
Somali Children in the Maltese Educational System

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Abstract

This paper examines closely the educational needs of one group of sub-Saharan African migrant children. The data was collected from a project which focused on these children's education at the primary school level and examined their level of inclusion and integration into the Maltese school system. Particular attention while collecting this data was given to the cultural, religious and linguistic needs of the participants and their families. This was examined against a wider policy of inclusion and differentiation espoused by those charting the Maltese educational system. Empirical research for the EU has shown that children living in basic income households, whose parents have low qualifications, are unemployed or are at risk of "in work poverty", and/or who come from a migrant or ethnic minority background are much less likely to gain good qualifications themselves at school. In other words, child poverty and educational disadvantage tend to perpetuate a vicious cycle of marginalization. The findings confirmed this assessment, underlining the need for affirmative action, while at the same time affording some hope for social inclusion.

Introduction

This article attempts to look at the progress of Somali children in Maltese state schools. The data on which the article is based is the result of a project funded in part by the University of Malta. What motivated this study was the new phenomenon on the island of displaced children entering Maltese schools. These were the children of irregular migrants, orphaned child migrants whose parents perished in the journey and older unaccompanied minors. All these would find their way to Malta through a torturous route that wound its way through the war torn states of Africa, across the Mediterranean Sea, landing at an EU border state where they sought asylum. The majority of these children would therefore be from Sub-Saharan Africa including Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan. Being minors they were spared the detention system and placed in community homes while their applications and those of their family were being considered (DEVAS National Report - Malta, 2010).

In conceptualising this study the focus was on the synergy between educational advancement and integration theories and by extension, unequal opportunities in education as a barrier to development and inclusion in wider society. The presence of social networks and dyadic ties in society reflecting Bordieu's notion of social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970) is something that displaced persons normally lack, given the absence of the social networks they probably relied on in their own country. Elaborating on the link between educational disadvantage and poverty and social exclusion, Nicaise (2010) distinguishes between two sets of factors; unequal opportunities and unequal treatment. The former refer to a set of causes that are largely external to the educational system. Dorling (2009) shows that the more equal a society in terms of the distribution of wealth and income the more equal opportunities are within education. The equitable distribution of wealth and resources leads to improvement in human capital, knowledge, skills and competences, physical and psychological health. Inequality needs to be compensated for, but the contrary often proves to be the case. "Far from "equalising" opportunities, education can be a powerful driver of social selection. When returns to education increase over time, this may lead to greater inter-generational persistence of poverty and less equality of opportunities" (Machin, 2006, p.5). Literature detailing discrimination and barriers in

education shows that children from migrant backgrounds are often referred to special needs programmes or lower educational school systems, as in the case of the Roma people (OSCE, 2012). Some school systems are also shown to amplify social inequalities by utilising such methods as retention in grade, selectivity in school admission and early tracking systems, vocational track at an early age, use of socially biased testing methods, particularly the use of certain types of IQ tests, and the design of curricula with an excessive focus on language and maths (Nicaise, 2012). However, the use of positive discrimination to compensate for inequalities is often overlooked (Lynch & Baker, 2005) as is the use of intercultural and experience based education to bridge the gap between school and home within school pedagogy (Blaton et al., 2010). Critical race theory, social justice and the reframing of education (Housee, 2012), may offer transformative responses to the issue of virtually transparent immigrant children in our educational system.

In attempting to understand these issues within the context of migrant children functioning within the Maltese educational system, it was decided to focus on the children of one ethnic group since we felt that an understanding of the children's place of origin and cultural and family values was essential to assist us in understanding the process of children's integration into the local school system. Accordingly, we took the decision to focus on Somali children, one of the largest asylum seeking cohorts on the island who normally succeed in attaining refugee status or qualify for subsidiary protection with all the auxiliary rights (Camilleri, 2010). According to statistics released by the Office of the Refugee Commissioner (Malta) as at 31st December 2011, Somali refugees accounted for 39% of all refugees (455) and were by far the largest number of any refugee group arriving by boat. They also appear to be the only ethnic group, apart from Eritreans, to be accompanied by children. Indeed in 2011, 29 Somali children, constituting 48% of all minors arriving by boat, registered for asylum (UNHCR Malta, 2011).

This project focused on children in primary schools, for although Maltese law specifies that children should attend school up to the age of 16 years, children older than eleven years appeared not to be attending regular schooling even if some form of

educational provision was available to them. This is reflected in the European Migration Network (2010) publication on unaccompanied minors. Thus most of the children of these migrants were to be found in primary school and were under the age of eleven years.

Background

In order to understand what these children are up against when they start school in Malta we need to have some idea of where they are coming from and what they are coming to. These Somali children originate from a country located in the Horn of Africa. As a group, ethnic Somalis are generally entirely Muslim and Somali society is clan based with large extended families that have many children. The language is Somali and until 1972 there was no written form of expression. The economy of Somalia is located largely in the primary sector (over 70%). Between 1991 and 1993 civil war created more than 1.5 million refugees. Today the country remains divided and only a transitional government is in place which controls only a small part of the country. There is no central government in a large part of the territory. Due to armed attacks on and threats to humanitarian aid workers, the World Food Programme partially suspended its operations in southern Somalia in early January 2010 pending improvement in the provision of security. The country is presently characterized as a failed state and is rated as one of the poorest and most violent states in the world (Marangio, 2012). Former UN Secretary General [Boutros Boutros Ghali](#) (1999) also referred to the killing of civilians in the Somali Civil War as genocide. Figures such as household incomes and unemployment rates seem to be unavailable. Comparing the 2005–2010 period with the half-decade just prior to the outbreak of the conflict (1985–1990), [life expectancy](#) actually increased from an average of 47 years for men and women to 48.2 years for men and 51.0 years for women. According to a 2005 World Health Organization estimate, about 97.9% of Somalia's women and girls have undergone [female circumcision](#) (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008).

The family

Somalis have large families, and several generations frequently live together in one house. The fertility rate is just over 7 children born to each woman (WellShare International, n.d.). Due to the civil war, families have lost members through death and separation. The father is considered to be the head of the household and family duties are divided by gender. The social standing of women is relatively high in that the work of women is respected and regarded as economically important. In the cities, women own shops and work in a variety of occupations. It is common for men and women to meet and eat separately. In a website that is no longer funded by the State of California and hence no longer available (<http://www.immigrantinfo.org/kin/somalia>), Stephenson, (n.d.) explains that because of the war and Somali oral tradition, Somalis are unlikely to have official written documents such as birth, death and marriage certificates. As such, they may not know their own age or the year in which an event occurred. This causes various conflicts in Western society in areas such as school, social security benefits and immigration.

