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I. INTRODUCTION

The Centre for Literacy continues to be an agent of change both on a national, European and international levels. Through strategic partnerships in Malta and abroad it seeks to influence policy and practice in the field of Literacy Education.

Literacy is fundamental to all forms of personal learning and intellectual growth. In today’s global society, a literate population is essential for a nation’s social and economic development. To improve the quality of life of its people, a country needs to maximize the potential of its human, social, and material resources. Citizens that are literate are crucial to this effort.

Literacy involves a complex set of abilities to understand and use the dominant symbols of a culture for personal and community development. The need and demand for these abilities vary in different societies. In a technological society, the concept is expanding to include the media and electronic text in addition to alphabets and numbers. Individuals must be given life-long learning opportunities to move along a continuum that includes reading, writing, and the critical understanding and decision-making abilities they need in their communities.

The Centre for Literacy of the University of Malta is a research and development centre that focuses on the area of literacy and other basic skills. Its mission is to respond productively to the increased need for literacy and other basic skills issues to be addressed in both professional development and research. The Centre is involved in policy advice, consultancies and training for different educational and professional bodies, ministries, national agencies and institutions. These include the Ministry for Education and Employment, the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity, The Employment and Training Corporation, the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology, the National Literacy Agency and a number of non-governmental organisations.

The Centre for Literacy strives to improve practice and inform policy through the generation of knowledge by creating a strong research culture and by developing professional practice. It is committed to the promotion of high quality research, and its effective communication, especially in areas related to children’s literacy, and to maintaining strong partnerships with schools and the wider educational community.
The Centre for Literacy seeks to:

- Undertake practical and theoretical research, which is of interest to policy makers, practitioners and academics in local, national, regional, and international contexts.
- Maintain strong partnerships with schools and other educational agencies.
- Provide consultancy services to the educational community.
- Give high priority to the dissemination of research outcomes.

Publications:


II. EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

1. Reading Recovery Intervention Professional Training

The Centre for Literacy, in conjunction with the Malta National Literacy Agency and the International Centre for Literacy of University College London, is offering a Master’s in Reading Recovery and a Reading Recovery Teacher’s to a number of Maltese Heads of Department of Literacy and literacy support teachers.

Reading Recovery is a school-based, short-term intervention designed for children aged five or six, who are the lowest achieving in literacy after their first year of school. For instance, a child who is unable to read the simplest of books or write their own name, after a year in school, would be appropriate for a referral to a Reading Recovery program. The intervention involves intensive one-to-one lessons for 30 minutes a day with a trained literacy teacher, for between 12 and 20 weeks.

In Malta the programme is being implemented in 12 Colleges and a number of educators are being trained as RR teachers and RR trainers through a Master’s programme in conjunction with University College London.

2. Bilingual Families sharing Digital Books

This research project, carried out in conjunction with colleagues from University College London, seeks to explore the home book-reading routines of 4 Maltese families with young children (5-7 years old) and to provide an understanding of how the parent and the child read digital books together. The data collection phase was completed over 4 months (February - June 2018). In the beginning of the project the families completed a short online questionnaire about their background and the use of digital technologies by the family. Then each family was visited by a researcher for 3 times.
During the first meeting, a short semi-structured interview was conducted separately with the child and with the parent dealing with the reading habits of the participants. Then the parent and the child chose two of the four digital books provided by the researcher and were recorded reading them together.

Four digital books/apps (two Maltese – on an Android device and two English – on an iPad) were given to each family. All parents were instructed how to work with the equipment provided for the project (mini video camera and an iPad). The families were encouraged to read the digital books as many times as they want but to record 4 interactions in the period of one month with their favourite books.

Each family had a camera and an iPad for a period of one month with the possibility to keep it for additional one or two months after completing the initial data collection. Three of the families decided to keep the camera and the iPad, however only two families made additional recordings.

Interviews with the parents and the children about their reading experiences during the project as well as two more reading sessions were conducted during the second visit of the researcher in the families’ homes. The three families who chose to keep the iPads for an additional month were asked a few more questions whether and if so, how they used the digital books in the additional time upon the collection of the equipment.

