

Educational Policies that Address Social Inequality

Malta case study report 1 The NWAR Family Literacy Programme

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1. Selection criteria for all the Malta Case Studies

Most of the projects chosen to be reviewed as case studies for Malta are ‘multi-strand’ (aimed at several themes, mostly poverty/literacy/work insertion), reflecting the main characteristic of most Maltese educational policies/actions. Some of them also work as ‘umbrella’ projects, displaying other, and more concrete actions. Our selections also favoured those projects that appeared to be better documented, consolidated, and were periodically (and positively) evaluated and updated.

Recommendation by external sources was also a relevant criterion, either through our survey sent to Maltese education experts, reception of awards or official recognition, or quoted as ‘good practices’ in other evaluating or thematic reports. We also considered their tendency to involve the community - especially parents - in the educational actions and policies addressing their pupils as a positive feature for instance, promoting literacy of students and at the same time adult literacy and life-long learning among these adults (most times mothers/women).

2. The NWAR (Late Blossoms) Family Literacy Programme from the Foundation for Educational Services (FES)

The Foundation for Educational Services (FES) is a public organisation belonging to the Malta Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment. It was created in 2001 as a mechanism that works hand-in-hand with the Education Division to provide a range of innovative educational initiatives to reduce illiteracy in the compulsory levels of education in Malta.

According to the FES Statute the foundation aims to bring innovation in education while complementing, incorporating, facilitating and strengthening specialised initiatives. The foundation supports approaches that have been proven valuable to the Malta society as a whole and will ensure that these approaches achieve and maintain high international standards. Above all, the foundation is committed to educational equity and excellence, especially towards persons at risk of social exclusion and to future generations.

The aims of the Foundation are to develop and manage innovative prevention and early intervention services and programmes that ensure the provision of quality education for all students at risk of school failure and social exclusion; develop and manage educational programmes for parents that enable them to meet the challenge of nurturing and supporting their children’s development; contribute to the meeting of non-formal lifelong learning needs of citizens; develop schools as community learning centres and promote and disseminate educational research and publications on good practice approaches (FES Statute; FES Report of Activities 2001-2003).

Its projects consist basically of a range of day-school and after-school services characterised by a multi-pronged strategy that includes support for all the affected stakeholders (pupils, parents, teachers, schools, colleagues - groups of schools within a geographical area - and local communities).

One of the valued outcomes of the foundation is introducing the concept and practice of ‘Family Literacy’ in the Maltese panorama, a complex concept that encompasses the different ways in which parents, children and extended family members use literacy at home or in the community. The essence of family literacy is that parents are supported as the first teachers of their children. Programmes work with individuals as well as with the family unit, involving parents in their pupils’ educational processes and at the same time encouraging life-long learning. Family literacy activities are intended to support the acquisition and development of literacy experiences of parents, children

and other family members, and include, among other activities: family story-book reading, completing homework assignments or writing joint essays and reports (Macelli 2004).

Apart from supporting children at risk of educational failure and their families, the foundation helps schools in their efforts to develop day-school capability to enhance basic skills acquisition and parental involvement in schools.

The FES has developed five core educational support programmes focusing in the field of literacy and family literacy:

- The NWAR (“Late Blossoms”) Programme: a secondary prevention family literacy initiative
- The Hilti (“My Ability”) Programme: a community-based primary prevention afterschool family literacy initiative
- The Parents-in-Education Programme (Id f’Id): a parent capacity building initiative
- The Malta Writing Programme (MWR): a teaching of creative writing initiative
- The Assist Programme: a capacity building of schools initiative (Macelli 2004)

3. NWAR

One of its main projects is NWAR (Late Blossoms), an ongoing family literacy programme that aims to significantly reduce the prevalence of illiteracy in children from age 8 to 13 (late primary and early secondary levels) through an integrated approach which characterises all FES projects. The NWAR Service trains teachers to work with students within a family literacy context. It is addressed to children who have presented significant deficits in basic reading and writing skills for years and are therefore at severe risk of educational failure. It also aims to involve the children’s families (usually mothers), and the programme consists of an intensive after-school service (two times a week for one hour) usually over a period of one semester, with the possibility of extended service to a full scholastic year if necessary. It offers literacy support in both Maltese and English languages.

