

# Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the Maltese Educational System

RAXEN

National Focal Point  
for  
Malta

The Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice

November 2004

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## Executive Summary

The study deals with the provisions for refugees and asylum seekers in the Maltese educational system. It gives a description of the system, and examines any strategies that have an inclusive, anti-discriminative or inter-cultural adjustment. Children of migrant workers are also mentioned in order to draw any similarities or contrasts regarding provisions within education. The National Minimum Curriculum<sup>1</sup>, which provides the framework for the Maltese educational system, does not make any specific reference to refugees, asylum seekers or migrant workers. However one of its principles is a “respect for diversity which enables and requires a type of education based on respect for and the celebration of difference.”<sup>2</sup> A discrepancy is found between the aims of the curriculum and the constraints of the Maltese educational system which still has a traditional pedagogical approach, is exam-oriented and uses streaming in the penultimate year of primary school to form as homogenous a class as possible. A two-year evaluation of the curriculum is underway within the Ministry of Education. Nevertheless, a closer look at the syllabuses at both primary and secondary level, reveals that there are various subjects such as Geography, History, Religion, Personal and Social Development that tackle topics which deal with identity, community, democracy, globalisation. These topics lend themselves to teaching strategies such as discussions, analytical and critical thinking and group work which promote a deeper understanding of the issues involved as well as promoting values of tolerance and democracy in the classroom. There is no discrimination against refugee students or asylum seekers regarding education provisions. They are assimilated in the system and are treated like any other student. If their standard of education is such that they need extra help, they are withdrawn from the classroom and given lessons by a support teacher in a programme that is known as Supplementary Education. This strategy applies to all students irrespective of their race. As explained in the demographic description, the presence of migrants in Malta is a recent issue. Teachers do not seem to be prepared to deal with the cultural diversity of their students as the focus is on assimilation rather than the celebration of difference.

It is not only state schools which cater for refugees and asylum seekers but also public-funded private schools. A lot of similarities were found in both state and private schools, regarding the educational provisions for them. The standard of education of refugees and asylum seekers varies from being very high to illiteracy. Compounded with the language barrier there are also traumatic experiences to be dealt with. Teachers commented that a number of weeks, even months would pass before the student would share his experiences. Private schools also use a withdrawal system for those refugees and asylum seekers, when these are found to have a low standard of education and would not benefit in the mainstream. There have been no studies concerning the attitudes of the population towards the groups in question, nor have there been any documented cases regarding racism. This does not exclude the fact that there could be prejudice against a particular group. This prejudice could manifest itself in the playground and in the teachers’ perception of the achievement of the groups in question. Drawing on the findings of a dissertation presented by two University students<sup>3</sup> there seems to be a prejudice against those students who

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<sup>1</sup> Malta, Ministry of Education (1999), *National Minimum Curriculum: Creating the Future Together* Klabb Kotba Maltin

<sup>2</sup> Malta, Ministry of Education (1999), *National Minimum Curriculum: Creating the Future Together* Klabb Kotba Maltin p.30

<sup>3</sup> Azzopardi, D. and Gauci, I. (2003), *Social Relations in a Multicultural Setting: The Case of a Primary School in the North of Malta*. Unpublished dissertation for the B.Education (Hons) course for the University of Malta

are non-European and come from Africa. On the other hand, three head teachers of private schools commented that having refugees and asylum seekers has been an enriching experience for their own students. There is no discrimination against refugees, asylum seekers and children of migrant workers regarding religious practices. All Muslim girls are allowed to wear the headscarf and are exempted from physical education during their religious observation of fasting during Ramadan. However, following an agreement between the Holy See and the Government of Malta,<sup>4</sup> in 1989, the only religion that can be taught is the Catholic Religion. Refugees and asylum seekers are provided with school uniforms both in state and private schools, by the local councils and school administration respectively. There is no refugee representative either on the teaching staff or parents' council. Heads of schools commented that refugees, asylum seekers and children of migrant workers performed best when their parents or guardians showed a keen interest in their children's progress and especially when they participated in school events or actually helped out with school activities.

Another aspect that is so dominant is that the number of refugees and asylum seekers is always fluctuating. Since Malta is not their place of destination, they often leave the island within a few months. It is only a small number of refugees who stay in Malta for a considerable number of years. Therefore monitoring their education progress is very difficult. Preserving their culture and language is also another hurdle. The state is legally bound to teach children of migrant workers their culture and language,<sup>5</sup> but there is no such provision for refugees and asylum seekers. There are no statistics available regarding achievement, school attendance, or dropout rates of refugees and asylum seekers.

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<sup>4</sup> Malta, Arcidjocesi ta' Malta, "Ftehim bejn is-SantaSede u l-Gvern Malti dwar ir-Religjon fl-Iskejjel ta' l-Istat" (1990) in *Bulletin ta' l-Arcidjocesi u Liturgija tal-Kelma*, No. 65 pp. 1-2, Media Print, Blata l- Bajda

<sup>5</sup>Malta, Legal Notice 259 of 2002 (13.09.2002)

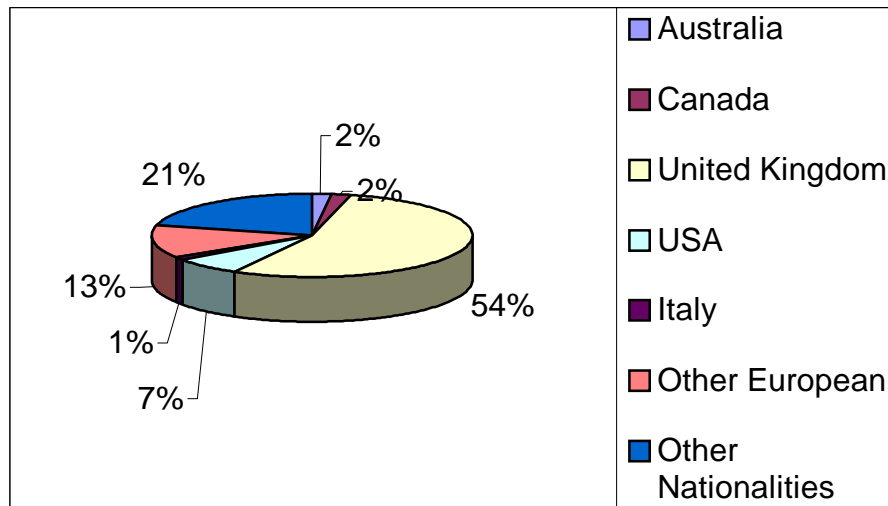
# 1. A Demographic Description of the Maltese Islands

