Studies in Social Wellbeing

An Open Access Journal

Volume 3 Issue 2, 2024
ISSN: 3007-4479

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This is an international journal published by the Faculty for Social Wellbeing, University of Malta.

Studies in Social Wellbeing -
ISSN: 3007-4479

About the Journal

Studies in Social Wellbeing (SSW) is an online, peer-reviewed, open access journal with an international focus on topics related to wellbeing from a social perspective. We look for contributions that engage with research that promotes wellbeing, inclusion, equity and equality. Contributions are welcome from scholars carrying out research in a broad range of areas related to wellbeing, including but not limited to counselling, criminology, disability studies, family studies, gender studies, gerontology, psychology, sociology, public health, social policy and social work, and youth and community studies. Our journal aims to promote original research which crosses disciplinary boundaries in an effort to stimulate knowledge-sharing in areas related to social wellbeing. The journal aims to have a broad scope, covering research from a wide range of academic disciplines, whilst also encouraging research papers with a niche focus on wellbeing. We encourage contributions from practitioners presenting their research or reflecting on their practice, as well as from post-graduate students. Co-authored interdisciplinary research articles are particularly welcome. The journal does not adhere to any single type of methodology; inviting qualitative and quantitative research studies that draw on various psycho-social approaches and philosophical orientations. The journal is owned and managed by the Faculty for Social Wellbeing, University of Malta. It only publishes manuscripts in English.

Peer Review Process

Manuscripts submitted to Studies in Social Wellbeing are subject to a rigorous process of peer review by at least two reviewers with a relevant academic background and expertise.

Open Access Policy

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This is an international journal published by the Faculty for Social Wellbeing, University of Malta.

Studies in Social Wellbeing, Volume 3: Issue 2: 6-9

ISSN 3007-4479 / https://www.um.edu.mt/ssw

Editorial

Maureen Cole
Editor-in-chief

The multiple challenges to social wellbeing experienced in many of the world's contexts undoubtedly draw different responses from us depending on whether we are amid a war zone or cursorily viewing those war zones on our devices. The risks for the former group are death, destruction, injury, pain, loss, sadness, hunger and more. The significant risk for the latter group is complacency. A complacency which makes us callous and uncaring. On the contrary, I hope that you are called to compassion and not to complacency when you encounter such situations.

Wood (2025), draws on Grayling who in 2022 stressed that compassion is an active step which goes beyond simply acknowledging distress and feeling sympathy:

> It is to feel as we say, moved – though too often, now, people use this term to mean simply an emotion, a feeling, rather than a state which impels one to act. Merely to feel is static, whereas to do is active: that is what 'being moved' properly means; and it is what compassion therefore means (p.5).

I augur that the contributions in this third issue of Studies in Social Wellbeing (SiSW) will draw you to compassion and therefore to action. This is in line with the journal's vision and that of the Faculty for Social Wellbeing, University of Malta, which is outward-looking, engaged with communities, and deeply committed to promoting wellbeing, inclusion, equity, equality and social justice.

In an article entitled 'Affinity and Connection: Maltese people's links to their locality'

(pp.10-40) Azzopardi, M.G. Vella, and G. Vella, explore Maltese people's connections to their locality. This study is timely in view of the fast-paced changes that have affected certain localities in Malta. They draw on a telephone survey of a representative sample of the population (n-400). Their findings indicate that most of their sample had lived in the locality for more than ten years with a good percentage having resided there most of their lives. The respondents expressed a strong connection to their locality which they conveyed through their sense of belonging and participation in social and cultural events. The researchers note that this sense of belonging was lowest for residents in the Northern district and was highest amongst Gozitans.

Gravina shares his interesting critical reflections on the reactions and reverberations that followed the publication of a report entitled 'A Proposal Towards the Definition and Estimates of the National Living Income in Malta' (Gravina et al., 2022). As one of the co-researchers, the author describes and discusses the contents of the Report in a paper entitled 'Charting household wellbeing in Malta. Critical reflections by a member of the research group on the reception of the group's proposed definition and estimates of the National Minimum Income in Malta' (pp. 41-68). The working definition adopted for a National Living Income was "the net annual income required for a household in Malta to afford a decent standard of living for all members of that household". Drawing on both primary and secondary data a representation of households emerged. This showed the inequality in Maltese society where certain households were clearly living in conditions below the decent standard indicated for them. As the results were discussed in several public fora, Gravina adopts notions from Antonio Gramsci's conceptual armature as developed in his Prison Notebooks to analyse the way in which civil and political society engaged with the National Living Income study.

The contribution by Fugaban Puntawe, Zammit, Camilleri and Caruana likewise adopts a critically reflective stance to present the inspiring experience of a collaborative workshop held with a view to nurturing artists' creativity and well-being through nature. This formed part of the

SPRING Artistic Programme for Emerging Artists of the Gabriel Caruana Foundation (GCF). Artists, well-being facilitators and environmental educators from the GCF, the Centre for Environmental Education Research (CEER) and the International Master in Adult Education for Social Change (IMAESC) at the University of Malta for this workshop. The authors reflect on how the cross-pollination of different disciplines with a place-based learner-centric pedagogy enhances social well-being, creativity and sustainability. Their piece, entitled 'Cross-pollination for social-well-being: An interdisciplinary pedagogy linking art, nature, and well-being' (pp.69-95) includes some valuable recommendations for practice and research.

D'Amico and Psaila, present an informative semi-systematic literature review on therapeutic trauma-informed practice for helping professionals in child and adolescent welfare settings. This paper, entitled 'Therapeutic Trauma-informed practice for helping professionals in child and adolescent social welfare settings: a semi-systematic review' (pp. 96-134) uses thematic analysis to map and describe how trauma-informed principles that are so key in such settings can be applied through therapeutic skills. Nineteen peer-reviewed articles published between 2000-2024 were analysed. The themes identified include skills and interventions such as the use of embodied and creative expression, systemic interventions, the importance of narratives and emotional regulation and the importance of human connection. The paper promotes practice and services based on trauma-informed principles and therapeutic competence to be able to meet the needs of children and adolescents in welfare settings.

Dr Shahd Alshammari, Assistant Professor, in the Department of English Language and Literature, at the College of Arts and Sciences at the Gulf University for Science and Technology in Kuwait is interviewed by Professor Anne-Marie Callus from the Department of Disability Studies, University of Malta. Dr Alshammari describes the interweaving of the personal and political which she transmits through both her literature classes and creative writing. These are the channels she uses to communicate her passion for disability studies, not simply as an academic exercise but also as an embodiment of her experience as a disabled woman. This

encounter with Dr Alshammari in ‘Living and working with the personal and the political in disability studies: A conversation with Shad Alshammari’ (pp.135-142) is both thought-provoking and powerful.

As I step down and pass the baton to Dr Claudia Psaila who will be taking on the role of Editor-in-chief, I would like to thank the current and past members of the Editorial Board who have always been exceptionally supportive and who have made this an enjoyable learning experience for me.

Thank you to the contributors and the generous reviewers who have made this issue possible. Special thanks to Professor Mario Cardano who has stepped down from the editorial board and Professor Joanne Cassar who will be stepping down. A warm welcome to the new members of the Editorial Board, namely Dr Jay Afrisando, Prof. Hyang Eun Kim and Prof. Maurizio Merico. Heartfelt thanks are also due to Ms Maria Giulia Borg, Assistant Editor for her constant and consistent support.

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Studies in Social Wellbeing, Volume 3. Issue 2:10-40

ISSN 3007-4479 / https://www.um.edu.mt/ssw

Affinity and Connection: Maltese people's links to their locality

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Abstract

This paper examines Maltese people's affinity and connection towards their locality in the context of conceptions of liveability and wellbeing in the Maltese Islands, namely Malta and Gozo. The participants of this study include a representative sample of the population of the Maltese Islands (n=400), who responded to a telephone survey. The findings of the research indicate that most residents have been living in their locality for more than ten years with a substantial percentage having lived there all their lives. In general, residents experienced a strong affinity and connection to their town/village, epitomised by a sense of belonging and everyday interaction, whether in terms of shopping for amenities or expenditure of leisure activities. While a significant number of participants reported participating in local social and cultural events, a lower number reported being directly and actively involved on a community-level. This sense of belonging was lowest for residents in the Northern district, possibly due to the distinct number of foreigners living in the region and highest amongst Gozitans, who were the least likely to consider moving from their locality despite travelling hurdles.

Keywords: affinity, connection, locality, wellbeing

Affinity and Connection: Maltese people's links to their locality

Affinity and connection to one's locality is dependent on various factors but is intrinsically linked to subjective perceptions on how people 'feel' physically, psychologically, socially, and emotionally with themselves, their community, and the general environment. Perceptions are directly linked to attachments as positive perceptions generally lead to deeper levels of attachment to one's locality, while negative perceptions tend to lead towards reduced levels of attachment. In a context of strong identification, where one's locality is considered by residents as a place, they "can call 'home'…emotional, behavioural and cognitive ties to their community" tend to be high (Jones & Dantzler, 2021, p.1795). Positive or negative perceptions of one's locality shape people's everyday life and may have significant and varied impact on residents and their communities, including on residential mobility. In fact, perceptions of one's locality deeply "affects the choice of staying or moving" (Jones & Dantzler, 2021, p. 1794).

Perceptions are possibly more influential than actual neighbourhood conditions in affecting affinity and closeness, emphasising the relevance of seeking and giving validity to citizen's subjective views (Jones & Dantzler, 2021). Despite this subjective element, since "people weigh the condition of and the amenities within their neighbourhood differently" (Jones & Dantzler, 2021, p.1795), various 'objective' and 'tangible' situations and circumstances may impact one's sense of affinity and connection to one's locality, such that "any change in the neighbourhood may affect the degree of attachment" (Jones & Dantzler, 2021, p.1794).

Neighbourhood transformations can indeed impact residents' relationships, expectations, and concerns (Brown et al., 2003). Such changes may be varied, and intersect across the economic, social, and environmental domains as all these dimensions act as important constituents of liveability and wellbeing. Wellbeing is largely dependent on liveability, widely defined as a space considered "fit to live in'' (Ruth & Franklin, 2014, p.18). Wellbeing is dependent on the balance between the economic, social, and environmental factors

(Sustainable Society Foundation, 2012). Sustainable development is thus pivotal for wellbeing, liveability, and in turn for positive affinity and connection with one's locality. This affinity and connection should in turn lead to empowerment and advancement for more sustainable localities.

Indeed, as the "power of emotional affinity toward nature" (Kals et al., 1999, p.180) can "explain nature-protective behavior" (Kals et al., 1999, p.197), affinity towards one's locality can help to lead to more involved and active citizens, who pride themselves in a sense of ownership to strive for their communities' economic, social and environment advancement. This impacts not only the tangible, physical and material aspects of culture, but also its innermost intangible aspects, as "new desires, hopes and expectations are generated through becoming community" (Cassar, 2020, p.12).

In the acknowledgement of these social, economic and environmental interdependent constituents of liveability and wellbeing, as well as the various challenges faced within the local context due to unsustainable development, the study aims to examine how such issues impact the Maltese people's affinity and connection towards their locality. Following a brief demographic review of Malta's population as a contextual background to the study, the paper reviews a case study of Valletta, as Malta's Capital City to highlight transformations which are impacting liveability and wellbeing. This will be followed by a brief overview of the methodological design of the study, and the main findings of the study, analysed within the context of pertinent literature in the field.

The Maltese Population: A Demographic Review

The population of the Maltese Islands amounted at 519,562 in 2021, a 25% increase from the previous ten years (National Statistics Office (NSO), 2023a). The Census of 2021 recorded an unprecedented increase in the proportion of males, with 52% of the population being males.

From all the Maltese districts[1], the Northern district saw the highest population growth, since 2011 with a 47% increase whilst the lowest growth occurred in the Southern Harbour district, at 8.3%. San Pawl Il-Baħar, the largest locality, experienced the highest population increase (95.4%), followed by Żebbug Gozo (79.4%) and Imsida with a75.4% increase, whilst Bormla, Valletta, and Senglea experienced in absolute terms the largest population decrease, with 695, 591 and 436 residents respectively.

Data shows that the Maltese Islands are the most densely populated EU Member State accounting for 1,649 persons residing per square kilometre (NSO, 2022), with specifically Malta being 3.4 times more densely populated than Gozo. The EU average density rate stands at 109 persons residing per square kilometre (NSO, 2022). In 2020, there were 206,868 households in the Maltese Islands, with 93.3% of them in Malta and 6.7% in Gozo (NSO, 2022). The two-person household was the most common type of household size for residents in Malta and Gozo (32.2% and 29% respectively) (NSO, 2022). The most densely populated districts of Malta were the Northern and Northern Harbour regions, accounting for 56.4% of all households. Sliema was the most densely populated locality, followed by Senglea and Pietà, while Għasri in Gozo was the least densely populated (NSO, 2022).

At 22.2% of the total population, during the 2021 Census, there was a total of 115,449 foreigners living in Malta (NSO, 2023a), reflecting a five-fold increase since 2011. The majority of these foreigners were male between 30 and 39 years of age (NSO, 2023a). The Northern Harbour (33.3%) and Northern (29.1%) districts experienced the highest increase in the number of non-Maltese residents, whilst the most moderate increase occurred in the Western district

[1] Districts as per NSO (2023a) Census 2021 are as follows:

- Southern Harbour: Bormla; Il-Fgura; Floriana; Ħal Luqa; Ħaż-Żabbar; Il-Kalkara; Il-Marsa; Raħal Ġdid; Santa Luċija; L-Isla; Ħal Tarxien; Valletta; Il-Birgu; Ix-Xgħajra.
- Northern Harbour: Birkirkara; Il-Gżira; Ħal Qormi; Il-Ħamrun; L-Imsida; Pembroke; San Ġwann; Santa Venera; San Ġiljan; Is-Swieqi; Ta' Xbiex; Tal-Pietà; Tas-Sliema.
- South Eastern: Birżebbuġa; Il-Gudja; Ħal Għaxaq; Ħal Kirkop; Ħal Safi; Marsaskala; Marsaxlokk; L-Imqabba; Il-Qrendi; Iż-Żejtun; Iż-Żurrieq.
- Western: Ħad-Dingli; Ħal Balzan; Ħal Lija; Ħ'Attard; Ħaż-Żebbuġ; L-Iklin; L-Imdina; L-Imtarfa; Ir-Rabat; Is-Siġġiewi.
- Northern: Ħal Għargħur; Il-Mellieħa; L-Imġarr; Il-Mosta; In-Naxxar; San Pawl Il-Baħar.
- Gozo and Comino: Il-Fontana; Għajnsielem and Comino; L-Għarb; L-Għasri; Il-Munxar; In-Nadur; Il-Qala; San Lawrenz; Ta' Kerċem; Ta' Sannat; Ir-Rabat; Ix-Xagħra; Ix-Xewkija; Iż-Żebbuġ.

(8.8%) (NSO, 2023a). The most common localities of residence for foreigners were Imsida, San Pawl Il-Baħar, Gżira, Sliema, and St. Julians. In contrast, Gozo registered a lower rate of foreign residents, with only one in every nine residents being a foreigner (NSO, 2023a).

With an average age of 41.7 years when compared to 40.5 years ten years prior, in 2011, Malta's population is demographically ageing, despite its still lower average age compared to the EU average (NSO, 2023a). The average population age stood at 41.5 years for Malta and 43.8 years for Gozo. With an average population age of 43.4 years, the Southern Harbour district registered the oldest, while the Northern district with an average age of 40.1 years registered the youngest average aged population (NSO, 2023a). In recent years, the old-age-dependency ratio of the Maltese Islands grew substantially from 23.7 in 2011 to 27.6 in 2022 (NSO, 2023a).

According to the ‘Cultural Participation Survey’, 32% of Maltese people ranked their life satisfaction at a positive rating of ‘8’ Arts Council Malta [ACM], 2017). In the 'World Happiness Report' (, the Maltese Islands ranked 33rd place for happiness, scoring 6.447. The islands also ranked first in terms of ‘balanced lifestyles’ (90.4%), and eighth in terms of experiencing ‘peace with life’ (94.4%) (Helliwell et al., 2022; Lomas et al., 2022). Yet, according to a US survey, a quarter of Maltese people reported experiencing rage, making the Maltese population the most irascible people in the EU. Furthermore, 64% of Maltese respondents, the highest percentage in Europe and the fourth highest worldwide reported experiencing anxiety (Farrugia, 2022). The Maltese environment, characterised by excessive noise, overcrowding, construction, traffic, and lack of open spaces, may be a contributing factor in people's feelings of rage and anxiety, according to Nigel Camilleri, President of the Maltese Association of Psychiatry and psychologist Gail Debono (Zammit, 2022). Gozo’s residents in contrast according to economist Marie Briguglio, experience lower levels of anxiety, mainly as a result of a slower pace of life and better natural environment (Zammit, 2022).

In a study carried out by Marmara (2019), participants were asked to rank five distinct

factors on a range from 1 to 5 (1 being least satisfied and 5 being the most satisfied), according to how satisfied they felt with their overall lives. The traits that respondents valued most were their social and familial lives (3.49), whereas the feature that they were least satisfied with (2.23) was Malta's environmental quality. Indeed, many residents of the Maltese islands attribute great value to family ties and close-knit community relations for their general well-being (ACM, 2017) with 54% meeting with their immediate family on a daily or regular basis (ACM, 2017). From another study on 'Social participation and integration' carried out by Eurostat (2017), it transpires that, Malta has a higher rate of daily and weekly integration with friends and relatives as frequency of meet up stood respectively at 34.7% and 40.8% for family and 19.3% and 30.6% for friends as compared to a daily and weekly EU-28 average of 16.7% and 35.2% for family and 15.0% and 38.2% for friends. This sense of social and community cohesion is also evident from the sense of collegiality. In terms of ability to ask for financial, material or moral help from family members and relatives, friends or neighbours, only 3.9% of the Maltese population responded that they could not ask for help as compared to 5.9% of the population in the EU28 (Eurostat, 2017). Similarly, people in Malta reported having greater opportunity to discuss personal matters with someone as those declaring having no one to discuss personal matters stood at 5.1% for Malta, compared to 6.0% for the EU-28. (Eurostat, 2017)

Doing sports and physical exercise was also attributed an important factor for an improved sense of wellbeing. Moreover, individuals who engaged in cultural activities in their free time had higher levels of life satisfaction than those who did not participate in such activities, suggesting the positive impact of cultural pursuits (ACM, 2017). Yet, a lower percentage of the Maltese population (37% as compared to EU average of 63%) participate in cultural activities (ACM, 2017) or indeed participate in formal or informal voluntary work. The involvement in voluntary activities across the EU-28 stood at 22.2% of the population for participation in informal and 19.3% for participation in formal activities. With 0.9%, Malta stood at the very lowest end of the scale for engagement in informal voluntary activities and with 8.8% also

ranked quite low in terms of participation in formal voluntary activities (Eurostat, 2017).

