The evolution of education in Malta. A philosophy in the making
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An unknown Maltese pedagogist of the 19th century wrote in an article entitled: “Educazione. Che cos’è l’educazione?” [Education. What is Education?] the following:

«Nel nostro Paese a dire, non possiamo piu’ chiamarci sopraffatti da questa inerzia, che incitati dal movimento che ha regnato e regna tuttavia in Europa. Qui dunque il riparo ha da comunicare dal persuadere gli amici delle vecchie abitudini, essere ormai tempo di mandare all’aria tutte quelle bambole e legami e fasce e stracciolini che si mettono prima intorno al capo, poscia intorno allo spirito del fanciullo. E v’è qui ancora pur troppo qualche rimascuglio di quell’educazione di cui i frati da spada si erano impadroniti, di quell’educazione gesuitica che insegnava all’uomo di tener sempre gli occhi bassi, invece di convertirli arditamente al cielo a cui siamo tutti destinati.»

The revolutionary tone of this quotation illustrates that education in Malta has in many respects a history of cultural prejudices, isolation and subservience to foreign interference. A system that is characterized by frequent adjustments; that offers adaptation as innovation; that fails to convince policymakers of its utility and is often alien to the socio-cultural and political reality of the Maltese islands is looked upon with suspicion. Over the years education in Malta has sought to tie its philosophy to the policy of the ruling invader.
A history in the making

A chronological evolution of Maltese education can truly go back to the Arab period in Malta [870-1090 AD]. The greatest legacy which the Arabs imposed upon the Maltese population and which left lasting effect was their language. In fact Maltese is the only Semitic language written in Roman letters showing the dual influence of an Island under Muslim rule but close to the shores of Europe. Islamic culture however did not impede Malta from assimilating European culture. Through the various rulers in Sicily, Malta's destiny was to be determined by the Normans, the Angevins, the Suabians, the Castillians and the Aragonese. The arrival in Malta of the Religious orders also played an important role in the spread of formal education in these Islands in the Middle Ages. The Franciscan Conventuals [c.1350], the Carmelites [1418], the Dominicans [1450], the Augustinians [1460] and the Friars Minor [1492] as well as the Benedictine Nuns [1418 and 1495] brought a new type of education to Malta: religious education. Learned members of these Orders would offer their services, or be asked to serve as tutors to the children of the more affluent families, or to set up classes for their instruction primarily in Latin, Italian and numeracy.2

The development of the Università was a milestone in the history of education in Malta. Starting as an institution run and financed by the Cathedral Chapter, the Università marks the existence of the first 'public school' in Malta and an interest in the civic aspects of the Maltese community in education, with a particular accent on educating for the leadership of these Islands. It was a time when the Maltese enjoyed a certain amount of cultural and political autonomy.3 With the arrival in Malta of the Jesuit Order, education was greatly enhanced especially with the setting-up of a College for the education of the Maltese in the heart of the new city of Valletta built by the Knights of Saint John of Jerusalem. In 1592 the Jesuits created the 'Collegium Melitense' which originally lasted for 150 years. It was re-constituted in 1769 by Grand Master Emanoel Pinto de Fonseca with the blessing of the Pope, renaming the college 'a public University for General Studies'. Besides the Faculties of Theology, Medicine and Law, other colleges were attached to the new institution such as the 'Collegio d'Educazione' (a Grammar School), the 'Scola Infima' a preparatory school and schools of Navigation, Naval architecture and Cartography. Under the Knights of Saint John, education in the Arts flourished in Malta. Private tutors were available for languages, navigation studies, accounting, music, rhetoric, philosophy and many other subjects.4 The noble and the wealthy had all the means at their disposal to enrich themselves with European culture and scientific knowledge. On the other hand the common people struggled to earn a living. Access to education for the poor was extremely limited, almost inexistent.5
When the French (1798-1800) expelled the Order of St John from Malta, they imposed their own form of government including new policies in education. All private schools were closed down. Reducing the University to an ‘école centrale’ the French made an attempt to introduce elementary education and a form of adult education or ‘matelot schools’. Under a French system of education, the Maltese gained a new sense of national identity and respect for their rights and religion. Education became a public concern. The state had practically full control of the education system of Malta.

