Students' Learning and Satisfaction In An Alternative Learning Centre In Malta

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Abstract

This paper seeks to establish the preliminary perceptions of students attending an alternative learning centre in Malta and whether it has succeeded in reaching one of its targets, that of tackling the problem of early school leaving in Malta and the problem of absenteeism. As a study, it represents a small-scale research, undertaken on five students, attending this school, who were chosen randomly. These students were interviewed with regards to their learning objectives, expectations, achievements and failures. The main result is that the students are happy with the type of education being given. They are now learning the things which interest them in a safe and caring environment. The major conclusion is that such type of education should continue to be encouraged in the Maltese Islands as there is a demand for it. One hopes that this study serves as a spring board for more detailed research about alternative education.

Keywords: Alternative Education; Special Education Provision; Early School Leaving.

1. Local context

The island of Malta is situated in the middle of the Mediterranean. Throughout its history, Malta has been a melting pot of cultures, having been conquered by different countries and civilizations. The greatest impact on modern times was left by British rule. This rule lasted for nearly two hundred years. The British influenced every aspect of Maltese life, especially education. In fact, even in this present day, Maltese educationalists still look to Britain for inspiration and innovation in the Maltese education system.

2. Background to the setting up of the school

In 2013, Malta, one of the EU smallest member states ranked very high in the early school leaving statistics published by Eurostat. Almost a quarter of Maltese sixteen year olds were early school leavers. Spurred by these findings, the Maltese government sprung into action. The publication of the National Early School Leaving Strategy in 2014 (p. 40) by the Maltese Education Department advocated the setting up of an offsite school, which would cater for those students who are disenchanted with mainstream education.

The ALP (Alternative Learning Programme), opened in that same year. In truth this is a fully fledged school. When one reads the set government objective, one must admit that this is an ambitious programme targeting pupils with a low academic performance. At the same time, it seeks to target students who are interested in pursuing a vocational pathway, since it was not offered in mainstream colleges. I am keeping these two separate, as students who wish to take a vocational pathway are not necessarily low achieving students. Then, the same school sought to target students who were at risk of early school leaving and students with a high incidence of absenteeism. This research will focus on the last two categories. According to the Early School Leaving Strategy (2014), habitual absenteeism is an indication that could lead to students to disengage from the educational system and thus become early school leavers.

This school is open to both boys and girls who come to do their last year of formal schooling (form 5). After the one-year course, they can either pursue another year of education at the Alternative Learning Programme to continue honing their skills in vocational education, or else move on to the many post-secondary education schools or start working.

I am interested in this study because I currently work in this newly set up ALP school. Prior to working in this school, I used to teach in an area secondary school, where the intake came from socially deprived areas, many of whom, even in year 7 were already

disenchanted with education. My daily experiences with disenchanted students in these past twenty years have made me ask what can be done for such students.

This study is one small step to fulfil my wish of providing a better education to such types of students. As far as I know, never did an education professional, working with these types of students, try to carry a preliminary survey on what is the best type of alternative education for the students. What has been carried till now is an external review, by professionals who are unfortunately, distinct, distracted and distant from these students. My approach can have its disadvantages but it has the advantage that besides the preliminary information that I am gathering from interviews, I am also a participatory observer. What I can state from this preliminary search is that due to my continuous contact with students, confidence is built up and the students will be more than ready to speak the truth in an interview than one interviewed by an external who is detached from their personal realities.

3. This study

Thus, this research will seek to find out the perceptions of students within this off-site school which is in its fourth year since its inception. All this is to be framed within the local context, in that there was no formal alternative pathway for those secondary students who felt disenchanted with the Maltese educational system prior to 2014, with the consequence that they became early school leavers.

The author intends to achieve this by looking at the answers given in the interview about their perceptions. Those interviewed were considered by the educational system as students at the risk of dropping out from mainstream education about their educational experiences. This is why they have ended in this school.

As the school where I am conducting the research is co-educational, it is interesting to know whether boys and girls have the same opinions on the subject or not, and if they have different opinions, whether this is related to biology or social factors.

Thus, this paper aims to answer the following research question:

How do students who are on the verge of early school leaving, and who have a track record of absenteeism perceive the alternative education provided to them?

4. Methodology

Will Gibson (2013, p.60) recommends that after one has formulated the research question, it is important to 'reflect on the various types of data that each available method may

produce...'. I have thought deeply about my research design and in order to answer my research question, I have chosen a qualitative approach. This is because I would like to explore and explain new theoretical insights (Hammond and Wellington, 2013) and generate new theoretical models after an in-depth study of the data resulting from how people experience a given research issue.

The number of interview samples hinges on a variety of methodological and epistemological issues. These include reliability, replicability, generalization, validity and saturation. Mason (2010) goes in depth into the concept of data saturation. He quotes Glaser and Strauss (1967) and argues that when the collection of new data does not shed any further light on the issue under investigation, it should stop. For this research, I opted to interview a sample of five students, using random sampling. At face value, this sample may appear small. But this is a school with an in-take of 200 students. Therefore, this sample represents 2.5 per cent of the school population, which is normally above the required average for the production of a reliable scientific survey.