The quality of our immediate surroundings poses significant impact on our living situations, highlighting the importance of the environment for our well-being. Within the EU, Malta had the highest population share reporting 'noise from neighbours or from the street' and the highest population share reporting 'pollution, grime or other environmental problems' (Eurostat, 2018). 88% of Maltese respondents hold that communities should have more green spaces and trees, while 86% considered Malta to be over developed (86%). With an average rating of 4.18 for air pollution, 4.13 for water pollution, and 3.90 for noise pollution, Maltese respondents also voice concerns about the rate of pollution in general (Spiteri & Briguglio, 2021).

A study by the Office of the Commissioner for Children (2022) voicing the views of children and young people highlights various issues of concern and the need for the improvement of localities, including; in terms of road safety (57.9% children and 47.1% adolescents), greater cleanliness and healthy public spaces (51.2% children and 47.6% adolescents), accessible public and natural areas (46.2% children and 41% adolescents) and spaces for sports and play (45.8% for children and 45.4% for adolescents). Children and young people also mentioned the importance of more accessible spaces for children with disability (41.9%), safer cycling lanes (41.5%) and an improved sense of feeling safe from strangers (40.9%). Similar concerns were raised by the parents of children and adolescents, as 48.3% complained about inadequate cleanliness, while 54% reported excessive noise and pollution. Parents also highlighted the importance of safety from traffic (74%), improved outside spaces (63.7%), play and sports amenities (61.9%) and the need for more green areas (61.9%). Parents also mentioned the importance of feeling safe from criminality, drugs and violence (59.1%), with 54% agreeing with the fact that all children should be respected irrespective of their race, religion, nationality, or disability (Office of the Commissioner for Children, 2022).

Over recent years, concerns over the state of the local ecology have been growing among the Maltese populace emphasising more attention to environmental issues and sustainable development. 90.5% rated the environment as having a high or very high priority, placing it at higher importance than the economy (85.5%) (Spiteri & Briguglio, 2021), while according to another survey, 66.5% upheld the importance of achieving a balance between economic and environmental interests, indicating the that environmental issues are equally important when compared to economic concerns by the general public (Marmara, 2019). In addition to the importance of investing in long-term plans to ensure an improved surrounding environment for themselves and future generations, many residents claim commitment to adjust their own lives to safeguard the environment. Indeed, 79.5% expressed readiness to alter their own behaviour for the betterment of the environment and their own health (Marmara, 2019).

Valletta: A Case Study of the Capital City

In the context of the affinity and connection to one's locality, Grima (2016) investigates wellbeing and liveability in Malta's capital city, where we can draw similar examples to links in various localities in the Maltese Islands reflecting the need to allow for a focus on wellbeing of various aspects of our loclaities. Whilst focussing on Valletta, this analysis functions as a case study, highlighting concerns that may be relevant to other localities of the Maltese Islands. Such analysis helps to shed further light on the relationship between liveability and wellbeing and the impact that this may have on one's affinity and connections towards one's locality. This investigation presents particular focus on the relevance of shorelines, viewscapes and soundscapes, as well as the adequacy and affordability of housing.

The Maltese Islands' coastlines are vital to the well-being of their people, particularly in Valletta, a peninsula with few green areas (Grima, 2016). Shoreline threats can have an impact on people's capacity to live and feel well in places like Malta and Gozo. The construction of yacht marinas and berthing areas along Malta's shoreline has sparked debate, with the proposed

Marsascala yacht marina project abandoned followed public outcry and demonstrations by residents (Visanich, 2022). Grima (2016) also draws attention to how development affects the Maltese Islands' viewscapes where open natural areas are becoming increasingly scarcer due to over construction. In 2022, the Maltese Islands recorded nearly 60% increase in the number of issued construction permits over the same period the previous year with significant impact on the viability of communities and the ecosystem (NSO, 2023b). In terms of soundscapes, Valletta is characterised by an imbalance between the loud music from entertainment venues and the more traditional sounds such as church bells (Grima, 2016). Because of the city's small size and high population, noise pollution has become a reality problem impacting the living conditions of its residents.

The topic of gentrification in Valletta, is also brought to light in Grima's (2016) study. As a result of rising property prices, the exorbitant cost of real estate is driving the local population from the area, where they currently reside. Significant changes in the physical fabric of Valletta also transpire from Zammit and Aldeiri's (2018) report on the city's cultural infrastructure projects, with the majority of development planning applications being related to commercial purposes, such as hotels and catering establishments. The report highlighted the city's transition from residential to commercial or recreational use as well as an increase in visitor accommodations, criticising the lacking an inclusive vision for planning cultural infrastructure. Other regions of the Maltese Islands are also affected by gentrification problems, especially the inner harbour area as investment-led approaches to urban regeneration frequently fall short of social and environmental concerns and adequate consultation with affected stakeholders.

Thus, though Valletta's economic development has improved, its social and environmental liveability have declined, drawing attention to the necessity of a more balanced approach to urban living and the importance of maximising well-being on all fronts.

Methodological Design

This paper examines Maltese people's affinity and connection towards their locality in the context of conceptions of liveability and wellbeing. A telephone survey was conducted amongst an anonymised representative sample of the Maltese population carried out via a commissioned third party (Sagalytics). A total sample of 400 valid responses was collected during March 2023, with a confidence level of 95% and with a confidence interval of +/-4.9%. Apart from basic demographic profiles, the survey which took approximately 20 minutes to complete collated information on quality-of-life indicators, perception of liveability and wellbeing, along with respondents' affinity and connection towards one's locality. The sample was stratified based on gender, districts and age. To ensure comparability of data, the survey was designed through close-ended and Likert scale questions. The questionnaire included questions related to the respondents' level of satisfaction with regards to the locality in which they reside, the activities and time spent in their locality, the level of active participation and attendance to events in the community life of their locality and their level of satisfaction with environmental, social and economic aspects of the said locality. Despite the presence of a considerable immigrant community in the Maltese Islands, as well as other minority groups, the survey collection was unable to stratify the data collection in order to ensure that a considerable immigrant sample of the population is included.

The research is in conformity with the University of Malta's Research Code of Practice and Research Ethics Review Procedures. The formal approval to proceed was obtained by the Faculty for Social Wellbeing Research Ethics Committee on the 20th January 2023.

Findings

Sense of Belonging and Satisfaction in the Locality of Residence

The sample was stratified based on gender, districts and age. 52% were females and 48% were males. The age distribution of the participants (as per Table 1) was as follows: 16-18 years

3%, 19-24 years 10%, 25-34 years 21%, 35-44 years 14%, 45-54 years 10%, 55-64 years 16% and 65 years and over 25%.

Table 1

Age category distribution of respondents

Age Category	Distribution (%)
16-18	3%
19-24	10%
25-34	21%
35-44	14%
45-54	10%
55-64	16%
65 and over	25%

As per table 2 below, 20% of respondents resided in the Southern Harbour district, 26% in the Northern Harbour district, 16% in the South Eastern district, 13% in the Western district 16% in the Northern district and 9% in Gozo and Comino.

Table 2

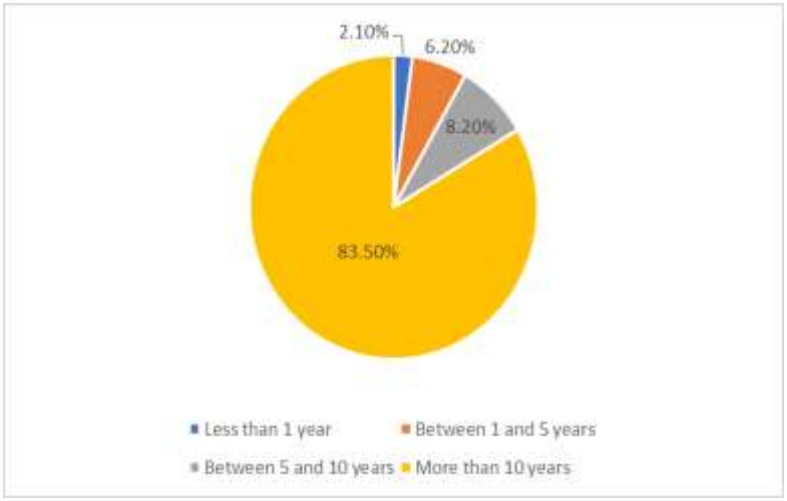
District distribution of respondents

District	Distribution (%)
Southern Harbour	20%
Northern Harbour	26%
South Eastern	16%
Western	13%
Northern	16%
Gozo and Comino	9%

The findings of the research indicate that most residents have been living in their locality over a number of years, with the main reason being that they were born in their locality of residence. Survey respondents indicated that they have lived in their locality for more than ten years (83.5%), as seen in Figure 1, with 43% of survey respondents highlighting that they were born in their locality or that they live in their locality because their family lives close by (22.9%) (Figure 2).

Figure 1

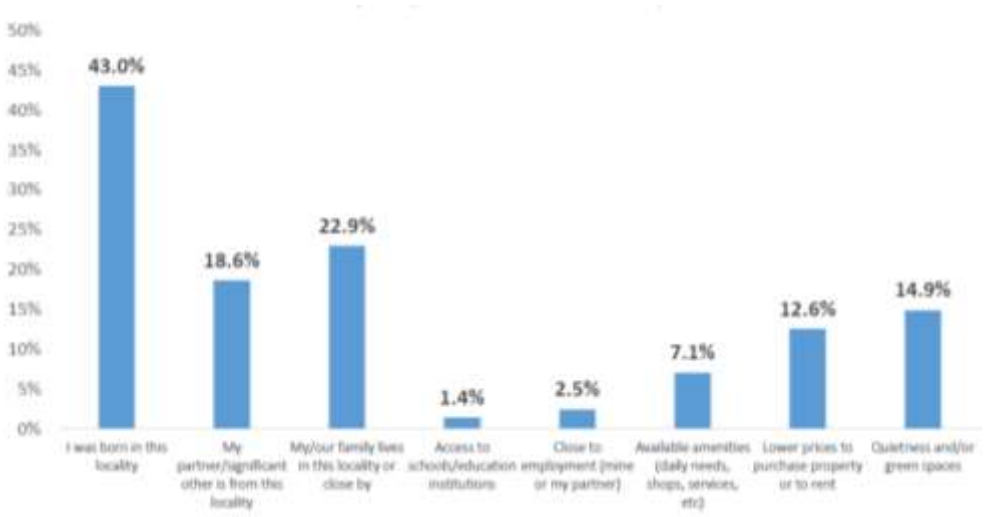
The number of years living in the locality



Note: N=400

Figure 2

The main reasons for living in the locality of residence



Note: N=400

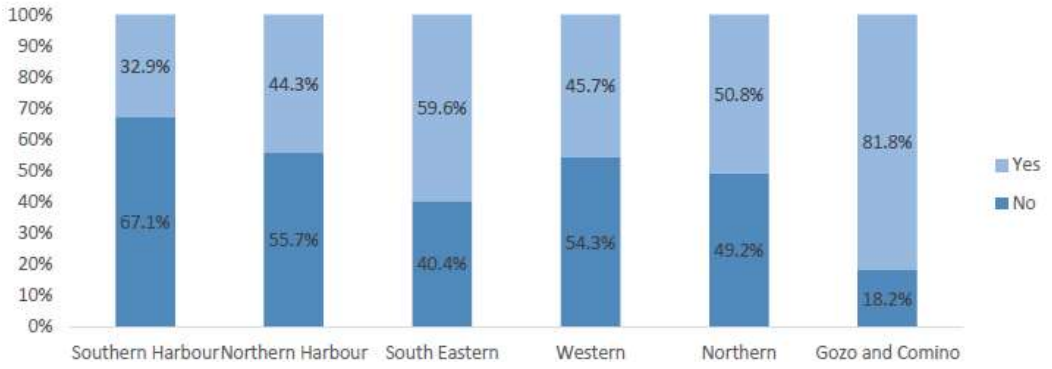
The quantitative survey showed that 58.7% of respondents do not work near their locality of residence, whilst 82.5% shop for daily needs in the locality they reside in.

Approximately half of the respondents from the survey instrument stated that they spend their free time in the locality they reside in, with the residents of Gozo being the respondents

who mostly choose to spend their free time in the locality they reside in (81.8%) (Figure 3). However, only 12% of survey respondents responded that they are actively involved in community organisations in their locality. The majority of the survey respondents who are actively involved within their community are males (15.7% males compared to 8.5% females) and reside in the South Eastern district (24.6%) (Figure 4). Only 12% of youths responded that they are actively involved within their local community. Survey respondents were also asked if they participate or attend to cultural and social events in their local community. 30.2% stated that they attend local events in their locality of residence, with those aged between 45-54 years being those who attend mostly to such events (39.2%). Similarly, to active participation, residents of the South Eastern district mostly participate in events in their local community (Figure 5).

Figure 3

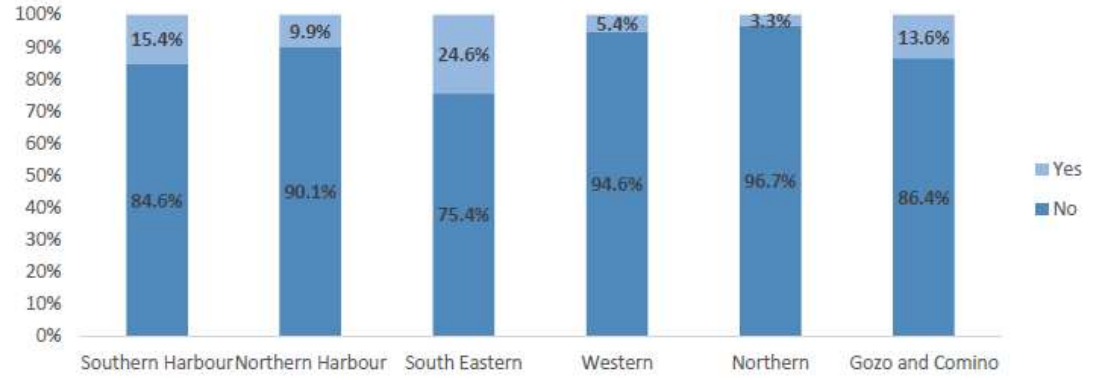
Free time spent in the locality of residence, by district



Note: N=400

Figure 4

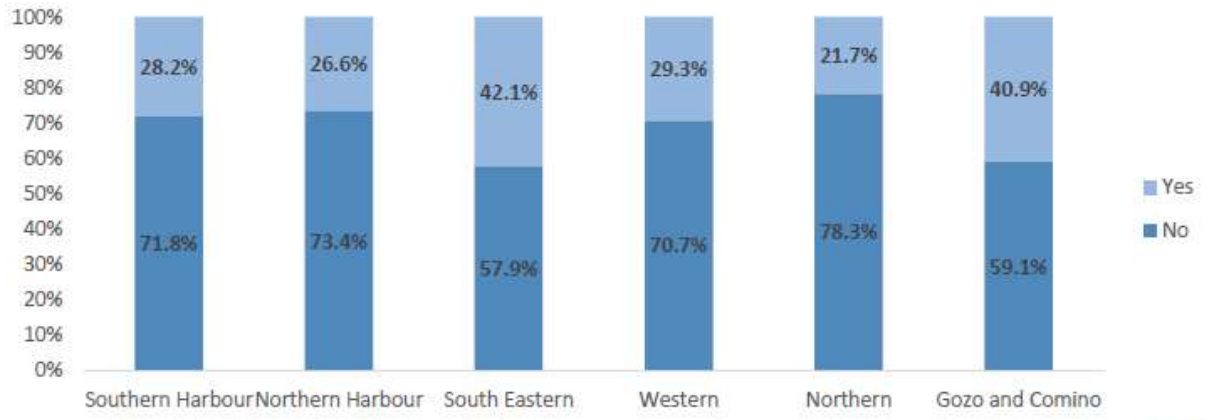
The active involvement in the locality of residence, by district



Note: N=400

Figure 5

The attendance to local and social events within the locality of residence, by district



Note: N=400

Fifty six percent (56%) of the survey respondents highlighted that they feel a sense of belonging towards their locality of residence, with the older aged and those who attained a lower level of education and are retired, being those who feel a stronger sense of belonging to their locality possibly as a result of having more free time available. Survey respondents residing in the Northern district are those who feel less attached and less sense of belonging within their local community (47.1%) (Figure 6). This may be a result of people residing in communities where they have not been born, with the possibility of having moved to their current locality of

residence a later stage in their lives, and also due to the possibility of having larger number of immigrant and other minority communities living in this district. Within the Northern district is the locality of San Pawl il-Baħar, which accounts for 34% of the residents of the Northern District, and one of the localities with the highest number of immigrant population within the Maltese Islands.

Figure 6

The sense of belonging to the local community of residence, by district

Note: N=400

Survey respondents were asked about their overall level of satisfaction of the locality they reside in and what they consider makes a place a desirable place to reside in. 29.1% of survey respondents rated their level of satisfaction as '3', on a scale of '1' to '5'. Survey respondents who live in the Southern Harbour region, are retired and have a lower level of education, resulted being the most dissatisfied with their locality of residence.

Most survey respondents expressed the wish for improved environmental aspects, such as a greater availability of natural and open spaces (21.2%), decreased levels of traffic (21.1%), a higher level of control with regards to the level of construction (15.3%) and an overall cleaner surrounding environment (15.2%). Survey respondents also mentioned the wish for better infrastructure within the locality (13.3%) and better provision of parking facilities (10.6%). When presented with a list of characteristics which make a locality an ideal place to reside in, survey

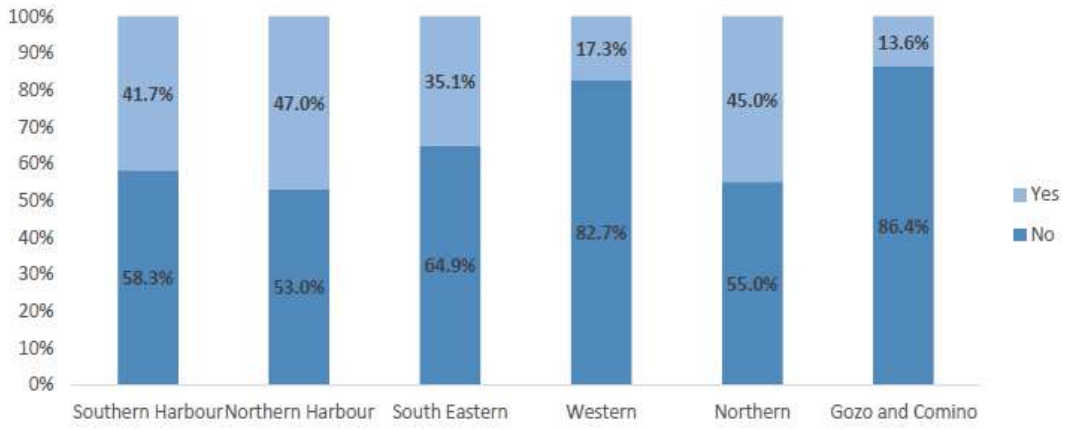
respondents mentioned the need for improved green and open spaces' (64.1%), a lower level of perceived air pollution (49.3%), lower levels of construction and traffic (43.8% and 43.5% respectively), and an enhanced sense of cleanliness (42.2%).