When Britain took possession of the Maltese Islands at the turn of the 19th century, one of the first objectives was “to promote every means by which the affections of the [Maltese] people could be drawn more closely to the British Crown”. Attempts to institutionalize primary education on a British system only came into effect under Governor Sir Richard More O’Ferrall, the artifact of a new constitution granted to the Maltese in 1847. A number of Committees were set up, one of which concerned education. Canon Paolo Pullicino (1815-1890) was invited to Head this Committee and to develop and manage primary education in Malta. It was under Pullicino’s Headship that primary education was founded on modern lines and extended to the masses in Malta. Pullicino also founded the Education Department which runs all public education in Malta. Schools were opened in every town and village and education was free of charge to all those who wanted to learn new skills and knowledge.

The Julyan and Keenan Reports of 1878 brought radical changes in the Maltese educational system. One of the most radical recommendations was to substitute the teaching of the Italian language with English. The use and teaching of Maltese in the primary school was encouraged. However English would become the language of instruction at secondary and post-secondary education, a policy which still holds in the Maltese educational system. The ‘Anglicization’ of the Maltese had started.

Subsequently, Dr Sigismondo Savona’s reforms (1837-1908) focused primarily on the ‘Language Question’ which was bitterly fought until 1934 over the use of Italian or English as the official language of Malta. With the rising threat of Fascism the 1934 Act abolished Italian as the official language of the administration and of the schools and replaced it with the Maltese language. English and Maltese, in this order, became the official languages of the Maltese Islands. It was only in 1964, with the granting of Independence, that the order was reverted: Maltese and English were declared the official languages of Malta; the Maltese language being Malta’s national language.

The period comprising World War I and II was marked by political unrest and post wars adjustments. While the war industry was seen as good for the Maltese economy, modern warfare was immensely destructive. If by good economy one means an economy which provides the population with basic needs and services, then at the same time one is obliged to recognize that war
itself induced the Maltese people to believe that the incentive for war production was counterproductive and could truly lead to dramatic scenarios. Standards of living were still very low for the masses, illiteracy was rampant and many children had to stay away from school to help their families earn a decent living.

When Malta became a sovereign State in 1964, there was a new sense of commitment towards Maltese culture and society. Tourism and the textile industries quickly emerged as the new foundations for the Maltese economy. In education “the greatest gift which the Maltese Government under the new Independence Constitution gave to Malta and to Maltese education was in 1970 when Secondary Education for all was introduced in these Islands”.

The Education Acts of 1974 [under a Labour Government] and 1987 [under a Nationalist Government] reflect Malta’s ambition to find its place in the world as an independent, free and sovereign State. The two Acts brought radical changes to the educational system in a search for a philosophy of Maltese education. My attempt now is to try to analyze these changes in the light of Malta’s quest for a philosophy of education.

In other words, did political Independence bring about a new philosophy of education for the Maltese Islands? Or is the Maltese educational system still a ‘philosophy’ in the making?

My efforts to answer the question fall into three parts. First some remarks about the three relevant immediate pasts of the Maltese education system. Secondly I shall try to define the general state of the field of education in Malta as I see it, highlighting the incredulous richness of the human resources available and the amount of work that has been done and is yet to be done.

Thirdly I shall refer to our present transitional period, which is, in many ways, a philosophy in the making, or to use a political term, a ‘silent revolution’ which could ultimately result in either an idealistic return to the past as an escape from immediate realities or, an ongoing search for an overall cultural approach for the future development of our small state.

Reforms and counter-reforms

In many ways the period 1945-1971 was a time of adjustments and reconstructions. After the Second World War a ‘Report on the Education of Malta’ presented by Ellis was more or less a drawing-up of a list of important recommendations for the re-establishment of an adequate system of education, in particular the introduction of compulsory education at the primary level. The post-war years were a time to adapt Malta’s philosophy of education to suit the future needs of its population and the heavy social demands of a small island on the morrow of a world conflict. It was during this period that the idea of education replaced the concept of instruction, thanks to the introduction of pre-service teacher training which was provided by two religious
orders. Compulsory education was launched in 1946. The immediate task of the education authorities then was to build the physical and moral infrastructure of the entire system of education. Needless to say, the model adopted was that of the British system of education which in many respects is still the prevalent model today.