Education

According to the latest UNICEF report on education in Somalia (http://www.unicef.org/somalia/education_56.html), education and formal classroom learning opportunities are limited and unavailable for the majority of children in Somalia. There have been substantial increases in the number of operational schools and in enrolment rates, but considerable disparities in the quality of and access to primary education, and this remains problematic in parts of the country because of the socio-economic, cultural and political realities. Most existing schools are concentrated in and around urban areas and are mainly financed by fees or other forms of support from parents and communities, with some input from external agencies. Around 20% of primary aged children are enrolled in primary schools and only 37% of these are girls. According to the CIA Fact Book (2012) there is a 38% literacy rate.

The Journey

The children that arrive in Malta are either born in Somalia or along the treacherous journey getting here, often in refugee camps. Others are born on the road,

in a few cases just before the boat journey to the island and a few are born soon after their mothers arrive on Malta. It is calculated that over a thousand Somalis leave their country each day, the majority women and children (Gettleman, 2011). They are targeted by bandits and run the danger of theft, rape and assault. Much of the journey takes place on foot and can take months and even years for these migrants to reach the Mediterranean Sea. Some of them never make it and die along the way (Schmoll, Saïd & Spiteri, 2011).

Arrival in Malta

Once the children arrive in Malta as minors, they are placed in detention along with their family. Since both minors and families are classified as vulnerable they are normally released shortly after, although at times it can take over a month. This process depends on how long it takes for their medical tests to be made available, and the load on the system. Unaccompanied minors also undergo an age assessment test before they are released from detention and this can take some time. Once children with their families are released, they are placed in family accommodation. There are three family facilities on the island located in Balzan (Good Shepherd Convent), Fgura (Dar il-Liedna/Ivy House) and Hal-Far (Hangar Open Centre). These centres provide some support in terms of social and community workers, although the degree of support provided varies from centre to centre. Normally families are provided with a room which doubles up as a sleeping and living area. Kitchen and bathroom facilities are shared. The Fgura facility (Ivy House) also provides housing for unaccompanied minors. However, these three family facilities are small and were soon filled to capacity. In 2011 with an increase in incoming migrants, many families were being placed in tents and containers in a hanger in Hal Far. Normally families are kept in this accommodation until they find their own place, however, under the pressure of placing new migrants, some families that have overstayed are being asked to leave. These normally go and live with other Somali families in the community, usually in small apartments (Personal correspondence from Alba Cauchi, Researcher for UNHCR, Malta).

The state of play in Malta

In order to understand the social context into which Somali families have to settle we need to have some understanding of the Maltese scenario. In the context of migration, Malta has for centuries been a country of emigrants. Organised migration was actively pursued under the period of British rule as an effective method of relieving the pressure of high population density on the scarcity of natural resources of a small island archipelago.ⁱ During the latter period of British rule the Maltese settled in droves in Mediterranean Basin countries as well as wider afield in the new world and in the then newly set up colonies in the southern hemisphere. Distinct efforts were made to settle Maltese nationals in other destinations in the British Empire such as Gibraltar, Corfu and Egypt, within the Mediterranean basin and later on, especially after the WWII to North America and Australia and to some extent New Zealand (Attard, 1999). In the Maltese psyche, Malta has always been considered to be the source of migrants and was always seen as being too poor to be otherwise. In fact the last waves of organised migration to Australia took place as recently as the late 1960s and continued well into the early 1980s with the odd migrant or two still utilising the assisted passage scheme to pay for their passage to Australia. Amore (2005) states that between 1945 and 1979, 140,000 men, women and children migrated to destinations outside Malta, with Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States being the main destinations.ⁱⁱ

Therefore, in the Maltese perspective, Malta is not seen as being a destination for settlement, and neither did it experience this phenomenon, except perhaps for some UK nationals, mostly ex-servicemen who in the 1960s and 1970s sought retirement on the archipelago.ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, the idea of Malta as a destination for settlement and work remains rather alien to most Maltese in spite of the fact that today a number of foreigners reside in Malta for work, family or tax reasons, mainly from the EU, the Commonwealth, Serbia and the former USSR. Nonetheless, there are fewer foreigners living in Malta (4.4%) than is average for the EU (6.4%). (Migrant Integration Policy Index, 2012)

It was only with EU membership that the island, for the first time in its history,

Malta became the target of regular and irregular migrants. However in the wake of the natural calamities and internal strife in sub-Saharan Africa, namely in Somalia, the Maltese in their majority could not conceive that Malta could possibly be the destination of a number of refugees who literally had to flee their country to secure some form of livelihood away from the dangers of famine and internal strife. Indeed, Amore (2005) makes mention of the fact that as immigration is a relatively recent phenomenon in the Maltese context, the word “immigrant” is not found among the terms used by the National Statistics Office (Malta) which uses “returned migrants” and “non-Maltese nationals”. These designations are used to describe those Maltese migrants who have returned to live on Malta and those relatively few individuals who have taken up residence on the islands, usually of British, Italian and French or of wider European origins. Malta is therefore not equipped to provide for immigrants who are forced to make recourse to public funds on a long term basis, having been promoted as a destination for wealthier northern Europeans seeking retirement in warmer climes. Since Malta does not boast of any natural resources other than its favourable climate, attracting wealthy foreign nationals to invest in Malta has always been considered of great importance to the island’s economy, and indeed, providing for refugees would be considered counter-productive to that end.

Schaa (2010) notes how along with Italy and Cyprus, Malta has become the destination of an influx of migrants from the Horn of Africa, and even if in comparison with the global number of migrants entering Europe the numbers of those arriving in Malta may pale into insignificance, “the impact in proportional terms – given the country’s small size and very heavy population density – has been higher than in most European countries” (p.6). It is probably the disproportionately large numbers of arrivals as well as the impact on the small infrastructure that has led to the development of xenophobic attitudes towards these particular refugees. At the end of 2010, the total non-EU population of Malta was estimated at around 11,300 persons or 2.7% of the total population (Eurostat News release 105/2011 14 July 2011). About 4,400 of these originate from sub-Saharan Africa (Hammarberg, 2011).

Until the influx of these irregular migrants, racism and discrimination were not

prevalent in Malta. Particularly because of its mixed linguistic and cultural legacies and its proximity to the African continent, Malta was deemed to be a tolerant society. However today, hostility towards black persons of African origin exists, though arguably it is not seen as being ideological (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) – Second Report on Malta, 2002). Indeed, a decade later in a sample of 500 African interviewees in Malta interviewed for the European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey (EU-MIDIS) by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2009), Africans in Malta ranked second (63%) in the ‘top ten’ ethnic minorities experiencing levels of discrimination over a 12 month period (p. 9). On a much smaller scale, Gauci (2012) writing for the European Network against Racism (ENAR) reports that of 32 interviewees in his study, every migrant interviewed for the study had been verbally harassed since arriving in Malta.

