

Public consultation "Schools for the 21st century."

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These comments address Question 2, and Questions 4 and 5 together. They address the goal of enabling *all* children to see themselves as lifelong learners and to gain from school the relevant foundation skills for lifelong learning.

Question 2: How can schools equip young people with the competences and motivation to make learning a lifelong activity?

The target set by the Lisbon Agenda that by 2010 at least 85% should complete at least upper secondary education has had a very important impact on Maltese education. Malta is still at the bottom place in reaching the target with only 69% achieving it but has already made significant progress in the last few years. The Lisbon target (i) bolstered the expansion of post-secondary vocational education facilities to complement the facilities offered by the University of Malta; and (ii) gave rise to awareness that our academically oriented selective system of education is creating drop outs, and so we need to change our view of education from selecting students for higher education to preparing all students for lifelong learning. So:

RECOMMENDATION QUESTION 2:

The EU can support the development of desirable outcomes in education by setting desirable targets (such as the 85% in upper secondary education) that also address the lower levels of education more directly, such as a target for '0' level illiteracy by age 12 (similar to a target effectively adopted by Finland) which should lead to early identification and remediation of difficulties in the acquisition of literacy skills. A similar target could be set for digital literacy.

Question 4: How can school systems best respond to the need to promote equity, to respond to cultural diversity and to reduce early school leaving?

and

Question 5: If schools are to respond to each pupil's individual learning needs, what can be done as regards curricula, school organisation and the roles of teachers?

Why consider Questions 4 and 5 together?

Questions 4 and 5 both address the need for R&D on cultures, policies and practices that lead to equitable motivation and progress of all the diversity of learners. But they seem to

distinguish generally between cultural, linguistic and socio-economic background (Question 4) and 'special needs' (Question 5). Though this dichotomy is often found in education literature and practice, it is suggested that one way forward towards a more equitable education for all is to avoid this distinction and instead make another one that will address a more real distinction of issues in education for diversity, namely (a) diversity due to gender, culture, language, race, ethnic group, faith, sexual orientation or disability or other disadvantaged group, and (b) diversity in rates of learning that is present in all groups. In both these diversities some students are disadvantaged through the use of one-size-fits-all curricula and standards in education that push out students whose learning characteristics do not fit the standards. But the needs of these two forms of diversity are different.

First of all, one must not equate persons with impairment (or disability or special educational needs) with low ability. A person with sensory (visual or hearing impairment) or physical impairment may be as fast a learner as any non-disabled peer. Like students from other minority groups, persons with disability experience attitudinal and technical barriers to accessing learning unless attention is paid to their ways of learning. So issues of equity in competitive situations are quite similar for persons with disability as for gender and minority groups: persons with impairment must be provided with equal access to learning and assessment through the removal of disadvantages for them to enjoy a level playing field. So:

RECOMMENDATIONS QUESTIONS 4 & 5 (a):

At policy making level, promote the conceptualisation of all disadvantaged groups as entitled to a similar right for equitable treatment, namely: the right for measures to remove the attitude and technical barriers to learning and testing that are hindering their progress; and the right for measures to enable access to learning and testing through arrangements for making use of the cultural or linguistic or other tools that arise from a student's characteristics or background.

As a corollary to the above:

RECOMMENDATIONS QUESTIONS 4 & 5 (b):

Encourage the promotion of the principle of equity and a level playing field also in education within competitive situations by the statutory requirement of equitable access to learning and assessment.

So continue to highlight the evidence that minority and less dominant groups achieve less than the dominant majorities, and set raising the expectations and achievement of the underachieving groups to close the achievement gap as a guiding target.

In addition, promote curricula and teaching that allow for flexible ways of learning to allow for multiple intelligences and for the gifted and talented to excel.

This recommendation applies to gaps in different gender achievements in different areas, as well as to the underachievement of all minority groups, be they immigrant or different racial, ethnic and linguistic or other groups, or persons with disability. Where one group

is underachieving there must be a call for more support and resources for the group to access the curriculum and rise to expectations for mastering the core curriculum.

