

Youth work development in Malta. A chronicle

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Malta is a small island sitting in the Mediterranean Sea. Its size is about 27 km long by 14.5 km wide, taking just over an hour to drive across. According to NSO (2008) the Maltese population is 410,290 and Malta as an island is considered to be the most densely populated country in Europe. The uniquely complex Maltese history which has gone through successive waves of domination by the Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Spanish, French and, the British – has left some distinguishing marks on contemporary Maltese society. However despite the often enforced engagement Malta remains its own unique reference point. Sultana & Baldacchino (1994) stated that Maltese people have managed to accommodate outside influences and retain a strong sense of national identity. The survival of the Maltese language and culture in the face of what we have gone through is certainly not evident. Sultana & Baldacchino (ibid.) identify three decisive influences on contemporary Malta: the British tradition, the Roman Catholic Church and, what they term, “*the Realm of Lilliput*” (p.14). What did they mean by this? British interest in Malta was essentially strategic and on the whole, the British model of imperialism tended not to disrupt local culture and customs unless it was absolutely necessary to its national interest. As such, the British did not seek to wipe out the local language or culture and certainly avoided serious disputes with the Roman Catholic Church. However, the British did leave the marketable asset of fluency in the Maltese language and also left an imprint on education, administration, justice and government. It happened that the posh, colonial governor-style of - ‘top-down’ administration, fitted well with established local traditions of paternalistic authority coming from the church.

The early 20th century

It is in this set up that youth work has been conceived. How? Looking back, work with young people was done mainly by the church. Maltese youth work has its origins in the activities of the Catholic Church and its voluntary organizations. Bodies such as The Society of Christian Doctrine, the Catholic Action and the Salesians which were all founded in Malta at the beginning of the 20th century were concerned with providing structures through which adults could reach youth and keep them connected to the *orderly* Catholic world. They mainly worked for the same cause using different methodologies. They were also committed to youth socialization, to mould a catholic character and to develop Maltese catholic citizens with habits of self control, rather than having a congregation of young people separate from adult society and whiling away their time aimlessly.

The Society of Christian Doctrine was founded in the early years of the 20th century by a young priest George Preca who has been proclaimed a Saint in 2007. St George Preca was imbued with the idea of building a relationship with a group of young laymen (and eventually women as well) to encourage them serve the Church, primarily by helping them lead a truly Christian life and a dedication to evangelization with young people.

Knowing that a group of youngsters were in the habit of meeting together regularly, Saint George Preca struck up a steady friendship with them. Sometimes he was rebuffed, more often than not he was gladly received so that gradually his advice about spiritual matters was as welcome and accepted as his chattering on other things. Soon the group of youths who met in the vicinity of the Hamrun Parish Church, chief among them being Eugenio Borg, grew and

grew so that a premises had to be rented where their meetings could be held. (<http://www.sdcmuseum.org/>)

Saint George Preca was of the opinion that although Malta was virtually completely Catholic and all the population was church-going, young people knew very little about the truths of Christianity. In general religion was based on the practice of popular devotions and little else. These lay men and women started catechetical work in the parishes. Society's centres were opened daily for catechetical formation of children and young people. Young people also found a space to socialize and discuss other things.

The Salesians on the other hand, founded the Salesian Oratory, better known as "Salezjani" in 1908, to carry out activities which promoted human and Christian education to young people. Don Bosco's Oratory as it was named, aimed at providing not only a "service" of catechism but a presence and participation in the life of youth. It aimed to provide a programme which was not limited to catechesis but included educative and pastoral work. The oratory in fact tried to move away from a parish mentality to a missionary outlook, open to young people who belonged to different parishes.

Some time later the Catholic Action founded in the 1930s aimed at forming groups of young males and females in the parish who practiced their catechises by taking action in the community and doing voluntary work depending on the needs of the particular community. Catholic Action was set up by Prof Daniel Callus OP who set up the Lega Universitaria Cattolica Maltese. The federation of the Catholic Action comprising male youth groups from eight parishes was formed in October 1931 and a year later the Female youth section was launched.