Living in the same locality or moving elsewhere

Sixty-two-point eight percent (62.8%) of survey respondents responded that they would not consider living in another locality, with only 14.7% of the elderly respondents considering moving to another locality. Gozitans are the respondents who least considered moving to another locality (14.7%), whilst residents residing in the Northern Harbour district are those who would mostly consider living in another locality, closely followed by the residents of the Northern district (45%) (Figure 7). This ties in with the fact that residents of the Northern Harbour and the Northern districts also include the residents from the three localities with the highest foreign community, and with the highest residential turnover, that is the localities of San Pawl il-Baħar, Tas-Sliema and Msida, where most residents were not born in the locality, and thus, as a result, may have a lower sense of belonging when compared to residents who live in the locality they were originally born in (NSO, 2023a).

Figure 7

Would you consider living in another locality? (by district)

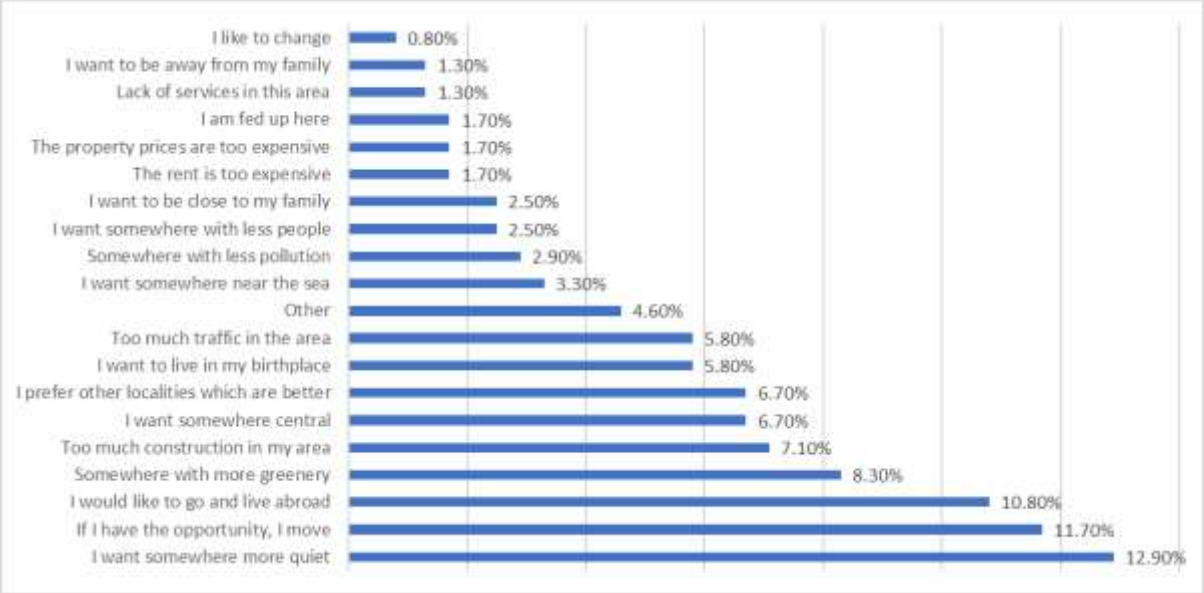


Note: N=400

Figure 8 reflects the reasons why respondents to the survey instrument would prefer moving out of their current locality of residence. Reasons mentioned included the wish to move to a quieter locality (12.9%), the wish to move elsewhere if an opportunity arises (11.7%), with the latter possibly highlighting a lower sense of belonging to their current locality of residence, and the wish to move abroad (10.8%). The desire to live in a greener locality (8.3%) and in a locality with lower levels of construction (7.1%) were also mentioned by survey respondents.

Figure 8

The reasons for wanting to move out of the current locality of residence

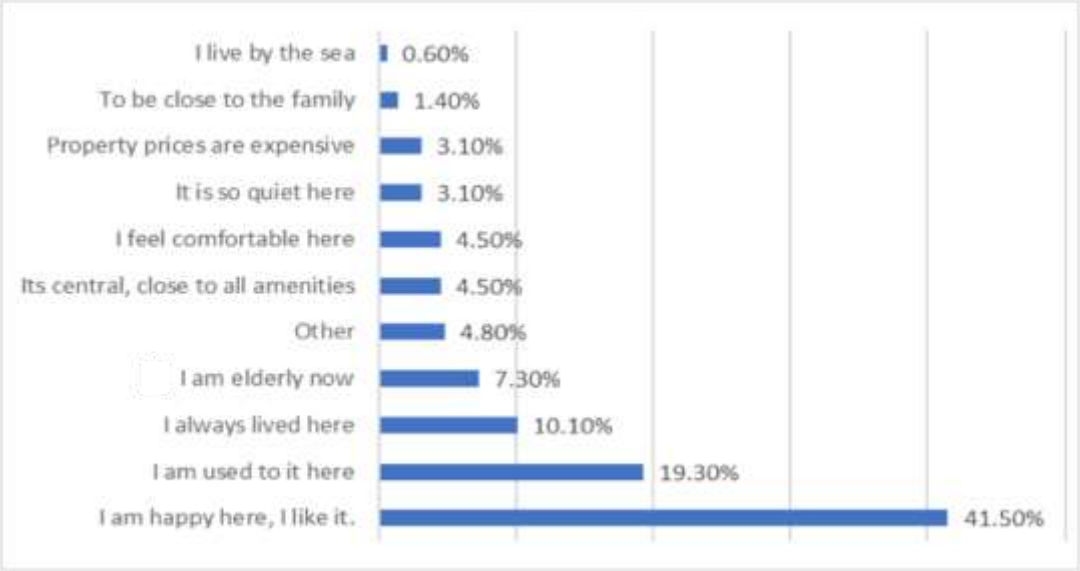


Note: N=400

Survey respondents who expressed the wish to remain in their current locality (Figure 9) mentioned an overall sense of happiness in their locality (41.5%), the fact that they have always lived in that locality, or simply being used to live in their locality or being born in that locality (10.1% and 19.3% respectively). A number of respondents also mentioned that they are now older and thus would not wish to move elsewhere at this stage in their lives (7.3%).

Figure 9

The reasons for not wanting to move out of the locality of residence



Note: N=400

Respondents in the Northern district ranked amongst the lowest in their sense of satisfaction with the natural environment (3.31 out of 5, with 5 being the least satisfied) and the urban environment (3.66) and the lowest in their sense of belonging to their local community (47.1%). Conversely, respondents residing in Gozo ranked amongst the most satisfied with both the urban (2.5) and natural environment (2.36) and reported a high sense of belonging to their local community (59.1%).

Analysis and Discussion

The ideal locality

Respondents to the survey instrument were asked to list the main characteristics they believe are important for an ideal locality, irrespective of whether such characteristics are present in their current locality of residence or not. Such characteristics mentioned were then grouped thematically into four areas, namely, the environmental, social, and economic aspects,

and the developmental element, which emerged during the data collection process (Figure 10).

Figure 10

Respondents' perceptions of the ideal locality

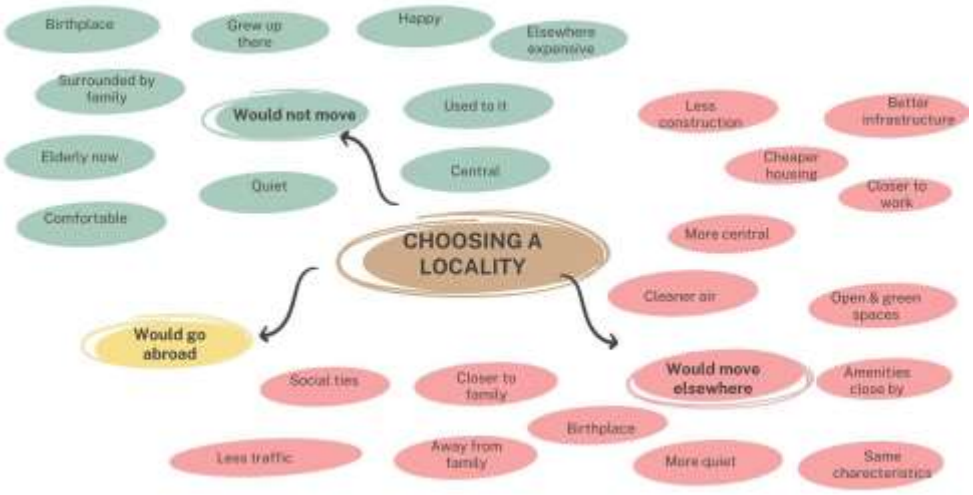
The environmental, social and economic aspects outlined by respondents are similar to the aspects mentioned as factors they would like to see, or improved, in their current locality of residence. The main outcomes emerging from all respondents' contribution as to what constitutes an ideal locality compares positively with literature focusing and explaining how the term 'liveability' is considered to be a fluid concept which involves a number of elements, including connectivity, infrastructure, the strong presence of a community aspect, and the importance of open, green spaces for restorative purposes (Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), 2022; Evans, 2003; Herrman & Lewis, 2017; Ruth & Franklin, 2014).

Choosing a locality of residence

Respondents, were also asked whether they would choose to leave their current locality of residence, and, what would be the main reason for them to choose to leave or stay in their current locality of residence (Figure 11).

Figure 11

Respondents' perceptions on choosing a locality of residence



The majority of respondents have been living in their locality for a number of years, with most having lived in their current locality since they were born. This reflects why most respondents would choose to live in the same locality because they were born in that locality or because they are surrounded by family members, thus reinforcing the sense of belonging and of community, and the need for such a bond. This finding is in line with literature which highlights the importance of community networks in localities of residence (Balsas, 2004; Kovacs-Györi & Cabrera-Barona, 2019). Respondents also mentioned that they would not leave their locality 'because they were happy living there', reflecting Barrington-Leigh's (2022) findings which highlight how a sense of happiness in the locality of residence is very important to allow a person to achieve an overall sense of wellbeing. Comfort, quietness and centrality were other aspects mentioned by respondents in choosing to remain in their current locality.

Overall, respondents emphasised a strong connection to their locality, including, through the interaction with their locality on a daily basis, for shopping for daily needs and to spend their free time. Although in lower numbers, respondents mentioned an active involvement with their local community mainly through their involvement in the local feast organisation and, local

council activities and administration. Respondents also reported that they tend to participate in events organised within their locality.

Respondents from the Northern district were the respondents who tend to feel that they do not belong to their locality. The Northern district also includes the locality of San Pawl il-Baħar which includes the highest percentage of foreigners living in a locality, reflecting that most of the people residing there were either not born there or were not raised there, and thus possibly having lived in San Pawl il-Baħar for a shorter period of time when compared to other localities. On the other hand, people residing in Gozo were the respondents who would consider moving from their current locality the least, highlighting their connection with the family and the lifestyle they feel they can achieve by living in Gozo. These factors reflect findings from literature (Balsas, 2004; Kovacs-Györi & Cabrera-Barona, 2019) highlighting the importance of achieving a connection between community and wellbeing in a locality. Furthermore, local literature also confirms the importance of family connections and the community, including meeting regularly with immediate family members (ACM, 2017).

Most participants declared that they would not leave their locality. Comfort, quietness and being centrally located were amongst the main reasons mentioned by those not interested to change their locality. Conversely, environmental issues were cited as the main reason for preferring to leave, in pursuance of quieter areas with less traffic congestions and construction, cleaner air and more open and green spaces. In general, those expressing interest to move from their current locality highlighted the wish to move to their birthplace and/or family town/village. A significant number of respondents expressed interest to move abroad, citing overdevelopment and the lack of green and open spaces.

Literature also highlights the importance of open and green spaces and the effect of traffic and pollution in localities on residents, reflecting the reasons mentioned by survey participants (Acar, 2013; Chu et al., 2004; Environment and Resource Authority (ERA), 2018; Evans 2003;

Kovacs-Györi & Cabrera-Barona, 2019; Leyden et al., 2011; Marmara, 2019; Mouratidis, 2021; Spiteri & Briguglio, 2021). The wish to be more centrally located, improved levels of infrastructure, being closer to various amenities and the affordability of housing were other aspects mentioned. Such factors also mentioned in literature highlighting the importance of living in a locality which allows for a greater sense of wellbeing (Kovacs-Györi & Cabrera-Barona,2019; Martino et al., 2021). Furthermore, a number of respondents also mentioned that they would only move elsewhere if another locality would have similar characteristics to the locality where they currently reside. Finally, a number of respondents also mentioned that that they would prefer to move away from the Maltese Islands, rather than moving to another locality, mentioning that this wish arises out of the current state of the Maltese Islands.

The research highlights a number of relevant issues and implications for liveability and social wellbeing. As social wellbeing is primarily dependent on various aspects, including physical and mental health, employment and educational opportunities, leisure and cultural participation, and adequate and affordable housing, any negative implications on these aspects will impact both individual and community wellbeing. The findings demonstrate that affinity towards one's locality is intrinsically linked to a sense of belonging and inclusion in the community which in turn impacts on social cohesion and individual and community wellbeing.

As observed from the above findings, areas which tend to be more socially and environmentally challenged tend to be attributed lower states of liveability by their residents, as experienced through a lower sense of wellbeing and affinity towards the locality. Thus, geographical areas which ranked lower in terms of liveability traits, also ranked lower in terms of social connectedness and cohesion.

The main agents and forces that were identified as strengthening affinity and social connections to one's locality are those of availability of amenities and facilities for everyday needs and green open spaces, as well as closeness of family members, whereas the main factors

that were seen as severing ties and inclusion to the locality were those of overdevelopment, gentrification, traffic congestion and pollution. Such traits, apart from posing significant challenges to the pursuit of more 'inclusive communities' (Azzopardi, 2012; Azzopardi & Grech, 2012), emerged as the main influencing factors in diminishing the sense of liveability and in turn the sense of connection, as residents feel pushed out from their community in pursuit of quieter, safer and more affordable and habitable conditions. At the same time, their sense of affinity and closeness to their locality pulls them towards becoming more actively engaged to raise awareness and improve and better their locality. This increased awareness in turn enhances mobilisation as "knowing about community engagement initiatives can encourage more community engagement" (Bonello, 2020, p.9).

Communities become "dynamic, unfinished and in a process of 'becoming'" (Cassar, 2020, p.12) as people traverse the wider natural environment they cohabit. Through this 'becoming', "communities embrace uncertainties and imagination and engage with what is outside of them" (Cassar, 2020, p.13). Such a process, which entails recognising and ultimately standing up to the "possible fragmentation and disintegration" (Cassar, 2020, p.13) experienced by communities in both the tangible and intangible spheres, engages community and civil society activism (Azzopardi, 2022). This productive force embodied through "the sharing of strengths, fears, vulnerabilities, hopes and aspirations" (Cassar, 2020, p.12) of citizens leads to community engagement s for improved liveability and wellbeing.

Conclusion

This research examined Maltese people's links to their locality by looking at their affinities and connections, both spatial and physical, and psychological and emotional. Such a relationship encapsulates various elements on the personal and individual level, including a sense of identity and feelings of inclusion and belonging; subjective aspects which are inevitably impacted by the tangible wider socio-economic and natural environment of the locality as they impact everyday

life.

In the context of an increasingly urbanised spatial environment, the research highlights the urgent need to acknowledge the significance of the natural environment for liveability and for individual and community wellbeing as these come under threat through overdevelopment, gentrification, and environmental degradation. These challenges however also highlight the relevance of social capital and community resilience, as citizen's call and engagement for liveability and sustainability in their locality has increasingly become a communal political practice – an illustrative example of their affinity and connection.

Collaboration and networking within and between communities is key for empowering communities and promoting active citizenship towards enhanced sustainability (Azzopardi et al., 2022). As a "community becomes aware and sensitised, it becomes a vehicle for activism" (Cassar, 2020, p.12). It mobilises itself against all the factors that destroy liveability and wellbeing, namely overdevelopment, gentrification, pollution, rampant degradation of the natural and traditional urban environment - indeed against the loss of communitarianism itself. In helping to preserve liveability and wellbeing, community mobilisation and activism become a form of self-determination attesting to people's affinity towards their locality – an affinity greater than the powers that be!

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Disclaimer

The study received financial support from the Environment and Resources Authority. However, the views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Environment and Resources Authority.

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Studies in Social Wellbeing, Volume 3. Issue 2: 41 - 68

ISSN 3007-4479 / https://www.um.edu.mt/ssw

Charting Household Wellbeing in Malta. Critical Reflections by a Member of the Research Group on the reception of the Group's proposed definition and estimates of the National Living Income in Malta.

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Abstract

To improve their capacity to engage in social dialogue on the issues of, among others, poverty and specifically in-work poverty in Malta, the General Workers Union (GWU) along with project partners, the Alliance Against Poverty (AfK) and Graffitti, issued a tender for research on the National Living Income (NLI) in Malta. The GWU assigned the tender to Rethink Advisory and an interdisciplinary team of researchers was selected by the assignee to carry out the project. The researchers eventually produced the Report, 'A Proposal Towards the Definition and Estimates of the National Living Income in Malta' (Gravina et al., 2022). The working definition adopted for NLI was "the net annual income required for a household in Malta to afford a decent standard of living for all members of that household". Primary and secondary data were gathered and analysed following both a qualitative and quantitative methodology. The map of households that emerged illustrated the inequality that pervades Maltese society - pensionable and single adult households being relegated well below the statistical reference points indicating a decent standard of living for these households. The results were discussed at a number of public fora and with all the social partners. Following the first part of the essay in which the present author and NLI co-researcher describes and discusses at length the contents of the Report in order to establish its potential claim to attention, the rest of the essay critically reflects on the aftermath following the publication of the report and its dissemination in public fora. Among others, it discusses the way civil and political society engaged with this NLI estimates initiative. The focus on political and civil society and reflection on the follow-up on the research was enriched by adopting certain notions from Antonio Gramsci's conceptual armature as developed in his Prison Notebooks.

Keywords: National Living Income, household, consumption, decent living, General Workers Union, Gramsci, Alliance Against Poverty, Graffiti.

