

Malta

Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes

Introduction

Overview of Education System

The Ministry for Education is responsible for education in Malta, with equity, inclusion, and diversity underscoring the government's objective of providing high-quality education for all. Commitment to these principles is demonstrated by inclusivity at all levels and the provision of free public school education to all, from childcare centers and Kindergarten settings up to the tertiary level at the University of Malta. The government also subsidizes church schools, which do not charge tuition fees. Parents whose children attend schools with a fee in the independent sector benefit from tax rebates.

The Education Act of 1988 is the legal framework regulating education provision in Malta.¹ A 2006 amendment to the act decentralized decision making by forming college networks in the state sector.² There are 10 college networks that have a common legal framework but distinct identities, consisting of multiple preprimary centers, primary schools, a middle school, and one or at most two secondary schools.

The Department for Curriculum, Lifelong Learning and Employability is responsible for formulating, implementing, and monitoring the curriculum. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF), which guides education provision in compulsory schooling in Malta, was launched in 2012 to address the gaps in Malta's instruction processes by shifting the emphasis of classroom instruction from teaching the subject to teaching the learner.³ The NCF takes a lifelong learning perspective and celebrates diversity by catering to all learners at each stage of their education journey. It aims to introduce greater equity and decentralization to the national education system while seeking to present a seamless curriculum that ensures learning for all children of compulsory school age, emphasizing smooth transitions and building on firm foundations laid in early childhood education. The NCF aims to provide quality education for all learners, encourage student enrollment in further and higher education, and reduce the number of early school leavers.

The NCF proposed a *Learning Outcomes Framework* (LOF) as the keystone for learning and assessment throughout compulsory schooling. The LOF aims to free schools and learners from centrally imposed, knowledge-centric syllabi by allowing schools to develop programs that fulfill the objectives of knowledge, attitudes, and skills-based outcomes for all learners in Malta. The LOF is intended to create greater curricular autonomy for colleges and schools, allowing them to better

address the learning needs of their students. In February 2014, the *Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014–2024* was launched to implement the Ministry for Education’s strategies, policies, and plans in a coherent and comprehensive manner.⁴

Compulsory education in Malta covers ages 5 to 16 and comprises three main cycles: Early Years 1 and 2 (ages 5 to 7), Junior Years 3 to 6 (ages 7 to 11), and Secondary Years 7 to 11 (ages 11 to 16). Prior to the start of primary education, there is provision for early childhood education and care through the Free Childcare for All scheme, established in April 2014 for children ages 0 to 3 and through Kindergarten for children ages 3 to 5. Although preprimary education is not compulsory, attendance is very high and reaches close to 100 percent for children between the ages of 4 and 5. Parallel to the public education sector, the nonstate sector is composed of church and independent schools. All state schools and independent schools are coeducational.

Students in Year 9 are required to follow a general or a vocational education path. Following completion of compulsory education, two-year general education courses leading to tertiary education are provided by the state or by nonstate educational institutions. As an alternative, students may pursue vocational courses at two state educational institutions, the Malta College of Arts, Science, and Technology (MCAST) and the Institute of Tourism Studies. Tertiary education is provided by the University of Malta and MCAST.

Use and Impact of PIRLS

Following PIRLS 2011 and PIRLS 2016, results were disseminated and findings were discussed with stakeholders, including directors, education officers, subject coordinators, and heads of primary schools. Literacy specialists reviewed students’ performance on reading comprehension tasks, and most schools held professional development sessions in which issues such as the school environment, teaching methodologies, parental involvement, and school libraries and their use were discussed, focusing on recommendations for improvement. Members of the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta also met to analyze PIRLS results, using them to make recommendations on how student teachers should build on their techniques to teach reading comprehension. Continuing professional development courses for teachers were organized, and all teachers participated in awareness sessions on the implications of PIRLS. The use of more challenging texts and questions during lessons is encouraged constantly.

Literacy teachers met with classroom teachers in hands-on sessions during which they illustrated strategies that enable learners to become more critical and insightful when reading and responding to questions. To continue to enhance and strengthen reading development in Malta and Gozo, the National Literacy Strategy for All was launched in 2014 to improve literacy outcomes and ensure that “everyone in Malta and Gozo is provided with the best opportunities to acquire the required literacy skills.”⁵ The National Literacy Agency was established in September 2014 to promote and ensure the delivery of the different aspects of the National Literacy Strategy for All and serve as a main driver in the field of literacy.

