of ending up in a lower stream (Borg & Falzon, 1995) and their performance in the 11+ selective examinations is still likely to be worse than that of the older ones even when the length of exposure to formal schooling is controlled for (Borg, Falzon & Sammut, 1995). And even though Maltese girls generally perform better than boys in local examinations (Borg, 1994), they still find it harder to make it through selectivity and many end up achieving below their potential (Darmanin, 1992).

Things may again be worse: Baldacchino (1993) asserts that in Malta family social networks (and private schools have this as one of their important spin-offs [see Sultana, 1990]) are in reality more important than formal qualifications. Another worrying problem is the rising level of illiteracy in Malta.⁹ Charles Mifsud, the Early Literacy Programme¹⁰ chairman, stressed in a newspaper interview (see Said, 1997) that the latest illiteracy figures clearly suggest that the educational system cannot continue to cater only for high achievers. He further pointed out that

9. Maltese educators are presently trying to analyse the three-fold increase in the number of illiterate persons aged 10 to 19 in the period 1985-1995. This data is rather surprising when one considers that the same period is also characterised by substantial increases in educational services (e.g., support teachers at primary level) and in the number of university students. However doubts have been expressed by some about this alarming data; the indicated years coincide almost exactly with the Nationalist Party's, now in opposition, preceding tenure in government. The possible political tinge to this controversy is substantiated by the present Labour government's constant reminder of its renewed emphasis on the primary and secondary sectors of education. The Labour Party also accuses the previous Nationalist government of expanding tertiary education at the expense of the earlier sectors.

10. The Early Literacy Programme, recently set up by the Education Ministry and the Education Faculty at the University of Malta, aims to investigate closely local levels of illiteracy and to recommend strategies for their improvement.

the recorded increase coincides with the renewed emphasis on formal examinations linked to the return of selectivity at 11+.

Even the Education Division is worried about the sifting aspect of the system. Recently Charles Mizzi, the Director General of Education, aired his concerns about the sifting process of the local system and expressed his desire to redress this problem.¹¹ He commented further that Maltese students who need help most are presently getting the least attention.

Apparently the system is all geared towards the top 20% students which the government would like to end up with a tertiary education.¹² The early streaming and the selective examination hurdles at 11+, 16+ and 18+ pave the way for university education and those who fall by the wayside have little hope of recuperating. Sultana (1994) provides data to show that, even if the Maltese system officially offers students the opportunity to transfer between types of schools at any point in time when and if the required academic level is reached, in real terms such occurrences are remote.

[C] OVERLOADED CURRICULA AND ROTE LEARNING

The return to selectivity may also be partly responsible for some of the present curricular problems. The newly set up Junior Lyceums were meant to beat the private schools, which remained selective throughout the comprehensive experience, at their own game. A type of mentality of 'what they can do we can do better' sort of ensued. This saw an escalation of artificial academic levels evident from the outset by very demanding entrance examinations with questionable validity.

It is not rare that students, after numerous sacrifices and hours of private tuition, finally make it to one of the Junior Lyceums only to find the going extremely hard and would either have to leave in due course or just sit back and endure. It is indeed disheartening to see the enthusiasm with which 'intelligent' children enter into the selective secondary schools turn to disillusion. Soon many discover that their star does not twinkle so bright after all.

The unreasonable number of subjects, at all levels and types of schools, which students have to study does not help matters. The primary and secondary levels curricula

11. Mr Mizzi was speaking on a local radio station (see Bonello, 1997).

12. The Nationalist government was targeting for a university students' population of 20% of all school leavers (*Estimates 1993*, 1992, p. 63) and a Labour Party's working document (Vella, 1993, pp. 20-21), while calling the 20% figure 'arbitrary,' still recommends that it should not be lowered by a future Labour government. The Labour Party's victory at the last General Elections in 1996 has brought no change in policy in this regard.

have over the years become overloaded as the direct result of the 'add-on reflex': New subjects and curricular items are squashed in between the already limited space in reaction to new pressures, needs and demands of the ever evolving educational system.