Charting Household Wellbeing in Malta.

Critical Reflections by a Member of the Research Group on the reception of the Group's proposed definition and estimates of the National Living Income in Malta

In 2021, the General Workers Union (GWU), the largest union in Malta representing approximately half the total union membership, along with two active NGOs, Graffitti and Alliance Against Poverty (AkF), was interested in and issued a tender for a research project on the National Living Income (NLI). An interdisciplinary team of researchers was selected by Rethink Advisory, the company that was assigned the tender, to develop household-based National Living Income (NLI) estimates.[1] The result was the report titled, *A Proposal Towards the Definition and Estimates of the National Living Income in Malta* (Gravina et al., 2022). The researchers understood the NLI as the net annual income required by a household in Malta to afford a decent standard of living for all members of that household. A determining factor for the interest in the NLI by the GWU was the consideration of how fundamental it was to take seriously the discussion on household wellbeing. The interest in NLI was accompanied by a specific concern for inequality, including the ability of employees to escape the poverty-trap (Doody, 2019). Promoted and commissioned by the largest union and two active NGOs, it was fair to expect the Report to be given due attention.

From 2012 to 2017, in-work poverty (IWP) increased by 13.5% and by 2023 it had arguably become a structural feature of the Maltese economic boom (GWU, 2023). Related to this, in 2022, the weekly minimum wage, recommended by the Employment Relations Board which represents all the social partners, was €182.83.2, and clearly ineffective to promote a dignified

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life for those 'benefitting' from it, let alone assuring comfortable living standards (Gravina et al., 2022). Other measures were necessary. Complementing the minimum wage there was the Tapering of Benefits Scheme and the In-Work Benefit scheme (Department of Social Security, 2024, -a, -b), and tax rebates (Department for Industrial and Employment Relations, 2024; Government of Malta, 2024-a). The beneficiaries, both of the welfare system in general and the minimum wage workers in particular, could be aptly described as those who Gonzalez and Katz-Fishman (2010) referred to as survivors dependent on distribution supporting basic consumption needs rather than their ability to pay.

The GWU, AfK and Graffitti were interested in, and vocally in favour of poverty reduction but in terms of NLI, the scope of the interest was broader. Thus, while earlier research by Caritas, the social welfare organisation of the Roman Catholic Church, on a Minimum Essential Basic Decent Living (Piscopo et al., 2020) was taken into consideration by the NLI researchers, it was complemented by broader discussions and research on a living income for all Maltese households based on prevalent consumption trends and material needs that went beyond an essential minimum. The GWU-initiated research explicitly reached beyond an income level below which people risked deprivation. Instead, it raised the threshold to allow for wellbeing characterised by human freedom and capability. In this sense, and in Sen and Anand's (1997) words, the perspective was *conglomerative* where one looked at the living conditions of all members of society, rather than adopt a *deprivational* lens, where one concentrated exclusively on the living conditions of the poor. When concrete measures focused solely on a *deprivational* approach, these tended to be relatively less successful because they depended on a heavy institutional presence, ill-equipped to appease just in time what are immediate concerns and, at the same time, challenged to consider ongoing and worsening poor living conditions on an individual scale. Fighting precarity, for example, risked precarity traps where a refusal to accept low-paid jobs implied one is fine; conversely, forced by financial necessity, agreement potentially meant chaining oneself to precarity. In Malta, refusing an opportunity for work or

training has come to mean being struck off the registers of JobsPlus, the national employment agency (JobsPlus, n.d.) and unemployment benefits. For residents in Malta who are registered unemployed, job searching is prescribed (Government of Malta, n.d.-b). As Padley and Stone (2023) argue, work becomes the only way to secure decent living standards. Opposed to this, and to overcome it, was the research project's idea of a decent living income household bracket that provided the time to find jobs that are not precarious (i.e., temporary, contingent, atypical). The reference point for a decent, or closely related minimum acceptable (Padley & Stone, 2023) standard of living was neither the impoverished nor the privileged household.[2] The following section presents the main contributions of the NLI Report.

The research project

As an NLI research object, living income consisted of estimates and as such required calculation. To arrive at its formulation, the first stage for the interdisciplinary team of researchers consisted of qualitative, single and focus group interviews. Data gathered supported the second stage design and itemisation of the quantitative survey. This was based on telephone and mobile phone interviews to a sample of 1,000 households, representative of the Maltese districts and households. The survey demographic did not distinguish Maltese and foreign residents but since in such surveys, foreigners do not total more than 5% (maximum), the researchers assumed the sample consisted of Maltese. This is still representative of a number of demographics, most importantly for this study, the average household income in Malta.

Table 1 below indicates the household categories. Based on 2020, the latest publicly available database at the time of the research, there was a total of 206,868 households with 505,014 members, and an average of 2.4 members per household (27% had just one member, 32% had two) (NSO, 2022). More than one-third of them lived in the Northern Harbour region. The Southern Harbour, Southeastern and Northern regions accounted for relatively similar

[2] The cost of decent living in the Report was presented as a range with the lower bound being the 40th percentile of the equivalised expenditure distribution for the entire household population and the upper bound being the 50th percentile (or the median) of the same distribution.

percentages, 15.9%, 13.8% and 18%, respectively. Gozo and Comino and the Western region accounted for the smallest shares with 6.7% and 11.0%, respectively.

Table 1

Household categories

Single, under 65 years	no children	single parent with one or more children
Couple, under 65 years	no children	parental couple with one or more children
Single, over 65 years		
Couple, over 65 years		

Qualitative data

The first participant data-gathering stage consisted of individual and focus group interviews. These allowed participants to profit from the conversational style set for the semi-structured format to contribute further feedback on the pre-set 'needs' themes (see Table 2 below). It assisted researchers to gain a more comprehensive and eye-opening understanding from the participants representing different income groups and households, of their life experiences related to the things a household needs for a decent standard of living. The researchers could verify and build upon what people thought about and how they related to a decent standard of living. Many queries arose both during the individual interviews and during the focus groups, among others, whether they believed they had the means (or not) to support a decent lifestyle.

Table 2

The 'needs'

Health	Health insurance, visits to private hospital or clinic, the family doctor or general practitioner, and costs of medicine.
Food and Drinks	Groceries (meat, fish, etc.), healthy food, eating out, delivery food.
Housing	Rent, maintenance, furniture, water and electricity (including A/Cs), house insurance, phone/tv/internet packages.
Education and Training	Obligatory and post-secondary schooling costs for participants with dependents and costs for adult education courses.
Transport	Vehicle insurance and licence, mechanic and new car.
Leisure	Holidays abroad or in Gozo, subscriptions to entertainment packages, sport including kit, apparatus, and gym.
Other Needs	Gifts, professional consultancies (legal, house-related, health, psychological, etc.), dressing up including for work requirements, hairdresser, facial, laser, nails and other cosmetic needs.

The wealth of in-depth knowledge contributed toward an understanding of the challenges faced by households in the constant struggle to acquire and sustain a decent quality of life. During one of the individual in-depth interviews, a waste management worksite labourer, with a wife and two children, was asked about a training course he attended to get a mason's licence in order to escape his job at the time. While this case does not represent all, it does illustrate the links between income, consumption and a decent life.

> To learn … [he] paid for the construction manual, safety [clearances], etc. [The] course which was a waste of time … a whole lot of theatrics [Maltese "tejatrini"]. He paid around 600 [Euros] to [name of course organiser] and got the licence. (Gravina et al., 2022, p.45)

This did not assist him in scraping through the day-to-day challenges.

> A family with two children, with less than sixty euros daily will not survive, he said [Maltese "ma tkampux"] … He calculates he needs sixty euros a day to spend, not to save, just to scrape through [Maltese "li tghaddi kexxun", similar to operating a tightly fitting drawer]. He wants to reduce the hardship without necessarily refusing overtime, so that he feels like he was living. (Gravina et al, 2022, p.54)

Referring to health payments, his response was shared by other lower income research interviewees in the private sector:

> No private health insurance, no support from employer and so expenses have to be paid from the worker's income. I had to work more, 12 hours a day. And when I am off, Wednesdays and Thursdays, I work another 8 hours. (Gravina et al, 2022, p.23)

Representing the first stage of research – interviews and focus groups – this qualitative data was a central source to interpret concepts associated with decent life and other complementary concepts. Throughout, interpretation was sought from the participants. No prescriptions were imposed by the interviewer. Following the relatively more biographic bend of the individual interviews, focus group interviews produced data that were more comparative. The sampling criteria of participants in both the interviews and focus groups were adapted from the National Statistics Office's official household income categories.

Quantitative data

The second participant data-gathering stage was the survey. The objective of establishing an income threshold necessary for a decent life required that a large nationwide household data gathering exercise be undertaken. This would establish costs met by different types of households. It confirmed NLI was essentially linked to household consumption. The survey items were aligned with the area of research and qualitative data gathered from the individual interviews and focus groups. Recalling 'living income' as what was needed to "enable meaningful participation in society beyond mere survival" (Gravina et al., 2022, p.4), leisure,

supporting dependents, saving against present and future unexpected events were retained along with some others garnered from the interviews and this firmly localised the context of the survey.

Besides the data gathered from the qualitative stage of the research, fundamental was the above-mentioned detailed 2020 (calendar year 2019) survey by the National Statistics Office (NSO, 2022) that measured household income – the European Union Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC). This aligned the NLI research to official statistics. All the data generated served as an 'income' reference point to compare with the data on consumption gathered from the research survey. Official up-to-date secondary data on consumption, unlike the income statistics above, were unavailable. The closest source was NSO's Household Budgetary Survey (HBS). At the time the research commenced, the last HBS that had been published was in 2018 with reference year 2015. This was another contribution of the data generated by the NLI research.

Results through comparisons

Significant results of the research emerged from the comparison of its data with those of other related data-gathering initiatives. The following sections will present a set of comparative results highlighted by the research.

National Living Income and Basic Income

NLI and the Basic Income (BI) refer to income. Fundamentally and distinctively, the BI consists of cash transfers whereas NLI "establishes the net annual income required for a household in a place to afford a decent standard of living" (Waarts et al., 2021, p.1467). However, similarities exist in their legitimisation as they share fundamental principles (Chrisp & Martinelli, 2019; Standing, 2017). Both represent a stand on social justice providing protection against insecurity. Both are non-paternalistic because they do not impose control on behaviour. NLI, like BI, is based on a rights-not-charity principle and is intended to be based on the

recipient's rights and freedoms more than the provider's discretion and power (Standing, 2017).

Similar to the basic income, NLI guarantees a qualitative upward shift which means a stop to the drift from paycheque to paycheque or dependence on irregular and uncertain earnings. It also means a stop to facing haplessly anything unexpected beyond one's means and uncatered for by welfare. NLI and BI do not cover luxuries; they protect by diminishing negative insecurity. They are especially a security-granting system for an outsourced or "tertiarised" labour market with high mobility and swathes of atypical, temporary, part-time, and casual jobs. They also cater for the security of employees who, when insecurity becomes chronic and employers demand flexibility, are forced to carry the burden as costs are shifted onto them. Furthermore, arguments in favour of a resort to NLI in its conceptual relation to BI refer to its contribution to the economy. These include an increase in purchasing power and aggregate demand especially for local goods and services; a better selection of training programmes; a boost to the caring sector; and, public expenditure reduction in, among others, mental health, healthcare, social support services, and the criminal justice system (Standing, 2017).

National Living Income and the Minimum Essential Basic Decent Living

Comparison can also be sustained between NLI and the above-mentioned Report on a Minimum Essential Basic Decent Living (MEBDL) proposed in Piscopo et al. (2020). Among others, both adopt a basket of needs. In the literature on such baskets, these can consist of a variety of items. Anker and Anker (2017) include in theirs a nutritious low-cost diet, housing that meets local norms and common international standards of decency, healthcare, clothing, education, leisure and transport. There is also a margin for unforeseen events that anticipates and plans for resilient livelihoods. The MEBDL Report comprised food, clothing, personal care and health, household goods and maintenance, laundry, care and services, education, culture and gifts, transport and housing. All such needs were contained in NLI's needs basket but in addition, leisure was included in the latter; it was understood to be an important contributor to

household wellbeing.

The main distinction between the two was what has been identified above as a focus on the essential minimum "for low-income households to live healthily, simply yet with dignity" (Piscopo et al., 2020, p.10). Recalling Sen's preference for conglomerative over deprivational approaches, and in full acknowledgement of the notion of relative poverty, NLI researchers opted for a cross-sectional view of households' prevailing expenditure trends without limiting data to specific income categories. This was the same approach adopted by the European Commission in the proposed Minimum Wage Directive and its adequacy; it was related to the general level of gross wages and their distribution (EU Monitor, 2022). NLI's figures approximated those of Piscopo et al. (2020) for the lower income categories, especially where the latter introduced the Augmented Basket which included the use of a private vehicle, eating out at least once a month, and payment for accommodation at commercial rates. As for the rest, the NLI research distinctively gathered year-long data on household expenditure and its mixed method promoted a rich data set. All expenses, trends and behaviours were elicited from participants. More research variables had to be included but arguably a broader depiction of household needs in Malta was achieved.

National living income, the minimum wage and expenditure

One other comparison set the NLI estimates against the statutory national minimum wage. Differences between the NLI estimates and the established minimum wage were indicative of the extent to which current labour market conditions fell short of enabling workers to afford a decent life. As already referred to above, the 2022 national weekly minimum wage at the time of the research stood at €182.83, an annual total of €9,507 (DIER, 2024). The most conservative NLI estimate for a Single adult household without children was €12,226, i.e., almost 30% higher than that. Consequently, the Cost-of-Living-Adjustment (COLA) became an essential safety belt. COLA was established in 1990 as a mechanism to determine an annual mandatory adjustment

given to all workers (Department of Social Security, Malta, n.d.-c). It is based on the inflation rate calculated over the previous twelve months by the Retail Price Index measured according to the cost of the above referred basket of consumer goods and services. This remains a safety belt, provided months later than the time it was needed and merely reproducing the status quo without offering resources for further improved conditions.

Minimum wage employees represent suffering categories of employees. The NLI research showed that the challenge to guarantee a decent life was not restricted to them. A number of households had income levels that fell below the NLI estimates. Table 3 illustrates the number of households that had an income level lower than the most conservative estimate for the relevant NLI household category. For example, 30.4% of the total population of Single adult households (under 65 years) without children had an income below the minimum standard estimated by the NLI researchers. Relatively more pronounced was the distress within the category of Single Parent household with one or more children. Households containing individuals over 65 years old were not spared: the percentage of the over 65s with incomes below the NLI was 72% for single adults and 69% for couples.

Table 3

Number of households with income below NLI.

Type of household	NLI (lower bound) Euros (€)	No. of households with income less than NLI	Household population %
Single, under 65 years	12,226	9,165	30.4
Couple, under 65 years	17,704	9,641	29.9
Single Parent, one or more dependent children	16,160 / 21,078	5,232	76.0
Two Parent, one or more dependent children	21,084 / 25,300	16,373	38.9
Single, over 65 years	12,226	19,650	71.6
Couple, over 65 years	17,704	18,441	68.6

(Gravina et al., 2022, p.79)

One comparison left out from the Report: Housing

Finally, a comment on housing which negatively affected a minority from the entire spectrum of households; this minority was effectively cut off from the market: "By early 2023, an individual (or group of individuals) with an annual income less than €25,000 became ineligible for a loan on the average priced-housing unit (c. €225,000)" (Cassar et al., 2023, p.7). That excluded approximately 75% of those aged between 20 and 30 years (ibid). Over the entire population of households, 13,000 have housing costs that consume 30%+ of their disposable income. In this study, housing expenses including any payments related to a home loan or residential rent, were captured along with other items of expenditure. However, in Gravina et al. (2022, p.5), "based on the general level of expenditure of the population", the NLI estimates proposed by the researchers did "not suffice to cover such housing expenditure", and it was proposed that "housing is treated by a policy that is separate but complementary to the NLI". The NLI Report described how, for a large number of households, housing was recorded as the single most expensive item in the consumption basket.

Discussion

Following the summary above of the more relevant results of the NLI Report, the rest of the paper discusses the dissemination and reception of the same Report as observed by the present author and NLI co-researcher. The discussion is divided into two, interrelated and interdependent sections. As it provides a concrete historical setting of regional and global developments that affected the economic situation in Malta, the first part briefly summarises the promotion of the Report by the authors and union leaders on nation-wide television, radio stations, newspapers and online media. Special events were organised for the purpose by the union and opened to the public including one for parliamentary and other official representatives from the two main political parties. Finally, NLI research results were presented during a meeting of the Malta Council for Economic and Social Development (MCESD), the advisory council and social dialogue bulwark hosting representatives from ministries, the Central

Bank, the main unions and employer associations, and other civil society bodies. MCESD presents recommendations on matters of economic and social relevance to the government. Significantly, the "ultimate aim" for MCESD is that "following consultations held within the Council, sound and concrete recommendations about socioeconomic matters will be heeded by the Government prior to any reforms or measures of relevance" (italics added by author) (MCESD, n.d., para.1).

Notwithstanding the positive reception of the Report throughout its promotion, no official response or reference to this Report from the government was recorded. Thus, in the second and final discussion of the paper, this non-response is picked up along with attempts to explain it. Conceptual elaborations developed by Antonio Gramsci (1975) in his Prison Notebooks (*Quaderni del Carcere*) are adopted for the explanation. This explanation is developed in the second half of the following two-part section. As anticipated above, the following section presents a historical setting and recall of the main contributions of the NLI Report.

First discussion

The concrete historical setting

All data - qualitative and quantitative - requires context. Engaging with concrete reality meant the researchers were also engaged with the context beyond the household and workplace. This research was anticipated and accompanied by a major financial crisis in 2007-8 followed by a debt crisis in 2011, the Covid-19 pandemic, inflation and war in Ukraine. The turn-of-century decline in absolute poverty figures was overturned as the global poverty rate increased (Yonzan et al, 2023). Foroohar (2022) argued that globalisation had produced the right conditions for economic growth: "globalisation and disinflation" went hand in hand and it only became complicated when multinational enterprises (MNEs) no longer used "technology, outsourcing and economies of scale to drive down prices", via "cheap labour, cheap capital and cheap commodities" (para.1). The war in Ukraine ended cheap Russian gas; decoupling between

the US and China ended cheap supply chains; the end of quantitative easing and the US Federal Reserve rate rise ended easy money.

