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MALTA'S NATIONAL CURRICULUM: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

CARMEL BORG, JENNIFER CAMILLERI, PETER MAYO and TONI XERRI

Abstract – Malta has recently introduced a National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) for primary, secondary and post-secondary levels. The authors of this article argue that the NMC, like similar national curricula in Britain, the United States and other countries, is underpinned by a conservative ideology. They criticize the NMC for, among other things, discriminating against women, giving insufficient value to non-European cultures, and promoting a hierarchical form of education that is geared to a capitalist concept of work. They argue that the curriculum, in its present form, cannot serve to promote a genuinely democratic education.

Zusammenfassung – Malta hat vor kurzem ein National Minimum Curriculum (NMC – Nationales Minimum Curriculum) für Schulen der Primar-, Sekundar- und Postsekundarbildung eingeführt. Die Autoren dieses Artikels argumentieren dahingehend, daß dem NMC, wie ähnlichen nationalen Curricula in Großbritannien, den Vereinigten Staaten und anderen Ländern, eine konservative Ideologie zugrunde liegt. Sie kritisieren das NMC u.a. für eine Diskriminierung der Frauen, eine ungenügende Integration nicht-europäischer Kulturen und die Förderung einer hierarchischen Bildungsform, die in ein kapitalistisches Arbeitskonzept mündet. Sie argumentieren, daß das Curriculum in seiner gegenwärtigen Form der Förderung einer wahrhaft demokratischen Erziehung nicht dienlich sein kann.

Résumé – Le gouvernement de Malte a récemment instauré un programme minimum national (NMC) pour les cycles primaire, secondaire et universitaire. Les auteurs de l'article objectent que ce programme, comparable à ceux de Grande-Bretagne, des Etats-Unis et d'autres pays, se fonde sur une idéologie conservatrice. Ils dénoncent entre autres la discrimination des femmes, la mise en avant de la culture européenne, et la défense d'une hiérarchie pédagogique orientée vers une conception capitaliste du travail. Ils affirment que ce programme dans sa forme actuelle ne peut constituer le fondement d'une éducation véritablement démocratique.

Sumario – Malta acaba de introducir un Curriculum Mínimo Nacional (NMC) para niveles primarios, secundarios y post-secundarios. Los autores de este artículo sostienen que el NMC, al igual que otros currículos similares de Gran Bretaña, los Estados Unidos y otros países está apuntalado por una ideología conservadora. Entre otras cosas, ellos critican el NMC por discriminar a la mujer, valorar insuficientemente las culturas no europeas y promover una forma de educación jerárquica orientada hacia un concepto de trabajo capitalista. Además, opinan que el currículo en su forma actual no podrá servir para promover una educación genuinamente democrática.

Резюме – Недавно Мальта ввела Минимальный национальный план обучения для начальных, средних и высших школ. Авторы этой статьи утверждают, что этот Минимальный национальный план обучения, как и ему похожие национальные планы обучения в Великобритании,

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Соединённых Штатах Америки и в других странах, поддерживается консервативной идеологией. Между иными, Минимальный национальный план обучения критикуется ими за дискриминацию женщин, за недостаточное оценивание не европейских культур и за поддерживание иерархической формы образования, направляемого по определённой, заранее намеченной капиталистической концепции работы. Они утверждают, что план обучения в его теперешней форме, не сможет действовать, чтобы поощрять искренне демократическое образование.

In the more progressive section of the vast and ever expanding literature on education available, it is argued, emphatically, that "Education is Politics", to borrow the title of a chapter in Shor (1992: 11). Decisions as to what should go into an educational programme are political decisions in that they reflect certain values which, in turn, reflect the interests of certain groups from among the many groups located differently and differentially within the social structure. These decisions therefore are never neutral. On a national, provincial and municipal scale, that knowledge which becomes legitimised and established, in Michael Apple's terms, as "Official Knowledge" (1993a), reflects the "cultural arbitrary" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) of the group or groups which exercise power in a particular society.

When we look at particular all embracing documents that delineate the contours within which formal educational activity takes place, we would do well to ask a series of simple but, in our view, key questions: Whose knowledge forms part of the curriculum, considering that the curriculum is often conceived, following Lawton (1984: 276), as "a selection from the culture of society" (or, more appropriately, the *cultures* of society)? Whose voices are legitimised in this curriculum and whose voices are constantly being pushed to the margins? In view of the above, it would also be appropriate to ask: Who participates in the process of curriculum development and who does not? These simple but direct questions are very familiar to those who engage critically with educational issues. They become ever so pertinent as we witness a number of countries following the trend, evident in industrially powerful nations led by New Right governments (cf, for example, Lawton and Chitty 1988), of establishing a national curriculum (cf, Apple 1993b: 234). The considerations which have led to the drafting of such curricula are many, not least of which being the need to ensure "core standards" in a bid to develop an educational system believed to render the country "competitive" in a world capitalist system. We constantly hear, especially from the business sector, which is ever so vociferous in matters relating to education, that unless such "standards" are ensured, we shall flounder. "Foreign competition", a situation treated unproblematically, becomes the pretext for the advocacy of uniform "standards" and the curtailment of certain gains made by social move-

ments with respect to the educational system. Not that “national curricula” were not in place prior to the drafting of such documents. As Apple (1988, 1993a, 1993b) has underlined, in relation to the United States, they have been in place in a less visible form. In other countries, notably former colonies in which hegemonic international languages are used throughout the educational system, this nexus becomes even more complicated in that the curriculum is constantly influenced by a powerful foreign, probably multinational, publishing industry. In this paper, we explore the politics of curricular dictates by looking at the specific situation of a former British colony, Malta, which as of 1990–1991, has had a National Minimum Curriculum (henceforth NMC) in place.

