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Shaping the Identity of the New Maltese through Ethics Education in Maltese Schools

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to show how changes in the social fabric of Malta have resulted in amendments to the school curriculum in respect to the teaching of moral values. The curriculum now caters for a new subject in schools called Ethics, which is aimed at students who opt out of the mainstream Catholic Religious Education classes. As educators directly involved in its introduction in Maltese schools, as well as in the training of the subject teachers, we reflect on how this new subject relates to the development of both Maltese and migrant students' identities. We highlight some of the challenges the subject of Ethics presents to parents, teachers and students, and the tensions some students encounter between the religious values taught at home and secular values taught at school.

Keywords: identity; ethics education; moral education; European values; religion; Philosophy for Children; new Maltese

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the transformation of the Maltese identity due to a number of factors, and on how these changes have impacted the nature of moral education in Maltese schools. In this paper, we will discuss the acquisition of a new Maltese identity by migrants who are settling in Malta in substantial numbers, and the role that schools play in shaping this identity. This is done through a discussion of the historical context that these changes are taking place in, describing the process of change from a strong conservative religious country to a relatively liberal one in a fairly short period of time. The paper focuses on the introduction of 'Ethics' as a new subject within the school curriculum, as an alternative subject for pupils who do not follow the compulsory traditional Religious Education classes. The paper introduces two terms that encompass those who are experiencing these changes: The 'New Maltese' and the 'new Maltese'. By the 'New Maltese', we mean those who are non-Maltese citizens who have been living in Malta for a substantial period of time, such as voluntary migrants, economic migrants and involuntary/impelled migrants, including refugees. The new Maltese are Maltese citizens whose values are typically very different from those of the traditional Maltese, who are also constructing a new Maltese identity for themselves. The role of the subject of Ethics in shaping the identities of the children of these Maltese is discussed in the third part of this paper.

Following a discussion of the research method used in this paper, which is one of using reflective writing as a qualitative research method in its own right in combination with a phenomenological approach describing the experience of the writers, who are both Maltese and have both been entrusted with the introduction of Ethics in schools, the paper provides a historical/religious understanding of the Maltese people, without which one would find it difficult to understand how the subject of Ethics came about. The third part of the paper discusses this new subject itself, and how this subject is being used, intentionally or unintentionally, in a subtle way, to socialize the New/new Maltese to ultimately live in harmony on such a tiny and densely populated island [1].

2. A Reflective Writing/Phenomenological Approach to the Subject

In order to contribute to new perspectives on educational developments, we as educators feel that it is imperative that we look at educational activities in a reflective manner, in order to critically reflect on what is taking place, and creatively provide alternatives, improve, change or consolidate what is taking place. One of the stronger tools of reflective thinking is reflective writing, which is what this paper is all about. It is a piece of reflective writing on a change that has implications not only for our country, but also for countries that are facing similar concerns. In this paper, we reflect on the contribution of the schooling system towards the harmonious living together of different communities of people in one nation-state. There are roughly two schools of thought on reflective writing: The first being that it is a method of qualitative research in its own right; while the second school of thought posits that reflective writing is a tool for better understanding within research [2–4]. It is our wish to make visible the knowledge we have gained through the processes we have experienced in introducing Ethics as a curriculum subject in Maltese schools through this process of reflective writing, hoping to link our 'narrative knowledge' [5] in a public forum through this journal. Thus, our reflective writing would become the data on which the readers of this journal can in turn reflect. The paper is written in the first person so as to stress the first person perspective of what is reported [6]. It is after all, the subjective presentation of particular data as experienced by us. This gives the paper a phenomenological approach to the description and interpretation of the experience [7]. In a way we are bracketing [8] our experience in order to reflect on it [9]. Phenomenology is described by Vagle [10] as 'an encounter . . . not only a philosophy and human science research methodology, but it is also a way of being, becoming, living and moving in the world'. It is described by the same author as a craft, embodying a relationship with the world and all things in it.