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

Reading Policy

The curriculum promotes the inclusion of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in the Maltese and English programs. Language specialists have designed the curriculum to ensure that learners are given opportunities to develop skills in the two official languages of Malta. The curriculum is cumulative in that skills are developed and extended further during each year of schooling. For example, while participation in shared reading experiences is encouraged in Year 2, it also is featured in Year 5.

Summary of National Curriculum

The English syllabus for Year 5 (equivalent to fourth grade in PIRLS) stipulates that students should use “a range of strategies automatically when encountering difficult text” and “with support, use a wide range of monitoring and adjusting strategies to aid comprehension,” thus promoting reading for learning and pleasure.⁶ To ensure that all learners become fluent and confident readers, teachers are provided with a set of learning outcomes that guide them on how to reach the expected targets. For example, reading of both fiction and nonfiction books is encouraged, as is awareness of descriptive and technical words. Learners in Year 5 are also expected to be able to skim texts to “gain a general impression of the main idea of text, to scan and locate specific information and also to infer and read between the lines.”⁷

The syllabus for Maltese similarly demands that learners be exposed to reading both fiction and nonfiction. Teachers are encouraged to expose learners to a variety of genres, initially focusing on what is of interest to individual children. As for English reading, learners also are expected to be able to locate important information in texts, follow story lines and arguments, comment on the material being read, and give their informed opinion about the author’s ability to produce interesting material. The syllabus encourages teachers to ensure that learners develop the confidence to read whenever possible and the required skills to read aloud in the presence of an audience.

The National Minimum Curriculum, launched in 1999, focused on the holistic development of all children. In 2011, a review was undertaken to reflect on and evaluate achievement. Following consultation with various stakeholders, the National Curriculum Framework 2012 was launched. The framework focuses on six general principles: entitlement, diversity, continuum of achievement, learner-centered learning, quality assurance, and teacher professional support. The National Curriculum Framework promotes a shift from a “prescriptive curriculum” toward one that allows for flexibility. It also promotes “diverse pathways to learning so that all learners are equipped with the necessary skills to experience success at school and beyond.”⁸

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

Teacher Education Specific to Reading

Teachers of Year 5 in Malta have completed a three-year course leading to a bachelor's degree followed by a two-year course leading to a Master's in Teaching and Learning (MTL). Prospective teachers can specialize in early childhood education or junior year education. Throughout the program, trainees study topics related to teaching and learning and carry out five-week practical teaching placements during the last two years of the program. This gives them the opportunity to implement what is discussed during lectures and to refine their teaching skills with the support of their tutors. Although student teachers follow general study units in reading, they may enroll in specialized courses on reading difficulties (e.g., specific learning difficulties) at the postgraduate level. Since 2016, the Bachelor of Education degree was replaced by a bachelor's degree in a specific subject followed by the MTL.

Requirements for Ongoing Professional Development in Reading for Teachers

Teachers working in the area of reading are provided with professional development that can total up to 40 hours per school year. Teachers also are encouraged to attend courses provided by different entities, such as the Institute for Education (IfE), which further enhance their professional development. Attendance in such courses can fast-track the salary scale progression of appointed teachers. Schools also might offer basic education in general reading strategies during the professional development sessions held each term during the school year.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Reading development is monitored in a variety of ways. The classroom teacher, supported by the complementary teacher, identifies learners' levels of attainment, monitors their progress, and plans long-term and short-term goals for each learner. Progress also is monitored by classroom teachers through guided reading sessions and by complementary teachers who identify students' individual strengths and weaknesses. Specific assessment policies and literacy strategies vary by school.

Informal assessments are held at the teacher's discretion, while summative tests are held annually in Years 4, 5, and 6. This gives teachers an overview of students' attainment levels and individual needs at the end of the school year. The final assessment is carried out through the central education authority to ensure consistency of standards among schools.⁹ The *Learning Outcomes Framework* (LOF) encourages continuous assessment throughout the year and promotes the use of assessment for learning strategies within the class. The LOF has already been introduced at the Kindergarten level in Year 3 and Year 4, and will be implemented in the remaining primary years by the 2023–2024 academic year.

