PROTOCOL FOR THE INCLUSION OF FOREIGN STUDENTS WITHIN THE MALTESE FORMAL EDUCATION SYSTEM
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FORMAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

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KOPIN

Kopin is a Maltese based NGDO which aims at poverty eradication and the wholesome development and effective empowerment of the poorest communities. It carries out development education and advocacy work on North-South issues directed mainly at local and EU policies. Kopin provides expertise regarding Mediterranean issues and specific inputs in the AidWatch group. It favours networks with other Maltese NGDOs and collaborates with fellow SKOP members. Kopin also participates in working groups at local and European level and has collaborated in the four Annual National Seminars on Development Education and the two National Seminars on MDGs. Kopin acts as the Maltese focal point for Social Watch International. It submits a national report for the yearly publication and undertakes lobbying initiatives with the national authorities regarding the relevant policies.
BUTD - Building Unity Through Diversity

The overall objective of this three year project (that come to a close in October 2008) is to present and promote new approaches to development cooperation that Kopin believes will make it more efficient through the increased involvement of the local community. Maltese citizens approached development cooperation from a point of view based on reciprocity and learning from one another. Participants developed customised development tools and methods. The main entry point of the project was the ‘1000 Families’ Exhibition based on the work by the world famous German photographer Uwe Ommer.

A European project: This project was implemented by a consortium of NGOs and was co-financed by the European Union.

A 'gentle' revolution: By definition, development cooperation brings together people of different cultures who are knowledgeable in different areas and have different worldviews. The gamble is to make diversity a developmental factor, and to make the project an opportunity for the involved parties to learn from each other.

We seek to suggest and encourage “a gentle revolution”. We say “gentle” because, in this project, everything is based on the exchanges and meetings that occur between people of diverse backgrounds. This point of contact will be both direct (during events, "Building Unity" gatherings and micro-seminars) and indirect (by visiting the exhibition or seeing the campaign in the press). This project is void of any didactic or aggressive rhetoric. We describe it as a “revolution” because in development cooperation, as in many other developmental processes (in education for example), an unhealthy practice became the norm in the West, one in which one assesses the weaknesses and lacks of others by attempting to provide solutions based on a Western value system.

The main entry point of ‘Building Unity Through Diversity’ is a photographic exhibition featuring the work of the world famous photographer Uwe Ommer. The main objective of the “1000 families” exhibition is to outline the fact that we live in a world where diversity is part of everyday life especially within the family nucleus. The exhibition includes 60 photos of different families from around the world and 3 Maltese ones which Ommer himself included to his ‘collection’ during his visit in August 2006.
A number of dignitaries and personalities have supported this project through their patronage, namely: the Prime Minister Dr Lawrence Gonzi, the Minister for the Family and Social Solidarity Dolores Cristina, the Hon. Evarist Bartolo MP, the Chairman of Alternattiva Demokratika Dr Harry Vassallo, Ms Ira Losco (singer) and Mr Renzo Spiteri (percussionist). Vodafone Malta Foundation and VOICES also supported the local activities through a financial contribution.

BUTD has supported SKOP in the promotion of the Code of Conduct on Images and Messages on the South published by CONCORD in November 2006 with the members of the National Platform.

BUTD has published in May 2008 a protocol for schools regarding the integration of foreign students within the Maltese educational system. This protocol was developed through the collaboration with UCODEP (an Italian NGO working on development education) and the active participation of over 20 Maltese educators.

Kopin is also contributing to a multi-stakeholder process for the protocol to be presented to educational authorities and schools.
Need to be addressed

The Maltese formal education system, to date, does not have any comprehensive policy for the inclusion of foreign students within its structures. It is evident that our system lacks knowledge of other education systems, particularly those of non-EU countries. This means that children arriving to Malta from such countries are often inserted into our education system in a rather ad hoc way. Such integration into a system which is often and naturally perceived as alien – in particular during the first months – is often traumatic and adds to an often already stressful situation for the families concerned. Language is often a barrier for which systematic personalised support is necessary if the parents and the student are to be given the appropriate tools and skills to adapt themselves to the situation and the new environment. Furthermore, although some progress has been forthcoming in this area, educators often lack the skills to deal with an ever increasingly multicultural environment, and both initial teacher training and in-service training within this area needs to be improved.

Kopin, together with a number of NGOs and educators, is concerned that this policy vacuum does not fully guarantee the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as enshrined in 1989, and of which Malta is a signatory, particularly in respect of Article 28 that deals with the Right to Education.

Besides catering for administrative and political decisions, Kopin would like to see an improvement in the quality of the education delivered to all our students. Adopting an intercultural perspective that promotes dialogue and an interchange between cultures goes further than the development of strategies for the integration of foreign students or any other special compensational measure. Educating within an intercultural perspective most importantly means adopting diversity within the school’s ethos, thus giving it a unique opportunity of openness towards all differences.

The presence of foreign students in our schools must be viewed within the wider change that our society is going through. These changes represent challenges and opportunities for all the new generations and thus the educational institutions should be developing tools that are able to weave personal uniqueness with a sense of belonging and responsibility towards society.
Contemporary pedagogy, with all its various nuances, aims at giving value to the person and at developing educational paths that are based on the personal and social uniqueness of the student. This principle is valid for all students, and particularly meaningful for minors of immigrants, as it puts diversity at the centre of our attention while reducing the risks of assimilation and homogenisation. At the same time, taking care of the social skills of the person will help avoid an overly individualistic approach and help the school to recognise the student’s context, his personal and social history and that of his family.

