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Ethics education in Maltese public schools: a response to otherness or a contribution to Othering?

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the establishment of an Ethics Education Programme for school pupils aged between five and sixteen years who opt out of Catholic Religious Education in Malta. It needs to be seen in the light of the changing demography of Malta and the increasing secularisation of the country, as well as to the growing racism, islamophobia and rejection of the Other to be found all over Europe (and of course beyond). We question if the Ethics Education Programme, in its commitment to ‘totalising’ western ideals of rationality, autonomy, and universal values, is itself rooted in discomfort with the Other and constitutes a form of ethical violence. The work of Emmanuel Levinas on Otherness, sameness and violence is central to this paper.

Keywords Ethics education Programme in Malta · Maltese public schools · Levinas · Otherness · Violence

Introduction

Malta, in 2012, witnessed the birth of a new National Curriculum Framework (NCF). It was the first time that a policy document raised the issue of non-Catholics and/or non-religious pupils in public schools participating in the learning of religious education. The NCF argued that these pupils should be given a substitution for missing out Roman Catholic religion lessons. Its authors argued that an Ethics Education Programme (EEP) should be provided (see Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family 2012, 8). Such a recommendation needs to be seen within the Maltese context where the Roman Catholic Church has a long-standing influence within all levels of society.

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Malta aspires to be a progressive European Union country when it comes to civil liberties, yet the Church's influence on much of Malta's populace and political decision-making remains very strong. Freedom of religion is pronounced in Malta's Constitution (1964), yet Article 2 of Chapter I of the Constitution states that, (1) The religion of Malta is the Roman Catholic Apostolic Religion; (2) The authorities of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church have the duty and the right to teach which principles are right and which are wrong; and (3) Religious teaching of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Faith shall be provided in all public schools as part of compulsory education. Moreover, the scholastic calendar is moulded around Catholic feast days, and most schools have reserved spaces within their premises and schedules for Catholic worshipping (Darmanin 2013). According to Borg and Mayo (2006), the Catholic culture has been allowed access to public schools and was permitted to work through intellectuals, such as teachers, curriculum administrators and textbook authors, to breed its privileged position within society. Schools conduct much of their activities to fit the needs of their Catholic students and families, as if the Maltese people were 'an undifferentiated mass, a unitary subject, with one belief system' (Borg and Mayo 2006, 44).

Schools in Europe are becoming increasingly culturally and religiously diverse due to the fluidity brought about by recent changes. There has been a large influx of mostly economic immigrants and also asylum seekers that impacted the composition of Maltese schools. The Maltese National Statistics Office (2018) found that foreign students from kindergarten to secondary school have more than doubled in five years, now making up 10% of the school-age population (Calleja 2019). While the most significant number of foreign students come from EU Member States, African and Asian pupils register the most significant increase. More than half of these foreign students in Malta attend public schools (Calleja 2019).

It can be argued that there is now equity for non-Catholics and non-religious pupils in those Maltese public schools that started to provide Ethics Education lessons as an alternative to Catholic Religious Education (CRE). However, this paper questions: How does the teaching of Ethics respond to the otherness of the Other? Secondly, does the EEP itself create processes of otherness and othering in schools? This paper will analyse data from a qualitative study that interviewed teachers of Ethics. The data is analysed using a theory-led thematic analysis based on the work of Emmanuel Levinas whose ideas are used to question how otherness is constructed in relation to sameness in the teaching of Ethics as a subject, and how this constitutes a form of violence.

The next section in this paper will provide a deeper context to the teaching of Ethics by focusing on the philosophy that underpins the EEP, followed by a discussion of some of Levinas' ideas. The main section of the paper will then focus on analysing the data from the interviews through a Levinasian lens.

The ethics curriculum

The Ethics Programme aims to address the diverse religious and secular moral beliefs, traditions and cultures of students. As is suggested by the Learning Area Outcomes Framework for the subject, the programme perceives such differences as 'valuable and something to celebrate' and 'tolerate' (Ministry for Education and Employment n.d.). The Ethics Programme affirms the position that a just and well-ordered pluralistic

society can only work well when people know one another, understand one another and get along agreeably. Consequently, the associated pedagogical approaches highlight the rational side of human relations and make use of notions such as empathy, tolerance, social contract and mutual understanding to bring about what the subject deems an ethical coexistence. A zone is said to be created where students are encouraged to listen to others, to think reflectively on different beliefs, experiences and ideas, to clearly communicate their positions about issues and respond to others in a respectful way.

