

Creating on site history activities for school children; an action research project

Yosanne Vella

yosanne.vella@um.edu.mt

Yosanne Vella B.Ed (Hons), MA (Lond), M. Phil (Lond), PhD (U.W.E. Bristol) is a lecturer at the University of Malta and the history co-ordinator of the faculty of Education. Her area specialisation is pedagogy of history and she teaches B.Ed and P.G.C.E. student teachers. She is also the P.G.C.E. co-ordinator of the faculty.

She was a history teacher for a number of years both in Malta and in England where she taught history at primary, secondary and sixth form levels. She has presented numerous papers at international conferences and published in journals on history teaching, in particular on children's thinking when using historical sources. She has also written various papers on women's history, general historiography, nationalism and citizenship in history teaching. She is presently the Vice-President of Malta's History Teachers' Association.

Abstract:

This paper is reporting an Action Research project conducted by the author. It is describing the process that went on in the creation of teaching and learning materials to be used by students on school visits to Maltese historical sites. The teaching approach behind the main objectives of the teaching resources was based on "New History" methods, that is, they target specific history skills and concepts rather than mere factual information.

Unfortunately until recently, museums and places of historic interest in Malta did not cater for school children. There have been several innovations as far as tourist guides, pamphlets, DVDs and video recordings of historical sites are concerned but more often than not these are not appropriate for secondary and primary school children. This paper describes the several stages and various objectives behind the development of on site educational teaching history materials.

Introduction

Studying local museums and historical sites has long been acknowledged as a powerful means of learning (Mainstone and Bryant ,1962; Andreetti 1993:32; Anderson and Moore 1994:196; Corbishley, 1991), however unless teaching materials are available for teachers to use with their students the full potential of such visits is not achieved. This paper describes the process that went on as teaching and learning materials for school children were created for Maltese historical sites. The use of historical sites and museums to help students develop a sense of historical enquiry is explicitly suggested in our National Curriculum, however one must ensure that a visit with school children to a historical site involves far more than passive looking and listening or sightseeing. Whereas tourist guides or instructions through headphones

might be helpful for an adult audience these are not appropriate for secondary students and even more so, not appropriate for primary pupils. (Vella, 2000:3)

General Plan

There were various stages and parties involved in this research. I first made a proposal outlining the objectives of this project to the Maltese National Commission for UNESCO (United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) where I explained that I aim to choose a number of Maltese historical sites which may include museums, buildings, monuments, ruins or catacombs and to create teaching resources which can be used on these sites. Historical sites which involve historical topics and subjects found in Maltese History Syllabi used in schools would be preferred. Once this proposal was accepted, I approached Heritage Malta, Malta's national organisation which is in charge of various historical sites and a number of meetings were held where a number of sites I could work on were offered and discussed. Next I focused my attention on finding a printer for the resources. Teaching and learning materials impose on the printing production more demands than other printing situations. The actual font size, colours, layout, position of pictures and diagrams all can make a difference between an attractive and user friendly task to one which is dismissed by students. Therefore I made sure the printing press I chose was one which would allow me to be very much involved in the creation of the layout and actual appearance of the learning materials.

Identifying initial idea

My objective in this project was to create teaching resources that can be used by students who visit these sites from our secondary as well as primary schools. These teaching resources would take the form of:

1. Teacher's book on how the resources can be used. The aim of this booklet would be to set out practical advice on the before, during and after site visit activities.
2. Worksheets/Handouts focusing on important skills of observation and analysis of artefacts. Besides analytical writing, drawing as a valuable method of recording will also be included.
3. Ideas on how simple costumes for particular sites for drama and role play activities can be created by teachers and their students. The site is then used to re-enact one of the events from its history.
4. Problem solving tasks. A strategy for exploring a site is to divide students into groups and to present an open ended problem for them to solve, demanding an on site research.
5. Craft work on site which may include model building, artefact making and painting.
6. Simulation games such as board games based on the general theme of the site.

