Educators' Attitudes at an Informal Learning Environment in the Society of Christian Doctrine in Malta: Insights for Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

Differentiated instruction for diverse learners has been generally applied to compulsory education. However, the challenge of learner diversity is faced by other educational institutions. In Malta, most children attend evening classes twice a week in Christian formation at the centres of the Society of Christian Doctrine. The aim of this study was to explore how catechists at these centres try to facilitate the learning and participation of all. A qualitative approach was adopted within the context of an interpretivist framework. Six catechists and eighteen children from classes in six different centres responded to semi-structured interviews, following observations of each catechist in three lessons. Data analysis yielded seven key themes. One of these themes was the adoption of inclusive attitudes towards learner diversity. Reflection on this theme provides nourishing insights to teachers, teacher educators, student teachers and educators in the informal learning environment on how to further enhance their inclusive practice.

Key words: catechists' attitudes, teachers' attitudes, differentiated instruction, informal learning environments, responding to learner diversity, teacher education, Society of Christian Doctrine

INTRODUCTION

The challenge of responding to learner diversity in class has most often been linked to formal education. However, it is no less applicable to the informal learning sector. This study contributes to extending the discussion from formal schooling to the world of informal education.

The context of the study is the Society of Christian Doctrine in Malta. Malta is the fifth smallest state in the world. It is geographically situated in the central Mediterranean Sea, just south of Sicily and about 200km north of North Africa, with a population of about 476,000. It is an archipelago of three islands: Malta (316

square kilometres), Gozo (67 square kilometres) and Comino (2.6 square kilometres). Situated in the middle of the Mediterranean it has always been considered a strategically important location. The population density of 1,346 per square kilometre is one of the highest in the European Union and in the world. It has been part of the European Union since 2004. There are relatively low levels of regional, cultural or ethnic divisions, although particular regions such as the Inner Harbour Area are considered relatively socio-economically disadvantaged. The official languages are Maltese and English. The native Maltese language is a Semitic tongue written in the Latin alphabet, with strong Italian influence. English is spoken and written widely in Malta, and it is taught from the first year in the primary school. Education is compulsory between the ages of five and sixteen years.

The Maltese educational system has three main educational providers: the State, the Catholic Church and the Independent sector. All schools in the archipelago are bound by the Education Act of the country, and standards are regulated by a central body within the Education Division. The State and the Church schools cater for 68.4 per cent and 22.5 per cent of the student population respectively; the remaining 9.1 per cent of students attend Independent schools (National Statistics Office 2018). The central government is responsible for the State schools, the Church sector is run by the Maltese Archdiocese, while Independent schools are privately-owned schools which are regulated by their internal statutes. It is a priority for Malta and its governments to employ educational practices and strategies that help to reduce poverty, augment the country's intellectual capital, and foster and enhance social cohesion and competitiveness through employability (Bezzina and Cutajar 2012; Camilleri and Camilleri 2016; Mifsud 2016, 2017). Evidence of this is the history of educational law updates, reforms, counter-reforms and policies intensification in these last four decades (Ministry of Education and Employment 1999, 2005, 2012, 2014, 2016; Education.gov.mt 2017). For instance, a major recent reform that has changed the governance of the Maltese educational sector from a centralised system to an autonomous one has been the initiative *For All Children to Succeed* (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment 2005). This reform has geographically clustered primary and secondary State schools into ten colleges. To address equity, social justice, diversity and inclusion in compulsory education, the *Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta* 2014-2024 plans to provide learners with skills and talents for employability and citizenships in the twenty-first century. The aim is to reduce the gaps in education outcomes, reduce the high incidence of early school-leavers, and increase participation in lifelong learning. Furthermore, the launch of *MyJourney* (Ministry for Education and Employment 2016) intends to move the educational sector from a 'one-size-fits-all' system to a more inclusive and equal programme through the choice of academic, vocational or applied subjects. This major reform in the secondary school system is to be available from scholastic year 2019/2020.