The EEP adopts a philosophical approach. It does not only sensitise students into knowledge and understanding of the moral domain but, presents ethics as a process of thinking and reflective practices that help students become skilful in ethical inquiry and action. Such an understanding of ethics involves encouraging students to live, in Socratic terms, an ‘examined life’ (see Wain 2016), by providing them with the opportunity to think about traditional values, as well as pay careful attention to their own private beliefs and consider the ethical dimensions of their experiences concerning oneself and others. Furthermore, a philosophical approach to the EEP could be regarded as the exercise of Aristotle’s *phronêsis* (see Wain 2014), or what may be translated into practical wisdom. It signifies the habit of making the right decisions and taking the right actions in context, coupled with the never-ending quests of excellence for the common good. As John Dewey (1960), to whose theories the Ethics Curriculum owes much, notes,

Moral theory begins, in germ, when any one asks, “Why should I act thus and not otherwise? Why is this right and that wrong? What right has any one to frown upon this way of acting and impose that other way?” Children make at least a start upon the road of theory when they assert that the injunctions of elders are arbitrary, being simply a matter of superior position. (5)

Following Dewey’s line of thought, proponents of ethical inquiry stress that students who engage philosophically with ethical norms concerning their own experience will comprehend that there are different conceptions, principles and ways of looking at things. They will also realise that these can come in tension with each other.

Throughout Western history, people have made use of normative ethical theories (virtue ethics, consequentialism, rights-based and Kantian ethics) to make and substantiate their moral judgements. Philip Cam (2016) argues that when students are made aware of how these normative ethical theories have been utilised in different times and places, they will ‘enlarge [their] social, cultural and historical knowledge and understanding’ (11). They will also ‘learn to deal with the sources of disagreement over ethical matters in their own society’ (Cam 2016, 11). Similarly, Wain argues that the Ethics Programme would help students realise that disagreements are ‘endemic to a society that values freedom of belief and that tolerates cultural difference’ (Wain 2016 para.5). The EEP, as a philosophical practice, is described as non-denominational, which means it does not seek to shape pupils’ ethical beliefs and conduct or conform their beliefs and demeanour to conventional norms. This does not imply that the Ethics teacher needs to disregard or pass conventional norms as irrelevant; instead, she should involve pupils to think critically, reflectively and creatively about them.

The Ethics Curriculum acknowledges that ethical inquiry is not ‘purely a cerebral affair’ (Cam 2012,82). In addition to thinking critically and thinking creatively, it

involves what Matthew Lipman calls ‘caring thinking’ (Lipman 1995; Lipman 2003), a kind of thinking which focuses on the social aspect of human personality and which takes place when pupils think collaboratively together. Pedagogically, the Ethics curriculum borrows considerably from the practice of Philosophy for Children and its central interpretation of the classroom as a Community of Inquiry. Wain (2016) describes a community of inquiry as,

[...] one that values discussion, dialogue, debate, the exchange of ideas and outlooks in social environment which is free and safe and where participants feel that they and their views are respected; it is, therefore, a community of friends. The community is a place where understanding is built and consensus valued, but also a place of non-violent struggle where arguments are owned, if at all, by persuasion. (para.4)

Following this conception of the Ethics Programme, we ask what the impetus for Ethics Education is. Is it a genuine concern to respond to the religious *other*, or is it driven by an underlying political ideology which functions to domesticate cultural and religious differences to preserve Western democracy and its values? Does Ethics Education feed into an assimilative discourse which supports the idea of Europeanness, democratic enculturation and adaptation?

Introducing Levinas

This section serves as the theoretical backbone of the study. Levinas asserts that the self comes into existence through the call of the Other.¹ His proposition counters the Cartesian Western philosophical thought summed up in the proposal ‘I think; therefore, I am’. Levinas takes issue with the logocentric perspective of the Western philosophical tradition for generating a totalistic discourse that dominates and reduces the otherness of the Other to sameness and identity. To overcome this, Levinas accords primacy to an asymmetrical relationship between self and Other, whereby the Other is privileged. This ethical recognition of the Other becomes the only way through which we can coexist in a peaceful and just way. In this relationship, the self, or I, is held hostage to the Other’s otherness because I am responsible not to appropriate or assimilate the Other to my worldly spheres. Levinas insists that ontology (that is, the nature of being) constitutes ‘a reduction of the other to the same’ which is done through an ‘interposition of a middle or neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being’ (Levinas 1969, 43). The Other becomes a problem for me to be solved. Interpreting Levinas, Brian Treanor (2006), describes the assimilating forces that shape our minds and practices, as follows:

The shock of the encounter with otherness is mitigated by interpreting it through the mediation of this neutral third term, which makes it understandable by placing otherness within the known categories of the system. I see the other as “like me”

¹ Levinas, very often, capitalises the word Other to highlight the asymmetry of relations whereby the Other is always above and before me, summoning me to respond to his call. The word “Other” in its capitalised form, used in this paper, reflects Levinas’s notion of alterity and asymmetry.

in some respects and “unlike me” in others, but both these ways of seeing the other are in terms of “me”. After the initial shock of the otherness is reduced in this manner, the otherness is completely dominated by the assignation of meaning to the other in relation to my projects – by naming the other. For example, I begin to think of the other as “my student”, “my colleague” or “my doctor”. (16).

