

PARENTS AND THE ASSESSMENT OF OUR CHILDREN AT THE END OF YEAR SIX

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At the end of Year 6, around four thousand five hundred students sit for the Junior Lyceum Entrance Examination, which, for a number of parents, is still known as the 11+ examination.

Now that (a) the 2003 edition of this examination is over, (b) Malta's future is secure within the European Union and (c) the Government has five years in office, it is highly appropriate that parents reflect objectively on the significance of this examination particularly in view of its serious implications and consequences.

Parents recall that back in December 1999 the Ministry of Education published our National Minimum Curriculum which states that:

“In the absence of different arrangements that would be of greater educational benefit, in State schools the final examination at the end of the Primary school and Junior Lyceum Entrance examination will be set by the Education Division” (p.78).

Perhaps parents should ask whether it is correct to assume that the authors do not seem to be all that happy with this examination and earnestly hope to find some arrangement which “would be of greater educational benefit”. The word ‘arrangement’ has been used; it is very pertinent to ask: “Arrangement for what purpose?” Perhaps for qualification or selection purposes?

As parents know very well, in February of Year 6, students in Government schools sit for their nationally prepared Annual Examinations in Maltese, English, Mathematics, Religion and Social Studies. For the more ambitious, these examinations serve as a mock for the Junior Lyceum which is held in the following May. Encouraged and often pressured by parents and teachers, these students do their utmost to obtain a pass-mark, namely a C grade in all examinations. If they don't make it to the Junior Lyceum, they are sent to an Area Secondary school where they follow a five-year course in Secondary schooling. However, parents realise that there are students who do not go either to a Junior Lyceum or to an Area Secondary. The Education Division provides well-equipped

centres, sometimes referred to as the New Secondary Schools, for those students who obtain a very low mark in the annual examination of Year 6. One can imagine how stressed parents become when they realise that their child will never make it to a Junior Lyceum. Moreover, they pass through an agony of uncertainty until they know whether their child will at least be able to attend what they perceive to be a 'normal' secondary school or will have to go to an ex-'opportunity centre'.

Parents have to reflect on the fact that in spite of our commitment to the policy of inclusion, we are still (a) practising strict streaming as from year 5 in the Primary and (b) following a system of segregation at secondary level. This is very much in contrast to what had been published in the Draft of the National Minimum Curriculum in March 1998. In the chapter on Inclusion (pp.17-18) it had then been stated that we should follow a policy of mixed ability schooling, that is, no streaming and no 'selection' system which leads to students being sent to different types of schools. In fact, our Draft NMC states that we should have an integration of the whole system and adopt one form of Secondary Schooling. This integration was forecasted to be in place by September 2005.

I believe that pressure from parents was the primary cause for the immediate abandonment of this policy. Three and a half years have passed since the publication of our NMC and "the different arrangements that would be of greater educational benefit" have not as yet been found. And what is the result?

(a) Many teachers in Years 5 and 6 in Primary Schools are still constrained to teach for the examination of the Junior Lyceum, which implies that they rush to cover the syllabuses (how much more beneficial it would be for students to 'uncover' the different parts of the syllabus at a slower pace and always according to students' abilities!).

(b) Teaching for an examination does not guarantee the adoption of the most effective pedagogical methods. It implies that cramming and rote learning is still going on, and very often, understanding and skills are somehow sacrificed due to lack of in depth approach to teaching.

(c) The Junior Lyceum examination for qualification and / or selection purposes is still in place and it still brings about unnecessary stress on our students. This stress is also reflected on students of Year 4 and Year 5 because these want to get the highest possible marks to secure a place in the A classes. Therefore, there is a rush to apply for special examination arrangements even in cases when students do not need them, with the result that unnecessary pressure is being put on the human resources of the school.

(d) About 46% of the candidates do not pass the Junior Lyceum examination and therefore we have hundreds of students who still label themselves as failures. They are still being separated from the 'bravi', and accept their destiny to go to a secondary school.

