Syrian migrant students’ academic and social experiences in Maltese state schools: An exploratory study

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Abstract
The ongoing civil war in Syria is one of the biggest humanitarian crises of our time. Since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, millions of Syrians have fled to neighbouring countries as well as other countries afar. The Syrian crisis has resulted in the highest number of refugees in recent years, and many Syrians are now trying to build a new life in other countries, including many in Malta. Since education is a vital component of any humanitarian response, educators have a crucial role in ensuring physical and psychological security. This paper, rooted in inclusive educational practices, explores the perspectives of students from a migrant background in government-run middle schools in Malta. This qualitative study is based on four semi-structured interviews with Syrian students aged between 11 and 13 years who arrived in Malta after the start of the civil war. It explores the provision of educational support from the viewpoint of the participants, and it also investigates the barriers they face in Malta, with the hopes that these are outlined and worked upon in schools. The participants reported having positive experiences despite the challenges they faced when receiving an education in a different country than the one in which they were born. However, they also note negative experiences such as bullying and language barriers. It is recommended that educators in schools in Malta are provided with professional development opportunities where they identify ways to incorporate multicultural education within their pedagogical strategies. It is also recommended that a national policy for the integration of all students from a migrant background, including those in senior school, is introduced to smoothen such processes. Ultimately, schools in Malta should provide holistic, meaningful and authentic learning experiences for students from a migrant background as a first step towards instilling a sense of belonging.

Keywords: language barrier, Maltese schools, migrants, multiculturalism, multicultural education, Syrian migrant students

1. Introduction
Since the onset of the civil war in Syria in early 2011, involving various factions, including the government forces led by President Bashar al-Assad, opposition rebels, extremist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, as well as interventions by foreign powers (Khan, 2017), a significant number of Syrians have fled their homeland. Over 5.6 million individuals have sought refuge in numerous European and Middle Eastern nations, including Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and even Malta. At the same time, another 6.6 million have been internally displaced within Syria to find safer havens (Syria Emergency, 2020). The UNHCR has characterised the situation in Syria as the most pressing humanitarian crisis of our era, given the staggering number of people struggling to access basic

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necessities like food, shelter, healthcare, and education. The impact on children has been particularly severe. While Palestinians still constitute the largest global population of displaced refugees, Syrians have recently become the second largest group (Rabia, 2016). Located strategically in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea and bridging the continents of Africa and Europe, Malta has emerged as an accessible destination for immigrants seeking a more promising future. By the end of 2019, 429 Syrians had sought asylum in Malta (National Statistics Office, 2020). Consequently, the country’s demographic makeup has become more diverse than ever, with numerous schools across Malta enrolling students from Syria and the broader Middle East.

Based on the experiences of four Syrian students in Malta, this qualitative study seeks to open the door for educators, policymakers, and scholars to recognise the barriers and positive experiences faced by refugee and migrant students in the classrooms. This exploratory study had two aims. First, to investigate the relationship between the Syrian migrant students’ experiences of living through a civil war in their home country and their academic successes and failures in Maltese state middle schools. Secondly, this study aimed to explore how these students are socially included at school (with their peers, their educators and within the system) and identify the barriers they face within the Maltese education system.

To fulfil these aims, the objectives of this study were to investigate whether there is a relationship between the Syrian migrant students’ experiences of living through a civil war and their educational attainment in Maltese state middle schools and to investigate how Syrian students are being included and what barriers they face in these schools.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Multiculturalism and migration

The progress in technology and the effects of globalisation have created a sense of global interconnectedness. In the present day, people find it more convenient to travel between countries, leading to diverse cultures coexisting (Celik, 2019). Throughout the 21st century, society has experienced rapid advancements in fields like science, art, and technology, fostering increased interaction among nations (Aslan, 2018). European societies, as a whole, have seen a rise in multiculturalism in recent times (Janta & Harte, 2015). While countries like the United Kingdom, Germany, and France have a long history of immigration dating back to the Second World War, the phenomenon of migration to countries like Spain, Sweden, and even Malta is relatively new (Janta & Harte, 2015).

Multiculturalism pertains to the presence of multiple cultural groups within a society, resulting in a blend of perspectives and practices that contribute to a distinct collective identity. Additionally, it celebrates the unique cultural aspects of various ethnic groups and enables students to uphold their community’s cultures and traditions within educational institutions. Moreover, it serves as an opportunity to educate all students about their school’s diverse cultures and traditions (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). According to Banks (2013), multiculturalism encompasses groups with varying backgrounds, including race, ethnicity, language, religion, geography, history, and political beliefs.

As individuals engage with diverse cultures, they become more attuned to each other’s cultural attributes, leading to mutual influence over time (Aslan, 2018). Here, culture encompasses the elements of everyday life within a specific community at a particular time and place. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) suggest that some of these characteristics are readily noticeable to community members due to their visibility, while others remain beneath the surface and are not easily discernible. To address the challenges arising from the potential difficulties of cultural diversity in the political and social spheres, multiculturalism policies have been instituted (Paksoy & Celik, 2019). Neglecting these issues can lead to problems that initially manifest in educational institutions and may persist in society at large. The latter also assert that various factors influence and mould society, and multiculturalism is evidently one of them. Consequently, it is imperative to analyse these social phenomena and occurrences within their historical and social contexts in sociology and education (Paksoy & Celik, 2019). This underscores the
significance of multiculturalism in many countries, particularly those that have witnessed significant waves of migration in recent times (Aslan, 2018).