Within the informal education sector, the Society of Christian Doctrine (commonly known as M.U.S.E.U.M.) offers regular catechetical formation to a large number of children and adolescents every evening in its centres. Because these centres are area (town or village) based, classes within these centres include a rich diversity of learners. This research study is an attempt at investigating the

major research question, "What varied approaches to learning and teaching do catechists in these centres adopt in response to the reality of learner diversity in their classes?"

This research aim was pursued through qualitative research that would allow the participant catechists to describe how, each in his own way, they approached the challenge of including all the children and how this was perceived by the different children in class.
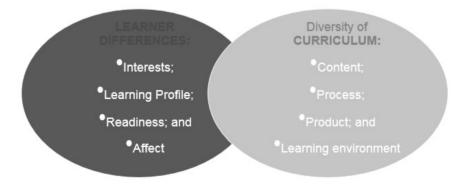
INCREASING LEARNER DIVERSITY

Teachers are experiencing increasingly diverse classrooms (Eurydice 2017; Mellom *et al.* 2018). The experience of Maltese educators is no exception. Following the reform *For All Children to Succeed*, teachers are being entrusted with more mixed-ability groups of students, facing the challenge of involving in learning a wider diversity of learners (Tanti 2017; Xiberras 2018). There is also an increasing level of mobility within Maltese society, and between the Maltese and other European Union countries, besides a substantial increase in the number of immigrants. The notion of differentiated instruction or responsive teaching assists educators in responding to increasingly heterogeneous classrooms to meet the strengths and needs of all learners (Tomlinson 1999, 2001, 2003, 2006, 2014).

Tomlinson's model of differentiated instruction

An influential model of differentiated instruction is that proposed by Tomlinson (2003, 2014), a long-time promoter of differentiated instruction in the formal education sector in the United States. It has proven to be particularly useful for researchers and practitioners alike (Bartolo *et al.* 2005, 2007; Humphrey *et al.* 2006; Mizzi 2007). Tomlinson (1999, 2003, 2014) suggests that responsive teaching should provide a match between the two elements in the teaching and learning process, namely the diversity of learners' needs and strengths with the diversity of the curriculum (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1:   MATCHING A DIVERSIFIED CURRICULUM TO THE DIVERSITY OF LEARNER CHARACTERISTICS (ADAPTED FROM TOMLINSON, 2014 AND HUMPHREY *ET AL.*, 2006)

In order to respond effectively to student diversity and ensure learning, Tomlinson (1999, 2001, 2003, 2006, 2014) argues that teachers need to be aware

of four major student traits or learner variance, namely interest, learning profile, readiness, and affect. It is this notion of diversity that this research study adopts. As teachers respond to the four learner traits that call for differentiated instruction, they can then vary the content, process, product, and learning environment of the curriculum (ibid). She refers to the curriculum as *what* educators teach (Tomlinson 2006).

In this differentiation model, teachers who decide to adhere to differentiated instruction continually assess learner readiness, interest, learning profile, and affect. Then they use what they have learned to deliberately modify content, process, product and learning environment to ensure maximum learning of content for each student (Tomlinson 2014). In these classes, teachers "adapt their instruction according to the learners' individual differences" (Valiandes *et al.* 2017:17) in an attempt to include everyone in the learning process. It is this notion of inclusion that this research embraces.

Differentiated instruction is generally applied to formal education. However, other educational institutions face the challenge of responding to learner diversity in informal learning environments. For instance, in Malta, most children attend twice or more weekly evening classes in Christian formation at the centres of the Society of Christian Doctrine.

The Society of Christian Doctrine

The Society of Christian Doctrine was founded by Saint George Preca in March 1907 for Catholic lay men and women who want to assist in the faith formation of children, adolescents and adults. At that time, Saint George Preca worried about the catechetical formation being provided to children and youths, set out to teaching the Gospel to lay people. He gathered around him and taught a number of youths, who eventually started to open up centres around the Maltese Islands, teaching children, adolescents and young people.

Nowadays, the male section of the Society has 35 centres in Malta and six centres in Gozo. In some instances, branches of the same centre exist; these are seven in Malta and four in Gozo. The women's section has 220 members running 25 centres in Malta and three in Gozo. The number of male members is 336 in Malta and 35 in Gozo (Society of Christian Doctrine 2017), with an additional fifty members outside Malta, especially in Australia where the Society first established itself in 1956. In addition to Australia, the activities of the Society extend to Australia, the United Kingdom, Albania, Kenya, Cuba, Poland and Peru.

