**Inclusive Education in Malta.**

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Malta has had a traditional single sex education system, based on streaming and selection. In the late 1990s moves began to a more inclusive, community-based system. On a recent visit to Malta connected with a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Commonwealth Disabled People’s Forum (of which I am General Secretary), I took some time to research and visit the University of Malta , a secondary school and meet with officers of the Education Department. On these later two I was accompanied by representatives of the Malta Federation of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (MFOPD).

Malta is a small county of 3 islands in the Mediterranean, some 80 miles south of Sicily. Its population -493,500 with 55,000 children of school age. It was a British Colony for 250 years with some cultural and structural similarities, but also differences, being more religious speaking Maltese, having strong national pride, focus on family and conservatism.

Education is largely delivered through the compulsory system comprising state (150), church (34) and independent (18) schools. There are 3 resource centres which act as special schools since they receive students on a full time or part time basis. At a point in time the numbers of students attending these centres were reduced and the schools were dying a natural death however, the number of students attending full time or part time at these centres have greatly increased. It is said that children attend these resource centres full time due to parental choice, although this may be true for some (after being disappointed with the type of support their children received) other parents have no choice. Unfortunately the resource centres have retained the role of the special school and one cannot say that the “Investment in existing special schools should be geared to their new and expanded role of **providing professional support to regular schools** **in meeting special educational needs**” (Salamanca Statement, 1994, p.12-13) has taken place.

Education is well resourced with 5.1% of GDP spent on education. The Average secondary class is 20. Since 2010 state schools organised through 10 geographic pyramidal Colleges and 1 on Gozo. Each College comprises a single Secondary school (Yr. 9,10, 11); 1 or 2 Middle schools (Yr. 7 & 8) and 6 to 10 Primary schools. In the church schools the state pays for the teachers’ salaries and recently also for support services. Parents are asked to make a voluntary financial contribution. In recent years state schools have become co-ed. The independent schools are fee paying schools. In 2014 a new Framework for Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 was launched to increase participation, support educational achievement, retention, community involvement and inclusion. A system of “banding” children into different classes was reintroduced at the end of year 4 (age 9yrs). The equivalent to the 11+ exam at the end of primary school was replaced by bench-mark exams in English, Maths and Maltese. The students move into middle schools and are ‘set’ according to the marks they obtained in these benchmark exams.

Recent figures from the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education EDSNIE[[1]](#footnote-1) show over 96% of those statemented attend mainstream inclusive classes. The Equivalent figure for England is 47.8%. The level of Statements is at around 5.5% in Malta compared to 3.5% in England. This figure is rather high. Rather than implementing inclusive pedagogies in class teachers tend to expect help from outside class usually in the figure of an LSE.

Nearly all children go to their local school and attend age appropriate classes so out of a school population of 55,000 only 160 attend special school. There are, however, also resource bases developed around nurture group principles in primary schools and learning support zones in secondary, with specially trained teachers for social and emotional issues currently one for primary and 4 for secondary schools (Secondary school).

In addition 32 children with significant autism will be attending a group 2 days a week with their Learning Support Educators (LSE) to undergo a TTEACH type programme. A foundation has been commissioned to offer this service. The effect of this provision is very low exclusions.

The provision of LSEs is provided by a Statementing Board that schools and parents apply to for either full time, shared, or shared in the same class support. The Board is appointed by the Minister of Education made up of SEND professionals most of which are working within the education directorate. The LSEs are encouraged to attend University of Malta, Department for Inclusion and Access to Learning for training to gain a diploma, which has been recently upgraded to a degree. Other institutions are also offering training courses. One particular course is of dubious quality. Many of the older teachers have not undertaken effective training in inclusion. In recent years there has been a big increase in LSEs to 2800 for 3800 children using the bulk of growth of SEN budget despite rolls falling. The LSEs protest that there is not always the necessary teamwork between them and the teachers to facilitate the inclusion of all the students. The student with a statement of needs is considered to be the responsibility of the LSE.