In May 1987, the Nationalist Party, which is of Christian Democrat inspiration, won the general elections in Malta.² A year later, the government passed a comprehensive Education Act through parliament, remarkably coinciding with similar legislation in Britain, which provided the impetus to the development of a National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) governing both state and non-state educational sectors in the country. This minimum curriculum can be considered as a document which attests to this government’s intention to ensure core standards before embarking on a hitherto unattained process of decentralisation in our educational system. It would be pertinent at this early stage to quote the following words by the then Minister of Education, Ugo Mifsud Bonnici, from an interview given a year prior to the 1987 elections: “We feel that a certain amount of decentralisation is of great importance whilst it is likewise important to achieve homogeneity with a certain amount of centralisation of command.”³

One can observe, from the nature of our analysis, that a lot of the language in this document smacks of New Right discourse in education. This is typical of other national curricula which have been introduced in such countries as Britain and the US. We have only to point to the literature dealing with such curricula in the US (cf. for example, the work of Michael Apple, Stanley Aronowitz, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren and Ira Shor⁴) or the UK (cf. for example, Demaine 1988; Chitty, Dale and Broadfoot 1991; Edwards and Whitty 1992; Ball 1990). Criticism of New Right policies in education normally deals with such issues as the obsession with “objective” standards (therefore implying a total disregard for issues concerning social difference), a reverence for traditional forms of authority (which translates into a preoccupation with the inculcation of traditional values – read “Western”, “patriarchal” and “white” – and an emphasis on the “great books”), new vocationalism and the ideology of the marketplace. These have figured prominently in Thatcherite Britain and the United States over the last 15 years or so and have been the subject of sustained criticism on both sides of the Atlantic. We would argue that the National Minimum Curriculum for Malta can attest to the fact that such discourse is all pervasive and extends beyond US-British shores to influence countries like Malta which have traditionally been culturally dependent on either or both of these centres of colonial power.

This immediately begs the question: Is the Christian Democrat government in Malta a New Right government? Contrary to New Right practice, the Maltese government appears committed to a strong social policy. It has strengthened the social services apparatus set in place by the previous government. It ought to be remarked, however, that the country has not yet been hit by the recession. It remains to be seen whether such a recession will bring about a shift in government policy in this and other sectors. At the moment, we do not have signs of the market ideology dominating the Maltese educational system. As far as education is concerned, there have been no significant cuts by the present government with the expenditure on the State education system (excluding university) remaining fairly stable over the years: 6–6.5% of the total national budget, rising from US\$ 49.2 million in 1987 to US\$ 74.8 million in 1990.⁵ The country has witnessed an expansion in government funding in a variety of sectors especially at the University where it introduced a stipend for students which has served and will probably continue to serve to increase the number of people attending university on a full time basis. The University, entirely funded by government, received a budget of US\$ 20 million in 1990, representing a substantial increase over previous years.⁶ This on its own does not say much. On the contrary, it could well be argued that the increase in investment, in this sector, is indicative of policies favouring the middle class which has traditionally constituted the absolute majority of the student population at university. After all, as Sultana forcefully argues, this increase in investment has not been matched by similar investment in areas frequented by students of working class background (Sultana 1992: 444). The provision of a stipend and the relaxing of admission requirements in most courses, in contrast to the stiff selection procedures adopted by the Labour government, would, in principle at least, render the university more accessible to students of working class background. This situation stands in marked contrast to that obtaining elsewhere, notably Britain, the US and Canada where cuts and pressure on universities to pay their own way seem to be the order of the day.

If one takes adult education as an example, the country has witnessed a considerable increase in government spending in this sector, providing courses free of charge for those who wish to pursue them – irrespective of market viability. Even expatriates who learn Maltese, in a state-sponsored adult education programme designed specifically for them, do so at no pecuniary expense whatsoever! This situation contrasts sharply with that obtaining in countries like Britain where adult education has, for a number of years now, been governed by the ideology of the marketplace (cf. Tuckett 1991; Mace 1992) and where provision and funding is justified according to cost effectiveness and number of participants per class. Malta is definitely experiencing a boom in such sectors as far as provision and funding of programmes go. This, however, could well be the case in the short term. The government is, after all, committed to obtaining full EU membership and it remains to be seen whether such membership will have a bearing on its educational policies.