3. The Maltese Identity within a Historical/Religious Setting

With Malta being an island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, very often dominated throughout its history by a benevolent or otherwise 'foreign' ruler, the Maltese have always sought to find what makes them Maltese, as a nation with separate and identifiable characteristics from those of the ruler. For a relatively long period, the core of this identity was Christianity [11]. All villages and towns in Malta are built around the village church, which is always a grandiose building dominating the center of the village square. Until recently, it was the village square that was a hub that created a sense of community where social encounters took place under the gaze of the church. Traditionally, the Maltese were proud to have been mentioned in the Gospel [12]. This is the result of a disputed historical event in AD 60, when St Paul is said to have been shipwrecked on the island of Melita. It is said that St Paul converted the Maltese people to Christianity, with St Publius eventually becoming the first Bishop of Malta [13]. During the Muslim occupation (869–1127), the Maltese became Muslim for some time, although they were reconverted to Christianity after the immigration of many Italians to Malta and the expulsion of the Muslims during the thirteenth century [14]. Following the Norman invasion, Christianity was re-established as the religion of the Maltese, strengthened in particular by another group of foreign powers, the Knights of Malta. The Maltese, together with the Knights of Malta, fought against a Muslim invasion posed by the Ottoman Empire, and successfully withstood the Great Siege of Malta in 1565 [15]. Subsequently, in the 18th century, another threat to the Roman Catholic religion came from the French, following an invasion by Napoleon and his troops in 1798 [16]. The Maltese were liberated from the French by the British forces in 1814, who, unlike the French, respected the Maltese faith, until the end of their rule, when the Maltese gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1964. This long history of Christianity in Malta culminated in an important statement in the first Chapter of the Constitution of Malta that reads "the religion of Malta is the Roman Catholic Apostolic Religion" [17]. This is followed by statements about the national flag and the national anthem, which is essentially a prayer to God, penned by the Maltese national poet Dun Karm Psaila, who was also a priest. The Constitution then declares that the national language of Malta is Maltese. The order of such important entries in the Constitution is in itself an indication of how

strong the Maltese Catholic identity is for the nation. With such a deep link between Maltese identity and Catholicism, one can imagine the threat that some felt when it was announced that the subject of Ethics was to be introduced as an alternative to Religious Education classes.

4. Changes in Demography

One reason for the introduction of Ethics in schools is the changes in the country's demography. The challenges to national identity by immigration and demographic shifts have been documented by Turner [18], Huntington [19] and Hidenori [20] among others, with the latter focusing on Japan. Hidenori writes on the need of a mass influx of immigrants into the country in order to maintain its economic growth. He maintains that the success of such a policy would depend on how much Japan could develop an openness towards new arrivals. This should include a consensus by the national population that the immigrants are friends who are contributing to Japanese society. It is Japan's way of becoming a tolerant, multi-ethnic society. The situation in Malta is practically identical to Japan's, with the added factor that because it is a country which forms part of the European Union (EU), there is much less control on influx from the EU. Malta's population growth has been the largest in the EU [21] and presently a fourth of the current population (close to half a million) is identified as 'foreign' [22]. This number has mushroomed due to a record level of unemployment, standing at 3.5%, which is the second lowest unemployment rate in the EU [23]. Several businesses, from those involved in construction to iGaming companies, are 'importing' (a word often used by the political parties) foreign workers. This augments the Prime Minister's vision of Malta as a cosmopolitan society [24]. Reality struck with some Maltese when they realized that in some towns, there were more non-Maltese voters entitled to vote in the local council elections than Maltese. One candidate expressed this reality as 'shocking', pointing out that 'becoming a minority in your own country is quite shocking. It will mean degradation of our identity, languages, culture and values' [25]. We, as educators within the country, feel that there is a tension in the country resulting from people of different ethnicities, cultures and religions living amongst each other. Although Malta is far from unique in this respect, these changes happened very quickly over less than a decade, leaving policy makers scrambling to enact policies and legislation to cater for such rapid change. We believe that the State has the duty to balance the interests of these various communities, welcoming them as the 'New Maltese'. These New Maltese are in themselves considerably varied. There are those who have settled in Malta over a period of time, lured by the easy access to the job market, amounting to approximately one fifth of the local population. Of these, around 80,000 are EU nationals, who to some extent, share the European values of the Maltese. The rest, around 19,000, are third-country nationals, registered as working in Malta. The other New Maltese are asylum seekers waiting for their working permit documents, including those who have a refugee status, or those who have subsidiary protection or temporary humanitarian protection. In 2017 there were 1616 people applying for asylum in Malta, some of whom have since resettled in other countries [26]. The number of non-Maltese students between the age of three and sixteen in Maltese schools has more than doubled in the last five years, now accounting for 10% of the total student population. The biggest increase is among African and Asian pupils, whose numbers have more than trebled. It is reported that the number of African nationals in schools has risen from 285 to 945, while the number of Asian students has increased from 242 to 769. The number of foreign EU nationals has more than doubled, from 2463 to 5401. No drastic change was registered in the number of students from European countries outside the EU, whose number in 2017 stood at 459 [27].