(e) Those in the lowest streams are still being sent to the New Secondary Schools. True, that lots of good practice is taking place in these schools but the question remains: Do we want these children to feel small and an utter failure, in spite of the fact that we think we are giving them what they really need? Can't we give them what they need within the walls of a comprehensive school?

The last point brings us to another serious consideration, namely a model of a school comprising students from Year One to Year Eleven (Form 5) without any consideration to ability. This, of course, does not mean that an academically very able student would necessarily be all the time with a far less able student in a particular subject. However, it doesn't mean strict streaming, either. The able and the less able have to be together at certain periods and separated at other times. A system has to be adopted which caters for the needs of everyone including those of the less gifted and those of high flyers. This is by no means without a precedent unless we want to forget the system of 'setting' in certain Government Secondary and Junior Lyceums, and a system approaching the Comprehensive that has been with us for a very long time in Church and Private schools. If such systems are working, why are we parents so scared to bring about change? A Government school, run by one of our able and imaginative Heads and a team of teachers who are determined to be successful in their teaching will surely work wonders. We already have leading Government Primary and Secondary schools. What difference would it make regarding outcome were we to join a Primary with a Secondary school and eliminate the purpose of qualification or selection of the Junior Lyceum Entrance Examination? And what difference would it make if in the same school there would be the more and the less able students working together during certain sessions and separated during others. On second thoughts it WOULD make a difference, but for the better.

Of course, such changes would have to be well planned to avoid unnecessary pressure on Church and Private schools (parents might want to ensure a place for their child in these schools if they think that government is bringing down its Junior Lyceums). While the Junior Lyceum examination is still in place, parents should seriously consider the suggestion that we start with a pilot project so as to have the advantage of testing new ideas. I'm sure that if things are done properly, we parents would back up this model wholeheartedly and forget about streaming and segregation, which, from an educational point of view, do not make any sense at all. It's the logistics that is a headache and not the philosophy behind the whole scenario.

Fearing what happened in the early 1970s, many parents ask whether examinations would remain. Of course they would, but the answer is a qualified 'YES'. Our NMC advocates the retention of periodical summative assessments for benchmarking purposes. We have to make sure that standards are kept and, if

possible, raised, that is deepened, and widened to affect more students as a result of better learning strategies. Hence the importance to introduce Level Descriptors and Attainment Targets so that students would know where they stand not in relation to one another but in relation to a body of knowledge (used in its wider sense to include concepts and skills) that appertain to a particular level. I believe that Level Descriptors would serve to motivate our students to reach standards that are presently unattainable.

The 11+ examination would be retained in this context, though not necessarily with its present syllabuses and in its present format. This examination has a long tradition; set, administered and corrected in a most professional way. It is a highly reliable examination, and could serve to show everyone interested in education, including students and parents, where they stand and whether the projected targets are being reached.

Targets will not be reached unless we emphasise formative assessment. Parents have to understand that we cannot test all the time for the sake of testing. We would be defeating our own purpose which should be students' progress. Our assessment has to be assessment for learning, that is, we assess while we teach and we use our assessment to feedback in the teaching and learning process. Parents should back up teachers in their effort and realise that if our assessment is always summative (which shouldn't be more often than between twenty-four to thirty months) we tend to increase stress unnecessarily in our children and, in the case of the less able, deepen the wound in an already injured and fragile self-esteem.

Small successes on a regular basis (and this not only in what is considered academic) will strengthen students' self-esteem. Hence the importance of continuous assessment and the keeping of a portfolio, which should exhibit what the learner knows. Such a portfolio places teachers, as well as parents, in a position "to address better the potential and needs of individual students" (NMC, p.78). This will truly mean putting the learner in the forefront of our priorities and building an educational system that is truly Child-Centred.

Let's cut down on the stress presently imposed on our clients, let's raise their self-esteem as well as the standards they are capable of reaching, and ensure for them a healthy future within the European and World community.