There already seems to be a conflicting discourse between educational and economic policy. In the latter case, there have been sounds in the direction of doing away with government protectionism as far as local industry is concerned. This would be in keeping with the conditions laid down in the EU avis regarding Malta's application to join the Community. We would argue that these conditions will have a bearing on the Maltese educational system.

It would be very easy and naive, on our part, to succumb to the temptation of arguing that elements of New Right discourse in such documents as the NMC are all part of a long term strategy for successful incorporation into a Europe governed by the market ideology and to bring a gradual shift towards New Right policies in education and Maltese society in general. We would rather favour an alternative explanation and possibly a more realistic one, namely that in countries like Malta which have traditionally been culturally dependent on the UK and the US, such elements of New Right discourse can easily be appropriated uncritically. This uncritical appropriation can be a feature of developing small states like Malta, the majority being former British colonies, that are easily invaded by the Western (read: Anglo-American) logic (cf. Baldacchino 1993: 33). Moreover, the reality of these states is such that, lacking a substantial local market and fearing the threat of insularity, they are totally dependent on the vagaries of international markets as they seek to enhance their "rentier" status (Baldacchino 1993: 43), relying, for their foreign currency, on such services as tourism, bunkering, transshipment, remittances by emigrants, offshore banking and, of course, foreign aid (ibid. 40). This could easily lead to the production of all-embracing documents, concerning various aspects of state policy, including educational policy, which would sound palatable to established European and American centres of power. This aspect perpetuates neo-colonialism and cultural dependency. Elements of the hegemonic New Right discourse in Western circles can therefore easily trickle down to permeate educational policy documents in such states. Our paper focuses on an important educational policy document in one of these states, Malta. Throughout the paper, we shall be establishing links with the critical literature that has focused on New Right curricular aspects in the US and Britain, hoping, through such links, to indicate how such hegemonic discourse invades educational documents of other countries. We shall do so, however, without overlooking other aspects of the document that appear to be endemic to the specific context under consideration. Not all of the values, and absences in the document can be attributed to such an influence. This should not, in our view, preclude us from problematising them.

Process

Our view is that a close examination of the manner of the National Minimum Curriculum's (NMC) creation indicates that it is in keeping with the transmission model, a process that suggests little in the way of promulgating demo-

cratic social relations. One can speak of the existence of democratic social relations in education when learners exercise control over the learning process, and when social difference is affirmed, and the multiplicity of voices that constitute this difference asserts its presence. We believe that democratic social relations in education imply a process whereby students, parents, administrators, and educators participate directly in educational policy making.

In our view, none of the above is reflected in the NMC. If anything, the opening lines of the various NMC sections state that “the Minister has made the following regulations” (e.g., *Government Gazette* L.N. 15, 140 of 1989, B381), which is followed by the various stipulations that constitute the different sections of the NMC. Such a statement is indicative of the fact that the decision-making power, as far as educational policy is concerned, has traditionally rested with the one person who sits at the helm of the traditionally rigid Maltese educational hierarchy. This can hardly be conducive to a democratic process of curriculum development. It is an eloquent statement on the way things have been carried out in Malta, which suggests that the prescriptive mode of communication, through a rigidly hierarchical Civil Service, has persisted to the present day.

Considering the manner in which this curriculum was developed, it is hardly surprising that its introduction was surrounded by a general lack of interest, that lack of interest underlined by Wain (1991). Workers who are alienated from the decision-making process cannot identify themselves with the product of their own work (Apple 1979; Young 1971; Apple 1982; Carnoy and Levin 1985). It follows that teachers, denied the right to exercise their creativity (Shor and Freire 1987), identify themselves with that part of the process that gives them the illusion of control, in this case classroom teaching. Alienation and resistance in the classroom constitute the price which must be paid for the arbitrary exercise of “powers” involved in the imposition of the curriculum.

Values – implicit and explicit

The following sections address the NMC from the perspective of some of its inherent values and the metaphors used to concretise them. In our view, the values have been adopted uncritically. Viewing these values as unproblematic gives rise to at least two different readings of the NMC dictates. It appears the designers were not aware of the problematic issues underlying these values, therefore espousing, by default, the belief in their “universality”. This demonstrates the authors’ ethnocentrism and ignorance of the work that has challenged these same values. Alternatively, the designers are assuming that no one could possibly argue or disagree with the values, which again gives rise to two readings – either that all Maltese *should* espouse such values, or, given our argument that the NMC is merely a textual formalisation, and hence a description of the educational status quo in Malta, that all Maltese *do* espouse

such values. The latter is an empirical question that has not, to our knowledge, been researched. Furthermore, if the research were to be carried out in the manner that the NMC was drawn up, it would not provide us with warrantable conclusions.

The following list of values which we find to be inherent in the NMC is not meant to be exhaustive. However, we do believe it to be representative of the uncritical approach adopted in the NMC. Moreover, the educational rhetoric used masks the danger lying in the dictates, which, in turn, are being undermined by the method and manner employed in the very design and implementation of the NMC. These values and their critique will continually weave themselves in and out of our analysis throughout this paper.