NWAR was launched in 2003, in a large part motivated by the significant number of Maltese students in compulsory education who failed in the acquisition of literacy skills, attributed – according to the FES - to a series of systemic factors such as the teachers’ lack of differentiated teaching competencies and the existing links between school and home teaching and learning processes.

Although the NWAR programme makes no specific distinction regarding minority groups, vulnerable communities are given precedence in the service. Nora Macelli, Chief Executive of the FES, labels the project as specially addressed to socio-economically disadvantaged groups (in a survey sent to the EPASI Spanish team). It also aims to improve gender awareness, by helping mothers get the chance to develop their own learning and literacy skills.

In fact, the NWAR programme has been included as one of the social exclusion prevention measures under the National Action Plan on Poverty and Social Inclusion of Malta (also included as Case Study n°3 in this review).

The NWAR strategy includes supporting students towards their basic literacy skills acquisition; actively involving parents in this process; providing school teachers with training opportunities at national and school levels (these include in-class actions so as to create a multiplier effect within school communities); supporting schools by providing technical assistance; collaborating with other learning support providers and submitting recommendations to policy makers (Ministry of

Education, Youth and Employment and its Policy Unit) on measures that would ensure basic skills acquisition by students at risk of educational failure (Macelli 2004).

The service is national in scope and currently operates in seven regional after-school NWAR centres, six on Malta and one on the island of Gozo. These centres are based in State schools, with the intention of transforming schools into hubs of community learning.

NWAR trains teachers in the application of Synthetic Phonics as a remediation tool in the early years of a child's educational growth, and combines it with other teaching and learning tools. After NWAR's introduction, Synthetic Phonics is being gradually incorporated to the Maltese State School System.

History (from FES activities report-4)

A three month pilot project was carried out in mid-2002 to determine the best methodology for the planned project, including discussions with parents to explore which learning and teaching techniques would be effective to implement at home. At the same time, sessions were held with children - who had been previously referred for presenting literacy acquisition problems - with the aim of setting basic reading and writing targets and reaching them through the application of specific tools such as flash cards, a word bank, poems, directions identification and sentence creation. These first sessions provided an initial picture of each child's abilities and level of education. The pilot experience also led to the first attempt in the preparation of informal individualised educational plans designed by the NWAR personnel and the parents for each child, and based on realistic targets that could be achieved within a short time span. As result of the pilot project seventeen families requested or were referred for literacy support, of whom eight (summing up 10 children) were assessed by the coordinator to make up the first NWAR project. The age range of pupils was from 7 to 11 years.

Although session plans were prepared beforehand, tutors found themselves adjusting the sessions to the specific needs of individual participants. Sessions were theme-based and participatory in order to make learning an enjoyable process, and pupil's participation was 90 percent. Parents' discussion sessions were held in parallel, with an attendance rate of 94 percent. Most times, both the mother and father participated (although the mother's presence became dominant in later years). Although the parent sessions were pre-planned, the process was flexible enough to focus on immediate concerns and solutions. The worksheets used by the children were shared with parents in order to stimulate their application and adaptation at home. Initial results and indications of service provision showed that the programme was a very effective tool since a good proportion of users made enough progress to be able to continue successfully their mainstreamed day school learning.

Service Expansion was very fast, and by its second year of implementation (2003), 89 families had benefited from the programme through one of three then-existing centres.

Social actors involved

Pupils

The admission criteria are directly related to the student's severe reading and writing difficulties and risk of literacy failure. Manifest symptoms included not speaking or listening with confidence; not answering relevant questions; being unable to express an opinion about ideas and events; not reading any given text; not remembering lengthy messages; not attempting to read unfamiliar words; not understanding what is being read and not being able to retell main points; not blending sounds; not writing legibly; not being able to compose a sentence; never using punctuation marks;

not being able to transcribe from a board or a book or never using interesting vocabulary (Macelli and Cini 2005).

The student profile is a child at upper primary or early secondary level of education, where no complementary education support is available and where previous attempts of literacy acquisition have been made by both the child and the parents but failed to achieve progress and did not qualify for the support of a classroom special needs assistant (FES activities report-4).

If the applicant is over 13 years old, the criteria are more flexible and acceptance is based on evidence that the parents have tried other possibilities of literacy support without success due to very late diagnosis or family problems; and the student risks reaching school leaving age without any literacy skills.