Every evening, these celibate catechists open the centres for the catechetical formation of children and adolescents and occasionally for adults as well. For instance, in 2017 the male section of the Society in Malta and Gozo welcomed in its centres 8500 learners aged between five and eighteen years (ibid). Children attend these centres, first to receive formation for the reception of the Sacraments (these amounted to 7140 in 2017), and later for a more comprehensive life-long faith formation. The latter amounted to 1360 in 2017 (ibid).

All catechists of this Society participate at the centre's activity after their normal day's work. Additional activities for children and youths include recreational and related activities. After their classes, the members participate in a daily one-hour formation session. These sessions include Bible study, theology, liturgy, spiritual

reading, catechetics and social teaching. This is a process of on-going formation in common, prepared by members for the members of the same centre.

Saint George Preca was aware of the richness of diversity in a class of children: "Not all children are alike, but they are all precious, because they are all created in the likeness of God" (Preca 1970:12). He therefore gave importance to and promoted the notion of differentiated instruction, unaware that the notion is considered by this term. He urged catechists to always "deliver a lesson to the soul when you find yourselves in the occasion of adapting a spiritual message according to the circumstances of the person who is listening" (Preca 2004:23). He encouraged his members that their teaching should be well understood by all (Preca 1915).

Malta has been continuously growing as a globalised and multicultural society (Tanti 2017). Catechists are therefore experiencing a richer diversity in their classes. I argue that their role as formators of future citizens has become more relevant than ever.

Researching differentiated instruction at the centres of the Society of Christian Doctrine facilitates the development of theoretical and practical knowledge regarding responsive teaching and inclusive practice both in the formal and in the informal education sectors. The current knowledge base is enriched by what will be learned from the attitudes and practices of thoughtful and caring catechists who, voluntarily and out of their free will and no personal gain, teach children and adolescents every evening.

METHOD

The study aimed to identify and describe the ways in which these educators in the informal learning sector differentiated their instruction in response to learner diversity. The major research question was: "What varied approaches to learning and teaching do catechists adopt in response to the reality of learner diversity in their classes?"

The study's research aim was pursued through qualitative research. This allowed the participant catechists to describe how they attempted to include all the children in learning and how this was perceived by the different children in class. This study was focused on classes for nine-year-olds attending twice a week for their Confirmation class.

Purposive sampling was employed to select six catechists from six different centres on the basis of their being regarded by their superiors as actively trying to respond to learner diversity (Table 1).

Each participant responded to a semi-structured interview aimed at eliciting a description of experiences relevant to responsive teaching. This lasted from an hour to an hour and a half. Each catechist was observed for three lessons in order to examine directly how they responded to existing learner diversity. Lessons observed lasted around 30-40 minutes. Furthermore, in an attempt to explore to what extent lessons were meeting their needs and interests, three children from each class were interviewed. Each interview took approximately half an hour.

TABLE 1: THE SAMPLE OF THE RESPONDENT CATECHISTS

Catechist	Teaching experience (years)	Number of children in class
C1	13	18
C2	5	42
C3	15	18
C4	36	21
C5	10	19
C6	18	17

Note:
i) The three boys interviewed from each class in the sample will be referred to as B1, 2, 3 of 1-6: e.g. B3.5 = the third participant boy in C5's class.
ii) Ob = observation. E.g. Ob2.3 = second lesson observation at Centre 3

All interview data was transcribed and lesson observations written up. ATLASti software was used for the qualitative and thematic analysis of the resulting data. Initially, each text was read over and over again. Textual passages were then categorised according to their relation to responding to learner diversity. The length of the passages varied from a few words to a whole paragraph. The software was useful in capturing all data relevant to the categories. Throughout the process, the aims, the research question and the relevant literature especially Tomlinson's model were used to guide the organisation and interpretation of data. The first three centres analysed provided me with a framework of the themes that had emerged so far. This framework was then applied to a thematic analysis of the data from the remaining three centres, allowing for emerging new categories, themes or modifications. In due course, notes were also written describing each data segment. This was an occasion for further data analysis. Finally, the results were written up from this information, once again allowing for further modifications within and amongst the themes.

