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Classroom climate as perceived by Maltese and non-Maltese pupils in Malta

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Abstract

An increasing challenge in providing a quality education for all is the new reality of a mixture of ethnicities in Maltese classrooms. This study focuses on perceived differences in classroom climate between Maltese and non-Maltese pupils. A multi-method approach, using both quantitative and qualitative paradigms was used to investigate differences in classroom climate perception by Year 6 primary (10-year-old) pupils in a stratified sample of schools from State, Church and Independent sectors. Classroom climate was measured along the nine factors of Clarity, Environment, Fairness, Interest, Order, Participation, Safety, Standards and Support. Results showed that, overall and in the State and Church sectors, Maltese pupils had a higher perception of positive classroom climate, most strongly in the dimension of Fairness, Clarity, and Safety dimensions. However, in Independent schools non-Maltese students perceived a slightly better climate on 5 dimensions, namely Participation, Environment, Interest, Standards and Support. It is recommended that teachers and school managers be offered opportunities to develop higher multicultural competences.

Introduction

Compulsory education has been well established in Malta over the past five decades. Malta's strong educational roots are now seeking new space, freedom and tools to head towards a new concept – a *quality education for all* (Ministry of Education [MOED], 2005). This transformation can occur more effectively if innovation processes within the school system are encouraged and supported by a research based platform. Over the past decade there have been various attempts to improve the quality of Maltese education through the introduction of a national curriculum, School Development Plans, inclusive education initiatives, literacy programs, use of ICT in schools, level descriptors, auditing of schools for teachers and school accountability.

However, this reform has not yet given due importance to the issue of increasing multiculturalism in our schools and classes. Children from different cultures through mixed marriages, foreign adoption and illegal immigration have become a salient and permanent feature of the school milieu in Malta. From a practical angle, the ensuing changes in the social and ethnic composition of student populations have far-reaching implications for educational leaders.

The increasing diversity of our classrooms urges educators to cultivate interest in the dynamics which make up a multicultural class. A lack of multicultural competence can increase difficulties that teachers and schools face to promote a positive classroom climate which is conducive to high quality learning. International research on multicultural education (e.g., Jennings & Smith, 2002; Paccione, 2000) highlight the importance of a positive classroom climate as a vital prerequisite towards the transformation of a society ready to embrace cultural diversity.

Schools managers have a responsibility to engage in a critical and continual process to examine how prejudices, biases, and assumptions influence their management activities and thus affect the educational experiences of students. Teachers need to be prepared to foster a positive classroom climate for *all* pupils.

This study was aimed at investigating whether there are differences in the climate of Maltese and non-Maltese classrooms as perceived by the pupils themselves, and if so in which areas such differences occur.

Classroom Climate

The literature on classroom management has paid little attention to issues of cultural diversity. According to Bowers and Flinder (1990) conventional classroom management is presented as if it were culturally neutral rather than a white, middle class construction. On the other hand, literature on multicultural education (Weinstein *et al.*, 2004) has tended to ignore issues on classroom management. Various researchers (e.g., Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; 2001) have called for a culturally responsive pedagogy, but they have primarily focused on curriculum content and teaching strategies. Although there have been some debates on how culturally responsive teachers foster fairness and collaboration (Nieto, 2000), and how teachers and students perceive order and discipline (Sheets, 1996; Sheets & Gay, 1996), other issues of classroom management (e.g., organizing the physical environment, aspects of communication, differential interests, and multicultural support structures) have not

been extensively explored (Weinstein et al., 2004). Yet, the cultivation of a positive classroom climate is a powerful factor on students' achievements – greater than students' general intelligence, home environment, motivation, and socioeconomic status (Wang et al., 1993; 1994). A positive classroom climate was found to be an essential factor affecting student's achievement (Wang et al., 1997, cited in Briggs & Sommefeldt, 2002) and a key indicator of quality in teaching (OECD, 1994).

A positive classroom climate is even more important in multicultural situations. Teachers are facing the task of providing an optimal learning climate to students from varying social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Phalet et al., 2001); students may experience clashes in the interpretation of verbal and non-verbal communication and behaviour between them and the teacher and other students. A positive classroom climate for *all* students can reduce tension and misunderstanding.