Due to its small size and overpopulation Malta has considered itself to be a transit country for these refugees as reported in the ECRI – Second Report on Malta (2002). On 31st October 2011 the Marsa Open Centre director Ahmed Burge stated that African migrants invariably look to Malta as a transit point and they resist leaving open centres because they see no future out there in Maltese society. “All the people registered at the Marsa open centre have applied to leave the island and get resettled elsewhere; 100 per cent. They want to leave Malta at all costs.” ... “Do people really want African migrants to remain in Malta? The answer is ‘no’,” Dr Bugre said. “There is a national mindset that says ‘African migrants are here as temporary guests, and one day they must leave’”.^{iv} Malta’s asylum policy makes little provision for the integration of refugees or migrants into broader society. Indeed a 2011 study by the British Council and Migrant Policy Group ranked Malta 28 out of 31 European countries in terms of integration of migrants. A 2010 report by the Jesuit Refugee Service had found that it was extremely difficult for migrants who moved out of centres in the hope of finding gainful employment to re-enter the same open centre system if they subsequently lost their source of income. Migrants granted subsidiary or humanitarian protection, are not eligible for unemployment benefits, and as a result, migrants wanting to seek work and their own accommodation think twice before doing so. If they lose their job, they end up jobless, homeless and with no social safety net.

Politics of Integration

Almost a decade after the first waves of irregular immigration, the official policy remains that of actively seeking to resettle as many refugees as possible outside the Maltese shores. However in truth there are some asylum seekers who do eventually end up residing permanently in Malta, and Hammarberg (2011) is correct in stating that “progress in resettlement and relocation [to other countries] should go hand in hand with the opening of clear avenues for local integration, which should be supported by an adequate integration programme ... and access to citizenship” (p. 15). A start in this direction has been made but is still in its infancy. *The Migrants Integration Policy Index* (British Council/Migration Policy Group, 2012) states that “Malta is only beginning to address immigration and asylum ... those who stay participate in limited integration programmes, often EU funded. The report states that “conditions would become more favourable for integration if Malta’s policies (currently 28th of 31 from the MIPEX countries) improved to the EU average [with] Malta usually ... [makes] progress when it follows EU laws and trends”. The report adds that eventually migrants can become long term residents although few become Maltese citizens. Furthermore, it goes on to say that there are “some of longest waits for family reunion”, and that the island “has one of most exclusionary naturalisation policies in Europe.”

Integrating Somali Migrants: The Maltese Educational System

Undoubtedly, providing educational facilities is one of the main pillars of any integration policy. The law regulating Education in Malta (Act XXIV of 1988) defines the rights and obligations of students, parents, the State and Non-Governmental Organisations (foremost amongst which is the Catholic Church) in the sphere of education. The Maltese educational institutions include State, private, and religious schools. Schooling is compulsory from age 5 to 16 years but kindergarten classes are provided from the age of 3 years. A state primary school is to be found in every town and village. State schools are fully funded by the state including the provision of text books at no cost to the parents. Church schools are substantially subsidised by Government and tuition is free although parents are expected to make a small annual

donation to the school if they can afford it. Independent schools are at a cost, with some imposing fees as high as €7,000 annually. There is a National Minimum Curriculum set for all schools to establish standards of teaching, hygiene, safety, dimensions of classrooms, and amenities. Currently a curricular reform is underway (Cutajar, 2007; Eurybase, 2007; UNESCO-International Bureau of Education, 2012).

The state secondary school system is located at the regional level and comprises colleges that prepare students for their MATSEC exams (comparable to English GCSEs). Students are placed in sets for English, Maths and Maltese, whilst all other subjects are taught in mixed ability classes. These schools also provide classes in sport and extracurricular activities. All classes are in English, barring Maltese, religion and social studies which are taught in Maltese. Final exam papers are also presented in English except for these subjects. However since the Maltese language is the first language of the majority of the children, a certain amount of code switching takes place in class and teachers may resort to the use of Maltese when they feel that certain children are not understanding them in English. Children will also use Maltese as their main language of communication in the classroom and the playground.

Malta has adopted an inclusion policy for special needs for the last 25 years. Support for children with special needs in state schools is provided free of charge on a one-to-one or shared basis. The system at secondary school level is being overhauled to ensure that support is provided on a subject basis, whilst in primary school there is a gradual shift towards the learning support assistant assisting the whole class with particular emphasis on the stated child rather than exclusively supporting that one child (Curriculum Review Committee, 2011). Malta's educational support system for special educational needs compares quite favourably with other support systems in Europe, sometimes bettering them because learning support assistants are required to follow further education courses in order to work as such, and because every school's needs in this domain are looked after by an inclusion coordinator with regular reviews of students' progress. (Spiteri et al., 2005; European Agency for Special Needs Education – Malta, 2010)

Although since the passing of the Refugees Act, Act XX of 2000, persons

recognized as refugees, and those granted humanitarian protection are entitled to access the state education system, to date, there are no special provisions or specific arrangements made for children of migrants and they are not deemed to have special needs (Eurydice, 2009). The Faculty of Education of the University of Malta, being the major agency for the preparation and education of new teachers, does not specifically offer any compulsory courses on the education of migrant children although the issue of diversity, sometimes including migration issues, spans most courses delivered in the area of educational psychology among others. In the case of Malta, the *Migrant Integration Policy Index* (2012) states that democracy and values education is part of the National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) at least on paper, while immigrant languages and cultures are not. The index goes on to say that “valuing social diversity is one of Malta’s NMC’s broad core values, along with considering change in the community, human rights and responsibilities, and promoting active global citizenship”. The Index concludes by adding that the Ministry of Education (Malta) has created a post for a teacher to focus on implementing intercultural education through, for instance, some in-service courses. However, as yet, the post is not operational and there is only one teacher detailed to look after the educational needs of unaccompanied minors (personal communication).

Since Malta has just started to adapt its schools to diversity, its policies are among the least favourable in Europe for migrant pupils. All children, regardless of their status, have the implicit right to an education, at least until age 18 but not up to university level. Despite some help for disadvantaged students, Malta does not target specific needs of newcomers in its policies. Teachers may receive some pre-service training on these needs, but schools are not guaranteed extra teachers, funding or language support for each newcomer. Malta is one of 5 countries without any policy on new opportunities such as (the teaching of) immigrant children’s languages in mainstream schools (Migrant Integration Policy Index, 2012). The spidergram in Figure 1 below would suggest that education ranks last in terms of the country’s ability to respond to migrant needs, ranking even lower than access to citizenship and political participation. This is in spite of it being a signatory to the Salamanca Statement which emphasises education for all persons, without regard to their economic condition.