Amidst the voluntary work done by a number of church organisations, the British connection brought about the Malta Scout Association which applied to become a member of the British Movement on November 9, 1908. The first few Scouts started a tradition that kept scouting in the very forefront of youth education in Malta. Baden-Powell visited Malta on several occasions. He took the Maltese Scouts under his wing, often writing to them with advice and praising *'the progress in efficiency and the spirit of the Boy Scouts of Malta'*. Shortly before his death Baden-Powell typed what was possibly his last letter, on July 21, 1940 from Paxtu in Kenya *'to congratulate my old friends, the Maltese on the plucky way they have stood up to the infernal bombing of the Italians ... They have the spirit of fearlessness and patience which enables them to face danger with a smile to stick it out to the triumphant finish'* (<http://www.maltascout.org.mt>)

Baden-Powell had expressed himself so because the Scouts of Malta played a distinguished role during the World War II aerial siege of the Island between 1940 and 1943. Until 1966 the Scout Association of Malta was a branch of the British Association. However Malta became an independent state in 1964 and in October 1966 the Maltese Catholic Scout Association became a member of the World Scout Conference.

It is evident from what I have been discussing that a culture of volunteering through a number of organisations existed and still exist in Malta. These organisations have been very directive and worked paternalistically between preventing young people off the streets and promoting moral behaviour and catholic formation.

A new wave!!!

With the inception of independence and the Second Vatican Council reform (1963-1965) the church had to take up the challenge of the new social role. The 1970s and early 1980s brought about parish based youth centres run by the parish priest or parish youth led groups run by the Catholic Action. These centres still aimed at catholic formation but also opened as a drop in club where young people could frequent the centre every evening, have a drink at the bar and play indoor games or football whilst at the same time attending a weekly bible study or religious meeting organized mostly by a young priest from the parish. These centres were complimented with some residential focused work where retreats were run for groups of young people in a residential retreat centre. Diocesan youth work was also introduced for which a coordinator was appointed by the Archbishop to assist the local parishes set up local youth groups where they did not exist, train local volunteers, organise large events like *Festa Zghazagh* (*Youth Fest*) and build links between the parishes.

New movements also started running local or national youth groups. These groups were not connected to the parishes and enforced a certain part of faith in young people or a certain tradition or style. Cassar (2004) stated that these movements embraced an essentially sectarian vision of Catholicism with very hierarchical structures whilst Abela (1991) described them as being very selective in their choice of members. He said that for example the Focolari Movement attracted the young upper class whilst the Comunione and Liberazione looked for young professionals.

The church was still the original and major provider of youth work. According to Abela (2001) the European Value Survey 1981-1984 revealed that Maltese young people unlike their peers abroad were found to be the most religious, very traditional and with no radical aspiration for social change.

The state and the youth service

Where does the state feature here? In reality the state did not feature much except for the fact that in the 1980s a section called YSO (Youth Services Organisation) within the Education Department was set up to organise youth exchanges between Malta and some close countries to encourage young people's mobility and strengthen language practice. These exchanges were organised through schools during the school holidays and young people were taken to countries like Italy and France. There was also the introduction of school chaplaincy both in secondary schools and the only state sixth form named as New Lyceum where a dedicated priest introduced at that time an element of youth work provision to back up the school's Catholic ethos and complement the mainstream educational work of the school. But was this enough? Did young people want any kind of youth service? What was happening in Malta then? What were the thoughts of young people?

Mid 1980s brought about a complete change in economy in Malta. The Mintoff socialist era ended in 1987 and the new Nationalist government adopted a policy towards a more open economy after an era in which 'the intensification of the policy of bulk buying and price orders was a peculiarity' (Agius, 2004). Moreover the economy became more dependent on services rather than manufacturing. This brought about a huge tourist influx and the development of modern leisure places like Paceville or touristic jungles like Bugibba.

This service mentality brought a shift in young people's thinking towards membership or participation in organizations. Youth sought belonging because of the services offered rather than because of an interest in the ideals of the group. At the same time the development of the newly attractive leisure places and the shift in values due to the effects of industrialism, consumerism, and tourism brought about a decline in the use of parish youth centres and other youth services offered by the church. The services offered by the church and the youth centres in the parishes were no longer attractive and numbers failed off drastically. Abela (2001) stated that the European value survey in 1991 showed that the religious homogeneity of former times was gradually giving way to more secularized lifestyles. Young people's focus shifted away from 'muscular Christianity' to social relaxation and personal development so that they could obtain greater enjoyment in their non work time.

Due to this new dimension a number of youth led movements – peace, political, environmental – were formed and a federation of Youth Organisations, was set up in the 80's by the government. However this federation collapsed due to lack of agreement between most of the organisations of the time. Following this collapse, the then 1st Parliamentary Secretary for Youth, Culture, Sport and Consumer Protection, Dr. Michael Frendo MP, set up a forum within which young people could express their views on how they wish to set up National Youth Council. As a result a first National Youth Conference was held and many proposals were brought forward. The results achieved from the National Conference enable the establishment of the National Youth Council.