Students endure the load both physically (heavy bags) and metaphorically (too much study), but teachers are not in a better position. Their imagination is largely restricted because they are conditioned by specific syllabi with exams in mind (Calleja, 1988) and their expertise is thus reduced to their ability to transmit a pre-prepared package under supervision (Wain, 1991).

On similar lines *Tomorrow's Schools* (1995) warns against overloaded curricula which, in conjunction with the local overemphasis on examination achievement, promote a culture of coverage as opposed to understanding and a classroom pedagogy aimed at faster short-term targets with long-term ineffective results. Overloaded curricula can definitely, as Wain (1991) argues, constrain schools to set different priorities than those recommended in the NMC (e.g., schools end up emphasising memory instead of understanding).

The ensuing limitations of the educational system are already manifestly known to all. The Minister of Education, Evarist Bartolo (1997), was only echoing general feelings when he complained that even the best Maltese students

are very good at reproducing what they have read in books. Come up with a real problem, though, and ask them to analyse, and to think, and to apply what they've been taught to the real situation, and they find that difficult. (p. 38)

Bartolo further argued that it is only by restructuring the local educational system into one which promotes independent and creative thinking that the 'culture of mimicry' could be defeated. Presently the curricula are being revised¹³ and one sincerely hopes that the present drive to release the pressure from the curricula would eventually promote a healthier learning environment.¹⁴ People involved in the Curriculum Reform Project, unless they are inclined towards laborious and futile exercises, ought to heed Bezzina's (1991) advice and complement reviewed NMC policies and recommendations with

13. During 1997 the primary school syllabus (years IV to VI) was reviewed in view of forthcoming changes in the curriculum. While drafts of the changes should be available by April of 1998, plans are at hand to revise the curriculum of the primary lower classes (*Estimates 1988, 1997*).

14. One can already note some encouraging initiatives. In the state primary sector, for instance, the newly reduced primary curricula have permitted the development of the Mid-Week Project, a joint venture between the Education Division and the Faculty of Education. Every Wednesday afternoon children are encouraged to develop their creativity in an informal atmosphere under the guidance of trained university student-teachers while class teachers participate in staff development projects.

adequate supporting structures. For it has been mainly the present incompatibility between structures and policies which impeded the present NMC from leaving any significant impact.

[D] A TOO STRONG PRIVATE EDUCATIONAL SECTOR

The Maltese system is basically dual: a strong private sector (reinforced following the comprehensive years¹⁵) comprising church and lay institutions competes with the state sector throughout the whole system except at university level. About 31% of all Maltese students from the pre-primary to the post-secondary level attend some private institution.

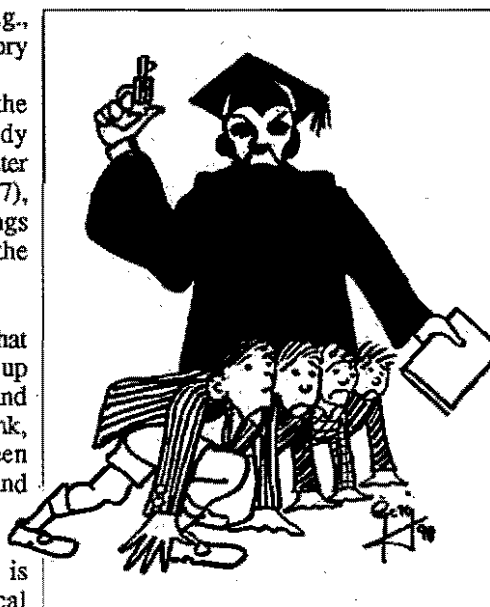
The role of the private sector, albeit very strong at the pre-primary (38%) and primary (34%) sectors, is even stronger with regards to the more academically gifted secondary students. Excluding state Trade Schools and Area Secondaries (both catering for students very unlikely to continue post-16 studies in academic schools), almost half (47%) of all local secondary students enrolled in academically oriented educational programmes are in private schools. At the post-secondary level 22% of the students following academic courses are in private colleges.