Explicit Values in NMC	Further Expressed as:
a) <i>Core</i>	The assumption that there is a <i>main trunk of knowledge</i> which is further divided into <i>fields of knowledge</i> which can be <i>planted</i> and <i>nurtured</i> in learners (see <i>Core, fragmentation, subject-centeredness</i> section below)
b) <i>Europe's common heritage</i>	The assumption that " <i>civilised life</i> " has a "common European" <i>cultural basis</i> (see <i>Racism, multiculturalism or anti-racism?</i> section below)
c) <i>Vocation/Work Ethic</i>	A belief in the cultivation of <i>work attitudes</i> , as an <i>initiation into the process of qualification at a later stage for a working life with professional ethics regulating one's calling</i> , to be transmitted by means of an <i>action-work oriented core</i> (see <i>Working class</i> section below)
Implicit Values	Expressed as:
i) <i>Meritocracy/Stratification</i>	A belief in the <i>process of qualification</i> as a way of preparing a <i>work force in greater proportion literate and trained, qualified and specialised as well as able and flexible to retrain, re-specialise or specialise later in a narrower field</i> (see <i>Meritocracy/ stratification</i> section below)
ii) <i>Universality/Absolutism</i>	A belief in the inculcation of <i>moral values</i> expressed through <i>right judgment and proper value formation</i> with the ability to <i>act according to what is right and correct, ask the right question in the right place</i> . A belief that there is such a thing as <i>the intrinsic essence of the scientific method</i> . The uncritical presentation of <i>Man's (sic) achievements</i>

Implicit Values	Expressed as:
iii) Fragmentation/Subject-Centeredness	The belief that knowledge is simply to be compartmentalised into the various subjects like, Maltese, English, mathematics, history, and science with a physics base (see <i>Core, fragmentation, subject-centeredness</i> section below)
iv) Canon	The assumption that there is a body of knowledge which is intrinsically more valuable than any other, and which can be divided into <i>systems of knowledge, the transmission of which includes the appreciation of established masterpieces which have become part of our living cultural heritage?</i> (see: <i>Racism, multiculturalism or anti-racism?</i> section below)

Core, fragmentation, subject-centeredness

The values implicit in the notion of a “core” are those that imply that all school goers must be exposed to a definite set of ideas, beliefs and “knowledge bases”. These somehow rest with the school and the teacher, which are repositories of the knowledge and culture that are universally valued. The schools and the teachers are then said to be in a position wherefrom they can and are mandated to transmit such knowledge. Within the NMC, this notion of core is further put forth in the form of core subjects. As a result, one ends up with a *set* of cores rather than *a* core. It seems that these subjects are intended to form the core. What is not addressed is whether the term “core” also refers to some “essential” elements of a subject. Becher and Maclure (1978: 64) suggest a reason why curriculum developers prefer subject-based projects to system-based development:

There were good reasons why curriculum development agencies initially preferred subject-based projects. In the first place, it is much easier to organize a development project which has a clear and limited set of aims. System-based development – that is, a change in curricular process designed to affect the system as a whole, or some sub-system within it – has to grapple with general goals, and to tackle the business of translating them into the specifics of classroom practice across the whole range of curriculum subjects (and often across a wide range of age and ability as well). It may have to cope at the same time with rearrangements in the structure and organization of schools. Subject-based developers, on the other hand, can set themselves a less daunting task: they may challenge the established traditions of teaching a particular subject, but seldom go further than this. They do not usually demand a radical change in educational policy, and they rarely make big demands upon the way schools as a whole are run.

In so far as the NMC is concerned, the designers have avoided all of the foregoing. There is merely a description of Maltese schooling and no challenge to the established traditions of particular subject teaching. There is obviously no demand for any changes (radical or otherwise) in the Maltese educational policy. Nor is there concern about how the issue of fragmentation plays itself out in the context of "educating the whole person", with the implication that for the designers, the "whole" is simply the sum of the constituent parts as defined in the NMC.

Meritocracy/stratification

One cannot conclude that the NMC is based on any explicitly expressed ideology. There is no unequivocally declared ideology in the actual text of the Curriculum. However, the Curriculum contains a hidden ideology which surfaces in various parts of its contents. This hidden ideology is an *instrumentalist* one, very much a feature of the *New Vocationalism*, stemming from predominantly New Right policies. According to this ideology, the students are mainly talked about as future members of the nation's workforce, especially in the primary and secondary sections and most explicitly in the latter. This is no mere coincidence. Secondary schools, incorporating the trade schools,⁸ are the training site for the backbone of the Maltese waged and unwaged, "productive" labour force. The authors of the NMC give the impression that the training of such a work force is ultimately the main aim of education in Malta based, it would seem, on nothing other than a meritocratic system whereby, in Mazurek's (1987: 141-2) words,

... everyone starts life with an equal chance: to develop innate talents; to pursue economic opportunities; to earn the amenities society has to offer; to "succeed," in other words, to the limits that individual ability, energy and motivation allow. This is only possible, however, if unearned privilege is not allowed to constitute an obstacle to the intellectual talent, productive energy, fortitude and discipline exercised by others in their labours to fulfill their aspirations. Neither wealth, gender, race, ethnicity nor religious affiliation must aid or hinder any citizen in the pursuit of his or her personal ambitions and social goals.

