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**The Experiences of Immigrant Students in Maltese  
Secondary State Schools**

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Education in part fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master in Access to Education

Master in Access to Education: Inclusive Schools and Communities

Faculty of Education

University of Malta

July 2024



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## **ABSTRACT**

In recent years, Malta has seen a significant increase in the number of immigrant students enrolled in secondary state schools. This shift has brought considerable changes to Maltese classrooms and schools, often leaving educators and students uncertain about how to respond to such a change. The transition has not only altered classroom dynamics but also profoundly impacted the daily lives and experiences of immigrant students as they adapt to new educational systems and the broader cultural context of their host country. Many immigrant students arrive with diverse backgrounds and experiences, often having faced significant challenges in their home countries. As they navigate the new educational landscape, they must reconcile their previous educational experiences with those of the Maltese system. This adaptation process can significantly affect their academic performance, social interactions, and overall sense of well-being. This dissertation amplifies the voices of these students, allowing them to share their stories and experiences. It examines how factors such as language barriers, peer relationships, and institutional support influence their integration and sense of belonging. The research employs qualitative methodology, using semi-structured interviews with 10 immigrant students from two different schools. The findings reveal that immigrant students in Maltese state schools still struggle with a sense of belonging. This highlights the need for schools to enhance inclusive practices and support services to better integrate these students. By identifying best practices and strategies, the study aims to promote a more inclusive and supportive school environment for immigrant students.

Keywords

**IMMIGRANT STUDENTS; EXPERIENCES; BELONGING; MALTESE STATE SCHOOLS**

To my beloved daughter, Ilyana Rose – may you always feel included and supported in every path you choose to follow in life. Your presence inspires me daily, and this work is a testament to my hope for your boundless future.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	i
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vii
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	ix
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	x
DECLARATION.....	xi
Chapter 1.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Choosing the Area of Study: The Researcher’s Perspective.....	2
Introduction.....	2
Aims of the Study.....	3
Overview of Chapters.....	4
Chapter 2.....	6
Literature Review.....	6
Introduction.....	7
Immigration and Education.....	9
The Education of Immigrant Learners in the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century.....	11
The Experiences of Immigrant Students before Transitioning to New Schools.....	13
Learning the Host Nation’s Language: A Key to Achieving Inclusive Education.....	16
Integrating Immigrant Students through Inclusive Education.....	17
The Concept of Belonging.....	19
Immigrant Students’ Sense of Belonging at School.....	21
Immigrant Students in Malta.....	24
Conclusion.....	27
Chapter 3.....	28
Methodology.....	28
Introduction.....	29
The Researcher’s Stance and Bias.....	29
Philosophical Assumptions.....	30
The Research Design.....	31
Qualitative Methodology.....	31
The Semi-Structured Interview.....	32

Reasons for Choosing the Semi-structured Interview .....	33
Access to Participants .....	33
Recruitment of Participants .....	34
The Interview Process .....	35
Data Analysis .....	36
The 6-step Thematic Analysis Procedure .....	37
Phase 1: Familiarisation with Data .....	37
Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes .....	39
Phase 3: Searching for Themes.....	41
Phase 4: Reviewing Themes .....	44
Phase 5: Defining Themes.....	45
Phase 6: Producing the Report .....	45
Ethical Considerations .....	46
Reflexivity .....	48
Authenticity and Trustworthiness .....	48
Triangulation .....	49
Limitations of the Study .....	50
Description of Sample .....	51
Conclusion .....	52
Chapter 4.....	53
Exploring Discrimination and Social Alienation .....	53
Discrimination .....	54
Religious Discrimination .....	54
Stereotypes .....	58
Foreignness and Otherness.....	59
Social Alienation and Exclusion .....	62
Feelings of Isolation during breaks and lessons .....	63
Impact on Community Cohesion .....	64
Negative Peer Relationships.....	66
Lack of Empathy and Understanding .....	67
Conclusion .....	69
Chapter 5.....	70
Exploring Teacher-Student Relationships, Language Acquisition, and Cultural Adaptation .....	70
Teacher-Student Relationship and Academic Engagement .....	71
The Importance of Student-Teacher Relationships and its Influence on Academic Performance	71
Emotional Support and Empathy .....	73
Language Acquisition and Social integration.....	75

Language Barriers and Social Isolation .....	76
Challenges in Language Acquisition .....	77
Cultural Adaptation .....	80
Challenges and Barriers.....	82
Social Integration and Cultural Identity .....	83
Conclusion .....	85
Chapter 6.....	86
Issues of Belonging.....	86
Issues of Belonging.....	87
Lack of Belonging at School and with Friends.....	88
Cultural Belonging and Bullying.....	94
Conclusion .....	96
Chapter 7.....	97
Conclusion.....	97
Introduction .....	98
The Main Findings from the Study.....	98
Implications.....	102
Recommendations for further research .....	103
Conclusion .....	105
REFERENCES .....	106
APPENDICES .....	120
Appendix 1: .....	121
FREC Approval .....	121
.....	123
Appendix 2: .....	124
Parents' information letter and consent form .....	124
Appendix 3: Ittra b'informazzjoni għall-Ġenituri/Kuraturi.....	127
Appendix 4: .....	130
Students' information letter and assent form .....	130
Appendix 5: .....	133
Ittra b'informazzjoni għall-istudenti.....	133
Appendix 6: .....	136
Permission to conduct research in state schools .....	136
Appendix 7: .....	138
Request for permission from Heads of Schools .....	138

Appendix 8: .....	140
Confidential agreement with Heads of school.....	140
Appendix 9: .....	142
Semi-structured interview questions.....	142
Appendix 10: .....	144
Coding samples .....	144
Appendix 11: .....	149
Transcript sample .....	149

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4.1 Sample of subthemes linked to main themes

Figure 4.2 Emerging themes

## **LIST OF TABLES**

Table 4.1 Sample of salient points

Table 4.2 Coding sample (question 4)

Table 4.3 Coding sample (question 9)

Table 4.4 Themes and preliminary codes (themes 1, 2 & 3)

Table 4.5 Themes and preliminary codes (themes 4, 5 & 6)

Table 4.6 Characteristics of the participants

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

MEYR	Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation
MLU	Migrant Learners' Unit
MUT	Malta Union of Teachers
TA	Thematic Analysis
SLT	Senior Leadership Team

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to begin by expressing my deepest gratitude to my beloved family and close friends for their unwavering support and encouragement throughout the journey of this dissertation.

My heartfelt thanks goes to all the Heads and Assistant Heads who supported me during this research and ensured I had everything I needed while conducting interviews at school.

I am also deeply grateful to the participants of this research and their parents for their willingness to be interviewed and for generously sharing their experiences with me.

Finally, I extend my sincerest thanks to Dr. Louise Chircop, whose mentorship has been instrumental throughout this journey. Her guidance and support have been invaluable, and she has consistently strived to assist me in the best way possible.

## **DECLARATION**

I hereby certify that the material that is submitted in this dissertation towards the award of the Master in Access to Education is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any academic assessment other than part-fulfilment of the award named above.

Anna Maria Salerno

Date: 30th July 2024

# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**

## **Choosing the Area of Study: The Researcher's Perspective**

From a young age, the fascination with the inclusion of immigrant students has been a driving force in the researcher's academic journey. Witnessing their resilience amidst the perils of war during their formative years, instilled a profound sense of gratitude and empathy in the researcher. These experiences continued to shape the researcher's perspectives on education, fostering a deep curiosity about the experiences of immigrant students within Maltese secondary state schools.

In recent years, the number of immigrant students enrolled in Maltese secondary state schools has soared, prompting deeper exploration into their lived experiences. This research study stands as a testament to the researcher's commitment to understanding and advocating for the needs of immigrant students within the educational landscape. Hence, this study aims to shed light on the challenges they face and identify ways of how their experiences could be improved.

### **Introduction**

In the tapestry of Europe's educational landscape, the integration of immigrant students into local secondary schools represents a profound journey of adaptation and resilience. Young minds from diverse cultural backgrounds embark on a transformative path, navigating the intricate terrain of new languages, social norms, and educational systems. This transition, while rife with challenges, should unveil opportunities for growth and mutual understanding within the fabric of multicultural societies.

Past studies have stressed the importance of this dynamic process. Scholars like Andreas Schleicher emphasise how the response of school systems to immigration shapes not only the academic outcomes of these students but also the broader economic and social cohesion of communities (Schleicher, 2015). In the Maltese context, where immigration is a relatively recent phenomenon, the educational landscape stands at a pivotal crossroad. Educators and policymakers grapple with the imperative to promote and ensure inclusive environments that cater to the distinct needs of a multicultural student body (Amore, 2005).

Amidst these complexities, the voices of immigrant students themselves emerge as crucial narratives that illuminate the nuances of their educational experiences. Their stories, told in their own words, offer profound insights into the daily realities, challenges, and triumphs they encounter within Maltese secondary schools. By delving into their perspectives, this dissertation seeks not only to enrich our understanding of their academic and social journeys, but also to equip educators and peers with invaluable knowledge to provide effective support and guidance.

As we embark on this exploration, we are reminded that the integration of immigrant students is not merely a matter of educational policy, but a shared endeavour to cultivate inclusive communities where every learner can thrive. Through a lens focused on empathy and understanding, this research endeavours to contribute meaningfully to the discourse on multicultural education, paving the way for more informed practices that honour the diversity and resilience of immigrant students in Malta and beyond.

### **Aims of the Study**

This research aims to delve into the academic and social experiences of immigrant students within Maltese secondary state schools. By capturing the perspectives of the students themselves, this study aspires to present an authentic understanding of their educational journeys.

A wholesome educational experience incorporates educational entitlement, culturally responsive teaching, nurturing friendships, feeling respected and welcome, among other things. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to uncover how immigrant students perceive and navigate their educational experiences within our secondary schools. To achieve this, the research is guided by two research questions:

- 1. What are the experiences of immigrant students attending local secondary state schools?*
- 2. Do immigrant students feel a sense of belonging - culturally, socially, and academically - at school?*

## Overview of Chapters

This first chapter serves as a general introduction to the entire dissertation. It provides the researcher's perspective, introduces the research questions and aims of the dissertation, and briefly outlines the remaining chapters.

The second chapter delves into the literature, discussing various theories and themes relevant to this study. It offers a detailed overview of the local situation in Maltese secondary state schools, with a particular focus on studies where immigrants themselves are the protagonists. An outstanding theme discussed is the concept of belonging, which is central to this research.

The third chapter presents the methodology of this research study, and it outlines the tools employed. It details the process of accessing participants and collecting data through semi-structured interviews, among other important aspects. This chapter also provides an in-depth explanation of the six-step Thematic Analysis procedure used in this dissertation, following Braun and Clarke's method (2006). The researcher also describes how themes and subthemes were identified through primary and secondary coding.

The fourth, fifth and sixth chapters present, discuss, and analyse the data in relation to the existing body of literature. Chapter four discusses the themes of Discrimination and Social Alienation, and it portrays the experiences of the participants while also discussing these in the light of existing literature. Chapter five discusses the themes of Teacher-Student Relationships, Language Acquisition and Cultural Adaptation. In this chapter, the participants' experiences highlight the current situation in Malta, emphasising the crucial role of teacher-student relationships in shaping their academic engagement and overall schooling experience. Chapter six is entirely dedicated to the theme of Belonging. This chapter directly addresses one of the dissertation's research questions and it focuses on how immigrant students perceive and experience belonging in their school environment.

The final chapter concludes the dissertation by discussing the implications of the findings and offering suggestions for improving current practices. These recommendations aim to promote nurturing school environments for all students.

## **Conclusion**

Malta has seen a significant rise in the number of immigrants, leading to a corresponding increase in immigrant students within secondary state schools. This demographic shift stresses the urgent need for schools to adopt meaningful strategies to ensure the emotional and academic well-being of these students. Although various key studies have been conducted in Malta, research specifically focusing on secondary school immigrant students, remains sparse.

This dissertation aims to fill this gap by providing a detailed portrayal of the experiences of these students. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions on educational inclusion and to pave the way for further research in this area.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

## Introduction

A welcoming host country provides a favourable environment for immigrants who already face numerous hurdles as they strive to establish new lives alongside their families (Council of Europe, 2023). In 2017, just about 3.6% of the global population was made up of international migrants living in a different country other than their own. The bulk of this total, affected mainly three regions namely Asia (c. 80 million); Europe (c. 78 million); and Northern America (c. 58 million) (UN, 2024). These statistics did not include people who migrated within their birth countries, where most migration takes place (Slowey et al., 2019). The European Commission defines a migrant as “a person who is outside the territory of the State of which they are nationals or citizens and who has resided in a foreign country for more than one year irrespective of the causes, voluntary or involuntary, and the means, regular or irregular, used to migrate” (Manolitzas et al., 2021, p. 289). Despite the several attempts of different organisations defining the term ‘migrant’, there is no universally accepted definition of this term (International Organisation for Migration, 2024).

Migration has become a global phenomenon extending beyond specific nation-states or geographical boundaries (Gibson, 2006; Hajro et al., 2021; Wenden, 2023). The drivers behind the escalating migration rates include growing global and domestic disparities (Czaika, 2014). However, alongside the free flow of capital, information, and services, globalisation has also led to the decentralisation and the displacement of an increasing number of individuals (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). This surge in migration has been increasing cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity in societies (World Migration, 2020). These migrations affect a larger swath of people and wield greater influence on the politics and economics of countries than ever before in modern history (Alesina & Tabellini, 2021).

The disputed connections that industrialised countries have with immigration, are reflected not only in governmental policies aimed at immigrants, but also in popular depictions of immigration, such as, magazine covers and newspaper articles (Szakacs, 2021). Chavez (2001) outlines the variety of analogies and visual representations used to discuss immigration in the US, such as, “invasion”,

“national crisis,” and “illegals.” This imagery raises implicit assumptions and unspoken queries about who the genuine citizen belonging to that country is, and how the latter’s descendants fit into such ideas. Such subtle images suggest that immigration is an issue that must be addressed and controlled as it threatens the nation-state’s purported cultural homogeneity (Munoz et al., 2003). Unfortunately, when depicted in such manner, multiculturalism is apprehended as a challenge rather than an embellishment (Baubock & Rundell, 1998). This contradicts the argument of the Committee on Migration, Refugees, and Displaced Persons (2023), which contends that host countries derive benefits from effectively integrating migrants and refugees. Such integration yields advantages for the entire society, optimising outcomes for all stakeholders engaged in the process. Despite the initial investment required by the state for integration, the macroeconomic impact of migrants becomes positive upon their arrival and in the years thereafter, as they attain permanent residency, integrate into the labour market, and contribute through tax payments (Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, 2023).

The efforts of various organisations to improve the lives of migrants are crucial; however, it is only the migrants themselves who truly understand the depths of the struggles they face. Before attempting to enhance their circumstances, it is imperative to address their needs through channels that serve as microcosms of the broader society. Therefore, this research aims to amplify the voices, perspectives, and experiences of immigrant students and to offer invaluable insights into their schooling experiences within Maltese state schools. Such research not only facilitates a deeper understanding of their needs, strengths, and challenges among educators and peers, but also enables the development of practical strategies for offering support and guidance (Micallef Cann, 2014).

Despite the considerable body of research on migration and its associated challenges over the years, there remains ample opportunity for further exploration, particularly from the perspective of migrant learners themselves. Thus, this research endeavours to place migrant students at the forefront, allowing their narratives to shape the discourse. Through a rigorous critical analysis of their responses,

this study aims to contribute to meaningful change in the lives of migrant learners, ultimately striving for a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

## **Immigration and Education**

Although moving to a new country may be an incredible experience, there are numerous difficulties and adaptations involved (Johnsson, 2015). The relationship between immigration and education is complex and intertwined in various ways (Jacobsen et al., 2023). The influence of immigration on education, viewed both from the perspectives of the host nation and the immigrants, presents a nuanced issue (Margaryan et al., 2018). With the notable rise in the number of immigrant students throughout European nations, it is essential to recognise the enormous pressures encountered by both the local communities and the immigrants. Nevertheless, this situation should not be viewed as problematic but rather as offering fresh opportunities for countries dealing with ageing native populations and the threat of workforce and skill deficits (Hippe et al., 2018).

The length of time that immigrant students have lived in the host nation is another factor that affects their academic achievement (Bossavie, 2018). Research shows that native students do better than immigrants even when compared to students who have entered the country at a very young age (Jensen, 2021). Furthermore, research indicates that family history and the importance of language proficiency in the host nation contribute to the widening inequalities between native-born citizens and immigrants in many nations (OECD, 2016). Language proficiency could help reduce the educational gap between native-born people and immigrants (Foged et al., 2023).

Racism and discrimination are true factors immigrant students face daily at school (Metzner, 2022; Odem, 2009). These factors could also hinder the socialisation of such students while also bring about a low average academic performance (Bottiani, 2022). Past research studies have also shown a high connection between the experiences of immigrant students at school and belonging (Brezicha & Miranda, 2022). Should the contexts of reception be unwelcoming, immigrant students would not only fail academically, but this would also affect their confidence level and feeling of belonging in the host

country (Salami et al., 2019). In the case of newcomer immigrant students (a term most scholars use to refer to recently arrived immigrants), adapting to a new social and cultural lifestyle, finding their way into new schools, and grasping a new educational system while achieving English proficiency, may be especially daunting (Baur, 2022).

Recent research about a group of high school students in Norway has also found that discrimination is an enduring aspect of society that affects visible minorities equally, irrespective of their immigration status or lineage (Midtbøen & Quillian, 2021; Quillian et al., 2017; Quillian & Midtbøen, 2021). Friberg's (2021) findings revealed that many young immigrants from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East reported that other people saw them as less Norwegian than they perceived themselves to be (Hans-Tore Hansen, 2024). Religion and race were seen as major obstacles to recognition and acceptance. Young people with roots in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East adopted their Norwegian identity more readily than those with parents from Western Europe and North America, despite not being recognized as Norwegians by others. Individuals self-identified with their paternal origin, regardless of their parents' history. Research on discrimination and social recognition indicates that descendants of immigrants often experience circumstances similar to immigrants, even though their situation is comparable to that of other native-born Norwegians (Hans-Tore Hansen, 2024).

These findings suggest that discrimination may persist as an enduring challenge for immigrant students. However, this is not their sole obstacle. Immigrant children often encounter a disadvantage in educational environments where the dominant culture prevails, resulting in the marginalisation of minority cultures (Roxas, 2010). Consequently, segregating migrant students from the wider community deprives both the students and the community of valuable educational experiences. Research conducted in Italy found that non-Italian students typically attain lower levels of education compared to their Italian counterparts and exhibit reduced inclination towards higher education (Minello & Barban, 2012). Additionally, dropping out of the educational system after completing compulsory education is prevalent among migrant students in Italy (Biasutti et al., 2019). These studies

show the imperative of addressing the specific needs of immigrant students to ensure an equitable and beneficial educational experience.

Segregation refers to the practice of separation. School segregation often carries a negative connotation due to its association with inequality (ECASS, 2024). In their study on school segregation of immigrants and its effects on educational outcomes in Europe, Brunello and De Paola (2017) investigate whether the concentration of immigrants in certain schools affects overall student achievement, as well as the average achievement of both immigrants and native students. They conclude that “desegregation policies are not only equitable – they provide better opportunities to individuals with relatively low parental backgrounds – but also efficient” (Brunello & De Paola, 2017, p. 46).

This finding differs from Bunar’s (2015) study, which indicates a possible decline in academic performance if immigrant students are integrated into regular classes without adequate language proficiency. However, Bunar (2015) also notes that keeping students in introductory segregated classes for too long can have negative consequences. Research from Sweden supports the nuanced view that while segregation can negatively impact immigrant students, it is crucial for these students to have the opportunity to spend time in introductory classes before transitioning to mainstream classes. This period in introductory classes allows for interaction with teachers and peers and fosters a sense of belonging, which they experience less in regular classes (Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013).

## **The Education of Immigrant Learners in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

As Suarez-Orozco (2001) points out, the high enrolment of immigrant children in American and European schools is one of the most obvious signs of globalisation. When considering the experiences of immigrant children, the contentious nature of immigration itself should be kept in mind (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Schools function as places of required interaction between differently positioned groups that might not have convened on their own (Carrasco et al., 2004). Due to this, sometimes disagreements, prejudice and discrimination might arise (Bejerano, 2005). Hence, schools must work

to provide all necessary methods of inclusion to promote and use diversity as a means of positive inclusion (Henry, 1963). Even though the lives of immigrant learners go far beyond the schooling sector, schools serve as microcosms of the larger society and hence they could often turn into sites of contestation and contradiction (Valenzuela, 1999).

A study about the integration and isolation of immigrant students carried out in Norway showed that immigrants face challenges in the educational sector (Froehlich et al., 2021). For instance, immigrant students dominate in high school dropout rates, with significant differences based on their country of origin and they perform worse in primary school (Teja & Schonert-Reichl, 2013). Furthermore, compared to native students, the graduation rate of immigrant students in higher education institutions is 10% lower (Kim, 2009). Higher education is seen as a crucial sign of immigrant integration by Norway's Directorate of Integration and Diversity (Froehlich et al., 2021). Another study examining whether the cognitive and emotional components of school engagements differ substantially between native and immigrant students, found that attitudes toward school are linked to cognitive and psychosocial constructs (Chiu et al., 2014). This research also indicates that, in addition to the low academic achievement highlighted by Froehlich et al. (2021), immigrant students often encounter cultural obstacles, such as discrimination and language barriers (Hirschman, 1996). Furthermore, Chiu et al. (2014) discovered that a positive attitude towards school does not necessarily equate to a strong sense of belonging.

These findings align with Norozi's (2023) analysis of the newcomer immigrant population in this county. Norozi argues that this approach must be addressed using a holistic framework, claiming that the three most crucial elements in such an approach are: well-being pedagogy, positive and comprehensive collaboration with newcomer parents, and teachers' positive ideology of newcomers and their families (Norozi, 2023). The most eminent result from this research shared views about the fact that immigrant students in Norway continue to be amongst the underachieving, despite the aids provided by the educational facilities. Given the increasing flux of immigration in the early 1970s,

schools in Norway made adaptations to accommodate these new heterogeneous environments. A shift from focusing on the needs and linguistic and cultural variety of indigenous people and national minorities to integrating immigrants became necessary as the number of immigrants in the educational system escalated (OECD, 2018).

This research has not only stressed the importance of a just educational system in Norway but has also left room for further research and assessment to take place in other countries (Panadero et al., 2022). The students' well-being is always a priority in such cases, as this is key to learning and comprehending newly arrived immigrant students (Willemse et al., 2016). This research also outlines the fact of how classroom pedagogies could be improved in a way that could benefit more the holistic classroom environment (Cafai & Cavioni, 2015). A deep analysis of the teacher is also pivoted here as according to this research, they are vital figures in the educational system. The term well-being was deeply analysed, and it was reported that despite the fact that most primary teachers around the world, especially in Australia and Malta, were highly familiar to this term, this was not the case in Norway (Ekornes et al., 2013). Ekornes (2013) argued that mental health in Norway was still disregarded and there were various empty gaps about this phenomenon, however, major differences were noticed among different schools.

### **The Experiences of Immigrant Students before Transitioning to New Schools**

*"You abandon everything you've ever known, and come to a foreign land, only to be subjected to all types of discrimination and violations."*

(Yerima, Togo, 2019)

Zaynab Baalbaki reviewed the book *Learning a New Land*, originally written by Carola Suarez-Orozco, in which she predicted, according to contemporary research that by the year 2040, one third of the American population will be comprised of solely immigrants. At the time of this review, twenty percent of children came from immigrant families (Rong & Preissle, 1998). Due to such demographic changes, the understanding of immigrant students' experiences is vital. Schools will have to start providing more

positive learning solutions for all students and aim towards an inclusive learning and structured environment.

Although numerous migrants leave their home countries in search of improved living conditions, many still encounter instances of violations of rights and discrimination in their host nations (McCarthy, 2019). Bachelet (2024) argues that every migrant has a story of exile and belonging to tell. She addressed the fact that however, such stories remain hidden, just like some migrants, who are forced to live in the shadows of societies, and who are deprived of a normal enjoyable life (Bachelet, 2024). The story of these migrants could be reshaped from one of dismay to one that celebrates universal humanity. This relates to Lijtmaer's (2022) study on social trauma, which posits that migrants employ nostalgia as a means of shielding themselves against the hostility stemming from their frustrations in host countries.