## 1.1 Migration Statistics

A study on Gypsies, Roma, Sinti or Travellers regarding education is not possible as Malta has never been home to such groups nor have immigrants come to work here until quite recently. A look at migration statistics can explain this. The term ‘immigrants’ is not found in national statistics. The terms ‘returned migrants’ and ‘non-Maltese nationals’ are used. ‘Returned migrants’ refers to those Maltese people who return to settle in Malta after having emigrated to another country. The migratory flow was outwards, especially after the Second World War, to four main receiving countries – Australia, Canada, United Kingdom and the United States of America. According to the Emigrants Commission,<sup>6</sup> 160,000 Maltese migrated from Malta during the last fifty years. However, the number of emigrants has dwindled drastically. In 2002 only 96 persons (46 males, 50 females) left Malta to settle overseas. On the other hand, the number of returned migrants for that same year was 382 persons made up of 219 males and 163 females.<sup>7</sup>

The term ‘non-Maltese nationals’ refers to those persons of other nationalities settling in Malta. In the year 2003, the number of non-Maltese nationals settling in Malta was 721<sup>8</sup>. The chart below shows the countries of origin. The fact that Malta is an ex-British colony where English is one of the official languages explains the high percentage of British settlers.

**Non Maltese Nationals Settling in the Maltese Islands (2003)**



All this is changing due to increased mobility, socio-economic changes and amendments to Maltese laws regarding immigration and citizenship, especially those addressing dual or multiple

<sup>6</sup> Emigrants Commission seminar on migrants quoted at <http://www.foreign.gov.mt/communities/default.htm> (01.11.2004)

<sup>7</sup> Malta, National Statistics Office (2003) *Demographic Review 2002*, p.viii

<sup>8</sup><http://www.nso.gov.mt> (12.10.2004)

citizenship,<sup>9</sup> and the foreign partner being allowed to work. There has been an increase of migrant workers who are given a work permit for a definite period of time when local skills demanded by the employer are lacking. The work permit may be renewed. The number of work permits held in 2003 was about 2232 average per month.<sup>10</sup>

There are also the residence permit holders who are allowed to reside, but not to work, in Malta without having to periodically apply for visas. The number of residence permits as at December 2003 was 1750 persons.<sup>11</sup>

The total population for the Maltese islands, which also includes work and resident permit holders and non-Maltese nationals at the end of 2003 stood at 399,867, with 198,099 males and 201,768 females. The Maltese population (at the end of 2003) stood at 388,867 and consisted of 192,934 males and 195,933 females. During the last ten years, the number of foreigners within the total population has risen from 6,730 to 11,000 persons.<sup>12</sup>

## 1.2 Asylum-seekers and refugees

The recent phenomenon of asylum seekers has also affected Malta. The first group that came to Malta were Iraqis who left their homeland in the wake of the Gulf War in 1991 hoping to settle in the United States and Canada. Since the Maltese Embassy was one of the four Western embassies still functioning in Baghdad, they entered Malta without any problems, planning to move on to North America. However, terrorist acts in New York led the United States to close their doors to Arabs, the main suspects. In the same year Bosnian refugees also arrived in Malta following the collapse of former Yugoslavia. Both the Iraqi and the Bosnian refugees moved to other countries of resettlement or obtained residence and work permits in Malta. According to the records kept at the Emigrants' Commission, the number of asylum seekers in Malta in 1991 was 112. This number soared to 927 the following year but dipped to 293 in 1993. The lowest number of asylum seeker recorded in the last ten years was in 1997 with 92 persons. Most asylum seekers now arrive in Malta in boats and come from Africa. In 2002 alone, 1,608 asylum seekers arrived in this manner. Malta is not the asylum seekers' destination. Rather, they come here as a stepping-stone to mainland Europe. It sometimes happens that asylum seekers refuse to enter Malta, carry on travelling to Italy, are intercepted by the Italian coastal guards and asked to turn back. The asylum seekers do not comply with this request and it is up to the Maltese and Italian authorities to resolve the situation. On 17.09.2004 and 23.10.2004 there were two such incidents. The following is an extract from a local newspaper report entitled "Migrants Request Political Asylum in Italy" describing the situation on 17.09.2004. "Two days after landing in Pozzallo (Sicily) the boat people are still in limbo with Foreign Affairs Minister telling *The Times* yesterday that the two governments are still looking at various possibilities of resolving the issue. The (ninety-seven) illegal immigrants made up of Somalis, Eritrean, and Ethiopians refused to land in Malta last Friday and are being housed in a first aid centre in Pozzallo. Another 100, however, had agreed to come ashore."<sup>13</sup> Such issues are resolved within the context of the International Maritime Rescue Law.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.foreign.gov.mt/service/citizenship/default.htm> (12.10.2004)

<sup>10</sup> Malta, Department of Citizenship and Expatriate Affairs

<sup>11</sup> Malta, Department of Citizenship and Expatriate Affairs

<sup>12</sup> Malta, National Statistics Office (2004), *Demography in Retrospect* 18.05.2004

<sup>13</sup> Grech, H. (2004) "Migrants Request Political Asylum in Italy" in *The Times*, (21.09.2004), p.1

On 23.10.2004, one of the local papers, *The Times*, carried the following report: “13 Turkish – Kurds in Refugee Stand-Off between Malta and Italy” which states: “Malta has asked Italy to assume responsibility for thirteen Turkish Kurds aboard a ship in a ‘desperate’ state 18 miles to the north of the island. The situation has become so serious that the United Nations yesterday urged Italy and Malta to let the thirteen stowaways on a freighter to lodge asylum claims and end the matter.”<sup>14</sup> These two incidents occurring within the space of a month show that Malta is not their intended destination. This has a bearing on the asylum seekers’ perception of the island and their willingness to integrate in Maltese society.