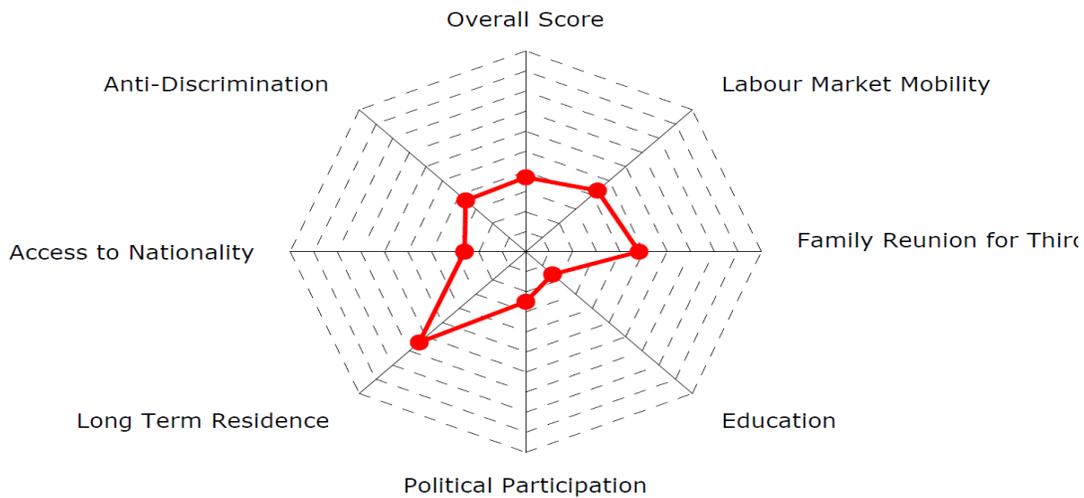


Figure 1

Since October 2003, it has been acknowledged in Malta that children of migrants have a right to a state education, and indeed all children of migrant workers within the compulsory school age group (5 to 16 years) have been subject to school-based measures indicated in the legislation, including support for learning one of the official languages (Eurydice, 2005). However, in April 2009, Eurydice published statistics on the measures taken to integrate immigrant children into schools in Europe, listing three particular measures to foster communication between schools and immigrant families among other measures taken to integrate children. The document *Integrating Immigrant Children into Schools in Europe* (EACEA, 2009) underlines the importance of parental involvement in their children's education and describes how many immigrant parents are likely to encounter difficulties of a linguistic or cultural nature in keeping contact with the school. The dissonance that occurs between the needs, values and traditions of the home and those of the schools is well described in Crozier & Davies (2007). The EACEA (2009) document lists three methods of promoting communication between the school and immigrant parents, namely the publication of written information on the school system in the language of origin of immigrant families, the use of interpreters in various situations in the school life and the

appointment of resource persons, such as mediators, to be specifically responsible for liaising between immigrant pupils, their families, and the school. This is shown graphically in Figure 2 below.

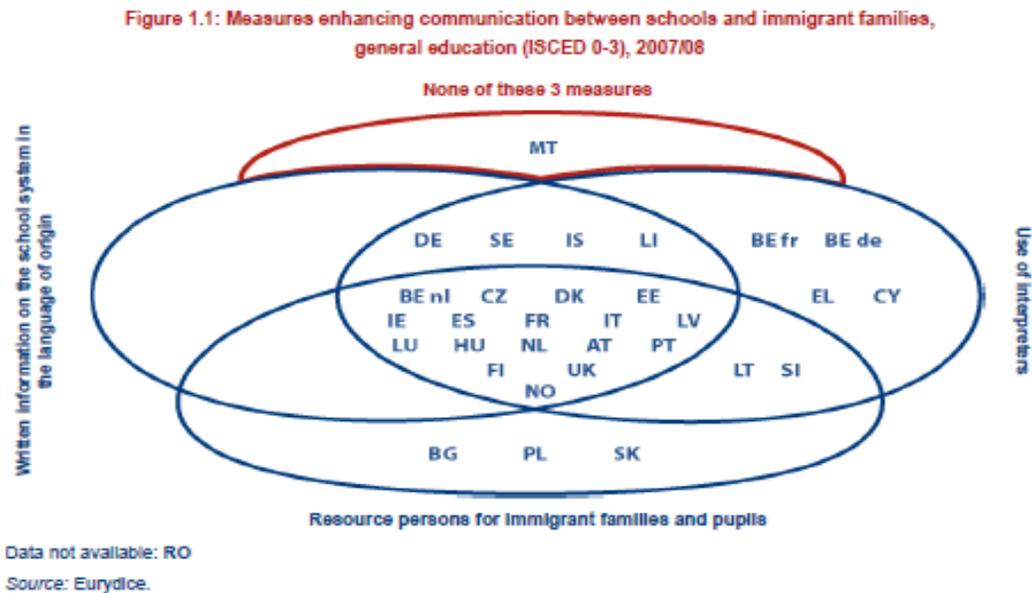


Figure 2

These three requirements make for healthy and productive school-home relationships which are likely to benefit all stakeholders in children's education, namely the parents and the schools themselves, whilst reducing misunderstandings and opening channels of communication and co-operation. As of 2009, half the countries of Europe, including Italy and the UK, countries with which Malta has close cultural and educational links, were making use of all three methods to promote communication between schools and immigrant families. Most of the other countries were using at least two of these methods to foster school-home links and communication. Even Cyprus, which is often compared to Malta because of its relatively small size, appears to be putting at least one measure in place to foster school-home links with interpreters being available to primary schools for Turkish Cypriot pupils and pupils from certain areas of the Former Soviet Union. However,

Cyprus undoubtedly is far more experienced in this field since the island has had to deal with integrating cultural mixes into the classroom for many years. On the other hand, having one or more, or even all three columns of the system does not guarantee a seamless service as there are various difficulties with the funding and sourcing of such services in a good number of states. Malta is the only state in the whole of the EU, with the possible exception of Romania, which does not implement any one of these strategies (*ibid.*).