5. Changes in Values

Although Malta is still predominantly Catholic, the signs of a gradual secularization have been manifesting themselves over the last few decades. After its independence from British rule, which took place in 1964, Malta started increasingly relying on tourism as one of the main sources of income, which opened up the insular island-nation to new ways of thinking. In 2018, 2.6 million tourists visited Malta, doubling from the 1.3 million in 2010 [18]. In the words of Boissevain, "International tourism has

unquestionably also contributed to the gradual erosion of traditional Catholic mores of behavior such as modesty in dress, sexual chastity, and the separation of sexes" [28]. Over the years, inbound and outbound travel has had a big impact on the Maltese culture and lifestyle. Foreigners settling in Malta and the Maltese who have resettled in Malta after long periods living abroad have also contributed to the process of secularization, as they tended to import new values which they brought with them from other countries [29]. Following Malta's accession to the European Union in 2003 and the adoption of the Euro in 2008, the trend towards increasing mobility, as well as the contact with other cultures that globalization has brought about, have contributed to a gradual path towards more liberal, secular values [18]. Globalization has also resulted in the proliferation of technology, which has effectively connected Malta to the rest of the world. Just as McLuhan predicted in 1964, technology has transformed the world into a "global village" [30], steering Malta towards a more liberal and secular mindset. One has to keep in mind that Malta is a small island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, and prior to globalization through technology, it was relatively isolated from the rest of the world. The trend towards secularization was confirmed in May 2011, when a divorce referendum was held in Malta which was won in spite of the conservative Prime Minister of the time voting against the bill in parliament, and the strong 'No' campaign led by the Catholic Church [31]. At this point, the church and the political parties recognized that there is a new breed of Maltese, those who had done away with the traditional conservative teachings of the church, and embraced a more secular way of life. They are mainly younger post EU accession families who do not agree with the Church's stand on many issues, and have rejected, if not the Catholic faith itself, most of the teachings of the church. This has paved the way for a number of secular legislatives reforms, including same sex marriage and the legalization of the morning-after pill. Until a few years ago, such things would have been highly frowned upon in Maltese society. For the purpose of this paper, we will label this group of Maltese as the 'new Maltese'.

The new/New Maltese have created a new challenge for the Maltese education system, the role of which, among others, is to socialize pupils into the norms of society [32,33]. Whereas before it was assumed that values were directly taught through the Religious Education classes, this is no longer the case for some children. Although 'Religion' is still a compulsory subject in Maltese schools, parents and guardians can opt to have their children withdrawn from these classes. However, this creates a vacuum with regards to these children's moral education. These challenges are being addressed to some extent by the introduction of a new subject in the Maltese curriculum, a subject which has been called 'Ethics'.

6. Religious Education in Schools

The Constitution of Malta secures the teaching of the Roman Catholic faith in state schools: "Religious teaching of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Faith shall be provided in all state schools as part of compulsory education" [17]. The church has always made sure that its dominance is protected through its compulsory teaching in Maltese schools. In the 1988 first national curriculum, it is stated that one of the principal aims of education in the primary school is the formation of good behavior and character formation "in a moral and religious field, in order that children may learn to act according to what is right, to love their fellow men, and to revere God" [34]. The secondary school curriculum is divided into five core areas, one of which is the "normative core". This normative core includes Religious Knowledge, Civics, Environmental Attitudes and Sport. This section states:

> It is essential that this normative core should be common to all schools and all through the stages. However, it must also be emphasised that parents, on behalf of their children, must be given the choice of opting out of Religious Education on grounds of Conscience [34].

