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Needs Assessment Report – Secretariat for Catholic Education

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The local context

Educational Attainment for All

In the paper entitled “*Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024: Sustaining Foundations, Creating Alternatives, Increasing Employability (Employment, 2014)*,” released on the 21st February, the Minister of Education, Evarist Bartolo, said that studies published over the past months, such as the TIMSS and PIRLS studies, painted a worrying picture of the situation and it was vital to address these issues. The paper presented is based on four main goals in line with European and world benchmarks:

1. Reduce the gaps in educational outcomes between boys and girls and between students attending different schools, decrease the number of low achievers and raise the bar in literacy, numeracy, and science and technology competence, and increase student achievement;
2. Support educational achievement of children at-risk-of-poverty and from low socio-economic status, and reduce the relatively high incidence of early school-leavers;
3. Increase participation in lifelong learning and adult learning;
4. Raise levels of student retention and attainment in further, vocational, and tertiary education and training.

The Minister further promised that:

“In the next ten years, the Ministry will carefully update the existing learning programmes and modes of assessment in both general and vocational and training education...there is no way our country can prosper and succeed as a democratic and just society if we retain the current high levels of children with low literacy, numeracy, science and digital skills, the low level of children who master higher-order thinking skills, and the current drop-out rates.”

(PIRLS 2011 Malta Report)

Three thousand, five hundred and ninety-eight students participated in the study from State (58.2%), Church (30.2%) and Independent (11.6%) schools. These are some of the scores and results obtained by students through the study:

- Malta’s mean reading score (477) was significantly lower than the international average and was ranked 35th of 45 participating countries.
- Reading attainment of Maltese pupils was comparable to pupils from Trinidad and Tobago but was significant higher than nine countries including Azerbaijan, Iran, Colombia, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Qatar, Omar and Morocco.
- The bottom 25% of Maltese students scored less than 412 and the top 25% scored more than 546 in the Reading Achievement scale.
- In both Maltese and English tests, Maltese pupils scored higher in tasks that required retrieving information and making straightforward inferences rather than in tasks that required interpreting, integrating and evaluating the information.
- • The language instructional time throughout a whole year in Malta (181 hours), reported by teachers is 51 hours less than the international average (232 hours)
- The time spent reading as part of language instruction throughout a whole year in Malta (37 hours) is the lowest of all the countries taking part and is 34 hours less than the international average (71 hours).

PISA 2009+ and PISA 2015

PISA assesses outcomes primarily in the areas of mathematical literacy, scientific literacy and reading literacy. The emphasis on 'literacy' refers to 'the capacity of students to apply knowledge and skills in key subject areas and to analyse, reason and communicate effectively as they pose, solve and interpret problems in a variety of situations.' With respect to reading literacy, it is defined in terms of students' ability to understand, use and reflect on written text to achieve their purposes. However, PISA takes this aspect of literacy further by the introduction of an active element – the capacity not just to understand a text but to reflect on it, drawing on one's own thoughts and experiences.

Malta also participated in PISA 2009+ and in PISA 2015, but not in 2012. In PISA 2015, Malta has obtained improved results across the areas of reading, mathematics and science. Malta was one of the few countries which increased the share of top-performing students in reading since PISA 2009. Another achievement for Malta has been in reducing the gender gap. This was especially marked for reading, with Malta being the country with the highest reduction in mean reading gender score differences. Differences in results among the schooling sectors have persisted. However, it is to be noted that these results are to be interpreted in the light of the socio-economic and cultural conditions which prevail in the different contexts and which have been proven to determine achievement. Also, against all international trends, immigrant children in Maltese schools have been recorded to achieve more highly.

PISA 2009

In 2010, three thousand, four hundred and fifty-three (3,453) students participated in the PISA study comprising of 1,839 females and 1,614 males. The sample comprised most of the population of 15-year olds and guaranteed a maximum margin of error of approximately 1% using a 95% degree of confidence. The students were selected randomly from 53 schools ensuring a good geographical representation. 920 students were selected from seven Junior Lyceums, 1049 students were selected from eighteen area secondary schools, 1176 students were selected from twenty church schools and 308 were selected from eight private schools. Students were given questionnaires where information on pupils' demographic and socio-economic backgrounds including parents' level of education, their qualifications and their main occupations were included, among others. Other questions comprised information about the students' study habits, and attitudes to reading and reading activities at school. Here is a

sample of the results:

Socio, economic and cultural status:

- The proportion of Maltese mothers doing a full time job (27.5%) is approximately half EU and OECD averages; however, the proportion of mothers doing a part-time job (18.0%) is comparable to EU and OECD averages.
- The proportion of Maltese fathers doing a full-time job (88.7%) exceeds EU and OECD averages by more than 7%; however, there is significantly lower proportion of fathers doing home duties. Compared to other countries, Maltese fathers are more likely to be breadwinners and mothers to be house carers.
- In Malta, the proportion of mothers doing a white collar high skilled job (38.6%) is significantly lower to EU and OECD averages; whereas the proportion of mothers doing a blue collar low skilled job (18.6%) is significantly higher.
- The proportion of fathers in Malta doing a white collar job (59.0%) is significantly higher than the EU and OECD averages; whereas, the proportion of fathers doing a blue collar job (41.0%) is significantly lower.

Reading attitudes:

- Over 66% of pupils in Malta spend some time reading for enjoyment, while about 34% only read if they have to.
- 18.6% of Maltese students believe that reading is a waste of time; however, this is significantly lower to EU (26.0%) and OECD (24.2%) averages
- For pupils in Malta the most popular reading materials were magazines (53.8%) and newspapers (45.3%). Pupils read fiction (39.3%) more often than non-fiction books (24.1%). Compared to EU and OECD averages, higher proportions of Maltese students read fiction and non-fiction books and lower proportions read magazines, newspapers and comic books.
- Pupils in Malta spent significantly more time chatting online and reading emails than the OECD and EU averages but were similar to their EU and OECD counterparts in the frequency of other online activities.

Learning time:

- Learning time at school does not vary much between countries. Most students have on average 4 to 5 lessons weekly in mathematics, science and test language (English in the case of Malta) and the duration of each lesson ranges from 45 to 60 minutes.
- The proportion of Maltese pupils attending additional lessons outside school hours is significantly higher than EU and OECD averages.
- Malta has the highest proportion (58.2%) of students in EU and OECD countries who take additional lessons in Mathematics, the highest proportion (43.9%) of students who take extra lessons in Science, the fourth largest proportion (21.2%) of pupils taking additional lessons outside school time in the test language (English), and the third largest proportion (28.7%) of pupils who take extra lessons in other school subjects.
- Those pupils taking additional lessons outside school time in Science and English scored significantly lower in the PISA science and reading tests than their counterparts who did not take additional lessons outside school time. In Mathematics, the mean attainment scores were comparable between the two groups taking/not taking additional lessons outside school time.

In brief, Maltese students were estimated to have an average score significantly higher in reading than for the lowest performing OECD country, Mexico. The Maltese average was statistically the same as those for Serbia and Costa Rica. 64% of students in Malta are estimated to have a proficiency in reading literacy that is at, or above the baseline needed to participate effectively and productively in life. This compares to 81% in the OECD countries, on average. Malta is notable among PISA 2009+ participants in that it has a PISA 2009+: Achievement of 15-year olds in Malta 88 relatively large proportion of advanced readers but also a relatively large proportion of poor and very poor readers in the population. In Malta, girls significantly outperformed boys and have the largest gender gap in reading across all 74 PISA 2009 and PISA 2009+ participants. Attainment in reading was also found to be positively and significantly related to the economic, social and cultural status of the child's family. While the reading scores of female students attending Independent schools is significantly higher than EU and OECD averages, the mean reading attainment of Church schools students, Independent schools boys and Junior Lyceums girls is comparable to EU and OECD averages. Junior Lyceum boys and Area Secondary students score around 100 scale points less when compared to other Maltese

Form 5 students. The multilevel model relating attainment in reading literacy to social, economic and cultural status of the child's family identifies substantial school-level variance in the reading attainment scores and was one of the highest among the seventy-four participating countries.

PISA 2015

In PISA 2015, Science was the major domain, while Reading and Mathematics were the minor domains. The Maltese group participating in the PISA study were three thousand, six hundred and seventy-seven students (3,677) where 1,875 (51.0%) were males and 1,802 (49.0%) were females, which were selected randomly from 61 schools ensuring a good geographical representation. The sample comprised 964 males and 989 females from 30 States schools, 695 males and 653 females from 21 Church schools and 216 males and 160 females from 10 Independent schools.