These activities promote teamwork where children can exchange ideas. Students working in a group may use their peers' talk to support their own thinking, in other words they use each other as a learning resource. One of the most interesting contributions to cognitive development is precisely this idea that talking produces learning. The implication is that there seems to be a definite link between communication and thinking, what Vygotsky calls 'verbal thinking'. The phenomenon of talk producing learning in the specific case of history, was observed in Maltese children in the analysis of their conversation while handling historical primary sources

in groups (Vella, 2001). If this is correct and there are several other research data which support this view (Speidel, 1983; Rogoff, 1990; Edwards and Westgates, 1994; Faulkner, Littleton and Woodhead, 1998) then the significance of group work cannot be ignored and must become an integral part of teaching and learning in our schools.

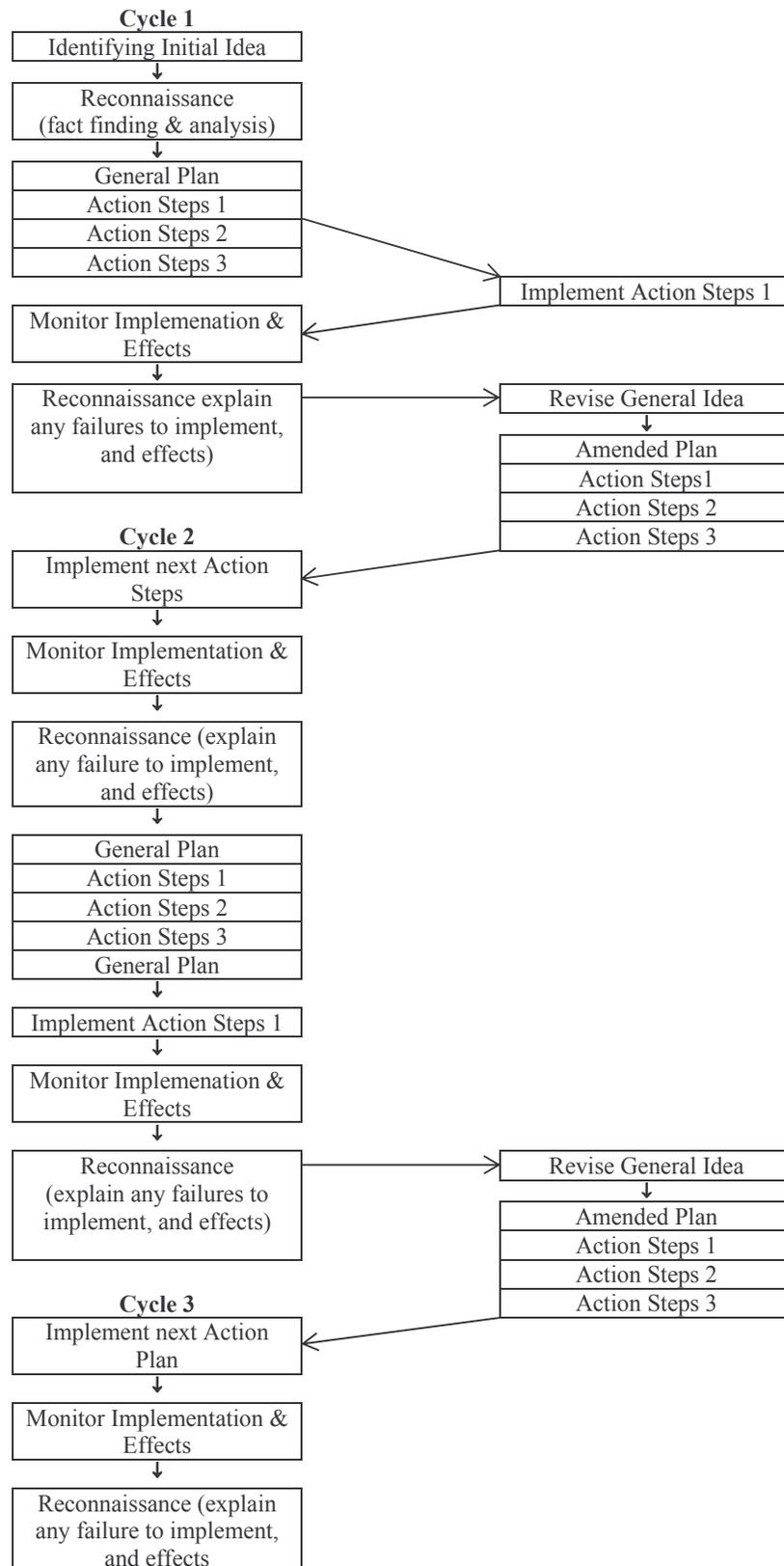
In sharp contrast to this teaching approach, traditional history teaching rests on the assumption that history is a ready product; the writings of historians, therefore history teaching involves merely transmitting information and facts. It is concerned with the 'what' to teach not the 'how' to teach. However, the teaching approach known as "New History" which has proved to be highly effective involves a different philosophy. What makes this teaching method so different from traditional approaches is the fact that besides the historical information "New History" involves source analysis and focus on specific history thinking skills, what R. Ben Jones outlined back in 1973 as a history teaching method that "lays less emphasis on content and more on the process of learning". (Jones, 1973:14)