Asylum seekers apply to the Refugee Commissioner in Malta for refugee status. According to the Emigrants’ Commission, from 01.01.2002 to 31.05.2004 the total number of applications processed was 1,014 cases involving 1,271 persons. 77 persons received refugee status, 563 received humanitarian protection and there were 519 rejections. Refugees have rights to a travel document, release on recognition of their status, the right to work and social assistance. “There are 187 refugees in Malta in possession of an active work permit, including 40 women. Twelve refugees, all men, are registering for employment”<sup>15</sup>

The National Statistics Office has no data concerning asylum seekers. It states that ‘the absence of exact figures and a shortage of reliable studies concerning clandestine migration from the south of the Mediterranean into Europe also applies to Malta’.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. The Legal Framework of the Education of Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Children of Migrant Workers

The legal framework regulating the education of refugees and asylum seekers is found in the Refugees Act<sup>17</sup> (2000) which incorporates the obligations Malta acceded to under the Geneva Convention, 1951 and the 1967 Protocol. Regarding the treatment of asylum seekers it states that “an asylum seeker shall also have access to state education and training in Malta.”<sup>18</sup> As to the rights of refugees, “a person declared to be a refugee shall be entitled to have access to state education and training in Malta.”<sup>19</sup> Those persons who are granted humanitarian protection also receive free state education.

Legal notice 259/2002<sup>20</sup> regulates the education of children of migrant workers. These children will be given state education and will be given support in the learning of the official languages. They will also be entitled to the learning of their language and culture.

The education background of asylum seekers and refugees is as varied as each individual. It ranges from illiteracy to a high standard of education. It is an undisputable fact that in countries where there is conflict, schooling is interrupted thus depriving many young people of their basic right to education. Besides being denied an education, one also has to keep in mind the trauma

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<sup>14</sup>Grech, H. (2004) “13 Turkish –Kurds in Refugee Stand-Off between Malta and Italy” in *The Times*, (23.10.2004), p.1

<sup>15</sup> Zammit, R. (2004) “Help to Malta vital in dealing with influx of migrants”, in: *The Times*, (16.09.2004), p.7

<sup>16</sup> Malta, National Statistics Office (2003) *Demographic Review 2002* p. ix

<sup>17</sup> Malta, Laws of Malta, Act XX of 2000 (The Refugees Act)

<sup>18</sup> Malta, Laws of Malta, Act XX of 2000 (Refugees Act), Part III

<sup>19</sup> Malta, Laws of Malta, Act XX of 2000 (Refugees Act), Part III

<sup>20</sup> Malta, Legal Notice 259 of 2002 (13.09.2002)

asylum seekers and refugees go through – living in a war-torn country, deciding to leave, travelling in appalling conditions and finally arriving in a foreign country where they are put in detention centres till their application is processed. Asylum seekers come from Afghanistan, Algeria, Cameroon, Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, Kurdistan, Libya, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan – to mention but a few as the list is not exhaustive.

### 3. The Maltese Educational System

#### 3.1 The Legal Framework of the National Minimum Curriculum

The National Minimum Curriculum<sup>21</sup> (henceforth the NMC) is the document that provides a framework for the educational system in Malta.

Among the ‘General Provisions’ in Part I of the Education Act we find that it is “the right of the state to establish a minimum curriculum for all schools”. Part III of the same Act states that it is the right of the Minister of Education “to establish the curriculum for state schools.”<sup>22</sup>

The current NMC came into force on 01.10.2000 but will be reviewed over two years after a five-year span of implementation. The evaluation process has already started. There are a number of issues that have been stipulated in the curriculum but have not yet been implemented, such as for example an inclusive education.

#### 3.2 An Overall View

The NMC was thought out against the backdrop of the approaching new millennium, of socio-economic changes, Malta’s then possible entry in the E.U. and the challenges that such changes bring with them. There was tremendous consultation, which started in 1995, among all the major stakeholders – parents, teachers, University lecturers, and trade unionists – well before the document was published. The title of the document of the NMC “Creating the Future Together” is indicative of the desired orientation of our educational system. It stresses the importance of preparing the student to live and work in a world that is ever-changing, becoming a global village and where information technology has made a vast impact on the acquisition of knowledge and communication. Malta has a rich and varied cultural heritage with its strategic position in the Mediterranean Sea. An appreciation of our cultural identity and history is underscored.

The Maltese Education system as outlined in the NMC lays emphasis on the learner rather than content. Therefore the holistic approach to learning is encouraged where the student can develop his/her potential in all areas of development – the social, affective psycho-motor rather than just the intellectual. There is also a different perspective to the way knowledge is acquired. Rather than relying on the teacher to give out information, students are encouraged to be analytical, curious, and critical of what is going on around them. Group work, project work and discussions should become synonymous with classroom learning. Another objective of the curriculum is to

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<sup>21</sup>Malta, Ministry of Education (1999), *National Minimum Curriculum: Creating the Future Together* Klabb Kotba Maltin

<sup>22</sup>Malta, Education Act, (1988) Chapter 327, General Provisions, Part I in: Malta, Ministry of Education (1999), *National Minimum Curriculum: Creating the Future Together* Klabb Kotba Maltin pp.15-16

have students who become life-long learners. The concept of a continuous and life-long education is promoted and the curriculum does that by having a single document to combine all three curricula at the three levels of education.

