

System of early education/care and professionalisation in **Malta**

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Submitted by

Dr. Valerie Sollars

Dean, Faculty of Education
Department of Primary Education
University of Malta
Msida, Malta

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General information

Malta is the largest of the archipelago of five islands in the middle of the Mediterranean. With a land mass of 316 square kilometres, an estimated population of 404,306 and 1,282 persons per square kilometre, Malta is the most densely populated country in Europe, (NSO, 2006a). Some 50.4% of the population is made up of women; about 3.2% are foreign citizens. There are no fluctuations in the population owing to migration¹ and the increase in population is attributed to the difference in births and deaths.

Considering the initiatives taken in the field of early childhood education and care in Malta over the past decade, ECEC is on the agenda of two government ministries: the Ministry of Family and Social Solidarity (MFSS) as well as the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment (MEYE). The reason for the divide and interest in two sectors arises from the fact that child-care centres fall under the responsibility of the MFSS, whereas KG and compulsory schooling are the responsibility of the MEYE.

Compulsory schooling starts at the age of 5. KG provision is widely available for 3 and 4 year-olds. Although this is not compulsory, some 98% of children attend KG regularly. Child-care centres are the most recent early childhood service in the Maltese society with the earlier ones starting their operation in the mid-90s. Child-care centres typically cater for children between the ages of 3 months to 3 years. Putting children into care at the age of three months links to the 13 weeks paid maternity leave which mothers are entitled to. However, there are also instances where babies younger than three months are already in care because of the mother's work commitments. Moving infants from child-care centres to KG centres occurs around the age of three as this is the first year of admission to Kindergarten.

Contextual data

The birth rate in the Maltese islands has been on the decline for years. The 3,858 live births in 2005 imply a decrease of 55% in comparison to 1960 (NSO, May 80/2007).

Year	Males	Females	Total
1996	2619	2419	5038
1997	2536	2312	4848
1998	2405	2265	4670
1999	2239	2164	4403
2000	2174	2218	4392
2001	2037	1920	3957
2002	2048	1870	3918
2003	2029	2021	4050
2004	1998	1889	3887
2005	1984	1874	3858
2006	2040	1845	3885 ²

Tab. 1 Total live births between 1996 and 2006

¹ According to 2005 figures, there were 187 returned migrants and foreign settlers, 187 new work permit holders and 624 adoptions, registrations and naturalisation. There is no data for emigration but estimates on past data suggest about 70. (NSO, 2006a).

² This figure was announced in *Naming Babies*, the NSO News Release of 16 May 2007.

Ages	Males	Females	Total
0 to 4-year-olds	9693	9203	18896
0	1846	1751	3597
1	1897	1794	3691
2	1958	1956	3914
3	2002	1814	3816
4	1990	1888	3878

Tab. 2 Maltese children³ by sex and single years of age: 31st December 2005

Births outside marriage are on the increase. In 2005, 20.1% of births were to single mothers; 26.9% of all mothers were single mothers aged 20 or younger, whereas 35.8% were between 20 and 24 years of age (NSO, 2006a).

Year	Number	% of total live births
1986	80	1.5
1990	95	1.8
1996	289	5.8
2000	464	10.6
2005	779	20.2

Tab. 3 Live births outside marriage; Source: NSO, 80/2007, 15 May 2007

At 34.9%, the number of women in full-time employment is the lowest among the EU countries (Eurostats, 2007)⁴. There are sharp contrasts between the number of men and women in both full and part-time employment, with more women than men having a part-time job exclusively.

Total number in part-time employment	44,157	100%
Part-timers who hold full-time job	19,608 – 100%	44.4%
Men	14,291 – 72.9%	32.4%
Women	5,317 – 27.1%	12%
Part-timers as a primary job	24,549 – 100%	55.6%
Men	9,821 - 40%	22.2%
Women	14,728 - 60%	33.4%

³Figures based on 391,906 as the total population. If one were to include births to foreigners residing in Malta (total population 404,346), the total number of children aged 0 to 4 is 19,697; total number of children aged 5 to 7 is 13,315).

⁴http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page?_pageid=1996,39140985&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL&screen=detailref&language=en&product=Yearlies_new_population&root=Yearlies_new_population/C/C4/C41/em012

Total number in full-time employment	139,456	100%
Men	97,015	69.6%
Women	42,441	30.4%

Tab. 4 Employment patterns for males and females – November 2006; Source: NSO, April 55/2007

According to local statistics, 57% of inactive women, aged 15 to 64 report that they are not looking for work because of personal or family responsibilities whereas 8.9% report that they are looking after children or incapacitated adults (NSO, March 37/2007)⁵. Of the 84,161 married women aged 15 to 64, only 26.7% are in employment. In contrast, 48.1% of unmarried women are in employment. There seem to be a number of reasons which contribute to this situation.

