

Breaking Barriers of Post-secondary Education: Gender and Cultural Diversity Issues in Advanced English and History Syllabi

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Abstract: This paper investigates to what extent the subject content, texts and objectives set for English and history A-level 2020 Matsec syllabi reflect gender equality and cultural diversity. It also suggests ways in which such syllabi can become more inclusive in the future. This research is important because it sheds light on gender and cultural mainstreaming in education by showing whether the new syllabi are responding to the values of Maltese society based on the need for inclusion and the acceptance of diversity. Students need to make connections between what they study and everyday life by gaining a sense of affirmation about themselves and their culture. A recently-published report for the Maltese Ministry for Education and Employment titled *The Working Group on the Future of Post-Secondary Education* (2017) remarks that there is a need for knowledge not to be restricted by gender, race or culture, and that equality, inclusion and respect for diversity should be the foundation that unifies learning across the curriculum. This research shows that there is a problem of gender and cultural discrimination within both the English and history A-level syllabi, but this can be eliminated if new subject content, texts and objectives are added to the syllabi. Literary texts written by Black and Asian poets and novelists should be introduced into the English syllabus, to enable students to learn about cultural diversity. For the syllabus to fully embrace gender equality in the syllabus, a play by an early female dramatist should be added. The history A-level syllabus requires new subject matter that features women from a local and global perspective. Moreover, new learning outcomes should be added to acknowledge the need for students to identify constructions of gender roles and representations of culture in set texts in the English syllabus. In this history syllabus, there needs to be a learning outcome related to women's suffrage. This paper suggests that if these changes are implemented, the syllabi will have the potential to break gender and cultural barriers in post-secondary education in Malta.

Key words: English, history, syllabi, gender, culture

1. Introduction

Do we really need to discuss whether the subject context, texts and objectives set for the Matsec syllabi for English and history A-level to be implemented in 2020 adequately cover issues of gender equality and cultural diversity? After all, recent policies of the National Curriculum Framework for Early, Junior and Secondary Years focused on gender and cultural issues. In a perfect world, this question would not need to be discussed, but

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unfortunately this is not a perfect world. Although recently Maltese society has broadened its democratic horizons by prioritising discussions about gender equality and cultural diversity, when it comes to the post-secondary curriculum, a curriculum that focuses intensely on gender and cultural inclusivity is still lacking. If such aspects are not represented in the A-level syllabi, students can be deprived of the chance to develop abilities that would make them more resilient to cope with cultural discrimination and gender inequality as adults. The subject content, texts and objectives across English and history A-level 2020 Matsec syllabi do not live up to the requirements of an inclusive and democratic curriculum, and changes are required so that they offer a positive link for students between learning and everyday life.

A recently-published report for the Maltese Ministry for Education and Employment titled *The Working Group on the Future of Post-Secondary Education* (2017) remarks that knowledge should not be restricted by “colour or gender, and that social inclusion, equality and respect for diversity are the underlining principles that unify learning” (p. 123). According to the Maltese government, this shows that post-secondary education requires the development of more democratic and inclusive syllabi; that is, syllabi that are based on knowledge that responds to the needs and values of a society that includes rather than excludes, and that make us confident that we are producing open-minded students, able to cope with diversity, and to accept and celebrate gender equality.

The need for more comprehensive syllabi within post-secondary education supports the notion that both men and women should be able to develop their “personal abilities and make choice without the limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles and prejudices” (ILO, 2000, p. 48). In Malta, despite improvements, gender inequality still persists in the post-secondary curriculum. Students need to make connections between what they study and everyday life by gaining a sense of affirmation about themselves and their culture (Colby & Lyon, 2004, pp. 24–28). The aim of this paper is to firstly provide an investigation into the extent to which subject context and texts for the 2020 English and history syllabi reflect gender equality and cultural diversity, and secondly, to suggest new subject content, texts and objectives that can be incorporated into these syllabi to reflect more democratic inclusivity in post-secondary education in the future.

This investigation uses a qualitative methodological approach to analyse two post-secondary syllabi, English and history, from a feminist and cross-cultural perspective. The decision to concentrate on English and history is neither to privilege nor to discriminate against any other subject. However, due to practical constraints, this paper cannot provide a holistic view of all the subjects offered at post-secondary level. Furthermore, these two subjects have been specifically chosen because of their intertwined nature and the many concerns that the two share regarding issues of gender, race and society. Indeed, both subjects ask questions about how human experience is written and recorded in the past and present, and are both shaped by a given social and political moment. Therefore, an investigation of these two subjects is vital to give indications of the nature of knowledge delivered in post-secondary education in Malta.