### 3.3 The Three Levels of Education

In the Maltese educational system, compulsory education is from age five to sixteen. However, the majority, if not all, parents send their children to pre-primary at the age of three. The three levels of education are pre-primary, primary and secondary. The child spends two years at pre-primary level, six years at primary level and another five at secondary level. At the end of secondary level, the student may opt to further his studies for another two years and then proceed to University. The scholastic year starts in the last week of September and ends in mid-July. The school day for both primary and secondary starts at 8.30 a.m. and ends at 2.30 p.m. and at 3.00 p.m. respectively. At primary school a teacher is assigned a class which she/he teaches for a year.

At pre-primary level, the main pedagogical tool is play. The specific aim at this level is to enhance the holistic development of children through their intellectual, emotional, social, physical, moral and creative abilities. Teaching becomes more formal at primary level. The following subjects are taught: Maltese, English, Mathematics, Religion, Social Studies, Physical Education and Sport, Science and Technology, Creative Expression and Personal and Social Education. Students are streamed in their penultimate year. In their last year at Primary level, students sit for competitive national exams for entry to either state secondary schools, known as Junior Lyceums, or to public-funded private schools, known as church schools and henceforth referred to as such. Those that do not make the grade are enrolled at the secondary state schools of the locality. Then there are the independent fee-paying schools, some of which offer education at both primary and secondary levels. Others offer primary education only and prepare their students for the exams for entry to either the Junior Lyceums or the church schools. One of the independent schools caters for the Moslem community in Malta. There are 120 students at primary level and it follows the NMC. It co-exists peacefully within the Maltese educational system and it also prepares its students for the national exams. The basic subjects at secondary level are similar to those taught at primary level with the addition of a foreign language. At the third year in Secondary school, students choose additional subjects to the core list. They may choose another foreign language, or accounts and economics, or opt for a specialisation in one of the core subjects such as computer literacy, physical education, or Science. The aim is to give the student a broad a knowledge as possible.

### 3.4 The Curriculum: Aims and Constraints

The promotion of values is fundamental to the learning process. It is interesting to note that one of the main aims of the NMC is to “provide an educational experience that promotes certain fundamental values among students. Among the values is the respect for others and for the right of other people to enjoy freedom, peace and security.”<sup>23</sup> The NMC goes on to state that in a society that is “increasingly multi-cultural the education system should enable students to develop a sense of respect, co-operation and solidarity among cultures.”<sup>24</sup> This statement reflects one of

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<sup>23</sup> Malta, Ministry of Education (1999), *National Minimum Curriculum: Creating the Future Together* Klabb Kotba Maltin pp. 23-24

<sup>24</sup> Malta, Ministry of Education (1999), *National Minimum Curriculum: Creating the Future Together* Klabb Kotba Maltin p. 24

the principles that underpins the NMC which is the principle of diversity, that “requires a pedagogy based on respect for and the celebration of difference.”<sup>25</sup>

The curriculum does provide the framework within which our educational system can offer a pedagogy that respects diversity. However, the pedagogical approach to education in state schools is still traditional and based on content rather than the learner since it is exam-oriented. Summative assessments are introduced in the fourth year of primary school. Students are streamed in their penultimate year at primary school. The last two years at primary school are crucial in determining the students’ choice of schools at secondary level. Since students sit for national exams at the last year of primary school, the class they are streamed in at the penultimate year will influence their pass or failure. The emphasis on the last two years of primary level is content and it is the students who have to adjust to the system which leaves little room for the celebration of difference. Nevertheless, despite the exam-oriented nature of our educational system, there are subjects in the curriculum which by their very content tackle issues of diversity, inclusion, community building. A closer look shows how and to what extent the aim of the principle of diversity is translated at all three levels of the Maltese educational system.

In the syllabuses at secondary level <sup>26</sup> there are various subjects, all with their particular orientation, which deal directly or indirectly with racism, tolerance and prejudices. Thus, in Personal and Social Development in the syllabus for students in their fourth year, the module ‘Dealing With Global Issues’ addresses specifically racism and prejudice. The aims of this module are:

- To increase awareness of one’s attitude towards minority groups
- To become sensitised to the needs of such groups
- to recognise the barriers that exist in society
- to learn to cope with prejudice

In the second year, again at secondary level, in the module dealing with friendship, under the heading of celebrating diversity /inclusion, the aim is:

- to participate in group activities designed to experience the benefits of diversity of personalities, origin, etc.

In the optional subject European Studies, which can be taken as from the third year, the topic of conflict and peacemaking processes, are tackled together with the issue of xenophobia. Demography and social realities in Europe are also discussed.

Learning about different religions is another objective in Religion again for second year students. In Social Studies, this time for the first three years at secondary level, various topics are discussed which once more include aspects such as respecting differences while appreciating our personal and social identity, and Malta as a community within the international community. Social justice and globalisation are also tackled.

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<sup>25</sup>Malta, Ministry of Education (1999), *National Minimum Curriculum: Creating the Future Together* Klabb Kotba Maltin p. 30

<sup>26</sup>Malta, Department of Education, School Syllabuses, available online at <http://www.curriculum.gov.mt/syllabus.htm> (27.10.2004)

The above-mentioned topics all have an inter-cultural nature to them. It is not only the content but also the strategies used that can help promote understanding among diverse groups. The NMC strongly recommends that the teaching strategy used be one that is student-centred. Therefore discussions, group-work, all promote intellectual freedom which is “an important feature of a healthy democracy where all voices are not only heard but also respected.”<sup>27</sup> Other strategies used are debates, reflective and critical thinking, brainstorming, role-play, research, interviews. Such strategies enable students to develop skills that help them understand individual, local and regional differences. Cooperative learning is effective in promoting tolerance and respect among students as they can easily see that each student has a valid contribution to make. Students can also be made aware that the same piece of information can have a different perspective to it, depending on its author. Such a skill can help reduce prejudice and generalisations. This strategy described as ‘knowledge construction’ is strongly recommended by Banks,<sup>28</sup> a leader in the field of multiculturalism.