For many years, the local culture has predominantly attributed the role of child-rearing and child-minding to women. Men have traditionally been considered to be the breadwinners whilst the women stay at home to raise the family. Although parental leave benefits have been introduced to encourage dads to stay home with their young children, very few Maltese men are making use of these benefits. For example, in a recent EU project *Modern man in an enlarged Europe*, in which Malta participated with Lithuania, Iceland and Denmark, only 10 men in Malta were identified as participants for the study on the basis of their having availed themselves of paternal leave within five years preceding the study (Centre for Equality Advancement, 2005). Other studies have found similar trends: a survey among 518 families focusing on satisfaction with child-care centres and small private KG centres indicated that in 49.6% of the participating families, the mother had been the person responsible for looking after the child prior to utilising child-care or KG services. For 24.9% of families, various people were identified with this responsibility. The father was identified as the person who looked after the child before using child-minding facilities in 1% of the families (Sollars, 2002). Another study looking into the impact of parental leave, career break and responsibility leave in the Maltese public sector illustrated that the uptake of parental leave and career breaks is dominated by women (98.4% against 1.6% taken by men) (Ministry of Social Policy, 2003). Such results confirm that parental leave and child-rearing are predominantly for women. It seems that men and possibly women are reluctant to move from their traditional gender stereotyped roles.

It is to be noted that there is some difference in parental leave entitlement for employees in the public and private sectors. Employees in the public sector are entitled to a one-year unpaid parental leave for every child, until the child is six-years-old as well as an unpaid five-year break in career until the child is six-years-old. The maximum five years can only be utilised once but can be divided and taken partially with subsequent children. In the private sector, parental leave is usually of a three-month duration.

Apart from cultural reasons, decisions which influence whether women are in employment relate to financial and economic ones. Men earn more than women in all jobs (NSO, March 37/2007). This could therefore be another factor contributing to a low female participation in employment. If a parent is to withdraw from work permanently or temporarily, the obvious choice would be for the lower-income parent to do so. Although

⁵ Overall inactive rate for women in 2005 stood at 62%.

parental benefits have been increased the only period of time covered by payment is the 13 weeks of maternity leave⁶.

Families are entitled to a children's allowance if the total income of the family does not supersede 23,922 Euros. In families where there are four or more children, or even a disabled child, the income of the family should not supersede 30,910 Euros for entitlement of the allowance. This allowance continues to be paid to children between the ages of 16 and 21, as long as they are in full-time education and have no additional remuneration. The allowance paid is calculated on a percentage on the difference between 23,922 Euros and the income declared of the previous year (Ministry of Family & Social Solidarity, 2007).

Finally, family-friendly measures at the place of work, which could support parents to reconcile family and work commitments seem to be difficult to introduce. About 12% of the employed population with child-caring responsibilities have to make use of vacation leave or have a specific working arrangement when the children are on holidays or when the child-care centre they normally use is not available (NSO, Feb 24/2006). Some 43.5% of people in employment claim that changing the start or end of their working day by at least an hour because of family reasons is not possible. In addition, 53.9% of employed persons claim that they do not have the possibility of working extra hours on some days to enable them to take days off for family reasons. It is interesting to note that in this latter result, there were no gender differences (NSO, Feb 24/2006). Finally, 67.9% of women and 64.3% of men believe that the main reason why employed people take vacation leave or make other work arrangements whilst children are on holidays is because there is no one to take care of the children during the day.

In the first ever survey on income and living conditions, national statistics indicated that 15.5% of women and 14.2% of men are at-risk of poverty, whilst 21.9% of children under the age of 16, fall below the poverty line (NSO, May 75/2007). Children living in single parent households are amongst the most vulnerable groups, with 47.9% of such households being at-risk of poverty (NSO, May 75/2007). Earlier data show that between October and December 2004, 9.5% of children under the age of 17 (9,274) lived in jobless households; 16.4% of people living in jobless households where children aged 0 to 14 years (NSO, July 145/2005)⁷.

Data on provision of early childhood services

Early childhood services in Malta incorporate child-care centres and kindergarten centres. The former generally cater for the under 3s whereas KG is for 3 and 4 year-olds. The child-care centres are almost exclusively private enterprises although several employers have invested in offering child-care facilities for their employees. Whereas most child-care facilities are independent of any other institution and operate in isolation, most of the KG centres are attached to schools. This is the case for State KG centres as well as KG centres in the Private and Church sectors. In addition, there are a number of small, private KG centres which are entirely independent of any school.

⁶ Expectant mothers in employment are entitled to 14 weeks of leave, 13 of which are paid.

⁷ Further details about family support services available for children and their families in Malta are available in Sollars (in press), Children's issues in Malta. To be published in a six-volumed encyclopaedia by Greenwood publishers.

Child-care centres

Child-care centres are relatively new within the Maltese context with the earlier ones dating to the mid-90s. They are primarily, although not exclusively targeted for families where the parents are in full-time employment. Earlier research had indicated that child-care facilities are also used by parents where the mother is not in employment (Sollars, 2002). Whereas 64.5% of parents using child-care centres reported that they did so in order to continue to work, 55.3% also reported using such centres because of the social benefit it offered for their children (Sollars, 2002). On the other hand, more recent data suggest that child-care centres or paid child-minding services appear to be the least favourite form of child-minding for children under the age of 14: some 21.5% of respondents claim that they rely on the husband, wife or partner living in the same house to mind the children when one adult is at work; 12.7% do not use any form of care although the parent is at work; 5.3% recruit the support of friends or relatives without any form of payment and only 0.8% report that they use a child-care centre or child minder (NSO, Feb 24/2006).