However, before this series of global negative events, austerity had already hit closer as far as Malta was concerned. It was imposed as prescriptive public policy within the European Union (EU), and absolute poverty began to increase as public debt control and EU-imposed balanced budgets checked public spending. Austerity also affected income (Botenga, 2024). Austerity-based policy and budgets were generally delivered with their own Gramscian common-sensical traps of moral righteousness (Gramsci, 1975, Vol.II, Q11: 13). Exported through the neoliberal political state model, rhetorical and regulatory instruments were devised to prescribe austerity which ultimately controlled public spending (Hyman, 2015). Ultimately, this account and the abstract concepts included therein were considered by Bonefeld (2019) to miss the main target which remained Capital. Meanwhile, as the political Left and Right continued to debate, economic and social inequalities increased worldwide, and also in Malta (Zammit, 2023).

Facing the paradox of the European Union's Single Market and its dependency on supply chain trade, the conditions of fragility were exposed by inflationary and rapidly rising costs of goods and services caused by supply-side shocks and the countermeasures of increased political control over the supply side and, where possible, a re-shoring of supply (Akgüç, Countouris, Hancké, & Pochet, 2022). This was meant to check inflation. However, transitional post-pandemic developments, distributional bottlenecks and other crises meant that, among others, the sharp increase in consumption prices threatened not merely the precarious but other households and their ability to afford a decent living standard (Nascia, Simone, & Pianta, 2023). The ubiquitous presence of the catchphrase 'resilience' qualified the European Union's NextGenerationEU (European Commission, n.d.-a) intent on promoting the urgent need to sustain resilience by fostering a strong recovery. Malta's policy path in this agenda was similarly traced along a 'recovery and resilience' programme that worked toward making the economy

and society more resilient and future ready (European Commission, n.d.-b). Considering that household members are, or should be, interested in what is going on that affects them beyond the conditions of work, one can conclude that a union's interest in matters affecting their members and arising outside the workplace is justified. It also means promoting those interests both politically and socially as it defends its members' decent standard of living. For the GWU, this meant adopting NLI estimates in its negotiations with the political state and private business.

The Report

The NLI estimates enable all members of society to plot their household's standing on a nationwide map projecting their capacity for a meaningful participation in society depending on a comparison of their income and consumption costs against national estimates. To reiterate, the concept goes beyond the notion of a bare minimum for survival since it conceptualises a decent quality of life. It still aims at shifting the lower-income categories upwards and ensuring access to the basket of goods to all. Similarly, this research supports a wide and far-reaching discussion on employment standards and the market economy when these do not guarantee the ability of persons in employment to escape the poverty-trap. The qualitative data include excerpts of anthropological interest indicative of ways and means adopted by individuals or entire households to work their way through difficulties in sustaining a decent standard of living. They also include references to the wage nexus where they blamed employers for not paying enough for them to sustain that same standard of living (Gravina et al., 2022).

The research suggested that statutory systems, such as the minimum wage and COLA have been unable to hold back socio-economic hardship created by the income-consumption imbalance. Consumption figures refer to the needs as identified and explored by the survey research data. The results point towards a call to re-evaluate income levels in Malta, particularly since there appear to be significant discrepancies among different income quintiles. A

guaranteed NLI for every household would help mitigate the differences and distances that currently exist between the bottom end and the average income earners.

Ultimately, the researchers provided data to improve the capacity of GWU, AfK and Graffitti to engage in social dialogue on the issues of, among others, poverty and In-Work Poverty in Malta but also to better align wage-based standards of living with national economic growth statistics related to wealth generation. The NLI is consequently a tool to fight social inequality and to support lower-income households from falling further behind. As should be clear in this discussion, simply because the NLI estimates are numerical, the interest in it is not to be reduced to an exclusively materialistic nature. Leisure and education were included among the main themes. There is an acknowledgment that the lifestyles of the residents in Malta have changed and there are more opportunities to develop talent and personal ambition. The point of NLI is to provide research-based means to address and consolidate self- and household improvement while allowing others not to be sacrificed by being guaranteed an extra margin to sustain a decent life as defined above.

Second discussion

Dissemination and reception

Beyond internal strengths and limits of the research, but still based on the observation that this was a Report promoted by the largest union in Malta, one can reflect and identify a number of issues related to the dissemination and broader reception of such a research initiative. Recalling that the present author assumes full responsibility for what follows in terms of observation and reflection, and adopting Gramscian concepts for analysis, it is safe to declare that civil society is not one homogeneous entity but consists of various pressure groups struggling to impose their presence in a context characterised as one of freedom of expression. When eventually, even following debates and discussions, one dominant vision consistently imposes itself, then civil society does appear to be one homogeneous entity and the freedom of

expression results in a top-down transmission translated as commonsensical views. This is a broad representation recalling Gramsci's *stato integrale* (the integral state) in which the formal state and legal institutions inter-relate, not necessarily smoothly, with civil society. The latter becomes a terrain of competition for social and political leadership, i.e., the hegemonic struggle that takes on a metaphorical representation created by Gramsci of fortresses and trenches protecting dominant state and private bourgeois interests (1975, Vol. II, Q7:16). In his intellectual grappling with hegemony and the state, Gramsci argued that civil and political society can become one, concluding that, "the State is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules." (Vol. III, Q15:10)

Within what remain multiple forms of state and civil society relations, the GWU's initiative (along with other civil society NGOs) meant that the trade union was not limiting itself to immediate bread-and-butter issues, i.e., wages and working conditions, and neither to a passive role in nationwide, so-called social dialogue. This was more than a token statement. The initiative confirmed the character of its participation in collective bargaining, where the GWU also focuses on issues of quality of life, identities, gender equality, work–life balance, and family-friendly measures. This is a good omen for some even if it is considered interference by others. At the same time, beyond mere rhetoric, an active civil society presence requires that one is able to mobilise people and support. As far as the government of the day was concerned, the GWU could assume a strong policy role strengthened by historically solid relations with the Labour Party in government. With a Nationalist Party (PN) government, this could be a bottom-up strategy where the union joined civil society organisations to pressure the government of the day over a national minimum income. This still requires coming to terms with the political parties' overdrive presence in civil society, especially the clientelism sustaining the political parties' presence characterised by its individualised patron-client relations (Meilak, 2020). The GWU thus faces multiple challenges in its promotion of the NLI research – not only political

party divide but also a research study that is based on households rather than union membership.

The promotion of the NLI by the GWU arguably ended up, not deliberately but forced by circumstances, more of a Gramscian war-of-movement (Gramsci, 1975, Vol. II, Q7:16), characterised by spontaneity in its contingent relation to the looming and weighty presence (at the time of its publication) of the 2024 Malta Budget (Ministry for Finance, 2023). There, the government opted to act on the minimum wage – a justified initiative but concerning a relatively limited number – rather than opting to gradually solve widespread inequality by a broad and nation-wide redefining of the living incomes of household sectors. The test would have included squaring up to the challenges faced by pensioners and single parent households, three quarters of whom are submerged at the bottom of the NLI estimates. Conversely, filling in cracks here and there, constitutes mere reforms that at best qualify as neoliberalism with a benevolent face. The alternative to a spontaneous war-of-movement (as in the dissemination events) and this type of neoliberalism is a war-of-position. This requires the union to protect household wellbeing in terms of a long-term trench strategy in order to face structured and structural forces including the above-mentioned civil society forts and fortresses that defend the interests of its social partners. This requires offering training and space to intellectuals, in the Gramscian sense, not merely to learn a language or skills for a job but also to fight or negotiate with institutional technocracy embedded in state offices (Gramsci, 1975, Vol. III, Q13: 24). This arguably represents the central lesson learnt from the Report and its dissemination.

Pre-eminently, dissemination is a pedagogic exercise. What Gramsci described as the passage from a purely economic consciousness to one that is “ethico-political”, i.e., the elaboration of the structure into the superstructure in the minds of men, is a society-wide pedagogic exercise (Gramsci, 1975, Vol.II, Q10: 6). People understand that the satisfaction of health, education, food, housing, leisure and transport needs is not, as common-sense might suggest, an exclusively economic concern but is actually a superstructural concern, i.e., a legal,

cultural, ideological and political concern, the result of struggle and conflict in civil society. Dominant common-sense instead projects partnership. Acknowledging this opens up the possibility of a transition from what Gramsci defined as common-sense to "good sense" (Gramsci, 1975, Vol. II, Q11: 13). The fact that political parties or political relations may be tempted to bury such good sense beneath the prevalent common-sense, needs to be questioned. It would mean challenging the political state by a politicised union membership that, at least for once, imposes the need for a knowledge society rather than the dominant knowledge economy. In a compromise, while it is assumed knowledge has the potential to generate economic growth and prosperity (and indeed this is EU policy), at the same time this does not displace attention for education to serve the requirements of a knowledge society. Within the limits imposed by the NLI researchers, this was a primary goal justifying the need to support leisure

Even if only on the premise of their membership dues (arguably not only), unionised employees should expect their unions to carry out their historical responsibility of promoting and protecting collective rights to give democratic expression to feelings of injustice but also to guarantee a 'conglomerative' understanding of a decent living income. Beyond the bread-and-butter wages and conditions of work, supported by NLI data based on scientific evidence, the GWU can support its members to judge better the balance of their income and consumption costs for a decent living standard. It is a choice to assist members through education and not be ostracised and locked exclusively into the role of negotiator over the price of work at the company scale. Unions need to re-connect with their educational and cultural mission and ensure employees' voices rise above those of the media and its multiple interests necessarily tainted by "the spirit of capitalist competitiveness" (Dukes & Streeck, 2019, para.19). Problematising and redefining unions' role at policy level might not necessarily and immediately translate into strength at workplace level. Workers may join unions only because they believe that unions can help them directly at their places of work, "rather than based on the perceived

relevance of unions at national or industrial level" (Debono & Baldacchino, 2019, p.431); this is a matter for further analysis. Indebted workers realise that debt payments need to be guaranteed by a trouble-free employment relation. The logical fallacy here is pervasive. Furthermore, paradoxically, the opportunity to be able to pay debts is a luxury some cannot even experience. This occurs even when trickle-down economics are rejected (Jafar, 2015; Lawson, 2016). Without a collective effort it is difficult to counteract all this.

Conclusion

To conclude on the NLI research, one can focus on the post-pandemic transition period when it was carried out and disseminated. It was a time of opportunity. Thus, while one expected business models and consumer behaviour to change with an emphasis on the digital, the post-pandemic period lacked the presence of those who ascertained that change was not enforced on a society unable or ill-prepared to manage a social and economic household imbalance (Madgavkar et al., 2020). Reflecting more closely on income, the difference between those who were able to save during the pandemic and those who depended exclusively on government hand-outs required more attention (Lund et al., 2021). Crawford et al. (2020), provided an answer in terms of falling incomes and the margins these allow for decent living standards:

> "If a household typically spends much of its budget on essential or inflexible items, it has less scope to adjust to a lower income by reducing spending without incurring relatively severe hardship. Hence it is relatively likely to run down savings, miss bill payments or go into debt. At the other extreme, if a large fraction of a household's budget goes on the kind of social and recreational activities that are now [during Covid-19] prohibited, or on commuting, which is now unnecessary for many workers, it may require little – or even no – further adjustment to cope with a fall in income" (p.2).

To overturn this requires a "paradigm shift" from "narrowly defined self-interest

maximization" to putting "humans back into the economic equation and acknowledge that it is only by maximizing our collective interests that the society can find a way out" (Rubinic, 2020, p.395). It is fair to suggest that unions have a significant role to perform as in the case of NLI supporting collective wellbeing over free-market individualism. This remains an open wound in the living income discourse and especially so in times of crises as described above because such crises are socially discriminating (Crawford et al., 2020). Emancipating from such discrimination means that collective wellbeing does not remain an empty ideal. The data gathered for the NLI derived from the concrete reality of contemporary society ontologically expressed through the participants' feedback means the GWU is now in a position to better defend households from falling behind the numerically outlined brackets of decent living standards of household income.

The eventual 2024 Malta Budget (Ministry for Finance, 2023) decision to tackle the minimum wage deficiencies was laudable but it maintains a deprivational stance rather than Sen's preferred conglomerative stance, the latter being the one supported by the NLI researchers. The NLI stance is expressed in tackling a broader scope in terms of a nationwide household wellbeing. It still integrates those households which are suffering relatively more than others. Nonetheless, as reflected in the reception to the NLI research observed and reported above, the 'integral state' in Malta representing collective state and private interests, is not ready to follow the path traced by the NLI. Instead, it prefers politically rewarding short-term programmes and responses.

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Studies in Social Wellbeing, Volume 3. Issue 2: 69-95

ISSN 3007-4479 / https://www.um.edu.mt/ssw

Cross-pollination for Social Well-being:

An Interdisciplinary Pedagogy Linking Art, Nature, and Well-being

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Abstract

This is a reflexive paper about a collaborative workshop aimed at nurturing artists' creativity and well-being through nature, as part of the SPRING Artistic Programme for Emerging Artists of the Gabriel Caruana Foundation (GCF). Artists, well-being facilitators and environmental educators collaborated from across GCF, the Centre for Environmental Education Research (CEER) and the International Master in Adult Education for Social Change (IMAESC). The authors offer a critical reflection on how this cross-pollination of different disciplines with a place-based pedagogy contributes to social well-being, including implications for further practice and research. The design included conceptual and contextual preparation, project planning, and design workshops that optimised collaboration and alignment. Understanding the broader social context informed the guiding principles, constraints, needs, and objectives that framed the cross-pollination with a learner-centric pedagogy of place. The multi-pedagogical delivery allowed emergent co-production of knowledge among the facilitators and participants. Leveraging nature created an embodied learning experience of well-being and creativity. The evaluation included participants' and facilitators' input. Participants' structured criticism and feedback loops throughout the workshop fostered conditions for creativity, critical dialogue, and co-creation. Embracing collaboration and connection to self, others and nature were central to the lessons learned. The facilitators' retrospective session revealed the transformative power of collaboration across disciplines, broadening CEER's scope to promote sustainability and community engagement as well as GCF's well-being initiatives for artists. Overall, the paper showcases the value of interdisciplinary collaboration and working at the edges to scale the impact of place-based pedagogy in fostering creativity, well-being, and sustainability.

Keywords: well-being, art, pedagogy, nature, sustainability.

Cross-pollination for Social Well-being:

An Interdisciplinary Pedagogy Linking Art, Nature, and Well-being

In examining well-being, both international and Maltese contexts share commonalities, such as the importance of social support, community engagement, and economic stability as key factors influencing individuals' quality of life. The Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society (n.d.) highlighted that “regular and robust national wellbeing statistics and research are required in Malta to be able to compare the wellbeing of different segments of Maltese society, over time, and with other countries, to evaluate policy performance in wellbeing terms” (para. 1) . According to a recent report as part of the Wellbeing INDEX project, youth in Malta are the unhappiest in the European Union (EU) (Cefai et al., 2024). Research on well-being in Malta explores different facets from socio-economic determinants, corruption, to the urban environment and coastal environments that impact the well-being of diverse communities in Malta (Azzopardi et al., 2023; Bell, 2021; Briguglio, 2015; Chetcuti, 2023; Satariano, 2019; Spiteri, 2021). These findings underscore the complex changing socio-economic and physical contexts of the Maltese Islands fuelled by a construction boom in the last decades (Pace et al., 2023).

In the context of this reflection, social well-being is seen as the extent to which individuals experience positive and supportive relationships, a sense of belonging, and active engagement in their social networks and communities. This is influenced by the work of Ryff (2014), who sought to understand well-being through a multi-faceted approach, such as purpose in life, autonomy, personal growth, environmental mastery, positive relationships, and self-acceptance. The presence of such aspects is often deemed to be present through self-reporting. A distinction is often made between individual well-being, which focuses on a personal sense of happiness, life satisfaction, and fulfilment, and collective well-being, which refers to the overall quality of life within a group or community. The mutual interplay between such dimensions is also

acknowledged (Walther, 2020). For the purposes of this reflection, the artist is both an individual, as well as part of a community of artists. In our reflections, we look at both individual outcomes as well as evidence of group cohesion and collaborative engagement.

When considering Malta's context and the effects of 'unhappiness' discussed above, the need to push for arts as a means of mitigating psychological and physiological impacts is brought into further perspective (Laganà, 2023; Visanich & Attard, 2021). In 2019, a World Health Organisation (WHO) report by Fancourt and Finn (2019) analysed over 3500 international studies as global evidence of the positive correlation between arts and health. The arts affect community engagement and social well-being by creating spaces of dialogue, opening up social commentary and providing room for critique on the status quo; and engaging action in a sea of indifference (Bishop, 2004, 2006; Bourriaud, 2002; Debord, 2014; Helguera, 2011; Wexler & Sabbaghi, 2019). Artists play a significant role in this through varied practices leading to moments of reflection, comic relief, communal happenings, interaction and expression through public participation (Bishop, 2004, 2006; Bourriaud, 2002; Debord, 2014; Dietachmair & Gielen, 2017; Wexler & Sabbaghi, 2019). Furthermore, this contributes to the diverse cultural capital of a city, adding to the broader community's social and economic well-being. With this role and responsibility, artists need the support and resources to thrive in a challenging environment like Malta to realise their potential as actively engaged artists in the community.

The profession of the artist in Malta is often undervalued and challenging, which may impact artists' economic stability, workers' rights and fuel precarious conditions (Briguglio & Camilleri, 2023; Visanich & Attard, 2020). The Gabriel Caruana Foundation (GCF) aims to provide the contemporary artistic community in Malta a space for their continuous creative development while fostering their well-being through social, cultural and creative dialogue. In line with this, the GCF developed the SPRING Artistic Programme for Emerging Artists based on the core values of understanding, conscience, community, connection, collaboration, innovation, experimentation and legacy. It is within this context that the need for initiatives that

care, encourage and nurture artists arises, as intended by the 'Cross-Pollination' workshop as part of the SPRING Programme.

Educators play a significant role in fostering ecological literacy, drawing among others on the influential works of Orr (1994) and Capra (1997). In line with this, the Centre for Environmental Education Research (CEER) privileges its outreach work, thus contributing to developing eco-literate citizens who are committed to sustainability. In a fast-changing Malta and an increasingly multicultural society in constant flux, the work of Orr (1994) reminds us of the social significance of edges by drawing parallels between ecological boundaries and cultural boundaries. Just as the juxtaposition of different environments along edges not only creates a support system for species from both ecosystems but also for other species found in the overlapping area, cultural boundaries can serve as sites of connection, innovation, and mutual learning. Capra's (1982, 1997) major contribution to exploring the interconnectedness of ecological systems and systems thinking is a reminder that we are bound through networks of relationships and feedback loops, where the teacher takes the role of a facilitator and education becomes a "dance between learner and teacher" (Fosnot, 1986, p.186).