Integrating Migrant Children

Although statistics are inconclusive, Malta is experiencing a rising number of foreign nationals settling on the island with their children entering the school system. In the case of migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, however, since most of these are single men of working age, the number of children of school going age is negligible, although this is expected to rise in future years as these men marry women from their own cultural background or even from the main population. In addition, a number of those, who are possibly of school going age, that is 14 and 15 year olds, attempt to pass themselves off as 18 in order to enter the labour market and help support their family (Frendo, 2008 cited in the appendix to the ECRI Third Report on Malta, 2009). To determine statistics for child migrants is a difficult task as there seem to be no statistics available for accompanied child migrants. In the case of unaccompanied child migrants, the statistics are fraught with errors due to the issue of the high number of young adults (over 18 years of age) claiming to be minors not to be detained. Pace et al (2009) indicate that during the period 2008-2009 there were around 400 claimants each year of which only a small fraction was substantiated. At present there are only a few migrant children from Sub-Saharan Africa attending school and this presents problems when conducting a study of child performance and integration in schools since the small numbers, do not allow one to extrapolate further than the individual cases.

Literature Review

As yet there is little material available on the performance of migrant children in Maltese schools. There is however, some literature available on education in Malta in

relation to the issue of migrant children. This literature tends to be of two types. There are a number of reports published by foreign organisations that detail the Maltese approach to this issue and these include reports by the EU Commission, Council of Europe, the ECRI and Eurydice. Hammarberg, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe stressed that the system in place in Malta to support migrants perpetuates their social exclusion and leaves them at serious risk of destitution (2011). This is epitomised by the state of affairs at the end of 2010 when 440 persons, including some families with small children, all originating from sub-Saharan Africa, were being accommodated in the Hal Far hanger in sub-standard conditions. Common themes run through these reports such as the emphasis on the common challenges faced by EU countries including Malta, the lack of co-ordination between the different policies addressed at migrant children and their families, the fact that schools still have not adapted to the needs of migrants pupils and their families, and the lack of necessary intercultural skills by teachers (Council of the European Union 2978th European Commission Education, Youth and Culture Council Meeting, 2009).

Eurydice (2005) lists a number of recommendations to assist Maltese schools to integrate immigrant school children including teacher training, incorporating cultural aspects into the curriculum and the need to teach these children both the languages of the state as well as their language of origin. The ECRI report (2011) also stressed that in the Maltese school curriculum there is a lack of teaching about cultures and about historical events of importance, and that this was needed in order to avoid stereotyping and prejudice. The report also points to some harassment of children, and emphasises that children in Malta need to be taught more about different cultures, religions, and histories in order that children gain a respect for those who are different from them. Schaa (2010) elaborates on the problems in detail: in 2006, 40% (289) of asylum seekers in Malta had never attended school and were illiterate while 36% (267) had only attended primary school. Just 17% (125) had been to post primary school, 5% had been to high school and 2% (14) to a tertiary institution. Therefore, in 2006 some 76% were illiterate or semi-literate. Teachers, he continues, consider students from Sub-Saharan Africa to be less motivated although he concludes by adding that the Jesuit Refugee Service had been activating an outreach programme to educate students in

cultural sensitivity. He also refers to the provision of the toolkit for teaching local children about asylum and migration in Europe entitled *Not Just Numbers* (IOM/UNHCR, 2009).

There are also a number of articles on the subject written by locals. Azzopardi (2008) focuses on tools for developing cultural sensitivity among the Maltese and particularly in schools, and on the need to transform the educational environment and further notions of justice and democracy in the schools. He stresses the need to develop an understanding of the diverse communities and the ethnically diverse children in the educational system. While Azzopardi (*ibid.*) stresses the need for schools to respond to cultural difference, he also emphasizes that these differences can provide stimuli. He concludes by calling for a more inclusive discourse and more research in this area and in multicultural issues which will help build multicultural schools. These should be characterised by high expectations for all students and a curriculum that reflects a range of cultures both in its content and testing procedures. Camilleri (2008) also focuses on the need for schools to be seen as places that fosters a politics of inclusion. His paper deals with the psychological effects on children who are regarded as irregular migrants; the trauma, the scars, the depression, the uncertainty, the feeling of confusion and uprootedness and the exposure to racial abuse. He argues that schools are the perfect place to foster integration but points out that normally schools, and schools in Malta being no exception, are highly institutionalized along the lines of the dominant culture.

In the context of works that deal with the issue at a more grass roots level, the article by Camilleri (*ibid*) is the only work that utilized interviews with parents, teachers and children. It was designed to research the school adjustment of children from migrant families aged 11 to 16 years. However, the data is limited to 3 students chosen from different backgrounds aged 15, 13, 11, two boys, one girl, their parents and teachers. The findings showed that there was apprehension about starting school, that the biggest barrier the children contended with was that of language, although the children felt that this was largely overcome with time. There was also an emphasis of a feeling of shame at being classed as an irregular migrant and of living in substandard

accommodation. On the positive side, the children felt Maltese and wanted to fit in. At least one of the children was receiving additional support which she found very helpful.

Pace *et al.* (2009) focus on the extent to which Maltese schools have adapted to the needs of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum. Their research has indicated that although unaccompanied minors are entitled to free education and are obliged to attend school, in practice hardly any such minors residing in residential facilities do so. They add that there seems to be huge obstacles to integrating unaccompanied minors into mainstream schooling and that at the beginning of the scholastic year a number had started attending school but were then told not to in order that arrangements could be made for them to provide for their needs in a different way. The article does not detail why their needs were deemed not to be met in the regular school, whether these needs were eventually met, and whether the children returned to school. However we are told that arrangements were being made to sponsor a teacher to visit the residential facilities three times a week to teach these children Maths and English as a stop gap solution until they were integrated into mainstream schooling. Meanwhile, a social studies graduate was selected to act as mentor at Dar is-Sliem to those children under the age of 16 living in residential homes to try to encourage minors to enrol on courses that enhanced their employment potential at ETC (Employment and Training Corporation) and the Adult Education Division.

Calleja *et al.* (2010) also focus on what is being done in schools in order to accommodate migrant children. These children come from all over the world and include those that have lived in Malta for a number of years and a few who have settled here. The authors report that in 2009 there were 555 students from ethnic minorities in state schools, 43 of whom were from Sub Saharan Africa and 9 of these were Somali. The publication outlines positive initiatives taken by state schools at Pieta' and San Pawl il-Baħar where a number of activities celebrating diversity were recorded and where inclusive practices were introduced. The authors cite the example of the state school at Birżebbuġa as a model of best practice. Here children and their parents were taught that Malta is a multi-cultural society, and the children regularly

dealt with multicultural issues in their learning, particularly through subjects such as religious studies, social studies, and sports. The school also introduced procedures to deal with a number of language problems that included students being taken out of class for an hour a week and given instruction in their own language. In the first three months, these migrant children were only exposed to English in their classroom, following which Maltese was gradually introduced. The services of learning support assistants were also employed as was a buddy system, where children were encouraged to help their peers. At the Sliema state primary school, children of migrant parents were also encouraged to celebrate their own feasts and traditions, whilst efforts were made to involve the parents of foreign children in the daily life of the school.