This neutral third term is totalising for Levinas. Simon Critchley (as cited in Critchley and Bernasconi Critchley 2004) explains that the totality which Levinas speaks about is characterised by my tendency to grasp the unfamiliarity of the other through general concepts. This grasping would eventually lead me to perceive the Other as a reflection of myself, who looks to the world in the same way as I do. I grasp the other in terms of ‘understanding, correlation, symmetry, reciprocity, equality, and [...] recognition’ (p.13). In my eyes, the other exists only in her generality and never in her individuality (Levinas 1969, 44).

For Levinas, ethics is more than a recipe which one shall follow to live a ‘good’ life. It is instead a radical rethinking of what it means to be human. Unlike Immanuel Kant, he does not conceive ethics as my duty to choose to be good. Instead, Levinas insists that I am called to be ethical before I can decide about it. Levinas, thus, reverses the Western idea that positions ethics in personal autonomy, to reorient it as ‘first philosophy’. He reconsiders the primacies of Western philosophy to affirm that ‘the opposition between “is” and “ought” is neither valid nor even possible’ (Peperzak 1995, xi). Ethics as first philosophy is, after Levinas, understood as ‘a relation of infinite responsibility to the other person’ (Critchley 2004, 6). Levinas’s philosophical project is not intended to provide a new ethical system or a specific set of rules but, is instead an inquiry into a relationship where the other constitutes my subjectivity and holds me hostage.

To be human is, according to Levinas (1969), to be ‘infinitely responsible’ for the Other without expecting the Other to do the same in return (244). It is I who is responsible for the Other and all Others, and this responsibility forms my subjectivity. When I accept responsibility for the Other, and all Others, and the unfreedom which it involves, I actualise my nature as an ethical being (Blake et al. 1998, 65). Thus, I am moral and free only when I respond to the call of the Other with ‘here I am’ (Chalier 2002, 78–79). Levinas posits responsibility for the Other as the necessary bedrock of subjectivity. As he puts it, ‘I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed, or for what does not even matter to me; or which precisely does not matter to me, is met by me as face’ (Levinas 1985, 95). Before the Other, I have no choice but to be responsible for her. This is because I cannot be freed from responsibility. It is inescapable. ‘To discover in the I such an orientation is to identify the I and morality’ (Levinas 1986, 353). For Levinas, this asymmetrical relationship is a departure from myself to the Other without any return to the self. In highlighting this asymmetrical relationship, he often fondly quotes Alyosha Karamazov in ‘The Brothers Karamazov’ by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, where he says, ‘we are all responsible for everyone else – but I am more responsible than all the others’ (as cited in Kearney 1984, 67). However, Levinas clarifies that Alyosha’s view of responsibility does not mean that every individual is more responsible than all the Others because that would imply a degree of reciprocity. It is solely I who is responsible more than the Other, and also for everyone else’s responsibility (Levinas as cited in Kearney Kearney 1984,

67). During an interview with Philippe Nemo, Levinas was asked, ‘but is not the Other also responsible in my regard?’, to which Levinas replies, ‘perhaps, but that is *his* affair. [...] I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it’ (Levinas 1985, 98). We have ‘no choice’ (Levinas, as cited in Hand Levinas 1989, 247). It is precisely because of my lack of freedom regarding my choice to be responsible or not, that Levinas (1981) describes ethical responsibility as anarchy. In his words, ‘anarchy is not disorder as opposed to order’ (Levinas 1981, 101). If we act responsibly, it does not mean that we follow the tenets of anarchism, as a political organisation (Critchley 2007), where we engage in a process that ‘has no conductive principle or rationality... [and as such] is...without direction’ (Dussel 1985, 61). Instead, Critchley, elaborating on Levinas’s notion of the term, argues that anarchy refers to ‘the negation of totality’, which requires us to distance ourselves from the traditional ways of doing things and continually question our thinking and practices, to avoid ‘the affirmation of a new totality’ (Critchley 2007, 122). Such an understanding of anarchy is, therefore, of value. In this view, responsibility is anarchic, in the sense that before the self has any consciousness or choice in the matter, responsibility imposes itself onto the subject. Faced by such imposition, the subject is taken by surprise.

But who is this Other that Levinas insists so much upon? For Levinas, the Other means any other person who is not me. In everyday life, we encounter many Others. We either meet them directly or experience their traces. However, Levinas uses the singular Other to accentuate that we meet Others one at a time, face to face. Here, Wayne Veck (2014) argues that it is necessary to indicate that the way Levinas conceives the Other is very different from the considerable academic discourse about the Other. In such discussions, the Other belongs to social categories deemed to be ‘Other-than-normal’, and as such needs to be kept at a distance from the “normal-us”. With reference to Sharon Todd (2003), Veck argues that the Other ‘does not simply mean a sociological “other” who is marginalised or maligned’, because as mentioned above, the Other is a mystery who resists assimilation (Veck 2014, 455).

