KeyCoNet (2012 – 2014) is a European policy network focused on identifying and analysing initiatives on the implementation of key competences in primary and secondary school education.

KeyCoNet’s continually growing network counts more than 100 members from 27 countries gathering together Ministries of Education/related agencies, universities/research institutes, European organizations, and practice related partners, dedicated to improving competence-based education.

On the basis of the evidence collected through literature reviews, case studies, peer learning visits, country overviews, videos and exchanges between network members, the project’s final objective is to produce recommendations for policy and practice regarding the enablers and obstacles to a holistic implementation of competence-based education in schools.
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The principal objective of the KeyCoNet network is to gather evidence about various key competence initiatives and their implementation strategies in order to build useful recommendations for policy and practice in this area. One way the network does this is through a series of peer learning visits to countries where an interesting initiative or reform has been identified.

Each peer learning visit includes a visit to one or more schools where teachers and students are observed implementing a competence-based approach into their teaching and learning; various debriefing sessions with relevant stakeholders ranging from representatives from the country’s Ministry of Education, inspectorate, and assessment bodies; as well as interviews and informal question and answer sessions with head teachers, teachers, pilot coordinators, and other pedagogical staff. The aim of each visit is for partners to engage in a critical and constructive dialogue with the initiators and stakeholders of the competence-based reform in question, enabling peer learning and comparative reflection on implementation issues.

The network’s first peer learning visit took place in Seville in the autumn of 2012 and focused on Spain’s national programme for the integration of key competences into the school curriculum, COMBAS, and more particularly its regional offshoot programme, PICBA. The second peer learning visit took place in Dublin in March 2013 and analyzed the holistic Irish Key Skills reform. This current report describes and analyzes the network’s third peer learning visit to Malta which took place in April 2014, and focuses on the Core Curriculum Programme which uses a competence-based approach to improve the learning of low achievers.
ORGANIZERS

KeyCoNet’s Maltese partner, the Maltese Ministry of Education and Employment, in collaboration with European Schoolnet, hosted KeyCoNet’s third peer learning visit. Debriefing sessions allowing KeyCoNet partners to engage in a learning dialogue with Maltese stakeholders took place with Education Officers responsible for the design and implementation of the CCP for particular subjects, as well as students, head/assistant head teachers, teachers, mentors, inclusion coordinators and other school staff regarding the implementation of the programme in their schools.

ORGANIZATIONS VISITED

- The National Curriculum Centre, Hamrun
- St Thomas More College
- St Lucia Girls Secondary School

PARTICIPANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bernhard Racz</td>
<td>Federal Ministry of Education and Women’s Affairs</td>
<td>AT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinhold Hawle</td>
<td>External expert: EduConsult</td>
<td>AT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bart Roels</td>
<td>Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training</td>
<td>BE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caroline Kearney</td>
<td>European Schoolnet</td>
<td>BE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Laura Rizza</td>
<td>European Schoolnet</td>
<td>BE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia Wastiau</td>
<td>European Schoolnet</td>
<td>BE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yves Beernaert</td>
<td>Junior Achievement Young Enterprise</td>
<td>BE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livia Di Nardo</td>
<td>European Schoolnet</td>
<td>BE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triin Kangur</td>
<td>Information Technology Foundation for Education</td>
<td>EE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet Looney</td>
<td>European Institute of Education and Social Policy</td>
<td>EU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean Gordon</td>
<td>Learning for Well-being</td>
<td>EU</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Miquel Essomba  SIRIUS – the European Policy Network on the Education of Children and young people with a migrant background EU

• Katerina Riviou  TRANSIT- TRANSversal key competences for life-long learning: TraIning teachers in competence based education EU

• Veera Kallunki  University of Helsinki FI
• Inka Mikkonen  University of Jyväskylä FI
• Alain Michel  European Institute of Education and Social Policy FR
• Bertrand Pajot  General Inspectorate, Ministry of Education FR
• Majella O’Shea  National Council for Curriculum and Assessment IE
• Miriam Bugeja  Ministry of Education and Employment MT
• Antoinette Laferla  Ministry of Education and Employment MT
• Christine Borg  Ministry of Education and Employment MT
• Clarissa Padovani  Ministry of Education and Employment MT
• Desiree  Ministry of Education and Employment MT