With regard to understanding the plight of a particular national cohort of children, or in our case Somali children, we had to draw on literature that dealt with comparable situations in Europe, the USA and Australia. From the literature we gained an understanding of the social background of the children which in turn afforded us a greater understanding of their situation. Dybdahl & Hundeide (1998) elaborate on the close fabric of family life and its importance in socializing children, for example, doing chores from an early age and being taught by their relatives to cook. They also add that these children spend much of their time with multiple minders from the village and with family. Castel & Kurata (2004) also confirm that the family is the ultimate source of identity for these children, and that a large extended family headed by the grandparents is a source of strength and security.

Guerin *et al.* (n.d.), who carried out a study with Somalis in New Zealand, explain that this mindset impacts deleteriously on the children's educational experience as different areas of their life cannot be easily compartmentalized and this results in a weak link between family and school. This differs from the environment that Western children find themselves in where friends and activities and to a certain extent school, are brought together in the concept of the family within the local community. In addition to this, these children face the added constraints of interrupted schooling, poor English, missing family members, poverty, and discrimination associated with presumed or real cultural deficit. Furthermore, Somali parents are not

involved in the children's schooling. Indeed, according to their culture, for parents to be involved directly in their children's education is considered to be in bad taste, and even if they wished to be involved their English is too weak to enable them to do so. Those Somalis arriving in their teens in host countries and being exposed to dual cultures have a hard time integrating. This is exacerbated by the fact that many of these children arrive with single mothers, where the boys have no authority figures. Guerin *et al.* (*ibid*) conclude with the following recommendations: that parents should be included in the child's education, that parents participate on school trips, that all letters and school reports sent home should be translated and that a video be produced showing all facets of the school system. Emua & Jones (2000) also recommend support, stressing however, that while these children bring into the class room a range of opportunities and perspectives, they should not be put at risk of underachievement. They also suggest that support be provided through Somali link workers, that these children are taught the Somali language, that there is a clear policy for refugee and asylum seeking children and that a programme be put in place that includes training teachers on how to cope with different languages in the classroom. They also conclude that extra English and maths classes be held after school.

Methodology

We found little available material in terms of methodological approaches to be utilized when assessing the performance of these students in schools. Most material consulted for this article comprised official reports submitted to governmental entities which were in large part based on official statistics. Others were based on insight into particular conditions afforded by bodies and organisations working with refugees and also included some personal anecdotal experiences like those of Camilleri (2008).

Among some of the relevant examples of valid methodologies was that of Emua & Jones (2000) which included questionnaires conducted with the community of teachers and parents in Camden schools attended by Somali children. The questions focused on determining the levels of support provided to these students.

After a study of the literature the authors decided that the best approach would be to work with a select number of students from one national group in order to make

it simpler to factor in national, cultural and religious influences that may impact on their educational experience. In our case, it was decided to focus on Somali children because they constitute one of the larger migrant groups from Africa entering Maltese borders and are categorized as nationals who can claim rights of asylum under international law. In the light of certain ethical considerations, and the vulnerability of the children being studied, the authors opted to interview their parents and teachers rather than the children themselves. This was seen a valid and sensitive approach to the issue which circumvented the issue of the possible vulnerability of the children being studied and which could to some extent have been interpreted by the children as intrusive and possibly even threatening.

In June 2009 permission was obtained from the Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family, under whose aegis migrant children fall, to conduct the current study. Seven parents of school-going minors were contacted anonymously and all consented to being interviewed. They also consented to their children's teachers and heads of school being interviewed on their children's progress. Parents, primarily mothers, as fathers or partners were rarely present during the meeting, were interviewed by the authors or by a research assistant. In all the writers identified seven children of Somali origin who could be followed up at school at the time of writing. They also identified another two who could not be followed up as they had recently left school.

The families were interviewed at their homes, primarily in community residences, run by the Church and NGOs. All interviews with the parents took place with the assistance of an interpreter since the mothers interviewed spoke little or no English or Maltese. The interviews commenced with a pilot study. This consisted of two sets of interviews. The first set of interviews took place with a mother who was not Somali herself but who was married to a Somali and who was perceived as being Somali by the other Somali women in the group. This interview was relatively unstructured and focused primarily on her child's performance at school and his perceptions of the school and the children as related to us through the mother. This was followed up by another unstructured interview with his teacher during which the

headmistress was also present. The interview focused both on the performance of the child and his ability to navigate the cultural differences that distinguished these children and problems they encountered, the methods the school had adopted to cope with this new situation, as well as suggested ways forward. The second set of interviews were semi structured and open-ended since questions were prepared prior to the interviews based on the findings of the first set of interviews. At this point the questions were also made available to the interpreter to assist him in conducting the interviews. On the completion of the second set of interviews, the set of questions were then fine-tuned and passed on to the research assistants in order to guide them in conducting further interviews.

We used our insight from the perused literature on Somali children's education, our own educational experiences and the feedback we received from the early interviews to structure the subsequent questions more tightly into different themes. These included background, family information and present living conditions, the child and general information related to school, the child's attitude to school, his/her performance and his/her ability to cope, facilities in place to assist the child, the school as a social and extracurricular experience, educational background of the parents/guardian and recommendations made by the participants.

The Central Themes that Emerged from the Interviews

Background

With one or two exceptions, all the children came from families who were living in basic accommodation shared with other refugees and not in a house of their own. In their majority the parents were illiterate even in their own language and could not support their children in the context of any formal educational experience, and more specifically they could not assist them with their homework. None of the children were older than 11 years, and none were in any of the moderately selective secondary schools (Junior Lyceums, which at the time of the interview were still in existence and catered for slightly more than 50% of the state school population). Many of the mothers were aware that their children were finding school difficult but were not aware of the extent of the difficulty and largely viewed their child's performance at

school as being more than adequate although the reality was that most of the children were performing poorly. Indeed the children were described by different heads of school as needing support beyond that made available. With the one exception of a child who seems to have had some degree of behavioural difficulties, all children were well integrated at a social level in their classes, and almost all claimed they socialized with Maltese friends outside school, either in the local playground or town or village centres.