This is the teaching approach behind the main objectives of the teaching resources I planned to create. Therefore my objectives would target specific history skills and concepts rather than mere factual information. The history skills I planned to focus on amongst others were; Analyses of Primary sources, Time, Interpretation/Extrapolation, Cause and Consequence, Change and Continuity, Empathy, and Writing skills in history. Besides pedagogical reasons I also had ethical reasons for choosing to focus on history thinking skills and concepts rather than on knowledge. By engaging students to come up with their own interpretations regarding the building as a historical piece of evidence, I was hoping to avoid to some extent reinforcing "the 'curriculum of domination', which reproduces class discrimination, racism, sexism and a disabling environment for some." (Borg, Cauchi and Mayo 2003:102) that can occur in museums and historical sites.

For the completion of the first cycle of this project I had planned a time span of around one and a half years, which was in fact adhered to. Work on the creation of the project started in September 2003 and the first cycle was completed in January 2005, with an invitation to all secondary schools to take part being sent in February 2005.

The research method adopted was that of an action research project. A method advocated by Malta's Minimum National Curriculum, which specifically states that "Action research should constitute the fulcrum of curriculum development." (Education Division, 1999:86) This method was also chosen because it involves what Jean McNiff (1988) calls "a self-reflective spiral of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and re-planning" (McNiff, 1980:7). Action research is different from traditional established research methods where often the idea is that evidence has to be empirically tested with emphasis on statistical analysis. These methods have their own valid applications but in my case I wanted a method that involves the researcher personally and is in itself educational to myself, an approach which would bring together educational theory and educational practice. My ultimate aim was to create a process whereby learning materials to be used on site are developed and meliorated as the project gets underway and John Elliot's model of action research proved to be very useful in the construction and refining of the teaching materials and activities. In

fact the action research model used during this project had the following structure (Elliot 1991:71):



Action Plan

In agreement with Heritage Malta I decided on the Inquisitor's Palace as the first site to work on. This building is almost five hundred years old and is found in Vittoriosa. It has had various occupiers and has served an array of functions ranging from the knights' first administrative centre and later their civil law courts, to also being used by the French as their Cottonera headquarters, later on it served amongst other things as a British military hospital. But without any doubt it remains most famous today because it was the official residence of the first Inquisitor who arrived in Malta in 1574 and all his successors until Napoleon abolished the Inquisition in 1798. It is a wonderful building to work with for as Kenneth Gambin says : "Although much has been changed in the structure of the building by its successive occupants, the Inquisitor's Palace remains an architectural gem, representative of the checkered history and European heritage of the islands." (Gambin 2003:3).

I first started working on this project by seeping myself in historical literature regarding the building itself and in particular the Inquisition. Naturally my top priority remained the history thinking skills and concepts however one cannot practise these in a vacuum, getting the basic historical facts and information correct is an absolute necessity before embarking on any history teaching be it on a site or in the classroom. While at the same time keeping in mind E.H.Carr's famous words that "To praise a historian for his accuracy is like praising an architect for using well-seasoned timber or properly mixed concrete in his building. It is a necessary condition of his work, but not his essential function." (Carr 1961:10/11)

I followed this with brain storming sessions where I thought about all kinds of possible activities and tasks children of all ages can do at the Inquisitor's Palace during a school visit. The site itself deemed some activities inappropriate while providing excellent opportunities for other activities. For example the large size of the building makes it difficult for one teacher to monitor groups conducting activities in different parts of the site at the same time, on the other hand role-play on site is very possible since the site is an indoor building and thus provides shelter against the elements.