Scicluna Bugeja
• Evarist Bartolo  Ministry of Education and Employment MT
• Francis Muscat  Ministry of Education and Employment MT
• Gaetano Bugeja  Ministry of Education and Employment MT
• Joanne-Rita Grima  Ministry of Education and Employment MT
• Jonathan Mifsud  Ministry of Education and Employment MT
• Kathleen Bonello  Ministry of Education and Employment MT
• Mariella Galea  Ministry of Education and Employment MT
• Mary Anne Camiller  Ministry of Education and Employment MT
• Michelle Attard Tonna  Ministry of Education and Employment MT

Tonson
• Paul Busuttil  Ministry of Education and Employment MT
• Richard Zahra  Ministry of Education and Employment MT
• Dag Johannes Sunde  Ministry of Education and Research NO
• Bente Heian  Ministry of Education and Research NO
• Ola Berge  The Norwegian Center for ICT in Education NO
• Øystein Gilje  University of Oslo NO
• Joanna Kaźmierczak  Educational Research Institute PL
• Luis Tinoca  University of Minho PT
• Luis Valente  University of Minho PT
INTRODUCTION

This report describes and discusses the Maltese peer learning visit, which took place at the National Curriculum Centre in Hamrun and St. Thomas More College St. Lucia Girls’ Secondary School, in Malta on 28-30 April 2014. The new Core Curriculum Programme (CCP) described in this report - and analysed more in-depth in a case study due to be published later in 2014 - focuses on the following key competences: communication in the mother tongue, communication in foreign languages, mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, and learning to learn.

The peer learning visit started in the afternoon of Tuesday 29 April at the National Curriculum Centre of the Maltese Ministry of Education. The Network benefited from a welcome address by Mr. Evarist Bartolo, Minister for Education and Employment in Malta, as well as a presentation of Malta’s Core Curriculum Programme (CCP) and a discussion with its three designers: Mr. Gaetano Bugeja (Assistant Director), Ms. Joanne Grima and Dr. Michelle Attard Tonna (Education Officers). A debriefing session followed in which various Education Officers responsible for the design and implementation of the CCP for particular subjects shared their experiences after this first year of implementation.

On Wednesday 30 April the peer learning visit continued at St. Thomas College St. Lucia’s Girls Secondary School, which included an observation of a mentoring session taking place in the school’s Learning Zone, an illustration of project-based learning activities within the school, the opportunity to consult and discuss CCP portfolios with pupils and their teachers, as well as a final debriefing session including the experiences of Head/Assistant Head teachers, teachers, mentors, inclusion coordinators and other school staff regarding the implementation of the programme in their schools.
INTRODUCING A CURRICULUM WHICH CATERS FOR DISENGAGED LOW ABILITY LEARNERS

The Minister, Mr Evarist Bartolo explained that the Maltese curriculum reform is being introduced as a partial response to address a significant proportion of learners (around 22%) who are at risk of poverty. The Minister implied that this could be the result of the financial crisis experienced all over Europe.

“Solving the problem of child poverty would resolve learning problems more than any kind of educational reform” stated the Minister. “The poorest children are often absent from school. How can we get them to go to school?”

According to him, going to school is a determining factor in a child’s future: the longer one goes to school the better one is able to manage one’s life. Although the Minister saw the poverty problem as the key factor to be solved, he highlighted the need to design new assessment and pedagogical tools, as well as the need for teachers to wholeheartedly commit to helping children with special needs. Indeed, he stated that research has illustrated that outside factors influence 70% of what happens inside of schools. Nonetheless, it is crucial that we get the remaining 30% right by ensuring a curriculum is in place to cater for the needs of disengaged, low ability learners.

“The pupils in the CCP now feel better at school. That is the biggest reward you can get.”
THE CORE CURRICULUM PROGRAMME (CCP)

The CCP targets low achieving learners between the age of 13 and 16, who throughout the years have lost hope of experiencing any achievement at school. This has resulted in a lack of self-esteem and a strong belief in being incapable to learn. Moreover, a number of them experience a difficult economic situation and the majority have psychosocial problems. This often results in absenteeism. In order to support the learning of these children in danger of dropping out, the Core Curriculum Programme has been established. This unique programme started seven months ago and is continuously being developed, reviewed and analysed.