A study carried out by an immigrant herself, Priska Imberti (2007), examines the most faced struggles by immigrants. Imberti (2007) expresses the silent struggle of wanting to communicate with people, as soon as you land in a new country, however you find yourself lacking the words.

"I feel like a child trying to organize my speech around basic words," reported María. "I want to say something coherently that can take just a couple of words, and it takes me two or three sentences and twenty minutes to put it together," expressed Pier. "It is totally infantile! I felt unable to engage in a serious, adult-type of conversation!" remembered Dr. López. "I'd rather stay home or go shopping for groceries to the supermarket where I don't need to ask for things I wish to buy. It takes only sign language to buy food" says Theresa (Imberti, 2007, p 70).

This shows the struggles faced by some immigrants upon arriving in new host countries. The narratives of these individuals correspond with Ainsaar's (2023) assertion that relocation is a complex process entailing various challenges. This also aligns with a study carried out by Martinez et al. (2024) which revealed that immigrants often encounter heightened hostility, encompassing not only physical aggression but also economic and social forms of discrimination and animosity.

Similarly, while Branker (2016) found that immigrants in Toronto often recounted personal racial discrimination, Olivares-Orellana (2020) emphasised that prior to describing their experiences in new schools outside their country, they felt compelled to recount the inhumane treatment they endured while journeying to their host country.

We sat there for five hours until they began calling people and taking them somewhere else. They called my aunt and her daughter, and my aunt immediately questioned why they had not called me, they told her because I was not her real daughter. I felt horrible. They put them on a bus and took them to another hielera [the word used by Spanish immigrants that refers to tents] and left me there. I started crying and crying nonstop because I wanted to be with my aunt, and then they took me into these rooms that had more people with small infants, children, young people and elderly people and everything. That place, oh my God, I regret having gone there. It was so cold that you could not stand it ... We were all sleeping on the floors, it was the worst. I had to spend three days there. We were fed bad food ... for the three days I was there I did not eat ... After three days, they called my name. I thought I would be taken to my grandmother but nothing. They took me to another hielera, where I would spend four more days. I was extremely cold and hungry. On the last day I was there, they called me and told me to give them my grandmother's number to let her know where I was (E. Olivares-Orellana, 2020, p 80).

Such narratives highlight the significance of this process as a pivotal event in the participants' lives (Olivares-Orellana, 2020). Another study which focuses on immigrant students settling in Sweden, revealed that participants reported encounters of racism and discrimination based on their ethnicity, religion, and skin colour in various public places and even when trying to look out for summer jobs (Osman et al., 2020). All participants expressed that these encounters hindered their process of acculturation in the new country, leading them to feel excluded and angry (Osman et al., 2020).

## **Learning the Host Nation's Language: A Key to Achieving Inclusive Education**

Language is an essential component of life that helps us communicate, forms our thoughts, links us to our cultural history, and is essential to many facets of society, including government and education. It is a tool that is necessary for social interaction, human growth, and the advancement of civilizations (Pinker, 1994). Many people's mythologies and faiths perceive language as the wellspring of human life and power (Shashkevich, 2019). Some Africans believe that a newborn child may only be considered a *muntu* (person) once they begin to speak (Blackwood, 2023). This tradition holds that the fact that people can all speak at least one language, makes us all human (Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams, 2003, p. 3). This illustrates the power of the spoken language that man is capable of conjuring. According to Pinker (1994), language with its delicate concept of words, is so ingrained in the human experience that it is difficult to conceive living without it.

Malta has three official languages: Maltese, the national language, Maltese sign language, and English. The prevalence of English is a legacy of British rule in Malta from 1814 to 1964. Maltese, the native language, is also taught in all schools starting as early as primary education, while the English language is still an official one. A fundamental skill that students must master by the completion of their schooling experience is bilingualism (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012). According to the Ministry of Education and Employment (2012), the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) views students' social, cultural, and economic integration as an ability to communicate in both Maltese and English. Hence, immigrant learners are faced with the challenge of connecting to two foreign languages. It is also important to note that immigrant students and teachers often do not receive adequate support for learning the language. For instance, Maltese as a foreign language is not always available in schools.

When language barriers are present, they could create significant challenges for immigrant learners and could eventually impact their overall inclusion and educational experience (Liebkind et al., 2004). Students' schooling experiences are directly impacted by their language proficiency (Jasinskaja-Lahti,

2004). Migrant students can succeed academically and integrate into society by learning the language of the host nation (Sam & Vedder, 2006). Thus, learning the official language or languages of the host nation is thought to be advantageous for immigrant learners (Chircop, 2018). The languages they manage to start mastering can help them grow in confidence and would eventually make it easier for them to feel a greater sense of belonging at school (Liebkind et al., 2004).

### **Integrating Immigrant Students through Inclusive Education**

Inclusion in education is about providing all students with equitable access to educational opportunities and ensuring they all feel a sense of belonging within the educational system (Liebkind, 2004). Inclusive education embodies the provision of genuine opportunities for every student, irrespective of their diverse needs, backgrounds, ethnicities, and religions (UNICEF, 2017). Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child both guarantee the right to an education. According to article 30 of the International Convention on the Protection of the rights of all migrant workers and members of their families, immigrant children have the right to an education, regardless of their official immigration status. In actuality, the fulfilment of this right may be impeded by stringent immigration restrictions, inconsistent legislation, and onerous paperwork requirements in the host nation (International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, 1990).

Ideally, inclusive education entails the recognition of all students in the same classroom, regardless of their origins. It is important to acknowledge that education within multicultural contexts is intricate. This domain is marked by dynamics such as transnationalism, hybrid identities, and the continual evolution of cultures (Sammut, 2020). Inclusive education has remained a prominent theme in discussions, policies, and implementations within the realm of educational theory over recent years. Despite its contemporary significance, the concept of inclusion in education has roots tracing back to earlier times.

The first World Conference on Education for All, convened in 1990 under the auspices of the United Nations, emerged in response to concerns surrounding educational disparities. The landmark event set the stage for subsequent declarations and conventions (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2011). UNESCO's pivotal declaration of 1994 underscored the imperative of restructuring educational frameworks, positing that true reform can truly take place if mainstream schools are equipped to embrace and educate all children within their communities. This declaration addressed the educational needs of students with disabilities or special education requirements. Only in recent years has the discourse on inclusive education expanded to encompass the necessity of accommodating all learners, acknowledging the increase diversity within schools and society at large (Ainscow, 2019).

A study conducted on inclusive education in Iceland, Finland, and the Netherlands concluded that inclusive education has progressed beyond solely focusing on special education and impairments. However, it also revealed that students who deviate from the perceived normative standards, i.e., lacking influence in the language of instruction and not being familiar to the educational system, encounter social and intellectual challenges (Huilla et al., 2024). The way teachers perceive their students reflects significantly on the students themselves. A local study on teachers' perceptions of immigrant students indicates that while inclusive education has expanded to encompass a broader spectrum of students beyond those with special needs, there remains room for improvement (Vella, 2011). Nguyen's (2017) research highlights that teachers often find the initial classroom arrangements for migrant students inadequate and unjust, grouping them together with learners with disabilities. Although inclusive education has made progress, it is crucial for educators and policymakers to also focus on fostering a sense of belonging for immigrant students. When these students feel like they belong, they begin to have positive experiences, which can ultimately lead to a successful and fulfilling educational journey (Chiu, 2012; Osman et al., 2020).

## The Concept of Belonging

According to academic practice, the term 'belonging' is used to refer to all its grammatical forms, functioning as a verb or noun, depending on the context (Antonsich, 2010). As a result, the word 'belonging' may signify 'to belong' (v), which means to hold or own something, as well as 'belongingness' (n), which indicates membership in and affiliation with a certain social group, solidarity, or organisation. Since this study focuses on the experiences of immigrant learners at school, the concept of belonging, which takes place in several different forms, will be analysed from its academical aspect.

Despite that the term belonging has been described as rather recent, in terms of theory, the politics that surround it include some major inquiries that concern multiple people and different sectors in modern society (Youkhana, 2015; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Hence, the theories and practices of belonging are now seen as multifaceted subjects, which include, for instance, the political science and studies of race and religion (Day, 2011; Garbutt, 2011; Vieten et al., 2006). Despite the importance given to this delicate subject, less attention has been observed with regards to the implementation of belonging within the educational sector, even though studies have shown that students benefit from a sense of belonging at school (Osterman, 2000). Hayes and Skatterbol (2015), demonstrate how impoverished students' emotional ties to peers and family, create a politics of belonging that materialises as opposition to traditional education. Nonetheless, students are given another opportunity at education that could eventually address their social disadvantage thanks to the social justice practices of an alternative school that caters to their forms of belonging (Martin et al., 2024).

Colhoun (2003) mentions the importance of connectedness in relation to belonging. He argues that not joining any social group is rather impossible. Belonging is a natural process that should take place in school environments as it does outside (Colhoun, 2003). The interconnectedness of the social and the self is highly valued, as highlighted by Wright (2015). Consequently, belongingness fosters social

cohesion, as noted by Halse (2018). These dynamics show how the sense of belonging shapes the lives and moral outlook of young individuals (Halse, 2018).

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs includes belonging as one of the fundamental needs that drive individual behaviour in a hierarchical manner. Maslow (1943) posits that every person possesses an inherent need for love and belongingness, suggesting that this need arises only after the fulfilment of physiological and safety needs. The designation of belongingness as a fundamental need stresses its significance. Given that students spend a considerable amount of time at school during their secondary education years, it becomes imperative that they experience a sense of belonging. Schools play a crucial role in fostering the social connections necessary for establishing this sense of belonging (Pesonen, 2016). Research shows that students who feel a sense of belonging at school not only exhibit better academic performance but also experience enhanced mental and physical well-being, as opposed to those who lack a sense of belonging, who tend to report adverse effects on health and well-being (Leary, 1995; Newman, 2007).

Therefore, research has shown that fostering an inclusive environment to address the multicultural aspects of the student population is a key strategy for meeting students' need for belonging. This can be achieved through various approaches tailored to individual student needs. Failure to acknowledge the diverse cultural backgrounds of students within the school can have negative repercussions, leading to a sense of exclusion among students. Despite educators' assertions of their commitment to implementing inclusive practices in classrooms, studies have revealed that many educators struggle with this task and feel the need for additional professional development in this area (Blad, 2017; Education Week Research Centre, 2017).

## **Immigrant Students' Sense of Belonging at School**

*"If they got into a really good, nurturing school it made a big difference in buffering a lot of these difficulties that many brought in with them."*

(Suarez-Orozco, 2017)

The recent phenomenon of migrant learners scattered in different countries, paved the way for an introduction of multicultural practices in secondary schools (Grima, 2020). This occurrence brought about multiple studies concerning migrant students, with the majority focusing on identifying and addressing the specific challenges these students face, such as lack of fluency in the language of instruction (Filomeno & Brown, 2022). Such research is crucial; however, one must also focus on the importance of providing these students with a sense of belonging, which makes the whole experience better (Osman et al., 2020). Even though this is not the case of every migrant student, learners have gone through discriminating events at school (Katartzi, 2017). Such instances could have negative impacts on the students' social and academic lives (Gonzales et al., 2012). Furthermore, very often research studies adopt a deficit perspective, implying that migrants lack the necessary tools for successful academic achievement. This outlook places the responsibility for success on the migrants themselves, rather than on the schools and the educational system. Hence, it is crucial that immigrant receiving nations work on providing meaningful and empowering schooling experiences to these students (Schembri, 2020).

A sense of belonging is a prerequisite for a positive schooling experience for immigrant students (Schleicher, 2015). In a study about belonging, students were requested to choose whether they agree, strongly agree, disagree or strongly disagree that they feel a sense of belonging at school. The results imply that the psychological health of immigrant students is influenced by a variety of factors, including how well their new host country's educational systems and social environments support them in overcoming the numerous challenges they are forced to confront, in order to academically succeed and embark upon this new journey in a fresh state (PISA, 2012).

Therefore, fostering a sense of belonging is paramount in supporting the adjustment of immigrant students to their new lives. Research indicates that one significant obstacle affecting immigrant students' well-being is their struggle with language comprehension, however, additional challenges encompass their difficulty in grasping the unfamiliar educational system (Olivares-Orellana, 2020).

My experience at school here has been a disaster. There are people who view us as if we are garbage because we are outsiders and can't speak English. Some teachers think that because I am an immigrant, I'm less worthy than others. Sometimes teachers make me feel like I should give up. I don't like my SIFE classes (Olivares-Orellana, 2020, p 13).

This quotation highlights the discriminatory treatment and perception of immigrant students solely based on their immigrant status and language proficiency, resulting in their devaluation. It stresses the significant influence of teachers' attitudes on the educational experiences of these students. This aligns with the findings of Caudenberg et al. (2020), which revealed that immigrant students experience greater satisfaction when treated well by teachers, leading to increased comfort, respect, and support. However, this research also shows that beyond the teachers' opinion and treatment, the sense of belonging and acceptance within the school environment plays an equally crucial role (Caudenberg et al., 2020). Despite the high educational aspirations of immigrant students, merely harbouring such aspirations does not guarantee a sense of belonging in the school setting. These findings contradict Thomas' (2016) assertion that immigrant students struggle only when they feel "like a fish out of water". Additionally, participants reported instances where teachers made fun of their clothing.

There are a lot of teachers who joke about the girls' veils and ask why they do not take off their veils. They say, for instance, "Isn't it warm?" They ask all those stupid questions, and then everybody looks at [the girls] and laughs. (Osman et al., 2020, p 5).

This quotation highlights how immigrant students were ridiculed because of their different faiths, hindering their acquisition of a sense of belonging in foreign countries and schools. These findings

contrast with those of Gopalan et al. (2020), who found that, on average, first-year U.S college students felt a sense of belonging in their institutions. However, belonging could vary depending on key institutional and student characteristics, as a matter of fact, first-generation students with different ethnicities reported a lower sense of belonging when compared to their peers (Gopalan & Brady, 2019). The disparities observed between such studies may stem from variations in background or demographic factors, or from the types of institutions students attend to. As noted by Willms (2003), immigrant students perceive their sense of belonging at school as crucial psychological state vital for their long-term well-being. Additionally, the sense of belonging is viewed as integral to an individual's perception of their connection to a group (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). When students lack a sense of belonging, this could result into trauma, hence it is highly important that schools cater for this need and ensure that immigrant students are endured with belongingness (Rababah, 2021). The correlation between a higher sense of belonging at school and improved academic performance stresses the importance of further research into experiences of belonging and factors that could impede this process (Goodenow & Grady, 1993).

Inclusive education should be achieved in its broader sense to provide all students, despite of their backgrounds, with equal access to it (Alexiadou et al., 2016). Furthermore, if inclusive goals are not supported at a macro level, succeeding with a disadvantaged position becomes considerably more challenging (Huilla et al., 2022). Institutions should consistently be on the lookout for innovative ways of promoting inclusion despite the fact that understanding inclusion as a whole occasionally conflicts with the educational system (Crozier, 2016).

## **Immigrant Students in Malta**

Currently (2023 – 2024), in Malta, there are 2343 migrant students attending state schools and 884 migrant students attending non-state schools (MEYR, 2024). Immigration in Malta is a relatively recent occurrence (Amore, 2005; Camilleri & Camilleri, 2008). A little over 18% of the students enrolled in state schools each year, are from immigrant families (SIS Q4, 2021). The Migrant Learners' Unit (MLU), initiated in 2014 as a result of the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) action. The union instructed teachers not to accept immigrant students in class unless they have knowledge of either English or Maltese. The establishment of the MLU is part of Malta's comprehensive approach to managing rising immigration, especially from non-EU countries. Over the last twenty years, Malta has experienced a notable increase in migrant families arriving on the island, resulting in a more varied student demographic. The MLU was established to cater to the unique educational needs emerging from this demographic transformation. At present, it offers induction and language hubs for students who do not communicate in the languages of schooling in Malta, i.e. English and Maltese (Migrant Learners' Unit, Malta, 2022). Despite the significant efforts put forth by the MLU, educators have reported substantial difficulties due to language barriers. Teachers often struggle when students do not understand Malta's two official languages, Malta and English, which severely hampers effective communication. This lack of common linguistic ground makes it challenging to deliver lessons and provide the necessary academic support, ultimately impacting the students' ability to integrate and succeed within the educational system (Ariza et al., 2019).

Schools in Malta are still trying to find their way on how to deal with a multicultural student cohort. This might not always be easy and brings about new struggles for educators too, since offering a fully inclusive, integrated, and culturally differentiated learning experience is not always a process that can be carried out at ease. It is highly important that schools equip all learners with lessons that address their needs. However, for this to be implemented, one must first understand the needs of immigrant students to be able to provide them with an education that fits their needs. Immigrant students who

have moved with their families are introduced to a new culture and hence, these students undergo various adaptation processes within the education system as they become acclimated to their new environment (Gürkan, 2021).

In Malta, research on the schooling experiences and sense of belonging of immigrant students in state schools is sparse. Most existing studies do not focus on secondary education and instead address various issues such as teachers' perspectives, language barriers, or the general concept of multiculturalism. This indicates a need for more research from the perspective of immigrant students themselves. Some key dissertations that have explored related themes include Micallef Cann's (2014) investigation into immigrant students' experiences with Malta's two official languages, Chircop's (2018) study of Maltese educators' attitudes towards migrant students, Camilleri and Camillieri's (2008) analysis of the psychological aspect of young immigrants' school experiences, Dalli's (2023) examination of teacher's understanding of inclusion concerning migrant children in primary classrooms, Mercieca's (2023) study on the experiences of migrant children in primary schools from the perspectives of both parents and educators, and Rababah's (2021) exploration of multiculturalism in schools from the viewpoint of parents and educators. While these studies are highly relevant, they focus on different perspectives. However, this research aims to amplify the often-overlooked voices of immigrant students themselves.

In a local study on ethnic minorities, Calleja et al., (2010) discovered that a large portion of the material offered in schools is sporadic and that "initiatives are often initiated by individuals out of personal interest" (p. 16). This is in accordance with the findings of Galea et al. (2022), who stated that "there are no particular policies that give direction to the processes of integration of such students within Maltese schools" (p. 107).

Similarly, Chircop (2018) also noted that despite the growing social diversity in Maltese schools, there is lack of specific policies to guide educators on addressing diversity in classrooms. Despite this, some educators have attempted to implement multicultural activities, such as, having foreign parents

prepare food for a multicultural event (Bugeja & Mercieca, 2012; Calleja et al., 2010). However, while these activities may show celebrations of diversity, they often, unknowingly, emphasise the differences, rather than foster inclusivity, since, during the scholastic year, diversity might only be marginally addressed (Chircop, 2018). Such studies highlight the fact that, to date, minimal efforts have been made to meet the needs of immigrant students in local state schools and to enhance their sense of belonging.

Hence, this sudden reported upheaval of multicultural and a diverse reality, is demanding a change to the Maltese educational system in that it has to provide equality and equity to all learners, even newcomers struggling with language, without any discrimination towards religion, race, gender, or socio-cultural backgrounds (UNESCO, 2020). Furthermore, an action plan on Integration and Inclusion covering period between the years 2021-2027, has been adopted in November 2020 by the European Commission. This plan was implemented to protect the rights of migrant learners and to encourage inclusion practices across all the platforms of integration (European Commission, 2018). This correlates with the conclusions of Chircop's (2018) study, which suggests that despite the issuance of new policies promoting inclusive education, some individuals still harbour apprehensions about this change and multiculturalism in general. Indeed, certain individuals express feelings of unease and a sense of loss over the transformation of Maltese society, from a predominantly mono-cultural and mono-ethnic society dominated by the Catholic Church, into a pluralistic society enjoying increased civil liberties (Chircop, 2018).

The findings of a local study on the experiences of immigrant students, stressed the recurring theme of participants frequently reminiscing about life in their home countries and drawing comparisons with their current circumstances (Micallef Cann, 2013). Additionally, a significant contributing factor identified in aiding immigrant students was the presence of their family members residing in the same country (Spiteri & Schembri, 2023). Despite the prevalence of negative experiences reported by most

immigrant students in Malta, Spiteri and Schembri (2023) noted that the majority of Syrian migrant students maintained a positive schooling perception.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has delved into the literature pertaining to this research study. It has juxtaposed and analysed findings from significant studies in the context of immigrant students and their experiences. The first part of this literature explores research from various countries and eventually the focus is narrowed to studies conducted within Maltese schools. Additionally, this chapter highlighted the significance of belonging and examined migrant learners' experiences from diverse perspectives.

Despite the considerable amount of local research conducted, there remains a notable gap in efforts to enhance the experiences of immigrant students and foster their sense of belonging in schools. While some educators strive to deliver inclusive lessons, as previously discussed, there lacks a cohesive policy or guidance to aid educators in effectively implementing inclusive teaching practices. Although some migrant learners in Malta report positive experiences, most studies indicate that discrimination, racism, and a lack of belonging are prevalent issues within school environments.

The Maltese education system has recognised the necessity to modernise its current practices, as evidenced by the publication of various frameworks and policies promoting inclusion and diversity. Nevertheless, Maltese teachers encounter a myriad of challenges within multicultural classrooms, as discussed by Calleja et al. (2010). These challenges, as highlighted in this chapter, have the potential to impede the educational experiences of migrant students. Therefore, this research endeavour aims to amplify the voices of immigrant students, shedding light on their primary vulnerabilities and proposing changes that could benefit the entire community.

The following chapter will delve into the methodology employed in this research study, with the objective of affording immigrant learners the opportunity to express themselves through their perspectives.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

## **Introduction**

This chapter serves as a comprehensive introduction to this research endeavour. It begins by elucidating the significance of the study, highlighting its relevance in addressing pertinent issues within the education system related to the experiences of immigrant students in local secondary state schools. Subsequently, the methodology employed in conducting this research is explained in depth, providing insights into the approach adopted and the rationale behind it. Additionally, a detailed account of the participant recruitment process is offered, outlining the strategies employed to ensure the representation and diversity essential for a comprehensive analysis of immigrant students' experiences in secondary state schools.

## **The Researcher's Stance and Bias**

The interpretivist paradigm assumes that multiple realities exist, shaped by the values, perspectives, and positions of those involved (Daily, 2007, p. 33). This research on young immigrant students reflects the researcher's unique perspective as a secondary school educator. The researcher, a young Muslim English teacher, has witnessed the challenges immigrant students face in adapting to new educational systems and their struggles with a sense of otherness, especially when interacting with educators of different faiths. This personal experience motivated the researcher to explore and document the experiences of newly settled immigrant students, aiming to provide valuable insights into practical support initiatives.

Research inherently encounters confounding variables and limitations, which researchers must acknowledge transparently (University of Arkansas, 2023). In this study, the researcher took additional precautions to avoid bias, particularly by excluding the current workplace to prevent familiarity bias. Conducting research in one's workplace can lead to biased responses due to cognitive priming, where participants might already be aware of the study's hypothesis, affecting internal validity (Walden University, 2024). By ensuring a more impartial approach, the researcher aimed to mitigate potential biases and provide a clearer, more objective analysis of immigrant students' experiences.

## Philosophical Assumptions

The philosophical stance embraced in this research study adopts an interpretive and phenomenological approach. This methodology explores phenomena through the subject perspectives of the participants (Brannan, 2022). Given that the aim of this research is to articulate the experiences from the students' standpoint, this approach was deemed most suitable. Qualitative researchers embrace a wide range of methodologies, spanning from very positivist to very interpretivist perspectives (Otani, 2019). The field of qualitative research encompasses a rich array of paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Given the continuum of paradigms within qualitative research, researchers must possess a comprehensive understanding of these diverse approaches in order to navigate the discipline effectively (Otani, 2019).