This clause was probably inserted in the national curriculum document in order to respect the Constitutional Article 40 (1) that states that "all persons in Malta shall have full freedom of conscience and enjoy the free exercise of their respective mode of religious worship" and Article 40 (2), which states that:

No person shall be required to receive instruction in religion or to show knowledge or proficiency in religion if, in the case of a person who has not attained the age of sixteen years, objection to such requirement is made by the person who according to law has authority over him . . . [17]

This first national curriculum was followed by one published in 1999, entitled: *Creating the Future Together* [35]. In this curriculum, there is again a reference to an agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Malta, signed in 1989, which regulates the teaching of the Catholic Religion in state schools [36]. However, there is also the same 'opt-out' provision as the one made in the previous curriculum. In this document, one finds the first reference to an alternative to the teaching of the Catholic religion, which is described in terms of "a formation in those universal values which provide the foundation for civil conviviality" [35]. However, this document does not specify what these "universal values" are, and neither do the other documents published by the education authorities of the time. The curriculum instructs teachers to give students who do not take Religion other educational work during religious celebrations in school and during class time devoted to the teaching of Religion (roughly half an hour a day in the primary sector and one and a half hours a week in the secondary sector). One of the fourteen general aims of this curriculum specifically states that students should "understand the Catholic Worldview (for those who embrace Catholicism)" [35]. The curriculum does not mention any specific aim for those who do not "embrace Catholicism". Still, it states that one of the objectives of this curriculum is for students to acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes in "self-awareness, and the development of a system of ethical and moral values" [35]. This aim was further developed in the third and current national curriculum entitled *A National Curriculum Framework for All* [37] with the introduction of a separate subject called "Ethics Education". This subject is offered as an alternative to those children whose parents decide that their child should not follow Catholic Religious Education [37].

We have to point out that although the subject in schools is officially known as Religious Education, everyone refers to it as Religion, which, as Darmanin [38] points out, is one of 'monopoly Catholicism'. The Catholic religion is built into the very fabric of the schools. Practically all the Maltese state schools which we visit as part of our work in schools have a daily morning assembly that includes a Catholic prayer and sometimes even the singing of religious hymns, as well numerous school projects and outings related to Catholic religious activities mostly associated with the major feasts around the year, most of which are also related to the Catholic religion. Anyone going into Maltese schools can notice the display of religious symbols, both in class and in public areas. It is this lack of respect to the different faith/non-faith of the New/new Maltese that possibly make schools unhospitable places for both these children and their parents.

7. Ethics in Schools

The current National Curriculum Framework states that:

For young people opting out of Catholic Religious Education, it is recommended that the Religious Education learning area will consist of an Ethical Education programme, which is preferred over a Comparative Religious Education programme [37].

The influx of children coming from New/new Maltese families holding other faiths has resulted in more and more parents demanding that their children opt out of the Religious Education classes. Whereas some years back there used to be only a few parents exerting this right afforded to them by the Constitution, at present there are schools in which more than half the students do not follow the subject [39]. After an initial pilot project, the initiative was rolled out in more schools, according to the demand and availability of resources. In 2015, the Ministry for Education and Employment commissioned a survey in all state schools in Malta to gauge the demand for the subject. In an address to teachers following a certificate course in the teaching of Ethics in schools, for which we were present, the Minister of Education and Employment reported that more than half of the parents of school-age

children (5 to 16 years) indicated a preference for the subject of Ethics in schools. This is an indication of the great transformation in the mentality of the Maltese over these last few years.

Within the Learning Outcomes Framework, which is the framework that indicates the learning outcomes of each subject within the curriculum, Religious Education and Ethics fall within the same learning area, with a substantial number of objectives in common. The principal difference is that whereas Religious Education is clearly based on the Roman Catholic religion, aiming to teaching morality from the perspective of that religion, the Ethics curriculum is based on a secular non-denominational approach. The principal goal of the Ethics program is to help students self-determine who they are through a process of reflection, basically developing their identity as citizens of this country. It does this by discussing moral and ethical issues addressed at both the child as a person and as a citizen; that is as the self, and as the self in relation to others. As a subject, it tries to instil in students a sense of responsibility and a moral outlook based on universal values such as justice, truth, honesty, compassion, care for oneself and care for others. Since Ethics is meant to be taken by all students, irrespective of their faith or whether they are religious or not, it is embedded in the tradition of Western philosophy, in which reason replaces faith as a basis for morality.