As explained by Assistant Director Gaetano Bugeja, Education Officer Joanne Grima and Education Officer Michelle Attard Tonna from the Maltese Ministry of Education, the aims of the CCP are 1) to instil key competences at EQF Level 1 in low achieving pupils between 13 and 16 years of age, 2) to give learners their curricular entitlement despite their low ability, 3) to provide opportunities for further education, 4) to increase their employability potential. The CCP is taught during the last three years of compulsory education in order to give low achieving pupils the possibility of a better future. The programme started in September 2013 with pupils in their third year of secondary school. The level of low achieving pupils has been defined by testing all the pupils and choosing the pupils with the lowest 3-5 % grades in the subjects of Maltese, English and Maths and confirmed through discussions with their teachers. About 125 13 year old pupils were identified.

When a pupil receives grades that illustrate low achievement, meetings with parents are organised. During these meetings, the CCP is explained to the parents and the fact that their children might achieve a level 1 certification in a number of subjects thanks to the project is stressed. Consequently, they are asked to give their consent so that their son/daughter follows this programme. Another programme, aiming at reinserting low achievers completely into the mainstream system is being envisaged. This programme would target pupils in their first year of secondary school. Although the programme is rather new, first results have already emerged. It is encouraging to hear that the programme has already started to show positive signs of success. “The pupils in the CCP programme are feeling better at school. That is the biggest reward you can get” implied Joanne Grima. “They have told us how happy they are now that the teachers have started to answer their questions and that they are being taken care of in various ways”.

To be part of the CCP means being taught separately from the mainstream for a number of subjects. This has proved to have both positive and negative aspects to it. One may ask if it is useful or fair towards the pupils to be isolated in separate groups. Being chosen to be part of this group surely increases pupils’ chances to learn and have a better future. On the other hand, studying in the CCP will provide alternate pathways for further education. These might (but there is always the possibility that they might not) be at a lower level than those pathways usually taken by pupils in the mainstream system. But, the task of the school is to do its best to educate all pupils using different pedagogies as necessary in order to reach the best results possible. It is worth asking, which alternative marks a pupil more: being left ‘invisible’ within the mainstream system without real possibilities to learn or being chosen to participate in a remedial education group and being given the chance to find the joy of learning.

WHAT IS STUDIED IN THE CCP AND HOW?

During a debriefing session with Education Officers, the CCP was explained. Teaching and learning in the CCP was discussed from the perspectives of the subjects of Maltese, English, Maths, Science and Technology, Religion, and Italian. The representative of Maths told us that the biggest challenges in teaching in the CCP are: the need to develop new tasks and learning contents for the pupils, absenteeism, and finding new criteria for assessment. In comparison to assessment in the mainstream classes, assessment in maths in the CCP is more based on the learning process and continuous learning, rather than on testing. Summative examination papers carry 25% of the total grade while continuous assessment counts for 75%. Group work, which is used to learn maths in CCP proved to be challenging for the teachers.

Pupils who partake in the CCP partially attend mainstream lessons and partially separate CCP lessons. “Differentiating the teaching to answer the needs of the CCP pupils and mainstream pupils in the same classroom is challenging”, said the representative of Religion. The textbooks for Religion are designed for homogenous groups of pupils and do not take different learners into account. Although teachers received special in-service training for the CCP and specifically on how to deal with differentiation, some of them are still uncertain on how to teach in classes where
the difference between student levels of achievement is very high.