Opting for an intercultural education would mean acting at all levels – teaching, the curriculum, didactic material, relationships and the life within the classroom. This approach is built on the assumption of a dynamic culture that on one hand avoids imprisoning the students in a closed culture and on the other avoids stereotypes or folklorisation. Intercultural strategies avoid categorising and separating individuals into autonomous and unapproachable cultural worlds. It promotes dialogue, interchange and reciprocal transformation that facilitate communal living and conflict resolution. We would like to see a new citizenship that adapts to a pluralistic society; that gives value to diversity; that is capable of learning; and that aims at social cohesion through the sharing of common values.
A First Step

Kopin, with the support of a number of NGOs and educators, considers a comprehensive audit of the current policy provisions to be a first urgent step towards guaranteeing a quality education for all. The aims of this audit would be:

- to identify the strengths and weaknesses of current provisions;
- to gauge to what extent have past placements of students been adequate, in particular, if students have automatically been placed into area secondaries and excluded from junior lyceums;
- to identify major gaps in the provision of quality education to foreign students;
- to understand to which extent is language a barrier to full participation;
- to understand to which extent are educators equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to deal with multicultural classrooms;
- to catalogue existent related local research on the matter;
- to catalogue examples of good practice in the field; and
- to charter the way forward.
Protocol

Based on the practical experiences of other countries, we feel that an agreed protocol for the inclusion of foreign students within the formal Maltese Education system would respond adequately to the need identified above. The results of the initial audit will ensure that such a protocol deals effectively with the local needs and that such a protocol is context specific.

Some suggestions of what may be included in such a protocol, based on the results of a workshop coordinated by Kopin, are the following:

a) Personal and Educational Profiling of each Child

In order to arrive at the most suitable decisions regarding the student’s insertion, there are a series of elements regarding an individual student that a school needs to examine in addition to all the administrative matters. Getting to know a new student can initially occur through a meeting with the parents and the student, with the assistance of a linguistic mediator if need be. During this stage, both personal and educational information regarding the student is gathered and recorded. Elements such as the family’s interests, its strengths, its skills, etc. are all important and central to establish a relationship with the whole family. This contact can also be established through non-verbal means such as drawings, gestures, photos and the like. Certain schools can give the new student a logic or mathematics test structured either in a way that the student can intuitively understand it or else drawn up in the student’s mother tongue. If registration of the student is to be requested, it is important that school information and any application forms must be bilingual, using the newcomer’s mother tongue and passed on to the parents.

b) The setting up of a Commission

A Commission for the Integration of Foreign Students should be set up in order to implement the policy that would be adopted by the authorities concerned. This Commission would be made up of professionals representing the schools’ administration, the teaching staff, the Office of the Commissioner for Children and the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality.
The remit of the Commission would include the personal and educational profiling of each student, the allocation of each student to a particular school, the monitoring of relationships between the school and the families of foreign students, the administration of the whole process of educational integration and the monitoring of the students’ educational progress. The Commission would also be responsible for arranging initial meetings between the school and student’s family, together with the teacher (or form teacher) who would assist with the integration, in order to assist both parties to get to know each other. Another important responsibility of the Commission would be the drafting of questionnaires, information leaflets and application forms in different languages that would be given to the families and students. The delivery of courses on non verbal skills and linguistic skills would also be a central feature of the series of tools that could be provided to the families and students.

c) School/Class Placement

The information gathered in the first two phases is aimed at guaranteeing an appropriate placement of the student and a smooth period of integration. We have to keep in mind that a foreign student is most probably disoriented, both mentally and emotionally, and therefore long term decisions and effective monitoring should ensure that the child senses stability while leaving room for immediate remedial action. In principle, students should be placed in a class according to their age, unless it is evident that she or he should be put in a more suitable class considering:

a. the student’s previous education system;
b. the student’s strengths and skills;
c. the subjects studied and the curriculum covered thus far by the student in her country;
d. the student’s qualifications.
The importance of sensitivity and flexibility from the Commission, and the school cannot be underestimated. It is evident that schools need to acquire a knowledge on foreign school systems including the curricula, length of academic calendars and so on. Therefore, one of the aims of the Commission could be to research data and materials regarding other educational systems of countries from which foreign students are coming. It is important that the school prepares itself in advance in matters such as the provision of language courses in Maltese and English but also by preparing suitably the class that would be receiving the foreign student. The protocol should for example indicate the maximum time allowed for the placement of a student into a class.

d) The Teacher

Teachers have often lamented a lack of formal training in this area. The teacher has to be prepared from the outset to manage the situation of a multicultural classroom. Besides the aspect of professional development, the teacher must be involved from the initial stages after the process of school and class placement is decided in order to get a strong knowledge of the profile of the student.

Conclusion

Kopin calls on the authorities to implement this proposal at the earliest. Kopin and its supporters believe that the way forward for arriving towards such a protocol is through a multi-stakeholder process that will include representatives from Government institutions, NGOs, Civil Society representatives, the University, the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality and the Office of the Rights of the Child.

As Kopin, we affirm our commitment to be part of such a process and to give our full support to such an initiative.
Corporate Information

This document has been drafted by the project manager and the pedagogy officer of the BUTD project, William Grech and Vince Caruana, respectively. They have taken into consideration the work and the recommendations of the participants of a two-day seminar organised within the framework of the same project in October 2008 at the Mediterranean Conference Centre. This seminar was facilitated by Ms Elisa Carboni and Ms Areta Sobieraj - two professional pedagogues working with the Italian NGO UCODEP from Arezzo and was attended by around 20 Maltese educators. Kopin is indebted to these persons for their invaluable input.

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