Scott and Safdar (2017) highlight that multiculturalism is a philosophy that advocates for cultural diversity and encourages immigrants to preserve their native culture while also allowing them to integrate into the broader society without being required to adopt the dominant group’s culture. They further note that the integration of immigrants can give rise to conflicting sentiments within the host community. Some view it as an opportunity for equality and collective unity, while others perceive it as a potential threat (Scott & Safdar, 2017). In multicultural communities, maintaining equal opportunities enables individuals to grow up in an environment rich in cultural heritage and to raise their children within the same community without division (Paksoy & Celik, 2019). The influence of multiculturalism is evident in various aspects, including arts, literature, and, notably, education. This influence has led to the establishment of multicultural education (Aslan, 2018).

Wars that have been taking place since the beginning of the 20th century have led individuals to migrate to other, safer countries (Aslan, 2018). Migration encompasses the significant movement of people, often driven by factors such as weather conditions, socio-economic circumstances, fear of persecution, and other challenges in their homeland (Arabaci et al., 2014). This relocation can occur either across international borders or within a single state, involving the departure or resettlement of individuals or groups from one place to another (Tosten et al., 2017).

This phenomenon has a history as ancient as humanity itself, with people historically seeking better resources like food and favourable climates (Baban et al., 2016). In recent years, particularly in Europe, media representations of migration have been highly diverse and sometimes conflicting. These narratives emerged in response to events like the Syrian refugee crisis and the Mediterranean migrant crisis. The media extensively covered the human toll of wars and the perilous journeys of millions of people striving for survival (Moore, 2015). According to the UNHCR, the past five years have witnessed around 15 conflicts displacing an increasing number of people, with children constituting more than half of the world’s refugees (Moore, 2015). Upon arrival in the host country, many displaced individuals seek asylum, a form of protection for foreign nationals who present themselves as refugees and require safeguarding from the circumstances they initially fled. An asylum seeker formally requests this protection, with the distinction between refugees and asylum seekers primarily involving procedural matters (Almadani, 2018).

A report by UNESCO (2003) indicates that the globalisation of skilled labour markets and the expansion of multinational corporations have led to a significant global circulation of highly skilled professionals from various fields. Policies regarding migration play a pivotal role in determining the number of migrants who move to specific locations. Other influencing factors include the safety of the journey, the legal status of the migrants, and various elements affecting their reception, along with social policies that impact their economic, political, and social integration (Bartlett, 2015).

2.2. Multicultural education

Multicultural education has undergone significant transformation and continuous evolution in theory and practical application since its inception in the 1960s (Gorski, 2010). While it encompasses various essential dimensions, Banks and McGee Banks (2010) assert that multicultural education consists of three core components: it is an idea or concept, an initiative in educational policy, and a methodology. Moreover, introducing multicultural education is founded on the belief that students, regardless of their diverse racial, ethnic, gender, cultural, and social backgrounds, should all have equal access to education and opportunities within schools. This is primarily aimed at fostering societal transformation and promoting equality and social justice (Banks & McGee Banks, 2010; Gorski, 2010).

Multicultural education and the inclusion of diverse students create harmony and remove prejudices (Sidhu, 2012) against migrants and diverse students. Gay (2004) stresses that it reduces cultural conflicts between students because when unfamiliar groups of people are not well understood by the nationals of the host country, anxieties, prejudices, and racist behaviour can easily occur. This is of utmost importance because many times, when situations are not comprehended, problems are created at personal and social levels. The furthermost goal is that multicultural education teaches students to
be empathetic towards each other and to look at diversity as richness (Paksoy & Celik, 2019). Multicultural education provides all students with equal opportunities to aim for academic success (Banks & McGee Banks, 2010), especially since social class status is also strongly related to academic achievement (Banks, 2013).

Such theorists have implied that multicultural education is a vital component of quality education; in practical terms, educators often perceive it as either a crisis-induced addendum or a luxury. Gay (2004) additionally implies that multicultural education is integral to improving the academic success of all diverse students and prepares all young people for democratic citizenship in a pluralistic society.

Gorski (2010), a prominent figure in multicultural education, contends that the primary objective of this educational approach is to drive enhancements in individuals’ awareness, school policies, and procedures while also rectifying disparities in access and opportunities within the broader community. He asserts that achieving this goal involves three crucial aspects of transformation: personal growth, changes in educational institutions, and shifts in societal paradigms.

Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) acknowledge that defining social justice can be a complex task, but they suggest that it fundamentally pertains to upholding people’s fundamental human rights with fairness and equity. Consequently, as demographics, social conditions, and political landscapes evolve, multiculturalism in both schools and society is acquiring new layers of intricacy (Gay, 2004). Educators play a pivotal role in ensuring that all students in their classes have the capacity to maximise their potential as learners, enabling them to excel (Gorski, 2010). Since 2016, the European Commission has assisted European Union (EU) Member States in their attempts to incorporate refugees into their schooling and training frameworks, from Early Childhood Education to Higher Education. The Commission Action Plan on integrating third-country nationals established three education priorities: integrating newly arriving migrants into conventional education systems as quickly as possible, preventing the underachievement of migrants, preventing social isolation, and promoting intercultural dialogue (European Commission, 2016). In addition, the Commission provides tailored expert guidance via peer advice to promote policy changes in Member States. These activities are held at the invitation of each Member State and include decision-makers from other national administrations and independent experts who are brought together to identify solutions to national problems in a participatory workshop (Public Policy and Management Institute, 2017). This has also been written in the Policy on Inclusive Education (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2019), where it is suggested that students from ethnic minorities, students whose first language is not Maltese or English and asylum seekers must be included in all aspects of school life and that all educators must be aware of this.