Attempts were made to ensure that the data and its analysis reflected as truthfully as possible what was going on in these classes with regards to the response to learner diversity. Using multiple methods of data collection helped to capture the process of differentiation existing at these classes in a rigorous and valid manner (Cohen *et al.* 2011; Robson *et al.* 2016). The author has also been a member of the Society for the last twenty-seven years and had firsthand knowledge of similar situations. At the same time, during the course of the study, it was kept in mind that the research was as much about the researcher's own experience as it was about others (Vernon 1999). By piloting the interview questions and observation guidelines and being open to feedback from my supervisor and a critical friend, an attempt was made to avoid bias during the questioning and the writing up of the observation notes. Furthermore, note was taken of all data including deviant cases (negative case analysis). This search for

negative cases was an important means of countering researcher bias (Silverman 2014).

This research study is underpinned by an understanding that ontology is real and epistemology is relativist; ontology (i.e. what is real, the nature of reality) is not reducible to epistemology (i.e. our knowledge of reality) – there is a 'real' world and it is theory-laden and not theory-determined (Fletcher 2017). Human knowledge captures only a small part of a deeper and vaster reality. The epistemological basis is one of a relationship and interaction between the researcher and participants with values and beliefs being made explicit and the findings being created. Participants would have been subject to influences which shape their world view and of learning, and so they would be reflecting different interpretations of reality. Their responses would be inextricably linked with their conceptions of learning, and would reflect different assumptions and backgrounds. Shaikh (2013) argues that participants in any social act will have different views on the act itself and the outcomes. People develop their own beliefs and understanding of phenomena; but in forming these perspectives there are bound to be elements of inconsistency and bias: the principle of fallibility (Soros 2013). Even the perspective of one individual will be influenced by different values, which in themselves may be inconsistent (Shaikh 2013).

RESULTS

Tomlinson's model of differentiated instruction proved to be a useful framework for analyzing the data. Seven main themes emerged (see Figure 2). These catechists were motivated to engage in learning all their diverse learners. They prepared stimulating lessons and, within a supportive learning environment, sought to engage each and every child through responsive teaching and learning. This paper focuses on Theme 2, namely that the participants *adopted caring and inclusive attitudes towards learner diversity*. However, two other themes were closely related to this theme, namely themes 3 and 4: *Educating in solidarity values* and *Creating a supportive learning environment*.

The theme of the adoption of caring and inclusive attitudes to all includes the openness to each child as part of his vocation, ensuring that everyone enjoyed himself and learned, the attitude towards classroom discipline, viewing disability as enriching, and learning with the children. As regards the first attitude, these catechists tried to be a model of God's care to the children, reached out to them, gave priority to establishing a relationship with each child, gave him their best, and listened and respected him (see Figure 3).
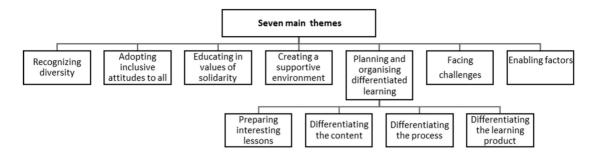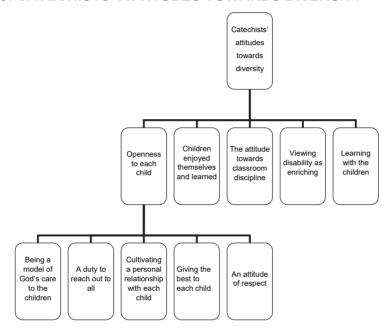
FIGURE 2: SEVEN MAIN THEMES

FIGURE 3: CATECHISTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS DIVERSITY

Openness to each child
This attitude of openness to diversity inherent in the catechist's vocation emerged during the course of the research.