Notwithstanding the limited financial and human resources available, rapid changes took place in education between the years 1955 and 1971. New schools and new higher education buildings were built providing adequate space for the implementation of innovative ideas such as those related to technical education and to 'Secondary Education' referred to earlier on.

Times were rapidly changing. The Maltese Governments that followed after Independence realized that new education structures had to be set-up to encourage and facilitate dialogue and consensus-building among the population and to train people for new needs and aspirations. The new social mentality was geared towards economic independence based upon entrepreneurship, greater accountability and responsibility at all social strata, coupled with a sense of national and cultural identity.14

The principles of Independence were implicitly adhered to in the reforms and developments of education in Malta in the period 1972-1986. The reforms were conducive to a series of policies which today can be classified under two big headings: constructive and counterproductive. Those policies which were constructive gave young people an idea of an egalitarian society. This was positive in many respects, for it encouraged in young generations a sense of pride, self-reliance and industrial attitudes. The student-worker scheme, for example, introduced in 1977, could be taken as an educational reform in this direction.15

But on the other hand, policies like the ones effecting tertiary education, relations between the teaching body and educational authorities and the Church/State 'rapport' over private education were so strained that they were doomed soon after there was a change in government in 1987. The teacher's strike in 1984, one of the longest in the history of industrial relations in Malta, and the problem of Church Schools were the highlights of a very difficult period for Malta. Malta's philosophy of education for the 70's and the first part of the 80's was geared towards the government's commitment to eradicate a sense of dependence from Britain, and to a certain extent from Western Europe, in matters that concerned values and security. But the world in the second part of the 80's was giving rise to an exciting order that, very few could refuse to see the absurdity of conflict in social relations at the national level.

The sudden changes in Europe almost coincide with the emergence of a new policy for education in Malta. One could affirm that even in education in Malta, a revolution took place in June 1988 when a new Education Act was enacted by Parliament. In many ways, the new Act laid down a new philosophy of edu-
cation and established a number of fundamental departures from previous education legislations.

The first relates to the idea that it is the 'state' and not the Minister of Education who is the prime mover of the educational system. This implies that the new Act asserts greater democratization of national education in Malta. Secondly, the Act makes it very clear that decentralization will be the key word in decision making at all levels of education a shift from government responsibility to a shared task with a larger and wider Community. Thirdly, the Act refers to the principle of life-long education as a guiding theory of education in school curricula and non-formal education programmes. These three basic concepts are attached to a number of innovative and far-reaching decisions. To name a few: the setting-up of School Councils to be responsible for the funds and the assets of the school; the important recognition of the teaching body as a profession in its own right; the lowering of the age of compulsory education to 5 years; the introduction of a set of rules concerning the National Minimum Curriculum from the pre-primary level to the post-secondary level; the right of every person to apply for a license to open a school. This principle implies that 'state' and 'private' schooling in Malta through the 1987 Education Act were tied to one common effort deserving adequate support and coordination. The Act also deals with the refounding of the University of Malta consisting primarily of the reinstatement of the Faculty of Arts, Sciences and Theology, the abolition of the worker-student scheme in its original form, a more meaningful academic and administrative set-up and autonomy, and greater emphasis on establishing international links.¹⁶

Practitioners and philosophers

A second point concerns the systematization of education in Malta. Throughout the years, education in Malta, as in other countries, had been at the mercy of the 'king' rather than in the hands of the 'philosopher' to use Plato's terminology. Whether society could be saved if either philosophers became kings or kings became philosophers, is hard to prove. But there is a point in believing that education can truly benefit not from kings who are also philosophers, nor from philosophers who crown themselves kings, but from cooperation which is necessary between the practitioners and the philosophers. One way of measuring the maturity of a system of education would be through the level of differentiation in the three sets of diagnosis, prognoses and therapies. So what are the major problems upsetting education in Malta? What plans are necessary to remedy the malaise? What specific action is needed to prevent further damage which in education could last for entire generations?