Parents

The programme works on the basis of a family learning contract, and parents are encouraged to make a commitment that they will take an active part in their child's learning process. Teachers trained in the NWAR method involve parents through the whole process, including the individual assessment of pupils' needs and determination of targets, the development of an Individualised Learning Plan (ILP) and its implementation and later review. During each hour of service, parents and their children participate in an intensive one-to-one/two literacy support session (each NWAR tutor works with one or two families). Parents are expected to use the tutor as a role model to learn the strategies that best support their child's learning, so that these can be replicated at home to enhance mastery. No updated data was found, but since its inception and up to 2005, 370 families have benefited by the service with very positive feedback and evaluation from the parents.

Teachers

Seven small teams of teachers have been engaged by the FES as NWAR tutors on a part-time basis. Teachers involved receive training in differentiated teaching methodologies -with a special emphasis on synthetic phonics- and parental participation strategies, plus mentoring and on-going support in the form of monitoring visits and on-going training. The application by these teachers of the learned methodologies in their classrooms works as a multiplier effect in schools.

Courses for both parents and teachers on Synthetic Phonics are delivered at both school and national levels. These include compulsory in-service training courses for teachers that are an integral part of their continuing professional development.

4. How the programme works

Applications for the NWAR after-school service can come by several means. Referrals from the child's school are especially relevant as well as referrals from the Statementing Moderating Panel, the Ministry of Education, and various psycho-social services within the Education Division (Macelli and Cini 2005).

A referral form filled in by the school administration and the parents is sent to the referrer in order to establish the principle that NWAR processes are inextricably linked to the school curricular processes and that the school is not relinquishing its responsibilities for the pupils attainment. Applications are acknowledged in writing followed by an invitation to an assessment session.

Pre-service assessment

Through an informal session, the NWAR Programme Co-ordinator and site Co-ordinators meet with parents and their child to understand their perception of the learning impasse and to discuss learning support strategies used at home. Assessment is carried out using a tool developed by FES personnel to determine the level of attainment in speaking, listening, comprehension and writing skills. Following this, realistic targets are identified and established within the context of an Individualised Learning Plan (ILP). A detailed explanation is provided to parents regarding how the NWAR tutor plans to work with the child, including a practical description of the multi-sensory approach, examples of exercises that would be used to enhance concentration, an explanation of auditory training (combining sounds to form words), decoding of sounds (identification of sounds in words), and a discussion of how the parents could use such learning-stimulating techniques at home.

Service

Implementation follows the initial screening and admission into the programme and design of the tailor-made educational project between the tutor and the referred child and parents. Literacy support sessions are held twice a week. Individualised learning plans (ILP) are prepared and implemented for a semester on a two-families-to-one tutor basis. The programme includes the active participation of the family during and between NWAR sessions.

Contact with school and integration of NWAR methodologies into day school processes

A first contact meeting is arranged with the child's school so that the centre gets to know about the NWAR approach, and to discuss the ILP and its implication for the school teaching and learning processes. Session plans are offered to the school for re-enforcement of the learning process as well as to familiarise teachers with the approach. Also, heads of schools and classroom teachers of each referred child are invited to visit their pupil at NWAR in order to familiarise themselves with the process being facilitated as well as to stimulate reflection about ways through which synthetic phonics can be applied in school.

Post-semester assessment

The same tool used for the pre-service assessment is used to compare levels of competencies, determine actual achievements, and to plan targets for the following semester, if required. In that case, the Individualised Learning Plan is reviewed for identification of learning targets for the next period.

5. Outcomes

NWAR has an average of 40 percent mainstreaming rate after one year of provision, and almost all the children are usually ready for mainstreaming after two years of provision (FES 2004).

Through the programme, those referred pupils considered 'unteachable' have gained literacy skills in a very short period. Students' fast learning has been attributed both to the innovative teaching methodologies and approach used by the NWAR tutors, and to the parents active involvement in their pupils on-going learning support process, thus positively influencing the informal curriculum of the home and enabling the capacity building of parents (FES 2004).

In this way the programme targets both the child and the adult: illiterate parents participating in the NWAR process - very often the mother or another female relative - have also gained literacy skills along with their children. Furthermore, parents who had never before considered accessing non-formal or/and formal adult education opportunities have, through the NWAR process, become interested in joining parent-focused courses offered by trained FES parent leaders and teachers.