Meritocracy itself has to be problematised if we are to ensure the kind of social democracy that the rhetoric used in the NMC calls for, despite the unequivocal top-down imposition of its mandate. A number of authors (e.g., Bowles and Gintis 1976: 102-124) have criticised the notion that the meritocratic system is a just system, wherein education is the means by which a person obtains a slot in life commensurate with his/her educational efforts and achievements. A much-cited formula in this respect is "I.Q. + Effort = Educational Attainment". This argument simply unwrites and dismisses long histories of privilege, marginalisation, and discrimination by perpetuating those very conditions that have led to the *status quo*. Such conditions are in

fact integral to the meritocratic ideal, since stratification is both a result of and the basis on which meritocracy finds its rationalisation. In order for peripherally capitalist Malta to maintain its modes of production it must, by necessity, stratify its population. The state must therefore find a “legitimate” means by which to stratify. Schooling, at once distanced from and integral to the state, becomes the legitimator (Althusser 1971; Bowles and Gintis 1976) through its meritocratic structure, disguised as apolitical on the basis of its “educational aims”, namely those of creating (read “stratifying”) a society with a “decrease in the percentage of citizens who are not properly qualified to perform a particular service in working life” (B 230). As if to show the uncritical manner in which these values are first taken on by the designers of the document, and then mandated as *the* values to be strived for, the NMC openly states. “A work force in greater proportion literate and trained, qualified and specialised as well as able and flexible to retrain, respecialise or specialise later in a narrower field” (B 588). Notice the emphasis on “retrain” and “respecialise”. Is this a case of the liberal notion of lifelong education being reduced to meaning simply a constant recycling of the work-force?

Politicising absence

There are various implicit messages conveyed by the contents of the NMC. As Apple (1982: 158) underlines, quoting literary critic, Terry Eagleton, “The *not said* of a work is as important as the said since ‘ideology is present in the text in the form of its eloquent silence’ ”.

A cursory view of the various sections of the NMC would be sufficient to indicate that the concerns of certain groups within Maltese society are not addressed. Furthermore, there are formulations throughout the NMC which serve the purpose of reinforcing the immersion of these marginalised groups in the “culture of silence” (Freire 1972). In this section, we unpack some of these formulations in an attempt to expose their underlying assumptions and the exclusionary agenda that is camouflaged by the totalising discourse.

Working class

When dealing with the politics of absence, one has to perforce deal with the issue of class, which has always been an important feature of educational systems and processes and which, despite claims to the contrary and appeals to national unity, has been the arena of New Right attack (cf. Meiksins Wood 1986). Therefore, in order to recognise and deal affirmatively with this issue, one would have to draw, for inspiration, on literature which highlights these aspects. There is a whole corpus of literature in the Sociology of Education which serves to expose the middle class bias of schooling. The work of the

French scholars, Althusser and Poulantzas, Baudelot and Establet and Bourdieu and Passeron, that of the "new" sociologists of education in the UK and that by the Americans, Bowles and Gintis, Apple, Anyon and Giroux feature among the most prominent. There is also pioneering Maltese research on the subject which exposes the middle class bias of our schooling system (cf. Sultana 1991a; Darmanin 1991b). For the most part, the NMC suggests little in the way of doing away with such bias. It promotes the idea of a "meritocratic" system, a point already indicated and illustrated elsewhere in the paper, which serves its purpose in making the individual place the blame for failure on herself or himself (the "if only I had . . ." syndrome), rather than on a selective process through which people are systematically channelled into the stratified slots within the labour market, by and large, on the basis of their social location (including gender and race). It is precisely because the meritocratic system is in and of itself reproductive of social class that the majority of students in the archipelago's only university hails from the middle class (Vella 1990; Schembri 1991),⁹ and that 90% of the students in the trade schools are the children of manual class background (Sultana 1991b: 32).

Reading through the primary section of the NMC, one obtains the false impression that Maltese, the native language, and English, the language of the last colonisers, which is spoken freely in middle class homes, are given equal importance in our educational system. This may be the case on paper, but our own experiences as teachers within the Maltese state school system suggests otherwise. English remains the dominant medium of instruction throughout the entire educational system and therefore ensures the reproduction of that class of Maltese society which, using Bourdieu's term, has the required "cultural capital" to make effective use of the language and, consequently, the educational system itself. In Zammit Mangion's words (1987: 23), ". . . a child's ability in the English language often determines what stream he (*sic*) will be put in, what type of education he (*sic*) will be given and what levels of education he (*sic*) will reach". Excessive use of English constitutes, in our view, one of the means whereby members of the Maltese working class, with whose culture English does not resonate, are programmed for failure. For instance, working-class children who are quite capable of successfully working out mathematical problems when these are phrased in their native language, falter when these same problems are presented in the English language. The language of instruction to which they are exposed is not one of their culture's "most immediate, authentic and concrete expressions" (Freire 1985: 184). The NMC provides no guidelines as to how the all-pervasive use of English throughout our educational system can be minimised.