Special Reading Initiatives

Over the years, a number of initiatives have been undertaken to increase literacy. The National Policy for the Attainment of Core Competencies in Primary Education focuses on identifying learners struggling with basic literacy, and the National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo focuses on promoting and enhancing “lifelong and life-wide literacy practices.”^{10,11}

Several programs are being promoted to increase standards of literacy development. For example, Read with Me seeks to motivate learners ages 0 to 3 together with their parents to develop an interest in books and enjoy reading. Because it is important for children to have a variety of books at their disposal, the national Enriching Classroom Libraries program has provided the class library in each state school with more than 100 appealing and attractive books in Maltese and English. Another program, Reading Ambassadors, invites well-known local personalities to visit schools, read stories aloud, and act as role models to promote enthusiasm for reading. A national contest, Reading Stars Campaign, was launched in 2014 and is still ongoing, encouraging children and teenagers to promote interest in reading among their peers by acting as reading role models.¹²

Other reading initiatives include The Magic of Stories, Reading Stars, and the Footballer’s Read and Write Programme. The Magic of Stories, a family literacy program for children ages 4 to 6 and their parents, involves weekly sessions during which stories are read in an engaging manner. Reading Stars highlights and models reading habits of fluent readers of all ages. People who are observed to be reading on camera are rewarded by the National Literacy Agency. The agency also organizes an intensive summer reading campaign to promote reading for fun in the summer months when children are out of school. It is presumed that through the agency’s initiatives, the “number of individuals who are socially excluded because of a lack of or a low level of literacy skills” will be reduced.¹³ The Footballer’s Read and Write Programme is a football and literacy program that offers upper primary and middle state school students an opportunity to participate in reading and writing activities related to football and sports.

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In 2020, providing children with access to education despite the COVID-19 pandemic was a priority. Once the first case of COVID-19 was registered in Malta in March 2020, health and safety measures were followed immediately and all schools were closed from mid-March until the end of the school year. During these weeks, teaching and learning shifted to a virtual platform and all students used various practices set up by their respective schools. Following the summer recess, all primary and secondary schools opened for students to attend in person following restrictions and guidelines issued by the health authorities. State schools were physically open for all students to attend daily, while some nonstate schools that had difficulty catering to all students at once due to social distancing guidelines provided students with alternative arrangements, such as physically

attending school on some days and learning virtually on others. Thus, all students had access to instruction throughout the 2020–2021 academic year. Due to another spike in COVID-19 cases in March 2021, health authorities issued another national two-week school closure during which all students learned virtually.

In order for all students to learn and, if required, refer to virtual learning platforms, the authorities made a number of resources available to students with low-income backgrounds, such as a laptop and internet service, weekly printed material in all subjects, and a virtual school for students who could not attend school in person due to their own or a family member’s medical vulnerabilities. For such students, annual examinations were also administered virtually.

Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

National efforts currently are being made to evaluate the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on students’ learning, such as analyzing data from annual examinations held in May to June 2021. Meanwhile, over 12,000 lessons have been recorded and made available for all subjects on the Teleskola.mt platform. Students can follow a lesson on any topic in any subject that has been prerecorded by qualified teachers. The education authorities also have reviewed and made changes to subject curricula to accommodate the different mitigation measures in place within schools during the 2020–2021 academic year.

A Catch-Up Education Programme was offered to students during the 2021 summer recess and also is offered on Saturdays from October 2021 to June 2022. The classes in this program are delivered in person in several subjects but also are available virtually.

Policy and Practice Changes

A number of practices implemented successfully during the pandemic will be continued. Thus, the above-mentioned Teleskola.mt platform and the Catch-Up Education Programme will still be available. Virtual educational platforms have been enhanced and their use will be encouraged in the coming years.

Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

The administration of PIRLS 2021 was unique in nature and reflective of the different scenarios that were in place within schools. Primarily, data collection was successful within all schools across Malta and Gozo between April and May 2021 in the preestablished time frame. All schools participated but a limited number of students did not because they were following lessons virtually. Mitigation measures in place limited the physical presence of national center personnel within schools, but contact was kept through online meetings, constant correspondence, and virtual communication.

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