

Chapter 3: Working in International and Multicultural Schools

Working in **International** and **Multicultural** Schools

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The term super-diverse is being used to describe contemporary society. Super-diversity, coined by Steven Vertovec in 2007, was intended to describe the different ethnic groups existing in society in general. Ontologically, this term takes into account the movement of people from one country to another and celebrates the fact that all people are different and unique and can contribute in different ways to society. In the past twenty years, the movement of people in the world increased, and this had led to a situation where we are now speaking more in terms of mobility, rather than in terms of migration when people move from one place to another.

This fluidity of people movement affects greatly the education sphere. Education is at the core of society, as through education one strives to have a better humanity. While education is a holistic process, schools form an integral part of this development. Schools are a microcosm of society and in the past few years, they have also become more diverse and susceptible to the movement of people.

Thus, education is an important facet of this super-diversity in a neo-liberal society. Education is important for individuals from a social, academic and also a personal perspective (Gill and Thomson 2012). Schools are important places where students attend to also meet their friends and forge future alliances and networks. In addition, besides being a means for social integration, they also serve as communities of academic or vocational learning which, in the future, will translate to social equality. The Maltese National Curriculum Framework (2012) emphasises the concept that no child is left behind. This is precisely why all students, irrespective of race, sex, class or income levels should have the same access to education.

Apart from the social and academic aspects, one has to look at education as a means to the development of the individual. All students need to feel competent, autonomous and have feelings of relatedness with those around them (Ryan and Deci 2017). Thus, the students' fundamental psychological needs are catered for and this ensures that such students regard the education given as a life-long process. This trajectory can only be followed if educational leaders support all students in their endeavours. This can only be done if such educational leaders



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possess the three basic psychological needs, which are competence, autonomy and relatedness. These ensure that the education leaders garner the necessary satisfaction from working in a learning organisation. Thus, it is important that the Senior Management Team in a school fosters a climate of good working relationships as this will ultimately affect the students' wellbeing and also the quality of teaching and learning.

Migrant Students in Malta

To meet this end, the Maltese government set up the Migrant Learners' Unit in 2014, where migrant students are inducted into the Maltese school life. The Maltese government believes that schools are the ideal places where a culture of learning and integration is promoted. However, integration cannot take place without the migrant students being conversant with Maltese and English, the two languages of instruction in Maltese schools. Consequently, those migrant students who lack knowledge of these two languages are given special courses while activities are organized for them, which aim to help them integrate better into the school community.

One cannot stress enough the importance that migrant students feel integrated and welcome in their school environment. This can only be done through having staff who are informed about multiculturalism and also students who are receptive to students who are different from them. Thus, in Maltese society, education is an important social structure which aims to enhance people's sensibilities and make them more aware of the advantages of living in a multicultural society. Hence, Maltese schools can be harbingers of change.

The Maltese situation is complex, as not all schools have the same school culture. State school colleges have different realities from church and private schools. They experience different categories of students and this dichotomy might not be found in either private or Church schools. In the case of Church schools, the current ballot system makes it very difficult for students beyond the age of the ballot, whether Maltese or foreign, to enter such a school.

On the other hand, migrant students from a low socio-economic background do not enrol in private schools. Yet, one must not get the impression that private schools do not have migrant students. Such migrant students that normally join these schools represent a different social category from those that register to attend a government school. Despite this contrast, it is very important that educational professionals working in the different educational sectors are made aware of the importance of responding to the students' needs, especially when preparing the lessons and also in informal everyday talks with the students.

However, this scenario has its advantages. Students attending government schools are more prone to be exposed to this super-diversity. The schools become a microcosm of this multi-ethnic reality. Each student has his or her own socio-economic background, while their home environment is unique for each and every pupil. This has implications for those who work in schools.

The School Environments under Discussion

Thus, the theme which will be analysed in the following pages is entitled, '**Working in International and Multicultural Schools**'. As discussed above, this is highly pertinent to the situation in Maltese schools right now. In this section, a number of contributions have been brought together. Each paper, in its own respect, examines a particular aspect of the complex and, at times, problematic nature of super-diversity in the Maltese school context. The Maltese classroom is becoming increasingly diverse. Falzon, Pisani and Cauchi (2012) had already predicted, eight years ago, that this trend was destined to increase and that our schools become 'progressively more multi-cultural and multi-lingual over time' (35).