 An important variable underpinning the above studies is the students' perceptions, in particular towards the school where they are undertaking their alternative provision (Jahnukainen, and Helander, 2007, Online). Jahnukainen and Helander focused on students' perceptions, in particular among those at the risk of dropping out of school, through a series of interviews, in which the students made their voice heard about what they think is the best education for them. Even if the same model is used in the proposed study, the context is different, as Jahnukainen's research was conducted in Finland while the proposed study covers an alternative school in southern Europe.

The interviews with the students within the school were held between October 2017 and January 2018. The persons involved included three boys and two girls, pursuing their higher education course at ALP. As this is their second year at this school, they are more informed about their education process. Understanding the students' perceptions is important as these are the ones who can guide the educational policy makers help to structure and implement what the students need to learn to have a better preparation for life. The students come from different parts of Malta and thus, they pursued their mainstream education in the different colleges found on the island. They did not know each other prior to coming to ALP.

The students were informed about the purpose of the study, and that any information they give was going to remain confidential and anonymous. They all agreed and gave their informed consent. These one-to- one semi-structured interviews were held in an empty classroom at the convenience of the interviewee. The interviews were digitally recorded and were then fully transribed and analysed for the emergence of topics.

5. Findings from the interviews

My study has put to the fore that the students are very happy to be studying at the Alternative Learning Programme. Like McCluskey et al.(2015), the students mentioned the caring environment and the pastoral care that they receive from their teachers. This is what makes ALP different from the main stream colleges that the students attended prievously.

The students had to apply to attend ALP school. Then, they were asked to sit for an interview, where their personality was assessed to see what motivated them to come to ALP school. This tallies with what Raywid (1994) and Gutherson *et al.* (2011) argue, that is, that alternative education provisions can be applied to early school leavers. These authors link alternative education provision with motivation. Imposing courses on students, in particular those with social and emotional problems, can be a real barrier for academic learning. Thus, Gutherson *et al*. (2011) conclude that alternative educational models, wherever possible, have to be voluntary and this applies irrespective of the gender of the students.

 ALP school has a pupil population of around 200 students, and the students are grouped in small groups of not more than 10. This was also highly commended by all the students. They all mentioned that they get individual attention and that the teachers do not get angry if they have to repeat. The teachers involved everybody so that they felt as if they were part of one big family. As student D said:

'... the teachers here are compassionate, they do not put you aside as happened in my mainstream college. Over there, the teachers told me to sit at the back... Lessons were done for those who sat at the front... if I asked for the teachers to repeat, many of them would get angry.'

These comments tally with the findings of Harper *et al*. (2011) and Biesta (2014), both of whom emphasized the need for small classes as these provide for a more personalized teaching and engagement from students. This is considered beneficial for those categories of students who drop out because of disenchantment with school or the learning environment.

Student A pointed out another facet of his education at ALP. He said that:

'...I am happy here because lessons are always done. In my previous school, there were lessons where the teachers had no control... Lessons were not done because of a handful of rowdy students, who were not interested.'

The students also mentioned that the teachers were more relaxed, in that there was no race to finish off the syllabus by the end of the year.

'... the teachers have drawn up the syllabus catering for our needs. We are learning what we want to learn, what we are going to need in the future. Also it is not so difficult...' (Student E)

The negative points were also mentioned. These included the fact that as it is not an area college, there are students from all the different colleges in Malta. Some of the students have challenging behaviour, others have mental health problems.

'....the place for some of the students is not here.... they need to be sent to an institution or rehabilitation.... Such students are a danger when one is doing vocational practice.' (Student B)

Lack of appropriate teaching resources was also mentioned, while the physical building in itself needs renovation to bring it up to scratch.

'... More students want to come to ALP. The fame of this school is growing.. there is a real need for such a type of school. But it needs to be well maintained, ...look, it is shabby, it needs paint, regular maintanance...also, we need more up to date resources to work with....'

6.Conclusion

All in all, this particular category of students think that the education that they are receiving at the alternative learning programme is better than in the mainstream, yet there is still room for improvement. It is now an integral part of the Maltese Education system and the demand for it is greater than the amount of students that it can cater for.

This preliminary review shows that all those interviewed where in favour of this school and they want this type of education and schooling to continue. Such an experiment has contributed, even if mildly, to tackle or lower the incidence of early school leaving and absenteeism in Malta.

As education systems vary from one country to another in the European Union, I hope that this study gives an insight into what these formerly disenchanted students think is the best way forward for alternative education in Malta, the EU's smallest state member. Without doubt, such a small study cannot represent in anyway a conclusive and final word on the subject, but it can serve as an indication of the way forward and may serve as an appetizer for more research on the subject.

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