The research process

This study consisted of in-depth interviews with teachers of Ethics to get a better sense of the questions, queries and assumptions concerning the reality out there in schools. The decision to interview teachers was based on the fact that they could provide first-hand accounts of the multi-layered nature of internal othering while also discussing pedagogical possibilities that promote hospitality towards the alterity of the Other. This research was part of a post-graduate degree followed by the first author, who, in the course of her research, shifted from teaching primary education to ethics at middle school level.

Following permission from the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee, two teachers (working with children aged between five and sixteen years) volunteered to be interviewed in-depth, three times each. The interviews were developmental and semi-structured to allow for further elaborations by the teachers and offer denser accounts. In this way, both interviewee and interviewer could formulate and articulate the web of meanings that construct an understanding of the Other, otherness and the self. Considering that the interview questions were informed by the philosophy of Levinas and also that some of the questions related directly to his philosophy, it was appropriate to share

the interview guide with the teachers a few days before each face-to-face interview. The interviews produced an extensive body of text that was thematically analysed from a Levinasian ethical perspective. This required the authors to become, in Janice Morse's (2002) words, as 'theory smart' as possible prior to the analysis, since it was not the type of analysis which centres on themes that arise naturally from the data. However, the fear of violating the data by imposing pre-decided themes was prevalent and very uncomfortable, mainly because the same theoretical framework warns against the imposition of rationality on the Other.

Discussion of three themes

Several themes emerged when analysing the interviews from a Levinasian perspective; however, for the purpose of this paper, three themes will be discussed.

Theme one: Perpetuating a culture of performativity

I have been told that if there are no more exams, then ethics will become a soft option. So, technically, let's face it, *it serves the system* [emphasis added by interviewee]. Pupils, I think, would become more relaxed and enjoy it more if there were no exams. Even the teacher would not feel so stressed. But, unfortunately, since we are all the time paranoid about comparing it with Religion teaching, we tend to follow what Religion curriculum does. So we introduce exams.... It's definitely not teacher-friendly... I know of refugee students who are seeking help in learning-hubs. So a project might not be really and truly [done] by the student; many factors come at play. (Quinn)

The teaching of Ethics was made examinable so as not to be seen as a soft option in comparison to Religious Education (Montebello and Muscat 2014), highlighting the instrumentalisation aspect of the subject. The teacher's choice of words, 'it serves the system', 'so stressed', 'not teacher-friendly', 'causes pressure', reveals the rising stress experienced by Ethics teachers to align students with the predetermined learning goals and have them submit their coursework for assessment purposes. Moreover, they know that, ultimately, they share a degree of responsibility for the students' final marks, and might eventually have to justify themselves with parents, school management team, or educational officers. Teachers end up, as Quinn puts it, 'like a hamster looping the loop'. We, thus, question whether teachers, as Gert Biesta (2017) puts it, become 'servants of the system', rather than 'key agents' in the educational venture.

One might argue that, when performativity urges teachers to retain responsibility for pushing students toward the learning outcomes successfully, they might become less concerned with creating educational spaces, where they, as well as students, can engage with each other beyond that which is already determined. According to Ruitenberg (2010), 'outcomes-based education is, by design, inhospitable' (271). This is because an approach to teaching and learning that is concerned with what learning should be and should be for is alien to that which is yet to come - the unforeseeable. This is particularly the case for the Ethics Programme, where self-reflection, regarding what

decisions ought to be taken, requires time and cannot be neatly pre-determined. Outcomes-based education has, thus, ethical implications, as it does not provide space for a genuine encounter with difference and with what is yet to come (see Attard et al. 2016). Moreover, although being aware that at times their actions are discriminatory, the research participants felt disempowered to challenge the status quo due to accountability issues, linked to the imposed task-orientedness and the students' abilities.

Assessment comprises coursework and an end-of-year exam. The nature of the coursework's activities varies, yet any coursework or exam requires a high degree of cognitive functioning. We question whether assessing students who are not well articulated, have language barriers or have a culturally different understanding of knowledge, risks othering them. Corinne, the other interviewee besides Quinn,² explains some of the challenges she has encountered in her Ethics classrooms as follows:

Many of the students are not able to write, not able to read. How can they, thus, ever do well? If the assessment is done orally, those students would still not be able to use the desired terminology. Same goes for foreign students [who] struggle with both Maltese and English. The fact that Ethics is being assessed causes many issues that are not easy to be addressed.

The above suggests that the way the Ethics Programme is being implemented in schools, particularly the aspect of assessment, is putting undue pressures on both the teacher and her students to perform, neglecting the ethical necessity of responding to otherness. Moreover, challenges also arise due to the nature of the subject, which requires students to possess cognitive faculties. Biesta (2017) observes that philosophical work 'can work quite well for children who can handle words and arguments, concepts and conversations, but far less so for children who are not "there"' (421).