A positive classroom climate enables teachers to understand 'how the pupils in their class feel' and thus how ready they are for learning, and it is

> a tool for measuring the impact created by a combination of the teacher's skills, knowledge and professional characteristics. Climate is a measure of the collective perceptions of pupils regarding those dimensions of the classroom environment that have a direct impact on their capacity and motivation to learn. (DFEE, 2000, pp. 7-8)

In addition, it must be noted that teachers have a major influence on classroom climate. Classroom climate is the mood or atmosphere created by a teacher in his/ her classroom, the way the teacher interacts with students and the way the physical environment is set out (Muijs & Reynolds, 2001). Effective teachers use their knowledge, skills and behaviours to create effective learning environments in their classrooms (DFEE, 2000; Gay, 2000; Mortimore et al., 1988). They create environments which maximise opportunities to learn, in which all pupils are well managed and motivated to learn. From the pupils' perspectives, they are mostly looking to the teacher to create a sense of security and order in the classroom, an opportunity to participate actively in the class and for it to be an interesting and exciting place.

The Hay McBer's Classroom Climate Model

Models of classroom climate have been around for some time (e.g., Arter, 1987). This study makes use of the model developed by the McBer (DFEE, 2000) which demonstrated a high correlation between classroom climate and student progress. McBer identified nine dimensions which influence pupil motivation and success:

Clarity: Clarity is the extent to which teachers know what to expect in their daily routines. Research shows that effective learning occurs when teachers clearly explain objectives of the lesson at the outset and communicate them clearly to their pupils (Brophy & Good, 1986, cited in Wittock, 1986, pp. 392-421).

Environment: Environment is 'the feeling that the classroom is comfortable, well organized, clean and attractive' (DFEE, 2000, p. 28). The surrounding environment in the classroom needs to be interesting and attractive and both children and teachers need to be involved in its organisation.

Fairness: Fairness is the degree to which there is equality and absence of favouritism. The McBer report emphasizes the need for teachers to win pupils' respect and trust and earn their confidence. In particular, 'being sincere and genuine creates an atmosphere of trust, and allows pupils to act naturally, express themselves honestly, and not to be afraid of making mistakes - an essential starting point for learning' (DFEE, 2000, p. 40).

Interest: Teachers need to know what motivates their pupils, their interests, their background, who they are, and their prior learning and attainment so that they can adapt different approaches to teaching. Within a multicultural setting, there needs to be a time and space for the children's multicultural experiences: teachers may use class time to discuss multicultural issues; classroom libraries can have a selection of the children's mother tongue to encourage sharing of experience, beliefs and traditions. Multicultural traditions can be linked with language, technology or art activities to stimulate interest and enthusiasm.

Order: Maintaining discipline is not a matter of imposing strict rules of behaviour. Rather, it is a matter of adopting a consistent approach (Rutter, 1983) and creating social cohesion in each class (Mortimore et al., 1988) so that students support each other's learning and sanction behaviour that interferes with learning. Sheets and Gay (1996) called for 'culturally responsive discipline' whose ultimate purpose is for teachers to 'create caring and nurturing relationships with students, grounded in cooperation, collaboration and reciprocity rather than the current teacher-controlling-student compliance patterns' (p. 14).

Participation: According to Bourdieu (1977) and Bernstein (1990; 1996) children's early school success is likely to depend upon ways in which they may or may not be able to bring with them appropriate *cultural* capital or ways in which they can or cannot access and situate themselves within the school's curriculum and pedagogy. Some minority students may lack social or cultural skills to participate actively in classroom interactions (Connell et al., 1994). Others may actively oppose or resist schoolwork as a reaction against perceived ethnic discrimination by teachers or peers (Ogbu & Simons, 1998).

Safety: Safety is the absence of threat or fear. Ryan et al. (1997) found that pupils who felt safe in their classrooms perceived themselves as socially competent, were less likely to feel threatened by help seeking, and were more likely to ask for help. According to Weinstein et al. (2004), creating a safe climate is a prerequisite for helping our pupils develop awareness of ethnocentrism: 'Within this learning environment, personal and professional assumptions and biases can be challenged and cultural content can be explored' (p. 29).