2. Advanced English Syllabus

The Matsec Examination Board demonstrates that the English level syllabus for 2020 consists of three written papers and an oral examination (Matsec Examinations Board University of Malta, 2018). Paper 1 looks at two Shakespeare plays, *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*, a number of poems by Elizabeth Bishop, Carol Ann Duffy and Seamus Heaney, and requires a critical appreciation of an unseen poem. Paper 2 covers five prescribed novels and a critical appreciation of an unseen literary prose passage. The novels are Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s*

Tale, Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mocking Bird*, Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. Paper 3 is language-based and tests the students' grammar and vocabulary, and basic concepts related to linguistics. When compared to previous syllabi, it can be said that the new English syllabus shows signs of development. This development is particularly shown by the poetry section, in the inclusion of literary works by women poets that challenge patriarchal gender roles and the centrality of male figures.

Indeed, the set poems by Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979) and Carol Ann Duffy (1955–) reflect gender equity by giving a voice to women through their female speakers. For example, “In the Waiting Room” by Bishop deals with issues of femininity and sexual maturity. The poem depicts a six-year-old girl, the speaker of the poem, who is at the dentist waiting for her aunt to have her teeth fixed. As she waits, she picks up the *National Geographic*, in which she sees pictures of nude adult African women. When she sees the different colour of their skin, their lack of clothing and their bare breasts she is afraid but fascinated at the same time. Her reaction suggests that this is her first exposure to women from other cultures, and of identifying difference in the anatomy of girls' and older women's bodies (Bishop, 1979).

The representation of women through the lens of gender equality becomes even stronger in Duffy's poems such as “Mrs Lazarus” and “Medusa”. In her poems, Duffy challenges the centrality of male dominance and traditional binary definitions by giving a voice to female characters from history, myth and fairy-tale, who have either been marginalised or completely omitted. For example, in “Mrs Lazarus”, Duffy gives a voice to the Biblical character Lazarus's wife, whose opinions about her husband's miraculous resurrection are never represented in the Bible. In contrast to the original tale of Lazarus, Duffy gives Mrs Lazarus a voice by presenting her emotional state (Duffy, 2004). There is no doubt that the inclusion of Bishop and Duffy's poems are in line with the report for the Ministry of Education and Employment that declares the need for post-secondary education to reflect gender equity in its curriculum.

However, this cannot be said of Heaney's poems. Although these poems are important for their portrayal of issues concerning Irish people and their searches for freedom, thus helping students learn about Irish culture and the struggles of its people, from a feminist perspective, Heaney's poems are gender biased as they tend to feature dominant masculine figures that reflect traditional gender roles. This means that if students are not made aware of the gender inequality presented in Heaney's poems, they might not be able to decipher that this work is biased against women.

An example of gender stereotyping in Heaney's poems is evident in “Digging”. Heaney's “Digging” opens with a male speaker sitting at his desk with a pen resting in his hands, as he listens to the sound of his father's digging outside on the farm. He then remembers his grandfather digging in the past, and then proudly starts to write. It can be said that by positioning the tradition of digging embodied in his father and grandfather, the speaker situates digging as an occupation for men. In addition, by his association of the act of digging with the skill of “digging” with a pen, which he sees as equally powerful as his forefathers' act of digging, he is emphasising the powerful role of his male ancestry, while female figures are silent and absent (Heaney, 1969).

Despite Heaney's poems' lack of gender equality in their representation, taken together, the syllabus definitely shows a development when it comes to gender recognition, both in the inclusion of more female poets and in the themes portrayed. However, this does not negate the fact that the poetry section lacks literary texts by Black, Asian, and ethnic minority writers. This fact creates cultural discrimination in the syllabus because it marginalises the voices of certain cultures. The poems are all written by white authors, and reflect experiences of

white speakers. This exclusion in the syllabus can be seen as highly unexpected, particularly given that female and male Black and Asian writers constitute a high proportion of the literary world. I posit that if students studying English are not exposed to a wide range of cultures, then this runs the risk that students will not be able to grasp the true nature of literature. Moreover, with the increasing number of students in the Maltese education system who come from different countries, it is crucial that students feel that they can relate to what they are studying by the curriculum's embrace of other cultures.