It is in this intersection of nature, art and well-being that we, the authors, collaborated in developing and delivering a "Cross-pollination" workshop. We embraced the concept of cross-pollination wherein the hybridisation of different disciplines met to favour new ways of being and doing. Together, from the University of Malta International Master of Adult Education for Social Change (IMAESC), GCF and CEER, we developed the workshop with an overarching framework of a place-based pedagogy (Gruenewald, 2003; Morgan, 2000). Place-based pedagogy can be broadly described as a pedagogy that relates the place/locale with the people which aims to move learning outside of metaphoric and physical institutional walls (Yemini et al., 2023). The premise was that connecting one to self and nature, with an embodied experience, unlocks a sense of well-being. This is supported by extensive research evidence which shows that a "sense of well-being is rooted in the experience of being connected to nature" (Kowal &

Mangal, 2021 p. 287).

With this backdrop, we reflect on the key question for this paper "*How does cross-pollination centered on a pedagogy of place contribute to individual and collective well-being?*" by revisiting the cross-pollination workshop through a critical reflection.

Cross-pollination Approach: Design, Development and Delivery

No precedent nor template existed for us to deliver a cross-disciplinary workshop combining nature, art and well-being for artists aged between 26 and 34. Making up the team, one of us is experienced in transformational facilitation with a background in psychology, cognitive behavioural hypnotherapy and neuro-linguistic programming. Two are social practice artists and cultural workers who share the lived experience of the target participants. The final addition to the team is an environmentalist and a seasoned facilitator in popular education for sustainability. While we had the experience of delivering educational workshops, the reality of each individual's shared experience is primarily of living and functioning in a compartmentalised society. In theory, our practices thrive off interdisciplinary collaboration and reflective processes for social change, but we tend to operate in silos in our respective domains or we face obstacles when privileging transdisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity.

The design and implementation of this workshop was an opportunity to break domains, a learning experience in ways of working together, beyond theory, and applied in practice. Indeed, throughout the planning, design, implementation and feedback processes of the workshop, we aimed to integrate playfulness consistently. Barnett (2007) proposes playfulness to be "the predisposition to frame (or reframe) a situation in such a way to provide oneself (and possibly others) with amusement, humour and/or entertainment" (p. 955). In bringing together different studies positively correlating playfulness and subjective well-being, Proyer (2013) noted various outcomes including intrinsic motivation, improved quality of life and heightened job satisfaction and workplace initiative.

Cross-pollinating with Shared Intentions

Uncovering shared intentions across silos of disciplinary domains was crucial. Interdisciplinary collaboration between University departments, different industries and cultural practitioners engaged in different media is championed by GCF and encouraged in the cultural scene. This has proven beneficial with resourcefulness, gaining access to a rich tapestry of perspectives, expertise, and approaches. Both GCF and CEER had the shared objective to expand their community engagement. GCF wanted to partner with CEER to offer SPRING emerging artists with a nature-based immersion at CEER's Fawwara Center, while also creating a reflective experience for the artists to consider different manifestations of community engagement and its vast implications on their practice. CEER was in turn interested in how the arts community can be engaged to foster sustainability, with the premise that while science often provides evidence-based knowledge on which one can make informed decisions, arts have the power to engage emotions, foster innovation, and promote inclusivity, possibly impacting behaviour further. Both shared the intention of fostering connectedness with nature to develop creativity, well-being, and a deeper appreciation for sustainability.

Preparation for Collaborative Design

Preparation was key to our collaboration, both conceptual and contextual. Conceptual preparation included reviewing the appropriate pedagogical theories and relevant frameworks to inform the design of a workshop for artists that fosters well-being through nature.

Contextual preparation required a broader understanding of the context in which GCF operates to support the artist community that it serves. It also meant understanding the salience of space, and how it impacts well-being and artist development. There is evidence, also in the Maltese context, that the natural environment contributes to improvements in mental health. In her study of Maltese youth, Chetcuti (2023) suggested that the surrounding environment has an apparent effect on improving or worsening their well-being. This is echoed

by Scerri (2020) who investigated street design and mental well-being. Further, Kenely's (2022) research on Maltese youth showed that their environment impacts belonging, identity, safety and security, influencing overall mental health and well-being.

Socio-economic Context and The Mill

The socio-political and economic context of the GCF influences the paradigm for artist development. GCF runs The Mill - Art, Culture and Crafts Centre, which is situated in a 300-year-old Schedule I heritage site *Il-Mitħna tal-Maħlut* in the locality of Birkirkira which is threatened by aggressive overdevelopment in the area (Cummings, 2023). The exploitation of Malta's natural spaces and The Mill's context recurrently serve as a guiding catalyst to concepts and initiatives implemented through the GCF artistic programming. This is often reflected in the conversations sparked throughout the development of the artistic programme, the curatorial direction, the materiality of the artists' work, and the themes that artists address. The GCF's regular Think Tank with the Birkirkara Active Residents' group serves as a community and online collaborative learning space centred around issues of public space, placemaking and mobility justice. During a particular Think Tank session, exposure to the setting provided a visceral appreciation of the GCF collaborators' advocacy for mobility justice which influences their engagement with the artists. Discussions included tackling issues of accelerating degradation of the environment, inaccessibility of public and open spaces, and how this impacts the community.

Physical Context of the Cross-pollination Workshop

It was also important to understand the context of the venue, the Fawwara Centre, located in Fawwara Siġġiewi, Malta, which is under the management of the University of Malta, through CEER, and its relevance to the workshop. Fawwara is located right at the edge of the southwestern coastal cliffs of Malta, facing the small island of Filfla. Under the care of CEER are the two stretches of land surrounding the Fawwara Centre. In front of the building is an

educational permaculture garden where edible plants are grown. This serves as an educational site while allowing experimentation of the different ways one can grow food while protecting the ecosystem and enriching the soil's long-term fertility. Outdoor benches are available which are conducive to group work and creation.

Indoor facilities provided critical mitigation for the risk of rain and storms, which were forecast for the day of the cross-pollination workshop. This context reinforced the outdoor learning aspect of the workshop with sustainability in mind.

Multidisciplinary Collaborative Design

Fostering social well-being in a sustainable way is inherently a cross-disciplinary endeavour. The challenge is bridging the gaps of siloed thinking across disciplines. The concept of "edges" served as guiding inspiration. It is a place, whether physical or metaphorical, where boundaries meet. This lends itself to the emergence of a rich diversity of ideas. This was inspired by permaculture and the seminal work of Mollison and Holmgren (1978), who posited the importance of edges in designing regenerative and self-sustaining ecosystems. The 11th Principle of permaculture is "Use Edges and Value the Marginal" (Permaculture Principles, 2024). This was alluded to as an invitation to immerse ourselves in the dynamic zones where different habitats and ecosystems meet. It encourages us to embrace transition zones and the juxtaposition of differences.

There were two phases to the collaboration, the planning phase and the design workshop.

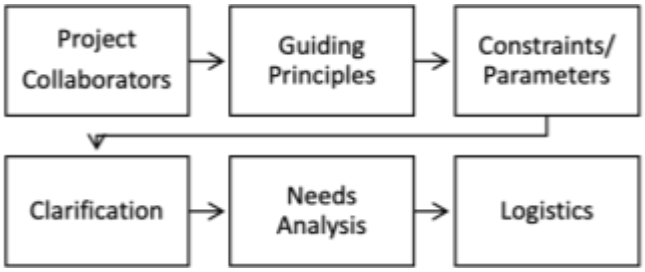
Planning for Collaboration - Six Elements

The key elements established in the planning phase were 1) project collaborators, 2) guiding principles, 3) constraints/parameters, 4) points for clarification, 5) needs analysis and 6) logistics. Understanding who we were as collaborators and what we brought to the table was the starting point for this phase. Guiding principles for interdisciplinary and learner-centred collaboration set out our direction and focus. Needs analysis was based on pre-existing GCF

assessment of the participants, including objectives, profiles and logistical requirements. We then considered the constraints to agree on a viable scope, time and location for the workshop. Setting constraints while ensuring moments of playfulness was instrumental in facilitating creativity. This was applied throughout the process, during our collaboration in design as well as with the participating artists during the cross-pollination workshop itself.

Figure 1

Six-step Collaborative Planning Elements



Note: This figure provides an overview of the collaborative planning method developed and employed by the authors.

Given the multidisciplinary collaboration, establishing a shared meaning of the concepts from which we operated was essential. As collaborators, we established in context what we meant by “art”, in what form or format; well-being in what sense; nature specifically in what setting; and, expectations on ecological literacy, the role of space, and what all these mean in relation to artist development and their engagement with their communities.

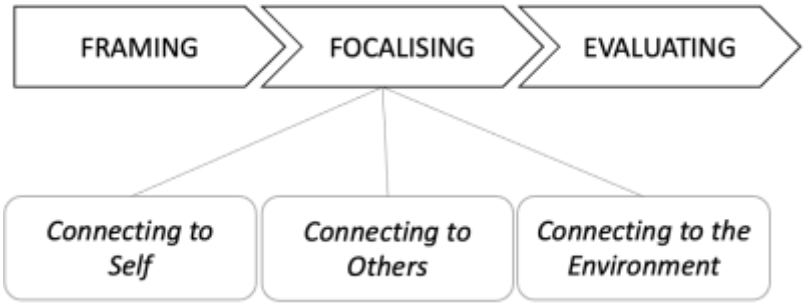
The elements of the planning phase set the tone for effective collaboration, clarifying our roles and what was expected from each of us as contributors. This helped optimise our limited resources with an understanding and respect for others’ constraints which in turn created an environment of trust and accountability. Uncovering assumptions and making them explicit, signalled to us a safe space to contribute and constructively challenge others’ ideas.

Collaborative Design Workshop - Three-step Structure

The second phase was our facilitators' design workshop where our ideas unfolded and were moulded from our diverse backgrounds and expertise. We launched our dialogue with "Starting with What We Know" revisiting the overarching aims of the GCF SPRING programme to frame the cross-pollination workshop design. We had a detailed briefing on the nature site, Fawwara, and the concepts of artistic creation. We then brainstormed using a three-step workshop structure of Framing, Focalising and Evaluating as illustrated in Figure 2 - Three-step Workshop Structure. Framing sets the stage, tone, and expectations for the workshop. Focalising involves 1) connecting to self, 2) to others, and 3) the environment. Evaluating includes reviewing and reflecting on the outcomes of the workshop (Puntawe, 2023).

Figure 2

Three-step Workshop Structure



Note. Chevron logic map of the workshop design. Own work.

This three-step collaborative design workshop structure guided our ideation process. This allowed us creative freedom whilst ensuring focused thinking and methodically capturing the flow of ideas along these themes. We used visual facilitation representing our ideas as modules of visually 'movable pieces' of activities. This helped us to flexibly 'slide' ideas or modules along the timeline with a logical flow. Like a jigsaw puzzle, it allowed us to mix and match, see where there were gaps, where buckets were empty, overflowing, or saturated, and what the best sequence was. We had a 'parking lot' for tools and ideas that seemed 'out of place' and did not

make the 'final cut' but we thought might be useful at the last minute.

Collaborative Delivery: Art, Nature and Well-being

The design that we created for the workshop allowed for co-creation and emergence with the participants. We facilitated exploration with mindfulness and creativity, prompting dialogue, with space for presenting, reflecting and evaluating. Our place-based pedagogy enabled spontaneity and flexibility to adapt to and be present to the conditions in the environment and how participants interact with it, with each other, and with us as facilitators.

Flow and Coherence

We needed to be responsive to what emerged while retaining coherence to the workshop. To do this, we maintained a logical flow that included the following elements of the workshop design:

1. Congruence and alignment, where we framed the session with expectations from everyone.
2. Connecting to the place, where we set the tone with stories about the place and with a theme of "edges", a space of rich biodiversity, as a prompt for exploration. The narrative of permaculture principles and ethics of foraging guided the participants' collection of art materials.
3. Connecting to self, exploring and creating was facilitated with a mindful walking exercise. Participants had the option to create clay impressions and/or take Polaroid photos – avoiding the use of phones. The intent was to get participants to connect to nature and disconnect from their devices.
4. Collaborative learning by working together in groups where they processed their explorations and represented them in their chosen forms of art, from photos, to artistic impressions with clay and with performance.

5. Presenting with ease in overcoming their fears of public speaking, and instead finding their voice in conveying their narratives, experience and insights.

We maintained our focus on ensuring a complete cycle of action-reflection-action. This meant that in the interest of time, we prioritised the participant reflection modules of the workshop, which also provided us facilitators with information for our reflection and evaluation. This allowed mutual validation of where expectations were met and the value we derived from the experience.

Participant Reflection

We facilitated the participants' reflections on their experiences with the workshop using three distinct tools of 1) structured criticism (Cavanagh, 2023), 2) workshop radar, and 3) expectations retrospective. This triangulated approach enabled more robust feedback from the participants providing us with a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p.3) that revealed consistent patterns of themes.

Structured Criticism. The structured criticism was adopted from the work of popular educator Cavanagh (2023). It helped determine the extent to which our multiple pedagogical approaches worked and how effective they were in fostering conditions for creativity, critical dialogue, and co-creation. It asked three simple questions: 1) What did I connect with? 2) What did I learn about the way I learned? 3) What would I change? (Cavanagh, 2023).

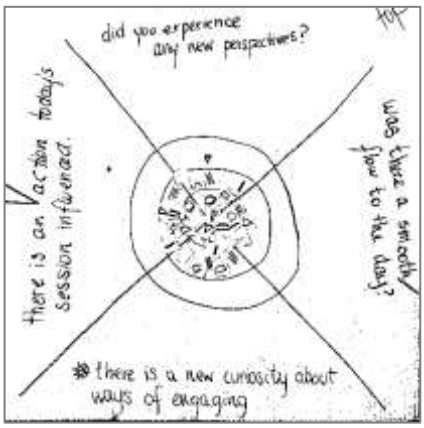
Workshop Radar. We engaged the participants and asked them to feedback on the quality of the session using visual representations like an arrow on a dart board. We asked the participants to position the workshop visually in terms of how on-target or off-target the workshop was according to their desired experience in terms of flow and impacts on their perspectives, engagement, and actions. The four dimensions of the workshop radar included:

- Did you experience any new perspectives?

- Was there a smooth flow to the day?
- Is there a new curiosity about ways of engaging?
- Is there an action today's session influenced?

Figure 3

Workshop Radar Feedback



Note. This is a photo exhibit of the workshop radar populated by the participants. The responses concentrated in the centre which meant that the dimensions were rated to be higher the closer they were to the centre. Own work.

Expectations Retrospective. We revisited and reviewed the list of expectations that we elicited at the beginning of the cross-pollination workshop that framed the whole session. These expectations served as a "checklist" that directed our facilitation and adapted the structure of our agenda to the group's emerging needs. This helped us to set ourselves up for a successful workshop, with tangible evidence from the positive feedback of the participants.

Limitations - Considerations and Conditions for Cross-pollination

What are the conditions to consider in cross-pollination and continuing to work at the edges across disciplines? There are limitations that we reflected on as collaborators.

Co-creating something without precedent meant being at the edge of what we know to embrace the unknown. This creates uncertainty which for some may elicit anxiety or discomfort. This requires being present and transparent with what we think and feel to negotiate the conditions to facilitate our best contributions.

Availability of and commitment from the right collaborators are essential. Time and timing are key considerations to ensure everyone can appropriately contribute. With only four of us, our collaboration was easier to manage which may not be the case for larger teams.

Constraints in resources have to be considered. The design, development and facilitation were pro-bono for the CEER and IMAESC collaborators, which cannot be presupposed as the condition for collaboration. Financial burden can be a barrier to bringing ideas to life that are exploratory, experimental and untested. This can pose challenges in enrolling participants as well as securing funding. We were able to pilot this cross-pollination with resources and funding already available from GCF since it was part of the SPRING programme co-financed by the Arts Council Malta.

Power dynamics can impact the quality of cross-pollination. Dominant views and lack of openness to what is new and different can be counter-productive to cross-pollination. Creating a safe space for co-creation allows vulnerability and freedom in sharing ideas, engaging in debate and constructive feedback. This also fosters openness to uncertainty as to what the final outcome would be like and responsiveness to what emerges in the process before and during the workshop.

Critical Reflection: Facilitating Well-being with Art and Nature

Dialogue and Co-creation

We designed the workshop to be learner-centric. We deliberated the extent to which it would be more directed by us or by the participants and opted to have an overarching theme to

meet the objectives of the workshop and the SPRING programme while allowing for freedom to explore. Asking the participants "what they want to have to happen" as a pre-frame, allowed the participants to set the direction of the workshop. Mutual respect, trust, and shared intentions helped in fostering a democratic process of co-creation. We cultivated a safe space for taking risks to experiment and be innovative. Dialogue was built into the workshop, with freedom for the participants to self-organise in exploring both individually and in groups.

One group performed pounding wood with stone, relaying the theme of "Edges" as two worlds colliding, literally of the "soft" and the "hard", and metaphorically of the powerful and the oppressed. This critical representation of hegemony evoked the experience of violence. Another group presented about "Edges" in the context of the blurriness between what is man-made versus what is natural, and the implications of this in the urban development.

Art, Community Engagement and Connecting Edges

One of the intentions of the GCF team and artists throughout the SPRING program was to find and implement connections between artistic practices and community engagement. Positioning the artist in this context continued to be a recurring conversation between the team and SPRING artists, with a question echoing across the cultural landscape; if an artist does not practice art for community engagement, does it remove the artist's potential for community engagement?

As intended for the cross-pollination workshop, there was space throughout for reflecting on this conversation in a new light - that of the theme of edges. With this in mind, the edge potentially provides a space for championing diverse practices in the arts. It is also an opportunity to inquisitively explore, through community engagement, the cultural ecosystems that pursue connecting edges between cultural practitioners, patrons and funders of the arts, audiences, transdisciplinary collaborators, and policymakers (Bishop, 2012; Kester, 2013).

Continually meeting at the edge of different disciplines, the co-design, implementation of,

and reflection on the cross-pollination workshop allowed for a renewed appreciation of the diverse, unique artistic practices developing through the SPRING program. It provided moments of togetherness and reflection between the workshop facilitators, artists and the GCF team to collectively value those artistic practices. This further supported the necessity of the GCF team to understand the artist's boundaries, and their position on community engagement, to facilitate connecting edges with communities and stakeholders.

Well-being through Cross-pollination

"Cross-pollination", from our perspective as collaborators, created an experience of well-being through flow and presence. Flow is being fully present in the moment, where one experiences being 'in the zone' characterised by performing with effortless ease (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Our experience of flow in co-creation was another factor that made our collaboration feel rewarding. As conditions shifted from what was expected, we were flexible, attentive, and adaptive to what was emergent. Accessing flow in groups or even communities unlocks collective well-being.

Inclusion in Cross-pollination

A sense of belonging is crucial to well-being which requires sensitivity to who is being excluded. This implies asking who is being limited from learning or participating in how social well-being learning programs are designed.