At Primary level, there are similar topics tackled in subjects such as Social Studies, History and Geography. As at Secondary level, the strategies used are as instrumental at enhancing values as is the content. The teachers at primary level especially in the last two years seem to have more difficulty in using discussions or other methods that steer from the traditional approach due to the pressure of exams. To counter-act this situation, there was the introduction of a non-examinable subject Personal and Social Development in primary state schools in 2000-2001. The aims of this subject are similar to those offered at secondary level. A Personal and Social Development session (referred henceforth as PSD) is delivered in an informal setting, where students sit in a circle. There are no more than fifteen students in each group. Such a setting is conducive to discussion and sharing. Through PSD, “the students learn to recognize their own worth, work well with others and become increasingly responsible for self-learning. They learn to respect diversity and differences so that they move to form effective fulfilling relationships that are a necessary part of life and learning.”<sup>29</sup> At pre-primary level one of the objectives in the realm of the child’s socio-emotional development is to “enhance the ability to trust others, appreciate difference, cooperate and respect the rights of others.”<sup>30</sup>

At all three levels of the Maltese educational system, there is scope for the educational experience to promote fundamental values of respect and understanding among students. To what extent this is carried out is undergoing evaluation. Much depends on the ethos and mission statement of each particular school outlined in its mission statement. It is the responsibility within the Ministry of Education to formulate educational policy and the Education Division, the central authority responsible for education in Malta, to implement it. However, the NMC advocates decentralization and (school) identity. In order to have a process of decentralization in education, heads of schools are expected to be curriculum leaders, and formulate a school development plan together with teachers, and preferably parents as well, which best suits the needs of their students and reflects the principles and aims of the NMC. The NMC stipulates that the development plan of each school “must clearly show that the school has a clear educational vision, clear educational

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<sup>27</sup> Malta, Ministry of Education (1999), *National Minimum Curriculum: Creating the Future Together* Klabb Kotba Maltin p. 25

<sup>28</sup> Banks, J.A., (2001) *Multicultural Education: Goals and Dimensions* in Azzopardi D. and Gauci I. (2003), *Social Relations in a Multicultural Setting: The Case of a Primary School in the North of Malta*. Unpublished dissertation for the B.Education (Hons) course for the University of Malta p. 27

<sup>29</sup> Baldacchino, J. *Educating the whole child* in The Times 24.09.2004

<sup>30</sup> Malta, Ministry of Education (1999), *National Minimum Curriculum: Creating the Future Together* Klabb Kotba Maltin p. 74

goals and a concrete and realistic strategy regarding how these educational goals must be reached.”<sup>31</sup>

#### 4. Educational Provisions for asylum seekers and refugees in State Schools

Rona Blackwood, the Refugee Director for Save the Children comments that “schools (in the host country) play a vital role in giving refugee children a sense of hope and security. It is also a place where children can learn first hand about each other’s countries and cultures.”<sup>32</sup>

##### 4.1 Complementary Education

Asylum seekers and refugees are not considered to be children with special needs. They are fully integrated in the educational system and are given the same educational provisions just as their Maltese counterparts. They do not follow a separate curriculum but if they are found to be weak in certain areas they are withdrawn from the mainstream class and receive lessons to suit their needs. This is a complementary service that the Education Division offers to all its students, irrespective of race and origin. A number of peripatetic teachers are assigned to schools and give lessons, usually in Mathematics, English and Maltese, to those students who are weak in these subjects. It is the classroom teacher who informs the head of the school if there is a student who requires the complementary service. The head then informs the department of complementary education. In order to maintain a sense of continuity the same teacher is assigned the same schools for at least a year. The teacher visits the school he/she is assigned every day. The groups can vary in size from two to eight students. The groups are very small so each student’s progress is meticulously monitored by the teacher by continuous assessment. The student may join the mainstream class just after three months of taking complementary education. There is a pooling of resources by the group of complementary teachers and such resources include compiling stories and rhymes besides other resources supplied by the department itself. The children themselves are encouraged to compile their own reading books to instill a sense of achievement. Refugees therefore have equal access to education in Malta. There has not been a revision of textbooks to omit any prejudiced material nor is there an awareness of including inter-cultural aspects in the materials prepared by the teachers. The refugee students do not stay long enough for an evaluation of the impact of complementary education. There are no statistics available as to the number of refugees having followed this programme.

##### 4.2 Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the Mainstream Class

As to the refugees or asylum seekers in the mainstream class there are no statistics regarding their enrolment or academic achievement. Since Malta is not their destination, many try to leave as soon as they receive refugee status. Others simply escape especially during the Summer months. Therefore it is not easy keeping track on their academic performance or to evaluate the impact of Maltese schooling. There are many difficulties facing refugees and asylum seekers regarding education. One is the lack of a common language. Both Maltese and English are used as the

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<sup>31</sup> Malta, Ministry of Education (1999), *National Minimum Curriculum: Creating the Future Together* Klabb Kotba Maltin p. 105

