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International Mother Language Day in multilingual Malta | Phyllisienne Vassallo Gauci

Today more than ever, it is crucial in teaching and educational contexts to sustain the development of plurilingual and pluricultural competence in our learners

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On the 21st February the United Nations celebrates International Mother Language Day. This day calls for each and every one of us to reflect upon our linguistic and cultural heritage, a heritage that derives from various sources such as family, school and society. It is also an opportunity to celebrate and promote multilingualism.

Multilingualism refers to the presence of several languages in a given geographical area. Due to the recent influx of migrants in Malta, there is hardly any doubt that Malta has become multilingual. Listening to non-Maltese nationals speaking an array of different languages is a reality which surrounds us in our everyday life.

Due to the demographical changes which took place over the last few years, celebrating International Mother Language Day in a country like Malta has thus gained a much more profound meaning. Apart from the importance of celebrating Maltese, our precious national language, it serves as an opportunity to foster what is known as pluriculturalism, or the desire and ability to identify with several cultures, and participate in them. Intercultural competence acquired from doing this helps individuals to understand cultural difference better, establish cognitive and affective links between experiences related to that difference and mediate between members of different groups and cultures.

As global and local migration flows increase, so do the number of migrant students in host country schools.

In Malta there are currently 5,744 foreign students in state, independent and church schools. In most cases these students are first-generation migrants with foreign-born parents who speak a foreign language different from the languages of schooling when at home.

The Migrant Learners' Unit, in charge of providing education to learners from a migrant background, has taken the initiative to encourage schools to promote International Mother Language Day amongst all learners deeming it as an excellent opportunity to foster awareness of languages and intercultural respect. Maltese learners, but also learners from a migrant background, are being encouraged to come up with something in their own mother language – singing a song, reciting a poem, a prayer or a small theatrical performance. Basically anything they feel they would like to share with the rest of the school in their own language.

While efforts are conducted every day to support migrant learners in acquiring our languages of schooling, Maltese and English, on this day they are being given the opportunity to celebrate their linguistic diversity and hence an important part of their cultural heritage. The occasion also serves to encourage them to remain fluent and literate in their own languages. Their plurilingual skills are a valuable asset which will be extremely beneficial for Malta in the future.

Today more than ever, it is crucial in teaching and educational contexts to sustain the development of plurilingual and pluricultural competence in our learners. Such competence plays a key role in accepting diversity while focusing on the ability to go beyond obstacles and open up a certain predisposition towards languages, cultures and communication in general, as part of a willingness to establish a dialogue with the other.

The benefits of linguistic diversity and multilingual education are many and far reaching and need to be communicated more clearly at all levels of society. Cheers to the celebration of International Mother Language Day and to creating awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity to inspire solidarity based on understanding, tolerance and dialogue.

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