The above requires the provision of curricula and teaching that allow for width and some choice in the curriculum content as well as in the teaching, learning and assessment methods to allow for multiple intelligences and styles of learning. This need is more obvious for persons with disability, such as in the need for more use of auditory methods for the blind and more visual methods for the hearing impaired. But it applies equally to the complex issues of culturally responsive curricula and methods that build on the affirmation of one's background and cultural identity and tools. It applies also to those who are gifted or talented in particular areas of knowledge or skills.

Consider the rights and needs of all students along the whole continuum of ability

On the other hand, in all groups of society, there is a continuum of learning ability or rates of learning – from very fast to very slow learners – with the slower ones often being disadvantaged in competitive situations however much support they receive. This issue of learning ability is more evident in students with special needs because they include an identified subgroup with 'learning difficulties' or with 'intellectual impairment' or 'intellectual disability' who clearly have difficulty coping with the regular curriculum; but slower learners exist in all groups: i.e. in both genders, in all ethnic and cultural and linguistic groups. One must be careful in distinguishing this group because intellectual disability carries the greatest stigma in education.

However, unless their needs are identified and understood they will not be addressed. So:

RECOMMENDATIONS QUESTIONS 4 & 5 (c):

The EU needs to promote the vision that all children are equal learners and that schooling (and lifelong learning) applies to all students without exception: all children want to learn, and all children can learn if we provide the appropriate curricula and opportunities, and if we measure their progress rather than absolute level achieved. To achieve this, the EU needs to raise explicitly the challenge to the prevailing idea of the desirability of competitive situations in education: in compulsory education most competitive situations are unfair to those who are slower learners because these will never have an opportunity to compete successfully.

Indeed, where the competitive norm of the school consists of standard achievement tests, these students will always show up as failures. So, in order to include all students as equal learners, the school teaching and learning and assessment systems must measure the progress of each student (value added) rather than the absolute levels achieved.

This recommendation aims to address the more problematic challenge for schools of different levels or rates of learning. This is particularly problematic where schools emphasise implicitly or explicitly the academic achievement norms and thus push out (we call failing students 'drop outs', but in fact are 'pushed out') those who fail to understand or to reach expected cognitive standards. This norm appears to be inherent in all education systems as schools tend to adopt cognition as their primary dimension. But it

becomes more pronounced in education systems where there is early use of selective one-size-fits-all, academic oriented testing attached to streaming inside classrooms or between classes and schools. This push-out effect is felt even where different provisions and facilities are provided with the stated aim of meeting the different needs of different students.

This issue raises two challenges for children, their parents, schools and educators.

- i) First of all, the assumption that children will achieve at different rates and levels may create some tension for the goal of recommendation (a) above, namely that expectations should be equally high for all and one must adapt the level and type of support for all to learn the core curriculum. So

RECOMMENDATIONS QUESTIONS 4 & 5 (d):

Create learning situations where no limit is put to any student's learning. This is more possible where children of all rates of learning are educated together and they can all reach for the top levels of achievement as and when possible.

- ii) Secondly, teachers and schools have a challenge to organise learning for mixed ability students. So

RECOMMENDATIONS QUESTIONS 4 & 5 (e):

Promote TRANSNATIONAL R&D to highlight and help develop best practices and ideas from and within different cultures on:

- *How to enable all learners to acquire a sense of progress instead of encouraging the higher fliers by the experience of outdoing and thus demotivating the 'failures'.*
- *How to orchestrate lessons in a way that all diverse learners are engaged in classroom learning and benefit from the presence of each other (instead of having children short-changed because the teacher focuses on the faster learners at the expense of the slower ones or vice-versa).*

The following research questions may be posed:

- What kind of school cultures, policies and practices can allow for mixed ability groups to learn together effectively?
- What kind of curricular organisation and materials allow for teaching mixed ability groups?
- What kind of educational assessment can focus on measuring the progress of each child (value added) while also allowing for teaching and school accountability?
- What kind of training and support do teachers need for orchestrating lessons for mixed ability groups in the classroom? (see e.g. Bartolo et al., 2007)

Reference

Bartolo, P. et al. (2007). *Responding to student diversity: Teacher's Handbook*. Malta: University of Malta. (Produced in 7 EU languages through EU Comenius 2.1 programme and available online on www.dtmp.org)