The Findings in Detail

1. The issue of accommodation

Most of the parents interviewed were living in shared accommodation. Specifically, ECRI (2008) indicated that conditions that accommodate persons belonging to vulnerable categories of migrants in Malta were reported to be good. The writers visited two mothers living in accommodation made available to the state by a Church order to house migrant women which in this case were in their majority from sub-Saharan Africa. The accommodation had an aura of institutionalisation but was hygienic. There was a gatekeeper who vetted visitors, and who ensured that the place was kept relatively clean and orderly and who drew up rosters for the residents to clean the common areas and keep the residence in good domestic order. In these facilities basic washing and cooking facilities were shared and generally there was very little privacy. Mothers and children were living in what was essentially small, cramped and inadequate, temporary accommodation, with one room housing a family of four.

Of the seven participants interviewed, six families were living in shared accommodation; only one family was in a house. This environment was not conducive to raising children because in the first instance, there was nowhere which was private or quiet enough for parents to support their children in their schoolwork. One parent told us that consequent to the cramped accommodation, and not to disturb the other residents she had to take her children outside to play since there was no indoor space

to do so. This was seen by the researchers as inimical to the needs of the children who could otherwise play inside the residence rather than be taken outside every time they wished to play. The lack of space resulted in no quiet areas for children to do their homework, no place to store school books and exercise books which resulted in their often being lost as corroborated by their teachers. To conclude it became clear that for most parents their main concerns centred on daily survival and pursuing refugee status rather than to attend to their children's educational needs.

2. The issue of illiteracy

In terms of literacy levels of the interviewees, of the seven mothers interviewed, five were illiterate in Somali and Arabic. The other two were literate in Somali and one of them claimed to be literate in Arabic, although she only attended primary schooling. This person claimed that her brother and sister had both been to university, so it would not be inconceivable that she had had access to some level of education. Of those mothers with a primary education, one was attending English classes twice a week, whilst another actively requested help in studying English although this does not imply that she had any knowledge of the language. Not being literate in their own language, none of the other five women showed an interest in studying English or Maltese formally as attested by each of the respondents.

By and large, the parents' illiteracy in any language is seen as a serious impediment to their children's progress at school. Had the parents at least been literate in their own language, this would have counteracted one aspect of the difficulties that their children experience at school. They would have possessed the cultural capital to be able to seek the provision of assistance in their children's school work even if they were unable to do it themselves. Within the limits of the small sample, parents' literacy, even if not in Maltese or English, was seen as a possible indicator of facilitated communication with the school. Once parents registered interest in their child's scholastic progress, some aspect of interpretation could possibly be availed of to enable the parent to voice her concerns about her child's or children's schooling. In fact, we found that the two parents who were literate both indicated that their children would benefit from support at school, and seemed all too conscious of their predicament.

3. Type of school attended

All the parents participating in this study had children who were attending state primary school. Some of these parents also had children who were attending or until recently had attended state secondary school. Although these children are not the subject of this study, it was noted that four of these children attended a non-selective secondary school or an Opportunity Centre School which is categorised as the bottom tier of the educational system providing a primary level rather than a secondary level curriculum. This supports the impression of the authors that the children of these migrants were experiencing considerable educational difficulties.

4. Children being reported as doing well but performing poorly

Although technically only seven mothers were interviewed, eleven children featured in their discussions with the researchers. In some cases, particularly where children were older and attending secondary education, the parents were somewhat more able to discern whether their children were performing well or poorly at school, and in these cases there was unanimous agreement among the parents that their children were performing poorly. This was not always the case with the parents of the younger children who interpreted no communication from school as a sign that all was well. This resonates with Kahin's (1997) statement that there were often problems with school-home communication. This was plainly illustrated in one case where the mother of an eight-year old took her son's word that he was performing well. In reality, his teacher confirmed that he was rather weak and required support. This state of affairs parallels that described in Crozier & Davies (2007), albeit with a different ethnic group.

Lack of communication was also compounded by the fact that often messages from the school sent with the child were not read at home unless a social worker was available to read and explain the contents to the parents. Communication problems were also identified in participants who were literate. In one case where the mother stated that she was literate in Somali, she was still not attuned to her son's educational needs, highlighting the gap that would need to be bridged for a better understanding of

her son's progress or lack of it. In another family the mother who had a child in primary school spoke to us about her older son who was 15 years old at the time. This woman claimed that this son had attended five years' schooling in Libya prior to coming to Malta and had attended school in Malta for at least four years. The boy was literate in both English and Maltese and his mother seemed happy with his progress. However, notwithstanding the mother's perception, his head of school indicated that this child was totally unprepared for schooling, lacked motivation and his scores in all subjects were around the 20th percentile. This again highlights the difference in expectations of the two cultures.

5. Awareness of children's difficulty at school.

All parents interviewed were aware that their children's situation at school was not ideal and some saw the interview as an opportunity to voice their needs. However, not all parents seemed to be aware of the severity of their predicament. All parents whose children had school work requested support because they were unable to help the children themselves due to their inability to understand the system, the language and the subject matter. Historically in Somalia, before the breakdown of government, children were not promoted a class before they passed the year's assessments, a remnant of the Italian occupation. Consequently, Somali parents may find the Maltese system rather difficult to comprehend as with some extremely rare exceptions, children are promoted irrespective of the progress registered. This may be the reason why parents held the view that once their children were being promoted, they must have been performing reasonably well. Despite this pessimistic outlook some of the heads of school interviewed did not identify the Somali refugee children as the weakest in class, even if generally falling in the lowest quartile.

6. All the children were described by heads as needing additional support

In spite of being well included in the school, all heads remarked that all the Somali children under their care, with the exception of one child with Down's syndrome who attended a special school, had wide ranging learning difficulties. One could classify these difficulties as falling into two categories; lack of preparedness for

school coupled with a lack of motivation to perform, and genuine difficulties, more often than not with the spoken and written languages, in this case Maltese and English. Even in those cases of younger children who picked up Maltese and could speak it well, there were issues with English, and with the written aspect of both Maltese and English. These difficulties were compounded by the lack of support from home in schoolwork, and a general lack of awareness of how the children performed at school. This resulted, in part, in unmotivated children who consistently performed poorly in their education following an unrelenting downward spiral. Underpinning this failure is that these children lacked *habitus*, Bourdieu & Passeron's (1970) notion that the cultural capital created by hegemonic forces is the primary currency in schools and classrooms.

In all cases, heads of school called for language and home support for these children. It was also recommended that children and their families be taught about Maltese culture, customs and norms in a bid for them to integrate as fully as possible at school. The heads of schools also recommended learning support for the pupils at school but it also needs to be said that for this to be effective, teachers need to be knowledgeable about the children's cultural background.