This study aligns with the interpretative paradigm by delving into the participants' narratives concerning their lived experiences and emotions (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). The interpretivist paradigm is characterised by its emphasis on comprehending the subjective interpretations and lived experiences of individuals within their social milieu (Faisal, 2014; Nickerson, 2024). By employing the interpretative paradigm, the researcher leverages these experiences to construct and interpret knowledge gleaned from acquired facts (Le Thanh, 2015). This method empowers researchers to perceive the world through the lenses of participants' viewpoints and experiences (Dahal, 2024).

Epistemologically, the research aims to explore issues pertaining to experiences and belonging from a holistic viewpoint as perceived by secondary school immigrant students. Consequently, qualitative methods will be employed to delve into the multifaceted realm of the exploration of these experiences from the immigrant students' perspective.

## **The Research Design**

In this section, the researcher will delve into the research design employed in this study. This will encompass a comprehensive explanation of the qualitative methodology utilised. Additionally, there will be an in-depth exploration of the semi-structured interview format, along with a detailed account of the interview process. Furthermore, the process of gaining access to participants and recruiting them will be outlined. Finally, a description of the data analysis employed in this research will be presented.

## **Qualitative Methodology**

The researcher employed a qualitative methodology to investigate the experiences of immigrant students in Maltese secondary schools, focusing on their sense of belonging and daily school experiences. This approach, characterised as the "people's voice" (Rahman, 2016), emphasises exploring individual narratives and perspectives, making it well-suited for delving into complex, real-world issues (Tenny, 2022). Given the nature of the research questions, which sought to understand deeply personal and emotional experiences, qualitative methods were deemed more appropriate than statistical or quantitative approaches (Cooley, 2013; Pelzang, 2018).

Qualitative research typically starts with broad questions that may evolve, offering detailed insights into underlying mechanisms and processes (Denny & Weckesser, 2020; Grund & Walter, 2015; Muhic & Bengtsson, 2019). This method, considered humanistic or idealistic, provides a nuanced understanding by giving participants a platform to express their own perspectives (Pathak et al., 2013). Such an approach is particularly valuable for investigating immigrant students' experiences, given the local context's specific dynamics.

Data collection in qualitative research is often time-intensive, ranging from weeks to months (Chetty, 2016). Despite this, the researcher aimed to authentically capture the voices of immigrant students to explore their realities comprehensively (Scott, 2011). The flexibility of qualitative methodology

allowed for in-depth exploration of interview questions, tailored to the unique needs and circumstances of participants.

Incorporating immigrant students' perspectives is crucial for enhancing their sense of belonging and overall school experience (Välimäki et al., 2024). Allowing students to express their views not only bolsters their sense of belonging but also significantly impacts their well-being and school experiences (Shallcross et al., 2007; Sharp et al., 2014). Research shows that active participation in school decision-making can mitigate ethnic victimisation's negative effects on immigrant youth's self-esteem, thereby improving their satisfaction with school and academic expectations (Bjereld, 2015). The researcher, recognising the importance of these perspectives, chose to engage directly with immigrant students, acknowledging them as best positioned to articulate their experiences. This direct engagement aims to contribute valuable insights to the existing local literature and inform practical support initiatives.

### **The Semi-Structured Interview**

A semi-structured interview is a qualitative research technique that combines a predetermined set of open-ended questions to stimulate discussion with the flexibility for the interview to delve deeper into specific themes or responses (Bryant-Waugh et al., 2019). This approach was deemed as the most suitable for this study as it provides the participants with the freedom to express themselves and elaborate on sensitive topics as they see fit.

The flexible way in which the semi-structured interview is constructed gives the researcher the freedom to elaborate new inquiries based on what the participant previously discussed. Semi-structured interviews aim to gain more insight while also elaborate more on the students' feelings and perceptions while also portraying their real-life situations (Voegtle, 2010). This tool is suitable for participants coming from different cultures and is often used as part of qualitative research studies, which seek to inspect first hand experiences amongst rather vulnerable groups of people (Davidson, 2008; Lodico, 2010).

## **Reasons for Choosing the Semi-structured Interview**

This method was chosen based on the desire to allow participants the liberty to share their experiences and perspectives openly. Unlike structured interviews, which may restrict participants' ability to discuss sensitive matters in detail, semi-structured interviews allow the discussion to go in directions chosen by the participants themselves (Pollock, 2020). Furthermore, unlike structured interviews, semi-structured approaches provide a framework that combines predetermined questions with the flexibility to delve deeper into participants' perspectives and experiences, thereby enabling the exploration of emergent themes (Salomão, 2024). The researcher opted for semi-structured interviews to facilitate open discussion (Heath, 2023). This was the best approach in this research as given its sensitive criteria, it enabled the researcher to gather unstructured information, investigate participants' perspectives, emotions, and convictions regarding specific subjects, such as, experiences in their new schools and their relationships at school, while also examining personal and delicate matters (DeJonckheere, 2019). Semi-structured interviews offer a flexible format for gathering detailed insights from participants (Mashuri, 2022).

## **Access to Participants**

Upon the approval of the research proposal and FREC (EDUC-2023-00249), the requisite documentation for conducting the study were promptly prepared. Since the study was conducted in state schools, the authorisation from the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR) to proceed with the research was needed. Upon receiving approval and subsequent disclosure of schools with a significant population of immigrant students by MEYR, correspondence with the respective school Heads, to seek permission for conducting interviews on their premises (See Appendix 7), was commenced.

Upon initiating contact with the Heads of Schools and receiving their responses, they were provided with all the necessary information letters, which they were responsible for disseminating among parents and students to solicit participation. The consent and assent forms were distributed to those

who accepted to participate in the study. It was envisaged that the first twelve parents who contact the researcher, whose children accept the invitation to take part in the study, would be the participants. Subsequently, as signed consent forms from parents began to trickle in, indicating permission for their children's participation, the researcher coordinated with the respective school administrators to schedule interview sessions with the participants, asking them whether they were comfortable with holding the interviews at their schools.

### **Recruitment of Participants**

Initially, the researcher aimed to include twelve participants in this research, however, ultimately, ten interviews were conducted altogether. The recruitment process posed certain challenges, requiring more time than anticipated. Engaging secondary school students, amidst their demanding academic schedules, and coordinating with various school administrators proved to be particularly demanding. Nonetheless, the ten participants who volunteered demonstrated keen enthusiasm, as did their parents, who eagerly anticipated the interviews, expressing a desire to share their experiences in hope of affecting positive change.

To secure the participation of more individuals, the researcher employed Snowball sampling, a technique commonly utilised in qualitative research when the target population is elusive (Parker, 2019). This method proved indispensable, especially given the sensitive nature of the topic and the difficulty in locating potential participants. Additionally, the selection criteria were expanded to include schools not initially considered, thereby broadening access to potential participants. Despite this, no participants from other schools were involved in the research. However, Snowball sampling proved highly effective in one of the schools where the study was conducted, as the majority of the participants were recruited from there.

The criteria for participant inclusion stipulated that individuals must be immigrant students currently enrolled in local secondary state schools. The participants were in years 9, 10 and 11, hence, their ages varied from 13 to 15 years old. Out of the ten participants, five were females and five were male

students. Students came from two local secondary state schools. Participants hailed from diverse backgrounds, originating from Spain, Colombia, Syria, Peru, England, and Libya. Students formed part of mainstream classes. Interviews were conducted in both Maltese and English, accommodating the language preferences of the participants.

### **The Interview Process**

The consideration of place and time was crucial in shaping a conducive environment for interviews (Ramdani, 2021). Ensuring participant comfort and security was a priority, typically choosing settings like classrooms or office spaces. During the first interview, a participant requested the door be closed for privacy, prompting the researcher to ask about preferences for such arrangements in subsequent interviews. This approach aimed to create an atmosphere where participants felt at ease and confident in sharing their thoughts.

Timing also impacted engagement levels, with participants showing greater involvement in morning sessions compared to afternoon ones. Each interview lasted between twenty and forty minutes, with efforts made to establish rapport beforehand (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Rapport, defined as a connection built through shared interests and understanding, is critical for eliciting truthful and full responses (Draisma et al., 2021; Eikelenboom, 2021; Horsfall, 2021). All interviews were scheduled during school break times to avoid disrupting lessons.

Challenges during the interviews included moments of participant silence, where the researcher had to resist interrupting, allowing time for reflection. External disturbances, such as student activity in the corridors, required intermittent pauses in the interview process to ensure a quiet environment.

To ensure accuracy and depth, interviews were recorded on two devices using a password-protected application, as electronic recording captures spontaneous and detailed responses (Cropley, 2021). Participants could choose between English and Maltese, with adjustments made to language complexity to aid comprehension.

After data collection, interviews were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. Participants received the transcripts via email and were asked to verify their clarity, suggest amendments, or clarify any points. Overall, participants engaged deeply and comfortably in the interviews, reflecting a positive and effective interview process.

## **Data Analysis**

In qualitative methodology, researchers have various options for data analysis. In this study, a Thematic Analysis (TA) approach was chosen. TA involves identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data. Proper data analysis enhances the reliability of the final research product. Researchers must clearly outline their methods and rationale, as advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Consequently, the data in this study underwent TA, where themes were derived from interview data and analysed through grouping. Caulfield (2019) asserts that TA, typically applied to interview transcripts, involves closely examining data to identify common themes, topics, and ideas, to then extract their meanings. In accordance with Lochmiller's (2021) insights, TA exhibits versatility, ranging from descriptive to explanatory or critical orientations as deemed suitable. Through the participants' firsthand accounts, researchers are empowered to delineate and characterise the subjective realities they present. This process entails condensing participants' narratives into a cohesive framework that highlights recurrent patterns or themes. Despite its accessibility and utility in qualitative research, TA faces challenges stemming from misconceptions about its theoretical underpinnings and inadequacies in its elucidation, hindering widespread use of this research approach (Kiger et al., 2020).

TA aims to identify patterns of themes in interview data (Mortensen, 2020). In this research, an inductive TA approach was employed, allowing the researcher to engage in comprehensive coding of pertinent data segments. This method facilitated a deeper understanding of the data, enabling the researcher to extract the overarching themes, generate interpretations and discuss the study outcomes. The results of this study are presented in the following chapter.

## **The 6-step Thematic Analysis Procedure**

The researcher opted for Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step procedure for TA to present the data. TA involves identifying recurring patterns or themes within qualitative data and is considered foundational for various analytical methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). While there are several approaches to thematic analysis, this diversity has led to scepticism about its nature and differentiation from qualitative content analysis (Alhojailan, 2012; Javadi & Zarea, 2016; Turunen & Bondas, 2013). Hence, the researcher chose to adhere to Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, which is widely influential and appreciated for its clarity and practicality (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

### **Phase 1: Familiarisation with Data**

In the initial phase of TA, researchers transcribe and immerse themselves in the collected data, identifying preliminary themes and significant segments. They carefully select quotes that capture diverse perspectives and patterns relevant to their research objectives. Transcribing data is challenging, requiring meticulous attention to ensure spoken words are faithfully represented in written form. Despite this difficulty, the researcher ensured transcripts retained essential information accurately.

After transcribing and reviewing interviews for clarity, the researcher engaged in repeated readings to become familiar with the data. This process helped explore meanings and identify key insights. Data reduction was crucial for organising the material for analysis and interpretation (Wolcott, 1994). While electronic notetaking is common, the researcher preferred physically highlighting crucial segments in the transcripts, a process that, although extensive, proved indispensable for gathering pertinent information and uncovering additional insights.

To maintain uniformity, the researcher translated interviews conducted in Maltese, omitting oral speech characteristics like "erm," "hmm," and "like" for clarity. The variability of semi-structured interviews posed challenges, as each interview followed a different trajectory based on participant

input. This resulted in inconsistent question numbering, complicating the identification of structured patterns. Despite these challenges, salient points and distinct responses for each question were carefully recorded, aiding in the TA. The sample provided below illustrates a subset of these salient points corresponding to Questions 4,8 and 9.

<b>Q4 How would you describe your experience at this school?</b>	<b>Q8 Which lessons are your least favourite?</b>	<b>Q9 How would you describe your relationship with your friends?</b>
I am not so happy because I do not have any friends. I am always sitting alone during lessons. I also eat alone during break.	Maltese and English. Those are the two I don't like. Maltese because I don't like the teacher... because I entered school one month later than the other students, so I don't know any words in Maltese. So, when she explains in Maltese I don't understand. Today I had an assessment in Maltese, and I didn't know anything because I don't know any Maltese.	I only have one friend here... our relationship is funny because he makes me laugh.
It was hard to start getting along with people here. I noticed a big difference between the private school and this school. I still prefer being here but sometimes they look at you differently because you are a foreigner.	I would say maths because I never liked the subject and Maltese because I don't know anything in Maltese, and I don't understand anything. It is very hard for me to sit in that classroom and not understand anything.	This is a hard question. The relationship with my friends from this school is a bit vague and I don't trust them a lot. I have more friends outside of school. Those are very good friends and friends that I can trust. They are my Colombian friends.
It is generally well. But I like to make friends with people from Syria mostly. Maltese people are ok with me too and the teachers respect me. I like the teachers here, but they are not all the same.	I don't have a lesson I don't like. I enjoy all lessons as I love learning new things.	Most of my friends are Syrian because I feel like I can trust them and my parents and their parents are friends, so I feel like we are family.
It is generally well. But I like to make friends with people from Syria mostly. Maltese people are ok with me too and the teachers respect me. I like the teachers here, but they are not all the same.	I don't have a lesson I don't like. I enjoy all lessons as I love learning new things.	Most of my friends are Syrian because I feel like I can trust them and my parents and their parents are friends, so I feel like we are family.
It was quite fine. I feel ok.	Maltese and English... we write a lot there. And I don't like the lessons.	It is fine too. My friends come from Syria. To be honest I feel more comfortable with them. But Maltese people are sweet too and I like them.
I feel ok with my friends and with the teachers. Even though I don't understand what goes on during the lesson. The lessons are hard sometimes.	I don't like the design lesson... I really don't like it.	It is difficult to make friends and I feel that I don't have a lot of friends, but I like the relationship I have with my few friends.
I mean the lessons are nice and they are enjoyable. As for friends I have maybe a few friends... they are Maltese mainly.	Maths because I don't like the structure of the lesson and I don't like group work too.	Not as good...they say bad things to me but not seriously... as a joke. I feel left out when they speak Maltese because I don't understand.
It is generally fine. However sometimes I feel lost, and everyone speaks in Maltese.	I simply don't like physics and Maltese.	It's ok. I like them.

I have mixed emotions about this question. It depends from which perspective. Teachers are nice but sometimes other children hurt me.	Arabic... somehow it reminds me of my home, and I miss it a lot.	I don't have many friends here. I am shy and sometimes I see other kids laughing at me. I have one friend though. She's very nice and she's Libyan too! Not from my country though.
At the beginning it was a little difficult to make friends because I did not speak English well but by time, I made some friends and started to understand the lessons more.	History. I cannot understand how these things happened and sometimes I get very confused, and I mix the dates with my country's.	The friends I spend most of the time with are Santea and Rayan. Santea is from Macedonia, but she was born here, and Rayan is half Maltese and half Libyan. we stay together in breaks and on weekends we also meet sometimes. Rayan joined the school in the same year as mine so its like we connected immediately.
Not very pleasant. As I said there are other children who don't like me because they say that if I am in Malta, I should speak Maltese. I need more time though because Maltese is a really difficult language for me.	Maltese. sometimes when the teacher is speaking in Maltese I start drawing because I don't like staring and not understanding anything.	As I said I have some nice friends. I feel like I can connect with them. we talk about the same things and stuff. I enjoy my time with them.

*Table 4.1: Sample of salient points.*

## **Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes**

Coding involves the systematic identification of themes, patterns, and distinctions within data, serving as a pivotal stage for organising material for subsequent analysis (Bailey, 2007). This phase represents a juncture wherein the researcher gains insight into the diverse perspectives of participants. Electing for an inductive approach, the researcher engaged in comprehensive coding of pertinent data segments, albeit not every textual fragment underwent coding as the researcher deemed it necessary not to include the fragments that did not evolve up to any tangible theme. Employing open coding methodology, the researcher eschewed pre-set codes and developed and refined codes iteratively throughout the coding process.

Each transcript underwent meticulous scrutiny for coding purposes, with every relevant excerpt aligned with others sharing similar thematic content or relevance to the research questions.

Subsequently, all transcripts underwent a comprehensive review to ensure coherence and structural clarity in the grouping of coded segments. The researcher then proceeded to identify primary codes based on thematic similarities, facilitating the identification of commonalities and connections across the dataset. This systematic highlighting of codes provided the researcher with a clearer overview of the substantive content gleaned from the interviews, fostering increased familiarity and confidence in handling the data.

Following this, all coded data was transferred into a word document to facilitate the extraction of overarching themes. Samples of primary codes are found in Appendix 10 while the following table provides shorter samples from random respondents of coding for Questions 4 and 9.

4. Can you tell me about your experience at school?	Primary Coding	Secondary Coding
I was very happy when I attended school in Spain. My experience there was amazing. Here I am finding it very difficult. They do not want me to be their friend. In all the countries I've been to I always made friends easily at school but here in Malta I cannot.	Finding it difficult in Malta: <b>cultural adaptation and integration.</b>	Was happier in Spain and was much easier there to make friends: <b>Social alienation and Exclusion.</b>
It was hard to start getting along with people here. I noticed a big difference between the private school and this school. I still prefer being here but sometimes they look at you differently because you are a foreigner.	<b>Cultural adaptation and integration:</b> "they look at you differently because you are foreigner."	The comparison between experiences in a private school and a different educational setting highlights issues of <b>social stratification and privilege</b> , suggesting potential disparities in social dynamics and interactions.
	<b>Perceptions of Foreignness and Otherness:</b> The observation that individuals may be treated differently because of their status as foreigners invites an examination of stereotypes and prejudices.	

Table 4.2: Coding sample (Question 4)

9. How would you describe your relationship with your friends?	Primary Coding	Secondary Coding
<p>In Spain I was very happy and even in the other countries. But here I do not have any friends. I always try to make friends with different students, but they don't like me. there are people I like but they tell me bad things and they don't want to play with me during break. Last time I tried to play a board game with other students to make friends with them. But they didn't let me play with them and they were saying bad things about me. The only friend that I had went abroad now. In German there is one guy I speak to, but I don't find him during break. I try to make friends with others, but they come up with excuses like I don't know how to speak in English, but I know how to speak. I think they just want me to feel bad. Sometimes they ask me for money. They tell me if you want to be our friend give us money, so I do not give them and then I don't have friends.</p>	<p><b>Social Isolation and Loneliness:</b> The predominant theme revolves around the participant's struggle with social isolation and loneliness. Despite efforts to make friends and connect with others, he experiences rejection and alienation, leading to feelings of sadness and frustration.</p>	<p><b>Cultural Differences, Discrimination and Bullying:</b> The mention of language barriers and cultural differences suggests a theme of discrimination and prejudice. The participant feels marginalised and mistreated, facing stereotypes and discriminatory behaviour based on his background or nationality. Bullying also comes into play as the participant encounters negative treatment from peers.</p>
<p>I have friends, but they are not my BIG friends. They are just my school friends. Not my best friends. I used to not get along with Maltese students because they were all racist towards me. Now it is a bit better. I feel like I am more open, and I feel that I could ignore some things that they say and still be their friend.</p>	<p><b>Racism and Discrimination:</b> This participant had to change his ways to be accepted. He feels that now he is more "open" and is also ignoring certain comments. This shows the racism and discrimination this student faces at school.</p>	

Table 4.3: Coding sample (Question 9)

### Phase 3: Searching for Themes

The preceding procedure facilitated the researcher's thorough examination and profound understanding of this phase. Prior to the extraction of themes, the researcher possessed a well-defined idea of the topics extracted from the data. A theme, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), encapsulates a fundamental idea or subject that captures a noteworthy aspect of the data or research inquiry. They emphasise the idea that themes are not governed by any universal pattern but should be determined based on their significance.

In the coding process of this study, the researcher grouped similar concepts together based on their commonalities. This categorisation occurred following iterative readings and in-depth analysis of the data. Initial codes were organised in tabular format, with related themes colour-coded for easier identification. Consequently, the researcher could discern preliminary themes more efficiently. Following this, the codes were further synthesised into overarching themes that appeared to be

pertinent to the research questions. These themes primarily took on a descriptive nature, elucidating patterns within the data that were germane to the research questions. The following table presents all the preliminary themes derived from the data, alongside the corresponding codes. Some codes were linked to more than one theme.

<b>Theme 1: Discrimination</b>	<b>Theme 2: Social Alienation and Exclusion</b>	<b>Theme 3: Teacher-Student Relationships and Academic Engagement</b>
<p><i>Codes</i></p> <p>Walking in the school corridor and getting called a terrorist.</p> <p>Students start yelling Allahu Akbar for no reason: Islamophobia</p> <p>Feeling of a stigma on the self because of being Muslim.</p> <p>They generalise.</p> <p>I am not like them. I obey.</p> <p>People tell me to go back to my country for nothing.</p> <p>Missing my home country.</p> <p>They say bad things happen in my country.</p>	<p><i>Codes</i></p> <p>Was happier in Spain but here it is much more difficult to make friends.</p> <p>I stay alone during break.</p> <p>During assembly they speak Maltese and I do not understand.</p> <p>I feel silly not knowing what's going on.</p> <p>It is frustrating.</p> <p>They don't play with me during break.</p> <p>Making up excuses.</p> <p>Foreigners feel left out when people communicate in Maltese in their presence.</p> <p>I see other kids laughing at me.</p>	<p><i>Codes</i></p> <p>I love the teacher. She is very nice, and I feel comfortable in class.</p> <p>The teacher is very patient.</p> <p>I feel welcome in class because the teacher smiles.</p> <p>It depends on the lesson and the teacher.</p> <p>I don't like Maths. The teacher is always angry, and she does not like to smile.</p> <p>I am afraid of asking her questions.</p> <p>I like the teachers here, but they are not all the same.</p> <p>I feel ok with my friends and with the teachers.</p> <p>Here it's much better.</p> <p>Showing interest in lessons.</p> <p>Showing disinterest in boring lessons.</p>

*Table 4.4: Themes and preliminary codes (Themes 1, 2 & 3)*

<b>Theme 4: Language Acquisition and Social Integration</b>	<b>Theme 5: Cultural Adaptation</b>	<b>Theme 6: Belonging</b>
<p><i>Codes</i></p> <p>Not understanding what goes on during lessons.</p> <p>Feeling left out because students do not communicate in English.</p> <p>Foreigners not understanding anything during assembly.</p> <p>Enjoying lessons because teachers communicate in English.</p> <p>Lack of enjoyment during lessons because everyone speaks Maltese which leads to frustration.</p> <p>Feeling left out in the classroom.</p> <p>Getting asked to speak Maltese since they are living in Malta.</p>	<p><i>Codes</i></p> <p>It was hard to start getting along with people here.</p> <p>Now it is a bit better.</p> <p>At the beginning it was much harder.</p> <p>It was very difficult to get used to the school system.</p>	<p><i>Codes</i></p> <p>It was hard to start getting along with people here.</p> <p>Sometimes they look at you differently because you are a foreigner.</p> <p>I don't feel like people like me here.</p> <p>No one introduces us to the system, and I felt so lost.</p> <p>In Maltese I don't understand because the teacher speaks in Maltese, and I can't understand.</p> <p>It reminds me of my home, and I miss it a lot.</p> <p>With Syrian people I can be myself.</p> <p>I don't feel like I belong with them even in class, they don't always speak to me because I am different.</p>

*Table 4.5: Themes and preliminary codes (Themes 4, 5 & 6)*

## Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

During this phase, the researcher reviewed and refined the identified themes, ensuring clarity and coherence without any overlaps. Systematically gathering pertinent data for each theme, the researcher meticulously conducted both primary and secondary coding. Significant themes emerged from secondary coding and were linked to main themes. The researcher faced a challenge with the theme 'Perceptions of Foreignness and Otherness,' deciding to integrate it as a subheading under 'Discrimination' for a comprehensive framework. Ultimately, six major themes and related subthemes were delineated from the dataset. The diagram below illustrates a sample of the subthemes connected to the main themes.