Currently there is no complete data compiled about the number of children actually registered in child-care centres or even the number of child-care centres in operation. The service has been totally unregulated thus far and no license is required to run a child-care facility. However, changes are being introduced gradually and these will eventually lead to stricter controls. In 2002, the then Minister of Social Policy set up a Technical Committee for child day care centres. Among its specific tasks, the committee was to:

- Develop standards for service provision
- Develop the sector's regulatory framework
- Set up a child-care inspectorate
- Identify and develop methods of encouragement for private sector initiatives
- Explore, develop and propose methods of supporting service users.

Since the setting up of the Committee, National Standards for Child day care facilities have been published (MFSS, July 2006) following a consultation document which had been circulated two years earlier. The standards are presented from a user's perspective, hoping to raise parents' expectations about suitable and quality services for young children. Ten standards were defined including: suitable persons; the physical environment; premises and equipment; management and organisation; health & safety of children; care, learning & play; working in partnership with parents; behaviour management; child protection; food and drink; equal opportunities and children with special needs. An appendix follows each standard to elaborate on the main items (MFSS, July 2006).

The Department for Social Welfare Standards (DSWS) within the MFSS has been entrusted with the responsibility of monitoring, assessing and regulating the sector. This task is being done by a group of social workers, currently referred to as assessors. One of the first tasks taken by the Department has been the drawing up of a framework for the registration and assessment of Child-Day Care facilities. Existing child-care centres were invited to contact the Department with a view to getting a provisional registration. This implies that potentially there are centres in operation which have not got in touch with the DSWS. It is even more difficult to obtain information for home-based care. In fact, this type of care is very absent from the records of any department or Ministry.

In order to establish how close existing and potential day care centres are to the proposed standards, a gap analysis exercise was conducted in 2005 (DSWS, Nov 2005). Service providers identified a number of barriers to the implementation of the then proposed standards. Difficulties were perceived in connection with Standard 1, the employ-

ment of qualified personnel to work in the centres and Standard 2, referring to the physical environment, premises and equipment. Five real concerns were expressed:

- Lack of, or difficulties in coming across appropriate training courses;
- Better qualified staff would opt to move to employment that offers better working conditions;
- The additional labour hours and costs that achievement of some of the standards would require.
- An increase in the cost of labour that would bring about a significant increase in recurrent expenditure that would necessitate raising fees considerably or terminating service delivery.
- An increased expenditure of a capital nature.

One of the specific difficulties perceived by providers and which is linked to Standard 1 concerns the carer to child ratios. The National Standards propose the following ratios:

Age of Children	Children per carer
0 to 12 months	3
13 to 24 months	5
25 to 36 months	6
Mixed group	6 (one of which can be under 18 months)

Tab. 5 Carer to Child ratios; Source: National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities (2006)

Service providers are aware that in order to adhere to these ratios, they will need to increase the fees. However, a hike in fees could effectively discourage parents from making use of the service unless subsidies are introduced.

In its own process of becoming a department responsible for maintaining Social Welfare Standards, the Department is working towards *raising awareness of what service users are to expect from child day care services, helping providers in the introduction of the service standards to be adopted by Government and in paving the way to becoming compliant with them* (DSWS, Nov, 2005). Sufficient time is therefore being allowed for the providers to implement the standards. The implications arising from having a better or highly-trained workforce will be elaborated upon in the subsequent section of this chapter.

To date, 26⁸ centres have been given a provisional registration. Between them, these centres have 610 children between the ages of 0 to 3⁹. There are a further 16 centres which are in operation but are yet to be contacted by the Department, three centres are awaiting the provisional registration and three proposed centres are in the construction phase as part of a building complex.

The gap-analysis exercise was also conducted in a bid to find out what potential child-care facilities could offer. The Employment Training Corporation¹⁰ (ETC) had ap-

⁸ This includes four schools who have entered the child-care field. Between them, they have 221 children under the age of 3. A list of the centres is available at: <http://www.childcarenmalta.org/etc/content.aspx?id=43594>

⁹ Some of the centres have older children as they offer after school and summer school services.

¹⁰ The Employment Training Corporation is Malta's Public Employment Service.

plied for and received European Social Funds in order to support employers to set-up child-care facilities close to places of work, as an incentive for mothers to remain in the labour market. The project was divided in two: the training of child-carers and providing a package of incentives to small and medium enterprises in order to encourage them to start-up and run childcare services at the place of work. The incentives included:

- A start-up grant of 900 Euros for each organisation to adapt premises for toddlers and children;
- A start-up grant of 1500 Euros for each organisation to purchase equipment and furnish the premises adequately;
- Half the salaries of trained child carers for the project lifetime (up to 3 carers per organisation)¹¹.