2.3. Education for students with a migrant background

In light of the unprecedented levels of human mobility witnessed worldwide, education systems in affected countries must adjust to meet the specific needs of their diverse student populations (UNESCO, 2018). The classification of students with a migrant background can vary widely based on their legal status, which may range from residents and citizens to refugees, asylum seekers, or irregular migrants. Their stay in the host country may be either long-term or short-term. However, their eligibility for full participation in the formal education system of the host country may be contingent on their legal status (Eurydice, 2019). According to a report by UNESCO (2018) on migration and education:

Migration and displacement can profoundly affect education, requiring systems to accommodate those who move and those left behind. Countries need to recognise migrants and refugees’ right to education in law and fulfil this right in practice. They need to tailor education for those cramming into slums, living nomadically or awaiting refugee status. Education systems need to be inclusive and fulfil the commitment to equity... (p. 1)

When students with a migrant background are part of a classroom, it is essential for educators to create a welcoming environment that nurtures their self-esteem, fosters teamwork and empathy through classroom and at-home activities, and instills a positive outlook for their future (Adelman, 2018). This approach can help promote an inclusive and accepting atmosphere and facilitate meaningful connections between refugee students and local peers (Adelman, 2018). Bartlett’s research (2015) on
migrant students underscores the significant impact of school-level structures on their education. This includes aspects such as funding for early childhood education, the effects of grouping students, and the accessibility of curricula and teaching methods. Various factors, including residential segregation, systemic structures, and income disparities, often restrict migrant students’ access to high-quality education. Furthermore, their presence in the education system can be disrupted, leading to a higher incidence of dropping out and leaving school prematurely compared to native students (Nusche, 2009).

Standardised tests like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) consistently reveal a significant performance gap between migrant students, especially first-generation migrants, and their native counterparts. Interestingly, this same report on educational equity suggests that many migrant students might be classified as having special needs, potentially leading to their placement in separate institutions rather than mainstream schools (Nusche, 2009). Students with migrant backgrounds face a variety of difficulties that can impact their learning and development. Three types of problems that can be differentiated according to academic research literature are problems related to migration, challenges pertaining to socio-economic and political context, and the challenges of students’ participation in education (Eurydice, 2019). The latter refers to students with a migrant background doing their schoolwork and homework because, compared to their native peers, migrant student populations face significant challenges in educational achievement (Bartlett, 2015). Other difficulties that students from a migrant background face in the host country are bullying and bigotry, which disrupt the well-being of the students. Guo et al. (2019) have found that post-migration stressors, such as violence or hostile peer-to-peer interactions, can have a much more significant influence on the psycho-emotional well-being of refugee children relative to pre-arrival trauma. Furthermore, they imply that discrimination among young refugees from the Middle East is related to mental health issues and the weakening of social adaptation, and bullying, in particular, can exacerbate acculturation challenges and lead to low self-esteem, stress, depression, poor academic performance, school dropout, substance abuse, and behavioural problems among refugee children (Guo et al., 2019).

To ensure that students from a migrant background receive a stable and quality education, their integration into established national schools is crucial. This integration, which brings together refugees and national students in the same educational system, helps streamline funding activities to direct resources toward sustainable education systems (Adelman, 2018). International agreements and national policies can serve as valuable indicators of the host country’s commitment and capacity to include refugees (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). The Eurydice report (2019) highlights that in most European education systems, students from a migrant background tend to lag behind their native-born peers. However, those who are well-integrated both academically and socially within the school system have a greater likelihood of realising their full potential. The report also emphasises that primary school students who do not speak the language of instruction at home may experience a reduced sense of belonging and a higher incidence of bullying at school (Eurydice, 2019). Therefore, local schools must possess the capabilities to support migrant youth in keeping up with their native peers, ensuring their effective integration into the economic and social fabric of their receiving communities.

Past experiences may also influence how children perceive school, and the relationships they develop with their teachers and peers, and this is particularly relevant for students from a migrant background whose pre-settlement background could have major implications on their academic futures (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Parnis & Schembri (2023) also note various ways to reach and teach students from ethnic minorities in secondary schools in Malta.

### 2.4. Education for students with a Syrian background

Since the start of the conflicts in Syria, especially in Aleppo, only 6% of students attended school or received some form of education (Akbarzadeh & Conduit, 2016). This suggests that educators in the host countries must understand the background of these students when they first come into class. Furthermore, many of these students come to the host countries with varying English levels, affecting their academic and social experiences in their new schools (Kilic & Gokce, 2018). Thus, the new curriculum, lack of language and new school can affect students’ academic experiences. This can even happen when students from a Syrian background migrate to a country which is very close and similar to
Syria, such as Turkey, because, in this case, Syria and Turkey are both very different countries with very different cultures and social and historical differences (Baban et al., 2016).

In their research, Kilic and Gokce (2018) identified four key challenges commonly faced by students of Syrian background. These include struggles with comprehending lessons taught in languages other than Arabic or Kurdish, leading to academic difficulties. Additionally, they encounter issues with local students and among their peers of Syrian background, particularly if there are political or ethnic differences, such as between supporters of different groups or those from distinct ethnicities like Kurdish or Yazidis. Lastly, they contend with financial difficulties within their families.