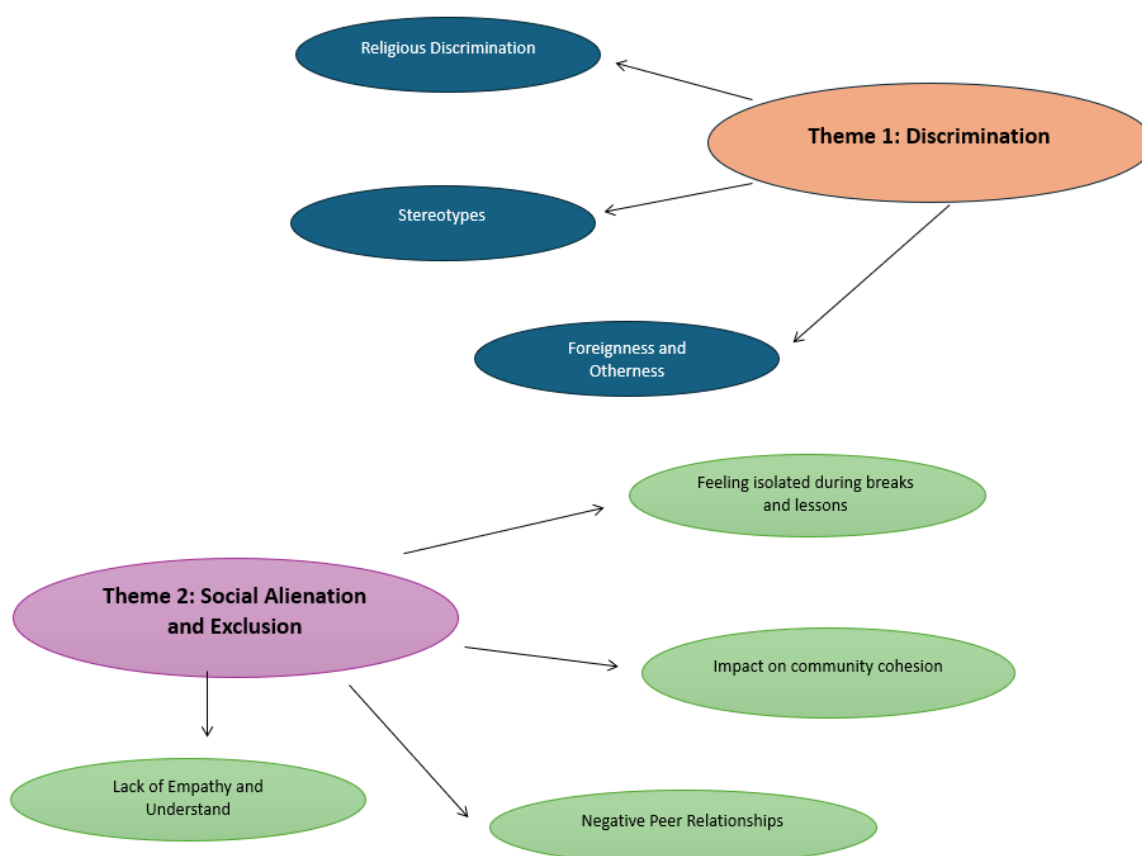


Figure 4.1: Sample of subthemes linked to main themes

## **Phase 5: Defining Themes**

After finalising the process, the researcher identified six major themes and their subthemes from primary and secondary coding. Themes and subthemes were meticulously reviewed to avoid overlaps and ensure coherence with research questions. The researcher confirmed that all themes were relevant, and no data points were overlooked by reviewing the table of themes and codes. Satisfaction was high with the emerging themes, deemed most significant from the interviews. Subthemes were appropriately categorised, and colours were used to highlight commonalities. In the final review, themes were simplified and clarified for thorough analysis, ensuring each theme was given appropriate importance.

## **Phase 6: Producing the Report**

The aforementioned process resulted in the identification of six major themes. In the final phase, an in-depth analysis and the write-up take place, which can be found in the following chapters. During this phase, the researcher remained disciplined and focused on aligning the extracted themes with the research questions. Some emerging themes were unexpected, yet they were deemed important based on the interview data.

The primary goal was to address the research questions, related to both experiences and belonging. The following figure illustrates the six main themes that emerged from the transcripts, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) method.

<b>Theme 1: Discrimination</b>
<b>Theme 2: Social Alienation</b>
<b>Theme 3: Teacher-Student Relationships</b>
<b>Theme 4: Language Acquisition</b>
<b>Theme 5: Cultural Adaptation</b>
<b>Theme 6: Belonging</b>

*Figure 4.2: Emerging themes*

### **Ethical Considerations**

Initially, upon obtaining clearance from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC – See Appendix 1) and MEYR, the researcher proceeded to seek permission from the respective Heads of schools (See Appendix 7) in order for them to disseminate information letters to both parents and students, ensuring they were comprehensively briefed on the research’s aim and objectives. Parents’ consent (See Appendix 2) was sought, and students were required to provide assent by signing a form (See Appendix 4), the details of which were clearly outlined in the information letters distributed to both parties. Once the Heads of Schools disseminated the papers, some parents of the participating students emailed me directly the consent forms, while some others returned the consent forms to the Head of School. To ensure the confidentiality of participants’ identities, the researcher requested that the Heads of Schools, to whom some students had returned consent forms, sign a formal non-disclosure agreement (See Appendix 8). It was emphasised that participation was entirely voluntary, with students retaining the option to withdraw from the study at any time, irrespective of parental consent. The interviews were conducted on the participants’ school premises, in classrooms or offices they felt comfortable and secure in. It is extremely important that the participants feel the freedom to share ideas and also feel that they are in a safe place where they could share sensitive information in (Cassady, 2021). Additionally, parents were welcomed to join the interview process, especially when

reflecting upon their evident enthusiasm demonstrated through the submission of consent forms via email, however, no parents were available to join us at the time of the interviews.

The researcher ensured that parental consent was obtained as a preliminary step, followed by seeking student assent only upon this approval. Parents were afforded the opportunity to address any queries they had for clarification, ensuring full comprehension of the study's parameters. Both students and parents were informed that participation would involve a roughly thirty-minute interview and were given the liberty to select a location and time most convenient for them. However, all participants wanted the interviews to be held at their schools, during break to avoid disruption of lessons. Moreover, it was communicated to both parents and children that participation posed no known or anticipated risks. Additionally, participants were informed of their rights to access and amend the collected data, as well as to request its deletion. They were also informed that pseudonyms would be utilised, ensuring their anonymity throughout the study.

All interviews were audio recorded and the data was stored securely in encrypted format on a password-protected device, accessible only to the researcher and the supervisor. Participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussion, with the assurance that data pertaining to withdrawn participants would be expunged entirely. Upon study completion, data will be preserved in anonymised form. Participants were apprised of their rights under the GDPR and national legislation, affording them access to rectification and where applicable, erasure of their data. Confidentiality was guaranteed, with participants being assured that their identities and names of school would not be disclosed in any publication. Given the sensitive nature of the research, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity is imperative, aligning with established ethical guidelines in qualitative research (Dougherty, 2021).

## **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity involves critically examining one's own beliefs during the research process and considering how these beliefs might influence the study (Finlay, 1998). This practice necessitates openness and an acknowledgment that the researcher is an integral part of the research. In this study, the researcher found common ground with the majority of participants. To maintain objectivity, reflexivity was consistently practiced, avoiding interpretations of data based on personal assumptions. Interpretations of the findings were regularly examined to ensure they were not influenced by the researcher's personal feelings.

## **Authenticity and Trustworthiness**

As qualitative research gains more acknowledgment and importance, it is crucial for it to be carried out meticulously and systematically to produce valuable and significant outcomes (Nowell, 2017). In order to gain credibility, researchers need to show that their data analysis has been executed meticulously and consistently by documenting and revealing the analysis methods with sufficient elaboration for readers to evaluate its credibility (Norris et al., 2017). Amin et al. (2020) asserted that the reliability and trustworthiness of a study hinge upon its credibility and dependability.

All ten interview participants exhibited remarkable sincerity and openness. The researcher discerned the authenticity of their accounts through the emotional depth and tone of voice they conveyed. The participants' active engagement suggested a profound desire and necessity to share their experiences, particularly emphasising their daily school experiences and frequently juxtaposed them with their homeland contexts, indicating significant differences. Direct quotes from participants were used to enrich the research by providing authentic, detailed, and contextualised insights. This approach supported themes with concrete evidence and demonstrated transparency and rigor in the research process.

Moreover, the researcher demonstrated keen attention to detail when analysing the transcripts to extract accurate themes. The recordings were listened to multiple times, and the transcripts were meticulously scrutinised for precision, ensuring that subsequent researchers interested in the same field would receive a fair and reliable portrayal of the findings.

## **Triangulation**

Triangulation is the practice of utilising multiple methods or data sources within qualitative research to attain a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Patton, 1999). Additionally, it serves as a qualitative research strategy to validate findings by corroborating information from diverse sources. Cohen et al. (2011) elucidate that triangulation enables researchers to delve into the richness and intricacy of human behaviour by examining it from multiple perspectives.

In this study, triangulation was employed to validate and strengthen research outcomes by presenting various viewpoints on the same concepts in order to make sure that participants are being consistent on their experiences. Through the interview questions, triangulation was evident as students were presented with different questions exploring a similar theme. This approach allowed the researcher to identify any disparities in responses. Purposefully similar questions, such as “Can you describe your school experience?” and “What aspects of school do you enjoy most?” were posed to gauge consistency in student responses. Similarly, questions like “If you could change something at school, what would it be? Why?” and “If you were the school leader for a day, what changes would you make?” were structured to elicit comparable insights. The researcher observed that through these akin questions, triangulation was practiced as students naturally connected and reiterated their experiences and concepts, hence increasing the study validity.

## Limitations of the Study

Limitations within a study encompass various challenges encountered throughout the research process that could potentially impact the outcome or overall conclusions (Ross & Zaidi, 2019). During the course of this investigation, the researcher confronted several obstacles.

There were instances where certain schools contacted did not respond or expressed disinterest in participating in this study, despite multiple reminders being sent. Consequently, this not only hindered the recruitment process but also led to a reduced number of schools involved in the study. However, appreciation is extended to the Heads and assistant Heads of the two cooperating schools, whose eagerness not only facilitated a conducive environment for interviews but also helped and supported the researcher too.

Moreover, communication challenges arose with participants who were not proficient in either Maltese or English, posing challenges in articulating their thoughts effectively. Despite this obstacle, participants demonstrated willingness to engage, albeit requiring repeated clarification of questions to ensure accurate comprehension and expression of their viewpoints.

Another challenge was encountered in the lower-than-anticipated participation rate. Although the initial target was to approximately recruit twelve participants, only ten ultimately took part in the study. Despite employing the Snowball sampling technique, further recruitment became challenging, possibly due to certain schools failing to distribute information letters and also the unfamiliarity of participants with the languages that were used to conduct this study, has prevented some potential participants from understanding the study's requirements. Given the small sample size used in this study, caution was exercised when interpreting the findings, as they may not be representative of the broader population. The limited sample could restrict the study's external validity, making it inadvisable to generalise the results without further research involving a larger and more diverse sample. Nevertheless, these findings still provide valuable insight into the situation of immigrant students in secondary schools.

## Description of Sample

The research sample consists of ten students, evenly split between five males and five females, each sharing their experiences in Maltese secondary schools. Participants, aged thirteen to fifteen and enrolled in years nine through eleven, varied in their length of residency in Malta and familiarity with the Maltese language. Originating from diverse countries, all participants felt compelled to compare their experiences in Maltese schools with those in their countries of origin. Pseudonyms were used for anonymity and to ensure precise presentation and analysis of findings. This diverse sample provides a broad perspective on the experiences of immigrant students in Malta. The following table delineates the primary characteristics of the participants involved in this study.

Interview number	Gender	Names	Nationality	Number of years living in Malta	Number of years attending school
1	Male	Carlos	Spanish	4 months	3 months
2	Male	Diego	Colombian	1 year	8 months
3	Female	Fatima	Syrian	3 years	2 years
4	Female	Aisha	Syrian	6 years	5 years
5	Male	Samir	Syrian	6 years	5 years
6	Male	Roberto	Peruvian	2 years	2 years
7	Male	James	British	8 years	7 years
8	Female	Nada	Libyan	3 years	3 years
9	Female	Yara	Syrian	3 years	3 years
10	Female	Ella	British	3 years	2 years

*Table 4.6: Characteristics of the participants*

## Conclusion

This chapter has undertaken a comprehensive evaluation of various methodological facets pertinent to this research study. As elucidated, the research study aligns with a phenomenological interpretive approach, aiming to delve into the experiences of immigrant students within local secondary state schools. The main tool utilised was the semi-structured interview, through qualitative methodology, with detailed discourse on the interview procedure provided. Additionally, a TA was employed to meticulously examine the research findings. Ethical considerations were conscientiously addressed in accordance with established research protocols, alongside an acknowledgement of their inherent limitations. The researcher also presents an in-depth analysis of how the themes and subthemes were extracted for this dissertation using Braun and Clarke's (2006) coding method. The process of primary and secondary coding is described and illustrated, leading to the identification of six overarching themes relevant to the research questions. The researcher will concurrently present the findings and analysis of the data to avoid redundancy of concepts. Therefore, the next three chapters will focus on delineating the research findings and scrutinising the data in light of existing literature. Chapter 4 will explore the themes of Discrimination and Social Alienation. Chapter 5 will delve into the themes of Teacher-Student Relationship and Academic Engagement, Language Acquisition and Social Integration, and Cultural Adaptation and Integration. Finally, Chapter 6 will engage in a detailed discussion on the theme of Belonging. The researcher intentionally decided to address the theme of belonging separately, as it directly correlates with the two research questions of this dissertation.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Exploring Discrimination and Social Alienation**

## **Discrimination**

Discrimination refers to the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, particularly on the grounds of race, age, sex, disability, or other characteristics (Zongwe, 2021). This research study examines discrimination from the perspective of immigrant students and the ways they are discriminated against in school. The interview data revealed that immigrant students experienced both direct and indirect discrimination, often through stereotypes, which led to various instances of discriminatory treatment. Hence, the researcher categorised this theme into three main subheadings: religious discrimination, stereotypes, and the perception of foreignness and otherness.

### **Religious Discrimination**

The interview data revealed significant religious discrimination, often targeting visible characteristics. Four participants in this study—three females and one male—reported experiencing religious discrimination from their peers. All instances of discrimination were directed towards Muslim students. Among the females, two wore the hijab [headscarf] at school. Fatima shared that she was subjected to Islamophobia, hearing phrases like “Allahu Akbar” while walking in the school corridors. She reported feeling “a stigma on myself because I am Muslim”. Other Muslim students in the study also reported being called names. For instance, Yara and Aisha said they were called “terrorists” by other students who are not in their classes. Yara also wears the hijab at school, making her highly visible in a school where they are a minority. Aisha stated, “I feel different because I am a Muslim.” This is significant because it highlights her sense of not fitting in due to the lack of acceptance she is enduring. Song’s (2020) findings were similar to the ones in this research as they emphasised the role of minority status visibility in social dynamics. Song discusses how physical appearance and other visible traits can contribute to the social domination and marginalisation of racialised individuals. The participants’ encounters with Islamophobia exemplify this concept, as their visible religious identity makes them more susceptible to discrimination and social exclusion within the school environment.

Additionally, Aisha and Yara felt the need to speak about the discriminatory comments they received while outside school. Aisha reported disliking “walking to school because when people see me walking with hijab, they start saying bad things about me. The most recent one was a man in the street saying that I must either take this thing off my head or else go back”. This highlights the distressing reality of Islamophobia experienced by individuals wearing hijabs [pl. form of hijab – headscarves]. Aisha expressed a strong aversion to walking to school due to frequent verbal harassment and discriminatory remarks targeted at her religious attire. Being told to either remove her hijab or "go back" stresses a common form of xenophobic and Islamophobic aggression aimed at visibly Muslim individuals. When asked if such comments affected them, they responded affirmatively, with Yara stating that “sometimes I would want to stay home not to experience these things”.

The experiences shared by Aisha and Yara align closely with the findings of Osman et al. (2020), stressing the pervasive nature of discrimination and its profound impact on young individuals. The study by Osman et al. (2020) and the findings of this data both show that participants reported instances of racism and discriminatory comments in public spaces, which significantly influenced their sense of safety and well-being. The reluctance of Aisha and Yara to attend school due to fear stemming from these external discriminatory experiences highlights a critical aspect of the broader literature on discrimination and its effects on education. For instance, the work of Benner et al. (2018) about everyday discrimination on young children, emphasises that discrimination, whether experienced directly or indirectly, can lead to adverse educational outcomes, including decreased school attendance, lower academic performance, and heightened psychological distress. Furthermore, the data resonates with the ecological systems theory proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), which posits that a child's development is influenced by the various systems they interact with, including family, school, and broader societal contexts. Discriminatory experiences in public places represent negative interactions within the macrosystem, which can adversely affect the mesosystem, such as school engagement and performance.

A significant finding in the interview data is that all participants who reported positive experiences at school, came from European countries, holding a Christian faith, whereas the participants who reported religious discrimination were all Muslim immigrant students. Yara claimed that “other students sometimes call me names because of my hijab. I feel that they do not like me because of it but it is part of me so I can’t do anything about it”. Yara’s statement reflects a poignant expression of the challenges faced by individuals who wear the hijab, in a school environment where cultural and religious diversity might not be fully understood or accepted. This might reinforce the idea of racism and discrimination towards non-Europeans, particularly those from the Middle East, as seen in this case. A 2023 survey in Germany aligns with this conclusion as it highlights that Muslims, especially those wearing hijabs, face daily discrimination and verbal attacks (Fürstenau, 2023).

Hence, one notable finding from this research would be that the visibility of one's minority status, through religious symbols or other physical characteristics, often triggers discriminatory behaviour and social stigmatisation. This understanding is essential for developing strategies to combat discrimination, suggesting that efforts should focus not only on promoting tolerance and inclusivity but also on protecting individuals whose minority status is visibly apparent.

Another finding from the interview data is that discrimination is not limited to student interactions, but also extends to educators. Three participants reported experiencing discrimination from educators. Fatima, for instance, reported that teachers “shout and yell at me for every little thing”, despite saying that she behaves well in class. Aisha reported similar feelings by saying that “there are bad teachers too, that shout all the time”. When asked by the researcher about the nature of the shouting directed towards her by educators, Aisha expressed a sense of confusion. She initially responded that “they shout at everyone,” but added a significant caveat: “we [the immigrant population] noticed that they shout more at foreign students, sometimes, and sometimes it is as if they do not like their job.” Aisha's observation that shouting was more frequently directed at foreign students, suggests the presence of discriminatory behaviour. Her perception is critical as it highlights a differential treatment based on ethnicity or nationality, which is a key indicator of discrimination.

Samir, another Syrian participant, also reported teachers blaming him for every incident prior to knowing the exact facts, saying that “teachers always blame me for whatever happens in class”. He also reported feeling “helpless” in class due to this situation. Samir’s statement that teachers “cannot tell you anything bad, but you can feel it”, shows that students like Samir are aware of the fact that educators might not be explicit in their discrimination, but the students are able to sense their attitudes. This echoes the sentiments of the participants in Olivares-Orellana’s (2020) study, that educators often regard immigrant students as less worthy.

Nada reported that she misses "my home country as these things [discriminatory behaviour] never happened there." It was poignant to see her longing for a place where she felt a sense of security and comfort, even though she was unhappy in Libya due to the war. Despite the instability and dangers, she highlighted the absence of discrimination in her schooling experience there:

Because of the government. We don’t have a government, and the country is not stable. Libya is big. The city where I come from is almost equal to all of Malta, and they fight a lot there. We don’t have water and electricity for long hours, and sometimes we cannot go out because it is not safe.

Nada's comments reveal a deep understanding and maturity beyond her years, reflecting her ability to critically analyse and articulate the challenges faced by her nation. This longing for her home country, despite its hardships, suggests that her current schooling experience may be making her feel unhappy and disconnected.

Yara reported a similar experience by saying that “I do miss my country. I felt more at peace at school there”. This might suggest the idea that immigrant students use nostalgia when experiencing something negative. This relates to Lijtmaer’s (2020) study on social trauma, which posits that migrants use nostalgia as a means of shielding themselves against the hostility they face in host countries.

## Stereotypes

Stereotypes, pervasive in societal narratives, play a significant role in shaping perceptions and interactions, especially within educational settings. In the context of this study, exploring stereotypes is crucial as they often contribute to biased attitudes and behaviours towards minority groups. Understanding how stereotypes manifest and their impact on students' experiences, provides insights into the broader challenges faced by immigrant students in integrating into their new educational environments. By delving into stereotypes, this study aims to uncover their influence on social dynamics, peer relationships, and academic opportunities among immigrant students.

Participants reported instances of stereotypes in the interview data. Diego, from Colombia, was stereotyped negatively due to associations with violence in Colombia and Mexico, affecting his social relationships. This demonstrates that racial and cultural stereotypes place certain immigrant groups at a disadvantage. Diego reported that

[They] used to say that bad things happen in Colombia and Mexico, and they were afraid of me because they thought I was a bad person. Even now there are people that still make fun of my country. But I don't understand why, and it is very offensive. Like there's nothing bad with me or my family.

Over time, the comments lessened, but Diego attributed this change to his increased resilience and openness rather than an improvement in students' attitudes: "Some people used to make fun of the fact that I'm foreign, and it used to be so bad. Now they still comment and say these things, but maybe not always in a mean way". Here, Diego is seen trying to give them the benefit of the doubt, perhaps this could be done to protect himself mentally as well. This also shows that Diego felt he was responsible for the actions of others as he had to change attitude when others were in the wrong. When asked whether such treatment still affects him, Diego applied in the affirmative and stated that "even though I try not to think about it, it is always on my mind". Since Diego initially said that students might not be doing this in a mean way, and then he claimed that this is always on his mind, shows that

he is constantly aware of the fact that he is being stereotyped and made fun of, despite trying to hide this. Similarly, Benner & Graham (2013) found that ethnic minority students who are negatively treated due to stereotypes, report higher levels of anxiety and depression, which can impede their social development. In Diego's case, the fact that he states that this issue is constantly "on my mind" shows that his social development might be affected.

Carlos, a Spanish student, also claimed that "sometimes students laugh about me being from Spain because they say that there are many thieves there". Carlos reported negative treatment and also shared an instance when students "did not want to work with me in a group during a lesson, so I ended up alone". When questioned about whether his educators noticed his solitary working habits, Carlos responded

They [the teachers] do notice and they ask me why I prefer working alone, but I do not tell them, firstly because I don't want the students to hear me and secondly because it is in vain. Every time I tried to talk to any teacher, nothing really happened, even if they [the teachers] are very nice to me, the situation with the students remains the same.

He expressed a desire for equality when asked what potential changes he would like to see at school by stating that "I would make sure that all students are treated equally, and no one is being hurt or left alone." His wish of everyone being treated equally sheds light on his own negative schooling experiences.

## **Foreignness and Otherness**

In the landscape of educational settings, the notions of foreignness and otherness often encapsulate the experiences of immigrant students, reflecting their perceived differences from the dominant cultural norms. This study explores the profound impact of foreignness and otherness on immigrant students within Maltese schools, shedding light on how these perceptions shape their educational journey. Foreignness manifests through cultural disparities, linguistic challenges, and distinct social norms that distinguish immigrant students from their peers.