Zammit Mangion (1992), referring to the numerical strength of the private sector, opines that it is too strong for the good of the whole system. He cautions that local private schools, instead of limiting their role to that of complementing the state sector, are in reality an alternative to it so strong as to challenge and clash with government policies. The de-routing of children from the state non-selective to private selective schools throughout the existence of the comprehensive system in the state

sector is just one example. The retained existence of selectivity in the private sector has partly contributed to the discontinuation of the comprehensive system (Darmanin, 1996), and some (e.g., Mercieca, 1997) suggest that this may happen again in the future.

The private schools variable has been exploited by some in a bid to scare people from further experimentation with justice in education. For instance Mercieca partially bases his arguments in favour of retaining the present selective policies (he particularly refers to streaming) on fears of another stampede from the state sector towards the private sector should the public sector decide to destream again. While such scaremongering arguments should not be permitted to fossilise educational progress in Malta, one should be wise enough to learn from past experiences. And the past clearly shows that, given its numerical strength and ability to absorb further enlargement, in any efforts aimed at improving justice in education one has to consult and to come to some agreement with the private sector.

15. Maltese parents, dissatisfied with the comprehensive system in the state sector, sought and found refuge in the more 'traditional' private schools (Zammit Mangion, 1992).



NEED TO RECTIFY UNSUSTAINABLE SYSTEM

Efforts to 'redeem' the Maltese educational system from the 'unpopular' comprehensive experience have unwittingly fallen victim to an even cruder one. The poor replacement has only managed to survive for so long because the influential parents who would have had the interest, the ability and the means to voice their concerns had either found a place for their children outside the state system or else had successfully ensured that their offspring would not end up at the bottom scale of the ladder.

But even though such 'lucky' students may eventually end up with the bumper rewards awaiting at the end of the line, they still suffer. Maybe not the humiliation and neglect reserved for the lower achieving students who usually fight the oppressive system by opting out or playing truant (see Chircop, 1997), but the more subtle psychological violence of continuous pressures from home and school which sadly equally distorts their childhood and youth (see Mansueto, 1997, for a detailed account of what primary achieving students have to put up with). The Maltese educational system somewhat manages to cheat out of a proper education all of its students, both the achieving and the academically weak as well as the willing and the unmotivated ones. And while some may choose to quote good-sounding statistical results to satisfy public commitments and maybe appease their conscience, others prefer to discuss the limiting effects for all of the system. For instance Calleja (1988) speaks of a system which,

instead of aiming mainly at a total formation of the personality of the child, is solely geared towards the achievement of good academic results. Headteachers and teachers do not think of anything else; they become part of the bureaucracy intent on judging students' success only by written examinations. (p. 31)

In this scenario, students not only feel the need to resort to private tuition in academic subjects, but, in an effort to complete their education, are also constrained to attend private lessons in subjects (e.g., music, dancing and drama) which are either ignored or not given due importance in formal schools. Calleja complains that "we have arrived at the absurd situation where the role of a formative system is not shared equally between the school and the family but is largely dependent upon the family" (p. 32). And it is exactly this concern which Maltese parents, irrespective of their children's potential or actual achievement, need to understand and act upon. They should unite their weight behind efforts aimed at finally transforming the system into a truly educational one. And under pressure policy makers usually act.

ENCOURAGING RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

The need to fight the local characteristic of exam-centred instruction led a lecturer and a group of students at the Faculty of Education to launch the Movement for Humane Education (MEU) in the early 1990s (Sultana, 1991b). The Movement, which remained rather active for some years before slipping into oblivion, sought and managed to sway public opinion in favour of an alternative educational system based on social justice and human dignity.

Maybe their greatest achievement, even though it never got to carry any legal weight, was the penning of the Charter of Students' Rights which met with widespread

consensus when it was published. Regrettably, the then Minister of Education refused to sign it and subsequent ministers followed suit. The charter touched upon sensitive issues (such as the right of all students for the best possible education, positive discrimination in favour of the least advantaged, the need for a participatory and decentralised system, the promotion of creativity in schools, and abuses related to private tuition) all of which lie at the heart of most unresolved local educational problems.