One major hurdle for migrants in their host countries is education. This is primarily because children are required to learn to read and write in a different language and may face differences in dominant religious beliefs, especially in Western countries (Almadani, 2018). Many students from a Syrian background arrive in the host country without basic English language proficiency (Kilic & Gokce, 2018). These students bring unique experiences, cultures, backgrounds, and histories to the classroom, and it is important for all students, including Syrians, to explore and understand these perspectives (Almadani, 2018). Taylor and Sidhu (2012) argue that the successful inclusion of refugees hinges on creating a welcoming environment for all students, free from racism, which can be challenging for educators. They also emphasise the importance of including students from a migrant background, particularly addressing their psychosocial needs, especially if they face language barriers or have experienced trauma. Schools play a pivotal role in the inclusion and success of refugees, but this requires effective leadership and support from education authorities (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). The inclusion of diverse students not only benefits their academic progress but also positively impacts the broader community. Dryden-Peterson (2015) suggests that four main factors influence migrant students’ academic experiences, including language barriers to educational access, inadequate quality of instruction, contested educational opportunities, and discrimination in school environments.

Almadani (2018) conducted extensive research on students from a Syrian background. It was found that all the participants in her study were very ambitious to learn and dreamt of achieving high academic performances to have a better life than the one they had during the first few years of their lives. Furthermore, they did their best to cope with living in a new society. Moreover, all the students said that their teachers in their school played a pivotal role in their lives. However, Adelman (2018) noted that even though students from a Syrian background have heard the school bell all year, it still frightens them when it rings. She also adds that one of the major issues of having students from a Syrian background in public schools is their behaviour because, especially during break times, they act like they are fighting an enemy.

This review has discussed current research about students from a migrant, specifically Syrian, background, mainly referring to their positive and negative social and academic experiences. It has presented research studies from countries similar to Malta that have recently experienced a number of students from a migrant background, such as Turkey, Lebanon and the United States. Most importantly, this is all being done so that all students, regardless of their origins and where they are, would feel a sense of belonging.

In light of the aforementioned aims and objectives and the review of literature, the research questions underpinning this study were:

- What relationship is there, if any, between the Syrian migrant students’ life experiences and their academic achievements in Maltese state middle schools?
- How are Syrian migrant students interacting socially within the school system and with their peers and educators?
- What are the barriers that Syrian migrant students are facing to be fully socially included within Maltese state middle schools?
- What type of support are Syrian migrant students being given by the professionals at their respective schools to thrive academically?
3. Methodology

3.1. The research design

It is not easy to reduce social reality to variables. This is why it was deemed important to understand and portray the meaning constructed by the participants in a particular social setting (Ary et al., 2010) through an exploratory qualitative study. The latter was used because it is an approach for understanding and exploring the meaning individuals or groups give to a human or social problem. Rather than gathering a numeric analysis of data, its purpose is to provide a deep and holistic understanding of the social experience (Ary et al., 2010). A qualitative approach can be interpreted by looking at three dimensions: its ontology (i.e. the way truth is perceived), its epistemology (i.e. the questions it deems important), and its methods (i.e. the techniques it uses to answer the earlier-mentioned questions) (Cropley, 2019). Moreover, qualitative researchers are interested in discovering the nature of a phenomenon for those concerned, and the ultimate aim is to understand how people make sense of their lives and experiences. This phenomenological research has allowed for a deeper understanding of the experiences of migrant students in Malta related to their educational and social experiences, with the hope that the study can act as a changing agent (Schembri & Sciberras, 2022), in a small island state such as Malta (Schembri & Sciberras, 2020).

3.2. Sampling and data collection

Once the Ethics Board at the education institution where this research was carried out and the MFED Research Ethics Committee (MREC) approved this research, a detailed email was sent to the various Heads of School. Considering that the latter were the gatekeepers, their approval and assistance were necessary for the study to take place while conforming to an ethical recruitment process. Gatekeepers are persons formally in charge within institutions and have the power to grant or deny access to persons or situations during research into their organisation. In this instance, the Heads of Schools were contacted to seek their permission to conduct the interviews with students from their schools. The students and their parents/legal guardians were given a participant information sheet. Moreover, the students were given assent forms, and their parents/legal guardians were given consent forms (to ensure informed consent).

Recruiting participants was not easy, and after numerous attempts, a total of four students from a Syrian background who live in Malta and attend Maltese middle schools participated in this research. All four participants were born in Syria and were all in Syria at some point during the war. Some of them have even said that they recall the bombings and shootings. Table 1 summarises some demographic information about the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Year Group</th>
<th>Place of Origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12 Years</td>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>Homs, Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahmed</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13 Years</td>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>Ma’Saran, Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rana</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11 Years</td>
<td>Year 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hana</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12 Years</td>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>Homs, Syria</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Participant demographic information

3.3. Research instrument: Semi-structured interviews

In this study, audio-recorded, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were used as the research tool. In the four different interviews, participants were asked similar questions, however, other relevant questions were also asked depending on what the students were saying. This was done as the researchers were aware of the ‘observer’s paradox’ and wanted to ensure that the data collected was as authentic and real as possible. This has helped in gaining a better understanding of the students’ unique experiences. The interview guide for the semi-structured interview consisted of 13 questions by which the students recalled their personal experiences, namely the positive and negative schooling experiences in Syria as well as in Malta. Furthermore, other questions addressed any other issues in
Maltese state middle schools that hindered the students from being fully included in the school system. The participants were given ample time to express themselves, and the dignity and respect of the research participants were prioritised, while privacy and protection were ensured. Ultimately, semi-structured interviews were used because they offer more flexibility to the interviewer and keep the interview flowing, especially since, in this case, it involved children. The interview guide is available (in Maltese and English) as an appendix. Transcripts were written verbatim, and thematic analysis followed.