Around 60 employers had shown an interest and applied to take part in the project and benefit from these incentives. However, only three eventually took up the offer; 57 of those who applied could not make use of funds. The main reason cited was the inadequate premises available to set-up the child-care centre (personal communication, May 2007). This suggests that a total of about 48 child-care centres are operational.

Kindergarten centres

Kindergarten centres are much more widespread than child-care centres. State KG provision started in 1975 for 4-year-olds and was extended to 3-year-olds in 1988. State KG schools are attached to the primary school in every town and village in Malta. KG provision was introduced for a number of reasons (Ministry of Education, 2006):

- To provide children with opportunities to socialise and develop their abilities under guidance;
- To provide children with opportunities to develop and catch up with the others especially if they came from homes lacking suitable educational opportunities;
- As remote preparation for entry into primary schools;
- To provide relief for working mothers.

State KG centres have the same opening hours as primary schools (08.30 – 14.30). They also follow the same timetable as the schools which means that they are closed for two weeks at Christmas, one week at Easter and just under three months in summer.

Although state KG centres were always attached to the primary school, they were not always the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. For some time, KG centres were the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Policy, suggesting that they were seen as a social service rather than an educational opportunity. Yet, parents had argued that sending children to school at the age of 3 rather than the age of 5 was one way of preparing children for compulsory school. Consequently, one impact of having KG centres so closely linked to schools has been on their daily practices. Unfortunately, some activities and practices which have seeped through to KG stages are not highly appropriate for the age group.

The late 1980s also saw an increase in the number of small, private KG centres which are not attached to any school. Many of these small KG centres were set up in town houses and big villas, parts of which were sectioned off for the playschool whilst the service providers continued to live in other quarters. These KG centres usually have very

¹¹ Payment of half the cost of a child carer was to be matched by the organisation (proposed salary of 10,000Euros per annum plus statutory benefits).

reduced opening hours and operate between 09.00 and noon or 12.30. Some offer extended hours, against additional payment to better accommodate working parents. Normally, the extended hours are up to 13.30. Yet, these hours are hardly sufficient for a mother to keep part-time employment (Sollars, 2002).

Several Church schools have provided KG services for 3 and 4-year-old children for many years. However, there is no collated documentation about the history of these centres. Most of the Church KG centres are also linked to their own primary and in some instances, the secondary school. This means that a child who attends a Church-school for KG provision can receive his/her entire subsequent 11 years of compulsory schooling within the same complex.

Independent private schools are also offering the possibility of having children with them for the entire education. Some have invested in child-care centres recently, after having extended their services to KG facilities too, in addition to their primary and secondary schools.

The changes in provisions and availability in the Independent sector have had an impact on the small private KG establishments. Rather than accepting three and four-year-old children only, many have started accepting younger children in order to make their business feasible. By accepting children under the age of 3, no legislation is being flouted. Whilst it is necessary to have a license and permits from the Education Division to operate an educational establishment even for KG aged children, to date, there is only the provisional registration given by the DSWS for child-care centres. On the other hand, the clear distinction which used to exist between child-care and KG centres is beginning to be somewhat blurred. The fact that to date child-care and KG services fall under separate Ministries but appear to be coming closer together by default rather than design, highlights the necessity for more dialogue at all levels to deal with practices and policies related to early childhood education and care.

In all there are 62 state KG centres, 28 Church-run centres and 21 private, independent centres. Tables 6, 7 and 8 illustrate the number of three and four-year-old children attending all forms of KG provision together with the number of groupings¹². Legally, there can be a maximum of 15 three-year-olds with one KG assistant and a maximum of 20 four-year-olds with one KG assistant. According to the data in the tables below, within state schools, the average number of three-year-olds in one group is about 13 whilst there is an average of just under 16 four-year-olds per group. Church and Independent schools have higher ratios: 19 and 17.5 three-year-olds per group and 20 and 18 four-year-olds per group respectively.

Data for scholastic year 2006-2007 indicate that 3,892 three-year-olds and 4,312 four-year-olds are attending KG. Considering data of annual births, these figures suggest that practically all three and four-year-olds attend a KG centre. According to Eurostats (2006), 97.5% of four-year-olds were attending KG centres in Malta in 2005. A further indication of how well attended KG centres are can be seen from data providing the number of new pupils registered at the age of 3, 4 and 5 who had never attended school before (Table 9).

¹² Source: Education Division personnel, May 2007.