If one had to diagnose the state of the Maltese educational system today, one would have to assert that there is a positive and constant state of recovery, due to precise theoretical orientations which at various levels continue to find
patches of suffocation in the unnecessary evil of bureaucracy. At all levels of education, formal bureaucracy is still higher than modern exigencies of professional teaching and education administration require. This means that teachers, educators, principals of schools, education advisors and, to a lesser extent, government fall into the time-consuming 'game' of suspension of decision-making and implementation.

This also means that a number of serious drawbacks emerge in those educational systems especially of small states where very often the people at the top 'wear many hats' and occupy various positions within the country's administration. The task is arduous and a special effort is necessary to avoid sclerosis.

A second problem which is being confronted relates to the potentiality and cost effectiveness of education, in particular at tertiary level. Development in small states heavily depends upon a system of potent exchanges. Today the Maltese educational system is in many ways geared to provide next generations with the capacity to think and invent their own future with the help of a solid formation in the arts, and a scientific and technological preparation from the early years of schooling. The integration of the arts and sciences is a recent development in Malta's system of education. Students, teachers and parents are realizing that the gradual evolution towards a higher standard of living in Malta is possible without denying one's own rich cultural past and social and historical existence. Furthermore, programmes in Maltese schools now centre around the idea that true development can only come from within one's own civilization which is, however, linked to specific directions. Endogenous development based upon cultural and scientific foundations is therefore the key sentence in Malta's philosophy of education. Education in Malta is centred around scientific and technological knowledge and the contemporary social and political values of democracy and social justice which, as a small European and Mediterranean state, enhances international respect and economic and cultural growth.17

A third problem, relates to Malta's cultural dimension of conflict. The cultural traumas suffered during the long period of colonization, led to the frequent erosion of Malta's cultural identity and the depersonalization of the individual. Consequently, people have been brought up to regard the state as a separate entity, a sort of cultural and social dislocation caused by foreign domination. Malta's educational system implicitly enforces defense mechanisms expressed in popular culture or in rituals which idealize ideological and ethical values of the feudal type in which, for example, the sections of the national bourgeoisie seek, through an appeal to archaic or reactionary ideas, to perpetuate a privileged and elitist life-style. Education in Malta today is shifting to authentic development, restoring, where necessary, Malta's cultural identity in all its constituent parts and assisting the young, as well as the elderly, in working to revive those values that spur on creativity and on mobilizing the energy of its people.
Teacher training

The fourth point raises the problem of teacher training. Two main problems come to the fore. The first concerns the relationship between the type of training and the type of education institutions teachers are expected to work in. There are significant problems between theory and practice, between what is needed and what is expected from teachers. This is one of the major problems in our educational system where it concerns teacher training. At the core of the problem there is the perennial debate over decentralization as against centralization, autonomy as against dependence, accountability as against ‘job’ security. Of course there are historical reasons for this dichotomy. Lack of coordination between education authorities and teacher trainers is one tangible sign of the malaise. A second is the ambiguous communication and cooperation between the various levels of education.

Pre-service teacher training started in 1944/45 with the setting up of two training Colleges, St Michael’s for men and the Mater Admirabilis for women. These colleges were run by English staff and from 1955 onwards, in close collaboration with the University of London Institute of Education. The colleges closed down in 1971/72 when Government created a co-educational Malta College of Education, later becoming the Department of Educational Studies at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology. From a one year course during the immediate post-Second World War years, the course was extended to three years. A new Post-Graduate Certificate in Education course was also created. The Faculty of Education of the University of Malta came into existence in 1978 and the B.Education (Hons.) course was rephased after the Education Act of 1988 to cover four years of full-time study.

The Faculty of Education consists of five departments, namely: the Department of Educational Theory; the Department of Psychological Studies; the Department of Primary Education; the Department of Science and Technology in Education; and the Department of Arts in Education.

Besides the B.Educ (Hons.) degree, students may continue their studies at higher level. An M.Ed degree is also available on a full-time or part-time basis through taught courses. The full-time course extends over two years. One may also obtain an M.Phil. or/and a Ph.D in Education.