Standards: Teacher's expectations have been shown to have an effect on pupil's achievement (e.g., Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Hartle, 2000, cited in Middlewood & Parker, 2001). In their study of children at risk and children of colour, Ashton et al. (1993) claim that 'Teachers' beliefs about, perceptions of, and attitude towards such students, relative to the students' actual ability or potential to succeed, have been termed cognitive mediators of teachers' classroom behaviours' (1993, p. 14). Effective teachers combine high expectations with a degree of caring (Oka & Paris,

1986). There is a sense of intellectual partnership between the teacher and students. Students believe that they can learn and that the work they are doing is important and meaningful.

Support: Support is the *encouragement* and *guidance* to try new things and learn from mistakes. 'Supported practice – guidance for pupils as they explore new content, or skills and approaches – is key, so that pupils can try things out for themselves and embed learning' (DFEE, 2000, p. 60). Creating a climate of differentiated support provides options and makes it natural for some pupils to work alone and others to work in groups, for some to have a more hands-on experience and for others to adopt a more visual approach. Creating such a climate supports every learner to achieve his/her maximum growth.

This article attempts to describe the experience of the above nine classroom climate factors by Maltese and non-Maltese pupils in Malta.

Methodology

A mixed research design was adopted for this study in order to provide a representative picture of classroom climate that also included illustrative accounts.

Participants
A stratified sampling procedure was used to ensure proportional representation from the three sectors of Maltese primary schools: three Year-6 primary (10 year olds) classes were chosen from 16 State, 9 Church, and 5 Independent schools.

Table 1 shows that in the resulting total sample of 1460 pupils there were 85 (5.8%) who were non-Maltese - a pupil was classified as non-Maltese if one or both the parents were foreigners and had been living in Malta for less than two years. Moreover, their distribution was varied, ranging from 2.4% in Church schools to 12% in Independent schools.

Table 1: Actual sample of pupils by school sector and nationality

Type of School	Total Sample (% of total)	Maltese Pupils	Non-Maltese Pupils
State	645 (44.2%)	606 (94%)	39 (6%)
Church	540 (36.9%)	527 (97.6%)	13 (2.4%)
Independent	275 (18.9%)	242 (88%)	33 (12%)
Total	1460 (100%)	1375 (94.2%)	85 (5.8%)

Quantitative data
Two types of data were collected. Quantitative data was collected through structured questionnaires to (a) teachers, and (b) pupils. These were supplemented by qualitative data in the form of Structured Observation (video shots), documentary evidence and diary studies, the latter again from both (a) teachers, and (b) pupils.

The first part of the questionnaire consisted of basic pupil information such as parents' nationality and number of years living in Malta. The second part consisted of a list of questions for each classroom climate with space for scoring along a 5-point likert scale (1 Disagree strongly to 5 Agree strongly). For example *clarity* included three separate questions referring to preparation, presentation and delivery of lessons. Mean scores were computed by awarding 5 points for an item circled as 5, 4 points for an item marked 4 and so on, and reverse scoring for items worded in the negative. Statements were carefully worded in plain simple English to avoid ambiguity, assumptions or interpretations.

The *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS) was used to support statistical computations. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were used for questionnaire analysis. In some cases the *mode* was also computed. T-tests were then computed to examine differences in *classroom climate* between teachers and pupils and between Maltese and non-Maltese pupils.

Video and documentary evidence
A 45-minute video observation was taken for each class under study for more ecologically valid data (see Denscombe, 1998, p.156).

Documents consisting of letters and circulars relevant to the study, transcription of lessons and lesson plans were also supplied by each school.

Diary Studies
The teachers' diary consisted of an open-format diary which allowed ample space for teachers to express themselves within the framework of the research. The pupils' diary consisted of an A3 format paper purposefully structured to give pupils opportunity to focus on every dimension. These provided a tool for charting both progress and critical research moments.

Results and Analysis

Ninety percent of the questionnaires were returned while eighty-three percent of schools voluntarily provided documentary evidence. The analysis consists of two sections. First an account is given of overall results focusing on the comparisons between Maltese and non-Maltese scores by school sector. These are followed by a more detailed analysis of the scores on each of the nine components of classroom climate, illustrated with data from the video transcripts, diaries and documents.

Overall results: More positive classroom climate perceived by Maltese than non-Maltese pupils

It must be stated that for the purpose of analysis non-Maltese pupils were treated as one cohort. However, pupils were from different Nationalities and Ethnic

backgrounds. The composition of the non-Maltese cohort in the different school sectors may also have had an impact on the results reported here, with those attending Independent schools coming from higher socio-economic backgrounds as they were paying fees which was not the case with those attending State and Church schools.