	Kindergarten 1 (3-year-olds)				Kindergarten 2 (4-year-olds)			
	Boys	Girls	Total	Groups	Boys	Girls	Total	Groups
MALTA	1194	1227	2421	184	1464	1304	2768	172
GOZO	80	94	174	17	100	76	176	16
Total	1274	1321	2595	201	1564	1380	2944	188

Tab. 6 KG children in State school centres (2006-2007)¹³

	Kindergarten 1 (3-year-olds)				Kindergarten 2 (4-year-olds)			
	Boys	Girls	Total	Groups	Boys	Girls	Total	Groups
MALTA	205	185	390	19	252	427	679	32
GOZO	56	61	117	8	57	46	103	8
Total	261	246	507	27	309	473	782	40

Tab. 7 KG children in Church schools (2006-2007)

	Kindergarten 1 (3-year-olds)				Kindergarten 2 (4-year-olds)			
	Boys	Girls	Total	Groups	Boys	Girls	Total	Groups
MALTA	399	391	790	45	402	287	689	38
Total	399	391	790	45	402	287	689	38

Tab. 8 KG children in Independent schools (2006-2007)

	3 year-olds		4-year-olds		5-year-olds	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
State KG centres	973	934	131	128	7	7
Church KG centres	228	224	97	119	2	29
Independent KG centres	418	372	117	125	2	11
TOTAL	1619	1530	345	372	11	47
Grand Total	3149		717		58	

Tab. 9 New pupils who had never attended school before (31st March 2005)

¹³ Data as at March 31st 2007. There are 3 intakes for three-year-olds in state schools. The 1st intake is in October; the 2nd intake is in January, for children who would have turned 3 since the previous intake. The 3rd intake is after the Easter break for children who would have turned 3 in the first months of the year. State school data are updated ever quarter. Church school data are updated annually.

According to National Statistics, the number of foreign children attending state KG centres is very low (NSO, 2007a). In the scholastic year 2004/2005, there were 15 three-year-olds, 24 four-year-olds and 7 five-year-old foreign pupils. The countries of origin varied and included: Algeria (2), Erithrea (4), UK (10), Sudan (3), Somalia (2), Italy (2), Russia (3), Tunisia (2), Germany (2), and individuals from Bulgaria, Canada, India, Iraq, Libya, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria and USA amongst others. Within Church schools, there were two foreign children in the KG classes: a Romanian and a Turkish child (NSO, 2007a). Within Independent private schools there were 72 foreign pupils¹⁴.

An inclusive educational policy was introduced in state schools in 1995. Consequently, more children with disabilities were admitted to mainstream schools rather than in special schools. According to data presented in a review of inclusive and special education, of 7771 children attending KG in Malta and Gozo, 58 children (0.75%) with disabilities were attending state KG centres; 19 (0.24%) were in Church KG centres (Ministry of Education, Youth & Employment, 2005). At the time data were compiled for the review, there were no stated children in Independent KG centres. However, children with disabilities are not turned away from Independent schools if registered there.

One contributing factor which could determine parents' decision in the choice of a suitable educational setting for their child relates to support. In State schools, the Education Division provides support by allocating to a class, a learning support assistant. In practice class support is given either on a one-to-one basis (one assistant to one student with individual educational needs), or on a shared basis, depending on the particular needs of the student. The assistant is expected to support all the children in the class, but to pay particular attention to the needs of the stated student/s (Ministry of Education, 2005). In Church schools, additional teaching assistants are allocated on the same model as in State schools, albeit recruited through a different procedure. They are funded by the state, according to the Holy See-State agreement on Church schools of 1991. Currently, Independent schools get no State support for additional staff for children who need support and the burden of financing a teaching assistant usually falls on the parents. One of the recommendations made by the review team is for this discrepancy to be rectified.

As stated earlier, because most KG centres are linked to schools, they follow the same time-table where opening hours and operational days are concerned. This means that by half-past two (for a few schools dismissal time is three o'clock), children of all ages would be out of school or their KG centres. A few Independent private schools offer extra curricular activities against additional payment. However, the majority of children are at home in the afternoon as schools close soon after dismissal. This means parents have to collect children or make arrangements for the children to be collected. For many parents who are in full-time employment, the extended family is generally very supportive.

There are many after-school activities which children of all ages can participate in: children can go for music lessons, ballet, drama, football nurseries etc. but virtually all

¹⁴ Countries of origin of foreign pupils in Independent schools included one each from Austria, Australia, Belgium, Bosnia, Egypt, Gaza, Greece, Ireland, Japan, Lebanon, the Philippines, South Korea, Sweden, USA and FR Yugoslavia; two or more children from China, France, Germany, Italy, Libya, Syria, Russia and the UK.

arrangements are private decisions parents would make. Additionally, these after-school activities naturally imply further financial commitments for families¹⁵.

As far as governance and curricula for the early years are concerned, early years settings are rather free to organise their programme of activities. The National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) (1999) was the first curriculum to recognise Kindergarten Education as a phase in the education process. Whilst promoting the holistic development of the child, the specific aims of KG education are intellectual, physical, socio-emotional, moral and religious development together with the development of a sense of aesthetics and creativity. The NMC also highlights the effective tools that facilitate the holistic development of children. These include:

- A physical environment that is of good quality;
- Educators as animators;
- Resources;
- Early assessment;
- Play as the key pedagogical means.

The extent to which the curriculum has actually been implemented is difficult to determine. Within the state sector, the service is currently provided and regulated by the same body, namely the Education Division. Whilst being responsible for offering the state school service, this central education authority is also responsible to ensure that all educational settings, State, Church and Independent adhere to and promote sound practices. Church and Independent schools have more autonomy in whom to employ and choice of text-books amongst other things. In State schools, teaching staff is assigned to schools by the central administration.