The majority of the participants in this study felt a sense of disconnection from other students, reporting that they felt less Maltese because they believed others perceived them differently due to their foreign backgrounds. This perception was experienced by the students in their interactions with both peers and educators. Notably, three out of ten participants mentioned instances of racism by teachers. Fatima recounted being shouted at due to language difficulties: "I am from Syria, and I learned Maltese words really well, but sometimes there are words I still don't understand, and they think I am making fun of them, but I would not." She emphasised the cultural differences, noting that in Syria, students respect teachers and would never mock them: "I do not make fun of teachers because in my country we respect teachers a lot." This suggests that cultural misunderstandings or microaggressions, can cause immigrant students to be treated unfairly by teachers and peers. This also shows that due to students like Fatima being misunderstood by teachers, such students feel disconnected from the school dynamics. Fatima further added that "sometimes, I need to be aware of what to say before speaking in class, because I am afraid that teachers would develop a negative opinion of me". The sense of otherness these students feel is shaped by classroom dynamics, the fear of rejection, and their deep need for acceptance. Fatima mentioned that, despite being respectful, this effort alone does not seem sufficient. She feels the need to be extra cautious about what she says, constantly monitoring her words and actions to avoid negative attention or further discrimination. This heightened self-awareness and vigilance creates a stressful environment where immigrant students must navigate their identities carefully. The fear of being misunderstood or ostracised by their peers places an additional burden on them, making their school experience even more challenging. Their desire to fit in and be accepted by their classmates highlights the emotional and psychological toll of discrimination, stressing the critical need for a more inclusive and supportive school environment.

Similarly, Yara also experienced a sense of otherness in her comment "at the beginning it was a little difficult to make friends". Nada also stated that "at the beginning it was very difficult to get used to it [the school system] but now it is much better. I feel that I have gotten more used to it". Both

participants experienced initial struggles, which improved over time. However, this improvement might not necessarily be due to changes made by the school community but rather the students' own adaptation and growing familiarity with their new environment.

Ella, despite being European, also reported a sense of otherness as she was told to "go back to my country for nothing, but I do not let such comments dishearten me. I move on. I still have some nice friends". This comment reflects a personal experience of encountering xenophobic remarks, specifically being told to "go back to [their] country". Ella acknowledges the negativity of such comments but emphasises her resilience by choosing not to let these remarks affect her spirits. Instead, she focuses on the positive aspects of her life, such as having nice friends, which helps her maintain a sense of normalcy and support. This highlights the individual's strength and ability to cope with such negative experiences through positive social connections.

Similarly, Nada also mentioned that maturity and past challenges helped her ignore such comments. She stated, "I think I am a very strong person because of what I've lived and seen, so there are things I ignore. If I had to focus on the little things, I would complain." Nada was the only participant who said she didn't mind such comments because of the hardships she lived in her country. Nada also observed that teachers often "generalise", in her statement: "When teachers address us, it is as if they look at everyone in the same way." Nada was here referring to all students, especially the ones who do not behave well in class, implying that the well-behaving students go unnoticed. Nada expressed sadness when reporting that teachers "generalise" and speak to them as if they are all bad.

According to Friberg's (2021) findings, young individuals from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East attending Norwegian schools, are more excluded than students from other countries. This research reveals a similar pattern in Malta as the participants from the Middle East reported more instances of discrimination than the others. Participants from countries like England and Spain reported more positive experiences. This could be due to their greater familiarity with the English language and the fact that, being Europeans, teachers and students view them as more similar to themselves compared

to non-Europeans. This notion is supported by a study by Fletcher et al. (2023) on the experiences of Asian students in New Zealand primary schools which found that they often face cultural challenges that can affect their learning experiences, such as differences in classroom behaviour expectations and language barriers, when compared to other European students.

As discussed in this section, when students experience forms of discrimination and sometimes end up feeling a great sense of otherness at school, it is highly probable that they will end up isolated. The following section will discuss instances of social alienation and exclusion faced by the immigrant students.

### **Social Alienation and Exclusion**

In the context of educational environments, social alienation and exclusion can have profound impacts on students' academic performance and overall well-being. This study explores the experiences of immigrant students, shedding light on how cultural misunderstandings, language differences, and lack of inclusive practices contribute to feelings of isolation and exclusion. By examining these factors, this research aims to stress the importance of promoting inclusive and supportive school environments to ensure all students feel integrated and valued.

Based on the data gathered, the researcher identified the need to organise this major theme into four subheadings: feelings of isolation during breaks and lessons, impact on community cohesion, negative peer relationships, and lack of empathy and understanding. These subheadings emerged from both primary and secondary coding. Issues of exclusion were prominently raised when participants were asked about their school experiences, what they liked and disliked about school, and their favourite lessons.

## Feelings of Isolation during breaks and lessons

Participants frequently expressed feelings of loneliness at school, with Carlos particularly stating that he dislikes break time because he is “always alone”. Carlos' statement that he is always alone exemplifies social alienation at school, as he states that “no one sees me sitting alone”. Carlos' comment brings out a deeper issue, where his presence and needs are overlooked by his peers and possibly by school staff. This indicates a lack of social integration and support, which can have profound effects on his emotional and psychological well-being.

Diego further mentioned that “I like to socialise. I like to meet new people. Sometimes I don't feel like people like me here, but I think the best thing about school is that you get to socialise with everyone and make new friends”. Here, Diego reported that although he likes to make new friends, he still feels like he does not fit in, and it also suggests that he tries to overcome the feeling of not being liked by looking for new friends. A study conducted by Nguyen (2017) explored teachers' perspectives on immigrant students and sought to understand the reasons behind social isolation and exclusion among students. The teachers acknowledged the presence of social exclusion, noting that it could hinder migrant students' efforts and motivation to integrate. They explained that this form of exclusion stems from a lack of knowledge and interest in other cultures, leading to the continuation of passive tolerance strategies. This observation aligns with intercultural theories proposed by social psychological research. Locally, Darmanin (2013) critically examines how Malta, the smallest EU state, has developed minimalist tolerance discourses and practices in the education of ethnic minorities and immigrants. Darmanin explores how Malta's historical and cultural context, particularly its history as a British colony and its strong Roman Catholic identity, has led to a discretionary model in education where the treatment of ethnic minority and immigrant children is left to the discretion of school principals and teachers. The findings from the interview data also align with Pisani's (2018) investigation on the educational experiences of migrant students in Malta, focusing on the challenges they face in integrating into the school system. It examined how factors such as national policy, school

resources, and teacher attitudes impact these students. Pisani's research also highlights the struggles with language barriers, cultural differences, and instances of discrimination and bullying.

These findings also align with those of Suárez-Orozco and Todorova (2008), that immigrant students often face social isolation and struggle to form friendships in their new school environments. Similarly, Peguero (2011) indicates that immigrant students are more likely to experience feelings of alienation and loneliness as they navigate the complexities of adapting to a new cultural setting while often encountering exclusionary behaviours from their peers. Additionally, the research of Zhou and Bankston (1998) highlights that immigrant children frequently face difficulties in establishing social networks within schools, leading to a sense of disconnection and solitude. This lack of social integration can negatively impact their academic performance and overall well-being. Similarly, a study by Vedder, Horenczyk, and Liebkind (2006), points out that the lack of peer acceptance and the experience of being different can exacerbate feelings of loneliness among immigrant students. A local study by Cefai et al., (2019) confirms that, similar to global findings, immigrant students in Maltese schools experience significant challenges related to social integration and peer acceptance, which can adversely affect their overall well-being and academic performance. This stresses the need for targeted measures to promote inclusive and supportive environment in schools to mitigate these issues.

### **Impact on Community Cohesion**

In the Maltese context, the implementation of inclusive policies (MEYR 2022a; 2022b) appears ineffective. This is because immigrant students continue to feel unhappy and excluded, as deduced from the interview data.

Social exclusion can be manifested in various ways through the participants. For instance, Ella, James and Roberto, expressed a dislike towards the Maltese subject because of the fact that they felt excluded during the lesson. Foreigners currently have the option to study 'Maltese for foreigners' at school, where educators prepare resources to offer fruitful discussions and translations to students

who are not familiar to the Maltese language. However, these students expressed that this is not happening, and they are not understanding anything during lessons and are also mixed with Maltese students. Diego further added that, "I don't know anything in Maltese, and I don't understand anything. It is very hard for me to sit in that classroom and not understanding anything." This highlights the isolation experienced by immigrant students in the classroom due to not knowing the native language and emphasises that insufficient measures are in place to help these students grasp the language and fully access their educational rights. The issue extends beyond language barriers to include systemic isolation, which hinders their learning and belonging into the school environment.

Ella mentioned that she resorts to drawing during Maltese lessons as a coping mechanism for her lack of understanding. Additionally, Ella also reported feeling strongly excluded during assembly, noting that, "they speak in Maltese and sometimes there are important notices." Here, one could note that the isolation is greater as Ella would not know what is happening at school. This might also show how Ella's school does not view immigrant students as equally valuable and deserving as their Maltese peers. Important notices are made solely in Maltese, further isolating the immigrant population that does not understand the language. James added that "during assembly I sometimes ask Maltese students what's going on". These observations indicate that sometimes schools are not sufficiently accommodating the needs of foreign students, significantly affecting their schooling experience in Malta. These instances of isolation, hinder the students' ability to participate fully in school and classroom activities and understand critical information conveyed during assemblies. Cummins (2014) highlights that the lack of language support in schools can lead to disengagement and alienation among immigrant students. The frustration and helplessness expressed by Ella, James, and Roberto regarding their Maltese lessons reflect this issue. Research by Breen (2018) suggests that immigrant students' negative experiences in school subjects that are linguistically and culturally alien to them, can lead to long-term disengagement and lower academic achievement. This stresses the importance of inclusive practices that consider the diverse backgrounds of students to encourage a more supportive and effective learning environment. Similarly, Galea, Borg & Chircop (2022) explored the

educational experiences and challenges faced by refugee students in Malta, Greece, Turkey, and Italy, and revealed that language barriers, social ostracism, and lack of cultural recognition are significant obstacles for these students.

### **Negative Peer Relationships**

Six out of the ten participants indicated difficulties in making friends, with Carlos stating that “they do not want me to be their friend” and that “Sometimes they ask me for money”. Carlos added that they “tell me if you want to be our friend give us money, so I do not give them and then I don’t have friends”. The request for money in exchange for friendship is a manipulative tactic that exploits his desire for social acceptance. This situation is reminiscent of bullying and peer pressure scenarios where individuals are coerced into doing something against their will to gain acceptance. Studies have shown that such behaviours can lead to long-term psychological impacts, including low self-esteem and anxiety (Kuhnke, 2024).

Diego, who had attended schools in various countries, found Malta to be the most challenging place to make friends: “In all the countries I’ve been to, I always made friends easily at school, but here in Malta, I cannot.” This adds another dimension to the discussion and highlights the variability in social integration experiences across different cultural and educational contexts. Research by Vedder, Horenczyk, and Liebkind (2006) and García Coll et al. (1996) suggests that the ease of making friends can vary significantly depending on the host country's social norms and the school's inclusivity policies. Hence, the fact that these participants were not comfortable making friends in Malta, sheds light on the practice of local inclusive policies and on the fact of how schools might not be taking action to encourage friendships. Similarly, Cefai et al. (2019) also found out that immigrant students frequently face difficulties forming friendships in their new school environments. Their study notes that many foreign children struggle with language barriers and limited friendships with Maltese peers.

The theme of social alienation and exclusion emerged prominently from the interview data, where most participants expressed a preference for isolation as a consequence of negative peer relationship.

In contrast, studies such as those by Szente, Hoot, and Taylor (2006) highlight instances where immigrant students successfully integrate into peer groups and develop meaningful friendships. In this study, James and Roberto also reported positive friendships, however, it was noted that all participants preferred befriending students holding their same nationality, as in the case of the Syrian students. This could be due to the familiarity of culture and language as well as mutual support faced when students come from same home countries. Factors such as supportive school environments, inclusive policies, and efforts to bridge cultural differences can facilitate positive social experiences for immigrant students.

### **Lack of Empathy and Understanding**

Empathy is a complex concept that many secondary school students may not fully grasp. However, those who do not receive empathy clearly suffer its consequences.

The data has revealed that even resilient participants, such as Nada, quietly suffer from a lack of empathy. Her statement that she appreciates "when teachers are strict and when students are punished for being mean to each other" suggests a desire for consequences for unkind behaviour. This suggests that Nada values fairness and discipline as means to counteract social exclusion and unkind behaviour, which she may have experienced or witnessed. This appreciation for strictness and punishment indicates her desire for a supportive and respectful school environment, reflecting her struggle with integrating and feeling accepted as a migrant student.

Another instance of a lack of empathy revealed in the interview data was when Ella resorted to drawing during the Maltese lesson and stated, "The teacher never said or did anything to include me in the lesson, even though she used to see me draw every time." The teacher's inaction suggests a lack of concern for Ella's participation and inclusion in the lesson. Furthermore, the teacher should be aware that Ella would not turn in classwork and homework. This passive approach can reinforce Ella's sense of being overlooked and unimportant in the classroom setting. This instance could also be indicative of a broader issue where teachers may lack the training or sensitivity to recognise and address the

needs of migrant students. It could also indicate that there might be lack of care and professionalism. Similarly, Chircop (2018), in her study on educators' constructions of social diversity, found that educators often lack concern for the academic achievement of migrant students, while those who did show concern seem unsure of how to address the issue. It emphasises the need for teachers to be more proactive and empathetic in their approach to ensuring all students feel included and supported. Research conducted by Berry and Kim (2018) investigates the psychological effects of acculturative stress and social exclusion on immigrant students. They highlight that the absence of empathy and understanding from peers and educators can lead to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression among immigrant youth. This correlates with the participants' reported feelings of loneliness and their inclination towards isolation as a coping strategy in this study.

These findings resonate with research by Zine & Cho (2023), who explored the experiences of immigrant youth in Canadian schools. They highlighted struggles with cultural adaptation, language barriers, and feelings of isolation among these students. Hence, both the interview data and existing literature, stress the pervasive challenges faced by immigrant students worldwide, stressing the importance of promoting empathy, understanding, and inclusive practices in educational settings.

## Conclusion

The exploration of discrimination among immigrant students in Maltese schools, sheds light on the challenges impacting their academic and social well-being. Religious bias, stereotypes, and perceptions of foreignness, contribute to social isolation and academic underachievement. Effective inclusive strategies are crucial to address these loopholes in the Maltese educational system, promoting empathy and cultural understanding among peers and educators alike. This study aligns with existing research highlighting discrimination's detrimental effects on educational outcomes (Odem, 2009; Metzner, 2022; Bottiani, 2022), emphasising the need for proactive measures in promoting inclusivity. Visible markers of minority status, notably religious attire, exacerbate disparities, particularly affecting Muslim students. Overcoming these challenges demands collaborative efforts from educators, policymakers, and communities to implement anti-discrimination policies, cultural sensitivity training, and supportive environments. By embracing inclusivity and empathy, schools can mitigate discrimination's adverse impacts, enabling immigrant students to thrive both academically and socially in their new educational settings.

## **Chapter 5**

# **Exploring Teacher-Student Relationships, Language Acquisition, and Cultural Adaptation**

## **Teacher-Student Relationship and Academic Engagement**

In this section, the researcher will discuss the theme of Teacher-Student Relationships in light of the experiences of the participants in this study and in comparison to existing literature. The relationship between teachers and students is a fundamental element influencing academic engagement, especially for immigrant students (Chiu, 2012). Positive and supportive teacher-student interactions enhance students' motivation, participation, and overall academic performance (Mahfud, 2023). This research explores the impact of these relationships on immigrant students' academic engagement, examining how empathetic, inclusive, and culturally sensitive teaching practices contribute to joyful experiences and success in the school environment.

### **The Importance of Student-Teacher Relationships and its Influence on Academic Performance**

Participants frequently brought up this theme, making it highly pertinent to the research questions of this dissertation. When asked about their preferred lessons, participants often linked their enjoyment to the teacher's character and mood. Fatima reported that her favourite lesson was Maths because "I love the teacher. She is very nice, and I feel comfortable in class. She is also very patient". Similarly, Roberto chose "chemistry because I like the teacher". Aisha mentioned liking Maths because the teacher "is calm and patient", emphasising the importance of teacher kindness and patience in creating a positive learning environment. Yara expressed a liking towards the English lesson "because we read nice stories, they are relevant, and the teacher is nice too". The fact that Yara adds that she feels "welcome in class because the teacher smiles", reflects recent research that when teachers smile, they convey warmth, approachability, and acceptance, which helps students feel valued and understood (Collier, 2023).

Similarly, when identifying lessons they disliked, they attributed their aversion to perceiving the teacher as unkind. Fatima stated that "There are lessons which I like. But not all of them. It depends

on the lesson. For example, sometimes I like physics but sometimes I really don't like it at all. It depends on the lesson and the teacher". Yara expressed that "I don't like Maths, however. The teacher is always angry, and she does not like to smile." Yara adds that sometimes "I am afraid of asking her questions". These insights emphasise the interconnectedness of teacher behaviour and students' schooling experience.

An intriguing insight from the interview data highlights issues related to groupwork dynamics in the classroom. Carlos, one of the participants, expressed a common frustration: "The only problem is that when we do groupwork I am the only one working. The others are just talking." Carlos had previously stated that he prefers to work on his own and when asked about this by the researcher he responded that "I prefer to work on my own, however, there are some teachers that do not allow us this option, but I still end up doing all the work". This sentiment suggests an uneven distribution of effort and responsibility among group members, which could impact the overall learning experience and outcomes for diligent students like Carlos.

When questioned about whether teachers are aware of this issue, Carlos responded, "There are teachers who pretend they do not notice me doing all the work, but they do get angry when this situation happens in other groups." This observation, as seen through Carlos' perspective, could indicate a potential inconsistency in how teachers monitor and address groupwork dynamics. The discrepancy in teacher reactions raises questions about fairness and the criteria teachers use to intervene in group activities. Further probing into why teachers might get angry with other groups but ignore his situation, Carlos noted,

I don't really know but sometimes I notice that when this happens in other groups, the teacher helps the students who are working but ignores me. This doesn't happen in all subjects but only some of them with some teachers.

This quote suggests that Carlos feels that he is not receiving the same level of attention or assistance from the teacher as his peers. The variation across subjects and teachers indicates that the issue might be influenced by individual teacher attitudes or subject-specific groupwork policies.

Conversely, some participants expressed appreciation for the fairness exhibited by their teachers. Nada, for example, highlighted her positive view, stating that she values “when teachers are strict and when students are punished for being mean to each other.” This indicates that a segment of students perceives strictness and disciplinary actions as essential tools for addressing negative behaviour and maintaining a positive classroom environment.

These findings resonate with the research conducted by Suárez-Orozco et al. (2008), which highlights the significant impact that teacher-student relationships have on immigrant students' academic engagement. According to Suárez-Orozco et al., students' academic involvement is greatly influenced by how they perceive their interactions with teachers, with fair and supportive relationships enhancing their engagement.

### **Emotional Support and Empathy**

Gay (2010) discusses culturally responsive teaching and highlights the importance of teachers being aware of and sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of their students. Teachers who fail to do so may inadvertently reinforce negative behaviours, leading to immigrant students feeling marginalised or misunderstood. The issue of perceived unfair treatment by teachers is evident in the case of Nada. She pointed out that teachers often "generalise," and when asked why she thinks this occurs, Nada explained, "teachers think we [all the students including the non-immigrants] are all the same." This sentiment was reiterated later in the interview when she expressed, "I feel sorry because I am a different individual and even though there are bad students, I am not like them." Nada's remarks reflect her frustration with being subjected to a homogenised view that overlooks her individuality. Nada might have been a student that needed to be more empathised with due to what she had seen

in her home country, as discussed in the previous chapter, and hence this shows that little emotional support was given to Nada, however, she coped by ignoring the negative instances.

Similarly, Samir shared his experience of a perceived lack of empathy from teachers at school. When asked if he had tried to speak to other teachers about his treatment, he confirmed that he had. Samir explained,

I tried speaking to my form teachers and guidance teachers, but they also implied that it is my fault because the teacher would never say something which is not true. So, they tell me to behave more during the lessons. They always tell me the same thing.

The repeated advice to "behave more" might suggest a tendency among teachers to rely on assumptions rather than investigating the specific circumstances and individual perspectives of students. This approach not only fails to resolve the underlying issues but also undermines the student's trust in the school's support system.

Ella also reported experiencing a lack of empathy from teachers when seeking assistance to better understand the information presented during assembly times. She recounted,

I tried speaking to a very nice teacher I trust but her reply was that unfortunately since we are in Malta this cannot change. I told her that all I ask for, is for the important notices to be translated in English, even in point form. I cannot always rely on my friends because sometimes they don't tell me everything.

The teacher is suggesting that the challenging situation that Ella is facing cannot be altered due to local circumstances. However, this is not entirely accurate since both English and Maltese are two official languages, and there should be no issue with providing explanations to foreign students in English. Moreover it is not a culturally sensitive response. When asked whether this situation had affected her school experience, Ella responded emphatically, "It definitely has! One time I came to school wearing the winter uniform because I did not understand them saying during the assembly that we should start

wearing the summer uniform. I felt so dumb." This may indicate that the lack of concern from schools and teachers towards immigrant children is causing them to feel like outsiders.

As Meyers et al. (2019) and Ibrahim & El Zaatari (2020) stress the importance of teacher empathy towards students, it becomes evident that students like Nada, Samir and Ella might not have received this crucial support in Maltese schools. Meyers et al. (2019) further emphasise this by developing a model that illustrates how teacher empathy positively affects student success. These findings highlight the gap in emotional support experienced by students like Nada, Samir and Ella.

Furthermore, existing research collectively supports the notion that the quality of teacher-student relationships remarkably influences immigrant students' perceptions and attitudes towards their lessons. Improving teachers' cultural competence and promoting respectful, supportive relationships can greatly enhance immigrant students' educational experiences (Coleman et al., 2021). This might also suggest that teachers could develop more empathy towards students and ensure that their rights are being respected.

### **Language Acquisition and Social integration**

Language is not merely a tool for communication; it forms the bedrock of cultural understanding, societal integration, and individual identity (Rabiah, 2018). For immigrant students, navigating a new educational environment in a host country, often hinges on their ability to grasp and use the language of instruction (Cann, 2014). Yet, the challenge of mastering a new language can become a profound difficulty, one that not only affects academic progress, but also shapes social interactions.

The unfairness of this situation becomes glaringly apparent. Immigrant students, already grappling with the complexities of adapting to a new country, face additional hurdles when their linguistic abilities are not yet developed. Their potential remains obscured, their contributions diminished, and their integration into society delayed—all because of linguistic barriers that are often beyond their immediate control. Such instances were highly observed in the interview data as most students linked their frustration of when people spoke Maltese in front of them, to lack of social integration.

## Language Barriers and Social Isolation

Ella expressed considerable frustration over school assemblies being conducted exclusively in Maltese “even the prayers” and important notices not being translated in English, leaving non-Maltese speaking immigrant students feeling marginalised. Additionally, this theme intersected with issues of racism, as James and Roberto reported being told [by students] to speak Maltese “since you are living in Malta”, which created further tension in their lives.

When asked about potential changes they would like to see at school, Ella stated that she would “ask the teachers and assistant heads to speak more in English. I know Maltese is their prime language, but I think they should know us foreigners feel left out sometimes especially during lessons and assembly”. The plea for teachers and assistant heads to use more English, despite Maltese being their primary language, reflects a desire for inclusivity and understanding from the perspective of immigrant students.

When asked about their efforts to learn Maltese, Roberto responded, "I am, and I would like to, but it is very difficult." He elaborated, "Outside school, I do not really feel the need of speaking in Maltese as wherever I go there are foreign people, however at school, I do need it, and I wish to learn it." This statement highlights Roberto's recognition of the importance of learning Maltese within the school context, despite finding it challenging and not perceiving the same necessity outside of school. This was also observed in a local study by Micallef Cann (2014).

Similarly, James expressed a desire to learn Maltese, stating, "I would love to learn Maltese, and I already know some words, and I use them too! However, when Maltese people start talking, they do so very quickly, and I do not grasp anything." When asked whether this language barrier had affected his school experience, James replied, "Not really, I still speak in English and communicate well with others, and to be honest, I don't blame them because they are in their country and Maltese is their language."

These responses illustrate the students' willingness to learn Maltese and their awareness of its significance within the school environment. However, they also reflect the difficulties they face in acquiring the language, particularly due to the rapid pace of native speakers. While Roberto feels the impact of not knowing Maltese more acutely in school, James appears more adaptable, continuing to communicate effectively in English and expressing an understanding of the linguistic dynamics in Malta.