7. Social Inclusion

Six heads of school were interviewed, and all but one remarked how well integrated the children were. The one child who was not well integrated had behavioural difficulties. Generally, heads described the Somali pupils as being well included, and as mixing well with other children, such that they were part of the fabric of the class. There were a few instances of name calling, or of initial settling in issues, but these were short lived, and in the one isolated case where one Somali child was racially abused by a Maltese child, this second child was described as being quite problematic in the first place and as needing support himself.

In terms of meeting friends outside school, some younger children reported meeting friends in the local playground or at the swings and going over to their houses to play video games. Older children met up in Valletta or other centres where young

people usually meet up. However, there may, in the long term, be an issue with the sustainability of these social meetings as they invariably involve some outlay of money for drinks, snacks and transport.

8. Islamic education

Despite the children's ability to integrate, these migrant families felt alien in a country that may not necessarily have been theirs by choice. This may be felt even more poignantly if they consider Malta to be a transit country and were seeking final settlement in countries with substantial Somali communities such as the UK, Italy, the Netherlands, Scandinavia and Germany. In Malta, the small Somali community that exists is dispersed, and is far from reaching the critical mass necessary for these individuals to feel that they belong to an established community. Thus they turn to religion to give them the comfort and stability they lack from being in an alien community. When asked what they would have liked for their children beside support at school, most parents requested an Islamic education, despite the existence of a mosque on the island, because this was seen as likely to keep their children in contact with their roots and afford them a sense of belonging in a culture which was fast becoming secularised.

Recommendations

Calleja *et al.* (2010) describe how most asylum seekers perform unskilled jobs. Frendo (2008) lists only ten percent as having some form of secondary school, high school, college or university education. This information about refugee appellants is mirrored even more starkly in Rutter (2004) who states that in a relatively long established Somali refugee community in the London Borough of Haringey, fifty percent of the newer arrivals had no literacy skills in any language. Kahin (1997) speaking of the same Somali community, laments that even for those who have been living in the UK for up to five years or more, literacy continues to be an issue and many Somali children continue to receive special educational needs provision.

Rutter (2004) lists nine reasons why Somali children underachieve, and among others she includes: poverty, parental illiteracy, poor home-school liaison, and lack of

exposure to reading material at home. We have been able to corroborate her findings and indeed all these issues are likely to affect Somali migrant children in Malta, particularly those who are living in temporary accommodation. In addition to this, Somali children like many other minor asylum seekers are coming from failed states where school provision was either absent or targeted at the few. In addition, many of these children may have spent several years of their life in transit before reaching Malta in conditions where schooling was inaccessible and, where to a degree they may have been adultified due to needing to care for younger siblings, experiencing death at first hand, etc. These factors coupled with poor accommodation, issues of poverty, cultural, religious and language differences and problems of communication where children have to learn not one but two new languages in Malta makes the educational experience for these children a gargantuan task. Complaints about lack of motivation at school seem to be misplaced when these children lack those resources that other children take for granted, a good diet and adequate accommodation. Without assistance they will, in all likelihood, fail and fail abjectly.

In conclusion it appears that at a systems level there are few structures specifically supporting the migrant child. However at a school level it seems that heads of school and teachers have endeavoured to support and include these children to the fullest extent possible, certainly so in the primary school system. In a number of cases, migrant children also benefited from support offered by learning support assistants in the classroom. They did this without a statement of special needs even if the praxis is that learning support assistants do help all children in class whenever possible. However, there is a very definite limit to how successful an ad hoc and nominal policy can be. Therefore the following recommendations are being made:

1. A resource person should be tasked with the responsibility of liaising between immigrant pupils, their families and the school. This is seen as even more important in the case of Somali families because in the Somali culture the role of the teacher is seen as distinct and separate from parenting so the parents feel their presence might be intrusive and undesired and leave it all to the school (Kahin, 1997). The resource person needs to be assisted by an interpreter since oral and written

communication remains a key problem: one would need to keep in mind that the Somali language only began to be developed as a textual medium in the 1970s. This individual should also be tasked with explaining the local educational system to Somali parents as well as provide a direct link between the family and the school. Reporting to the family about the child's progress should also constitute a key task.

2. For the last 25 years Malta has adopted an inclusion policy for students with special needs in education. Furthermore, since the passing of the Refugees Act, Act XX of 2000, persons recognised as refugees, and those granted humanitarian protection, are entitled to access the state education system. However, to date there is no special provision or specific arrangements for children of migrants and they are not deemed to have special needs. These children's needs should be addressed and an initial assessment carried out to determine whether teaching is to be tailored to their needs. This assumes even greater importance in the light of the fact that although initial teacher education courses do touch on intercultural approaches in education and schools, such input only serves to raise consciousness and awareness and does not equip teachers in training with any specific tools or strategies that they can bring to bear on the issue of responding to individual migrant children's needs (Eurydice, *Integrating Immigrant Children into Schools in Europe - Malta, 2004*).

3. Categorically, a call is being made for specific study units to be made available to teachers in training and all learning support assistants. Such study units should include practical experience with such children and their families. This, in order to equip future teachers with the skills necessary to respond to the needs of migrant children and dispel many of the myths and prejudice that may exist.

4. Homework support also needs to be addressed. Since many of these children live in communal homes, one may consider setting aside a room where the children can do their homework in relative comfort and with adequate support. A system of organised voluntary support may also be set up and extra language teaching also needs to be provided.

Working with Somali children allowed us to identify and understand both the difficulties as well as the needs of immigrant children. In this regard these epitomise the gravest humanitarian needs of a child migrant cohort, coming from deprived and endangered communities, with minimal access to education and with very different cultural, religious and social mores. In addition, unlike Maltese children who fail to obtain any formal qualifications upon leaving secondary education, immigrant youth do not have access to wider societal and familial connections to afford them access to monetary and employment opportunities. This best practice approach which addresses these children's and their families' needs should be transferable across other national child migrant cohorts. This claim needs to be tested by further study. Indeed, we view this article as one of the few studies available in the area of child migration and education in the Maltese context and recognize the need for extending research in this area since Maltese schools will increasingly be challenged by burgeoning numbers of entrants born overseas.

ⁱ Note the island has the 3rd highest population density in the world

ⁱⁱ Amore records that there were two waves of returned migrants, one peaking in 1957 and in one of almost 3000 individuals peaking 1975 in particular, when these returned migrants felt that with the financial stability gained overseas and the increasingly stable economic situation in Malta, their livelihood was no longer at risk.

ⁱⁱⁱ As of 2002 the number of UK nationals residing in Malta constituted 58% of all non-Maltese residing in Malta

^{iv} Times of Malta 31/10/2011

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