Currently the research team is working on coding and analysing the collected data.
3. Language Mediation Strategies used by teachers in Bilingual Primary schools.

This project was conducted with colleagues from universities in Israel. This study examined the use of language mediation strategies by teachers to support bilingual learners in the Junior years. In Malta, the languages of schooling are Maltese and English. Teachers use a number of strategies to facilitate learning. Such strategies included the use of bilingual resource strategies which refer to the use of translation and presenting key vocabulary and language structures bilingually; nonlinguistic strategies such as gestures and translanguging. The use of these strategies can contribute to the development of language skills and raise attainment.


4. Digital Reading Project

The project is being carried out in collaboration with researchers from two US universities - University at Buffalo, SUNY and Oakland University.

The Digital Reading Project seeks to understand how children develop knowledge when reading digital texts. This issue is critical for informing instructional interventions in the emergent stage of literacy development given the increasing prominence of digital texts and the need to develop digital literacy.

Four Maltese schools took part in the project. The children were in Year 1 classes and had different linguistic backgrounds. The project lasted 23 consecutive school weeks during which each child was given opportunities to learn to engage with digital texts. The researchers provided weekly interactive read-aloud sessions using digital books projected on a screen, including modelling and guided practice for understanding how digital texts work, as well as using digital features to construct meaning effectively. During each week, children were video-recorded reading the same text in pairs, a total of 32 sessions per child over 16 weeks.
At the end of each month, the researchers observed each child independently read a digital book similar to what they practised reading that month. They then asked the child to provide comprehension responses, across a 20-minute session conducted in a quiet space. Children’s interaction with the digital text were video-recorded. The parents were asked to fill in a short questionnaire containing background data on the child’s reading habits and the technology used in their homes.

The results of this study will contribute to finding new ways to describe and understand the transactional process between emergent readers, and digital text, in an independent school reading context. The researchers will try to identify concepts about digital text that reflect important understandings about how it works, as well as, the developmental process for learning how to more effectively construct meaning from digital text. By investing in how emergent readers engage with multimodal text, the study will seek to advance the learning and development of young children and provide guidelines to teachers about how to use digital text in classrooms.

5. European Literacy Policy Network (ELINET)

ELINET aims to improve literacy policies in its members’ countries in order to reduce the number of children, young people and adults with low literacy skills. One major tool to achieve this aim is to produce a set of reliable, up-to-date and comprehensive reports on the state of literacy in each country where ELINET has one or more partners, and to provide guidance towards improving literacy policies in those countries. A report on the state of literacy in Malta was developed as one of the series of reports produced by ELINET.

The report looks at the Literacy Performance Data for Children and Adolescents in Malta based on the following criteria: PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) Reading Benchmarks, PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), MATSEC (The Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate) and a review of relevant policy documents, strategies and literacy strategies implemented in Malta in order to promote literacy and positive attitudes to reading both at home and at school.


6. Study on Young Children and Technology at Home with the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the EU

The Young Children (0-8) and Digital technology – qualitative exploratory study was carried out done in the context of the JRC’s Project ECIT, Empowering Citizens’ Rights in emerging ICT (Project n. 572). ECIT deals with “Identification of new threats to children by ICT besides social networks. Development of recommendations to empower children’s rights by preventing and mitigating these emerging issues through education, school and community co-vigilance, as well as reconciliation of digital and personal interactions”.

There have been noticeable increases in the Internet participation rate of children and young people in all EU countries. However, very young children (0-8) are showing particularly increased patterns of Internet use. Tweens’ (9-12 year olds) usage patterns now resemble those of teenagers five to six years ago, and younger school-aged children’s usage is increasing to the equivalent of tweens’ previous use. Pre-schoolers are going online too, and most babies under the age of two in developed countries have an online presence (or digital footprint). This tendency has noticeably been confirmed since the advent of 24/7 mobile internet access. Given the dramatic increase in Internet uptake by both young schoolchildren and preschool children, parents and policy-makers have been left without clear direction regarding the benefits and challenges involved — and about how best to support children’s engagement with the Internet in safe and beneficial ways.

In collaboration with nineteen European countries, the present study is a pilot qualitative study of children in early schooling age and their families.