Table 2 below shows that overall mean scores for positive classroom climate was higher for Maltese than for non-Maltese pupils in all three school sectors (State, Church and Independent). T-tests revealed statistically significant disparities ($t_{obt}=3.76$, at $t_{crit}=2.306$, $\alpha=0.05$, df=8) with Maltese pupils perceiving a 'better atmosphere' (Muijs and Reynolds, 2001, 57) than their counterparts. Data from non-Maltese pupils confirm Phalet et al.'s (2001, p. 60) contention that 'teachers are facing the difficult task of providing an optimal learning climate to students from varying social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds'. These results call for the identification of the factors that have led to this discrepancy in perception and to provide support in 'culturally relevant pedagogy…… to facilitate the success of culturally diverse students' (Paccione, 2000, p. 982).

Table 2: Maltese and non-Maltese pupils' mean positive classroom climate scores by school sector (low 1 – 5 high)

School Sector	Maltese Pupils' scores (N = 1375)	Non-Maltese Pupils' scores (N = 85)
State	3.61	2.75
Church	3.39	2.85
Independent	3.26	3.17

Moreover, Maltese pupils in State schools scored higher classroom climate than their counterparts in Church and Independent schools (3.61 vs 3.39 and 3.26). On the other hand, non-Maltese pupils obtained their lowest climate scores in State schools (2.75), with slightly higher scores for those in Church (2.85) and Independent schools (3.17).

Higher scores for non-Maltese in Independent schools on five dimensions

Table 3 gives a breakdown of the mean scores obtained for Maltese and non-Maltese pupils in each sector and for each classroom climate dimension. This shows a difference in the comparative position of non-Maltese pupils' perceptions in Independent schools. Thus, while Maltese pupils in State and Church schools score a higher climate than non-Maltese pupils on all the dimensions, in the Independent schools the non-Maltese obtained higher scores on 5 dimensions, namely Participation, Environment, Interest, Standards and Support (shown as negative differences in Table 3).

Table 3: Pupils' mean positive classroom climate scores by school sector across the nine climate dimensions

Classroom climate dimension	State Schools			Church Schools			Independent Schools		
	Maltese (N=606)	Non-Maltese (N=39)	d	Maltese (N=527)	Non-Maltese (N=13)	d	Maltese (N=242)	Non-Maltese (N=33)	d
Clarity	3.64	2.31	*1.33*	3.45	2.29	*1.16*	3.49	3.23	0.26
Fairness	3.69	2.28	*1.41*	3.34	2.11	*1.23*	3.50	2.33	*1.17*
Participation	3.62	3.42	0.20	3.44	3.03	0.41	3.33	3.42	-0.09
Order	3.64	2.54	1.10	3.28	3.28	0.00	3.43	3.26	0.17
Environment	3.81	2.15	*1.66*	3.45	2.90	0.55	3.00	3.16	-0.16
Interest	3.52	3.33	0.19	3.39	3.23	0.16	3.07	3.41	-0.34
Safety	3.53	2.05	*1.48*	3.33	2.14	*1.19*	3.32	<u>3.02</u>	0.30
Standards	3.59	3.35	0.24	3.43	3.29	0.14	2.90	3.27	-0.37
Support	3.41	3.38	0.03	3.41	3.35	0.06	3.34	3.46	-0.12
0verall mean Score	**3.61**	<u>**2.75**</u>	<u>**0.86**</u>	**3.39**	<u>**2.85**</u>	<u>**0.54**</u>	**3.26**	<u>**3.17**</u>	<u>**0.09**</u>

Note: N = number of pupils, d= difference in scores. A negative 'd' implies that scores are higher for non-Maltese pupils.

On the other hand, it is striking that on one particular dimension, namely *Fairness*, the non-Maltese in all school sectors perceived a significantly lower climate with the difference in mean scores being more than one: d=1.41, 1.43, and 1.17 in State, Church and Independent schools respectively (see Table 3).

However, it was only in State and Church schools that non-Maltese pupils perceived a similarly significantly lower climate in three other dimensions, namely *Clarity* (d=1.33 and 1.16), *environment* (d=1.66 and 0.55) and *safety* (d= 1.48 and 1.19). A deeper understanding of each of these findings was sought through the qualitative data.