Three catechists believed that to their children they should be **a model of God's care**: "You show the children that you love them, and that you care for them. We do our best so that they feel welcome and at home" (C3). Care was observed to be shown especially during playing time. One catechist, C3, loved to ask, "What nice things have you done today?" B1.2 reported that his catechist gave attention to all, especially to the mischievous. He compared him to God, who takes care of everyone.

These catechists felt an obligation to be persons of integrity, living everywhere their vocation to the full and joyfully. They referred to their task as a "mission" (C2). C4 reported that the way the catechist behaved was very important because it

would be picked up by the children: "What my catechist has taught me? I do not remember! But I remember how he behaved."

All the interviewees felt that it was their **duty to reach out to all**. C2 reflected that when he tried to reach out to all children, he was fulfilling more his vocation as a catechist, in the sense that his work started to make more sense. He argued that "the fact of excluding someone is not a nice thing." Another participant, C6, regarded this reaching out to all as his "daily bread". Catechists explicitly referred to this reaching out as becoming an attitude:

> I try to reach out to everyone and that everyone understands me. I keep this in mind. You are there for everyone. Because you are always conscious of it. But then in turn it becomes an attitude in you. It becomes something … without knowing … it is in you. You do not make an effort. Obviously it requires work. But you start doing it automatically. (C5)

These participants attempted to take care of the individual person. This was C2's concern and challenge when he taught large groups: "It is important to cater for the needs of each one of them. You do not have numbers but persons." This, he argued, was the ingredient for the inclusion of all children. C4 recalled a phase in his life when he used to employ the traditional method of chalk and talk, and those who understood had understood and those who hadn't, hadn't. He was now concerned to do justice to all learners and reach out to all. When talking about a distracted child who seemed not to be paying attention, C5 spelled out this urge to reach out to all children: "Without knowing, we want everyone to look at us."

These catechists were concerned that

> everyone should be involved in activities. At one time or another everyone should be asked a question, and if something is given out to them, for example a handout or a picture, you should have for everyone. These are small things, but which the children do appreciate. (C3)

For instance, at times this participant asked himself whether he was distributing his questions equitably. He was in fact observed encouraging the participation of everyone. C3 made noteworthy attempts to include a boy with epilepsy triggered off by changes in the conditions and amount of light: "It is not just on him to exclude him from class, definitely not. It is not just on him because it hurts him." He avoided activities like video projections that excluded him from participating in class.

This attitude of reaching out to all was not easy. C2 and C6 argued that it was something that tired the catechist, and demanded commitment and effort. However, it was a source of satisfaction for the class catechist. C3 reported that in trying to reach out to all, he felt the great satisfaction that no one was being left out.

These participants **cultivated a personal relationship with each child**. They regarded such a relationship as vital in reaching out to all learners under their care, conducive to a positive classroom environment and "giving life overall" (C5): "It is this personal contact that the children need so that I reach out to them" (C6). This participant was aware that during a lesson he might not have personal contact with each child. So he made it a point that as they entered or left the centre, he briefly communicated with them. C3's task after taking control of a large class of children was that of developing a relationship with each child.

These catechists were in fact observed striving to create and maintain personal contact with their children. They attempted to get to know each individual child, "the whole packet in front of me" (C5), because each child in class "is not a number, but a person, a person" (C2). For instance, C4 was concerned that during a whole week he did not meet his children once in their class because they had the activities of the village/town feast. In order to keep this personal contact, he made it a point to meet them for some minutes in class after the activity was over.

Establishing a loving relationship with the children was regarded by these class catechists as an ingredient for an ideal catechist. When asked what was such an ingredient, C5 replied immediately, "The relationship! The relationship! How you relate to them. Every time."

These participants believed that an aid to establishing such a relationship was playing time, during informal contact with the children. Similarly, the activities, like barbecues in summer, helped to reach out to them, provided there was direct contact with them: "If you stay cooking and the children playing, there isn't that direct, personal contact. It is that contact that the children need so that you reach them" (C6). The observations confirmed the positive and joyful relationship this person had with the children.