As mentioned above, reading was the main focus in PISA 2000 and 2009, and a minor domain in PISA 2003, 2006, 2012 and 2015. Reading literacy, is defined in terms of students' ability to understand, use and reflect on written texts to achieve their purposes. However, PISA takes this aspect of literacy further by the introduction of an active element – the capacity not just to understand a text but to reflect on it, drawing on one's own thoughts and experiences. In PISA, reading literacy is assessed in relation to:

- *Text format* - PISA has used non-continuous texts that present information in other ways, such as in lists, forms, graphs, or diagrams. It has also distinguished between a range of prose forms, such as narration, exposition and argumentation. In PISA 2015, the framework encompasses both print and electronic texts, based on the principle that individuals will encounter a range of written material in their civic and work-related adult life and that it is not sufficient to be able to read a limited number of types of text.
- *Reading aspects* - Students are not assessed on the most basic reading skills, as it is assumed that most 15-year-old students will have acquired these. Rather, they are expected to demonstrate their proficiency in accessing and retrieving information, forming a broad general understanding of the text, interpreting it, reflecting on its contents and reflecting on its form and features.
- *Situations* - These are defined by the use for which the text was constructed. For

example, a novel, personal letter or biography is written for people’s personal use; official documents or announcements for public use; a manual or report for occupational use; and a textbook or worksheet for educational use.

The characteristics of the texts are clustered into five dimensions: text medium, aspect, format, type and situation. The seven proficiency levels used in the PISA 2015 reading assessment, ranging from advanced proficiency (Level 6) to very basic proficiency (Level 1b), are the same as those established for the PISA 2000 and 2009 assessments, when reading was the major area of assessment.

The required skills at each proficiency level are according to the three processes that students use to answer the questions. *The access and retrieve process* refers to the reader’s ability to find and collect information. *The integrate and interpret process* refers to the reader’s ability to process what is read in order to make internal sense of the text. *The reflect and evaluate process* refers to the reader’s ability to engage with the text while drawing on information, ideas or values external to the text.

These were the mean reading scores and percentiles obtained by Maltese students in each proficiency level as well as the international average of 72 countries:

Country	Mean	5th %	10th %	25th %	50th %	75th %	90th %	95th %
Malta	477	236	284	366	456	533	595	631
Average	493	326	364	428	498	561	613	641

The following table shows the percentage of Maltese students in each proficiency level and the average obtained across the 72 countries participating:

Country	Below level 1b	Level 1b	Level 1a	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
Malta	7.5	11.1	17.0	22.5	22.5	13.9	4.7	0.9
Average	1.3	5.2	13.6	23.2	27.9	20.5	7.2	1.1

Reading attainments

- When comparing European countries, Malta scored significantly higher in reading than Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Montenegro, Moldova, Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo.
- Malta scored significantly lower than Finland, Ireland, Estonia, Norway, Germany, Poland, Slovenia, Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, France, Portugal, United Kingdom, Spain, Switzerland, Latvia, Czech Republic, Croatia, Italy, Austria, Iceland, Luxembourg, Israel, Lithuania, Hungary and Greece.
- The proportion of Maltese students (5.6%) performing at or above proficiency level 5 is lower than the international average (8.3%); while the proportion of Maltese students (18.6%) performing below proficiency level 2 is significantly larger than the international average (6.5%).
- In all seventy-two countries participating in PISA 2015, girls outperform boys in reading. The mean reading score of Maltese girls exceeds the mean reading score of Maltese boys by 42 score points. This gap is significantly larger than the difference in the mean reading scores of boys and girls across all countries (27 points). However, Malta has reduced substantially the mean gender score difference for reading from 72 in 2009 to 42 in 2015.
- The mean reading score of Maltese students in the PISA 2015 cycle (447) was 6 points higher than the PISA 2009 cycle (441); however, the increment is not significant.
- Compared to PISA 2009, the mean Reading scores in PISA 2015 increased by around 5 points in State and Church schools and by 10 points in Independent schools. For males attending State schools the increment in the mean Reading score was significant.
- Malta together with thirteen other countries (Romania, Luxembourg, Norway, Chile, Denmark, Czech Republic, Portugal, Croatia, Lithuania, Germany, Singapore, France and Latvia) saw growth in the share of top-performing students in reading since PISA 2009 with no concurrent reduction in the share of low-performing students.
- With the exception of females attending independent schools, the percentage of high- achievers increased in all school types for both male and female students. The percentage of low-achievers increased for female students attending state and church schools but decreased for females attending independent schools. On the other hand, the percentage of low-achievers decreased for males attending state

schools but increased for males attending church and independent schools.

- Between PISA 2009 and PISA 2015, the gender gap shrank by 30 points in Malta (PISA 2009 and PISA 2015 assessments were both delivered on paper).