3.4. Ethical issues

A number of ethical considerations had to be addressed in this study, which included the responsibility to inform the children (together with an assent form) and their parents or guardians (together with a consent form) about everything they agreed to. Before the parents/guardians and the children signed the consent form, it was explained that participation was voluntary, that they could stop the interview at any time, that the interviews would take place in a safe place and that the interviews were confidential. These ethical considerations were highly important because this research explores the personal lives of these children.

The participants’ real names were not used, and the study does not mention the schools the participants attended. No details which could lead to identifying the children or their families were included. Schembri and Sciberras (2020) explain that although researchers do their utmost to comply with the ethical principle of confidentiality, it is often difficult to maintain adequate confidentiality in studies conducted in small island nations. Apart from respecting that research participants should not be subject to harm in any way, the children’s vulnerability was considered throughout this research. The fact that migrant and refugee children might be more vulnerable than others (Dryden-Peterson, 2015) was also taken into account.

4. Analysis and discussion

To answer the previously outlined research questions, the findings and the respective discussion were organised into the different themes that emerged, namely:

- Syrian migrant students’ life experiences and their academic achievements in Syria and Malta;
- The social interaction and barriers for students from a Syrian background; and
- The support (provided and needed) for students from a Syrian background.

4.1. The experiences in Syria

The first emerging theme poses the relationship between students from a Syrian background and the experiences that they had in their country, especially the negative ones, since negative experiences such as fear, trauma, poverty, inadequate health care, exhaustion, and over-experience during the conflict and migration period adversely impact their cognitive systems and decrease academic performance.

Upon commencing the interviews, the students did not take long to recall positive moments from their homeland. Sara fondly recalled her most cherished memory in Syria: swimming in pools with other children. Despite the pools being far from lavish, they still derived much enjoyment. Ahmed, Hana, and Rana emphasised that their fondest memories in Syria were centred around playing outdoors with relatives and other village children. These observations align with Almadani’s (2018) extensive study, which also found that socially, students with a Syrian background commonly had positive experiences in their home country, particularly in terms of having many friends to play with and fostering meaningful family connections. In fact, Ahmed recalls finding many flowers and green areas in his village as something he will never forget. Furthermore, he alluded to playing ball outside without fear and how all the inhabitants assisted each other in his village. This was also pointed out by Sara when she said, “a nice memory is when everyone used to help each other, where we used to live in Homs”, and even though she comes from a city, everyone in her community still helped each other, especially when in need.
Given the recent turmoil in Syria, reflecting on their experiences and the negative incidents they endured there was profoundly emotional for the participants. Ahmed vividly remembered a particularly harrowing moment when his village was subjected to aerial bombings. In the ensuing chaos, civilians scrambled for safety, desperately hoping to avoid harm. Many of his neighbours sought shelter in his home before making their escape. They were often uncertain of their destination, but the paramount concern was ensuring their survival, regardless of where they ended up. Moreover, Rana stated that “when we went out of Syria and did not know where to go”, it was a negative experience for her, and Hana went into more detail and stated, “we were beaten before we were able to flee”. Sara recalled that the moment she learnt that their house had been destroyed was the worst part of it all, and this has had a negative effect on all her family members. These answers are similar to what Almadani (2018) found when she implies that all the students in her research had experienced positive and negative encounters in Syria before they, together with their families, had moved to the United States.

4.2. The experiences in Malta

Another notable theme revolved around the positive and negative encounters that students of Syrian background undergo in Malta. There was a common sentiment among the participants that having their parents with them in Malta was a positive experience. Hana, in particular, expressed her joy at reuniting with her father, who was already in Malta when she arrived. She further stated, “when we arrived, we all lived with my uncle, and the experience was very good, before my father bought a home, and that was one of the happiest moments in my life”. The participants in this study held a positive view of Malta, much like Almadani’s participants, who expressed positivity towards America, the country they immigrated to, despite the challenges they have encountered and continue to face in schools (Almadani, 2018). Sara reminisced about the positive experience when they arrived in Malta and were shielded from news about the war in Syria. Ahmed also highlighted the positivity he experiences in Malta, particularly in his schooling, expressing great satisfaction with his education. This is crucial, as students need positive experiences in Maltese schools to achieve full inclusion, which is only possible in an environment free from prejudice and characterised by harmony for all the diverse individuals in attendance (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012).

Although three participants could not recall any negative experiences in Malta, Hana did have negative encounters, particularly at her primary school. She revealed that she had been subjected to bullying on numerous occasions, a topic that will be discussed further under another theme. Additionally, Rana and Hana recounted negative experiences during their journey to Malta by boat, with Hana’s boat even stopping, requiring them to swim before being rescued. Further to this theme, Sara stated, “we spent a week on the boat until we arrived in Malta.” Rana similarly recalled that “we were 90 people on the boat” and that, at one point, they were going to fall out of it.