Our "Cross-pollination" and play with the concept of edges in permaculture allowed multiple pathways to foster well-being. Centering our approach to an arts- and place-based pedagogy made it possible for us to collaborate not despite, but because of, our diverse pedagogical traditions. It allowed us to be innovative and inclusive of diverse learning pathways towards achieving well-being. This is evident from the participants' feedback, including:

- Emergent learning – *"You can learn even when you are not trying to specifically learn anything."*
- Ecological learning – *"My surroundings have a deep influence on how I perceive."*
- Social learning - *"I learn a lot through hearing others discuss and bounce off ideas."*
- Experiential learning – *"I find experiential learning the best, there's been a sensory experience that I can take with me."*
- Reflexive learning – *"The physical exploration combined with the conceptual investigation was a potent method of understanding."*
- Arts-based learning – *"Exploring and moulding clay while I was walking really helped me to just be me."*

The unintended positive consequence of multiple pedagogies is that it is inclusive of multiple types of intelligence (Gardner, 1999).

Playfulness and Embodied Metaphor

Simple activities, such as sketching out an impromptu 'permaculture field to fork' scenario during a planning session with the facilitators and imagining the comparisons of this scenario to the cultural landscape, made room for a few laughs and plenty of creative thinking and a palpable enthusiasm in moving forward.

During the workshop at CEER in Fawwara, we employed playfulness to prompt an adventurous exploration of the natural surroundings with the theme of "edges". Activities included walking with clay and capturing images with a Polaroid camera to tell a story, which allowed for a playful and memorable experience of the space. The artists were invited to explore the area with clay and a Polaroid camera, in an unplanned walk around the Fawwara Centre. This opened up unexpected encounters that facilitated dialogue and learning experiences

(Saldanha, 2021). This facilitated embodied cognition which refers to the interconnectedness between the body, mind and our environment that enable active modes of learning, rather than passive ones, thereby activating empathic responses and reflections (Lasczik et al., 2021, 2023; Middleton, 2010; Power, 2023; Skulmowski & Rey, 2018). Such opportunities were cherished by the GCF team particularly when noting the strengthened sense of belonging for artists within the SPRING artistic community through such communal moments of laughing, engaging and playing.

Conclusion and Implications for Future Practice and Research

As authors, we are concerned with the outcomes of the World Happiness Report (Helliwell, et. al., 2024) that Maltese youth under 30 are the unhappiest in the EU (Borg, 2024). It is beyond the scope of this paper to illustrate the specific reasons behind this unhappiness – however such realities are often multifaceted and may be linked to economic, social, political, and cultural factors. Addressing such a concern requires a comprehensive multi-stakeholder approach based on partnerships involving both government and community support systems. This implies a multiplicity of interventions and solutions that can encompass not only macro-factors at the societal level but also micro-factors linked to the unique circumstances and perspectives of those experiencing discontent and uprootedness. In such a context the question of “how does cross-pollination centred on a pedagogy of place contribute to individual and collective well-being?” becomes a matter of urgency.

The feedback received taken as a whole indicates the importance of understanding the interconnectedness between human well-being and planetary well-being. Artistic expression can act as a catharsis and the use of clay in the cross-pollination workshop allowed participants to explore and process their feelings while immersed in a green space and environment for inspiration. The context of community and familiarity contributed to fostering a sense of belonging and connection, which are essential for overall well-being. The relative remoteness of the chosen place allowed participants to be fully present and for a day released from the

pressures of urbanisation, multi-tasking and daily life. This set the context for artistic creation and the envisioning of a preferred future.

Revisiting our “Cross-Pollination” from a distance, rather than from the immediate viewpoint of an educator or facilitator of the process, allows also for a reflection on the political. The government is often criticised for competing with cultural operators through the regular organisation of well-resourced entertainment – something that non-profits or small organisations cannot match. Perhaps providing an enabling environment for more opportunities for artistic expression, community engagement, identity exploration, and empowerment can be an alternative route, and a recognition that the arts are a catalyst and vehicle for personal and social transformation, connection, and well-being.

Sites of biodiversity are sites of connection and learning, and Cross-Pollination was one way of embodying the systems approach popularised by Capra (1997). Combined with the interdisciplinarity of the backgrounds of the facilitators, this was yet another recognition of the interconnectedness of human societies and the natural world, something that a world based on compartmentalisation often makes us forget. Through an exploration of edges, ecological boundaries and cultural boundaries thus become spaces for connections and innovations, as embodied in the versatility, plasticity, endless possibilities, and sensory experience of clay.

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Disclaimer

The SPRING Artistic Programme for Emerging Artists by the Gabriel Caruana Foundation was co-financed by Arts Council Malta. Views expressed are solely of the authors.

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Dr Vincent Caruana's mission in life is to inspire people to take action for a better self and a better world. In 2014, he obtained his PhD, focusing on education for sustainability and the social economy, through four case studies, in Egypt, Malta, Italy and Palestine. Vince is currently a full-time lecturer and researcher at CEER – Malta's University Centre for Environmental Education and Research. He is active in the Social and Development scene locally and at a European level and is an established mentor, trainer and evaluator for various organisations.

Studies in Social Wellbeing, Volume 3. Issue 2: 96 -134

ISSN 3007-4479 / https://www.um.edu.mt/ssw

Therapeutic Trauma-Informed Practice for Helping Professionals in Child and Adolescent Social Welfare Settings: A Semi-systematic Review

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Abstract

Trauma is considered to be pervasive particularly in child welfare settings. Principles of trauma-informed care and practice have become established and numerous efforts have been made to apply these principles when working with children and adolescents who have experienced trauma. However, a comprehensive understanding of how these principles are translated into practice, particularly in child and adolescent welfare settings seems lacking. This paper presents a semi-systematic review using thematic analysis to map and describe how trauma-informed principles are translated into practical, therapeutic skills by professionals in such settings. Nineteen peer reviewed articles published between 2000-2024 were retrieved using the HyDi search portal. The themes portray various skills and interventions considered important when working with trauma in children and adolescents. The practices of integrating embodied and creative expression and systemic interventions in social welfare practice are emphasised. Skills highlighting the power of human connections and the significance of narratives and emotional regulation in trauma-informed practice are also evident in the articles reviewed. As a result of the review, a common process that starts with the establishment of safety and moves toward narrative expression and processing is observed within containing and supportive relationships. Ultimately, this paper advocates for practice and services that are grounded in trauma-informed principles and therapeutic competence. As a result, such services and practices may contribute to meet the complexity of the needs of children and adolescents in welfare settings.

Keywords: trauma-informed practice, social welfare settings, children and adolescents, therapeutic interventions.

Therapeutic Trauma-Informed Practice for Helping Professionals in Child and Adolescent Social Welfare Settings: A Semi-systematic Review

The experience of trauma is pervasive, particularly in child social welfare settings with many children having experienced complex trauma (Fraser et al., 2014; Popescu et al., 2017). Thus, understanding trauma is necessary to minimise the risk of re-traumatisation and the exacerbation of children's symptoms. While the prevalence of Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) ranges between 3-6% (Koenen et al., 2017), these rates are significantly higher among looked-after children (children and young people living in out of home care) often exceeding 30% (Borg et al., n.d.; Vasileva & Petermann, 2018). Consequently, the call for therapeutic trauma-informed (TI) care and practice in these settings responds to the profound and far-reaching impacts of trauma.

This paper presents a semi-systematic review utilising a flexible yet structured approach involving a targeted search and thematic analysis of 19 peer-reviewed articles. The review aims to map therapeutic skills used across disciplines and describes how TIP principles are translated into practice in child and adolescent social welfare settings[1].

Inspired by my (D'Amico) personal experience as a social worker, counsellor and foster parent, a hypothesis emerged on the centrality of relationships and body-based processes when working with trauma. This review adopts the hypothesis that there are common skills relevant for helping professionals working in welfare settings with children and adolescents impacted by trauma. Helping professionals include social workers, counsellors, psychologists and psychotherapists who typically constitute the multidisciplinary team in welfare settings. These professions have been selected because they are regulated professions, trained in establishing

[1] For the purposes of this review, social welfare settings are taken to include all services and settings that provide social welfare services to children and adolescents including but not limited to adoption, fostering, looked after children, youth services, after care service, community homes service, home based therapy services and community social work services and specialised programmes delivered in community settings such as schools for the purposes of prevention or crisis intervention. Such services may be offered through state provision or non-governmental, private and voluntary organisations.

therapeutic relationships and versed in participating in clinical and reflective practices.

In the following paragraphs we discuss the importance of therapeutic trauma-informed practice (TIP), the theoretical framework shaping the semi-systematic review, the methodology adopted and the presentation and discussion of the results.

A Call for Therapeutic Trauma-Informed Practice and Care

The evolution towards TIP and trauma-informed care (TIC) is driven by the recognition of the prevalence and implications of trauma (Hopper et al., 2010; Lurie et al., 2016). TIC aims to establish organisational cultures that prioritise safety and therapeutic support. Concurrently, TIP integrates trauma awareness into daily practices focusing on recognising trauma signs, trauma-specific interventions, and resilience promotion (Carello & Butler, 2015; Harris & Fallot, 2001). TIC and TIP are essential to minimise and address trauma in social welfare settings.

Levenson (2020) highlights the urgent need for TI knowledge and skills, emphasising the detrimental effects of trauma on childhood development across social, emotional, physical, and neurological domains (Cook et al., 2005; Courtois & Ford, 2012; Felitti et al., 1998; Hamai & Felitti, 2022; Van Der Kolk, 2007; Vasileva & Petermann, 2018; Watters & Wojciak, 2020). The impact of trauma on children underscores the necessity for TIP and TIC which is not confined to any specific social context or helping profession. For example, in Malta, a significant portion of social work cases involve children at risk (FSWS, 2019) with complex mental health needs including trauma and attachment disruptions (Abela et al., 2012; Grech, 2017).

Such scenarios raise the expectation for TIPs to become more therapeutic, fostering environments rooted in relationships, safety, trust, empowerment, and healing (Harris & Fallot, 2001; Najavits, 2015). This approach aims to reduce trauma symptoms and enhance mental health in clients (Larkin et al., 2016). However, despite the articulation of TI principles in the seminal work by Harris and Fallot (2001), a gap remains in actioning these principles into skills and practices, especially in child welfare settings (Berliner & Kolko, 2016; Donisch et al., 2016).

There has been significant development in specific psychotherapies dealing with trauma, such as Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (TF-CBT). However, a gap exists in the training of various helping professions on TI therapeutic competencies (as opposed to general TI principles) (Chatters & Liu, 2020; Courtois & Gold, 2009; Dublin et al., 2024; Goodwin & Tiderington, 2022; Levenson, 2017, 2020; Sadusky et al., 2021). This gap is greater for competencies needed when working with children (Dublin et al., 2024).

In an effort to provide such a portfolio to social workers, Munisamy and Elze (2020) proposed guidelines tailored for working with youth having experienced trauma, emphasising safety, emotional regulation, empowerment, and the construction of coherent narratives among others. Similarly, Malchiodi (2022) targeted expressive art therapists and Cook et al., (2005) addressed medical professions, they outlined principles and intervention components focused on addressing the multifaceted impacts of trauma. These include attachment issues, affect regulation, and positive affect enhancement, illustrating the complex interplay between theory and practical application. These efforts underscore the necessity for a deep, practical understanding of trauma and its effects to translate TI principles into practical skills and applications for helping professions working with children and adolescents. It is worth noting that as authors we are not advocating for the identification of these skills to be used “randomly” and “ad hoc”. Rather, such identification could contribute to the inclusion of TI skills in the wider context of training of helping professions, informed by professional ethical frameworks and supported by the personal and professional development required for working in therapeutic relationships.

Thus, the question emerges: Based on theory and practice, which are the therapeutic, interdisciplinary, trauma-informed skills that are relevant for helping professionals working with children and adolescents in social welfare settings? To answer this question and describe how these principles are being translated into practice by helping professionals in this field, a semi-systematic review was carried out. This method was chosen to encompass the broad theoretical

scope of a mapping exercise, conceptualised across disciplines and research traditions (Snyder, 2019). Such an approach is gaining visibility in inter- and transdisciplinary research (e.g. Abedi et al., 2023; Post, 2024; Sodano & Gorgitano, 2022; van der Leer et al., 2023; Wallengren-Lynch, 2024).

Theoretical framework

Drawing on pioneering works (Cozolino, 2017; Ginot, 2015; Hart & Jacobsen, 2018; Porges, 2022; Schore, 2001; Siegel, 2020; Van Der Kolk, 2014) the theoretical framework of this review rests on the pivotal realisation that irrespective of theoretical orientation, the body, human relationships and safety are central in addressing trauma. Integrating therapeutic TI interventions into welfare settings may be seen as a development of TIC anchored in a systemic perspective and focused on the centrality of attachment and emotional regulation in trauma care (Hodgdon et al., 2013). This conceptualisation allows the components of TIP (Cook et al., 2005; Harris & Fallot, 2001; Herman, 1992, 1997; Malchiodi, 2022; Munisamy & Elze, 2020) to be organised around the theoretical framework of trauma theory (Ginot, 2015; Hart & Jacobsen, 2018; Levine & Kline, 2006; Porges, 2022; Siegel, 2020; Van Der Kolk, 2014), systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ranjbar et al., 2020; Saleebey, 2013), and attachment theory (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969; Conroy & Perryman, 2022; Ginot, 2015; Schore, 2001; Siegel, 2020). This structuring of TIP components within this framework, facilitates the conceptualisation of these principles into actionable skills and practices. Moreover, it adopts the view that the complexity of trauma requires an interdisciplinary approach to understand its impact on individuals and communities (Courtois & Ford, 2012; Felitti et al., 1998; Herman, 1997; Levenson, 2020; Van Der Kolk, 2014).

Method

A literature search was carried out between September and December of 2023, using the HyDi search portal. This resulted in publications across the databases shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Collections used in Hydi Search

Applied Social Sciences Index & Abstracts (ASSIA)
CINAHL Complete
EBSCOhost Academic Search Ultimate
Education Database
Hellenic Academic Libraries Link
IngentaConnect Journals
Journals@Ovid
ProQuest Central
Scopus
Social Science Premium Collection
Social Sciences Citation Index (Web of Science)
Sociological Abstracts
Sociology Database
Springer Nature - Springer Journals All 2022
SpringerLink Contemporary (1997 - Present)
SpringerLink Journals - AutoHoldings
Taylor & Francis Combined Library (SSH & ST)
Taylor & Francis Current Content Access
Taylor & Francis Social Science and Humanities Library
Taylor & Francis: Master (3349 titles)

The search criteria consisted of the title containing the terms (trauma OR ptsd OR cptsd) OR (complex ptsd) OR (complex trauma) OR (developmental trauma). These different terms were selected as they are often used interchangeably. The terms child* OR adolescent OR youth OR teen were included in the title search field to target the client population. The terms skills OR therapy OR intervention OR practice were included in the same field. These terms were selected through trial and error since using only ‘skills’ or ‘intervention’ resulted in too few results that did not capture the research question. The terms neuroscience OR neurobiology OR body OR somatic OR sensory OR social work OR attachment were included in the same field to focus on

results that reflected the theoretical framework. It was necessary to include 'body' and 'somatic' terms since these often-reflected approaches that integrate the neuroscience of trauma into the therapeutic relationship. The terms welfare OR care OR (social work) were searched for in any field to keep the results within the context of welfare settings.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The search process began with 140 records published between 2000-2024. Applying filters for 'articles' and 'peer-reviewed journals' reduced the number to 84. The subjects of psychiatry, caregivers and medicine were excluded resulting in 47 records. From these, articles were excluded according to the criteria shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Exclusion Criteria used in Screening of Records

Duplicates
Book reviews
Descriptions of conferences or events
Descriptions of prevalence or symptomatology without reference to practice implications
Articles without reference to skills or practice implications
Articles not referring to social welfare settings
Articles that were not directly about children and/or adolescents with trauma
Articles that were exclusively about the prevention of risk of trauma or exclusively about organisational TIC policy.

This resulted in 19 articles shown in Table 3. Seven of the articles analysed consisted of different types of empirical studies; seven described detailed case material, four were reviews of the literature that considered the effectiveness of specific interventions, and one was a statistical study. Due to language proficiency and database limitations, only English-language papers were included, leading to a predominance of articles from the United States and Canada. This North American bias may affect the applicability of findings to other cultural contexts, as trauma and care responses can vary globally (Ranjbar et al., 2020; Stamm & Friedman, 2000).

Nevertheless, the review includes articles from India (n=1), Ireland (n=1), and Australia (n=2), offering some insights into different cultural practices, though they do not represent a global diversity of approaches.