Lack of *Fairness* perceived by non-Maltese in all sectors

Maltese pupils commented more positively on the teacher's approach to equality within the class. Some stated that the teacher was able to create a feeling of trust, fairness and respect. Diary entries from some non-Maltese pupils, however, commented about limited fairness in the classroom. A Polish pupil wrote: "Teachers give more work [responsibilities] to Maltese pupils as they seem to know more". A Libyan student pointed to cultural unfairness:

> The teacher said the test would cover material covered in November and December……but….No !!!.. It covered material mostly covered during the Ramadan season….[when it's harder to study] ....It's really unfair !!

This latter situation illustrates the difficulty of teachers to act as 'cultural brokers' in a way that they would be able to

> thoroughly understand different cultural systems,…….interpret cultural symbols, from one frame of reference to another…… mediate cultural incompatibilities and …. know how to build bridges or establish linkages across cultures that facilitate the instructional process. (Gay, 2000, p. 287)

This raises a challenge for teachers who reflect on their legal, ethical and moral responsibilities to provide the best education they possibly can to members of all racial, ethnic and cultural groups.

Lack of *Clarity* experienced by non-Maltese also in all sectors

Even with regards to *clarity,* non-Maltese pupils in all three sectors reported a lower climate than their Maltese peers, though not significant in the Independent schools (d=0.26: see Table 3). Maltese pupils noted this aspect with such comments as "explains really well," "very good class notes," and "brings different resources." Direct observation was similar to that reported by Mcber (DFEE, 2000, p.12): 'Each activity is preceded by clear set of instructions …… for pupils, there is the clarity of what they are doing, where they are going, how they will know and when they have achieved the objectives of the lesson.'

Non-Maltese pupils, however, reported difficulty in understanding teachers' instructions. They felt they needed more help generally and called for improvement of communication by having a translation facility in the classroom. In particular diary responses from non-Maltese pupils included several statements like the following: "I don't understand my teacher," "pronunciation is not good," and "I find it hard to listen." These diary excerpts confirm Tharp's (1989) findings on psycho-cultural variables, namely that pupils from different cultural backgrounds have difficulty in understanding teachers' instructions and in structuring school tasks and hence use less effective learning strategies.

Non-Maltese pupils' perception of classroom *environment*

While Maltese pupils gave high ratings in the environment dimension ($m_{p\ gov}$ =3.81, $m_{p\ ch}$ =3.45), non-Maltese pupils gave lower scores in both sectors ($m_{p\ gov}$ = 2.95, $m_{p\ ch}$ = 2.90).

Video shots, diaries and questionnaire evidence gave particularly contrasting views of the *environment* dimension from Maltese and non-Maltese pupils. While direct observation of classrooms suggested particularly lively and motivating physical environments, diary excerpts from non-Maltese pupils revealed contrasting views. A pupil from the U.S.A. put down the following note about 4th of July (America's Independence day):

> In the states [of America] we all celebrate this important day. Children decorate their classes and sing the national anthem. I miss it and I wish the teacher could put it in the school's calendar.

Pupils may be surprised that important events in their culture, as the celebration of the 4th July is for US students, to be respected and celebrated at school. Similarly an Indian student wrote about the absence in school of a national icon of their country:

> Yes, my class is full of colours, paintings, etc, all is very nice but there is little knowledge [information] of what I would like to see …… for example my dad mentions the Taj Mahal….people from my country know all about it…. I don't.

This comment is more striking as the pupil appreciated the pleasant classroom environment, but still perceived missed the representation of his/her culture. A teacher's diary portrayed the same feeling about a pleasant classroom environment while stressing the need to be more directed towards the multicultural milieu of the school: "Our school environment is positive and induces children to learning. More may be needed to sustain multicultural influxes in our school."

Diary responses confirm that the classroom environment, although appealing to Maltese pupils is 'failing to facilitate the success of culturally diverse students' (Paccione, 2000, p. 982). School documents underline the necessity for a school environment to be more appealing to multicultural pupils. This calls for greater efforts from school managers and teachers to challenge 'professional assumptions' (Weinstein, *et al.*, 2004, 29) and express more 'positive expectations of pupils' (DFEE, 2000, 36). A teacher from a school which actively promotes multicultural education stressed that, although providing a multicultural environment took a lot of effort, he was proud of his success:

> It takes a real effort to provide a multicultural environment in a school like ours. Though all children are Muslims they come from different Arab countries with different traditions, cultures and customs. Children seem to appreciate my efforts.