Eventually a choice was made and a number of activities were designed and the tasks were graded in difficulty to cater for all levels of achievement. By achievement it is meant how well they are doing in their school assessment records which naturally is not necessarily a reflection on their ability. All secondary students high, average and low achievers should be able to carry out tasks A to E found in Teacher's Resource Book (Click on end Note 1, p.14 to p.16), as well as take part in the role-play. These activities are also appropriate for junior years primary school pupils.

Average achievers 11 to 13 year olds should be in a position to work out the student workbook. On the other hand, some of the follow up activities suggested to teachers (Click on end Note 1, p.17 - 20) are more challenging. While by no means suggesting that only high achievers can do these follow up activities, (indeed role-play in the classroom is appropriate for all) the writing and discussions need higher order thinking skills. This means that the amount of learning support needed with different students will vary.

Difficulties in establishing fieldwork relationships can be a problem when one is conducting research (Delamont, 2002) and I am always keenly aware that my intrusion as a researcher might be greeted with hostility. In fact I received the opposite reception from the curator of the Inquisitor's Palace, he was very enthusiastic towards the project and gave it his full support which undoubtedly contributed to the success of this project. All ideas by the researcher were met with eagerness and offers of help. Apart from encouraging the development of the project, this support is a crucial element for the future running of the project. I was present and co-ordinated the pilot activities, and I was also present for the first of the school visits to arrive, however once the project is finished it is the staff under the direction of the curator who have to be involved in the day to day implementation of it.

Implementing Action

Once the draft materials and costumes for the role play were ready the exercises were piloted with secondary classes coming from two different schools, a mixed coed private school and an area girls' secondary school.

While planning the activities I had several discussions with the various parties involved regarding what language, that is, whether Maltese or English was to be used in the workbooks and other activities for the children. At this point it became clear that Antoinette Camilleri's concern that "The most transparent deficiency in the Maltese education system is the lack of a coherent language policy." (Camilleri, 1995:222) has still not been adequately addressed. There is still no proper referral system for educators to base their decisions on, regarding choice of language for teaching materials. Various opinions do exist and I was advised that English should be used, for English is very important and needed to be strengthened, arguments were also put forward that Malta is a bilingual country and our students in fact needed to be fluent in both. Another view point was that since materials were to be available to foreign visitors English should be used throughout. However, I personally felt strongly that since history as a school subject is taught in state schools in Maltese and annual examination papers are in secondary state schools in Maltese, it was a very valid reason as to why Maltese should be chosen. Initially I felt that I had to make a choice especially since the costs of the whole project would be cut down considerably if one adhered to just one language. However, the reality of our socio-cultural situation immediately became apparent once the workbooks and activities were tried out with students. It was obvious that the English speaking students from private schools would not be comfortable with a Maltese text while the Maltese speakers from an area secondary schools would not be comfortable with an English text. The few words in Maltese in the role-play script were mispronounced by the English speakers who had real and serious difficulties in reading the Maltese words, this caused giggles and agitation on the part of the students involved in the acting distracting from the task at hand. On the other hand, the board game cards were initially only in English and while the English speakers thoroughly enjoyed and participated fully in the game, the Maltese speakers in the pilot group dismissed it immediately while others tried half hearted attempts and did not finish it. I considered the distribution of students in Private and State schools and decided to produce materials in both languages.

Monitoring Implementation and Effects

The first group of students to arrive, was given the worksheets in the workbook to work as a final activity following all the other tasks including the role-play. Although the students appeared very involved while going round the site filling in the answers on the sheet, the final work handed in was not of good quality. Whole sheets were handed in empty and many questions were left blank while others were graced by one word answers or comments like "could not find it". I attributed this response to the sequence of activities. The initial activities involving craft work and the role-play were very exciting, while filling in worksheets was quite an anti-climax in comparison. Definitely the worksheets in the student workbook had to become the first event. This was in fact done with the second group and the difference in response was immediately evident. Worksheets were handed in mostly filled in with answers that students had clearly given thought to.

Each item in the workbook was adjusted after feedback from students given on the spot, as I went round the Palace while they were filling in the answers. The questions involved investigative activities with a focus on artefacts. These artefacts were the various human made objects found at Inquisitor's Palace including such things as a sundial, an oven and various cisterns.