The students continue to grapple with these traumas (Adelman, 2018) despite now leading settled lives here in Malta. For all the participants, arriving in Malta and being confronted with news about the ongoing events in Syria was a distressing experience, especially when they heard distressing reports about their hometowns or villages. This aligns with findings in the Eurydice report (2019), which highlights the various challenges faced by students from migrant backgrounds that can impact their overall development. However, the participants, on the whole, expressed positive sentiments, possibly because they were contrasting their experiences in conflict-ridden environments with the relatively peaceful lives they now lead in their host country (Almadani, 2018).

4.2.1. Social interaction with peers

Throughout the interviews, it was evident that all the students at the time of the interviews had no issues with their friendships. However, Sara mentioned that she only had two close friends, which she is content with. As Rana and Hana shared the same class, they had a common group of Maltese friends. They mentioned that they enjoyed conversing in both Maltese and English with their friends to practice, and importantly, they always managed to understand each other even if they were not fully proficient in both languages.
Even though Ahmed was in a new school in a different country, all the students in his class were his friends, and everyone helped him when he needed it. Sara liked to go out with their friends in the mornings when they were not at school and go to “Sliema to eat and play together”. Moreover, Hana and Rana liked to play with their friends during break times at school as well as with all their other classmates. This affirms that schools offer a myriad of options for refugee children to socialise and make friends (Guo et al., 2019), possibly also because the participants feel safe in their current schools. All the participants agreed that they made new friends from diverse cultures, and these social interactions became the key to getting back a sense of normality in their lives. This finding confirms what Taylor and Sidhu (2012) found in their research, that the integration of refugees would be successful if the climate were to be welcoming to all students whilst being free from bias, which may be a struggle for educators.

4.2.2. Language barriers

A prominent theme that surfaced in these interviews was the challenge of language barriers faced by students from a migrant background. Dryden-Peterson (2015) has noted that language barriers are a widespread issue experienced by refugee students. Similarly, the findings of this study underscore that language barriers are a significant concern for Syrian children and their families, as they encounter difficulties with language and communication in both school and social settings (Dryden-Peterson, 2020).

Learning a new language is a pivotal experience that holds significant importance in the lives of students from migrant backgrounds, facilitating their full integration into the host society (Guo et al., 2019). Nonetheless, this process is often challenging, as all the students in this study arrived in Malta with either no or very limited proficiency in Maltese or English. This aligns with the findings of Almadani (2018) and Kilic and Gokce (2018), who suggest that migrant students typically arrive in the host country without a foundational grasp of English, and in this case, Maltese. Even though Ahmed initially came to Malta at a young age and learned Maltese, his subsequent return to Syria posed a challenge in reacquiring proficiency in the language upon his recent return to Malta. At the time of the interview, he faced difficulties primarily in writing and reading, which were being addressed in school. Sara recounted that she did not speak Maltese when she first arrived in Malta. She has received substantial support within Maltese schools to accelerate her learning of the language. This assistance has proved highly effective, as she is now studying Maltese and English at the Track 3 level, the highest level offered in middle schools. Rana, along with her siblings, initially had no knowledge of Maltese. However, their father was proficient in the language, and they gradually learned it from him.

She further stated, “at school, a specific teacher comes to help me to learn even more.” Hana admitted that she still does not know how to speak Maltese, and when the researchers told her that she was speaking well and that he could understand her, she surprisingly said, “I know how to speak?” These findings show that it is a struggle for all the students to learn these new languages, especially English. However, Hana stated that she would like to learn more English, which she barely understands, as she knows that in Malta, the English language is very important. In fact, all four students shared the belief that learning English would have a positive impact on their social and academic lives.

Since the Maltese language is analogous to Arabic, it has been easier for all the participants to learn the basic ways of communicating in Maltese schools and ultimately adapt to their new lives as much as possible. Because of the language barrier, Ahmed, Rana, and Hana were all in Core Curricular Programme (CCP) classes, which are classes where students have knowledge of only some basic language skills and, therefore, are the lowest level at which Maltese and English can be studied in Maltese middle schools. This corresponds with findings by Baban et al. (2016) when they imply that the lack of language, the new curriculum, as well as the new school, all affect the migrant students’ academic performance.

4.2.3. Bullying

Another emerging theme was that of bullying, as this is a sensitive topic amongst children, and this topic was taken very seriously by Sara and Hana, who both were bullied at school when they came to Malta. The study by Guo et al. (2019) found that the children interviewed recalled cases of ethnic-
religious persecution where they were battered and ordered to return to their own country. Sara specifically said, “they called me a boy,” which is particularly offensive, especially in the Arabic culture.

Tensions that involve prejudice often occur not in the standardised curriculum or textbooks but in classroom conversations and activities (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Hana, another participant who has been bullied, stated that, “in Year 5 and 6, the children called me names, beat me and grabbed me by my head.” She went further to state that the children used to tell her, “go back to Syria, Syria is ugly, why did you come here?” However, Hana’s teachers have always tried to stop the bullying and supported her. She remembers the teacher saying, “you cannot call Hana that.” This poses a critique to Guo et al.’s (2019) study when they assert that in terms of social inclusion, what was more disturbing for children was the lack of help from teachers while Syrian children were exposed to bigotry and abuse. This confirms that while some teachers become ardent supporters of refugee children and can work beyond their academic position to help refugee families, others are hesitant to do so. While all kinds of harassment can be distressing, race and religion-related harassment is especially troubling. On the other hand, Ahmed and Rana have never experienced bullying within Maltese schools or by Maltese students.