Biesta's argument can also be extended to raising concerns about the cultural and social dimensions of learning. Kirova and Prochner (2015), refer to several studies conducted within minority and non-Western contexts, to argue that the way children learn is deeply embedded in their cultural and social backgrounds. Socio-economically disadvantaged children are more likely being raised in a context where 'learning relies on observation and participation in everyday life alongside parents and older, more experienced members of the child's community' (Kirova and Prochner 2015, 387). In this so-called paediatric model, the teaching of morality is distinct from the pedagogical one, which characterises Western learning approaches in schools. The former model does not promote, for instance, discussion, debates, questioning, and reading, which are intrinsic elements of the Ethics classroom. Instead, oral storytelling and respect for authoritative figures are favoured. Considering the above, one can question the extent to which the Ethics classroom can cater to culturally and even socially diverse groups of students.

Quinn recalls an episode in which she tried to respond to the language needs of one of her culturally diverse students, who have difficulties expressing themselves in English or Maltese:

When there is a big, big problem, I try to find a translator to translate to the boy or girl [...] It happened. But then, I wasn't really sure whether the translator is really

² Teachers names are pseudonyms.

translating what the girl or boy is saying rather than what...he might be telling his own opinion, for example, and I cannot get to know... It also depends on whether the student really wants to get a translator. It happened that, for the first year, this boy was willing to be the translator, but the next year he grew disinterested. He didn't want to act as a translator any longer. I tried to bribe him with a certificate [laughing].

Quinn's decision to involve her students in responding to the needs of their culturally diverse peers can be interpreted as a showcase of her responsibility towards the particularities of students. While acknowledging the limitations, and perhaps the impossibility of overcoming the challenge, motivated by the necessity to respond, she opens up to uncertainty. Without negating the fact that Quinn could also have been driven by the need to assess the students, it can also be argued that she took her responsibility to a relational level to overcome the cultural obstacles, leading to inequity in the classroom.

Theme two: Empathy

As already mentioned earlier, the Ethics Programme identifies empathy as a pivotal emotion and salient prerequisite to promote the idea of ethical responsibility towards the Other. Both the Maltese Curriculum and the EEP consider empathy as a cognitive habit that should be taught as early as possible (see Kienbaum 2014) in order to cultivate moral reasoning. If empathy can be taught, then teachers can assess its development, as is suggested by the measurable learning outcomes for the Ethics Programme (see Ministry for Education and Employment 2015).

The learning outcomes approach calls for Ethics teachers to use 'a number of diverse resources, such as visual materials, e.g. stories, documentaries and dramatisations; and written materials, e.g. short stories, plays, novels, poems, case-studies [and] reports', to facilitate the empathic process (2015, 29). It assumes that these resources will assist pupils' understanding of the most profound dimensions of the other person's point of view and 'be able to put [themselves] in the position of others, and grasp their perspectives and feelings' (Siegel 1990, 43). They will also assist pupils in replicating the experiences of the Other empathically.

From the data of this research, we ask if it is indeed possible to take the perspective of a real or fictional character and imaginatively replicate her subjective experience. Secondly, we question how Ethics teachers can ensure that an empathic understanding of the Other is being achieved within the classroom. Both interviewed teachers think that empathy offers possibilities for children; however, they also stress that we can never fully empathise with the differently situated Others. Thus, they claim, empathy proves challenging to teach.

Well, you do your best to impart the value of empathy to the pupils – that is, the capacity to put yourself into someone else's shoes. But, let's say you try to understand and empathise, do you succeed to step into someone else's shoes if you have not experienced the situation yourself? If it's not first-hand, I do not think you can empathise a hundred per cent. How can you ever achieve this? (Corinne).

The above quote reflects the significance of the uniqueness of experiences which, however, could eventually point towards the impossibility of complete empathy. Quinn, though, clarifies her thought by stating that contextual information could help us empathise, albeit not wholly, better with the different Other. At this point, one could argue that holding your experiences as personal is not reason enough to discard the possibility of empathy. After all, as Todd (2003) acknowledges, we all, to some degree, engage in projections of some kind or another. We do attempt to imagine how others feel in one situation or another, and this could trigger us to reach out to individuals or groups who need help. For instance, Todd (2003) argues that teachers often try to ‘feel with their students’ in order to get an understanding of how to act in their students’ best interests. Kosmos Sobon (2018) writes ‘a student’s burden becomes the burden of the teacher. Any errors, omissions, ignorance, delinquency, disharmony, success and even the happiness of a learner is the responsibility of a teacher’ (161). However, the teachers go on to say that we should never assume that what we think how others feel is indeed what they feel (Todd 2003). This unreachability comes across very strongly in the teachers take on empathy. Although Quinn makes reference to the significance of information for an empathic understanding of the other, it seems that it is the uniqueness of the experience (not lack of knowledge) that is responsible for the inconceivability of empathy.