There is furthermore nothing in the NMC which deals with the issue of streaming and selectivity, in our schooling systems, and the kind of different social relations which characterise the different streams and schools that, as Bowles and Gintis (1976) have shown, albeit somewhat mechanistically, can have a correspondence with the kind of social relations prevalent in different

sites of production. One notices, in the first and second sections of the NMC, a strong emphasis on the “transmission model” of communication. This model also militates against the interests of working class and similarly underprivileged groups, in that it involves a process of cultural imposition or “cultural invasion” (Freire 1972). What is imposed is a predominantly middle-class culture which does not resonate with working class students’ experience. Through the “transmission model”, students are allowed little opportunity to air their voices in a dialogical process, through which their own culture becomes part of the learning process and is given its due esteem.

Furthermore, we must note that there is no mention, throughout the NMC, of a social studies component that incorporates the history of working class organisations (the same applies to social movements) in their struggle for social justice (cf. Apple 1982). Neither is there recognition, with respect to the “particular commercial or trade choices” (B 589) mentioned in the Secondary Section, of alternative modes of production, such as, for example, cooperatives and self-management programmes.

Gender

As in all other contexts, the constant use of androcentric language (to begin with, the male referent is emphasised throughout the Primary and Secondary Curriculum) is not coincidental. It is symptomatic of the very patriarchal structure of Maltese society, a structure which the NMC perpetuates. In general, Maltese girls and women are still socialised into having limited expectations for their future and into choosing to take secondary roles in the social sphere as opposed to the private sphere of the home. Motherhood and wifehood are still presented as the ultimate and most appropriate goals for any Maltese woman. Active participation in the social life is still a male domain. This differentiation between Maltese men and women is reflected in the tracking of Maltese girls into traditionally “female” options, such as foreign languages, secretarial skills, and “needlework” (Darmanin 1991a). The authors of the NMC: a) do not suggest any strategies for promoting more participation from women in traditionally male-dominated fields such as the sciences, political participation and community leadership; and b) they persist in retaining “home economics” as an option.

In the secondary level section, we find that “home economics” is offered as a choice within the “action-work oriented core” (B 589). The authors of the curriculum do not indicate to whom this choice should be offered. It is common knowledge that in Maltese secondary schools, which are not co-educational, home economics is still conceived of as a girls’ subject. Although it is offered as an option to boys, only a handful, throughout the island, choose it (Darmanin 1991b: 162). All home economics teachers are female, with the exception of one male, who is stationed at the Head Office in Gozo (*ibid.*). The authors of the NMC do not say much about this subject, except that it is

offered as an option together with "particular commercial or trade choices" (B 589). There is certainly no suggestion in the way of affirmative action in this regard. The case of home economics reinforces the theory that the main aim of the NMC is to confirm and strengthen what is already happening in Maltese schools.

We think that a subject like home economics should either be a compulsory subject for both sexes or else eliminated from the curriculum. While "offered" as an option to boys, this subject has been a Maltese girls' and young women's domain, and it continues to socialise them into becoming "good housewives", in other words, hardworking, unwaged labourers. Frequently, although not always, girls who are not considered "bright enough" to take on more academic subjects are channelled into the home economics option. When compared to boys' trade schools, girls' trade schools offer a much more limited choice of subjects. Moreover, trade choices are not offered in secondary schools. Therefore, many female students in secondary and trade schools "choose" to learn home economics. The fact that this subject is included in the NMC shows that the authors see nothing wrong with systematically training a lot of Maltese girls to become used to unpaid housework, while depriving them of other choices which can provide them with skills and training that they would be able to use for waged labour in the future. The authors of the NMC insist several times that Maltese students should be prepared for future participation in the workforce. Apparently, the workforce that is being referred to is primarily male. This invisibility of females in the labour force is a salient example of discriminatory politics of absence in the NMC, since the type of education a female student receives impinges directly on the kind of employment she will have as a woman (Deem 1978). The differences in the education of girls and boys are camouflaged by the authors of the NMC. They write as if the opportunities and choices given to boys were identical to those offered to girls. It is a known fact that subjects like technical design and woodwork are offered in boys' schools but not in girls' schools. This inequality of opportunity in subject choice is a crucial cause of the unequal labour distribution according to gender in Malta.¹⁰

Partly because of limited choice in trade skills, Maltese women predominate in factory assembly lines and do most of the unpaid work at home. The education that they are receiving is not providing them with the required awareness of other choices and the skills necessary to exercise those choices. Such sexist discrimination in the schools is resulting in big gender differences in the amount of earned money and job categories (Darmanin 1991b). As Delamont (1980: 3) argued, referring to British schools, schooling does not create gender roles which are at odds with those operating in society at large, but "schools develop and reinforce sex segregations, stereotypes, and even discriminations which exaggerate the negative aspects of sex roles in the outside world, when they could be trying to alleviate them".