On the 28th January 1992, the National Youth Council was declared as the National Organ for Youth Organisations. The National Youth Council adopted its Statute, thus obtaining autonomy from Government and established a number of Committees which discussed and worked on a number of issues including International Relations, Social Activities, Education and Employment.

This interest brought about a transformation for the parliamentary secretariat into a Ministry of Youth and Arts which started working to draft the first Maltese youth policy which was published in 1993. Since then subsequent changes were made as the result of regular reviews and in 2003 an International Review Team of the Council of Europe was also invited to evaluate its progress.

Professional Youth work

In 1992 the University of Malta agreed to a request from the Ministry to establish an Institute of Youth Studies and to start and give training to those who wished to become professional in the field. The training model adopted was a British model from the 1970s. As a result a professional cadre of qualified staff has been trained with no full time professionalized service to go into. The concept of youth work has been used since the Institute of Youth Studies, which has now become a Department of Youth and Community Studies within the Faculty of Education, has launched the official training for Youth and Community workers in 1993. At that time I was one of the students who had embarked on the course and when I went around saying that I had taken up a course which trains people to become youth workers, people asked what will happen to the students when they become older. At the time the general public mixed the term youth worker with young worker. Many times I found myself explaining when introducing myself as a voluntary youth worker that I am the person working with young people and that a youth worker may not necessarily be a young worker.

The first group of graduate students founded the Maltese Association of Youth Workers (MAY) in 1998 and later on in 2001, a Code of Ethics was launched in MAY's general meeting. MAY applied for professional recognition by the Maltese Federation of Professional Associations, which means that now youth workers are represented in Government consultations with other professionals in the development of relevant policy areas. It has also taken up the responsibility to campaign for state funding and professionalization. Whether MAY will become a trade union or remain a professional association is an issue under lively debate.

As a result the government established a number of Youth Empowerment Centres within the local councils and a Youth Information Centre. However MAY feels that this is not sufficient and its ultimate aim is to see the full recognition of youth work as a profession with appropriate employment opportunities available. Worth noting is that the Diocese Synod which ended in 2003 published a document for youth which stressed the importance of having professional workers working with young people. As a result KDZ – the Diocese Commission for Youth - also initiated professional training for volunteers working with young people within the church.

Now or never

We have become European Union Members in 2004. We are now committed to a society in which young people are valued on their own terms as creative, autonomous citizens. The emphasis on promoting moral behaviour and character development has enlarged to recognise the educational validity of leisure. Since 2004, a young people's employment strategy has been published and an educational reform will be developed. However, we tend to forget and do not realize that neither decent employment, nor comprehensive education guarantees the successful enjoyment of youth. Consumer and market pressures, and the emotional and psychological turbulence of growing up from dependence to independence, generate both individual and group challenges and more important opportunities which are specific to young people in our society. Minds are set and lifestyles created throughout this period. Young people need opportunities for learning beyond the classroom to learn more about themselves and their culture and their rights and responsibilities. They need an entitlement to learning, personal support and easy access to public space, as places of their own where they can enjoy themselves. They need to be empowered not directed, as can be seen from the history I gave an account of. Empowering young people means creating and supporting the enabling conditions under which young people can act on their own behalf, and on their own terms, rather than at the direction of others. We are in need to create a social space for young people to explore spiritual, emotional, artistic and intellectual capacities outside of the formal education system and demands of work.

Till today we still do not have much paid youth work. Graduate students involve themselves in voluntary work and have embarked on projects through the Youth in Action Programme, but they are not professional workers. I describe youth work in Malta as a very new profession that has not yet clearly identified its role or purpose with the Government. For the trained youth workers the overwhelming definition of youth work is that of 'empowerment of young people'. However the exact nature of empowerment, the settings and contexts in which it is to take place is not yet embedded into practice and is not clearly evident to those in power. Amongst policy makers there are notions of youth work that could contribute to the development of community and lifelong learning. An agreement with the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) has been established to integrate youth workers in schools both with

challenging behaviour students and in extended school settings to support youth participation through student councils. However there is still no clear commitment or articulated need for a regulated and developed profession of youth workers. There is still a strong belief that the Government should continue to promote volunteering and as such, whilst there is such an active voluntary sector, there is no clear incentive to replace voluntary youth work with professionals employed by the state. The future of young people is a collective concern and therefore cannot be left only to the church or voluntary effort. The state may of course fund voluntary organisations, but it should commit itself to be the prime mover.

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