The conception of empathy endorsed by the Ethics Programme might have Ethics teachers trust that empathy is what gives their students access to the lives of others, who are differently situated. It is through empathy that they feel connected to the underprivileged and marginalised others and that a sense of social justice is triggered. Moreover, the curriculum provides plenty of avenues where an empathic understanding could be incorporated. As a result, through various pedagogical means, teachers regularly ask students to experience a mode of ‘being-with’ others who come from culturally underprivileged backgrounds (Todd 2003, 47). In such cases, students are required to enter the mind-frame of children and young adults, whose rights are violated through, for example, the exploitation of labour, early marriage, oppressive governments, and hostility towards them seeking refuge. The Others awaiting an empathic response, often, are persons whose alterity is different from the students in the classroom. Nevertheless, teachers seem to trust the capacity to be moved and touched by another life’s story and expect from the students some transformation and responsible commitment towards social justice causes. However, as the participants argued, this process is never easy.

Let us consider Corinne’s pedagogical exercise as she narrates the following in her interview. Focusing on Children’s Rights and using a video documentary, her students are asked to identify with the feelings of Pakistani children (as young as six years olds) who are forced to work as bonded labourers in the carpet-weaving industry. The documentary depicts how vulnerable families, crippled with extreme poverty, trade their children for the equivalence of ten Euros to work in servitude as carpet weavers to pay off the family’s debts. Children ‘sell’ fast in the carpet industry for two reasons. Firstly, their small, nimble fingers are ideally suited to hand-weave threads. Secondly, children are more easily than adults controlled and compelled to work long hours for little money, in illegal and unjust conditions, every day. For these children, the prospect for compulsory education is non-existent, and, sadly, most of them die while enduring a miserable life, as a result of poor health and exhaustion.

Corinne hopes that, by seeing the way children bonded in labour live, students will stand a better chance to understand them, and, eventually, build a more just and safer world, where everyone is accorded equal treatment, respect and dignity. Corinne links the experiences of the Pakistani children in the documentary with the realities of children forced to work for major sports brands favoured by her students. She wants to make them aware that child labour is closer to home than they realise. They, too, are indirectly involved in this exploitation whenever they buy a football or a pair of trainers from companies which employ children for a higher profit. Arguments pointing towards an ethical leap to responsible consumerism shall then be reflected in the students' journal writing, in which they indicate new perspectives, thoughts or affirmative, just actions for the future.

However, to her dismay, Corinne realises that most of her pupils did not react to the documentary's storyline in the way she hoped for: 'So what?' How can they remain indifferent before other children's suffering and exploitation? Why does her pedagogical practice fail in enabling students to become Other-oriented? What happens when empathy fails?

Corinne seems to have come to terms with the unexpected feedback by blaming today's individualistic and materialistic outlook to life, whereby individuals see themselves as distinct and separate from others, in their pursuit to live a good quality life in comfort. She argues that her students' concern to look cool in a pair of branded trainers tampers with their understanding of the distinction between making the right, responsible choices and wrong ones. According to her, it is, thus, possible that materialism, coupled with individualism, can conceal the commonalities that we share, which could then lessen our readiness or capacity to feel any consideration for others. Nevertheless, in view of a recent study carried out by Daryl Cameron et al. (2019), the students' suppressing feelings of empathy could also be understood as a result of its 'inherent cognitive costs' (11). For example, for some, an empathic understanding of others is mentally demanding, or it can make them feel unconfident, anxious or upset.

Theme three: The formation of the democratic person

Since its inception, the teaching of Ethics has also been framed as 'an education for democratic citizenship' (Wain 2016). It becomes an instrument for the production of responsible and moral subjects (see Todd 2003; Biesta 2008, 2011) and suggests a norm of what it means to be 'human'. Influenced by Kantian and Hegelian ideas, the individual is constructed as a rational and autonomous being who possesses agency, while also endorsing a democratic way of life. It, therefore, becomes evident that the curriculum is imbued with ideas that root in the Enlightenment and humanism (Biesta 2008). It means that the Ethics curriculum resorts to principles and values that are understood as being universal and which can be acquired by all, through rationality. A universalistic discourse becomes promoted as the basis for peaceful coexistence among different people, and also as a basis of moral guidance vis-à-vis ethical dilemmas. It can be argued that a universalistic discourse generates a spirit of inclusivity, as reflected in Corinne and Quinn's observations, concerning the teaching of Ethics:

Ethics is a universal umbrella, through which we can discuss in a wholly and holistic way, without excluding anyone [...]. In this regard, Ethics is more inclusive than the teaching of Religion. (Corinne).