Low psychological *safety* experienced by non-Maltese pupils

The safety dimension showed lower mean scores for non-Maltese pupils (see Table 3). This was supported by observational evidence demonstrating non-Maltese pupils' reluctance to "raise hands" when prompted by the teacher, thus indicating possible feelings of 'threat regarding making mistakes' (Ryan *et al.*, 2001, 111). Diary excerpts also support these findings. In particular, a pupil of British origin wrote:

> I think it is important to feel comfortable and confident with teachers and to feel relaxed when talking to them. I think our teacher should try to be more of a friend to us.

Non-Maltese pupils reported that teachers were inconsistent in their behaviour and hence did not feel *safe* with them. On the other hand Maltese pupils perceived the teacher as displaying a climate of equity and a striking ability to "be a good friend to us". This shows a variation in the way pupils experience 'feelings of psychological safety' (Ryan *et al*., 2001, 111). It seems that more care needs to be taken to the 'individual's well being in schools' (Somersalo *et al.*, 2002, 289) and that students from outside the dominant culture might require a more supportive classroom climate to develop a sense of safety.

Are *Standards* challenging to Non-Maltese Pupils?

With regards to the *standards* dimension, there were contrasting results: while a slightly lower score was obtained by the non-Maltese in State and Church schools (d = 0.24 and 0.14), the situation was reversed in Independent schools (d = -0.37).

This seems to suggest that teachers in Independent schools are more accustomed to the need of adapting to the different standards presented by diverse pupils in their classrooms. Teachers from independent schools seem to be more aware of the need to "enable all pupils to progress and make bounds in their learning" (DFEE, 2000, 60).

An Indian pupil from a government school commented:

> I think the examiner expects too much from us children. I have to work harder to keep up with others [pupils] since they've been longer at school [since kindergarten].

Such perception was not shared by Maltese pupils. A Maltese pupil wrote:

> The teacher gets involved with the class and really cares about our grades and good work. The teacher comes round and helps, not just the class, but everyone of us. She doesn't sit behind or leave the class to get coffee or something.

This supports research conducted by Turner and Patrick (2004:5759) which showed that 'patterns of teacher discourse, or what teachers say and how they say it, are related to student's intrinsic motivation to learn'. Less articulate and developed responses were also presented but it was clear that pupils were comfortable with their teachers' expectations.

There is a growing need for teachers to develop a wide range of instructional strategies that target not only the whole class but individuals and small groups within that class.

Non-Maltese pupils' *interest* in lessons

The *interest* dimension assumed important disparities in data from questionnaires and diaries. While many diary responses from Maltese pupils ranged from "interesting" to "informative", non-Maltese pupils reporting low scores in this dimension also rated lessons as being "boring" and "can't wait for the bell".

The responses illustrate the need for teachers to 'identify enthusiasms ….. that can be used as a springboard for learning' (McBer, 2000, p. 66). This data supports Connell et al.'s (1994) study that minority pupils lack the social and cultural skills to participate actively in classroom interactions. The following excerpt illustrates a teacher's attempt to sharpen her skills and attain multicultural competence:

> *Teacher* (speaking about months of the year and celebrations): Tell me more what you do in this month [January].
> *Pupil A* (Tunisian): We celebrate Eid Al Adha in this month.
> *Teacher*: What is it about?
> *Pupil A*: It is about the feast of the lamb…… when Abraham killed the Lamb.
> *Teacher*: I see….. Anybody celebrating anything different?
> *Pupil B* (Russian): We just celebrated Christmas….
> *Teacher*: Yes… And how did you celebrate it?
> *Pupil B*: By having a dinner... without meat and with porridge called kutya ...
> *Teacher*: What's this kutya?
> *Pupil B*: It is porridge …. it's full of berries and poppies.

Teacher: Oh, I think in your country you do many things like this, don't you? Well done.