Periodically, the schools also receive notices concerning the curriculum. Such information is the responsibility of the Education Officers together with the Directorate for Curriculum and Management.

The Education Division had one Education Officer responsible for KG and the first two years of primary. Apart from providing support to staff in all schools for KG centres and the first two years of compulsory school, the Education Officer was responsible for curriculum matters and in-service courses. One noteworthy document was the *Guidelines and suggestions for the implementation of the curriculum in kindergarten* (January 2002). The publication provides practical suggestions and an interpretation of the curriculum to “help KG assistants plan their work by focusing on the holistic development of children” (p.5). Owing to the lack of staff at the Education Division within the area of early childhood, for a very long time, staff at KG centres and teachers in the first two years of primary school have been left to work unsupervised and unmonitored.

¹⁵ An in-depth study on how children (7 to 15-year-olds) spend their time after school hours is available in Sollars, V. (2006). *Children's right to play. A Study of Maltese Children's Perceptions on Cultural and Recreational Activities*. Malta: Office of the Commissioner for Children. Available:
http://www.crin.org/docs/CFC_Children's%20Right%20to%20Play.pdf

Data on personnel

Professional pre-service and in-service training for personnel working with newborn to five-year-old children is one of the most challenging issues in Malta.

Training of staff working in child day care centres is a very recent development in Malta. The same can be said of the majority of service providers who own and run child-care centres. Typically, staff employed to work in this service would be mothers who have raised a family and are therefore considered by the service providers to be suitable to look after children at the centre. Given these circumstances, service providers could therefore afford to employ child - minders on a part-time basis, with a very low remuneration paid by the hour.

The sector is at present benefiting from the willingness of unqualified staff to work for low remuneration and to accept working conditions that do not guarantee security of tenure. The providers can call upon part-timers according to need and can thus ride over low demand periods of business without being burdened with heavy overheads (DSWS, 2005)

Child minders working in child-care centres are currently paid less than 5 Euros an hour (personal communication, May 2007). Thus, adhering to the first standard as identified in the national standards may be a goal which is agreed upon by all but the implications of having a qualified workforce need to be anticipated. Qualified, trained personnel will not accept to work in circumstances where working conditions and remuneration are not commensurate with their qualifications and responsibilities. Government subsidies have been recommended as an option which could potentially stem a high turnover, thus helping to retain the trained workforce.

The 91 child-care workers employed in 24 of the 26 centres which have to date been given a provisional registration have the following qualifications (personal communication, June 2007):

Number of carers	Type of qualification
61	ETC qualification
5	Montessori
1	MCAST qualification
1	International Cambridge qualification
12	Completing the ETC course; awaiting results
5	Waiting to being course
5	Unqualified in childcare
1	Experienced in childcare but lacks qualifications

Tab. 10 Qualifications of employed child-care workers

Two entities are predominantly responsible for training child-care workers: the ETC and the Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). The latter is the institution responsible for vocational courses. One of the main differences between the two entities concerns the students targeted: ETC aims at training or retraining citizens for the

labour market whereas MCAST targets school leavers who, at the age of 16 opt to go for vocational qualifications rather than pursue University courses.

ETC embarked on training for child-care workers in 2001 and by the time European Social Funds were secured in 2005, the course had already run four times (personal communication, June 2007). Between 2005 and 2007, 11 courses were organised with support from the European Social Funds. The students of the first set of courses were primarily service providers and child-care workers already in employment. About 69 service providers and child-care workers were trained in the first courses. Apart from practitioners, subsequent training was directed at increasing opportunities for women in the labour market and intended to prepare participants to work with children from birth to five years of age. Although not advertised as being exclusively for women, no males have followed any of the courses. It is anticipated that the course will resume sometime between October and December 2007 as part of the ETC training courses (personal communication, June 2007).

According to ETC documentation, the objective of the course is:

...for childcare workers in crèches, day-care and KG centres, under the general supervision of a crèche or centre manager while having responsibility for the care of individual or groups of children and of making lower-level day-to-day planning and decision making as regards the care of children, aged 0-5 years, who are in her/his charge.

The course is divided into three phases to incorporate a theoretical as well as a practical component. Phase one is 120 hours long and establishes the underpinning theoretical knowledge in the areas of child development and childcare; phase two is 180 hours long. It reviews and discusses theories and methods of Early Childhood Education. Phase three consists of 500 hours of practice in childcare centres and incorporates practice with babies, toddlers and two to five-year-old children in various childcare settings. Students can proceed to the practical and methodological components upon passing an exam at the end of the theoretical part. Phases two and three run concurrently.

Although each of the 11 courses funded through ESF had an intake of about 22 participants, certification for this course will be awarded to 130 participants who successfully completed the course. It is not yet clear what recognition the ETC childcare course will be given once the National Qualifications Framework becomes operational although training being offered by ETC is claimed¹⁷ to be equivalent to an NVQ Level 3¹⁶.