Its results will serve as a basis for recommendations on what should be looked at when launching larger studies across the EU for benefits and challenges of young children’s online presence.

The environment of this research is limited to the home and family context. It focuses on interviewing children that use digital technology at least once a week, aged between 6 and 7 (with at least nearly one year of primary school experience and possibly with at least one younger sibling) and their family (at least one parent). Observations in the homes of 10 selected families were carried out by the Centre to investigate the family use of digital technologies focusing more specifically on the 6/7-year-old child in the family. Interviews were conducted with both - the parents and with the children.

During the second round of the study the research team returned to 5 of the 10 families, who took part in the original study and explored how their digital practices have changed since the first visit two years ago. The parents were invited to complete a short online questionnaire followed by individual interviews of the parents and of the children.

When coded and analysed the results will be used to determine changes in the use of digital technologies by the families, as well as:

- How did the engagement of children under the age of 8 with online technologies evolve over the course of two years?
- How did the perceptions of the online technologies by the different family members evolve over the course of two years?
- How did parents’ mediation of young children’s use of online technologies evolve over the course of two years?
- Has the role that the online technologies play in the children’s and parents’ lives changed over two years?


Chaudron S., Di Gioia R., Gemo M.; Young children (0-8) and digital technology, a qualitative study across Europe; EUR 29070; doi:10.2760/294383
7. The Digital Literacy and Multimodal Practices of Young Children

DigiLitEY is part of the COST Action IS1410 and it seeks to develop an interdisciplinary network that enables researchers to synthesise existing research and identify gaps in knowledge in this area. This will help to avoid duplication, foster innovative avenues for future research and effectively advance knowledge in this area. The Action focuses on children aged from 0-8.

A representative of the Centre participated in the meetings organised by DigiLitEY in Prague, Czech Republic (7-8 November 2016), in Bologna, Italy (31 August – 1 September 2017) and in Riga, Latvia (21-22 June, 2018). The Centre is taking part in two of the working groups formed for the purpose of the project, namely: working group 3 dealing with Reading and Writing on Screen and working group 4 dealing with Online/Offline Practices. Joint international comparative research projects are being organised by both groups.


8. Evolution of Reading in the Age of Digitalisation (E-READ)

Developments in basic reading skills are a matter of urgent concern, and literacy is a key factor in the EU’s growth strategy (Europe 2020). Research shows that the amount of time spent reading long-form texts is in decline, and due to digitization, reading is becoming more intermittent and fragmented. There is much speculation about the cognitive implications of digitization, and empirical evidence indicates that affordances
of screen devices might negatively impact cognitive and emotional aspects of reading. The goal of this Action is to improve scientific understanding of the implications of digitization, hence helping individuals, disciplines, societies and sectors across Europe to cope optimally with the effects. Based on a multidimensional, integrative model of reading, and combining paradigms from experimental sciences with perspectives (e.g., diachronic) from the humanities, the Action will develop new research paradigms, and metrics for assessing the impact of digitization on reading. These metrics enable the development of evidence-based knowledge of paper and screen reading, and provide guidance for practitioners, policy makers, publishers and designers.


9. Internet of Toys (IoToys)

As part of the working group 4 Online/Offline Practices of the DigiLitEY COST Action the Centre’s team took part in an online research study on the use of IoT toys in Malta. Children’s every day experiences are being enriched by internet-connected toys. The study seeks to provide critical introduction to the Internet of Toys, by setting its conceptual boundaries and discussing the theoretical, methodological and policy challenges in raises. In order to achieve this a comparative research project was conducted among the twelve participating countries.

The research was conducted during the 2016 Christmas season based on the assumption that IoToys would receive more media coverage. Each country listed the IoToys mentioned in the local media – printed and online as well blogs, articles, videos etc by the local parents.

Following the data collection and processing a report was drawn discussing the most important findings and topics which emerged from the study, such as: the issue of gender and how this impacts on the study of childhood and media; discourses and children; the global IoToys market; risks around IoToys; representation of parents and children in relation to IoToys.

10. European Literacy Network - Multilingual Classrooms

The Centre for Literacy is participating in the European Literacy Network (ELN) COST Action IS1401: http://www.is1401eln.eu/en/. ELN builds on the work of existent reading and writing research communities.