The lack of texts by Black, Asian and other ethnic minority writers is not only found in the poetry section of the English syllabus, but also in the choice of novels. Cultural and gender awareness are not excluded from all the set novels, as is evident in Lee's *To Kill A Mocking-Bird* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. By reading Lee's novel, students can learn about racial issues and discrimination in the American south in the 1930s, and the detrimental consequences this can have on humanity (Lee, 1960), while through Atwood's novel, students learn how hierarchical societies create discrimination in women's lives (Atwood, 1986). However, the same cannot be said about Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* and Dickens's *Great Expectations* (Bronte, 2003; Dickens, 1992). Both novels can be seen to reinforce stereotypical gender roles.

It cannot be disputed that Dickens's and Bronte's works are significant novels for students, from which they may gain knowledge about traditional gender norms and Victorian society. However, this knowledge cannot be acquired adequately if the identification of gender inequality in the texts is not set as a learning outcome in the syllabus. In this way, teachers can help students gain awareness of gender constructs and of the different social and domestic spaces that men and women were expected to occupy in Victorian society. Thus, this knowledge will help students to understand about women's status in different periods in history, and at the same time remove gender discrimination from the syllabus.

When it comes to the lack of gender and cultural awareness in certain set texts, this paper suggests providing new learning outcomes that acknowledge the need for students to be able to identify and discuss gender inequality and cultural diversity within the texts. However, in order for the poetry and novel sections of the English syllabus to become completely democratic in nature, the inclusion of new texts by Black, Asian and other ethnic minority authors is required. Given the huge number of set poems, this might sound like an impossible endeavour. However, a large number of poems are selected from only three poets: twenty-one poems by Duffy, ten by Heaney and fourteen by Bishop. Some of these poems reflect a repetition of themes, and the reason why only three poets are represented is not clear, as the syllabus does not demand a comparative analysis between the poets.

Without increasing the existing course-load, this paper suggests that fewer poems should be set by Bishop, Duffy and Heaney. In this way, poems by Black and Asian writers can be included in the syllabus, reflecting different voices. This paper specifically recommends the inclusion of poems such as "An Hymn to Humanity"; written by the first published African American poet, Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784), the poem serves as a tribute to humanity and self-discovery in the time of slavery in America (Wheatley, 2001). Other suitable poems are Moniza Alvi's "Presents for my Aunts in Pakistan" and "An Unknown Girl", which present themes related to loss and belonging (Alvi, 2002).

New novels could include Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), which deals with issues of caste, women's position in Indian society and the influence of globalisation and decolonisation in India. This paper also suggests the inclusion of E. R. Braithwaite's *To Sir, With Love* (1959), which features themes of racism, violence and antisocial behaviour by a group of white students in an English school towards their new Black teacher. Other novels could include Toni's Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) which depicts the effects of slavery on women, and

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), featuring a storyline based on India's transition from British colonialism to independence and the partition of British India in 1947. Another novel worth considering is *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* (2016) by the Asian Canadian writer Madeleine Thein, which portrays the struggles of three musicians and their families before and after China's Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. The inclusion of these poems and novels would definitely help students to gain awareness about cultural diversity through the inclusion of distinctive voices that go beyond those offered by white writers.

I further posit that if the English syllabus is to embrace not only cultural diversity but also gender equality, it requires some changes in the set texts for drama. The set drama texts consist of two of Shakespeare's plays, *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Both plays are firmly established within the literary canon and will certainly help students to continue developing their awareness about Shakespeare's works within the Renaissance period. However, the lack of inclusion of early women dramatists will create yet another gender imbalance in the syllabus. This will not only give the students the false impression that no plays were written by women around the Renaissance and Restoration periods, but they will also not gain knowledge about literary works by women that challenged dominant ideologies of gender in the early modern period.

One play that will surely help to remedy this is the play *The Concealed Fancies* by Lady Jane Cavendish (1621–1669) and Lady Elizabeth Brackley (1616–1663). In the play, the female characters, through their actions and speeches, challenge the stereotypical gender roles of daughters and the patriarchal traditions surrounding marriage negotiations by taking an active stance. In the absence of their father and brothers, who have gone to fight in the English Civil War, the female characters gain authority by making their own marriage arrangements. If students read Shakespeare alongside *The Concealed Fancies*, they will learn how women dramatists have used writing to challenge patriarchal conventions.

The key point is that if the English A-level syllabus is to adequately cover issues pertaining to gender equality and cultural diversity, as projected by the report for the Ministry of Education and Employment, then this requires adaptations to the subject content and the inclusion of new texts and objectives to make the syllabus more inclusive and democratic for students.