In the CCP the two official languages of the country (Maltese and English) and Italian are taught. Learning Italian is based on the functional use of the language, rather than grammar. Functionality in teaching a language focuses on speaking and listening comprehension. The emphasis on speaking and understanding in learning Italian is also reflected in the assessment criteria: The Italian CCP will be assessed through a portfolio used for continuous assessment purposes which will carry 70% of the total mark and the half yearly and annual examinations which will carry the remaining 30%. The summative examination marks will be divided as follows: Listening 30%, Speaking 30%, Writing 20% and Reading 20%. Using portfolios to collect evidence of pupils’ work continuously throughout the year is new for teachers and students and requires time for them to grow accustomed to this new assessment tool. For Science and Technology, the CCP focuses on inquiry-based learning in order to encourage pupils to experience hands-on activities and investigation. This is a new pedagogical approach in schools, so teachers and student teachers need to be trained. Science and technology in the CCP focuses on the formation of empirical concepts rather than theoretical academic content.

The new pedagogy is a challenge for teachers, because the curriculum is not based on any textbook. Teachers need to design every lesson according to the needs of the pupils. Thus, teaching is really pupil-centred. On the other hand, focusing on the functional use of the language also requires a different kind of pedagogy. In the future, the challenges of teaching will be eased when the electronic study material for the CCP is ready.
VISIT TO ST. THOMAS MORE COLLEGE ST. LUCIA GIRLS’ SECONDARY SCHOOL

On the second day of the peer learning visit, a visit of the local girls’ school, St. Thomas More College St. Lucia Girls’ Secondary School was organised. The school is a big secondary school for girls with 1500 pupils and 120 teachers. In addition to the mainstream pupils the school also instructs a group of CCP pupils. The philosophy of the school is: “We need all of our children to succeed.”

After the warm welcome of the Head and Head Assistant of the school, Gaetano Calleja and Joanne Mangion, we got to observe a mentoring session taking place in the Learning Support Zone and to listen to a session on project-based learning activities undertaken within the CCP.

The Learning Support Zone is a special classroom reserved for remedial education purposes for pupils with various special needs. The classroom has been decorated both cosily and practically; the room is equipped with soft sofas, a kitchenette, a large table with chairs, an exercise bike, a punch bag, as well as modern devices for teaching. The room’s set-up supports both group and individual work.

During our visit to the school, we also witnessed a mentoring session of the CCP group. According to the curriculum of the CCP, pupils are guided by a mentor in addition to their subject teachers. The mentor has 4 lessons per week dedicated to following the progress of CCP learners, and ensuring their general wellbeing. During these lessons, the mentor can either meet all the learners together, some of them, or each of them on an individual basis. The mentor discusses with the pupils the progress made in relation to the pre-set learning outcomes of the different CCP subjects. In addition, the mentor and pupils can discuss achievements, strengths or the difficulties faced by the pupils, whether emotional or academic. By
doing so, the learners understand where they stand in their learning process, what questions they need to ask, where their strengths lie and what they need to do to overcome their weaknesses. This process develops the learning to learn competence of pupils.

During our visit, the CCP pupils in the learning zone were working in a small group on a consumer education task involving them to decide on a bag of groceries they wanted to purchase from the local supermarket using a given sum of money. While doing this task, the pupils sat on the sofas arranged in a semicircle and used both the white board and the Smart Board. Budgeting the groceries was a multi-disciplinary task that clearly developed transversal competences including learning to learn, entrepreneurship and social and civic competence. The joy of learning was obvious, when the pupils keenly negotiated and justified their choices in solving the task.

In the CCP classroom, dedicated to this group of pupils, evidence of their project-based work was displayed on the walls as well as in personal portfolios. The pupils took great pride in illustrating the work they had produced as a result of their project-based learning. The pupils’ portfolios, as well as providing evidence of students’ best work in a specific subject area or multidisciplinary activity, also included personal reflective statements by the pupils. These statements indicated pupil’s own appraisal of their learning and where they felt they needed improvement. These self-reflective statements also contributed to the development of pupils’ learning to learn competence.
CHALLENGES FOR THE CCP

Although everything seems to progress well and pupils and teachers appear satisfied, the educators explained how the change had been, and still is, difficult.

“Both pupils and teachers have to change” said the CCP coordinator, Joanne Grima. “The problem is that pupils are used to their roles as failures, and teachers are used to their traditional everyday teaching routines. In the case of pupils, the challenge of changing one’s attitude can still be seen in the number of school absentees. Motivating them to come to school is a continuous task for the teachers”.