The excerpt also highlights the teacher's ability to capitalize on pupils' different *interests* to promote 'goal directed efforts to learn' (Renninger et al., 1992). However, the last statement uttered by the teacher emphasizes the need to 'establish more linkages across cultures that facilitates the instructional process' (Gay, 2000, p. 287). It is clear that the teacher used pupils' interests as a springboard to achieve further learning and to promote a 'culturally responsive pedagogy' (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994) in his/her day to day planning. Of course one must not equate culturally responsive pedagogy with simply making reference to celebrations in different cultures, but this can offer one lever for starting to listen to the different cultures.

Non-Maltese pupils' perception of *order* and discipline

On the *order* dimension, it was interesting that Maltese and non-Maltese had similar scores in Church schools but higher scores for Maltese in State and Independent schools. Diary studies reveal that while some pupils appreciated strictness and good control in their classrooms, others seemed unsure of what constitutes *order* and discipline. Some even asked whether "joking sarcastically in a nasty way" is an appropriate mode of discipline.

Responses such as "teacher shouting", "responding in a nasty way" and "teacher belittling us" were not uncommon. "Respect" was a word which came up often. Both Maltese and non-Maltese pupils said that teachers should be able to control and discipline them while still respect them. They disliked the fact that sometimes "excessive control" is exercised. All this points towards 'a long term strategy of getting to know the pupils with behavioural problems' (McBer, 2000, p. 15) and the need for 'maintenance of effective discipline ….. building shared norms with students, ….. about what is acceptable behaviour that will positively sustain learning' (Busher, 2002, p. 285).

Maltese pupils demonstrated more compliance with the teachers' perception of the need for *order* in class. The teacher's assertion that "without order and discipline you cannot teach," was complimented by statements from Maltese pupils such as: "You always know what is going to happen next and everything is well in place". Regardless of the ethnic origin of pupils, it is reasonable to point out that more effort needs to be directed towards a more 'consistent approach to discipline' (Rutter, 1983).

To what extent do non-Maltese pupils *participate* in class?

On the *participation* dimension there was little difference between Maltese and non-Maltese scores, with a slightly higher score for non-Maltese in Independent schools (see Table 3). By directly observing the various teachers during different class activities, it was evident that they showed a variety of supporting strategies to 'enable all pupils to progress, or to make leaps and bounds in learning and consolidate and internalize concepts at a deep level [thus reaching] ….. a further level of sophistication' (DFEE, 2000, p. 60).

The following excerpt shows a teacher's intriguing ability to scaffold the group's understanding of the word 'average':

> *Teacher*: Can you think of another meaning for average?
> *Paul*: It means 'normal' — say…. an average person….for example an average height.
> *Teacher*: Yes ……… you mean there are shorter children and taller children in your class and you are …yes, 'average'…. What about in tests….Yes!
> *Hilary*: It's when you count all marks and divide by the number of tests, or homeworks…. you call that average.
> *Teacher*: Yes. Very good. Anything else? What about the time you take to come to school ….. What do you call that?
> *Massimo*: It's the time you take…..like you don't know exactly the time…. but say from home to school it takes an average of half an hour.
> *Teacher*: Well done all of you!

The excerpt below confirms the professional techniques the teacher used to *enhance* pupils' participation during lessons and understand important concepts during an English Language lesson:

> *Teacher*: And older and younger…. Can anybody give me an example of older and younger?..... Let me see…… Who is 9? [Some pupils raise their hands]. And who is 10……[Some other pupils raise their hands and teacher brings out two children in front of the class]. So who is younger……Tina or Claire?
> *Pupils*: Tina!
> *Teacher*: Yes, Tina is younger ! ……. And who is older?
> *Pupils*: Claire!
> *Teacher*: Yes…….Claire is older……… But now, look carefully, who is taller…. Tina or Claire?
> *Pupils*: Tina !
> *Teacher*: Well done! So does younger mean shorter?
> *Pupils*: No
> *Teacher*: Or does taller mean older …..
> *Pupils*: No
> *Teacher*: So you did understand the difference now, didn't you?
> *Pupils*: (in chorus) Yes!!

Support experienced by non-Maltese pupils

Non-Maltese pupils felt less supported in all schools, particularly in the State and Church sectors. The overall perception was however of adequate support levels. A Canadian pupil wrote:

> When the teacher gives us problems [mathematical] he makes them interesting by writing ….for example: A mosque is 50m high and a school is 30m high. What is the difference between the two heights?"