In Ethics, there is proximity. Students are sitting together, and I find it very amusing to see them becoming friends, at first, then they get to know towards the end of the year that, for example, student X is Muslim, or student Y is Reborn Christian. So, there is this element of seeing the human being first, and then we see post-religion or post-belief. There is a friendship grounding first. Religion or the lack of it comes later. (Quinn).

However, this ‘holistic’ (Corinne) discourse, which shall come ‘first’ (Quinn), seems to have ethical implications since it is founded on an idea of being, which, as explained earlier, is rooted in the modern Western tradition. This notion favours the common characteristics of all people over their particularities. Robi Kroflič (2007) argues that a ‘universalistic discourse [...] overlook[s] the peculiarities of different, particularly marginalised groups and individuals and exclude [es] their views, values, needs, and opinions’ (38). Students, who cannot live up to the norm delineated by the Ethics curriculum, because they are culturally different, may feel excluded or othered unless they use their rational faculties to transform themselves and endorse such standards. However, some students might interpret the curriculum as a tool for Western imperialism, whereby their cultural differences are domesticated through an emphasis on what they should know and what they should become to live well together. In this regard, the teaching of Ethics creates an advantage for those students who align themselves with a Western way of life. At the same time, it alienates or is “violent” against those who are culturally different.

The religious and cultural other is, thus, doubly rejected and doubly othered. Firstly, by the NCF and secondly, by the teaching of Ethics. Although on paper, the Curriculum ‘acknowledges Malta’s growing cultural diversity, and values the history and traditions of its people’ (2012, 50), it is still highly influenced by the Catholic Church and does not, as yet, allow ‘provisions for the teaching of religion to those who are not Catholic’ (Chircop 2018, 103). Added to this, the Ethics Programme, as an available alternative, requires the religious and cultural Other to transcend their particular otherness and accept a Westernised value system. It could be argued that the real impetus behind the implementation of Ethics in schools is to ‘equip newcomers with the cultural tools needed for participation in [our] particular form of life, and at the same time secures [our] cultural and social continuity’ (Biesta 2008, 198). The teaching of Ethics becomes an instrument by which these newcomers are perceived as others and consequently reduced to the instrumental category of sameness. It becomes a tool to perpetuate a Eurocentric ‘cultural hegemony’ (Chircop 2008, 75; Borg and Mayo 2006, 36).

Interestingly, Quinn recalls her encounter with a Catholic priest who is convinced about the alignment of the values promoted by EEP with those of Christianity:

I was accompanying children to confession at school ...and, I remember I was telling the priest how heavy I was feeling about this tension to smoothen out othering issues in my classroom [...], and he told me, ‘Relax you’re teaching them Roman Catholic values at the end of the day!’ I wasn’t sure what to think. Okay, I teach about the Golden Rule, which is present in the Abrahamic religions, and I think across the board [...]. But short term, it was a release for me, like a sigh of relief, although, thinking deeply about it, the Roman Catholic authorities always want to make sure that we’re not teaching about something else. (Quinn)

Following this line of thought, one can conclude that philosophy is indeed not neutral but can serve as an instrument for challenging cherished beliefs and worldviews to transform subjects to identify with Western culture. This, intentionally or inadvertently, may cause discomfort for students whose identities are questioned and, therefore, eventually ruptured in the process.

Exemplifying this discomfort, Corinne talks about a situation that occurred during one of her lessons with Year 7 students (age 11–12), which focused on the topic of child marriage.

The lesson started with screening a documentary featuring interviews with parents who were about to marry off their daughters, some as young as 12. Asked about their motivation, these parents mentioned elopement, exogamy, and the loss of dowry. Their girls had no other option than to accept what the parents referred to as a cultural tradition. Following the documentary, those students in the class who had a Western cultural background, expressed shock and disbelief, blaming the parents for forcing their children into something they could not bring themselves to imagine.

Corinne, then, involved her students in a discussion about how this practice violates the girls' mental and physical wellbeing. Many of her students felt that early marriage prevents the girls from obtaining an education, burdens them with an adult's family responsibilities and puts them at health risks due to early pregnancies. The discussion then moved on whether they think if certain cultural practices should be abolished due to their violation of human and children's rights, to which most of the students expressed their agreement.

After the lesson, Corinne was approached by a Syrian girl who was quiet in class. Slightly embarrassed, the girl told Corinne that her mother and grandmother had both been married at the age of 13. She also explained that she had not wanted to discuss this in class for fear of judgement by her peers. What until then seemed normal to Corinne, has suddenly been questioned:

Initially, I was surprised. Although one would assume that those students in a class who belong to different cultures or different religions, might have similar experiences, you would not expect them to approach you. At that moment, I could sense that she was caught between two worlds. The documentary and the discussion which followed have made her feel uncomfortable, I could sense. I had not expected this. (Corinne).