Inclusive Educational Practices

Inclusive Education in Malta is one of the main targets of our education system. Education is to enhance children with various abilities at various levels. “The aim is to create environments responsive to the differing developmental capacities, needs, and potential of all students.” Malta has one of the highest rates for mainstreaming in the EU (only 0.35% of the total school population is in Resource Centres - the term used for former special schools). Despite this development, it was difficult to integrate students with disability in the mainstream learning system due to the rigid curriculum which leads to the national examinations. With the help of the learning Support Assistants, children with disability were also integrated into the main streaming. Although this can sometimes lead to exclusion of the child with disability from his or her peers. Another challenge to inclusive education arose when, there has been a strong reaction to foreigners especially Muslim asylum seekers. It was also noted that there are deprived communities or groups of learners who are also pushed out of education through the experience of failures in education.

Several initiatives have been introduced in Malta to support inclusive education:

- A National Curriculum Focus Group for Inclusive Education - worked on making the schools responsible for the education of all children.
- A National Minimum Curriculum (1999) was passed unanimously through parliament – one curriculum aimed at a quality education for all, highlighting holistic education, social inclusion, and formative assessment
- Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) role- it was important to have teachers trained to act as coordinators of support within the schools – regarding the work of LSAs with teachers, as well as to organise relations with parents and other outside school support services.
- Collaboration with parents - where possible, the IEP is preceded by what is called a Making an Action Plan (MAP) session with the child and parents at the centre and a focus on the Child’s holistic development and learning; Dreams and Nightmares about his or her development; Child’s Strengths and Weaknesses; and Development and long term Goals.
- Other supports – the availability of multi-disciplinary teams, early intervention teachers, nurture groups and learning support zones for students with SEBD, peripatetic teachers for VI/HI and alternative communication support.
- Examination access arrangements – a system has also been developed for ensuring that students with special needs are provided not only with arrangements for learning in class, such as prompters, extra time, use of word processing facilities, but also during examinations as long as the examination objectives are maintained.

- Peer preparation - Social inclusion requires children to be equal members of the class. Peer Preparation sessions help classmates develop understanding and respect for diversity and how best to include the child with a disability in their class such as through Circle Time and Buddy systems.

Interactive Groups (IG)

Where we are today

Group work has been used to some extent in our schools. How much and in what subjects it is done is left to the teacher's discretion. In primary schools, most times, this type of learning is carried out in science but most widely in non-core subjects. It is mainly used to create unified learning within the diverse needs of the students in class and generally to create a form of record of what they have learned by creating a chart or to take part in an experiment. During this type of learning, formative assessment takes place and observations of learning only rarely recorded. Moreover, in general, not enough emphasis is placed on the degree to which students are actually participative during this type of learning and on the roles which they assume during the collaborative activity.

Where we want to go - The way forward

Through IG we would like to see all students involved in their learning where each child will have a chance to try out what is presented to the whole class. Having an adult with each group will facilitate social skills such as turn-taking, peer to peer tutoring, empathy and solidarity between different social groups. Adults in turn, will give feedback to the teacher on how students in their group have fared, thus each student receives feedback from the adult, not only academically but also from a social context, the soft skills, so important in today's society. The project provides an opportunity for teachers to further enhance their skills in managing groups as well as working with volunteers to facilitate learning.

Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLG)

Where we are today

To our knowledge, this learning concept has never been explored in Malta. The objective behind reading lessons in schools is one in which competence as well as understanding is developed in the learner. A love for reading is instilled from a very early age with shared and guided reading sessions ensuring that all learners are included and are developing basic competences. One has to point out that in most cases the emphasis is on individual competence in reading skill and in superficial understanding. Students may sometimes be encouraged to link the text to their everyday life however they are hardly ever encouraged to give their own views or opinions on the issues which are presented.

Where we want to go to – The way forward

Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLG) provide the right framework for learners to develop the 21st century skill of critical thinking in an environment which promotes collaboration, empathy and tolerance. The concept of parental and community involvement is one which schools constantly strive to improve. Again the project itself gives the structure for teacher training which is crucial for the successful implementation of this strategy.

Dialogic pedagogical training

Where we are – Today

Teacher professional development in Malta is based largely on upskilling teachers in subject methodology and knowledge content. Unless teachers undertake post-graduate studies, they rarely have opportunities for sharing their knowledge and views on educational research.

Where we want to go to – The way forward

Dialogic pedagogical training offers an opportunity for educators and educational leaders to meet in learning communities to analyse and discuss academic readings of educational value. This will serve to encourage educators to engage in professional discourse and explore how to enhance their practice within schools. Teaching and learning are complex endeavours which require adaptability to contexts, learner socio-economic background and social realities and attainment levels. The more educators problematize options for improvement and change and discuss with their peers, the more probable it is that they find solutions in meeting learners' needs.