Through this Action, reading and writing research communities across Europe are joining, integrating their findings, and aligning their agendas so that they can: i) develop an integrated and inclusive approach to foundational literacy across Europe; ii) devise a comprehensive framework of developmental aspects of literacy and education in a digital world; and iii) further improve literacy technologies.

This will be valuable for promoting citizens’ interdependence, participation, and innovation, which are key assets to a united and diverse Europe. For that, Europe needs a Literacy Network via which capabilities can be strengthened to all of its citizens.

Europe is becoming increasingly multilingual. This brings many benefits and also many challenges, both curricular and organisational, to schools and classrooms. According to PISA 2015, 12.5% of the 15+ year old students across the OECD countries had an immigrant background. This presents diverse challenges to schools, and especially to teachers.

The Centre for Literacy forms part of Working Group 1 – An integrated and inclusive approach to foundational literacy across Europe and is researching the Teachers understanding of multilingualism. It is spearheading the Multilingual Classrooms Project. Through surveys and interviews with teachers, the Multilingual Group of the European Literacy Network (COST Action IS1401) is seeking to obtain and analyse information about teachers’ knowledge, attitudes and behaviours with regard to multilingualism.

11. The Malta TabLit Study – Using tablets for Literacy teaching and learning in Primary schools.

The study examined the ways in which teachers in four primary schools in Malta used various kinds of tablets for the duration of eight months for the teaching of bilingual literacy. The project formed part of an international book project to present international best practices in the use of tablets and apps in classrooms.

The participants in the study were five Grade 3 and Grade 4 (7-8 year-olds) classes from two State, one Church and one Independent schools. A range of language activities in both languages were observed; listening comprehension tasks including listening to recorded readings by the teachers, reading from digital books, reading comprehension, and guided and creative writing activities. Teachers’ planning and preparation, the classroom environment, pedagogy and other professional responsibilities were documented using a focus group, classroom observations teacher interviews and reflective diaries and student questionnaires.

Findings showed that the teachers integrated the use of tablets in their teaching for a number of creative literacy activities in the two languages such as reading from e-books, sentence building, listening comprehension, language awareness activities, and guided and creative writing. Teachers used traditional materials such as handouts, copybooks, and exercise and practice books, in conjunction with the tablets. Relevant apps were used to support reading and writing activities, such as reading comprehension, guided and creative writing.

Recommendations for teachers’ professional development, including school-based professional and technological support and ways to strengthen school-home links with the use of tablets were discussed as a result of the study.

III. NATIONAL LITERACY PROJECTS TO COMBAT SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND POVERTY.

Literacy is a key element for success in education and at the workplace. The correlation between poverty and literacy is well-established\(^1,2\). PIRLS shows that children from a low socioeconomic status and migration backgrounds are the biggest group among poor readers\(^3\).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report, 1996\(^4\), highlighted the role of literacy in promoting competitiveness and employment, democracy and social cohesion, and addressing poverty. Literacy is essential for the building of a knowledge society and the strengthening of people, families, communities and nations.

Individuals who have higher levels of literacy are rewarded by society. Schools are responsible for the literacy of children and young adults. However, there are many young people who finish school with low levels of literacy, or who are illiterate. There are also adults who are reluctant to read and this limits their participation in society.

Socio-economic factors are seen as major determinants of levels of literacy acquisition. Children coming from families with a lower socio-economic status are likely to lag behind in cognitive and educational performance. This happens as early as kindergarten\(^5\). In Malta, the level of education and the type of occupation of the parents were found to correlate significantly with the level of literacy achievement.

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of their children\(^6\). The National Literacy Strategy for All will address this situation by seeking to reduce as much as possible the number of individuals who are socially excluded because of a lack of or a low level of literacy skills. The following are a number of projects which seek to address the literacy needs of children in the Early and Primary Years.

### 1. The National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta

The Centre for Literacy continues to promote the objectives and policy measures of the National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo, mainly its promotion of Bilingualism in Maltese and English, Balanced Literacy, and specific programmes for reluctant readers like Reading Recovery, etc.