As things stand now, a progressive series of curricular guidelines must suggest solutions and strategies through which this inequity could be

redressed. Any curricular guidelines for Malta, where gender-specific socialisation and traditional gender roles have hardly been challenged at all, would require the incorporation of classroom initiatives to combat gender-stereotypic socialisation. These initiatives are most effective when they are started at the Primary level (Tutchell 1990). The authors of the NMC do not suggest any initiatives of this kind, probably because they do not see any need for them. But then documents which are indicative of uncritical appropriation of New Right discourse, can easily be gender blind, given this discourse's affirmation of standards at the expense of acknowledging difference.

Racism, multiculturalism or anti-racism?

In the post-secondary section of the NMC we came across the phrase "cultural basis of civilised life", which is described as "a historical perspective highlighting Europe's common heritage enriched, as it is, by multicultural diversity" (p. B236). The term "civilised life" implies a differentiation between cultures in terms of "civilised" and "uncivilised". This is eurocentric racism at its most dangerous level. It not only constructs non-Western groups as "other", but does so in a form that pretends to be inclusive. This eurocentrism, with its historically racist, colonising foundation, exalted as it is to a seat of "classical" values in the traditional, subject-centered approach, is that to which the NMC authors uncritically aspire. This has been evident in *Systems of Knowledge*, the area which is accorded prominence in the Post-Secondary NMC and which involves, among other things, the teaching of selected texts. The 1987 syllabus (Heywood, Serracino Inglott 1987) involved a selection of "great" books from a list which totally excludes the contributions made by the Maltese themselves, women writers (there was no female author in the first list), Arabs, Blacks, people of colour, and other racial groups (the only exception is *The Arabian Nights*, which is of Persian origin). This strikes us as being very much in keeping with the ideas advocated by such conservative writers as Hirsch (1988), Bloom (1987) and Chester Finn Jr., important sources of influence in US New Right policy, with Bloom having advocated the teaching of "the great books". Their position has been the subject of scathing critiques from a critical pedagogical perspective (cf. Giroux 1988; McLaren 1989; Aronowitz and Giroux 1991; Shor 1992)¹¹ and, in the US and UK at least, has been seen to represent the conservative presence alongside that of neo-liberalism within the New Right project (Apple 1993). In all fairness, one notices a welcome change with the introduction of an Egyptian and Japanese writer in the new syllabus.¹² Nevertheless, this remains a mere token representation. The kind of "civilised life", referred to in the NMC, would, by and large, still be read as being "White", "male" and "Western". Our (Maltese) systemic racism, as evidenced by our idiomatic expressions and recurrent jokes, is not only left unchallenged, but is perpetuated in the name of a more "civilised" and more "qualified" way of living.

Referring to the proposed National Curriculum in Britain, imbued as it is with New Right discourse, MacNeil (1991: 81) states that, apart from the curriculum itself reflecting a White Anglo-Saxon culture, it

excludes the significant input from the Caribbean, the African and Indian continents and elsewhere. . . . Teachers subscribe overall to a Eurocentric perspective, and unless there is guidance for teachers on an appropriate multicultural knowledge base, the Eurocentric approach and subject content is what they will teach. There is no sign that a move to change is projected, nor is it evident in the bulk of in-service training.

The similarities, it would seem, between the absences in the British proposed product and those in the Maltese mandates are unnerving. Further, not only are the guidance and in-service training not available in Malta and the Maltese NMC, but the very notion of Eurocentrism (read "White" and called "Europe's common heritage" (Department of Information 1991, p.B236) is openly mandated as a valued aim in Maltese schooling. This value cannot be disentwined from the notion of "core" which forms the very foundation of the NMC. A core, by definition, is exclusive, assuming as its framework a universality of commonalities, of essences that must be inculcated in a nation's citizens, treating the latter as, or striving to turn them into, as homogeneous a group as possible. The idea of multiculturalism is therefore turned into a tokenising nod, a passing comment on the way to "better and more important" functions to be served by the curriculum. If, as we suspect, a superficial rendering of a multicultural education is to be introduced, then we (Maltese) must look to the experiences of culturally and racially diverse groups in countries like England, Canada, and the US, where multicultural education has failed to attain the results claimed for it when implemented in the midst of deep-rooted and systemic racism. We believe, along with Troyna (1987: 310), that the educational system has to be exposed as a site in which the reproduction of racism takes place. He argues that:

. . . the main imperative for educational policy makers in the mid-1980s is to develop practices which focus on the racist underpinnings and operation of white dominated institutions . . . rather than ethnic minority cultures and lifestyles, and which aim to remove those obstacles which impede the educational advancement of black students.

In short, ethnocentrism and White dominance pervade the NMC which does nothing to promote anti-racist education, our preferred alternative to multicultural education, among our students.

Students with disabilities

One of the assumptions the NMC makes is that this curriculum does not apply to those students with mental disabilities. In the second section of the NMC,

the authors refer to “the whole mass of students who are not mentally handicapped” (Department of Information, Secondary Level) as the students for whom the curriculum was written. It is assumed that all students who have any mental disability, cannot benefit from any part of the NMC. The way in which students with mental disabilities are mentioned only to be excluded perpetuates their marginalisation and their deprivation of the importance to which they are entitled.