One issue with this system is that school students are said to ‘become dependent’ on their LSE and they are only allowed 1 year with the same LSE, usually not transferring phase to phase with them. A second problem is the disconnect between teachers and LSEs with any communication or planning being informal. There is no built-in timetable for reflection and planning. This undermines whole school approaches of collaboration. There seemed a willingness from teachers to learn what was necessary, not in a coherent pedagogy of inclusion but piecemeal around particular students needs. There is an Inclusion Manager from the Directorate of School Support who coordinates LSEs in several schools, is part of Leadership in schools, monitored practice, ensures Individual Education Plans are constructed, monitored and annually reviewed. The IEPs are in practice designed by the LSEs using a software package. The IEPs are designed according to the diagnosis, which is based on the medical, deficit model of disability.

Dingli Secondary School in the North of Malta has 486 students on role with some 30 students with some form of LSE support (13 had 1:1). It was a spacious new build campus with lifts, wide corridors. The Principle explained that in the last two years they have introduced (as all secondaries have) a vocational/practical based curriculum for those more suited to it, alongside the academic. Training was arranged and a meeting with middle school teachers to sort out a lap top, raised diagrams and class teachers giving notes on a pen drive. He is now doing very well. We met Sheranice, a girl who use a rollator to get about. She used the lifts. She liked the school, had 2 best friends and seemed to have an ambivalent attitude to her LSE as she wanted to be more independent.

We saw very well resourced, specialised areas for Hospitality- with a suite with a restaurant, kitchen and accommodation; Video and Communication/Photography, Food Lab, Textile, Craft, Electronics and Engineering areas. Other than the streamed Literacy, Maths and Science all other subjects in Year 9-11 we were told were mixed ability, though we think the banding still applied. Different weight is given to assessment through course work, projects and exams marks varying from 60% /40% to 40% /60%..

In the Learning Support Zone (LSZ) children attend with parental permission for on going 2x2 hour sessions per week. Progress is measured on entry and end of year on Boxall profile. Focussed groups are run on appropriate behaviour, friendship and anti-bullying. The LSZ teacher and LSE can also work in whole mainstream classes, individual and group interventions with strong evidence of improved behaviour and children better dealing with social and emotional issues. A favourite was a ‘punch bag’ that was well used for getting rid of aggression.

My conclusion largely coincides with the European Agency Audit carried out in 2014 and although various initiatives to improve things to a more inclusive approach have been launched in the period since the following issues remain largely the same:

* The UN CRPD Article 24 has not been incorporated into Maltese Law;
* The resourcing approach is largely deficit/medical model and not a human right approach particularly on the resourcing model of individual Statementing and need replacing by resourcing schools;
* A narrow, results-based curriculum and assessment system, though recently modified still seems to dominate rather than teachers and schools collaboratively taking responsibility for the learning of all;
* The need for schools to develop and take responsibility for involving all in Inclusive Education Policies;
* All staff need twin-track accredited training on inclusion in general and impairment specifics accommodations for running an inclusive classroom.
* Not allowing LSEs for more than 1 year destroys continuity and changing teachers and LSE’ each year is very disruptive
* The Education Directorate needs to have regular meetings with MFODO to discuss issues before decisions are taken.
* The need for whole school approach for academic progress through UDL and behaviour through evidence-based whole school positive behaviour support.
* There should be more push in services into mainstream schools and classes rather than pull out
* A primary focus of the inclusion process should be building relationships between non-disabled and disabled peers and more involvement of disabled individuals and their parents in decision making

That said Malta has many examples of good inclusive practice, accessible schools and a willingness to improve practice, which should embarrass the former colonial power -the United Kingdom, whose Government seems determined to reverse Inclusion in England.

1. Education for All Special Neds and Inclusion in Malta External Audit Report (2014) EASNIE [↑](#footnote-ref-1)