<sup>32</sup><http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/scuk/jsp/resources/details.jsp?id=366&group=resources&section=publication&subsection=details> (21.09.2004)

language of instruction. A lot of translation goes on in the classroom as some refugees would understand one language more than the other. Young refugees and asylum seekers, who came from countries where Semitic languages are spoken, pick up Maltese very quickly. Besides complementary teaching, the teacher often places a refugee student near a Maltese student who would be able to help him. Many adult refugees do not learn to speak Maltese or English so easily, especially those women who do not work and have very little contact with Maltese society. The refugee child thus becomes more knowledgeable than his or her parents, and cannot find help or support from them as any other child would. Since their stay in Malta is transient and many times, involuntary, the purpose of learning the Maltese language or integrating in society may not be appreciated by the refugee adults. Whereas voluntary migrants have a positive perception of the locality they have chosen to live in, and will “interpret cultural and language barriers in a positive way, – as something to be overcome in order to achieve their immigration goals, involuntary minorities see the cultural modes of the dominant group as a hindrance for them to move ahead.”<sup>33</sup> The Department of Further Studies and Adult Education offers literacy courses in both English and Maltese. These are held in the evening at schools in the locality. The numbers of refugees attending dwindle as the course progresses. The state does not offer lessons in the language of origin of the refugees or asylum seekers, however they are allowed to speak their native language both inside and outside their classroom. Another problem that refugee children and asylum seekers encounter is that they are unable to learn about their religion unless it is the Catholic religion. Following an agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Malta in 1989 regarding the teaching of the Catholic religion in state schools, it is stated that “the Republic of Malta guarantees the teaching and education in the Catholic Religion in all state schools of all types and levels, except those at tertiary level, in the context of the school’s aims and as an integral part of its work. Nobody, however, can be compelled to receive teaching and education in the Catholic Religion.”<sup>34</sup> This last clause is important as there is no discrimination against those who do not wish to learn about or follow the Catholic Religion. However, the refugees or other students simply stay in the classroom while the Religion lesson is going on and no other provision is offered them. These differences in religion are blanketed over. All Muslim students are allowed to fast during the month of Ramadan and girls are allowed to come to school wearing a headscarf. They are also exempted from physical education during fasting. The celebration following Ramadan is also shared among classmates. This is an excellent opportunity for cultural sharing and understanding.

Other opportunities for cultural exchange usually occur in the celebration of World Children’s Day and other special days. World Children’s Day is utilised for students to gain an understanding of issues relating to children, especially in developing or war-torn countries. Such topics deal with poverty, child labour and war. These issues are usually presented during assembly and are organized by PSD teachers. Some teachers take up the issue in the classroom and assign project work for their students. Students are encouraged to do their own research at home and discuss at school any information they found relating to the topic.

Another occasion used to promote cultural diversity is the European Day of Languages where one school invited five expatriates to give a message of peace and understanding in their own

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<sup>33</sup>Ogbu, U.O. (2000) “Adaptation to Minority Status and Impact on School Success” in: Noel, J (ed.) *Notable Selection in Multicultural Education*, California State University: McGraw.Hill, pp. 54-61 quoted in Azzopardi, D. and Gauci, I. (2003), *Social Relations in a Multicultural Setting: The Case of a Primary School in the North of Malta*. Unpublished dissertation for the B.Education (Hons) course for the University of Malta p.23

<sup>34</sup> Malta, Arcidjocesi ta’ Malta, “Ftehim bejn is-Santa Sede u l-Gvern Malti dwar ir-Religjon fl-Iskejjel ta’ l-Istat (1990) in *Bulletin ta’ l-Arcidjocesi u Liturgija tal-Kelma*, No. 65 pp. 1-2, Media Print, Blata l-Bajda

language to the pupils during assembly. On another day this time dedicated to World Peace, one school, which does not have refugees in its population, invited twelve refugee children to spend a few hours at school. The refugees were given gifts donated by the students themselves. It is dubious whether the occasion was utilised to promote cultural understanding between the two groups and go beyond the gesture of solidarity.

Refugee Day falls on 20 June which is exam week, therefore very few schools celebrate it. This does not exclude the fact that during the scholastic year, activities are held to show solidarity with refugees. Though such celebrations must have some positive impact on students, especially on the level of consciousness-raising, there is another side to the debate. If such issues are only tackled on special days, especially in primary schools, pupils will see them as distinct and isolated topics, thus reinforcing generalisations and stereotypes.

### 4.3 Covert Racism

There are no documented cases regarding racism. However, this does not exclude the fact that prejudice does not exist in a school setting. The dissertation<sup>35</sup> presented for a degree in Bachelors of Education regarding social relations in a multi-cultural setting in one state school throws light on the covert racism that goes on in the classroom, school corridors and playground. This state school is in a very popular tourist area, has relatively inexpensive accommodation, therefore attracts many foreigners to live here. As a consequence it has a high rate of foreign students – refugees as well as children of migrant workers and others who have a non-Maltese national parent. Amongst the different pupils, “those coming from non-European cultures are the ones who carry with them most prejudices.”<sup>36</sup> These prejudices are targeted mainly against the Arab and African people. A negative attitude towards these pupils by some teachers is noted in the dissertation. Teachers for example were able to identify the nationalities of their foreign students but when it came to the African students they generalised their country of origin, not knowing exactly which country they came from, simply saying “Tunisian, Libyan, Moroccan, Egyptian, anyway from those whereabouts.”<sup>37</sup> The teachers’ perception of their academic achievement was also negative, as another generalization is that “African people are lazy and culturally inferior.”<sup>38</sup> Though such research has been done in one school, a report by the ECRI<sup>39</sup> supports the findings of this dissertation that the Maltese people do have a prejudice against dark people. Instead of celebrating diversity, and learning from the different cultures, the Arab culture as well as other minority groups were at times “ignored, echoing the traditional American ‘melting pot theory’ that cultural diversities should be assimilated into the dominant culture.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Azzopardi, D. and Gauci, I. (2003), *Social Relations in a Multicultural Setting: The Case of a Primary School in the North of Malta*. Unpublished dissertation for the B.Education (Hons) course for the University of Malta