The National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta considers literacy as an important element in the field of social inclusion. Therefore, it recommends over one hundred policy measures which are to be implemented in order to ensure that everybody in Malta has the opportunity to obtain the skills required for them to participate fully in society.

The Strategy promotes:

- A literate community which provides opportunities for learners to make sense of their experiences and to make connections with their histories, cultures and communities. Through increased access to books and the language arts participatory democracy is strengthened.
- A policy of bilingualism with biliteracy in Maltese and English and seeks to consolidate and integrate better existing initiatives and programmes in the field of literacy to ensure increased effectiveness and impact.
- The integration of the skills of oracy, reading and writing.
- Increased language learning methods to be adopted are to include Language Exposure, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and Language Tandems.
- Balanced Literacy Teaching where the technical aspects of reading and writing are taught in the context of making meaning through text and the integration of the skills of oracy, reading and writing.
- Increased opportunities for Reading Time in Maltese and English throughout the curriculum, within the frame of reference of the National Curriculum Framework.

- Professional development opportunities for educators at all levels in literacy learning and teaching.
- The increased use of new technologies in the teaching and learning of literacy.
- Research studies that will provide a better understanding of literacy practices in Malta and Gozo.
- Literacy awareness through national initiatives, the media and family-oriented measures.
- College Literacy Teams have been set up in every state College in Malta and Gozo. These are led by the Heads of Department for Literacy and bring together in a team the literacy-related staff of that College. The literacy teams are implementing both literacy assessment and intervention procedures in the schools within their Colleges in collaboration with classroom teachers.

2. A Language Policy for the Early Years in Malta and Gozo

The Language Policy promotes the bilingual development of young children (0-7 years) in Malta and Gozo. It is intended to provide national guidelines for bilingual education in Maltese and in English. It envisions the provision of support to the schools to meet the needs of their leaners by developing their own language plans and strategies.

The Policy strives to provide learners with opportunities to:

- Have positive attitudes towards Maltese, English and other languages;
- Develop competences in Maltese and English in different settings.

The Policy offers direction in the promotion of Bilingual Education to parents and caregivers, Early Years educators, managers of Early Years education settings, and Early Years teacher educators.


3. National Readathon

The Centre for Literacy together with the National Literacy Agency, the President’s Trust, the National Schools Support Service and the ReMax Foundation organised the First National Readathon in Malta. The initiative is for students from Year 1 to Year 6 in primary schools. The aim of the Readathon is to foster a love for reading among children while nurturing a sense of solidarity with their peers through reading for pleasure.

Each participant has sponsors (family members and friends) who sponsor the child’s reading through a monetary donation. The funds collected are used to purchase or to create the required resources for children with specific educational needs.

The First National Readathon took place from March to July, 2018. The funds raised during the Readathon were used to purchase educational equipment for 90 visually impaired children.

4. Aqra Miegħi (Read with Me)

Community Centres to promote Early Literacy and Parental Education.

This project seeks to convert local libraries or similar (where local libraries are not appropriate Kindergarten Centres may be used) into community centres for the promotion of early literacy and related parental education. The objectives of the programme are to promote the love of books among children aged 0-3 years through fun and play activities and by involving their parents and caregivers.

Enthusiastic facilitators are trained to engage both children and their parents. Most of the highly interactive sessions are conducted in local libraries. In the first phase
of the project, packs with books in both Maltese and English are made available to the parents and children groups. Facilitators are provided with relevant training and opportunities to observe and participate in demonstration sessions.

The programme provides also parental education opportunities, training courses and materials about the benefits of shared reading, etc.

5. **Seħer l-Istejjer (The Magic of Stories)**

Seħer l-Istejjer/ The Magic of Stories is a family literacy programme intended for children of 4 to 6 years and their parents. The primary objective of this bilingual programme is to promote a love of books among children through the involvement of their parents. Parents are shown how to share books with their children. One hour sessions are held in a literacy rich environment. The sessions are in either Maltese or English.