In fact, Ethics in Malta is based on a particular approach to teaching, called Philosophy for Children (P4C) [40–42]. P4C first emerged in the US in the 1970s at the Institute of the Advancement of Philosophy for Children in Montclair University, New Jersey. Matthew Lipman, a philosophy professor, devised a program for teaching critical thinking and informal logic to children. P4C uses the tools of philosophy, such as critical thinking, reasoning and argumentation, to help children explore values, assumptions and important concepts like justice, truth and knowledge [43,44]. This is done by first presenting a text in the form of a story, so that the children can identify and empathize with the characters and the scenarios presented in the narrative. The practice of doing philosophy in the classroom provides a forum in which students, together with their teachers, can search for meaning together, in what Lipman called the "Community of Inquiry", or CoI (ibid.). The CoI [45] is both reflective and collaborate in nature. Its aim is for the students to have a space in which they can discuss different issues, with all students being given a chance to speak, safe in the knowledge that their opinion will be respected by the rest of the group. Lipman believed that Philosophy for Children, with its emphasis on the values of respect and tolerance, as well as its promotion of higher order thinking, can help foster a more democratic community [46], which is ultimately one of the core aims of the subject of ethics in our schools.

The methodology of P4C is particularly useful for teaching Ethics, because one principal objective of the CoI is to understand and solve moral issues or dilemmas by distinguishing and comparing acceptable behaviors, making sure that all the relevant facts have been presented, and assessing the consequences which would result from different decisions [47]. Although P4C's main focus is on creative and critical thinking, it also deals with emotional and moral development by focusing on moral dispositions such as sympathy, caring for others and democratic virtues such as self-correction and turn-taking. Sharp [48], influenced by Lipman [49], gives some examples of the ethical tools or procedures need to be fostered in the classroom, such as 'citing reasons for opinions or actions', 'utilizing criteria or standards', 'defining terms', and 'investigating underlying ethical assumptions'. The idea of teaching ethics through philosophy has been taken up by Philip Cam, who has helped construct and implement a pilot program for ethical enquiry in New South Wales primary schools. Just like the Maltese Ethics program, this program is intended as an option for students who do not attend religious instruction. In his book, Cam [47] elaborates on the relationship between moral education, ethics and collaborative inquiry, which is also one of the objectives of P4C. He illustrates how an ethics-based approach to moral education can fit in with recent educational trends such as character education and citizenship education, which emphasize collaboration and inquiry-based learning. Again, this is very much in line with the goals of the Ethics program in Malta, since the Ethics syllabus places a lot of emphasis on rational discussion in the classroom. Usually lessons start with the presentation of some kind of stimulus, such as a story, film, picture, case study, ethical dilemma and so

on, and then the teacher proceeds to invite discussion of the moral issues related to it. The aim is to foster reasoning and critical thinking skills in children, as well as listening and speaking skills and skills related to good judgement. The syllabus starts from issues related to the immediate world of the child, such as the family and the school, then moves on to the broader world around us, such as the community we live in and the global environment. It takes a spiral approach to the presentation of topics, for example, in the primary years, it talks about pets and how we take care of our pets, but the topic is covered again in middle school and the secondary school, when the topic of animal rights is covered in more detail. This is also the case when it comes to issues such as bullying and human rights. The syllabus also differs substantially from other subjects in its approach to assessment. Rather than relying on end of year examinations that require students to study and memorize facts, it aims to assess how well students can reason things out, how well they can argue, whether they can work together as a team, and other "soft" skills which are so important in today's ever changing world. It does this by giving a lot of weight to different types of tasks, such as presentations, group work activities, projects, and so on and so forth. In fact, due to this particular approach, teachers have to be specifically trained to teach Ethics in schools.