Corinne admitted that particular topics while offering a possibility to bring about personal and social change, might also disturb and discomfort some students as these make them question their identity. Their cherished beliefs and practices become interrogated by a dominant moral yardstick. Corinne's experience, thus, puts into question the understanding of the Ethics classroom as a safe place to discuss and debate different practices. The girl's inhibition to join in the discussion points towards a perceived conception of superior norms of behaviour. Her relating with the documentary's storyline, coupled with her peers' reaction to the stories, could have made her see her frame of reference challenged and othered by a discourse in which people from other cultures are seen as offenders of the rights of people. It is pertinent to emphasise here that students who are othered by a liberal Western discourse may be

both foreigners or Maltese, but whose cultural or religious background differs from what is considered to be the norm.

Given the above, the ethical implications for pedagogical decisions and strategies are significant because although the Ethics teacher should be ‘objective’, her desire to align the students to a Westernised curriculum could result in othering the experiences of students. Teachers, as well as students, with an individualistic mindset, might be unable to comprehend subjects whose cultural backgrounds and practices differ from their own, and could judge them as illogical and immoral. They might, willingly or not, try to “cultivate” the “uncultured” other through logical persuasion. This is not an argument for moral relativism but a call for caution and sensitivity when encountering the otherness of the Other. Indeed, Ethics teachers need to be aware of the potential violence committed on students through structures and practices of othering. Perhaps adopting a critical stance towards the culture into which we have been socialised and which dominates the curriculum could open up possibilities of seeing students as different, through various encounters.

Conclusion

In view of the points discussed in this paper, we deem it relevant to briefly discuss the notion of responsibility, as developed by Levinas, to be considered as a way forward for the teaching of Ethics. Julian Edgoose (2005) remarks that, ‘once we have interacted with the other, we are responsible to her or him because our interaction never gains the status of closure that, in our interactions with objects enables us, to discard them’ (123). This could be understood as central for teachers who are engaging with the students who are others. Levinas considers responsibility to be a burden. He draws our attention to the fact that being responsible makes us vulnerable as we are required to open up to the unexpected and unfamiliar otherness. Levinas stresses that the Other can resist us. He ‘can oppose to me a struggle, that is, oppose to the force that strikes him not a force of resistance, but the very unforeseeableness of his reaction’ (Levinas 1969, 199).

Levinas sensitises us to the fact that students’ interaction with the curriculum and the student-teacher relation are uncharted territories; they are complex, nuanced and mysteriously unpredictable. The students are Others to teachers, just as the teachers are Others to students. Following Levinas, Edgoose (2005) state that the unpredictability of the Other can always surpass my assumptions, in different ways and scales. The uncertainty surrounding the Other in the Ethics classroom results in feelings of vulnerability, as teachers are vulnerably ‘haunted’ by this fickleness of outcomes (Edgoose 2005, 123).

Nonetheless, isn’t this vulnerability also part of what it means to be human? Duncan Mercieca (2007) would answer this question to the affirmative, as he argues:

There are moments when silence or tears need their space. Space needs to be given so that certain issues are approached with a degree of awe. [...] Teachers need to rekindle these possibilities of discourse, and to note their absence. Let us keep this astonishment and silence, and perhaps also the experience of pain as they are. [...] Let us allow ourselves and our students to be surprised – to be violently surprised by the advent of the Other. (156)

We, therefore, encourage Ethics teachers to resist the teaching of Ethics becoming a technicality predetermined by learning outcomes, where the teaching of Ethics becomes merely a technical exercise, requiring skills of content knowledge, behaviour control, classroom management, and of meeting the predetermined targets (Howard 2005). Teachers should consider pre-empting the mounting stress to prove the outcomes of teaching in measurable forms, as in, through project writing, tasks on handouts, oral and written presentations, and journal writing, which risks skewing the classroom experience towards industry. One is left to wonder how much time and autonomy is left for teachers to create educational spaces where students can relate and astonish each other. An idea of relationality that fosters a kind of philosophical thinking which gives precedence to the relations among people and their needs (Benjamin, 2015) should rather be nurtured. Perhaps, then, a move towards, what Dietrich et al. (2003), call, ‘a Levinasian care ethics’, could help Ethics teachers to respond to students. This would imply forms of resistance to current inhospitable ways of teaching and thinking, which perceive students as consumers of education.

Levinas’s thoughts enable Ethics teachers to broaden the scope of ethics beyond its common understanding to give precedence to the ethical dimension of human relations. This would lessen, for instance, the violence committed in the name of ethics ‘against those who do not conform to the dominant ethical norms’ (Butler as cited in Zembylas, 2015, 167). We encourage teachers to navigate human relations in the Ethics classroom with great cultural sensitivity and responsibility, for example when it comes to their choice of pedagogical resources, teaching strategies and their engagement with the vulnerability of students.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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