<sup>36</sup> Azzopardi, D. and Gauci, I. (2003), *Social Relations in a Multicultural Setting: The Case of a Primary School in the North of Malta*. Unpublished dissertation for the B.Education (Hons) course for the University of Malta p. 70

<sup>37</sup> Azzopardi, D. and Gauci, I. (2003), *Social Relations in a Multicultural Setting: The Case of a Primary School in the North of Malta*. Unpublished dissertation for the B.Education (Hons) course for the University of Malta p. 71

<sup>38</sup> Azzopardi, D. and Gauci, I. (2003), *Social Relations in a Multicultural Setting: The Case of a Primary School in the North of Malta*. Unpublished dissertation for the B.Education (Hons) course for the University of Malta p. 70

<sup>39</sup> ECRI 22, Second Report on Malta, ECRI, Council of Europe, 2002

<sup>40</sup> Azzopardi, D. and Gauci, I. (2003), *Social Relations in a Multicultural Setting: The Case of a Primary School in the North of Malta*. Unpublished dissertation for the B.Education (Hons) course for the University of Malta p. 85

A school audit is being envisaged for primary and secondary schools. It is planned that a team of educational officers will spend three to five days at each school and evaluate among other issues, the system of teaching and learning at classroom level. There is a pilot study going on that involves one primary school and one secondary school.

#### 4.4 Drama and Refugees

The Ministry of Education organised two programmes in creativity for three groups of refugee children and unaccompanied minors between July and November 2003. In all, thirty-six refugee children and nineteen unaccompanied minors participated in these programmes which comprised acting, dance, an improvised theatre and art.

Another good practice that is worthy of note was carried out by the Drama Unit of the Department in the scholastic year 1994-5 on the initiative of the International Red Cross (Malta). The Drama Unit was asked to raise awareness in schools of the issue of refugees using drama as the medium. Students in the third and fourth forms of secondary schools were invited. The message was conveyed using three sketches. The first described the plight of the refugee in a cramped boat, leaving his homeland not out of choice but out of necessity, the second sketch was a description of the Maltese during the second World War when many Maltese had to move to safer areas on the island, albeit the same country, but such people were also referred to as 'refugees'. The final sketch was on dealing with the enemy, prisoners-of-war. What was most effective was when roles were changed, especially during the first and second sketch when the refugee was a national and no longer anonymous. Students were made to consider how they would like to be treated if the tables were turned and they were refugees. This sketch has not been repeated since. It had an impact on the students and discussions were held in class. However there has been no follow-up and the issue of refugees is now only discussed in the classroom. On the other hand this does not rule out similar sketches being held again.

### 5. Educational Provisions in Public-Funded (Church) Private Schools

A number of refugees also attended or attend church schools. One school catered for ten refugee students as early as 1993 all through to 1999 and again had one other refugee student during the last scholastic year, that is 2003-2004. Their ages varied from thirteen to twenty years of age, and so did the country of origin. They came from Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Burundi and former Yugoslavia. It was the Jesuit Refugee Service (henceforth referred to as JRS) who liaised with the college. There were no problems in enrolling them as the college administration was receptive and supportive of the idea.

As in the situation in state schools, there was complete integration within the educational system. Their academic achievement was monitored by the prefect of Studies if they were at secondary level, by the Headmaster at Sixth Form. Those parents who were in Malta also took an active interest in the academic achievement of their children. If the children were unaccompanied JRS would fulfil that role. All the students stayed on at this church school until they left Malta or completed their Sixth Form. Four of them made it to University in Malta and one actually followed a post-graduate course and obtained M.Sc with distinction. However there were three

students who were academically very weak. There was no withdrawal system so teachers offered to coach the students during break time and even after school hours.

## 6. Children of Detained Asylum-Seekers

In the scholastic year 2002-2003, there were a number of children both unaccompanied and accompanied who were held in detention centres. JRS insisted that they be sent to school and not have their basic right to education denied. This was a situation the Education Division had never faced before. Therefore, due to a lack of policy structure there were many problems such as medical tests to be taken, transport to be organised to and from schools. It was not until April 2003 that the above problems were solved and the children were allowed to attend school. Again, thanks to the insistence of JRS, detained families and unaccompanied minors are now given priority and are interviewed within a very short period of time on arrival by the Refugee Commissioner. Therefore, the time spent at the detention centre is no longer than a couple of weeks so the situation has resolved itself.

These children attended state schools but three other private schools also offered to take them in. The experience in all three schools was similar even though two were church schools and one independent. The level of education of some of the detained children was so poor that two schools – one independent and one church, decided to have a special programme for them. In the smaller independent school – the children were offered lessons in English, Maltese and Maths, given by a volunteer teacher. The church school also offered computer skills, and those students who made progress even sat and passed their ECDL examination. This school also offered a cultural programme for them to discover and learn more about Malta. Both schools commented on how quickly the children learnt Maltese. This is not surprising given the natural aptitude children have for learning, and also that the Maltese language is for the most part a Semitic language. Both schools integrated the children in subjects such as drama, physical education. The third school fully integrated its refugee student, since he could cope reasonably well. He was given extra lessons though by his teachers during the break and sometimes even after school hours. His work was regularly checked every three weeks by the headmaster. He was also given the opportunity to talk about his country in project work. Whenever there were projects to be done about Malta he would be asked to write about his own country. There was another problem of hygiene. Since the students lived in detention, they very often attended school not having showered. One headmaster allowed them to shower in the college's sports complex before school started.

All the students attending all three schools were given uniforms, stationery and books. They were also given packed lunches. These were provided at the detention centre, but they would often be consumed by the time they got to school. A fund was started at all schools, by the staff and school students. There was also positive feedback from the parents once they were reassured on two points. One was the health aspect. Parents needed to be reassured that all the detained students had undergone a medical test. Another issue affecting only church schools was the enrolment of these children since their Maltese counterparts sat for a competitive exam to enter the school. Some parents thought it unfair that the detained children were accepted while theirs were left out. In order not to cause any ill feeling, it is a policy of church schools to enrol asylum seekers well into the second week of the beginning of the first term.