Thus, eight years after this prediction, it is also time to have a snapshot of the current situation. Super-diversity is analysed through four different papers which deal with the internationalisation of schools in Malta. The analysis will move away from a descriptive situation but will focus on the new

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challenges that educators are facing and what are the real-life situations today which were not present a decade ago.

Vassallo looks at multicultural education from the perspective of educators coming from different schools and nationalities. He studied their perceptions towards multiculturalism both before and after undertaking a course, of which he was the course tutor. This was done through the use of concept maps and the keeping of a reflective journal by the teachers following this course. He took into account the links between the different notions expressed through these concept maps and analysed how deep and critical they were both before and after the twenty-hour course. The end result was that educators were more open to ideas of multiculturalism after the course. Teachers expressed a better understanding of multicultural education and what it entailed.

Seguna and **Spiteri** look at super-diversity through a lecturer's perspective. The paper delves into an aspect of super-diversity at an independent sixth form. It seeks to analyse how the lecturers working in this sixth form understand intercultural diversity and how it affects the implementation of the curriculum. How do the lecturers' personal experiences with ethnic and culture diversity inform their thinking? This paper explores the lecturers' beliefs and what influences their ideas and practices of intercultural education in the classes they teach. This was done through a qualitative study involving interviews with seven lecturers. The outcome of this research has yielded that educators' best interests in their students must be supplemented by a curriculum which takes into account that students might have different cultural backgrounds.

Farrugia Buhagiar and **Sammut Debono** write about the work done at the Migrant Learners' Unit. This unit was set up in 2014 to cater for the teaching of English and Maltese to those migrant children who do not possess one of these two languages. The authors look into the policy behind the setting up of this unit and how learners are identified for induction. Different aspects of life in the classroom at this unit are discussed. Training of teachers who teach at the induction hub is also examined, whilst there is a discussion about the community liaison team. Thus, the paper takes the reader through the whole process,

from registering to enter the school to the assessment and attendance at the induction hub.

Schembri analyses the voices of five young migrant students, and what their perceptions are at a secondary level Government school. These five migrants were all in year 9, when this study took place. Her study was conducted through informal conversations and participant observation. Through her research, she sought to find how the students felt with regards to their integration within the school. She concludes that while national policies regarding migrants should be in place, all schools should have individual policies which are relevant to their context. Each and every school in Malta has a different migrant reality, and migrant students can be integrated by developing an appropriate school culture of inclusion and integration tailor-made for the school.

Conclusions

These four papers thus give us different perspectives on what is at work in some of our schools and how these schools are coming to terms with super-diversity. The first general conclusion is that multiculturalism is affecting schools at various degrees and levels. There is nothing new in this. What is new and this results from these works, is that these four papers expose the complex intersectional variety of identities, experiences and other factors that make up life in the present Maltese schools.

What these studies are showing is that we need to follow Slim's (2018) advice and 'resist reducing real people to simplistic categorizations'. One has to appreciate the 'complexity of human identity and power relations' that make everyone's experience distinct and individual. In other words, these studies have again confirmed that education is human-centred, which means that the child, whatever his background, and wherever he comes from, is and should remain at the centre of the teaching activity. Only with good relationships in a school can the student flourish and be intrinsically motivated to learn. Having ownership of the learning means that the student knows that learning is a means to get equality in society. Learning through one's volition means that the student

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appreciates that learning is not only about equality, but it is also about being integrated in society. When these aims are achieved, the student will feel integrated and this will enhance his or her wellbeing. Respect should be upheld in all educational institutions and it should work both ways. Only thus can relationships of trust be built which will help in the integration of all stakeholders as a professional learning community.

While much has been done by the government towards the integration of students who come from other countries, the second conclusion from reading these four papers in this section is that schools should have a coherent framework of policies which take into account the views of staff working in schools, and also include the voices of the migrant students themselves. It is only through such educational structures where all those involved take away their biases and are truly conscientious and empathic towards others, that all students within our schools, irrespective of race, ethnicity and creed, can be enabled to flourish and reach their full potential. Only when such flourishing is achieved, can we say that our schools are really inclusive learning organisations.