MCAST offers a two-year full-time course leading to a BTEC National Diploma in Early Years. According to published course information, “*this course is designed to enable students to work with children in a professional capacity. The qualifications provide the knowledge, skills and understanding required for working in a care or early years environment*”¹⁷. Several study units are undertaken during the course including ten core units and seven specialist ones¹⁸. Supervised placements are also incorporated in the course. Practical components are done with babies, toddlers and infants. The BTEC National Diploma in Early Years is meant to prepare personnel to work with children from birth to five. This cut-off point is promoted locally since a university qualification (a

¹⁶ This has been checked against British NVQ curricula such as CACHE.

¹⁷ http://www.mcast.edu.mt/institutes_communityservices.asp#6. Accessed on June 9th 2007

¹⁸ Course work in the first year includes Equality, diversity and Rights in Early Years Work; Communication and Interpersonal Skills in Early Years Work; Learning in the Early Years; Professional Practice; Human Growth and Development; Observation of Children; Play and Learning Activities; Developmental Psychology Supporting Numeracy Skills; Supporting Literacy Skills. Course work in the second year includes Protection of Children; Child Care Practice; Professional Practice; Research Methodology for the Early Years; Child Health; Sociology for the Early Years; Children with Special Needs; Design and Technology for the Early Years Practitioner; Special Needs; Physical Activities; Early Years Project

four-year full-time B.Ed.(Hons.)) is required for teachers who want to work with children aged five and over, this being the start of compulsory schooling. MCAST accept twenty-five students on the course each year. To date, all students have been female.

The BTEC National Diploma in Early Years was introduced in 2003 when the two-year Education Division certificate course for Kindergarten Assistants was phased out. Ironically, the Education Division does not recognise the BTEC qualification as a sufficient one for Kindergarten Assistants. An agreement has been reached between the Education Division and MCAST to top-up the BTEC qualification with a 12 week supervised placement in a Kindergarten centre. This implies that currently there are no specific pre-service courses for people who are interested in working with three and four-year-old children.

Between 1993 and 2003, the Education Division organised and ran a two-year course leading to a certificate in Early Childhood Education. This was the first attempt at having formal training for people wanting to work with three to five-year-old children. The course had a strong practical component in addition to the theoretical areas. Although the course became mandatory and employers in the private sector were to employ staff with this qualification, hardly any Kindergarten assistants in possession of this two-year qualification ever found employment in the State sector. The results of data collected in 2005 to establish qualifications of the work force, indicated that only 14 (3.7%) of 382¹⁹ KG assistants in state schools are in possession of the two-year certification (MEYE, 2006). The overwhelming majority of KG assistants currently employed in the state sector have been working in the field since the centres were opened in 1975 and 1988. Recruitment procedures then required potential staff to be in possession of four GCE 'O' level certificates and upon employment, they followed a six-week training period.

Kindergarten staff in church schools fared better with 26.3% (15 out of 57 respondents) having the two-year qualification. In Independent schools, 9.9% (7 of 71 respondents) of KG staff are in possession of the two-year qualification. Within the church and private sectors, there is also a significant number of staff who claim to have followed Montessori courses: 19.3% (N=11), 16.9% (N=12) in the Church and Independent sectors respectively. Only 1 KG assistant working in the State sector mentioned a Montessori diploma. There were variations in the duration of the Montessori courses reported with some respondents claiming a one-year diploma and others reporting a two-year course (MEYE, 2006).

Table 11 provides details about the number of KG assistants currently working with three and four-year-olds.

	State Schools	Church schools	Independent schools	
			Full-time	Part-time
MALTA	356	51	28	67
GOZO	33	16	---	---
Total	389	67	28	67

Tab. 11 Number of KG assistants (2006-2007); Source: Education Division personnel

KG assistants have a starting salary of 2182.56 Euros. The salary increases to 2307 Euros following five years in the service and 2447 Euros after a further eight years in the

¹⁹ The total cohort of state KG assistants in 2005 was 387.

service²⁰. They earn less than University-qualified teachers who work with children aged five or more. They are in fact referred to as assistants not because they assist anyone but because they are not qualified in the same way as teachers.

KG assistants are expected to follow in-service courses which are predominantly organised by the Education Division. However the courses they apply for and attend do not necessarily address professional issues directly concerning the age-group of children they work with. The in-service courses offered to KG assistants and teachers are three-day courses which take place at the end or beginning of a scholastic year²¹. This suggests that although participants do attend for courses which they are interested in, there is no gradual or sequential accumulation of courses which contribute to a growing knowledge base focused on early childhood education.

An exhaustive list of courses made available over the years for KG staff is hard to come by. Data collected in 2005 requesting KG staff to indicate training courses they had attended illustrates that over the years, different entities did organise training specifically addressing KG assistants (Table 12). Six of the courses referred to were the on-the-job training given to the first KG assistants upon employment. Current documentation about the in-service courses available for 2007²² suggests that only two College-based courses²³ are directly addressed to staff in the sector. College-based courses are developed on the initiative of the College co-ordinators. One of the courses will focus on *Non-directive play skills in KG classes* and a second course will focus on *Using Creative play effectively*. For KG assistants working in these particular college networks, the courses are compulsory.

Certificates of attendance are usually awarded to participants at the end of the course.