3. Advanced History Syllabus

This idea can also be applied to the history A-level syllabus, in which certain topics tend to be marginalised, causing gender inequality in terms of knowledge given to students. The history A-level syllabus consists of three papers. Paper 1 is based on Maltese history, Paper 2 on European and international history, and Paper 3 on Mediterranean history. Each paper is subdivided into a number of topics and sub-topics (Matsec Examinations Board University of Malta, 2018).

The main topics for Paper 1 include political, economic and social development in Malta, and church-state relations in Malta between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. For Paper 2, the main topics are political, economic and social development in Europe and worldwide, which starts from the French Revolution in 1789 and concludes with European enlargement in 2004. In Paper 3, the main topics are political and strategic developments in the Mediterranean from 1789 to 1921, with a focus on the Napoleonic Wars, the Egyptian, Moroccan, and Balkan conflicts, and World War One. Other topics in Paper 3 include the balance of power from the 1920s until the Second World War, the decolonisation of Algeria, Cyprus and Malta, and the Arab-Israeli conflict from 1945 until 1993.

Despite the wide amount of subject content set for the history examination, one crucial topic remains absent throughout the syllabus. In all three papers, no reference is ever made to women's position in society from either a political, economic or social standpoint. Also missing is the relationship between the church and state with regard to women's right to vote in Malta. The absence of women as a topic from the syllabus is quite surprising, particularly given two crucial events that have taken place recently. The first is the issuing of a silver coin by the Central Bank of Malta in 2017 to mark the 70th anniversary of Maltese women being permitted to vote for the first time in 1947. The second is a series of celebrations held in the UK in 2018 to mark the centenary of women's suffrage. Taking both events into account, it is high time that women's achievements, both nationally and internationally, are incorporated into the syllabus, so that students gain knowledge about the important milestones that women have gained in the twentieth century. As it stands, with its lack of representation of women's place in history, the syllabus runs the risk of female students not cultivating their sense of empowerment, and for male students to lack the ability to recognise gender inequality in the past and the present.

To dispense with gender inequality in the syllabus, this paper suggests the incorporation of knowledge that deals with women into the existing topics. The first subtopic should deal with women's suffrage in Malta, taught in relation to the topic on political developments in Malta since 1921. In this way, the topic will become balanced, as it will give students knowledge about the connection between gender and political developments in Malta from the perspective of both men and women. Students will learn about the events that led women to achieve the right to vote and contest elections in 1947. At the same time, they will learn about strong powerful women such as Josephine De Bono and Helen Buhagiar, who initiated such legislative changes in Malta, serving as models of empowerment. The second subtopic can also be incorporated in Paper 1 under the topic of church-state relations, in which students will learn about the Catholic church in Malta and its views on women's position in society.

If the history syllabus is to become completely democratic, it also needs to embrace cultural diversity. This paper recommends the addition of one other subtopic, which can be within the topic that deals with politics, economics and social development in European and international history in Paper 2. This subtopic will look at the rise of women's movements in Europe and beyond, as well as drawing contrasts with non-democratic countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, in which women suffer from gender inequality due to issues related to religious and cultural values. Finally, texts that could be useful in helping students to learn more about women's issues include Carmen Sammut's *The Road to Women's Suffrage and Beyond* and Callus's *Ghadma minn Ghadmi. Grajjiet il-Mara u Jeddijetha (Flesh of my Flesh. The History of Women's Rights)*.

4. Conclusion

Overall, the problem of gender and cultural discrimination in English and history A-level syllabi can be eliminated. It will, however, require changes in their subject content, so that both syllabi provide a positive link between students' learning and their everyday lives. This will eliminate the risks of knowledge being restricted by issues of gender, race and colour. The English syllabus needs to incorporate works by Black, Asian and other ethnic minority poets and novelists, so that students learn about cultural diversity through distinctive voices. There is also the need to include plays by early women dramatists, such as *The Concealed Fancies*, for the syllabus to fully embrace gender equality. The history A-level syllabus can also become democratic if new subject matter related to women's issues from local and global perspectives is added. New learning outcomes should acknowledge the need for students to identify, discuss and write about constructions of gender roles, challenges to

patriarchal discourse, and representations of culture in set texts in the English syllabus, as well as learning about women's role in society and how it has developed in the history syllabus. If these changes can be implemented, we will surely see syllabi that break gender and cultural barriers in post-secondary education in Malta.

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