Apart from the better public awareness of the right for a quality education for all, there are signs that things may also be moving at the decision making level. Some of these improvements include:

- (a) the postponement of streaming to year five of the primary level in state schools;
- (b) free education in church schools and the lottery entrance system at the primary level;
- (c) the number of Junior Lyceums has gradually increased from the initial two to the present ten, and presently over 46% of students in state secondaries (excluding Trade Schools) attend one of these;
- (d) the 11+ examinations for entry into the Junior Lyceums have changed from being selective to qualifying;
- (e) the postponement by one year for entry into the Trade Schools; and
- (f) the 16+ University of Malta SEC examinations, which have recently replaced the traditional English 'O' system, cater for a much wider audience.

Noting such changes, Darmanin (1991) suggests that the state secondary sector is slowly moving back to the comprehensive model, but others are less optimistic. For instance Wain (1994) simply dismisses such developments as an attempt to render the tripartite system less rigid and more humane.

CONCLUSION

The present situation surely does not call for optimism. The price Maltese society and individuals have to pay because educational policies have misfired is high and far-ranging (Wain, 1994). But some recent developments, even though piecemeal and uncoordinated, may still offer some hope. At both the policy level and the general public's feelings one can note a certain swing in favour of a greater social awareness with regards to education. Important educational issues such as equity and entitlement, long buried and forgotten in our pseudo-meritocratic educational setup, now probably stand a better chance to be favourably considered as part of the educational agenda. Hopefully inglorious reminiscences of the recent past would not resurface to spoil it all once again.

Educational policies need to move away from the sphere of 'party' politics with all the ensuing power games and calculations. Their rightful place is the realm of 'educational' politics. Only then would the Maltese educational system regain its lost credibility to which Calleja (1988) refers. Short-sighted political gains in the field of education can prove very costly to both 'winners' and 'losers,' and in such circumstances only influential interest groups hell-bent on safeguarding their privileges are bound to make any headway. Had not the mismanaged comprehensive policy cost the Labour Party so many votes, and had the Nationalist Party not made such a feast of the public's dissatisfaction, maybe both parties would today be more inclined to realign our anachronistic educational policies with modern Western systems.

Could it be that Maltese politicians refuse to take the plunge for fear of possible electoral backlashes? If these were to be the case, as one is bound to suspect, than local educators should take it on their shoulders to spur the horse forward. By presenting strong arguments based on theoretical and all sorts of local data, educational researchers should embark on a dual mission: mobilise public opinion on lines already pursued by the MEU and pressure politicians to implement change. A swing in the public's perception would reassure politicians that it is ultimately in their interests to make the necessary changes.

However similar efforts do not easily bear fruit unless the native research output gains in respect. Local educational policies have traditionally relied heavily on foreign ideas and expertise at the expense of neglecting the development of a local approach to curriculum development. Again, as Wain (1994) rightly complains, local educational research of note was conspicuous by its absence until lately and still remains limited. Whether foreign reliance continues because of our persisting neo-colonial mentality or due to the dearth of local research, the truth is that local experts are rarely considered when it comes to educational planning.

But there have again been some improvements lately in this regard (Mifsud, 1994). The report *Tomorrow's Schools* (1995) (which incidentally calls for the reintroduction of the comprehensive system) written by indigenous experts with an international experience and reputation is just one fine example of collaboration between researchers and policy makers. It is the good quality of the local research output which will induce decision makers to make further use of local expertise, but good quality output in turn

depends on the availability of adequate research grants to local experts in pursuit of local solutions to local problems. Only the mutual recognition of the ones' dependency on the others may eventually break the vicious circle which still largely bedevils the system. However once appropriate research is commissioned and a general consensus is reached on the validity and reliability of the ensuing results, there should be a strong commitment towards change. *Tomorrow's Schools* has unfortunately only been an academic exercise; its numerous progressive recommendations have so far largely failed to find their way into the system.