8. Discussion

There are various concerns that we have reflected on as educators involved in the introduction of Ethics in schools. One of these is whether we have the right to introduce values to children which may be in conflict or not compatible with their family's values. Our experience indicates that most of the new Maltese children come from families which hold secular values, for whom the subject of Ethics does not create any problems. However, this may not be the case for the New Maltese whose very identity is developed by their family's beliefs and rituals. For example, some parents have complained that they are unhappy with both Religious Education classes and Ethics, because they would like their children to be taught values that are in accordance with their religion. However, this is not tolerated by the authorities, since Ethics is a secular, non-denominational subject that promotes universal values [50], and within the local context, European values as well. Ethics teachers are trained to teach the identified values, clarify the students' present values [50] and develop their character (values clarification [51] and character education [50]). In order to be sure that we are not, at the end of the day, indoctrinating students into one kind of value system, we have followed the Philosophy for Children approach, which sets our minds at rest, since it takes a nondirective approach, but at the same time leaves space for teacher guidance. So while respecting the diverse nature of the family values of our students, we are promoting the values shared by most Maltese people, that is, values that reflect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as the values cherished by the European Union, including the respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy and equality. The values we promote through Ethics also reflect the values of our parliament as enacted in the laws of the country. What this means in practice is that there is no space in the Maltese value system for violence, sexism, homophobia, abuse, torture, slavery, and genital mutilation, to give a few examples, even if they are acceptable in some other cultures and traditions. This is the kind of identity we are striving to develop in our students: An identity based on European values as reflected through our way of life. The emphasis is mainly on the teaching methodology, emphasizing the process of reaching a moral judgment through being morally sensitive, and developing a moral character [52].

Another issue that we have reflected on is whether we are segregating a particular group of students (the new/New Maltese students) from the rest, identifying them as outliers, rather than creating an integrated approach to the teaching of common values. This is due to the fact that Ethics is presented as an alternative to Religious Education. Students' parents are asked by the school authorities if they want their children to take Religious Education. If they don't, they have to take Ethics. They cannot take both, and they cannot opt out of both. Before the introduction of Ethics in Maltese schools, other options were considered. One of the options was to completely do away with the teaching of Religious Education in state schools. However, this would have proven to be

impossible to do for a number of reasons. The first hurdle would have been the agreement with the state and the Vatican on the teaching of the Catholic faith in state schools and the mention of the teaching of Catholic Religious Education in the constitution, referred to above. The second hurdle would have been public opinion. Although Malta is becoming increasingly secular, the Catholic way of life is deeply entrenched in the Maltese lifestyle. In fact, almost a third (29.2%) of all students in Malta are enrolled in church schools [53], most children attend hours of "doctrine" lessons each week after school hours, and there is one church or chapel for every kilometer in Malta. One has to note, at this stage, that the Church authorities have decided not to offer Ethics in church schools, which means that in practice, a third of Maltese pupils aged five to 16 do not have the possibility of following the program. The official reason given is that teaching Ethics in church schools goes against the ethos of those same schools. Of course, one wonders what the new/New Maltese students who attend church schools make of the Religious Education classes.

Another option that was considered prior to the introduction of Ethics was the teaching of other religions to children of different faiths, such as Islam, which is the predominant minority faith of the New/new Maltese. The Muslim community has asked for the teaching of Islam in place of Catholic Religious Education or Ethics. This argument holds some weight, since Muslims constitute the largest minority group in Malta. However, this was deemed to be impossible due to logistical reasons. First of all, there were no qualified teachers who were also qualified to teach Islam. Secondly, Muslim students are spread all over the island, making it difficult to justify the additional resources for a small number of students in each school. Thirdly, it was argued that if the teaching of the Muslim faith were to be introduced in schools, the teaching of other faiths would have to be considered. Eventually, a compromise was reached when the educational authorities promised that Islamic studies will be taught in state school premises after formal school hours. This means that it would not be part of the compulsory curriculum, but would be taken as an extra-curricular subject by the students who opt for it [54].

One concern that we have is that the current system may encourage religious identity, as well as ethnicity, to become "signifiers", or signs of difference and differentiation. We are afraid that as things are, mainstream Religious Education is perceived to be linked to the Maltese identity, while Ethics as a curricular subject is thought to be solely for migrants, or "foreigners", or for children who have a different faith. We do not want to form 'clans' of foreigners in schools, a term unfortunately already used by the Leader of the Opposition, who has taken a populist stance and in the process instigated negative feelings towards foreign workers (and by implication their families), whom he described as 'clans' of low quality foreigners who are frightening children and making society poorer [52]. On the other hand, it is encouraging to note that many parents have expressed a wish for their children to take Ethics, because they see value in it as a subject, but not at the expense of Religious Education. However, we have encountered strong resistance, such as that by Dimech [55], an academic specializing in theology and education:

> "Ethics may not be the best alternative to religious education, not because ethics is not important, but because religious education should not be an option! No one ought to have the right to opt out."