Similarly, Studies have shown that language barriers could impact the social and academic integration of immigrant students. For instance, a study published in the *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research* found that immigrant students often feel excluded and face challenges in understanding school instructions, which affects their overall school experience and academic performance (McIntyre et al., 2011). Additionally, the lack of translation services for important notices stresses this issue, leaving students like Ella feeling "silly" and "frustrated" because they do not understand what is happening around them (Sibley & Brabeck, 2017).

### **Challenges in Language Acquisition**

Language acquisition challenges were evident not only during assembly but also in lessons and social interactions with friends at school. Samir reported that despite some of the teachers being friendly, he still does not "understand what goes on during the lesson." This raises questions about the role of cultural and linguistic diversity in educational settings and the promotion of inclusive environments. Ella shared similar difficulties, explaining that during Maltese lessons, "I start drawing because I don't understand anything." Carlos emphasised the importance of understanding the language of instruction, stating that he preferred Science and German lessons because the teachers spoke in English, whereas he disliked Maltese as he "can't understand".

Diego articulated the difficulties he encountered when first starting school due to his limited language proficiency, which impeded his ability to form friendships. He stated, "It was hard to start getting along with people here at the beginning because of the language. I noticed a big difference between the

private school and this school. I still prefer being here but sometimes they look at you differently because you are a foreigner." Diego's experience highlights the dual challenges of adapting to a new educational environment and overcoming social barriers related to his foreign status.

James shared similar sentiments, remarking, "When I first started school, I could not get used to the system here, especially because everything revolves around the Maltese subject, and I don't really understand." This statement highlights the broader adaptation challenges faced by students transitioning into a new school system, which can be compounded by language barriers and cultural differences.

Both Diego and James's experiences reflect the significant impact of language proficiency on social integration within the school environment. The initial struggle to communicate effectively and understand the new educational system can hinder students' ability to connect with peers and fully engage in the school community. Additionally, the perception of being viewed differently due to their foreign status can further isolate students and affect their sense of belonging. This is similar to the findings of Yeh et al. (2008) who found that language barriers impede immigrant students' ability to form friendships and participate in social activities.

Feelings of exclusion and frustration due to language barriers, as reported by Ella, James, Roberto, and Diego, are also consistent with Roessingh and Douglas' (2012) findings that immigrant students often feel marginalised when they cannot understand the language of instruction.

The data has also revealed that participants from Syria and Libya reported fewer negative experiences due to language barriers. Fatima noted that

Even when I speak in Arabic, people understand me because it [Maltese] is so much similar to Arabic! Sometimes I enjoy some free time with teachers during free lessons as they ask me about some Arabic words, and we realise that that would be an old Maltese word! When I was in Belgium, this was a problem, because no one understood my language and they speak difficult English. But here in Malta I am happy because I don't have language difficulties.

Aisha echoed this sentiment too, stating, "they all understand me here. The language is very similar." This is interesting because Arabic immigrant students have reported a sense of religious disconnection, while linguistically they feel quite similar to the local population. Therefore, immigrant students from Arabic-speaking or Muslim countries feel like outsiders due to religious differences, but insiders because of linguistic similarities. Samir's comment, "I communicate well in Maltese, even when I don't know how to say a word exactly, I use the Arabic word and sometimes it would be it," further illustrates the practical benefits of linguistic similarities, enabling smoother and more effective communication. Nada, the only Libyan participant, expressed, "The best thing here is that I can easily communicate with people. Sometimes I would be out and listen to Maltese people speaking and understand everything because it is similar to my language." Nada's ability to comprehend and participate in conversations effortlessly highlights the importance of linguistic compatibility in enhancing students' confidence and sense of integration.

These positive experiences faced by these students from the perspective of language might be attributed to the linguistic similarities between Maltese and Arabic, which might make it easier for them to understand Maltese. This finding is particularly interesting because immigrant students displaced to countries other than Malta might face greater challenges due to the use of different languages (Hanlon, 2020). The case of these students in Malta suggests that linguistic compatibility can play a pivotal role in the integration process. In environments where students can draw on similarities between their native language and the language of instruction, they are likely to experience less anxiety and frustration, leading to more positive educational and social outcomes. This finding is particularly intriguing because, despite being foreign and having different religions, cultures, and backgrounds, Arabic-speaking immigrant students face challenges with social integration. Nevertheless, they find it relatively easy to speak or understand Maltese compared to students from other countries. This contrasts sharply with the experiences of immigrant students in countries with significant linguistic differences, such as Ella, James and Roberto, who often encounter substantial barriers that impede their academic progress and social integration.

The existing body of research, combined with the findings from this research, support the notion that language barriers notably impact immigrant students' academic performance and social integration. Addressing these barriers by promoting linguistic diversity and inclusive practices in educational settings is crucial for enhancing the educational experiences of immigrant students (OECD, 2018). This is further supported by Cassar and Tonna (2018) in their local study on migrant students navigating language barriers at school.

### **Cultural Adaptation**

Cultural adaptation is a pivotal process for immigrant students as they navigate new educational environments. These processes involve adjusting to new cultural norms and practices while seeking to maintain a sense of one's own cultural identity. A successful experience requires both the host community and immigrants to engage in mutual adaptation, ensuring an inclusive environment where diverse cultural backgrounds are respected and valued (Morris, 2024).

This theme emerged predominantly when participants were asked to describe their schooling experience. Participants who had resided in Malta for a longer period, exhibited a sense of adaptability to the school system and culture. While the majority of the respondents claimed facing adaptation challenges, James and Roberto claimed a positive general experience in Maltese schools, despite reporting feelings of exclusion when Maltese was spoken, as previously discussed. Roberto reported that his overall experience at school "is quite good." However, he mentioned an ongoing situation that he found bothersome: "Sometimes they call me burglar, but I mean my maths teacher sometimes as a joke she also calls me burglar, but as a joke, I know that she would be joking. She doesn't say it to insult me." When asked why he thinks this happens, Roberto explained, "It is because of my last name." Initially, Roberto found the joke amusing, but he noted, "At first it was funny but then when she [the maths teacher] kept on repeating it, it got pretty annoying." Despite this annoyance, Roberto maintained that his overall school experience remains positive, stating, "I have no real problems with

the school." James also described his school experience as "quite good," noting that his only issue was that "the school is very packed as there are lots of students."

The accounts of Roberto and James provide insight into the nuanced nature of student experiences in the school environment. Roberto's experience highlights how seemingly harmless jokes can evolve into sources of irritation and discomfort over time. While Roberto initially perceived the joke about his last name as humorous, the repeated nature of the comment by his maths teacher became annoying. This scenario highlights the importance of sensitivity in teacher-student interactions, as even jokes made in jest can become problematic if they persist and target personal attributes.

Despite this issue, Roberto's overall positive perception of his school experience indicates a level of resilience and adaptability. His ability to distinguish between the teacher's intent and the impact of her words reflects a mature understanding of interpersonal dynamics. However, this situation also suggests a need for educators to be mindful of the potential long-term effects of their comments on students.

James's experience, on the other hand, highlights a different aspect of the school environment: overcrowding. His description of the school as "very packed" points to challenges related to space and resources, which can affect students' comfort and access to facilities. While James did not express significant dissatisfaction, the mention of this issue indicates an area where improvements could enhance the overall student experience.

Despite widespread reports of discrimination among participants, individuals like James, Roberto, and Ella recounted positive social interactions and friendships within their school environments. The data revealed an interesting pattern: European participants generally formed friendships with peers of various nationalities, including Maltese, while non-European participants, such as Aisha and Fatima, felt a stronger connection with peers sharing their nationality. This conclusion was also drawn locally by Galea, Borg & Chircop (2022) through an Erasmus project aimed at identifying the unique challenges faced by refugee students and exploring effective support strategies. This pattern mirrors findings

from recent studies on social integration and cultural identity, which highlight that European students are more likely to engage in multicultural interactions, benefiting from a broader sense of inclusivity and diverse friendships, whereas non-European students often report forming bonds primarily within their cultural or national groups, reflecting a coping mechanism against feelings of exclusion (Abacioglu et al., 2023; Shaheed & Kiang, 2021; Karacsony et al., 2022). Given the complexity of this theme, the researcher categorised it into two further subheadings: Challenges and Barriers, and Social Integration and Cultural Identity.

### **Challenges and Barriers**

While James, Roberto, Diego, and Ella all reported having positive friendships, only Ella felt a genuine social connection with her friends. She expressed, "I have some nice friends. I feel like I can connect with them. We talk about the same things and stuff. I enjoy my time with them." In contrast, James, Roberto, and Diego, although having amicable relationships, noted that these friendships lacked depth and complete trust. James stated that "even though I have friends here at school, they are not people I would want to go out with". Diego, similarly, remarked, "I have friends, but they are not my big friends. They are just my school friends. Not my best friends."

This distinction highlights how students differentiate between types of friends and culturally adapt to form friendships with individuals who may not share similar traits. The experiences of James, Roberto, and Diego reflect Shaheed and Kiang's (2021) findings that superficial friendships, while amicable, often lack the depth needed for trust. Furthermore, Diego's experience of having "school friends" but not "best friends" is also seen in Gummadam et al.'s (2016) work, which indicates that ethnic minority students often experience friendships that do not fulfil their deeper emotional needs.

Similarly, Yara reported having two close friends, but when discussing her interactions with other classmates, she noted, "We get along, but I don't speak to them very much and we are not close, because I am not the type of person who likes big groups so when I found my small circle it's like I didn't feel the need to make more friends." Yara's perspective sheds light on the diversity of social preferences

among students in educational settings. While some students thrive in large groups and actively seek broader social interactions, others, like Yara, find fulfilment and comfort in maintaining a smaller, more intimate circle of friends. This preference may be influenced by personality traits, such as introversion or a preference for deeper, more meaningful relationships.

The adaptation of forming friendships with individuals of different characteristics resonates with Karacsony et al.'s findings (2022) that highlight that students in multicultural settings often form friendships based on immediate social environments while dealing with cultural differences (Karacsony et al., 2022). The data also revealed instances where participants experienced happiness, either in class, with friends, with teachers, or by not feeling isolated. These instances will be reported and analysed in the following subsection.

### **Social Integration and Cultural Identity**

Despite most participants reporting negative schooling experiences, a small number of participants reported positive experiences. From the interview data, it was noted that these participants attributed their positive experiences to cultural adaptation. The researcher aimed for this study to be trustworthy, valid, and authentic, thus, it was crucial to report the positive experiences as well.

To begin with, Nada reported that “at the beginning, it was very difficult to get used to it [the school system], but now it is much better.” Cultural adjustment and adaptation were also related to language acquisition. Yara stated, “At the beginning, it was a little difficult to make friends because I did not speak English well, but over time, I made some friends and started to understand the lessons more.” The initial difficulty in making friends due to language barriers, sheds light on the fact that a lack of language skills can lead to immigrant students feeling isolated.

The observed low adaptation rate might be linked to the school environment's lack of cultural inclusiveness. Schachner et al. (2019) and Ward and Masgoret (2004) suggest that culturally plural and supportive school climates, enhance students' psychological adaptation. If Maltese schools do not promote such environments, it could explain why many students struggled to adapt. Additionally,

findings by Edele et al. (2013) and Schachner et al. (2017) indicate that both integration and assimilation can lead to positive educational outcomes, only if the students wish to do so. However, if Maltese schools predominantly promote assimilation without supporting ethnic identity, this might not work for all students, particularly those who require a balanced integration strategy.

Ward and Masgoret (2004) also emphasise the importance of host national connectedness. If immigrant students in Maltese schools do not feel connected to the local culture, this disconnection might hinder their overall adaptation and integration process. This was seen through Yara's statement

I really do not like history because the lessons are always about Maltese cultures like feasts and holidays, and I wouldn't know anything. Other students in class would be saying what they typically do on such days, but I cannot relate to this. Even remembering dates for exams is very hard and I often confuse them with the dates related to the history of my country.

The fact that most participants reported feeling isolated at school or not adapting culturally, such as Yara, reflects the findings of Juvonen et al. (2010), who indicate that schools might often lack adequate support systems, such as counselling and mentoring programs, specifically tailored for immigrant students, which are crucial for their cultural adaptation and integration.

## Conclusion

This chapter highlights the crucial role of teacher-student relationships in shaping immigrant students' academic engagement and overall school experience. Positive interactions, characterised by empathy, inclusivity, and cultural sensitivity, are pivotal for enhancing educational outcomes. European participants reported various challenges due to a lack of language skills, while Arabic-speaking students did not report such issues. Addressing these challenges requires not only supportive educational practices but also a broader cultural shift toward inclusivity and understanding. By improving teachers' cultural competence and promoting linguistic diversity, schools can better support immigrant students in thriving within their new educational environments. The following chapter will focus solely on issues of belonging.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Issues of Belonging**

## Issues of Belonging

Belonging is a complex concept with profound implications and nuances (Halse, 2018). It is widely acknowledged as a fundamental human need (Pardede, 2023), in fact, Maslow positioned belongingness and love needs immediately after physiological and safety needs in his fundamental hierarchy of needs theory, dating back to 1943. Since then, the quest for belonging has remained a constant aspect of human existence.

However, there exist more extreme cases where the pursuit of belonging takes on heightened significance. This dissertation delves into such scenarios, particularly focusing on the experiences and sense of belonging of immigrant students. For individuals who have fled their homes in search of better opportunities, the need for belonging is not merely a desire but a crucial aspect of their adaptation and integration into new societies. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the theme of belonging emerged prominently in the interviews conducted for this study. Moreover, it directly addresses the two research questions driving this dissertation.

This theme predominantly emerged from responses to questions four and five, which inquired about participants' experiences at school. The researcher aimed to authentically portray the experiences of immigrant students to honour their voices and to shed light on their lived experiences. To provide a comprehensive understanding, this theme was further categorised into two aspects: lack of belonging at school and with friends, and cultural belonging and bullying. The researcher extracted these two aspects as they were the most prominent in the interview data. This chapter will explore the participants' experiences of belonging. The researcher has dedicated an entire chapter to this theme to provide a comprehensive discussion from various perspectives. The primary focus will be on interpreting and analysing how the data presented in the previous chapters impacts the students' sense of belonging. Additionally, the chapter will examine data specifically related to belonging.

## **Lack of Belonging at School and with Friends**

Throughout the interview data, it became evident that students often miss their home countries and feel a lack of belonging, both with their peers and in the classroom. Several participants repeatedly brought up issues of belonging throughout the interview. Carlos' testimony reveals significant difficulties in forming friendships in Malta compared to his previous experiences in other countries. When probed further about the possible reasons behind this, Carlos responded, "I don't know. But in Spain, I was very happy and even in other countries. But here I do not have any friends." This suggests a stark contrast between his social experiences in Malta and elsewhere. When asked if he made efforts to befriend other students, he said, "I always try to make friends with different students, but they don't like me." Carlos' feeling of being "always alone" raises questions about whether the problem is rooted in his personality or if he is being ostracised because of his immigrant status. He mentioned being happier in Spain, which might be because he could communicate in the language of instruction there, making a significant difference. Additionally, student cliques often form based on shared cultural backgrounds, possibly contributing to his isolation. Moreover, Carlos' experiences suggest that his school may not be addressing the students' sense of belonging effectively.

Samir's experiences in Maltese schools are marred by what he perceives as discrimination based on his religion and race, as previously discussed. He reported, "sometimes because of my religion I feel that they [teachers and students] do not treat me as well as others." He elaborated,

For example, they [the students] tell me very bad words because of the colour of my skin.

Sometimes I feel that people treat me differently or even look at me differently because of this. Both the students and the teachers.

Samir's perception of being treated unfairly due to his skin colour is reinforced by specific incidents, which could also be an instance of discrimination,

Because teachers stare a lot at me sometimes. I see them. With students it is different because they call me 'l-iswed' (the black one) or 'l-Għarbi' (the Arab) in Maltese. They do not really do that with other students from other countries. For example, I've never heard them call a Spanish student 'l-Ispanjol' (Spanish), but with me, they do it on purpose, and I get angry.

The use of racial and ethnic labels by peers, such as 'the black one' or 'the Arab', indicates explicit racial discrimination. The student notes that such terms are not used for others, like Spanish students, which highlights a selective and targeted form of racism. This targeted behaviour creates a hostile environment, fostering anger and resentment in the affected students. Such an instance could possibly hinder his sense of belonging. This is similar to the findings of Afonso et al. (2023), which indicate that Latino college students who perceive a hostile racial climate are more likely to feel a reduced sense of belonging. This can be attributed to the negative stereotypes and discriminatory behaviours they encounter, discussed in previous chapters, which impede their integration and acceptance within the school community.

Nada also feels a sense of exclusion in Malta, which she attributes to cultural differences. She stated, "people do not like me here," and when asked why she believes this is so, she explained,

I would say that it is because of my different culture. I feel like I do not belong here, I mean, back at home, at my school, I did not have these thoughts all the time. Here it is different because I always have a feeling that I am doing something wrong, even when I am not.

Nada's constant feeling of being out of place and fear of doing something wrong highlights her struggle with belonging due to cultural differences and a non-welcoming environment. Nada's feelings of not belonging and constantly doubting her actions reflect an atmosphere that fails to embrace and support her cultural identity. Similarly, Yara's initial struggles in school highlight the challenges of adapting to a new cultural and educational context. She expressed,

I believe that the problem could have been that I am foreign, and I have a different background than the students here. Sometimes I do not continue talking to them during a conversation because I feel that I do not connect to what they are saying. I feel different.

Yara's experience mirrors Nada's, indicating that the challenges arise from the educational context rather than the students themselves. The perception that it is impossible to experience school as they once did, contributes to their feelings of loss and lack of belonging. This stresses the need for emotional support during their transition, which they currently lack. Furthermore, this sense of disconnection and difference impedes her ability to fully integrate and engage with her peers. Additionally, her claim of feeling different from the other students could indicate either cultural incongruence or that her experiences have caused her to mature more quickly than her peers and thus she might find their conversations somewhat frivolous.

Ella's experience is characterised by linguistic barriers and intentional exclusion by her peers. As discussed in the previous chapter, Ella's sense of exclusion from the school assembly due to her lack of understanding may impact her sense of belonging. Furthermore, when speaking about the exclusion she feels with some students at schools, who are not the friends she stays with during breaktime, she reported that,

Some students are cruel and just want to hurt others. They know that I do not understand Maltese and I sometimes notice that they speak in Maltese on purpose to intimidate me. Even though I have my happy moments here, I miss my country a lot, no one used to blame me for speaking my language there.

Ella's experience may impact her sense of belonging in various aspects, such as, language barriers and cultural isolation, as discussed in previous chapters. She feels targeted by peers who deliberately speak Maltese to intimidate her, creating a hostile environment that makes it difficult for her to feel accepted into the school community. Additionally, Ella experiences cultural isolation, similar to Nada and Yara as she misses her home country, where she could speak her native language freely without

fear of judgment or exclusion, indicating a lack of belonging. This shows that even though Ella has reported positive friendships, especially with her chosen group of friends, she still faced negative experiences.

This theme also raised concerns about the general educational system, as some responses indicated that students feel lost and that no one adequately introduces them to the school system. This suggests that schools often do little to make students with foreign academic backgrounds feel welcome, in fact, Diego reported that

If you asked me this question when I first entered, I would have said the school system. No one introduces us to the system, and I felt so lost. Now I feel a bit better, but I still remember how lost and confused I was at the beginning.

Diego's statement highlights the challenges new students face in adapting to an unfamiliar school system and how these challenges can impact their sense of belonging. The initial difficulty in adapting to the school system and making friends, as discussed in previous chapters, contrasts with the experiences of students who adjusted more easily than other immigrant students. However, students like Diego, who felt overwhelmed and disoriented due to a lack of guidance, may struggle with a sense of belonging. Therefore, ensuring that immigrant students receive proper orientation before starting new schools could improve their experience and enhance their sense of belonging (Chiu, 2012). Nada reported similar feelings when she stated that “the school system and rules are very different to what I was used to”. This feeling aligns with a broader report highlighting that many recently arrived immigrant students struggle with integration and adapting to new school systems. (Migration Policy Institute, 2023).

Issues of belonging were also observed when participants were asked about their favourite aspect of school. Fatima mentioned break time “because I can be with whom I want and speak to my friends”. Fatima was here referring to her Syrian friends, which might indicate that she would be looking forward to break time in order to feel in a safe space. This might also indicate that students look

forward to break times as these are opportunities for socialising. Break times allow students to connect with their chosen social circles, developing a sense of community and belonging within the school, which is essential for a positive school experience (Kidger et al., 2012). A study by Swain (2022) highlights that social interactions during break times are crucial for students' emotional and social development. It emphasises that unstructured social interactions, help students develop critical social skills and form meaningful relationships, contributing to a sense of belonging and well-being within the school environment. Such studies underscore the experiences of students like Carlos, who, as noted in previous chapters, often find themselves alone during breaks, indicating potential distress regarding their isolation. Numerous studies emphasise the crucial role of socialisation during school break times (Barros et al., 2009; Smith, 2010; Frost, 2021), suggesting that students who remain unnoticed and unsupported in their solitude may experience a profound lack of belonging. The persistent isolation of students like Carlos, without intervention, suggests the need for schools to actively foster inclusive environments to enhance all students' sense of belonging.

Among the ten participants, only James and Roberto expressed a generally positive sense of belonging at school, and they both cited positive relationships with friends, with Roberto stating that he likes this school because the people “are nice and we have a nice relationship.” However, the remaining eight participants, reported a lack of belonging, predominantly describing negative experiences and friendships, as discussed above. All Syrian participants mentioned that they can only be themselves with Syrian students. Aisha reported that “To be honest I feel more comfortable with them [Syrian students]. But some Maltese people are sweet too and I like them. Not all of them are the same” Despite Aisha’s experiences of Islamophobia, she still described Maltese people at her school as “sweet”, which shows that she has not allowed the negative instances to cloud her judgement and generalise her opinion of Maltese students. Verkuyten's (2018) research on ethnic and cultural identity in school settings highlights that immigrant students often seek comfort and acceptance within their own cultural groups. This can lead to the formation of ethnic enclaves within schools, where students feel safer and more understood by peers who share similar backgrounds and experiences. This

phenomenon could explain why Syrian students, like Fatima and Aisha feel they can only be themselves with students of their same nationality.

Nada's experience highlights the adverse effects of cultural exclusion on immigrant students while also showing how some students are not tolerant towards students who are different than them and have different backgrounds. This is because during a Christmas activity at school, Nada was explicitly told by some of her classmates that she should not attend because "it is not my feast." This exclusionary incident reflects the broader social challenges faced by immigrant students who are often marginalised during cultural celebrations that do not align with their own traditions. Such experiences, as indicated by Titzmann and Jugert (2019), significantly impair immigrant students' sense of belonging, thereby hindering their integration and well-being within the educational environment.

The data also revealed that most participants also reported not understanding what is being taught to them in class. James reported that even though he has positive connections with friends and teachers, he still doesn't "understand what goes on during the lesson. The lessons are hard sometimes". This might also influence the sense of belonging of such students as when they do not understand what is constantly being taught to them, they might develop feelings of outsiders. This issue could also indicate that educators do not receive the appropriate training needed to teach a multicultural classroom. This was also observed by Rababah (2021), as educators in his study claimed that they do not know how to adapt lessons to accommodate foreign learners.

The data revealed that negative schooling experiences significantly affected the students' sense of belonging. Specifically, adverse interactions with peers contributed to a diminished sense of belonging, while negative encounters with educators fostered feelings of alienation and negatively impacted immigrant students' overall school experience. Moreover, when students felt lost or unfamiliar with the school system, their sense of belonging further deteriorated. This finding stresses the urgent need for schools to create more inclusive environments and support immigrant students as they acclimate to the school system. Educators are encouraged to adopt more inclusive and

supportive strategies to cultivate a positive and empowering environment for all students. This finding resonates with Yoo-Lee's study (2023), who also demonstrated that negative school climates adversely affect immigrant students' sense of belonging. Consistent with the dataset, Yoo-Lee (2023) found that immigrant students who experienced discrimination or social exclusion at school, as discussed in previous chapters, exhibited a lack of belonging (McKenna & Silva, 2022; Harlow & Lee, 2023; Murad & Fernandez, 2023).