Sometimes students could not find an artefact mentioned in a question so it was obvious that instructions were not clear enough, at other times they were asking for the meaning of words in the question which they found hard to understand, so it was clear that particular phrases needed to be reworded or vocabulary to be replaced.

Further analysis was conducted from the collected workbooks after the visit. None of the students managed to finish all the exercises in the first version of the workbook, so I shortened its length considerably. I also substituted words that they found too difficult with easier ones with the same meaning, while other exercises proved to be too childish for secondary school children and were removed. Reference to artefacts which were duplicated in different rooms caused much confusion therefore I included clearer instructions.

The choice of an action research model with its revisiting approach proved to be the correct one for it became immediately clear that all materials and activities needed to be piloted and tried out with actual school children and the creation of on site teaching materials cannot be a one off exercise but rather a back and forth process involving continual feedback and input from the learners themselves. Therefore the first cycle of the Action Research project lasted from October 2004 till January 2005. The second cycle commenced in May 2005 and is presently in the process of implementation.

The learning theories of "New History" with its emphasis on history skills and concepts, as well as children being given first hand experience with historical evidence proved to be solid in that they produced very good responses from the students. This reconfirmed the effectiveness of the basic principles behind "New History" as a teaching approach. However, as the research progressed it became evident that even the most attractive and educationally sound materials can in fact flounder in practice. This is not as disastrous as it might first sound, very often it was a question of fine tuning rather than total removal or total changing of the activity but that fine tuning was crucial for the success of the activity. This fine tuning involved

changing things such as time management, sequence and chronology of activities as well as vocabulary usage.

From this research it became clear that the creation of teaching materials for on site activities cannot be a haphazard activity and much preparation is needed. The problem of on site activities is that the logistical difficulties are manifested ten fold and one has to be very well prepared for all contingencies. An amount of military precision is an important element which I feel contributed to the success of the activities and learning materials. Therefore from monitoring the implementation of the activities I concluded that the exact timing of the actual activities proved very helpful, and this strict adherence to timing ensured the whole experience was synchronised and worked. The sequence of activities was also crucial to the success of the activities and text had to be in both Maltese and English if one wishes to ensure the full participation of all kinds of students coming from different backgrounds. Meanwhile items on the student workbook were adjusted, removed or reworded after monitoring students' reaction to it. For example a photo of a well in the kitchen had originally been included in the workbook with an activity for children to draw it. This was considered a tedious exercise by many students and therefore it was removed.

Student evaluation of the whole project was obtained by asking students taking part in the pilot activities to fill in a note asking them "Whether they felt they had learned more with this approach or whether they preferred to be just taken round the site and listen to an adult talking". The student response from both schools was very positive, all the students except one replied that they much preferred doing the activities, they were described as "great fun" and "it was like an adventure" much better than "listening to somebody which is very boring", "I feel I learnt more through the activities because they were fun and I really enjoyed the play". One said s/he learnt better "through the activities because we learnt alone and it was great!" and some revealed insightful understanding of student behaviour "I think I learnt more doing the activities cause just listening is boring and we won't take much notice!" Only one student answered "I prefer just listening to somebody while showing me around , but I also learnt through the activity, which was to use a mirror and look up and copy one of the ceilings". This is an interesting response. The reason why a student would prefer to be just shown around could be because of his/her particular learning pattern. What Christine Johnston (1998) would describe as a student with 'high precision' who prefers to listen to a lot of facts and information, such students according to Johnston prefer traditional approaches for s/he feels safer in this method. "Unfortunately, students think that this is what teachers think that this is what learning is all about. We convince our students that communicating or repeating the facts we have told them demonstrates their learning. So, learners seek to regurgitate information, falling victim to the trap that correct answers equal knowledge and understanding." (Johnston 1998:26/27) While this analysis is probably correct, I think this should also make us, teachers, aware of different types of learners in our audience and therefore expose our students to a variety of approaches which target different learning patterns.

Therefore besides evaluating the project from the students' perspective this student evaluation exercise served in directly another purpose, that is, students were given the opportunity to think about what they had done. Metacognitive learning occurs when the learner thinks about how he or she best understands and learns or as described by Wittrock " the awareness and control over one's thought processes during learning".

This reflective thinking is important on the part of the learner because it has also been shown that it actually influences achievement (Baird, 1986).