These catechists cited four benefits of a caring relationship. They asserted that "when you try to build a relationship with the children you come to know them and their character" (C5). Then, during lessons, catechists could differentiate instruction by mentioning examples that were relevant to the children's interests (C3). Such a relationship helped the catechist to learn about any individual educational needs the children might have (C1). Secondly, it made discipline easier: "Even when you correct them, they accept it, because it has been delivered on the basis of love." (C2). Thirdly, the children could find someone with whom they could open up: "Because children do feel sad. They have things that concern them. Maybe they talk with me. But with the teacher who shouts at them they do not open up!" (C1). Finally, an important benefit and aim of establishing this personal relationship was that it aided the children's formation of values.

Establishing a personal relationship with each child was a source of satisfaction for these catechists. One boy, B3.2, confirmed that when the lesson progressed smoothly and he and his friends were learning, his catechist visibly enjoyed himself and it was "the best day of his life. It shows … as he explains the lesson."

Catechists felt that it was their challenge and responsibility **to give their best** to the children entrusted under their care. C6 argued, "When I see them receiving Confirmation, I say, 'I have done my best.' " And the children wanted their catechists to give them their best. One child, B1.6, asserted that the ideal catechist should concentrate on teaching, concerned only that they were understanding, just giving his best and not being concerned about something else.

Catechists cultivated **an attitude of respect** towards their children. This included an attitude of listening to all children: "I love listening to all children ….. I think that a child who has raised his hands wants to share an experience" (C1). C3 made it clear to his learners: "Listen. Here everyone can express himself" (Ob3.10). C1 reflected that telling a child to lower his raised hand was like telling him, "Shut up. I am not interested in your experience." Because, according to this educator, children mostly recounted their experience, which was always personal. And telling them to lower their hand, they would not realise that the catechist wanted to

proceed with the lesson, but that he would not listen to them. The children noted this: "When I raise my hand, he asks me at once" (B1.5).

Three catechists reported an attitude of respect towards their children's privacy and did their best not to put them in embarrassing situations. When trying to involve learners by asking them to read or asking them a question, they were cautious in doing so "because the person involved may feel embarrassed" (C2). So they attempted to come to know the child's readiness level as soon as possible.

Children enjoyed themselves and learned

A guiding principle expressed by these catechists was that while learning, the children enjoyed themselves: "My measuring rod is always: what are we going to do so that everyone is enjoying himself. That's very important. And also that everyone feels that he is learning" (C3). This educator believed that if the lesson was well-planned, the children participated, learned and enjoyed it. And he felt that too: "If I have enjoyed myself, the children have enjoyed themselves. If I was not enjoying myself, then the children would not have enjoyed themselves." It is important that the children should feel that "they are learning. There must be the feeling that, 'Listen, we are learning!' "

The attitude towards classroom discipline

Catechists were very attentive to keep discipline: "We always try to keep order, silence, and calmness in our classes" (C2). This educator argued that such a learning environment was conducive for a better level of inclusion. C1 strived to educate the children understand that, although they came to the centre to learn in a formal manner, but not in the manner of the army, as he argued might be the case at school.

Four catechists believed that classroom discipline should respect children and not be based on shouting and noise: "I never shout at children! When I shout at them I feel that I am degrading them. I feel like shouting at my dog!" (C1). C5 was sorry for those times when, after a day's work, he shouted at a child. He would later say, "I should have tackled him differently!" Leaner B2.5 picked up this feeling that his catechist got angry because he was tired. B3.4 argued that when someone did not understand, his catechist "explained again, but is never angry at him." C4 recounted how during the initial encounters with the children he is strict. Then he starts relaxing, joking with them occasionally.

Experience taught these catechists that corrections should be carried out with much love, helping the child realise that he had made a mistake. Punishments were given sparingly. C4 would tell the misbehaving child, "Do not do it again. I am helping you grow up so that you do not repeat this mistake." Because, he argued, children would only remember those incidents when they were punished severely, possibly when their catechist was angry. He reported how his discipline had progressed from one based on punishments to one based on love.

These catechists believed that effective discipline entailed knowing the child well so as to approach him in the right manner. And to do a correction, "I would

mostly talk to the child personally, so as to avoid embarrassing him in front of others" (C3).