Although such a view is certainly extreme, even unconstitutional, many parents have expressed with us their wish for Ethics to be offered in addition to Religious Education. They argue that they would like their children to take Ethics, because they like the fact that it is based on reasoning, logical thinking and argumentation, and because it deals with contemporary, sometimes controversial, issues. However, they are unwilling to opt out of Religious Education, because they identify as Roman Catholics and think that their children should also receive education in the Catholic faith. However, the educational authorities have ruled this option out for the time being. Although it could become a possibility in the future, it is currently difficult to do so because the introduction of new subjects in the curriculum is always done at the expense of other subjects. Another major challenge would be the limited number of trained teachers, since if the subject were to be rolled out as a compulsory subject,

more teachers who are trained in the teaching of Ethics would be required. As it is, Heads of Schools often complain that the logistical challenges are considerable, because of time-tabling issues and the lack of resources, such as trained teachers and physical space for extra classrooms.

We also observed that many parents do not know what we mean by 'Ethics'. This is compounded by the lack of information they seem to have with regards to who can follow the subject at school. Although the National Curriculum Framework [37] does not put any restrictions on who takes Ethics, it is often assumed by Heads of Schools, teachers, parents and the general public that children who have been baptized in the Roman Catholic faith are not allowed to opt for Ethics. What this means, effectively, is that sometimes parents ask for their children to take Ethics, but are discouraged, or even prohibited from doing so, due to a mistaken belief that only atheists or children of a different faith can opt for it. In fact, although more than half of parents who participated in the national survey indicated that they would like their children to take Ethics, in reality, only a minority have actually opted out of mainstream Religion to take up Ethics, and most of these are children coming from a migrant background. This further strengthens the idea that Ethics is for "the foreigners", rather than "the Maltese", serving as another differentiator between those who have a Maltese identity and "the others". This is problematic from a social and educational perspective, because one of the goals of Ethics is to level the playing field, rather than to "ghettoize" children who come from migrant backgrounds.

One difficulty that we have experienced in the introduction of Ethics in schools is the lack of trained teachers in the area. In Malta, one cannot teach a subject in school without a teacher's warrant issued by the National Council for the Teaching Profession. This warrant guarantees that teachers have received appropriate training. In order to teach Ethics in Maltese schools one needs to possess either a Post Graduate Certificate in the Teaching of Ethics in Schools or a Master's in Teaching and Learning, specializing in the teaching of Ethics. Another concern of ours is the homogenous makeup of Maltese teachers. One of the requirements to teaching in Maltese state schools is proficiency in both Maltese and the English language, which effectively means that teachers from a migrant background are discouraged from entering the teaching profession. Thus, the lack of diversity among teachers further serves to marginalize migrant students. We have resisted the approach taken by some other countries, such as Australia, where volunteers are asked to do 'Ethics' with children at the primary level. Within this system, volunteers are trained through a two-day course to support children to 'develop a life-long capacity for making well-reasoned decisions' [54]. However, we feel that for Ethics to be taken seriously, we must ensure that teachers are well trained and possess all the necessary qualifications.

9. Conclusions

In this paper we have tried to emphasize the responsibilities that teachers have in shaping a European/Maltese identity through the subject of Ethics, highlighting the delicate balance between maintaining students' autonomy in developing their character and values, but at the same time being directional, at times even going contrary to the students' family values. It is a balancing act between the individual child's sense of self and identity with that of the collective identity, a new/New Maltese identity. We feel that as educators, we have the duty to support the integration of the New Maltese through a socialization process into the norms of our nation, as reflected in local laws and prevalent traditions. These values are not presented as superior to the values of the student, but as the shared values of a Maltese community. Although such values are presented through dialogue and critical thinking activities in a community of inquiry, at the end of the day, the new/New Maltese are expected to follow the local norms and values. The predominant aim of the Ethics program is specifically this: The education of the student in a European westernized set of values. The Ethics syllabus is specific and prescriptive in this regard. In fact, one has to point out that the Maltese Ethics syllabus goes beyond moral education: It touches on legal values, political values and community values. We acknowledge that we may be expecting too much from children to have this 'dual' set of values and consequently a 'flexible' identity—one as directed by the Ethics program in a Maltese society, the other, as shaped by the language, beliefs and traditions of one's families. Such positioning reminds one of a 'fluid identity',

as characterized by the philosophy of Bauman [56]. It is our responsibility to do this while respecting the diversity of students in our multicultural classrooms.

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