No one is suggesting that Maltese educational researchers need reinvent the wheel. More appropriately one should ensure that, in view of the unique local circumstances (see Ventura, 1992), internationally accepted policies which may benefit our system be scrutinised by native experts in consultation with interested parties. Experience has shown that foreign implants imported lock, stock and barrel may well be rejected by the receiving body; the Maltese experimentation with the comprehensive system may be a case in point. Not only do all forthcoming reforms need to be thoroughly explored from a local perspective at the outset, but their subsequent implementation (especially more so if these include local variants) needs to be consistently monitored and evaluated, and any resulting necessary adjustments should be carried out in due time before any snowball effect sets in.

Maltese education has for far too long played the 'waiting game' only carrying out piecemeal alterations which have not led us anywhere. Now is the time to learn from the past, pick up the pieces and move forwards with

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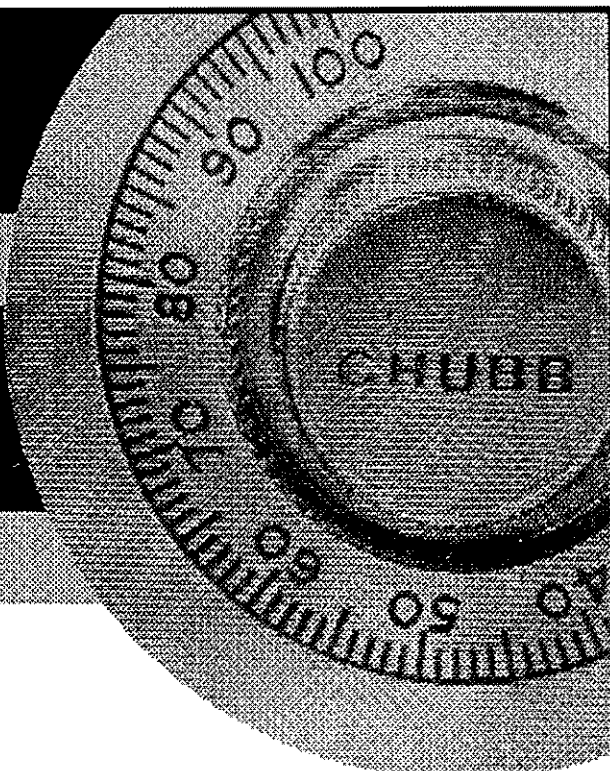
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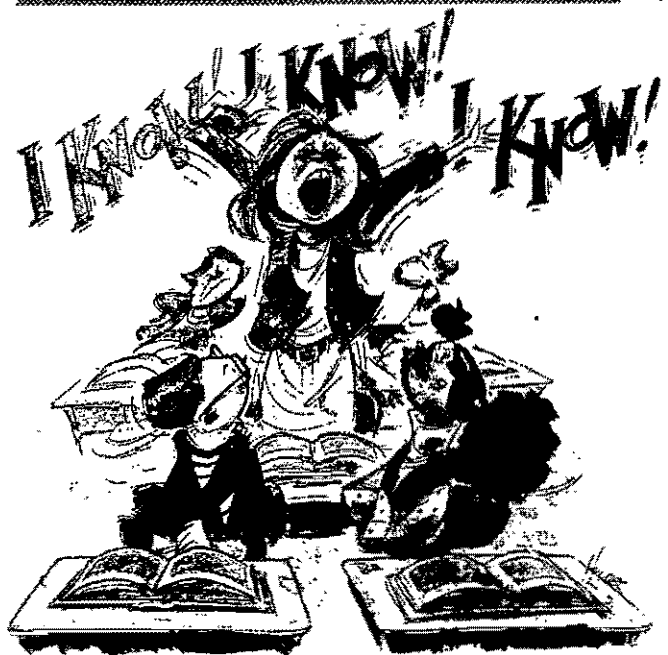


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a clear destination. But where to? The challenge facing the Maltese system to which Sultana (1997, p.111) refers could offer the necessary direction. He speaks of the need to work at improving the quality of education for all students with all sorts of occupational aspirations without further intensifying social stratification. A hard challenge indeed, but then, that is what visions are. One ought to appreciate that all relevant present and past experiences, irrespective of their outcome, can be used profitably. Maltese educational history can certainly teach that the bitter consequences of a miscondacted reform may take a very long time to wear off, if at all. And should everyone keep this in mind and act wisely on it, then the future of

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