Conclusion

Ultimately the following final versions of materials were produced; a teacher's resource book (Click on End Note 1), student workbooks in Maltese and English (See End Note 2), board game (See Figure 1) and a number of items to be used for craft work on site, explained in teacher's resource book (See activities A to F described in teacher's resource book Click on End Note 1). The teacher's resource book was sent to history teachers in all secondary schools in Malta. The teacher's resource book introduced the project and in it all the activities were described. There were also instructions which focused on class management procedures with model examples of classes of 30 students on a three hour visit. The role play scripts were included in the teacher's resource book, so teachers could assign roles to students before arriving at the Inquisitor's Palace, so students would be prepared. The teacher's resource book also included follow up activities teachers could do with their class once they returned to their school. Only the teacher's book was sent to the schools, once the classes arrived each student would be greeted with a pack which included the other items.

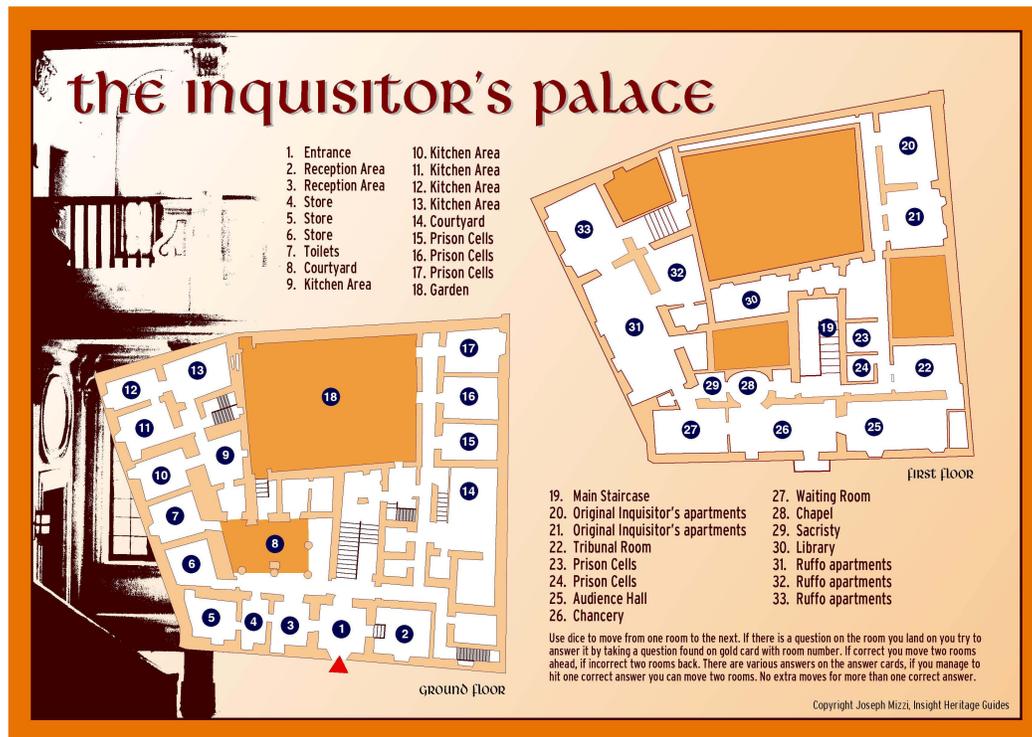


Figure 1: The Boardgame

This paper is reporting the main objective of this action research project, which was to start a process where children's learning materials would be made available in Maltese historical sites. This aim was reached in cycle one of this research, in the second cycle of this action research project I plan to target another historical site and with the insight provided by cycle one, new resources will be developed and implemented.

Besides the creation of teaching resources to be used on historical sites, there is a secondary but equally important objective in this project and that is to ultimately assess the effectiveness of these learning materials and activities. Not in just how motivating and enjoyable they are but whether history thinking skills were being improved or not through the participation in these activities. Data collection regarding this part of the research will start in the near future and it is hoped that eventually these results will also be published.

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Notes

1. Teacher's Resource Book may be downloaded from www.educ.um.edu.mt/jmer/library/TRB.pdf
2. Student Workbooks in Maltese or English may be bought from Heritage Malta, Inquisitor's Palace Vittoriosa.