The Faculty of Education also provides a wide range of in-service training of teachers at Diploma level in a number of subjects as requested by University authorities, the Education Department (Ministry of Education and Human Resources) or Private Schools. The Education Department is responsible for the training of kindergarten assistants and instructors and the training of teachers overseas through scholarships and bursaries offered through...
various international organizations and through bilateral and multilateral agreements between the Government of Malta and other states.

It is therefore within this institutional network that teachers in Malta receive their training. Beneath this infrastructure, the absence of the perennial answer to a ‘philosophy’ for teacher training remains in sharp contradiction with the needs of a Mediterranean community such as the Maltese society. There are four main reasons to substantiate this argument:

i) teacher training as a philosophy is still anchored to an Anglo-Saxon model of the late 60’s and early 70’s in which the teacher was the centre of the learning process and not the ‘child’ or the ‘problem’;

II) teachers are subjected to unreasonable amounts of writing assignments leaving no space for oral expression or for the student teachers to become familiar with the general operating laws of communication processes;

III) teachers are not adequately exposed to critical thinking, nor to the techniques of education research and further training, nor to the critique of the education system in its complex role between the school and the professional world;

IV) the content of teacher training is mostly unrelated to the problems of a small country such as Malta, in particular areas related to moral and civic education. Inevitably, one of the shocking discordance between teacher training and teaching as a profession in Malta is the failure to deal with the culture, the traditions and the current needs of a community through the child’s deep-rooted motivations.

The results of these approaches can also be classified under four consequences:

i) several inner resources of the child are left unexplored. If parents and pupils face failure, they simply confirm the uselessness of the school as a learning institution;

II) people are finding it easier, but not necessarily positive, to conform to changes rather than actively participating in constructing social realities. The needs of the community become more and more controlled by the few often helping internal strife and conflict grow;

III) there is a growing need to adopt new approaches to education through a comparative study of systems and philosophies especially in a world becoming more and more interdependent;

IV) while politicians strive to establish an educational policy (based on a national policy), teacher trainers are tempted by their institutional set-up and tradition, to remain locked up in an ivory tower away from a reality (the school-environment) which bureaucracy and narrow mindedness have failed to change. The two worlds continue to live apart while children and parents find in communication technology the natural substitute to ‘education’.
Within this framework, while the Maltese education system continues to produce highly qualified people from the various educational institutions, the quality and the democratisation of education remain complex and difficult objectives to achieve. And, since teacher training and teaching, as a profession, remain devoted to the organization of a social life, which more or less belongs to the past, puts the school in a very unfavourable position vis-à-vis parents and the states’ market economy. The radical changes proposed in the 1988 Education Act are meant to remedy the situation. But teacher training must follow suit by improving, not only the methods and techniques of teaching, but also by defining the guiding philosophy underlying the purpose of knowledge and action specifically for Malta and therefore in a Euro-Mediterranean context.

**Fundamental priorities**

The utilitarian strategies of the 70’s and the early 80’s had a futuristic-radical approach in education in which the objective was to put an end to a situation and create a completely new society on a new basis, starting from values hitherto unknown to society. Today’s philosophy of education in Malta asserts cultural specificity and freedom of expression within the harmonious development of a state in the international community. A look at the programmes of education at primary, secondary and post-secondary level, reveals a tendency to enhance the genuine participation of people in development as a fundamental condition and an indispensable guarantee for the preparation and successful implementation of a market economy based upon coherence and quality.

The Education Act of 1988 was an apposite preventive and curative therapy to a system of education which now faces the challenges of the times brought about by science and technology on the one hand, political orientations on the other. The fact that Malta applied for membership in the European Community, created a mission which education, more than other sectors in our society, is bound to effectively contribute, by preparing young generations to appreciate the privilege of sharing in a highly organized form of corporate life. The Maltese school of the future is henceforth based upon the principle of a change of policy and mentality. This is the revolution that is expected to take place in the Maltese educational system. According to the Education Act of 1988, the immediate goal is therefore to create a moral climate in which the acquisition of wisdom becomes the driving force that pushes each and every citizen to be ready for the service of the state, to face reconciliation and be prepared to replace all that fueled conflict and laissez-faire attitudes in society (bought through hundreds of years of colonialization) by a culture of high standards.