4.2.4. The support for students from a Syrian background

The students discussed the plethora of support they have at and out of school. The participants all agreed that they have continuous support, particularly related to their academics, where they were being supported in literacy and numeracy. Sara said that mainly the French, Maltese and English teachers support her to improve in languages and ultimately get good grades in the exams, especially since she is studying them at the Track 3 level. About the support that she received at school, Sara stated, “We are happy when we hear that someone loves us because people from other countries, for example, the United States of America, do not want us. We were going there, but they told us ‘no, we do not want Arabs here’.”

Ahmed, Hana, and Rana all express gratitude for the support they receive, primarily from their teachers. They appreciate the extra effort teachers put in to explain lessons or specific tasks whenever they face difficulties, especially considering that they are in CCP classes focused on basic skills, where teachers play a crucial role in helping them with reading and writing. All three of them also agreed that when migrant students follow the same curriculum as their peers, those from a Syrian background face a higher risk of struggling, often due to differences in religious practices. With a Learning Support Educator (LSE) assistance, Ahmed emphasised that he received continuous support in class, enabling immediate resolution of any challenges he encountered. On the other hand, Hana stated, “I want to have an LSE, but I don’t know why they don’t give me one.” From the interviews, it has emerged that all the participants were being supported in many ways by different professionals, which asserts that the schools are including migrant students and catering to their psychosocial and academic needs (Adelman, 2018).

Amac and Yasar (2018) emphasise the critical role of inclusive education strategies and support for students from a migrant background. While educators should certainly aim to understand the students’ backgrounds and cultures, it is equally important for the students to learn about the culture and geography of their host country, which is now their new home (Akbarzadeh & Conduit, 2016). An interesting observation from the interviews was that Hana and Rana’s school provided specific lessons for migrant students, focusing on Maltese culture and points of interest. This initiative played a significant role in helping them integrate more effectively into Maltese society. They mentioned that they always look forward to these lessons, and Hana admitted that “the teacher helps us a lot.” On the contrary, Ahmed and Sara did not have these lessons in their school.

4.2.5. Future Aspirations of Syrian Migrant Students

The final theme from the participants’ interviews centred on the future aspirations of Syrian migrant students. This theme holds significant importance in this research, as one of its primary aims was to support students from a Syrian background in achieving a better future. Gaining insight into their future
goals will assist educators in setting achievable objectives for these students. Additionally, it may guide policymakers in making necessary adjustments to existing policies.

Ahmed’s ambition is to work with his father in construction when he finishes school, especially since Ahmed’s father told him he would. On the other hand, Sara aspires to become a doctor for the elderly so as “to give an example of the good life in Malta”. Hana is also an ambitious student who would like to be a doctor or hairdresser. Finally, Rana stated, “I wish to work as a teacher to help my family.” The girls’ aspirations and hopes were suggestively more ambitious than the boy’s. All the students answered the question about their future aspirations with their family members in mind so that they could all make them proud because, as Baban et al. (2016) imply, cultural traditions and societal differences remain strong even when Syrians are living in another country. In conclusion, Sara, Hana and Rana have very high future aspirations, which affirms what Almadani (2018) outlined in her extensive study. On the contrary, Ahmed’s future aspiration is that of working with his father in the construction industry. This might show that boys are meant to have their father’s job and help the family, especially if they are the firstborn.

5. Conclusion

This research delved into the topics of inclusion, barriers, challenges, and support for students from a Syrian background, especially within the context of the increasing relevance of multicultural education in Maltese schools. A parallel study on the integration of Syrian students in Turkish schools highlights the critical nature of their education, emphasising that a delay in schooling could lead to a generational gap. To prevent this, continuous education is imperative. Additionally, education serves as a means to prevent radicalisation and aids in the social integration of asylum-seekers into the host community (Amac & Yasar, 2018). While multicultural education is crucial for providing equal opportunities for academic success, some institutions and schools may still fall short in providing equitable opportunities, underscoring the influence of social class status on academic achievement.

In the case of the participants in this study, a sense of identity within the school environment has facilitated openness and the sharing of relatively positive sentiments. Teachers, educators, and other school practitioners play a pivotal role in the students’ learning and establishing connections with other diverse individuals for meaningful interactions. The four participants expressed gratitude for their teachers who motivate and encourage them to learn. Despite initial hardships, migrant students were collectively appreciative of their present circumstances and strived for academic excellence with the hope of securing a better future for themselves and their families. Overall, the research also indicated that Syrian migrant students face challenges adapting to Maltese schools’ current curriculum, attributed to language barriers and gaps in their earlier education. That being said, the Maltese Inclusion Policy of 2019 (MEDE, 2019) is a step in the right direction when it comes to diversity and multicultural education in Malta.

The findings comprehensively addressed the research questions. Firstly, it is evident that the conflict and disrupted education in Syria continue to significantly impact the students’ educational journey, both in the past and present. Secondly, while two participants experienced bullying, overall, they managed their interactions fairly well. However, it is notable that the girls tend to have a relatively small circle of friends. Thirdly, it is apparent that bullying and language barriers emerge as the primary challenges impeding the full inclusion of students from a Syrian background within schools. Finally, in response to the last research question, all participants expressed receiving support from their teachers and other professionals. Nevertheless, there appears to be some uncertainty among the participants regarding the roles and identities of these professionals.