According to FES Chief Executive Macelli, in this sense NWAR is seen as a last-chance programme for the child and very often a second-chance for the adult that enhances self-esteem, upgrades literacy skills and leads to lifelong learning.

The programme also has the aim of transforming schools into learning centres for the whole community, through teacher training and the dissemination of effective differentiated teaching methodologies. In this context, NWAR has exposed hundreds of teachers in Malta to the application of synthetic phonics in the early years of a child's educational process. Another contribution of the NWAR Programme to the Maltese education system is the dissemination of the synthetic phonics methodology which, since the scholastic year 2005-2006, is being adopted by a number of state schools as another key differentiated teaching methodology. The dissemination of this teaching and learning methodology takes place through a number of ways; including but not limited to in-school early years teacher training and support to classroom teachers, training of complementary teachers and official in-service courses for teachers and courses for parents (FES 2004).

Also, a "basic skills assessment tool" (BSA) developed for application by NWAR Programme personnel has been refined for adoption, on a wider scale, by the new state colleges that form part of the reform process of the Maltese state compulsory education system implemented by the Ministry of Education and entitled "For All Children To Succeed". This assessment had been designed to provide detailed information on the basic skills attainment and needs of the learner both to the secondary school administration for classification purposes. It also helps teachers adapt their teaching according to the individual student's attainment levels. What started as an in-house development by the NWAR Programme has been transformed into a basic skills assessment tool that can be used by all state primary schools.

Another outcome is the development by NWAR personnel of 'Attainment Targets in Maths, English and Maltese' for use at secondary level of education by state centres for low achieving students. The Maltese and English components of this assessment have been adapted from the NWAR assessment tool.

Evaluation

The NWAR Programme has been evaluated by an overseas external consultant, the late Professor Sheila Wolfendale from the School of Psychology at the University of East London, who was an expert in the field of family literacy. Her studies have shown significant gains in a number of literacy areas, and gains for the parents as well, for whom such participation has led to reflection about their own learning needs and engagement in existing lifelong learning opportunities (FES 2004).

According to this experts' evaluation, some of the identified key success factors of the NWAR programme are: the rigorous selection process and the intensive induction and on-going training of NWAR tutors; the fact that NWAR field teams are small learning communities that engage in twice weekly training and planning sessions; the on-going follow-up and mentoring of tutors by the NWAR Programme coordinator; the on-going active participation of parents throughout the service provision period; the parent-empowering partnership that is established between NWAR tutors and parents. NWAR has demystified the professional role of teachers and helped parents overcome fears

of engaging in dialogue with teachers regarding their child's learning and development potentials and difficulties. The programme has also enabled many parents and schools to link up and maintain contact. This takes the form of the twice weekly circle time for participating families where they share the outcomes of their home-based efforts and the monthly meeting of parents where they discuss issues they themselves bring up. The fact that the programme does not directly target illiterate adults (parents) but that such parents become literate indirectly by their on-going presence and participation in the programme has also been evaluated as a very positive element of the project. Parents who are normally too shy to join basic adult literacy courses find themselves learning for the sake of their children and subsequently realise that learning is in fact fun. They may then join adult learning opportunities.

The multiplier effect of the programme is also another positive feature. NWAR trained part-time tutors, teaching them how to apply the project's methodology in their own classroom processes during their day school provision. Additionally FES offers practice-based training in the NWAR methodology to a wider group of teachers both during school hours (in-school professional development) as well as through short courses at national level by application. They also provide technical assistance to secondary schools through which small teams of teachers have been formed to develop and implement in-house literacy strategies and resources in support of struggling students. The fact that many teachers have heard from colleagues about the success of the NWAR programme and applied for a part-time position with FES is evidence of the positive effect the programme is having (Macelli and Cini 2005).

According to the 'National Action Plan on Poverty and Social Inclusion' 2004-06 the programme can be considered a wide success especially considering that students, whom schools and teachers had given up for un-teachable, learn to read and write in a few weeks – plus the fact that parents are involved throughout the whole process.

Finally, parents' feedback points to a general appreciation of the service for the following reasons: They had the opportunity to express and share their concerns with others in similar situations; they could ultimately acknowledge previously unrecognised internal strengths and skills that they could enhance in order to participate more effectively in their child's educational journey; parents with literacy difficulties themselves managed to do so as well; parents could practise learning strategies together and managed to try them out with success at home (FES activities report-4).

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