Acquiring wisdom and economic well-being are certainly two basic objectives which require an adequate physical environment in which to develop. Economic factors determine the forms and content of culture and education.
This is demonstrated, on the one hand by the productive forces through the economic mode and its development, and on the other hand directly by these forces themselves. A philosophy of education which claims ‘quality’ on top of qualifications deserves for its workforce adequate school environments which reflect the essence of the same philosophy. Culture can only develop in pace with the economic evolution of society. Uplifting the physical school environment is perhaps the next important step in the history of education in Malta.20

The strengthening of teacher training with a clear orientation towards a pan-European dimension of education is also another fundamental priority to help the teaching profession and next generations step into the 21st Century with a humanistic and critical view of a fast emerging reality described as a historical unity within the richness of cultural diversity. Furthermore democratization and participation in the political processes of a small country require people to be brought up with self-assumed responsibilities and accountability. Lastly, media and channels of social communication are rapidly becoming partners and competitors of education. To encourage a healthy ‘rapport’ between the two sectors, distance learning can provide the missing link between the value-free commercial input and value-oriented commercial education.

Like many European countries, Malta’s philosophy of education is at the crossroads. The choices at the political level have been made and strengthened through international cooperation and national legislative measures. An immediate priority is now to speak of education in Malta in terms of a moral education which can help young and old generations put into practice the intrinsic values of the 1988 Education Act.

NOTES


9. Vide Camilleri Joseph J., Canon Paolo Pullicino, unpublished dissertation for the degree of M.A. in the Faculty of Arts, University of Malta 1969 [Melitensia Library, University of Malta].

10. Vide Constitution of the Republic of Malta, A Department of Information Publication, Valletta June 1975. Article 5.1 declares that: The National Language of Malta is the Maltese Language. Art.5.2 states: The Maltese and the English languages and such other languages as may be prescribed by Parliament (by a law passed by not less than two-thirds of all the members of the House of Representatives) shall be the official languages of Malta and the Administration may for all official purposes use any of such languages. Vide Hull G., The Malta Language Question. A case study in Cultural Imperialism, Said International, Malta 1993.


13. During World War II Malta suffered heavy bombardment from Nazi and Fascist attacks. On many occasions the Islands were about to surrender but faith, courage and fortune saved the Islands of Malta from falling into the hands of Hitler. Malta has always attracted the attention of foreign powers because of its strategic position. The Carthaginians [480 B.C.], the Romans [218 B.C.], the Arabs [870], the Normans [1091], the Knights of Saint John of Jerusalem [1530], the French [1798] and the British [1800-1964/1979] found in the Islands of Malta and Gozo a favourable geographical and geopolitical position to defend and expand their empire. Almost every invasion had characteristics of relief as well as conformity - relief from the previous oppressor, conformity to a new system of existence, new modes of living, customs and tradition. Malta’s proximity to Sicily and North Africa has, in many ways, saved the Islands of Malta from poverty, but on the other hand, it has been the cause of endless instability.


16. The setting-up in 1986, of the Foundation for International Studies at the University of Malta was in that direction. Today the Foundation forms an integral part of the University coordinating the international relations of the Alma Mater.

17. Due to the fact that the language of instruction is in the main English, one of the major problems in the Maltese educational system is the use of foreign textbooks mainly from the Anglo-Saxon world. The teaching of the social and cultural contexts of an Island in the Mediterranean are very often left to the teacher’s discretion with sometimes serious repercussions on the child’s concept of national and cultural identity.

18. The information is applicable for the Academic year 1993-1994 and therefore is subject to change.

19. I am particularly referring to the Maltese Socialist praxis of the 1970’s and the early 1980’s which was centred around the idea of a “new” beginning, of a new history with social and political values linked to a European socialist model of society. This model was in sharp contrast with the conservative/nationalist model which, during that period, resorted to an almost “return to the past approach” in an attempt to save Malta’s historical and traditional roots, embedded in Christian and democratic values, from annihilation.

20. It is interesting to note that upon taking office in Spring 1994, the new Minister of Education and Human Resources Mr. Michael Falzon, an architect by profession, embarked on an extensive project of refurbishing of primary and secondary schools in Malta.