5.1. Limitations of the Study

The main limitation of this study was extraordinary since the interviews were carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, and schools were not accepting in-person research. It was also difficult to conduct interviews online as many students did not know how to use a computer. Furthermore, other students were not permitted by their parents to participate in this study. Initially, the study aimed to interview
students with a Syrian background from middle and secondary state schools. However, since many students were not attending school during that scholastic year, the research had to be limited to state middle schools.

Since having students with a Syrian background as part of the school population is a recent phenomenon within schools of developed countries around the world, there is ample research that could be carried out. However, research about migrant students and, even more so, students from a Syrian background was very limited. It seems that this topic is being developed as time goes on, and clearly, there are now more students from a Syrian background in Maltese schools. Finally, another limitation was that different Syrian students have different realities, and the findings from this study do not necessarily reflect the realities of all Syrian students in Malta, hence cannot always be generalised.

5.2. Implications and Reflections

The perceptions of students from a Syrian background in this study not only shed light on the current challenges and difficulties that migrant students presently face, but also detail suggestions as to what practitioners can do. This research opens up opportunities for further study about migrant students in Maltese schools. The implications of this study's findings lead to educating not only the students themselves but also the local students about the ways of life of migrant students.

It is hereby recommended that all educators who are working within Maltese schools have Community of Professional Educators (CoPE) sessions where they are given the correct information about how to incorporate multicultural education within their lessons because educators need the pedagogical skills to teach children who come from foreign or war-torn countries (Adelman, 2018). This should be mandatory because, at some point, all educators will experience a multicultural classroom. In this way, they would have the basic skills to deal with this ever-growing situation and ensure that their students thrive. They would also be assured that they receive the training needed to do their job authentically and in the best way possible. Specific schools should also offer on-premises training as part of their professional development, informing all educators about the specific cultures and traditions present within their school. This would benefit everyone involved in that school, and ultimately, it would create a more harmonious environment where everyone would feel comfortable coming to school while lessening xenophobia (Banks & McGee Banks, 2010).

It is hereby further recommended that a national policy is introduced with clear guidelines regarding the language barriers faced by students from a migrant background at all levels. Although the Maltese policy 'A Language Policy for the Junior Years' briefly mentions that “all migrant learners are to be provided with opportunities to develop their bilingual and plurilingual competences” (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2023, p.19), we acknowledge that this policy is aimed at students within the Junior school cycle and does not include students in the Middle or Secondary school cycle. Furthermore, it would be greatly beneficial if a programme is introduced for migrant students about Maltese cultural heritage, especially for students who do not attend the Migrant Learners’ Unit. Therefore, introducing a specific policy involving all migrant students is essential for Malta to continue working hard as a nation so that all students succeed no matter what. If educators can effectively manage the situation, social and cultural issues will be avoided. This policy could also include some recommendations provided by Schembri (2020), which were mainly aimed at students in primary education in Malta.

In conclusion, it is in the hands of all educators working within Maltese schools to create a positive, supportive environment and a harmonious learning community where all students feel a sense of identity and can succeed academically. The individual efforts of the school leadership team, the teachers and the LSEs are vital and need to be encouraged to ensure academic and social inclusion, and support for both local students and students from a migrant background, in order to provide quality education for all students.
References


Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (2023). *A Language Policy for the Junior Years*.


APPENDIX – Interview guide

**English:**
1. Where are you from?
2. How long have you been in Malta?
3. How was your journey from Syria to Malta?
4. Think about your life in Syria. Can you tell me one happy memory and one not-so-happy memory?
5. Think about your life in Malta. Can you tell me one happy memory and one not-so-happy memory?
6. What were the first problems, if any, that you faced at school in Malta?
7. Were there any language problems that you had to face?
8. Who are your friends at school, and in what way do you interact with them?
9. Have you ever had any problems with your peers at school?
10. Who are the people who have supported you at school?
11. How did they help you?
12. In what ways do the educators in class support you?
13. What are your aspirations for the future, and what would you like to achieve when you finish secondary school?

**Malti:**
1. Minn fejn int eżatt?
2. Kemm ielek Malta?
3. Kif kien il-vjaġġ tiegħek mis-Sirja għal Malta?
4. Aħseb fuq il-ħajja tiegħek fis-Sirja. Tista’ tghidli memorja sabiħa u memorja mhux daqshekk sabiħa li tftakar sew?
5. Aħseb fuq il-ħajja tiegħek f’Malta. Tista’ tghidli memorja sabiħa u memorja mhux daqshekk sabiħa?
6. X’kienu l-ewwel problemi, jekk kellek, li kellek tiffaċċja fl-iskola f’Malta?
7. Kien hemm xi problemi fil-lingwi li sibt hawn Malta?
8. Min huma l-ħbieb tiegħek l-iskola u x’taġħmlu filmien bħala ħbieb?
9. Ġieli kellek xi problemi ma’ sħabek l-iskola?
10. Min huma l-professjonisti li jissaportjaw l-iskola?
11. U kif tawk sapport?
12. L-edukaturi fil-klassi tiegħek kif jżinun?
13. X’inhumna l-aspirazzjonijiet tiegħek għall-futur u x’tixtieq li tikseb meta tiśpiċċa l-iskola sekondarja?