### **Cultural Belonging and Bullying**

The aspects of cultural belonging and bullying also emerged strongly in the data, indicating that cultural dissonance and bullying contribute remarkably to a sense of belonging, or the lack thereof, among immigrant students. Studies have shown a notable correlation between immigrant students' sense of belonging, cultural belonging, and experiences of bullying. Research by Rodríguez-Hidalgo et al. (2019) highlights the distinction between personal bullying and ethnic-cultural bullying, noting that the latter is specifically tied to discriminatory aggression and victimisation based on cultural or ethnic backgrounds. This form of bullying can severely impact the psychological well-being and social development of immigrant students, leading to increased feelings of isolation and depression. Instances of bullying were observed through some participants' experiences.

Carlos reported being forced to give students money in order to be their friend, as discussed in previous chapters. Diego reported that other students "don't like my culture. I used to be mad before. It was very hurtful. I used to tell them *"What do you mean? I came here to study what is wrong with my country?"*. Here, Diego recalls challenging these criticisms by questioning why others would find fault with his country when he came here [in Malta] to study. This response shows a desire to defend his culture and perhaps educate others about its value. Similarly, Samir reported instances of bullying from other students. He recounted, "Sometimes they [the other students] say very bad words about my family. It is very hurtful. Sometimes they lie about me too. I try to avoid these people. I try not to talk to them." Samir was reluctant to share the specific words used by the bullies, but he did say that

they "mention my dead relatives too." This reluctance to detail the language suggests the severity and harshness of the language used by bullies in schools. Aisha's experience also includes witnessing and experiencing bullying which could have affected her sense of belonging from the aspect of culture, which she attributes to physical appearance and cultural differences, as discussed in previous chapters. She stated,

They [the students at school] don't like other people, some students. They bully them [the immigrant students] because of their hair sometimes, or because of how they look. I hate that. I try to intervene and try to stop them. Once it happened to me. I did not wear hijab at that time, I only started wearing it last year. But once I remember they were saying things about my hair because it was long, and they don't like it.

Aisha's proactive stance—trying to intervene and stop the bullying—demonstrates a strong desire to combat the injustice she witnessed and experienced. This response reflects a sense of responsibility but also highlights the ongoing struggle to fit into a community that may not fully accept or understand her. Aisha's comment also reveals how deeply these experiences of bullying could affect the student's sense of belonging, making them feel marginalised and undervalued within their school environment.

The accounts of bullying provided by Carlos, Diego, Samir and Aisha, revealed the deep impact that ethnic cultural bullying has on immigrant students' sense of belonging. Their experiences illustrate how such bullying not only causes immediate harm but also significantly damages these students' connection to their school and community. These cases suggest that these students struggled to find a cultural connection within their schools. This aligns with the findings of Garcia et al. (2023), who reported that frequent bullying severely hinders immigrant students' sense of belonging. Additionally, other studies have emphasised the need for targeted interventions to help these students maintain a supportive and positive school environment (Morales, 2021; Johnson & Collins, 2022; Nguyen & White, 2023; Taylor & Khan, 2024; Lee & Martinez, 2023).

## **Conclusion**

This research study has uncovered a direct correlation between negative schooling experiences, often stemming from discrimination, stereotyping, and bullying, and the sense of belonging among participants. The majority of the participants expressed a diminished sense of belonging both during lessons and within their peer groups at school. Moreover, the study has stressed the urgent need for improvement within Malta's school systems to promote a stronger sense of belonging among immigrant students. While some schools may promote multicultural activities, there remains substantial room for improvement, particularly in addressing instances where students feel excluded due to their differences on non-event days. These findings raise significant concerns about the effectiveness of inclusive practices in schools, as they appear to inadequately address the realities and needs articulated by the students.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Conclusion**

## **Introduction**

The primary aim of this dissertation was driven by two research questions that investigated the experiences of immigrant students in Maltese secondary schools and their sense of belonging. The researcher sought to address these questions through a thematic analysis of the interview data, interpreting the findings to benefit both the participants in this study and future researchers in this field. This chapter starts with an overview of the main findings from the study, derived from the themes extracted from the interview data. Then, the implications derived from this research are provided followed by several recommendations for future research. The aim is to contribute to the ongoing dialogue and efforts to enhance the educational experiences for immigrant students in Malta and beyond.

## **The Main Findings from the Study**

Through the six main themes extracted from the interview data, several findings were revealed from this study. The researcher will discuss the different findings derived from each theme. To begin with, the theme of Discrimination, unveiled various forms of direct and indirect discrimination experienced by immigrant students. This included instances of stereotyping leading to discriminatory treatment, particularly evident in religious discrimination faced by Muslim female students wearing headscarves, and discriminatory attitudes towards students of darker skin tones. The findings align with previous research indicating that visible characteristics can exacerbate social marginalisation and stigmatisation (Song, 2020). Moreover, instances of discrimination outside school settings adversely affected the well-being of these students, resonating with existing literature on the impact of public space discrimination (Osman et al., 2020). Additionally, the study highlights a pattern wherein positive school experiences were predominantly reported by European Christian students, contrasting with Muslim immigrant students who frequently encountered religious discrimination, thus indicating persistent racism and discrimination against non-European ethnicities, especially those from the Middle East (Fürstenau, 2023).

The theme of Social Alienation and Exclusion, as evidenced by the immigrant students' perceived disconnection and feelings of otherness within the school environment, highlighted that immigrant students often feel overlooked in terms of their social and educational needs, contributing to a sense of exclusion, despite nominal inclusive policies (MEYR, 2022a; 2022b). Language barriers further exacerbate this isolation, with reports of inadequate support in Maltese language lessons hindering their integration (Cummins, 2014). The study also revealed challenges in peer relationships, where some students found it difficult to establish meaningful connections, while others prefer isolation due to negative interactions. Despite instances of supportive teachers, inconsistencies in empathy from both peers and educators contributed to feelings of alienation among participants.

The theme of Teacher-Student Relationship and Academic Engagement mainly revealed that participants often linked their enjoyment of lessons with teachers' demeanour, perceiving kind teachers positively and expressing aversion towards those perceived as unkind. Instances were noted where teachers neglected group dynamics, leaving students to work alone without addressing the situation, contrasting with participants who appreciated teachers' fairness on other occasions because they noticed certain situations and helped the respective students. Gay (2010) emphasises culturally responsive teaching, stressing the importance of teachers' awareness of and sensitivity to students' cultural backgrounds to avoid reinforcing marginalisation or misunderstanding among immigrant students.

The theme of Language Acquisition and Social Integration highlighted the participants' plea for more English usage from teachers and assistant heads, despite acknowledging that Maltese is the primary language. This desire reflects a quest for inclusivity and understanding from the immigrant students' perspective. Participants also expressed a keenness to learn Maltese, recognising its significance within the school environment. A primary finding was that language barriers often lead to feelings of exclusion and difficulty comprehending school instructions and potentially impacting overall school experience (McIntyre et al., 2011). Additionally, reported instances of inadequate translation for critical notices, further marginalise students (Sibley & Brabeck, 2017). Language acquisition challenges

extended beyond academic settings to include assemblies and social interactions, hindering some participants' ability to form friendships, a phenomenon documented by Yeh et al. (2008). Interestingly, participants from Syria and Libya reported fewer negative experiences regarding language, probably attributed to linguistic similarities between Arabic and Maltese. On the other hand, this contrasts with their experiences of Islamophobia. Despite students from these countries not facing significant language barriers, they still encountered Islamophobia and racism, which marked them as outsiders.

The theme of Cultural Adaptation revealed varying experiences among immigrant students in Maltese schools, with some reporting positive experiences despite initial challenges. Positive friendships were often cited as a contributing factor to these positive experiences. The data highlighted a pattern where European participants formed friendships across various nationalities, including Maltese peers, while non-European participants tended to connect more strongly with peers sharing their nationality. Similar findings were locally observed by Galea, Borg & Chircop (2022) through an Erasmus project, exploring the challenges faced by refugee students and effective support strategies. Participants who reported positive friendships also noted their superficial nature, lacking depth despite being amicable, a reflection consistent with Shaheed & Kiang's (2021) findings on trust in friendships. Despite predominant negative schooling experiences, a minority of participants attributed their positive experiences to successful cultural adaptation, highlighting potential shortcomings in the cultural inclusiveness of the school environment. In all instances, it seems that it was the students who had to change and adapt, rather than the school community. The necessity for students to make the change themselves is concerning, as it may indicate that certain schools are not as inclusive or welcoming as they ought to be. This is because many schools and educators continue to act as if the school community is homogenous, placing the entire burden of adaptation on the immigrant students.

The theme of Belonging uncovered several pertinent findings that directly addressed the research questions of this dissertation. Throughout the interview data, it became apparent that many immigrant students experience a profound sense of longing for their home countries and struggle with

feelings of not belonging, both among their peers and within the classroom environment. Most participants repeatedly expressed these sentiments, highlighting instances of bullying and derogatory name-calling that contribute to their diminished sense of belonging. Comparisons with other immigrant students who do not face such mistreatment reflected the impact on their self-perception and integration efforts.

This research revealed that Arabic-speaking students, although often more adept at learning and using the Maltese language, face higher levels of racism and discrimination compared to their peers from other backgrounds. These findings suggest that linguistic integration alone is insufficient for social inclusion and that there is a critical need for anti-racism initiatives within school environments.

Moreover, the data raised critical concerns about the broader educational system, revealing that students often feel adrift and insufficiently oriented to the school or its administrative processes. This suggests a systemic failing in adequately welcoming students with foreign academic backgrounds into the educational fold. Conversely, participants who reported a stronger sense of belonging at school, often attributed this to the presence of positive friendships. Furthermore, challenges related to religious acceptance were evident, with instances where native students did not readily accept peers of different religious backgrounds participating in school religious festivities, such as Christmas. Such exclusionary experiences, as highlighted by Titzmann and Jugert (2019), significantly undermine immigrant students' sense of belonging, thereby impeding their overall sense of belonging and well-being within the educational milieu.

In conclusion, the comprehensive analysis of all the themes reveals the multifaceted challenges faced by immigrant students in Maltese schools. Discrimination and social exclusion, compounded by inadequate language support and inconsistent teacher empathy, significantly impact these students' educational experiences and sense of belonging. The findings stress the importance of culturally responsive teaching and inclusive practices to mitigate feelings of marginalisation. Despite some positive experiences attributed to cultural adaptation and supportive friendships, the prevailing issues

of bullying, derogatory treatment, and systemic failures in welcoming immigrant students, highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions. Enhancing the school environment's inclusivity and promoting meaningful peer relationships are crucial steps toward improving immigrant students' well-being and sense of belonging within the educational system.

## **Implications**

The following are key implications from this research to consider for better accommodating immigrant students in local schools.

The data revealed several critical implications regarding the experience of immigrant students in Maltese secondary state schools. To foster a more inclusive environment, schools must address both direct and indirect forms of discrimination, such as stereotypes and religious biases. There is an essential need for greater acceptance of visible characteristics, like headscarves or skin colour, which can be fostered through inclusive programmes and multicultural activities. Ensuring cultural relevance across the curriculum necessitates proper teacher continuous professional development. Additionally, the negative impact of discrimination outside school on students' well-being, stresses the importance of broader community engagement to combat public space discrimination.

The theme of Social Alienation and Exclusion also brings to light important implications. The differing experiences between European Christian students and Muslim immigrant students highlight the need for cultural sensitivity workshops for students. More effective enforcement of inclusive policies is crucial, as immigrant students often feel overlooked, indicating a gap between policy and practice that schools must address.

Teacher-student relationships play a vital role in students' enjoyment of lessons, emphasising the importance of training teachers and SLT to create positive, engaging classroom environments that offer a safe space for all learners. Instances where teachers neglect group dynamics indicate a need for professional development in culturally responsive teaching to ensure all students feel included and none are marginalised.

Language barriers played a major role in creating feelings of isolation, highlighting the need for better language support programmes, particularly Maltese lessons for foreigners. The call for more English usage by educators indicates a demand for bilingual or multilingual teaching methods to foster inclusivity. Moreover, inadequate translation of notices marginalises students, highlighting the need for comprehensive translation services within schools. For example, having a member of the SLT translate for non-Maltese speakers and providing notices in English, especially during assembly time, would be beneficial.

The theme of Cultural Adaptation revealed the challenges immigrant students face. The data suggests that students who have lived in Malta for a longer period, adapted more culturally. However, they still recalled initial struggles or continue to face challenges with the school system. Systemic failings in welcoming students with foreign academic backgrounds suggest the need for comprehensive orientation programmes for new immigrant students.

Finally, issues of belonging are evident, with many participants recalling schooling experiences from their home countries or comparing them to their experiences in Malta. This indicates that students may not feel a strong sense of belonging in Malta. The low adaptation rate linked to a lack of cultural inclusiveness in schools highlights the need to foster a culturally diverse and accepting atmosphere. Furthermore, bullying and derogatory name-calling diminished the sense of belonging of the participants, stressing the necessity for effective anti-bullying strategies and supportive peer networks. Positive friendships significantly enhanced school experiences, emphasising the importance of social integration activities in schools.

### **Recommendations for further research**

Given the gap between policy and practice observed in this study, further research could investigate the implementation and effectiveness of inclusive policies in schools. This includes examining the extent to which these policies address the social and educational needs of immigrant students and

identifying best practices that successfully bridge this gap. Comparative studies across different regions or countries with similar immigrant populations could offer broader perspectives on policy efficacy.

There is a need for research focused on the effectiveness of language support programmes in schools, particularly those designed to help immigrant students learn the native language while maintaining their own linguistic identity. Studies could explore different models of bilingual education and their impact on students' social integration, academic achievement, and sense of belonging. Additionally, investigating the role of translation services for critical school communications would provide insights into reducing language-related marginalisation. Researchers interested in this field could also explore teachers' continuous professional development regarding teaching students from different linguistic backgrounds.

Further research should explore the dynamics of peer relationships among immigrant students, focusing on how friendships form and develop in multicultural school settings. Studies could examine the factors that facilitate or hinder meaningful connections between students of different nationalities and backgrounds. Qualitative research, including ethnographic studies, could provide in-depth understanding of these social interactions and the role of school programs in promoting deeper, trust-based friendships.

Given the profound sense of longing and lack of belonging reported by immigrant students, future research should investigate the effectiveness of various emotional and social support systems in schools. Studies could evaluate the impact of counselling services, peer mentoring programmes, and extracurricular activities designed to support immigrant students. Additionally, exploring the role of family and community involvement in enhancing students' sense of belonging would be beneficial.

Further research is needed to understand the challenges related to religious acceptance in schools and to develop strategies for promoting religious tolerance. Studies could assess the impact of educational programmes, both for educators and SLT, aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of different religious practices and their effectiveness in reducing exclusionary behaviours. Research

could also explore the experiences of students from diverse religious backgrounds in participating in school religious activities and the implications for their sense of belonging.

To foster a truly inclusive environment for immigrant students in Maltese secondary state schools, inclusion efforts should also focus on a curriculum that promotes inclusive practices. Integrating multicultural education into the broader school curriculum could provide Maltese students with opportunities to learn about diverse cultures, histories, and perspectives, helping to build empathy and understanding from a young age. Practical strategies might include incorporating multicultural themes across the curriculum as well as creating collaborative projects where students of different backgrounds can share their experiences. Such initiatives could help break down stereotypes, reduce prejudice, and create a more welcoming atmosphere for all students, ultimately enhancing the social cohesion within the school community.

## **Conclusion**

The journey of this research study has been immensely rewarding. From delving into the study area and engaging with the enthusiastic participants, to conducting interviews and writing the dissertation, the researcher has found great satisfaction in contributing to the improvement of immigrant students' lives. The experiences shared by these students, along with the emotions they expressed when discussing what they have left behind, deeply resonate with those who can be of help towards them. The researcher aimed to depict their experiences as accurately as possible and to interpret the data in a meaningful way. By outlining the study's implications and offering recommendations for future research, the researcher hopes this work will inspire others in the field to make incremental changes in the Maltese educational system. These small adjustments, while seemingly minor, could significantly impact the lives of immigrant students as they build new futures in our country.

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# APPENDICES

## **Appendix 1:**

### **FREC Approval**





## **Appendix 2:**

### **Parents' information letter and consent form**

**20<sup>th</sup> December 2022**

***Parents' information letter and Consent Form***

*Dear Sir/Madam,*

My name is Anna Maria Salerno and I am a student at the University of Malta, reading for a Master in Access to Education in Inclusive Schools and Communities. I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled 'The Experiences of Immigrant Students in Maltese Secondary State Schools.' This is being supervised by Dr Louise Chircop. This letter is an invitation to allow your child to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your child's involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study is to explore the academic and social experiences of immigrant students in local secondary state schools. This study will be held from the students' perspective for it to be as authentic as possible. Your child's participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of such experiences. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study. Should you choose to give permission for your child to participate, they will be asked to take part in an interview about their personal experiences at school.

The interviews will be audio recorded and the data will be stored in an encrypted format on a password protected device, which only myself and my supervisor will have access to. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to give permission for your child to participate, without needing to give a reason. Your child is also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for them. Should your child choose to withdraw, any data collected from the interview will be erased, unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymized form.

If your child is allowed to participate, and they choose to do so, please note that their participation would enhance our understanding of migrant students' experience in Maltese schools. Your child's participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks. Please also note that, as a participant, you and your child have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning your child to be erased. All data collected will be retained in anonymous form, upon completion of study.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor via the emails listed below.

Sincerely,

Anna Maria Salerno

*Anna Maria Salerno*  
[anna.maria.salerno.15@um.edu.mt](mailto:anna.maria.salerno.15@um.edu.mt)

*Dr Louise Chircop*  
[louise.chircop@um.edu.mt](mailto:louise.chircop@um.edu.mt)

I, the undersigned, give my consent to my son/daughter to take part in the study conducted by Anna Maria Salerno. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that my son/daughter is free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should my son/daughter choose to participate, my son/daughter may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. If I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected will be erased as long as this is technically possible, unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymized form.
3. I understand that my son/daughter has been invited to participate in a semi-structured interview in which the researcher will interview my son/daughter about my experiences of attending a local secondary state school to explore such experiences. I am aware that this interview will take approximately half an hour and it will be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for us.
4. I understand that my child's participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.
5. I understand that there are no direct benefits to my child from participating in this study, however, its findings will benefit society as a whole.
6. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, my son/daughter has the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning my son/daughter to be erased.
7. I understand that all data collected will be stored in an anonymised form on completion of the study and following publication of results.
8. I give my consent for this interview to be audio recorded and reproduced in anonymous form by the use of pseudonyms.
9. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and also a copy of this consent form.

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**If you would like your son/daughter to participate in this study, kindly fill in the consent form on the following paper and send it directly to my email address: [anna.maria.salerno.15@um.edu.mt](mailto:anna.maria.salerno.15@um.edu.mt) or call me on 99342931 to confirm participation.**

I have read and understood the above statements and give consent to my son/daughter to participate in this study.

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Name of parent in block letters

---

parent's signature

---

Name of participant

---

Date

## **Appendix 3:**

### **Ittra b'informazzjoni għall-Ġenituri/Kuraturi**

**20 ta' Dicembru 2022**

***Ittra b'informazzjoni għall-Ġenituri/Kuraturi***

*Għażiż ġenitur/kuratur,*

Jien jisimni Anna Maria Salerno u bħalissa qiegħda insegwi kors fl-Universita` ta' Malta dwar l-Inklużjoni. Bħala parti minn dan il-kors, qiegħda nagħmel studju dwar l-esperjenzi ta' studenti immigranti fl-iskejjel Maltin, li qiegħed isir taħt is-supervizjoni ta' Dr Louise Chircop. Din l-ittra qiegħda tiġi mogħtija lilkom bħala invit sabiex tkeggu lit-tfal tagħkom jipparteċipaw. Hawn taħt għandkom issibu l-informazzjoni kollha dwar dan l-istudju.

L-għan ta' dan l-istudju hu li jiġu esplorati l-esperjenzi akkademiċi u soċjali li dawn l-istudenti jgħaddu minnhom ta' kuljum fl-iskejjel tagħhom. Jekk it-tfal tagħkom jipparteċipaw, ikunu qegħdin jikkontribwixxu sabiex dawn l-esperjenzi jiġu mifhuma aħjar. It-tfal tagħkom ser jiġu mitluba jieħdu sehem f'intervista ta' madwar nofs siegħa u l-informazzjoni li toħrog f'din l-intervista ser tibqa' anonima.

L-intervisti ser jiġu rrekordjati u l-informazzjoni ser tinzamm sikura permezz ta' password, sabiex hekk inkunu nistgħu naċċessawha biss jiena u Dr Louise Chircop. Il-parteeċipazzjoni tat-tfal tagħkom hija waħda volontarja u jistgħu jieqfu minn dan l-istudju bla ebda konsegwenzi.

Filwaqt li niringrazzjakom tal-ħin tagħkom, inhegġeg lil uliedkom jieħdu sehem. Jekk ikollkom bżonn ta' xi għajjnuna dwar dan l-istudju, nitlobkom tikkuntattjawni fuq l-imejl mehmuż hawn taħt.

Dejjem tagħkom,

Anna Maria Salerno

[anna.maria.salerno.15@um.edu.mt](mailto:anna.maria.salerno.15@um.edu.mt)

Dr Louise Chircop

[louise.chircop@um.edu.mt](mailto:louise.chircop@um.edu.mt)

## **Il-kunsens tal-ġenitur/gwardjan**

- 1 Niddikjara li qrajt l-informazzjoni fuq in-natura tal-istudju, fuq l-involvement tagħna u fuq l-immaniġġjar tal-informazzjoni.
- 2 Kelli l-opportunità nistaqsi dwar l-istudju u l-mistoqsijiet tiegħi ġew imwiegħba b'mod sodisfaċenti.
- 3 Nifhem li t-tifel/it-tifla tiegħi qed jiġi/tiġi invitat/a sabiex tipparteċipa fl-istudju msemmi hawn fuq billi tiegħu sehem f'intervista`.
- 4 Nifhem li dan l-istudju ma fih l-ebda riskji.
- 5 Nifhem ukoll li ibni/binti mhux ser tibbenefika direttament minn dan l-istudju iżda jekk tipparteċipa ser tkun qed tgħin ħafna lill-komunita`.
- 6 Nifhem li jekk għandi iżjed mistoqsijiet, nista' nikkuntattja lil Anna Maria Salerno jew lil Dr Louise Chircop.
- 7 Naqbel li ibni/binti jipparteċipa/tipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju.
- 8 Naqbel li l-informazzjoni miġbura tkun użata biss għall-fini ta' dan l-istudju.
- 9 Nikkonferma li qrajt sew l-informazzjoni dwar l-istudju hawn fuq.

---

**Jekk tixtieq tagħti l-kunsens lil ibnek/bintek sabiex jipparteċipa/tipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju, nitolbok timla din il-formula u tibgħathieli fuq dan l-imejl: [anna.maria.salerno.15@um.edu.mt](mailto:anna.maria.salerno.15@um.edu.mt) jew inkella ċempilli fuq 99342931 sabiex tikkonferma li ibnek/bintek ser jipparteċipaw.**

Jiena niddikjara li qrajt sewwa l-informazzjoni dwar dan l-istudju u nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi lil-ibni/binti sabiex jieħu/tieħu sehem.

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Isem il-ġenitur/gwardjan (b'ittri kbar)

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Il-firma tal-ġenitur/gwardjan

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Isem il-partecipant/a

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Data

## **Appendix 4:**

### **Students' information letter and assent form**

**20<sup>th</sup> December 2022**

***Students' information letter and assent form***

***Dear Student,***

My name is Anna Maria Salerno and I am a student at the University of Malta. I am reading for a Master in Access to Education in Inclusive Schools and Communities. I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled 'The Experiences of Immigrant Students in Maltese Secondary State Schools.' This is being supervised by Dr Louise Chircop. . The aim of my study is to explore the experiences of immigrant students in local secondary state schools. For this reason, I would like to ask you to participate in my study by allowing me to interview you about your life at school.

