

THE JUNIOR LYCEUM ENTRANCE EXAMINATION 2003 INTO FORM 1 AND AFTER

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The 2003 edition of the Junior Lyceum Entrance Examination into Form 1 was a great success. As has become the tradition, these examinations were once more professionally administered and hence everything ran smoothly. Out of 6078 eligible students, there were 4503 who chose to sit for this examination. Interesting and perhaps worrying is the fact that 467 eligible students in Government Primary schools (11.6%) did not take the examination and therefore lost the chance to enter a Junior Lyceum. Is it possible that at such a tender age this examination is perceived by the students themselves (and / or by others) to be beyond their capabilities? Have these children already given up and settled for what may be considered the bare minimum?

Students who opted to sit for these examinations received the results at home on Thursday 26th June. The following day the results were put up in schools. Only Index Numbers were indicated on the results; other identification details were excluded. Unsatisfied candidates who wished to revise the examination scripts had the opportunity to do so during July and early August. The Educational Assessment Unit has clear indications that the public regard this examination as highly reliable. The fact that this year there were 283 individuals who asked for the revision of 378 examination scripts (involving mostly English and Maths) is definitely not a vote of no confidence in the system. It is rather an attempt on the part of parents to know more about the academic weaknesses of their children and to help them rectify such weaknesses. The revision of scripts is a very effective exercise in formative assessment, helping children, parents and at times teachers to identify what went wrong and what can be done to improve future performance.

The Annual Report of the Junior Lyceum Entrance Examination will soon be published. It will show that 55.2% of the candidates (2486 out of 4503) were successful, that is they succeeded in obtaining a minimum of grade 'C' in Maltese, English, Mathematics, Social Studies and Religion. These students have now the opportunity of attending a five-year course in a Junior Lyceum where they will receive a sound education in all aspects of their development, whether it is physical, social, emotional, moral and / or academic. Hopefully this five-year course will prove to be challenging enough to all students including the 124 who obtained five 'A's in the examination and who will choose to attend a Junior Lyceum rather than a Church or, may be, a Private / Independent School.

Those students who failed the Junior Lyceum Examination and who were born in 1991 have to go to a Secondary School this September. However, they will be eligible to sit for the Junior Lyceum Examinations into Form 2 next June. These examinations have become very popular indeed. Last year there were 425 applicants, 163 of whom were successful. This year there were 500 applicants, 206 of whom (41.2%) were successful and therefore can continue their education in a Junior Lyceum.

Students who failed the J.L. examination and who were born in 1992 have to carry out some serious reflection on what they are going to do this September. In fact they can go to a Secondary school and take again the J.L. Entrance Examination into Form 1 next year (10th to 14th May). They will also be able to sit for the J.L. Entrance Examination into Form 2 next June. However, they can also opt to stay on in the Primary school in the Year 7 class. You do find cases of students who make it on their second attempt after receiving that extra help in a particular subject, mostly in English or in Mathematics. Such cases (which amount to more than half the number of applicants) open the eyes of educators to the fact that a number of students do arrive but in their own time and therefore at a slower pace than other students.

Perhaps one should reflect on the curriculum that is being offered to Year 7 students, as well as on the pedagogy that is being adopted. The curriculum should contain enough ingredients to raise the students' self-esteem which, very often, is shaken when the child learns that he or she has failed to enter a Junior Lyceum. Moreover students shouldn't be led to think that they are repeating Year 6. Hence teachers would have to change their method of teaching. They would have to make the effort to say the same thing in a different way. Parents and teachers have to find out and to exploit those methods, which prove effective in the transformation of teaching into learning. Everyone has to respect the fact that the National Minimum Curriculum emphasises Child-Centred Education, which implies taking into serious consideration the individual with his or her own strengths and weaknesses.

A serious weakness in our students is definitely English, with 1111 students obtaining a 'D' and 664 an 'E' grade. Parents have to understand that their children need to read more if they want them to be capable of expressing themselves in good English. They have to create in the home a culture of reading. Children, however, will not read unless this proves to be an enjoyable experience. The reading material has to be appropriate to the child's capabilities, maturity and likes and dislikes.

Perhaps we should focus more than we are doing on the students' needs regarding English and encourage them to speak the language. Therefore the necessity for more conversation in class and the use of English during drama and other school activities. Children who do not practise the language at home need to do so at school for longer periods. We shall not be successful unless we are determined and ready to make sacrifices. It is important that English becomes part and parcel of our students' daily experiences, which moreover, have to be stimulating and enjoyable. Parents and all educators should study carefully the Chief Examiners' Comments that are published in the J.L. Annual Report. Extracts of this Report will be made available on the website of the EAU (<http://www.curriculum.gov.mt/eau>).

I believe that the standard of English will be raised if children are encouraged to read, to listen to the spoken language and to express themselves in English every day. Children will pick up new words and learn how to use them, both when writing and when speaking the language. As a nation we have to understand that English is our passport to the world of knowledge and to the outside world. Without it we become more insular and limited in every sense of the word.

Over 44% of the students were unsuccessful in the J.L. Entrance Examination into Form 1. Focussing on State Primary school children, one should realise that 1715 were unsuccessful. Adding to this figure the 467 students who did not sit for the examination, one gets a total of 2182 students. It is perhaps rather disturbing to realise that 54% (2182 of 4040 [State Primary School Children eligible to sit for the J.L.]) are directly or indirectly getting stuck in the sieve of the J.L. Entrance examination. In their majority these students will be attending a Secondary school. There is a general feeling that these students, though merely 11 years of age, are already a failure. Receiving an 'F' result may prove to be really

traumatic to a number of students. Moreover there is an impression that students attending secondary schools are not academically oriented, they lack motivation and have no high hopes for their future. This may be true in some cases and it is therefore the duty of one and all to remedy the situation. As indicated above, we have to help the children increase their self-esteem. This will not increase unless the students experience small daily successes.

I think one should combat the idea that all or most of the students attending secondary schools are not capable of learning because they are very weak. Evidence proves the falsehood of this statement. It is a fact that in the 2003 edition of the J.L. Entrance Examination, over 200 students passed in English and over 500 passed in Mathematics without, however, succeeding in entering a Junior Lyceum. There were in fact 569 students who failed in just one subject. It is our duty to nourish and to stimulate these students who in some cases and in particular subjects may have done even better than a number of students who made it to the J.L. I think the worst we can do is to give up on these students. If we don't challenge them enough they will lower their expectations, become apathetic and lazy. On the other hand we should be realistic and do not expect from the children what they are not capable of giving.

Whichever type of school our children will be attending, whether it is Year 7, a Secondary school or a Junior Lyceum, it is our duty to commit ourselves to the development of their potential for their own good and for the good of our nation. We have to make sure that all students receive the education to which they are entitled and hence become self-fulfilled as well as fruitful members of the community.