Moreover, students with physical disabilities are never mentioned in the NMC. We assume that, since they are not mentioned at all, they are being included with the rest of the students. That which is prescribed for able-bodied students is also applicable to students with physical disabilities. The text of the NMC simply renders people with physical disabilities invisible. There is nothing in the NMC which suggests ways which ensure that these students participate fully in all school activities. The NMC suggests nothing in the way of raising a consciousness about the experiences and needs of disabled persons or about giving them the opportunity to express themselves about their marginalised position in society. The NMC ignores the fact that people with disabilities are subjected to various forms of social discrimination. Affirmative action is needed to destroy such forms of discriminatory practice. We suggest that, when dealing critically with social studies, an analysis of how this section of the population has always been marginalised should be made. Work in this area should entail the exploration and development of strategies aimed at countering this discrimination. Systematic programmes which facilitate integration (when this is possible and when the necessary resources and teacher preparation are available) and the increase of opportunities for people with disabilities would also be effective against discrimination.

Conclusion

The National Minimum Curriculum under review here illustrates a process that favours conservative discourse. Such discourse selectively negates opportunities for self and social empowerment by continuing to exclude traditionally disenfranchised voices. By emphasising subject-centredness, a European canon as the centre of civilised life, the cultivation of work attitudes in the context of a capitalist economic formation that is moving towards overdose proportions, a socialisation process based on character formation in line with existing moral codes, coupled with the illusion of social and economic mobility that meritocracy is meant to generate, the foregoing document transmits an official discourse that seems to be calling for a set of values that critical educational theorists regard as preparation for existing social relations. Lacking a transformative edge, the document fails to challenge the status quo. Thus, although the National Minimum Curriculum has been advertised as a catalyst for change, one can hardly speak here of qualitative change, that is, a curriculum that looks forward to empowering students as critical, active

agents of change. Instead, traditionally disenfranchised students are forced to contend with institutional negation and disrespect of the particular cultural experiences that inform their consciousness.

To conclude, if the Maltese Education system is to establish the link between schools and issues of equity and justice, and therefore create a context of cultural democracy within the educational system, particularly in the classroom, we suggest that an examination of what constitutes dominant cultures in the Maltese context is imperative. Only preliminarily, the foregoing study suggests a preoccupation with New Right discourse that is committed to a white, middle class, male, European, able-bodied, Catholic canon. As illustrated above, such discourse is mixed with general goals that invoke "forms of institutional authority" (Giroux 1988, p. 19), disguised as character development, that rule out conflict and contradictory discourses. In fact, the NMC may be described as symptomatic of the general policy of social harmony that isolates the discourse of ideologies and struggle. Against such a backdrop, while reiterating the importance of a pedagogy of critique, a pedagogy of possibility that helps invent a new public life centring around social justice and equity, ought to be a major priority on the agenda of teachers who perceive themselves as cultural workers rather than mere transmitters of official discourse.

Notes

1. Malta is the largest and most substantially inhabited island in an archipelago which includes Gozo and Comino. These islands constitute one nation state, referred to officially as The Republic of Malta. The population throughout the archipelago is approximately one third of a million, and the surface area is 316 square kilometres. These islands are situated right in the centre of the Mediterranean, between Sicily (ninety-six kilometres away) and Tunisia (one hundred and ninety-two kilometres away). They have recently emerged from a long history of colonisation (independence, 1964; withdrawal of British armed forces, 1979).
2. The Party was re-elected in 1992.
3. "Decentralisation", interview with Peter Mayo⁶, published in *The Teacher* (magazine of the Malta Union of Teachers) in October 1986, p. 11.
4. Critiques of New Right policy constitute a recurring feature of their writings. It would therefore be inappropriate to single out specific works.
5. *The Development of Education 1990-1992, National Report for Malta*, presented at the International Conference on Education, Forty-Third Session, Geneva, 1992, p. 19.
6. Ibid, p. 7.
7. Cf. Heywood and Serracino Inglott (1987).
8. Trade schools are strictly vocational schools which are generally frequented by "failures" of the mainstream school system.
9. We are indebted to Sultana (1991a), for drawing our attention to these points.
10. We are aware that offering traditional "boys' subjects" to girls does not redress the gender imbalance in schools and the workplace. In fact, history has proven that traditional "male" jobs which start to become dominated by women are eventually ghettoised and become less prestigious and underpaid.

11. In our view, there is nothing wrong with having a broad based programme of studies at this level. We advocate, however, a more inclusionary programme, one consisting of a selection of writings which is as diversified and representative as possible in terms of social and geographical location. We propose a cultural studies programme which admits no boundaries between areas of knowledge. Such a programme would incorporate canonical and non-canonical works, including elements of popular culture (eg. film and popular music) which play an important part in the students' construction of their own subjectivities.
12. Information as of 1992.

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