The interview shall be recorded, but only I will listen to it. The recording will be saved in a password protected device. You take part in the study only if you want to. If you do not want to participate, that is fine. If you participate and decide to stop, that is fine as well. If you decide to stop participating, and tell me in time, the information you would have given me shall not be used. No one will know who you are, and if I quote you in my dissertation, I will use a pseudonym. This means I will use another name instead of yours, to make sure no one will know who you are.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor on the emails listed below. If you would like to participate in this study, kindly fill in the assent form on the following paper and return it to your Head of School.

Sincerely,

Anna Maria Salerno

---

*Anna Maria Salerno*  
[anna.maria.salerno.15@um.edu.mt](mailto:anna.maria.salerno.15@um.edu.mt)

*Dr Louise Chircop*  
[louise.chircop@um.edu.mt](mailto:louise.chircop@um.edu.mt)

***Student's assent form***

I confirm that I have read and understood the *Participant Information Sheet* for this study and that I have had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study. On the basis of the information given, I give my assent to Anna Maria Salerno to:

- Interview me about my experiences at school.
- Audio record our discussions.

I give my assent on condition that:

- The audio recordings will be stored safely and are only accessible to Anna Maria Salerno and Dr L. Chircop
- I am free to stop any time without having to explain why.
- My real name will not be used at any time in any write-up about the study.

Student's name

Student's signature

Date

*Anna Maria Salerno*  
[anna.maria.salerno.15@um.edu.mt](mailto:anna.maria.salerno.15@um.edu.mt)

*Dr Louise Chircop*  
[louise.chircop@um.edu.mt](mailto:louise.chircop@um.edu.mt)

## **Appendix 5:**

### **Ittra b'informazzjoni għall-istudenti**

**20 ta' Dicembru 2022**

***Ittra b'informazzjoni għall-istudenti***

*Għażiż student,*

Jiena jisimni Anna Maria Salerno u bħalissa qiegħda nistudja fl-Universita` ta' Malta dwar l-inklużjoni. Bħala parti minn dan l-istudju nixtieq nitlob l-għajnuna tagħkom billi tiegħdu sehem f'intervista, ta' madwar nofsija, li ser nagħmel dwar l-esperjenza tagħkom fl-iskejjel sekondarji. Dan l-istudju ser isir taħt is-superviżjoni ta' Dr Louise Chircop. L-għan ta' dan l-istudju hu li jinħarġu l-esperjenzi akkademiċi u soċjali ta' studenti immigranti fl-iskejjel Maltin.

Inti wkoll liberu/a li twaqqaf il-partecipazzjoni fl-istudju meta tixtieq, mingħajr ma jkollok tagħti spjegazzjoni u mingħajr ebda riperkussjoni. Jekk tagħzel li tirtira mir-riċerka, l-informazzjoni li tkun laqgħet ittiegħdet fl-intervista miegħek tithassar dment li dan ikun teknikament possibbli (ngħidu aħna, qabel ma tiġi anonimizzata jew ippubblikata), u sakemm l-għanijiet tar-riċerka jkunu jistgħu jintlaħqu u ma jintlaqtux serjament. F'dak il-każ, l-informazzjoni tiegħek tintuża u tinzamm anonima.

Jekk tagħzel li tippartecipa, tajjeb tkun taf li m'hemm l-ebda benefiċċju dirett għalik. Il-partecipazzjoni tiegħek ma fiha l-ebda riskju magħruf. L-informazzjoni miġbura ser tintuża biss għal dan l-istudju. Jekk jogħġbok innota li, bħala partecipant/a, skont ir-Regolament Ġenerali dwar il-Protezzjoni tad-Data (GDPR) u l-legiżlazzjoni nazzjonali, għandek dritt li taċċessa, tikkoreġi u, fejn hu applikabbli, titlob li l-informazzjoni li tikkonċernak tithassar.

Dejjem tiegħek,

Anna Maria

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*Anna Maria Salerno*  
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*Dr Louise Chircop*  
[louise.chircop@um.edu.mt](mailto:louise.chircop@um.edu.mt)

### Il-kunsens tal-partecipant/a

- 1 Niddikjara li qrajt l-informazzjoni fuq in-natura tal-istudju, fuq l-involviment tiegħi u fuq l-immanigġjar tal-informazzjoni.
- 2 Kelli l-opportunità nistaqsi dwar l-istudju u l-mistoqsijiet tiegħi ġew imwiegħba b'mod sodisfaċenti.
- 3 Nifhem li jekk għandi iżjed mistoqsijiet, nista' nikkuntattja lil Anna Maria Salerno jew lil Dr Louise Chircop.
- 4 Naqbel li nipparteċipa f'din ir-riċerka.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Isem il-partecipant/a (b'ittri kbar)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Il-firma tal-partecipant/a

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Anna Maria Salerno*  
[anna.maria.salerno.15@um.edu.mt](mailto:anna.maria.salerno.15@um.edu.mt)

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Dr Louise Chircop*  
[louise.chircop@um.edu.mt](mailto:louise.chircop@um.edu.mt)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Data

## **Appendix 6:**

### **Permission to conduct research in state schools**

Dear Ms Salerno,

Further to your application to carry out research in state schools, I am pleased to inform you that your application has been approved by the MEYR Research Ethics Committee within the Office of The **Director** General, Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department.

Attached please find the Research Authorisation Letter, which is also being forwarded to the Head of School where you intend to carry out the research. ***Kindly forward the acceptance email from the Head of School, prior to commencing research.***

Please do get in touch with the Head of School so that they are aware of the timeframe during which you intend to carry out the research. You should be aware that this research is not the only research carried out in State schools.

Wishing you luck with your research.

Kind regards,

Claire Mamo

MA Ed (Open)

Secretary, MEYR Research Ethics Committee



## **Appendix 7:**

### **Request for permission from Heads of Schools**

7<sup>th</sup> February 2023

### **Request for permission from Heads of School**

Dear Head of School,

My name is Anna Maria Salerno and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master in Access to Education in Inclusive Schools and Communities. I am presently conducting a research study for my thesis titled 'The Experiences of Immigrant Students in Maltese Secondary State Schools'. This study aims to explore the academic and social experiences of immigrant students in local secondary state schools. This project is being conducted under the supervision of Dr Louise Chircop.

The aim of my study is to explore the academic and social experiences of immigrant students in local secondary state schools. This study will be held from the students' perspective for it to be as authentic as possible. I would like to kindly ask for your permission to conduct research in your school, since you have a high number of migrant students attending. Should you accept, I kindly ask you to distribute information letters, consent and assent forms to parents of migrant students who have been in Malta for these past two years. Those who accept to participate in my study can contact me through the email provided.

Participation will be entirely voluntary, and participants will be free to withdraw at any point, without any repercussions. Data collected will be stored in an encrypted format on a password protected device, which only myself and my supervisor will have access to.

Should you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor; both our contact details are provided below.

Thank you for your kind consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Anna Maria Salerno

Dr Louise Chircop

[anna.maria.salerno.15@um.edu.mt](mailto:anna.maria.salerno.15@um.edu.mt)

[louise.chircop@um.edu.mt](mailto:louise.chircop@um.edu.mt)

## **Appendix 8:**

### **Confidential agreement with Heads of school**

17th April 2024

*Dear Head of School,*

I hope you are well. I am Anna Maria Salerno and I have recently conducted research involving participants from your school. I am writing this email to formally request your assistance in maintaining the confidentiality of these participants for ethical reasons.

As you are aware, your cooperation and support were invaluable in facilitating my research at your school. I am immensely grateful for the assistance provided by you and all the SLT.

In order to uphold ethical standards and protect the privacy of the students involved, I kindly ask for your signature on the attached document. By signing this document, you agree not to disclose any information regarding the students who participated in my research, nor to reveal their identities under any circumstances.

I consider this request a crucial step in ensuring the integrity and ethical conduct of my research, and I sincerely appreciate your cooperation in this matter.

Once again, I extend my heartfelt gratitude for your unwavering support and assistance.

Warm regards,

*Anna Maria Salerno*

*MA Inclusive Education*

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#### Confidential Agreement

I, \_\_\_\_\_, Head of \_\_\_\_\_, hereby affirm and pledge to maintain the confidentiality of the students from my school who participated in the research study conducted by Ms Anna Maria Salerno and that is supervised by Dr- Louise Chircop. I undertake not to disclose any information regarding the participants' identities or provide any details pertaining to their involvement in the study.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 9:**

### **Semi-structured interview questions**

## *The Experiences of immigrant students in local Secondary State Schools*

### The Semi-Structured Interview:

1. *How long have you been living in Malta?*
2. *How long have you been attending school in Malta?*
3. *Have you ever changed school in Malta? If so, how did you feel?*
4. *Can you tell me about your experience at school?*
5. *What do you like most about school?*
6. *What do you like least about school?*
7. *Which lessons are your favourite, and why?*
8. *Which lessons are your least favourite, and why?*
9. *How would you describe your relationship with your friends?*
10. *If you has to change something at school, what would it be? Why?*
11. *If you were the Head of school for a day, what would you do?*
12. *Who are your friends and what do you like about them?*

# **Appendix 10:**

## **Coding samples**

4. Can you tell me about your experience at school?	Primary Coding	Secondary Coding
I was very happy when I attended school in Spain. My experience there was amazing. Here I am finding it very difficult. They do not want me to be their friend. In all the countries I've been to, I always made friends easily at school but here in Malta, I cannot.	Finding it difficult in Malta: <b>cultural adaptation and integration.</b>	Was happier in Spain and was much easier there to make friends: <b>Social alienation and Exclusion.</b>
It was hard to start getting along with people here. I noticed a big difference between the private school and this school. I still prefer being here but sometimes they look at you differently because you are a foreigner.	<b>Cultural adaptation and integration:</b> "they look at you differently because you are foreigner."	The comparison between experiences in a private school and a different educational setting highlights issues of <b>social stratification and privilege</b> , suggesting potential disparities in social dynamics and interactions.
	<b>Perceptions of Foreignness and Otherness:</b> The observation that individuals may be treated differently because of their status as foreigners invites an examination of stereotypes and prejudices.	
	<b>Issues of belonging:</b> The tension between preferring the current environment despite experiencing discrimination as a foreigner prompts an exploration of how individuals negotiate their identities and sense of belonging in diverse social settings.	

It is generally well. But I like to make friends with people from Syria mostly. Maltese people are ok with me too and the teachers respect me. I like the teachers here, but they are not all the same.	<b>Cultural adaptation and integration:</b> "I like to make friends with people from Syria mostly."	<b>Teacher-Student Relationships and Academic Engagement:</b> exploring the differences in experiences with different teachers offers insights into the role of teacher-student relationships in fostering academic engagement, motivation, and student success.
It was quite fine. I feel ok. Sometimes children at school call me a terrorist because of my veil. But now they do not comment like they used to before.	Adaptability.	
I feel ok with my friends and with the teachers. Even though I don't understand what goes on during the lesson. The lessons are hard sometimes.	<b>Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Education:</b> Considering the potential impact of language barriers on lesson comprehension raises questions about the role of cultural and linguistic diversity in educational settings and the promotion of inclusive learning environments.	<b>Teacher Pedagogy and Instructional Methods:</b> Investigating the effectiveness of teacher pedagogy and instructional methods in facilitating students understanding and engagement can offer recommendations for improving teaching practices and curriculum design.
I like it here in Malta because it is not so strict. In other countries the form teacher was the teacher for all the lessons but here it's different. The teachers are very strict there too... here it's much better.	<b>Teacher-Student Relationships:</b> The observation of differences in strictness among teachers prompts an investigation into the dynamics of teacher-student relationships, including the impact of disciplinary styles on students' behaviour and academic performance.	<b>Educational Systems and Teaching Practices:</b> A comparison of educational systems and teaching practices between Malta and other countries could be explored to understand the differences in teacher roles, classroom management, and disciplinary approaches.
I am happy here.	Adaptability.	

6. What do you dislike most about school?	Primary Coding	Secondary Coding
That I stay alone during break.	<b>Social exclusion and loneliness:</b> The mention of staying alone during break suggests a theme related to social isolation, highlighting the experience of feeling disconnected or excluded from social interactions during leisure periods.	
If you asked me this question when I first entered, I would have said the school system. No one introduces us to the system, and I felt so lost. Now I feel a bit better, but I still remember how lost and confused I was at the beginning.	<b>Sense of Belonging and integration:</b> The experience of feeling lost and then gradually feeling better <u>highlights</u> themes of belonging and integration within the school community, underscoring the significance of social connections and familiarity with the school system in fostering a sense of belonging.	
I will have to reply with teachers too but not the ones I was speaking of. There are teachers who shout and yell all the time especially when you don't understand something they say. I am from Syria, and I learned Maltese <u>really well</u> but sometimes there are words which I still don't always understand. And they think I am making fun of them, but I would not. I do not make fun of teachers because in my country we respect teachers a lot. For example, I would be walking in the corridor and for no reason I get called a terrorist or other students start yelling Allahu Akbar. I feel that I have a stigma on myself because I am Muslim.	<b>Religious Discrimination and Stereotyping:</b> The experiences of being called derogatory names and facing religious discrimination highlight the theme of religious discrimination and stereotyping, underscoring the challenges faced by individuals with different faiths.	

I will say teachers again here but not the ones I was speaking of but the teachers who shout for every little thing. I don't like them. I also dislike walking to school because when people see me walking with hijab, they start saying bad things about me. The most recent one was a man in street saying that I must either take this thing off my head or else go back.	<b>Pedagogical Approaches and Teaching Styles:</b> The preference for certain teaching styles over others suggests a theme related to pedagogical approaches and teaching styles, emphasising the importance of employing effective and respectful methods of instruction to engage and motivate students.	<b>Cultural Sensitivity and Respect:</b> The aversion to teachers who shout for every little thing underscores the theme of cultural sensitivity and respect, emphasising the importance of creating inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment where all students feel valued and respected.
The design lesson. I really don't like it. The lessons depend on the teachers. When something happens in class teachers always shout at me first, even when they don't know what happened yet, because they think I am troublesome, and they think it is always my fault.	Pedagogical approaches and teaching.	
Homework.	Pedagogical approaches.	
It is very packed. There are lots of students.		
They generalise. Lots of students misbehave and do not do their work. When the teachers address us, it is as if they look at everyone in the same way. But I am not like them. I obey.	<b>Perception and Stereotyping:</b> The participant's feeling that teachers "look at everyone in the same way" reflects a theme of perception and stereotyping. This theme explores how individuals are often judged or treated based on generalisations or stereotypes, rather than as unique individuals with their own behaviours and motivations.	
Some lessons especially the ones that are boring.	Pedagogical approaches.	

9. How would you describe your relationship with your friends?	Primary Coding	Secondary Coding
<p>In Spain I was very happy and even in the other countries. But here I do not have any friends. I always try to make friends with different students, but they don't like me. there are people I like but they tell me bad things and they don't want to play with me during break. Last time I tried to play a board game with other students to make friends with them. But they didn't let me play with them and they were saying bad things about me. The only friend that I had went abroad now. In German there is one guy I speak to, but I don't find him during break. I try to make friends with others, but they come up with excuses like I don't know how to speak in English, but I know how to speak. I think they just want me to feel bad. Sometimes they ask me for money. They tell me if you want to be our friend give us money, so I do not give them and then I don't have friends.</p>	<p><b>Social Isolation and Loneliness:</b> The predominant theme revolves around the participant's struggle with social isolation and loneliness. Despite efforts to make friends and connect with others, he experiences rejection and alienation, leading to feelings of sadness and frustration.</p>	<p><b>Cultural Differences, Discrimination and Bullying:</b> The mention of language barriers and cultural differences suggests a theme of discrimination and prejudice. The participant feels marginalised and mistreated, facing stereotypes and discriminatory behaviour based on his background or nationality. Bullying also comes into play as the participant encounters negative treatment from peers.</p>
<p>I have friends, but they are not my BIG friends. They are just my school friends. Not my best friends. I used to not get along with Maltese students because they were all racist towards me. Now it is a bit better. I feel like I am more open, and I feel that I could ignore some things that they say and still be their friend.</p>	<p><b>Racism and Discrimination:</b> This participant had to change his ways in order to be accepted. He feels that now he is more "open" and is also ignoring certain comments. This shows the racism and discrimination this student faces at school.</p>	

<p>Before they used to be more racist than they are now. Now they comment less. So now I could be their friend. Some people used to make fun of the fact that I'm foreigner and it used to be so bad. Now they still comment and say these things but maybe not always in a mean way. I kind of got used to them too so I think I changed and now I could be their friend. Sometimes they still joke about my country but now they do it in a funny way. They don't like my culture. I used to be mad before. It was very hurtful. I used to tell them "<u>what do you mean? I came here to study what is wrong with my country?</u>". They used to say that bad things happen in Colombia and Mexico, and they were afraid of me because they thought I was a bad person. even now there are people that still make fun of my country. But I don't understand why, and it is very offensive. Like there's nothing bad with me or my family and there are good and bad people in every country. The relationship with my friends from this school is a bit vague and I don't trust them a lot. I have more friends outside of school. Those are very good friends and friends that I can trust. They are my Colombian friends.</p>		
<p>My friends are Mostly Syrian. But I have some Libyan friends as well and even Maltese friends. I like them and with Syrian people I can be myself.</p>	<p><b>Identity and Belonging:</b> Through their friendships, the participant may explore themes of identity and belonging within their cultural community. Friendship</p>	

	with individuals from similar backgrounds can contribute to a sense of belonging and validation of one's cultural identity.	
It is fine. They are mostly Syrian. To be honest I feel more comfortable with them. But Maltese people are sweet too and I like them.	Prefers Syrian students/friends because she is most comfortable with them.	Has a good relationship with Maltese students.
I am ok with them.		
They are nice and we have a nice relationship.		
It's ok. I like them.		
Generally fine... but... I think I am a very strong person because of what I've lived and seen so there are things I ignore. If I had to look at the little things... I would complain... because I don't think people like me here... I feel it and I think it is because I cover my hair. I don't have many friends here... I am shy... and sometimes I see other kids laughing at me... I have one friend though... she's very nice and she's Libyan too! Not from my city though.	<b>Shyness and Social Anxiety:</b> The theme of shyness and social anxiety emerges as the individual acknowledges their difficulty in forming friendships and interacting with peers. These feelings may contribute to a sense of isolation and hinder their ability to connect with others.	
The friends I spend most of the time with are Santea and Rayan. Santea is from Macedonia, but she was born here, and Rayan is half Maltese and half Libyan. We stay together in breaks and on weekends we also meet sometimes. Rayan joined the school in the same year as mine so it's like we connected immediately. Our personalities match, and we agree on many	<b>Cultural Diversity and Friendship:</b> This extract highlights the theme of cultural diversity within friendships, as the participant's friends come from different cultural backgrounds (Macedonian, Maltese, Libyan). Despite cultural differences, these friendships are characterised by mutual understanding and compatibility.	

things. I immediately felt included with them. With my classmates, however, we get along but I don't speak to them very much and we are not close, because I am not the type of person who likes big groups so when I found my small circle it's like I didn't feel the need to make more friends.		
We do not agree on everything because they have different cultures, but respect knows no cultures and in my opinion we can all respect our friends and be nice to each other. That is the most important thing. As I said there are other children who don't like me because they say that if I am in Malta, I should speak Maltese. I need more time though because Maltese is a difficult language for me. I feel like a fish out of the water. Sometimes when the teacher is speaking in Maltese I start drawing because I don't like staring and not understanding anything. Even during assembly, they speak in Maltese and sometimes there are important notices. I feel silly because I wouldn't know what's going on. It is a bit frustrating to be honest.	<b>Sense of Belonging and Alienation:</b> The participant describes feeling like a "fish out of water" due to the challenges faced with Maltese language, which contribute to a sense of alienation and disconnection from her peers and school community. This theme explores the psychological impact of language barriers on feelings of belonging and inclusion.	<b>Language barriers and integration:</b> The theme of language barriers and integration is prominent, particularly in the context of the participant's struggle with learning the Maltese language. She expresses frustration and feelings of alienation due to her difficulty understanding Maltese, which affects her ability to fully participate in classroom activities and school events.

## **Appendix 11:**

### **Transcript sample**

**How long have you been living in Malta?**

Around 3 months.

**How long have you been attending school in Malta?**

Almost three months.

**So you immediately started school once you arrived in Malta?**

No, we moved here around nearly 4 months ago and then I started school after a month. I have been attending this school for 3 months now.

**Have you ever changed schools in Malta?**

This is my first school in Malta.

**Did you go to other schools abroad?**

Yes, I went to many different schools. I've been in two different schools in Spain, one in Poland, two in China and one in Singapore.

**If you had to think about your schooling experience so far, in which country would you say you were most happy at school?**

I was very happy when I attended school in Spain. My experience there was amazing. Sometimes students laugh about me being from Spain because they say that there are many thieves there".

**Why do you think you were mostly happy in Spain?**

There I had some good friends.

**But can't you make friends here too?**

No, here I am finding it very difficult. They do not want me to be their friend. In all the countries I've been to I always made friends easily at school but here in Malta I cannot.

**What do you think was different from your classmates in Spain and the ones at this school?**

I don't know. But in Spain I was very happy and even in the other countries. But here I do not have any friends.

**Why do you think you don't have any friends here?**

I always try to make friends with different students, but they don't like me. For example, one day during a lesson, did not want to work with me in a group during a lesson, so I ended up alone.

**Didn't the teachers notice this situation?**

They do notice, and they ask me why I prefer working alone, but I do not tell them, firstly because I don't want the students to hear me and secondly because it is in vain. Every time I tried to talk to any teacher, nothing really happened, even if they [the teachers] are very nice to me, the situation with the students remains the same.

**Don't you ever work with other students in class?**

I do, sometimes, the only problem is that when we do groupwork I am the only one working. The others are just talking.

**And when the teacher asks you to work with other students, does it work?**

The only problem is that when we do groupwork I am the only one working. The others are just talking. There are teachers who pretend they do not notice me doing all the work, but they do get angry when this situation happens in other groups. I don't really know but sometimes I notice that when this happens in other groups the teacher helps the students who are working but ignores me. This doesn't happen in all subjects but only some of them with some teachers.

**Therefore, you do work with other students sometimes.**

I prefer to work on my own, however, there are some teachers that do not allow us this option, but I still end up doing all the work. It is just because I have to, because if it is up to me, I prefer working alone.

**Isn't there anyone you can connect with? Maybe during any lesson?**

Yes, there are people I like but they tell me bad things and they don't want to play with me during break.

**And apart from these people, aren't there other people you could be friends with? Maybe someone from a different class?**

Yes. Last time I tried to play a board game with other students to make friends with them. But ... they didn't let me play with them and they were saying bad things about me. The only friend that I had went abroad now.

**During break, who do you stay with?**

I am alone.

**How would you describe your experience here at school?**

I am not so happy because I do not have any friends. I am always sitting alone during lessons. I also eat alone during break.

**Where are these students mostly from? Maltese/ from other countries?**

They are mixed. I only talk to some people from Ukraine, but I do not have any Maltese friends.

**Is there a reason why you never tried to befriend any Maltese students?**

No, I just try to make friends with anyone. I don't care if they are of here or of any other country. But even Maltese people pass comments because I speak in English. Then I love some teachers mostly the German teacher and the science teachers.

**Why do you prefer these lessons over the others?**

Because I love the lesson and the teachers speak in English. They always speak in English. So, I can understand the lesson. In Maltese I don't understand because the teacher speaks in Maltese, and I can't understand.

**Ok. So, what do you like most about school? It could be anything you like about school, not just the lessons. It could be someone / something.**

I love the lessons I told you about. The science lesson and the German lesson.

**If you had to change something from school, what would it be?**

I would make sure that all students are treated equally, and no one is being hurt or left alone.

**Do you have friends in these classes?**

Yes, in German there is one guy I speak to, but I don't find him during break. I try to make friends with others, but they come up with excuses like I don't know how to speak in English, but I know how to speak. I think they just want me to feel bad. Sometimes they ask me for money. They tell me if you want to be our friend give us money, so I do not give them and then I don't have friends.

**Is there anything else you would like to add?**

No, thank you!

**Thanks for your participation!**