This is in line with McBer's (DFEE, 2000, p. 60) emphasis on *support* as the key for pupils to 'try things out for themselves and embed learning'. Other responses included "explains really well"; "you don't feel embarrassed about asking him again"; "listens to you"; and "really gives a chance to all of us". Teacher's diaries complemented these responses and asserted that:

> One has to constantly bear in mind that our children are a small ethnic minority in a predominant Catholic society. Providing the best possible *environment*, *clarifying*

possible misconceptions, and making the best use of *supporting* structures is of paramount importance.

Managers and teachers must work hard towards the identification of factors whose interaction provide a fabric of support that enables all learners to reach optimum levels of performance.

Conclusions

This study has shown that:

- There are no statistically significant differences in pupils' perception of *classroom climate* across State, Church and Independent school sectors in Malta.
- In State and Church schools Maltese pupils perceive a better classroom climate than their non-Maltese peers. The Independent schools sector did not follow the same pattern, with non-Maltese pupils perceiving a slightly better classroom climate on five of the nine dimensions.
- The dimensions mostly contributing to variations were *fairness, clarity, environment*, and *safety*.
- Elements of classroom instruction (e.g., pronunciation) need to be modified to better reach non-Maltese pupils in the classroom.
- The classroom *environment* needs to be inclusive of the multicultural 'weight' present in the classroom.
- Teachers need to be more sensitive to the cultural capital present in the classroom to ensure *fairness* and equality in the classroom.
- There is a need for higher levels of support for non-Maltese pupils to feel more psychologically *safe* in their classrooms.

Implications and recommendations for teachers and managers.

The above results suggest that Maltese schools are not tapping the possible enrichment of having increasing numbers of non-Maltese pupils, while also not providing an equally supportive learning climate for the non-Maltese. Given the level of ethnic mixture in our schools, it seems appropriate for educational stakeholders to restudy the National Minimum Curriculum to include diverse perspectives for all subjects within the regular curriculum. Maltese pupils can be introduced to and learn from the cultural richness represented in a diverse society while non-Maltese pupils can feel they too belong fully to the school. Multicultural approaches to classroom settings are needed to ensure 'a refreshing change' (MOED, 2005, p. xiii). Teacher can play a pivotal role in the process. But, for this role, teachers have to be trained and adequately equipped during pre-service and ongoing in-service training programs.

Curricular activities must reflect the multicultural 'weight' present in the classroom. School managers need to advocate for educational material (especially reading books) which is inclusive of diverse voices and perspectives so as to ensure a 'culturally relevant pedagogy' (Paccione, 2000, 982) that enables pupils to feel 'psychologically safe and comfortable' (Ryan *et al*., 2001, 111).

On the basis of the findings in this study, the following strategies are suggested as ways of enhancing multicultural friendliness in schools:

- Ensure the promotion of mutual respect and understanding regardless of culture, religion, racial and linguistic background.
- Promote awareness of multiculturalism among staff, pupils, parents, school boards and other stakeholders.
- Ensure that the school environment promotes diversity and preserves the cultural heritage of *all* pupils.
- Promote and affirm diversity in all aspects of work practices and ensure that teaching and assessment strategies cater for a range of learning styles.
- Ensure that curriculum programs and resources incorporate multicultural perspectives.
- Be friendly with all students and show consistency across *all* pupils and across *all* cultures.
- Tune in to other cultures, experiences and customs and share their own appropriate experiences with pupils. Acknowledge contributions from all cultures.
- Encourage pupils to write contributions in their language of origin.
- Provide multilingual signs around the school premises that welcome pupils of different languages reflected in the school.
- Employ teachers who can tutor pupils in their first language.
- Provide books with multicultural content and incorporate sections of the school newsletter to cater for the multicultural groups in the school.
- Invite people from various ethnic communities to act as guest speakers to pupils in both formal and informal settings.

Finally, Culturally responsive teachers recognize their own motives, beliefs, biases and assumptions about human values and behaviour. They recognize that the ultimate goal of classroom management is not to achieve compliance or control but to provide all students with equitable opportunities for learning. They understand that culturally responsive classroom management is classroom management in the service of 'quality education for all' (MOED, 2005, p. xi).

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