All asylum seekers and refugees socialised very well. In the case of male students, sports, especially football seems to be a common ground to make friends. One college perceived having

refugees as such an enriching experience, that at the start of every year, it invites the parents of the Maltese students to a talk and a presentation specifically about the refugees. The college also sees this as an opportunity for parents to voice any queries regarding them. All three schools commented that whenever the parents of asylum seekers or refugees took an active interest in their child and participated in school events, the child would do better than others whose parents were either detained or not in Malta.

The educational provisions for asylum-seekers in church and independent schools were similar to those at state schools. The withdrawal system was used for those students who were academically too weak to be put in the mainstream and would not have benefited by being there. Both the church schools and independent schools were willing to accept the asylum-seekers. This willingness was reflected in the manner the schools catered for them, despite the financial element. The schools recognised the positive impact of the cultural exchange between their own students and asylum-seekers. All three schools are ready to welcome other asylum-seekers in their schools again.

## 7. Good Practices

A number of good practices are being undertaken by public funded private schools as well as independent schools regarding asylum seekers and children of non-Maltese nationals.

### 7.1 Social Awareness Day

One church school organised a Social Awareness Day that was dedicated to refugees. So, through the collaboration of JRS, refugees were invited to the school and they talked about their country and their lives. Refugee women prepared different dishes of their own countries. A band also came over. A football match was also organised between the college boys and the refugees.

The above practices promote cultural exchange. While integration is positive, and has no aspects of racism, it could lead to the refugee child losing contact with his own culture and language. . Therefore opportunities for refugees to talk about their country are to be encouraged.

### 7.2 Summer Schools

Another good practice, this time initiated by an NGO, JRS, is the organisation of summer schools.

Summer holidays last for the three whole months of summer. Summer schools are very popular with working parents and students alike as they usually involve arts and crafts, drama, sports, camping, fishing, visits to places of interest, to mention a few of the activities.

Three summers ago, JRS contacted an independent school as well as a public-funded private school to take in refugee children in their summer programme. The independent school which accepted fifteen children asked the parents of their own students to sponsor a refugee child. The refugee children in both schools integrated well with their Maltese counterparts. However it was no longer economically sustainable for the independent school to cater for the refugees.

For the last two summers, JRS has organised its own summer school for refugees. This year it collaborated with a Christian movement to provide activities for as many children as possible. These activities included singing (in English), art and crafts, swimming. It was a success and sustainable because volunteers were involved and most activities were sponsored by various companies. Transport was paid for by the JRS. Although the children were all refugees and they did not interact with any local children, it was a good experience for the Maltese volunteers who were mainly young adolescents and who had never worked with refugees before.

Literacy courses for refugees were also organized both by JRS and the Emigrants' Commission. This experiment had a similar ending to that organized by Department for Adult Education. Numbers dwindled as the course progresses. JRS tried organising morning courses for women but the cultural differences proved an obstacle. The Emigrants' Commission organised evening courses for men but without a satisfactory outcome. It was only individual tuition that was fruitful but this is not feasible owing to the lack of human resources.

## **8. Non-Maltese Nationals and Children of Migrant Workers**

Children of migrant workers are also fully integrated in the classroom. They also form part of the complementary service if necessary. In order to fulfil the obligations outlined in Legal Notice 259 of 2002<sup>41</sup> concerning the teaching of the language and culture of migrant children, the Department has liaised with the respective Embassies and lessons are held there every Saturday.

One independent Catholic school has five Moslem students who are non-Maltese nationals. Two of them have asked and been granted permission to attend Friday prayers at the mosque close by. The school also allows the use of the headscarf for the Moslem girls and allows them to wear trousers instead of their kit during their sports lesson. As in the case of state schools, the Moslems are exempted from religious classes and go to the library instead. Since their parents settled in Malta a few years ago, the children have integrated very well with their peers.

Another independent school which also caters for children of migrant workers also uses the withdrawal system of teaching if the particular child is weak in English which is the principal language of instruction. The child is taken out of the classroom for only half an hour a day, and is given individual attention. The head also pointed out that young children pick up languages very quickly. In order to make the child of a migrant worker feel at ease, the parents are invited to the classroom during the first week. They are asked to talk about their country, their customs, and food. They are even encouraged, as all parents are, to participate actively in the school, and help out in the classroom. It has proven beneficial to the child whenever the non-working parent volunteers at the school. Another good practice adopted by the school is having the child teach Maltese children a foreign word a week.

## **9. Teacher Training**

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<sup>41</sup> Malta, Legal Notice 259 of 2002 (13.09.2002)

The Faculty of Education of the University of Malta tackles issues that deal with diversity, equity through study units in the sociology of education. The courses look at social and cultural differences and how these produce different learning patterns. They also explore how the curriculum can be adapted to suit these diversities. The units are compulsory but are more awareness-raising of the issues rather than pedagogical. Another unit called 'Investigating Citizenship in Education' does focus on the pedagogical aspect and students explore how strategies such as discussions and debates can be used in the classroom and do lead to a more democratic learning environment.

## 10. Conclusions

The study shows that there is no discrimination to refugees regarding educational provisions. However, the emphasis is on assimilation rather than diversity. The multi-cultural approach to education still has to be explored and understood by the major stakeholders before it can be implemented. The lack of a data-unit at the Education Division is an obstacle to research and conclusive findings. A few directors within the Division were very wary of and at times reluctant in giving any information. Nevertheless, the results of the evaluation of the NMC should be the start of a formulation of an inclusive pedagogy that has as its aim the celebration of diversity.

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