6. **Aqra Kemm Tiflah (Enriching Classroom Libraries)**

The Aqra Kemm Tiflah/Enriching Classroom Libraries project aims at providing 100 high-appeal books (50 in Maltese and 50 in English) for the classroom library of Years 1, 2, and 3 classes in Primary and Middle state schools. Reading records have been created to help teachers establish a child’s reading level, and a number of reading resources (for before, during and after reading) are being provided. Last year, 23 schools comprising of 2580 children and 149 classes benefitted from this programme.
7. Reading Champions

The National Literacy Agency in collaboration with the National Book Council and the Department of Curriculum Management is organising a yearly Reading Champions award ceremony as part of a nationwide campaign for the promotion of reading. The main objective of the campaign is to give recognition, not only to those students who are proficient readers in Maltese and English, but also to those who have made an effort to improve their level of reading ability.

8. Ambaxxaturi tal-Qari (Reading Ambassadors)

Ambaxxaturi tal-Qari (Reading Ambassadors) is a school based literacy initiative promoting a positive attitude towards reading. Local personalities (singers, actors, sport players, journalists etc.) are invited to read out loud to different classes either in Maltese or in English and then discuss the book with the students.

The event finishes in an informal forum where the whole school has the opportunity to ask the Reading ambassador different questions related to reading and their experiences.

9. Aqra fis-Sajf (Summer Reading Campaign)

The Centre for Literacy and the National Literacy Agency (NLA) in collaboration with the Foundation for Educational Services (FES) and Malta Libraries organised the Aqra fis-Sajf reading programme within the Skolasajf centres during summer 2017. Shared, animated reading sessions in Maltese and English were delivered to children in the Skolasajf centres across Malta and Gozo. As part of the ‘Aqra fis-Sajf’ summer reading campaign, the NLA organised the Klabbsajf guided reading programme within 10 Skolasajf centres.
10. Nwar

The Nwar family literacy programme is for learners who have not acquired the basic skills level by the end of Year 3. Learners participate in an intensive literacy support programme twice weekly together with their parents or guardians over a period of one semester, with the possibility of extended service based on the end of semester assessment. Parents/guardians are actively involved throughout the teaching and learning process to be able to consolidate the literacy strategies and skills at home.

11. Brilliantini tal-Qari (Reading Stars)

The objective of this campaign is to encourage children and adolescents who love reading to be role models by reading in public spaces and to encourage reading for pleasure among young readers. So far over 250 children who have distinguished themselves as avid readers were nominated. Students who love reading anytime and anywhere were nominated by schools, teachers and parents. The students are awarded a letter of achievement and a book voucher.

12. Bil-Qari u l-Kitba Niskorja/Footballers Read and Write Programme

The Bil-Qari u l-Kitba Niskorja/Footballers Read and Write Programme is a football and literacy programme which offers upper primary school students an opportunity to participate in the game of football and reading and writing activities related to this sports. The programme seeks to use the passion and enthusiasm for football to inspire a love of reading and writing amongst students who have this game at heart. Particularly, it will have a strong appeal to those boys who are reluctant to read and write in Maltese and English during their primary school years.
13. Digital Reading Guidelines for Parents

The number of children using smartphones and tablets is rising. Whether families opt for a smartphone, or a tablet, there will be plenty of child-friendly content to consider. Tablets have many advantages for children, with videos and apps to keep them entertained and educational games to help with learning. There are many Story Apps on the market. It is important to know what makes a Story App good, how the child can make the most out of it and what safety issues should be considered. The Guidelines for Parents are available in English and in Maltese.

14. Digital Reading Area at Science in the City

The Centre collaborated with Science in the City and set up a Digital Reading Area. It was aimed at children under 5 years of age and their reading “buddy” the Reading Corner provided families with an opportunity to be part of the ongoing research into the use of children’s digital stories. The parents and the children were invited to read a digital story together and then build the ending with the use of creative props such as art materials and puppets.
15. Adult Literacy

The Centre has collaborated with NGOs, namely the Paolo Freire Institute, in the provision of adult literacy services. This involved mainly support in the EU-sponsored Basic Skills in Maltese Literacy: iċ-Ċavetta and related training seminars.

The Centre continues to provide support services to Local Councils who offer Basic Skills courses to adults in both Maltese and English, namely through consultancy services and the provision of relevant multimedia materials.

https://cavetta.org.mt/mt/