Title of course	Date	Duration/Details
Training programme for KG assistants	5 th May to 31 st July, 1975	full days
Training programme for KG assistants	1 st to 18 th September 1975	full days
Training programme for KG assistants	8 th Jan to 13 th February 1976	Evenings
Kindergarten Education	16 th July to 31 st August 1976	6 weeks
Kindergarten Special Primary	4 th to 12 th December 1979	12 hours
Nursing for KG	1983	17.5 hours
Problems of speech and language	February 1984	
Pre-school education	20 th to 30 th July 1987	30 hours
Pre-school education	October to December 1988	30 hour
Pre-school education	1989	20 hours

²⁰ MUT (2007). *Pay/Conditions*. <http://www.mut.org.mt/conditions.htm>; Accessed June 12th 2007.

²¹ In-service courses take place in July and September. KG assistants and teachers are obliged to attend an in-service course every two years.

²² A copy of the Catalogue of in-service training courses on offer for 2007 can be downloaded from http://www.curriculum.gov.mt/docs/in_service_courses_2007.pdf

²³ Since 2005, Government schools have been grouped into networks to incorporate a number of primary schools in an area together with the receiving secondary schools into Colleges. Apart from the Heads of school who administer specific schools, there are now College Co-ordinators who are responsible for the management and administration of an entire network or college.

Title of course	Date	Duration/Details
KG education	September to December 1990	75 hours
Toy making with children	April – May 1991	MUS, University of Malta
The contribution of physical activity to development in the early years	1991	MUS, University of Malta
Reading and writing in the infant classroom	May – June 1992	MUS, University of Malta
Creativity in the KG class	Sept 1995	In-service course; 12 hours
Learning in the KG	4 th to 8 th July 1997	
Science in Early Childhood	7 th to 14 th July 1998	24 hrs
Early Childhood Education	15 th to 23 rd Sept 1998	In-service course; 20 hours
Early learning – make it easy, make it fun	15 th to 22 nd Sept 1999	In-service course; 20 hours
Putting play on the KG agenda	6 th to 10 th November 2000	
Implementing a high quality curriculum	4 th to 6 th June 2001	
The way forward	29 th & 31 st October 2002	Focus group NMC
Towards an ECE curriculum	26 th – 29 th November 2002	Focus group NMC
Thinking is fun for everyone	15 th – 17 th September 2003	In-service course; 12 hours
Sharing nature with children	7 th to 9 th July 2003	12 hours (BirdLife, Malta)
Art through creative play	2004	In-service course
Cooking is fun ...for everyone	2004	In-service course
Putting fun in Maths (Abacus)	27 th to 29 th September 2004	In-service course; 3 days
Starting from the child: Observation & assessment in early childhood education	30 th – 31 st August 2004	8 hours, University of Malta
Cooking – a tool for better learning	2005	In-service course

Tab. 12 Selected list of in-service courses followed by KG assistants; Source: Early Childhood Education & Care – A national policy 2006

Conclusion

One of the main issues, which needs to be urgently addressed in the Maltese Early Childhood Education and Care system, concerns training of practitioners, predominantly for staff who will be working with the under-fives. Whilst a number of European countries offer at least three-year university degree courses at undergraduate level in the field of early childhood education and care, the training currently on offer is not conducted within a University degree programme but at the vocational school. The B.Ed. degree in Primary Education has a small number of study units aimed specifically at early childhood education but these modules focus on children aged 5 to 7. One of the recommendations made in the Early Childhood Policy document (MEYE, 2006) was for a university-qualified

teacher together with an assistant to accompany every group of three to five-year-old children. Naturally, such a change needs to be implemented gradually to give opportunities to current practitioners to up-grade their status. This implies finding ways of acknowledging prior learning and experience, in addition to furthering studies.

Expertise in the field is highly limited and to date, individuals who want to deepen their studies in the area have to do so abroad or follow courses with foreign universities by correspondence. With the support of EU funding, a post-graduate degree in early childhood education has just been developed and will be starting in Autumn 2007. This will go some way to producing graduates who can in turn support practitioners in planning and reflecting upon good practice as well as support policy makers in designing and implementing appropriate practices which recognise and value learning processes amongst young learners.

A second issue relates to the responsibilities for provision: having two Ministries responsible for diverse forms of early childhood services requires more effort and co-ordination to ensure equal access to good, quality services as well as policies which make children's transition from one type of provision to another as seamless as possible. Given the isolated way in which most child-care centres operate, and unless children have been registered at the same centre for child-care, KG services and formal schooling, it is very difficult to find transition policies between services. Receiving centres and schools do not necessarily have any knowledge or information about the children and their achievements during the time they would have spent in a previous setting.

Issues related to financing are a further priority. Whether in the form of subsidies to registered centres who are applying the standards or to parents who make use of child-care facilities, whether it's in the form of stronger financial, parental support in the first year of a child's life, flexi-time measures at the places of work or accessibility to and affordability of after-school activities, together with increases in wages for practitioners working with the under-fives, the local Government and private enterprises have to tap sources which will make the early childhood sector sustainable for all involved.

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