“One critical factor is to make the right choices concerning which teachers are considered suitable for teaching the CCP” argued the Head of School, Gaetano Calleja, reflecting what was also said during the debriefing session with the panel of school staff from St. Lucia. According to the panel all teachers are not suitable to answer the needs of this special group of pupils. The right kind of teacher is the one who has good communication skills, is passionate about his/her subject/s, is ready to modify the teaching programme towards more hands-on activities instead of more academic content, and is in general ready to do what is necessary to motivate these pupils and ensure a better future is obtainable for them.

Value issues have also been an important challenge in establishing the CCP. Work had to be done to challenge and change teachers’ attitude by helping them understand the importance of investing in the school’s low achievers. For example, in the beginning, some teachers did not appreciate the fact that the school’s limited budget was being used to equip the CCP classroom which only serves a small number of pupils, rather than using the resources to redecorate mainstream classrooms serving a larger number of pupils.
REFLECTIONS

Following this peer learning visit which consolidated the first results emerging from this newly implemented reform, one year since its introduction, it can be said that the CCP which caters for the lowest achieving 3-5% of the 13-16 age group, has in fact affected the whole school system in Malta: teachers have started to cooperate, new pedagogical approaches have been put into operation, schools have become more autonomous, and most importantly, all pupils are now visible in school, and are learning to expect their voices to be heard.

Differentiating or not, is the recurring question in schools. How should such differentiation be implemented, who should be the target group, and when and in which circumstances should we differentiate teaching at school, are difficult questions to answer. Any pupil who is considered in need of remedial education has a right to be supported. Differentiation is based on the idea that there are different learners, different groups of pupils, and different degrees of readiness of pupils. Remedial education focuses on the emotional needs connected to pupil’s motivation and self-esteem. The goal of differentiation is to produce experiences of success and to develop according to one’s own strengths. Both the weakest and the most talented pupils can need differentiation.

Malta’s differentiation strategy which concerns a specific age group can be considered an effective way of dealing with the learning problems of different pupils. This is a good start. Perhaps it would be worth considering expanding the CCP to younger pupils as well.

The pedagogical approaches used in the CCP (e.g. focusing on the functional use of language or using inquiry-based methods etc.), is something that needs special attention. The key question is, are such approaches only applicable to low achievers or are they sound pedagogical methods which could benefit all learners? While competence-based education may seem to be especially suited to low achievers who particularly struggle with traditional methods of teaching, research on competence-based education seems to suggest that such constructivist, authentic and pupil-centred pedagogical methods can only be beneficial for all learners.

Assessment of such competence-based learning is also an issue that generates discussion. Summative testing is a more time-saving way of assessing pupils compared to continuous assessment based on portfolios or other tools which focus on the process of learning. However, beyond the question of efficiency, we need to ask ourselves whether we value the process or the products more. What is the most
important outcome of learning? The detailed knowledge itself, or the know-how or expertise in constructing the knowledge? Concentrating on the process of learning is very much in line with the development of the competence of learning to learn, one of the eight key competences, which is an important aim of modern school education in the 21st century. From this perspective, the CCP pupils are developing an important skill by being exposed to this competence-based pedagogy and through being assessed in a formative and continuous manner.

To sum up, the new and continuous development of the CCP in Maltese schools is invaluable in providing us with very useful experience-based knowledge on how to organise teaching and learning in order to cater for the needs of different pupils, and especially those in danger of poverty. This process of development is worth documenting further and being studied carefully in order to benefit from this first experience as much as possible. As discussed above, it is also worth considering how this valuable competence-based approach could be implemented throughout the mainstream system also, in order to benefit all pupils.
KEYCONET ASSOCIATE MEMBERS

http://keyconet.eun.org
European Schoolnet is the coordinator of the KeyCoNet network.

European Schoolnet is the network of 30 European Ministries of Education, based in Brussels. As a not-for-profit organisation, we aim to bring innovation in teaching and learning to our key stakeholders: Ministries of Education, schools, teachers, researchers, and industry partners.

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- Policy, research and innovation: information sharing and evidence building.
- Schools services: enhancing cooperation between schools across Europe.
- Advocacy: how ICT and digital media contribute to transforming teaching and learning processes.

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