Viewing disability as enriching

These catechists regarded disabilities as contributing towards the enrichment of the class. One catechist, C3, reported the absence of the child with epilepsy as a loss: "This year we have not enjoyed him much."

Learning with the children

Three catechists viewed their teaching as an ongoing learning experience: "the best training is practice, and it is with experience that you learn. ... I tell the children so, 'We learn from each other. I learn from you.' " (C2) This learning from experience was a point of concern for C6: he was learning at the children's own expense. He therefore felt the need for more training to avoid future mistakes, especially in the area of how to tackle disabilities.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this research was to find out about issues related to responding to the diversity of learners' strengths and needs in classrooms at the Society of Christian Doctrine in Malta.

The emergence of the theme of caring and inclusive attitudes is in line with the wish of the Founder for his catechists: "The catechist should be zealous in showing love equally to everyone. We should imitate God who before Him there are no distinctions of persons" (Preca 1970:12). The message was reaching some children very well: "Our catechist is like God, who takes care of everyone" (B1.2). This flows from the vocational aspect of the teaching of these catechists: "Above all, this is an apostleship, a vocation. Not a job" (C5).

This theme of inclusive attitudes is consistent with the importance Tomlinson gives to the emotional aspect of learning – she adds knowing children's 'affect' in addition to their interests, readiness and learning profiles – and to the need to modify the learning environment (Tomlinson 2003, 2006, 2014). For instance, the positive affect existing between the catechists and the children and the importance these educators gave to cultivating a harmonious and 'safe' learning environment helped the learners to be more fully engaged in their learning (Tomlinson 2014).

Inclusive values and attitudes alone provide no guarantee of inclusive and responsive practices. The strength of this study lies in actually attempting to assess these practices, through the use of other data collection methods other than catechists' interviews, being classroom observations and children's interviews. Catechists' attitudes were translated into truly inclusive approaches in class. The participants sought to know their children and their background, also by using interaction during their leisure activities. It was within this caring relationship that they then adapted the content, process and product of lessons (Tomlinson 1999, 2003, 2014) to enable each one to participate actively and successfully in learning.

The attitude of cultivating sustaining relationships with the children is similar to Tomlinson's (2003) reference to taking the risk to 'tame' each child who comes the teacher's way. In her metaphor, Tomlinson underscores the importance of 'connecting' with each child (Tomlinson 2003, 2014). An interesting feature of the

catechists' attitude was their concern that the children enjoyed themselves and learned. They truly believed like Tomlinson (2006) that "teaching is about ensuring learning. ... Teaching without learning is an oxymoron" (p.3).

Along the research process, I have myself become aware that more positive attitudes towards diversity have been welling up and cultivated in me, especially to be open and reach out to each and every learner entrusted to my care. Such attitudes have been and are reflecting themselves in my daily practice. This highlights the potential benefits of raising the issue more explicitly among educators in both formal and informal learning environments. Through personal reflection on the inclusive attitudes reported in this paper, student teachers, teachers and teacher educators can enrich their practice. For instance, as a teacher educator I find it much beneficial discussing the results of this theme with student teachers and set them thinking about inclusive attitudes and practices they can cultivate.

CONCLUSION

This study has helped to further widen the discussion on the importance of responding to diversity in all community situations in an inclusive society, especially in schools. In particular, it has shed light on the elements that impact on the attitudes and behaviour of educators and learners in both formal and informal learning environments towards more inclusive practice. It recommends educators to get to know the whole person of the child entrusted in their care, especially by making fruitful use of playing time. In due course, they should further try to 'orchestrate' differentiated and inclusive learning accordingly (Tomlinson 2003, 2014), educating him or her to respect the diversity of others, and ensuring that there is a supportive climate which welcomes every learner to take an active part in learning (Mizzi & Bartolo 2007). It is beneficial that student teachers, teachers, teacher educators and educators in both formal and informal learning environments reflect upon and cultivate in themselves the positive inclusive and responsive attitudes celebrated by these experienced catechists. Then, as has happened to myself, one starts seeking ways of effectively reaching and engaging all students in learning.

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