Table 3

Final Selection of Articles included in the Review

Article reference	**Type**
Allen, B. (2011). The use and abuse of attachment theory in clinical practice with maltreated children, part I: Diagnosis and assessment. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, *12*(1), 3-12.	Review
Anderson, K. M., & Cook, J. R. (2015). Challenges and opportunities of using digital storytelling as a trauma narrative intervention for traumatised children. *Advances in social work*, *16*(1), 78-89	Analysis of case material, intervention study
Caouette, J., Hébert, M., Cyr, C., & Amédée, L. M. (2021). The attachment video-feedback intervention (AVI) combined to the trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy (TF-CBT) for sexually abused preschoolers and their parents: a pilot study examining pre-to post-test changes. *Developmental child welfare*, *3*(2), 119-134.	Pre-post test pilot study
Cherian, R. (2021). A narrative approach to dealing with trauma in refugee children through Social Case Work Practice. *Journal of Social Work Education and Practice*, *6*(1), 17-30	Analysis of case material
Corrado, M. (2023). Storiez with Urban Youth: The Evolution of a Trauma Narrative Intervention. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 1-11Cherian, R. (2021). A narrative approach to dealing with trauma in refugee children through Social Case Work Practice. *Journal of Social Work Education and Practice*, *6*(1), 17-30.	Analysis of case material, intervention study

Eads, R. (2023). Solution-focused body-mind-spirit (SF-BMS) group therapy for mental health and trauma symptoms among Asian American youth: A mixed methods pilot evaluation. *Families in Society*	Mixed methods pilot study
Farina, A. S., & Mancini, M. (2017). Evaluation of a multi-phase trauma-focused intervention with Latino youth. *Advances in Social Work*, *18*(1), 270-283	Pre-post intervention study
Friend, J. (2012). Mitigating intergenerational trauma within the parent-child attachment. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, *33*(2), 114-127	Case Study
Hobbs, S. D., Bederian-Gardner, D., Ogle, C. M., Goodman, G. S., Hastings, P., Cordon, I., ... & NYTD/CYTD Research Group. (2019). Psychological security in at-risk youth: Attachment, emotion regulation, and PTSD symptom severity. *International journal on child maltreatment: research, policy and practice*, *2*, 17-36	Quantitative, comparative study
Lewis, C., Kwee, J., Rossen, L., & McDonald, M. (2021). Integrating Attachment Processes with Lifespan Integration Therapy: a Hermeneutic Single Case Efficacy Design with an Adopted Child. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 1-18	Case Study
Mancini, M. A. (2020). A pilot study evaluating a school-based, trauma-focused intervention for immigrant and refugee youth. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *37*(3), 287-300.	Mixed methods pilot study
May-Benson, T. A., & Teasdale, A. (2020). Safe place: clinical utility and feasibility of a multi-disciplinary intervention for children with sensory processing disorder and complex trauma–a feasibility study. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, *13*(2), 207-216	Mixed methods pilot study
Mayer, S. S. (2019). Enhancing the lives of children in out-of-home care: An exploration of mind-body interventions as a method of trauma recovery.	Review

Journal of child & adolescent trauma, *12*(4), 549-560	
McGreevy, S., & Boland, P. (2020). Sensory-based interventions with adult and adolescent trauma survivors: An integrative review of the occupational therapy literature. *Irish Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *48*(1), 31-54	Review
Powell, T., & Blanchet-Cohen, N. (2014). The journey of hope: a group work intervention for children who have experienced a collective trauma. *Social Work with groups*, *37*(4), 297-313	Analysis of case material, intervention study
Salloum, A., Garside, L. W., Irwin, C. L., Anderson, A. D., & Francois, A. H. (2009). Grief and trauma group therapy for children after Hurricane Katrina. *Social work with groups*, *32*(1-2), 64-79	Analysis of case material, intervention study
Salloum, A., Lu, Y., Ali, O., Chen, H., Salomon, K., Cohen, J. A., ... & Storch, E. A. (2024). Exploring treatment response predictors of a parent-led therapist-assisted treatment for childhood trauma. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *34*(1), 3-16	Empirical Study
Southwell, J. (2016). Using 'expressive therapies' to treat developmental trauma and attachment problems in preschool-aged children. *Children Australia*, *41*(2), 114-125	Mixed methods intervention study
Vis, J. A., & Battistone, A. (2014). Faith-based trauma intervention: spiritual-based strategies for adolescent students in faith-based schools. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, *33*(3-4), 218-235	Review

Data Extraction and Analysis

The articles were analysed using MAXQDA software identifying skills that are relevant to helping professionals working with children and adolescents experiencing trauma in child welfare settings. The theoretical framework described above was used to identify the skills as theory-based abilities developed by practitioners (e.g. BACP, n.d.; NASW, n.d.) and select terms for the skills identified in the reviewed articles.

Limitations

This review encompasses a variety of study designs. While methodological diversity enriches the scope of the review, it also introduces challenges in comparing findings and assessing the overall quality of evidence due to varying designs, sample sizes, and methodologies. To manage this challenge, findings were synthesised thematically, focusing on patterns across different methodologies rather than forcing consistency. Being a single reviewer (D'Amico) could contribute to bias in selection and data extraction, influencing the objectivity and reproducibility of findings. To mitigate this, the second author (Psaila) reviewed and helped the first author reflect on the process throughout. As mentioned earlier, the articles reviewed have a North American bias, thus, applicability of the findings to other cultural backgrounds is limited. The diversity and type of methodologies also limit generalisability of these findings or their contribution to outcome-evidence on TIP.

Results

The varied, qualitative methodologies contributed to the identification of a diverse set of skills informed by rich and contextual examples. This importantly provided insight on the therapeutic process within which such skills are used.

The thematic analysis resulted in five overarching themes shown in Table 4, along with the number of articles in which each theme appeared.

Table 4

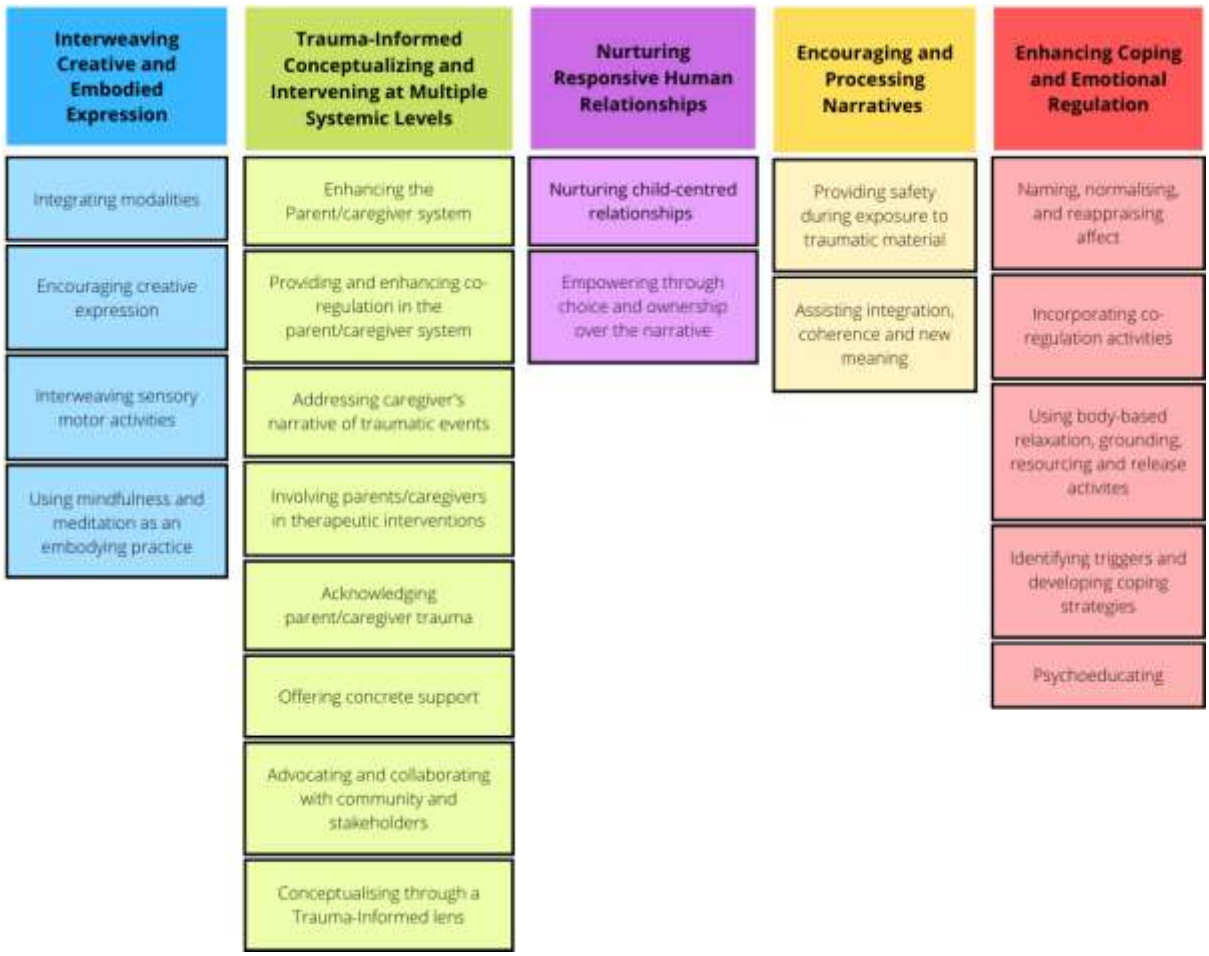
Overarching Themes for Central Skills

Theme	Number of articles
Interweaving Creative and Embodied Expression	12
Trauma-Informed Conceptualising and Intervening at Multiple Systemic Levels	12
Enhancing Coping and Emotional Regulation	9
Nurturing Responsive Human Relationships	7
Encouraging and Processing Narratives as central to the therapeutic process	6

The following sections describe these themes and subthemes (see Figure 1) including their respective skills in more detail.

Figure 1

Themes and Subthemes



Interweaving Embodied and Creative Expression

12 of the 19 articles studied interventions involving interweaving embodied and creative expression into their practices(Anderson & Cook, 2015; Caouette et al., 2021; Cherian, 2021; Corrado & R., 2023; Eads, 2023; Farina & Mancini, 2017; Friend, 2012; Mancini, 2020; May-Benson & Teasdale, 2020; Powell & Blanchet-Cohen, 2014; Salloum et al., 2009; Southwell, 2016).

Integrating modalities

These 12 articles described integrating different modalities in order to incorporate embodied and creative expression. For example, Anderson and Cook (2015), used digital storytelling combined with Trauma Focused-Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (TF-CBT) bringing together storytelling with a mixture of imagery, writing, audio, narration, and music. This was used to empower youth to express and process trauma coherently in a multi-sensory and embodied way. Southwell (2016) describes Yourtown's Expressive Therapies Intervention (YETI), which integrates different expressive modalities enabling service users to express themselves in their preferred way. These include play and sand-play with parent-child attachment-based interventions and a bottom-up neurological approach beginning with somatic and sensory processes to support emotional regulation as preparation for therapeutic activities. These examples align with attachment theory and emphasise the importance of working in a child-centred way that suits their developmental age.

Encouraging creative expression

Almost half of all the articles reviewed described the use of creative expression, including various modes of creative expression (Southwell, 2016; Corrado, 2023; Salloum et al., 2009; Powell & Blanchet-Cohen, 2014; Friend, 2012; Farina & Manicini, 2017; Anderson & Cook, 2015; Cherian, 2023; Eads, 2023). Southwell (2016) highlights the importance of giving children a choice of creative media, including music, dance and movement, sand-play, video and

photography, collage, creative writing (writing prayers, songs, poems), drama, drawing and painting and storytelling. Such creative activities were used individually, in groups or in carer-child dyads. In one example a mother and child were asked to co-create a picture combined with text, to support the parent-child attachment relationship (Friend, 2012).

Throughout the reviewed articles, the role of play and imagination as transformative tools was underscored. Friend (2012) provides a touching description of the parent going through a transformative shift from difficulty in engaging in affectionate touch with her child, toward a tender and spontaneous quality facilitated by using metaphor and play through the child playing the role of a kitten.

Eads (2023) explains that the imagination of play opens dimensions of space, time, detail and symbolic interpretation in which ordinary experiences can be transformed into stories that are out of the ordinary offering the possibility of new perspectives. Eads (2023) describes monsters in children's play as metaphors that serve as points of reference. One child, with a memory of escaping from her village, associated this experience with her packed bag underneath her bed. This was expressed through a story involving a monster hiding under the bed. Ead (2023) points to the way that metaphors help develop individualised meanings and ways of coping. For example, a group facilitator provided a metaphor of the capacity of the camel vs the juggler to hold balloons. A group member was inspired to balance the various obstacles in his life, realising to go with the flow rather than hold onto problems.

Interweaving sensory motor activities

Whilst all embodied practices can be considered sensorimotor, three articles specifically tackled specialised activities originally developed in the discipline of Occupational Therapy (OT). The practices were targeted toward sensory integration, arousal regulation, sensory processing, sensory diet, and soothing to support emotional regulation (Mancini, 2020; Farina & Mancini, 2017; May-Benson & Teasdale, 2020). For instance, Farina and Mancini (2017) describe an

approach based on the principles of safety, choice, pace and success through mindfulness and breathing activities that flux between arousal and relaxation to mimic rhythms that exist naturally in the body during cycles of calm and activation.

Using mindfulness and meditation as an embodying practice

In relation to this, (Farina & Mancini, 2017; Eads, 2023) describe mindfulness and meditation activities involving identifying thoughts, emotions, body sensations, meditation, breathing exercises and focusing on positives and strengths to help children move into a state of relaxation.

Trauma-Informed conceptualising and intervening at multiple systemic levels

Nine of the reviewed articles wove in various TI therapeutic interventions to target different systemic levels (Allen, 2011; Caouette et al., 2021; Friend, 2012; Mancini, 2020; May-Benson & Teasdale, 2020; McGreevy & Boland, 2020; Powell & Blanchet-Cohen, 2014; Salloum et al., 2009, 2024; Southwell, 2016; Vis & Battistone, 2014). The largest focus was placed on the parent-child system, reflecting the literature's emphasis on the centrality of attachment in children and adolescents who experience trauma. In the articles, the role of strengths-based (Saleebey, 2013) and ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) perspectives was highlighted through interventions involving stakeholders actively providing concrete services and supports and holistic TI assessments.

Enhancing the parent/caregiver system

Whilst attachment and parent-child relationships were mentioned throughout, four articles analysed and described ways to enhance attachment relationships in more detail (Friend, 2012; May-Benson & Teasdale, 2020; Southwell, 2016; Caouette et al., 2021). These included designing interactive play activities and coaching caregivers in their interaction with the children (Friend, 2012), teaching and facilitating body-based activities to support emotional regulation and co-regulation to strengthen attachment and provide emotional safety (May-

Benson & Teasdale, 2020) and raising parental awareness of their own emotional responses to repair attachment ruptures in their relationship with the child (Caouette et al., 2021; May-Benson & Teasdale, 2020). Southwell (2016) also outlined the practitioner's supportive role during parent-child play, to reinforce and model responding to the child's attachment needs.

Providing and enhancing co-regulation in the parent/caregiver system

In working with parents, the role of the parent/caregiver and therapist in providing co-regulation was highlighted (Friend, 2012; Southwell, 2016; Caouette et al., 2021). This concept is consonant with the literature (Schore, 2001) describing how playful interaction supports emotional regulation through non-verbal physiological interactivity. Similar to the process of interpersonal process recall in supervision, Couette et al. (2021) employ the attachment video-feedback intervention. Here, helping professionals use support and reflection to guide parents in reviewing and reflecting on video clips of their own interactions with the child.

Addressing caregiver's narrative of traumatic events

Friend (2012) notes that successful processing of traumatic experiences in children relies on caregiver and family interventions where helping professionals focus on fostering affective and reflective narratives which support the processing of overwhelming traumatic material into autobiographical narratives of more coherence for both parents and children. Similarly, Salloum et al., (2009) describe the skill of listening and giving space to the parent’s narrative of the traumatic event as essential for the child’s therapeutic process.

Involving parents/caregivers in therapeutic interventions

Friend (2012), Salloum et al., (2024) and Caouette et al., (2021) describe interventions that further actively engage the parent/caregiver in the therapeutic relationship. This requires the skills of modelling and teaching parents to create stories for home-time routines such as bedtime. Friend (2012) also describes teaching caregivers to use storytelling as a relational activity that supports adaptive integration for traumatic memories to be processed into

coherent autobiographical narratives. Salloum et al., (2024) describe the therapeutic process of parent-led sessions supported by: preparatory meetings with the therapist, ongoing weekly phone support (supervision), psychoeducation through video demonstrations and a PTSD activity workbook.

Acknowledging parent/caregiver trauma

The latter is an essential element to consider when involving the parent/caregiver (Friend, 2012). One or both parents may be themselves survivors of trauma or would have experienced secondary traumatic stress. Friend (2012) describes the skill of creating a person-centred safe space for the parents. This space allows them to share their traumatic material, be it intergenerational, childhood or other experiences, such as a problematic postpartum, affecting their capacity to show physical contact, emotional warmth, and empathy towards their child.

Offering concrete support

Southwell (2016) describes a programme for children and adolescents that acknowledges parents as survivors of trauma and offers concrete support in the form of a domestic and family violence refuge and a young parents programme. Additionally, Salloum et al., (2009) acknowledge the intersectional nature of trauma by dedicating time to hearing children's views on how changes may be negatively affecting them and exploring providing essential services like food or housing to assist families.

Advocating and collaborating with community and stakeholders

Salloum et al., (2009) and Powell and Blanchet-Cohen (2014) both describe the value of social and emotional support groups provided in partnership with stakeholders in community settings such as schools, to support community resilience in the aftermath of collective adversities such as environmental disasters. McGreevy & Boland (2020) note that their review of studies suggests continued community support and a TI approach are essential for resource-intensive trauma treatment programmes to be effective. This is especially the case in the long

term. They highlight ongoing community support, including a spiritual component. This type of support contributes to a culturally embedded meaning-making component of trauma care. Referring to the importance of this component, in Cherian's (2023) study, professionals explained that the therapeutic process was often interrupted when children were transferred or families moved.

Mancini's (2020) study is another example of the effectiveness of interventions delivered in collaboration with community stakeholders. Mancini (2020) suggests that such interventions may be helpful in school settings with limited resources to help children shift out of hyper-vigilance and support their learning capacity. The results of this study support the view that the safe, stable and accessible environment of schools offers an effective setting for care, particularly for low-income families affected by trauma. Mancini (2020) also notes the potential for schools to provide early assessment and intervention toward the prevention of life-long consequences.

Conceptualising through a trauma-informed lens

To prevent life-long consequences, Mancini (2020) emphasises the need for early TI assessment. Salloum et al., (2009) discuss interventions within the ecological perspective that require helping professionals to understand risk, protective factors and strengths at various systemic levels as part of TI assessments. These researchers also action the empowering and collaborative approach by involving the child in assessing negative effects that changes, brought about by traumatic experiences, may be having on them. They identify concrete assistance and services to support children and families. In their study on sensory-based interventions, McGreevy and Boland (2020) argue for assessments and interventions to be a transdisciplinary process. They assert that this approach more accurately represents the complexity of trauma by requiring a diverse set of knowledge and skills with different disciplines collaborating to build expertise.

Allen (2011) discusses the use of attachment theory in TIP and assessment suggesting that attachment difficulties in the parent-child relationship could impact therapeutic progress. Attention to attachment is therefore essential to a TI assessment. Allen (2011) explains how this approach helps to enhance the child-caregiver relationship and improve the effectiveness of other interventions.

As described earlier, such interventions actively involve stakeholders through a strengths-based and ecological approach. Within this theme there is substantial emphasis on enhancing the parent-child relationship and offering holistic support. In the next theme, the centrality of relationships continues to emerge, with a focus on the helping relationship.

Centrality of Nurturing Responsive Human Relationships

The importance of the helping relationship was implied throughout and more explicitly referred to in seven articles (Corrado & R., 2023; Eads, 2023; Lewis et al., 2021; Mancini, 2020; Powell & Blanchet-Cohen, 2014; Salloum et al., 2009; Southwell, 2016).

Nurturing child-centred relationships

These articles detailed approaches based on the belief of the inbuilt drive toward healing and growth, the importance of child-centred practice, a strengths-based approach and the critical importance of the therapeutic alliance through promoting positive relationships with caring adults. Supporting this, Mancini's (2020) study measured improvements in children's and adolescents' symptoms and functioning. The study's qualitative reports indicated that participants attributed positive changes to the therapists being described as highly supportive and to the program's culturally tailored approach. Indeed, the study in Salloum et al., (2009) required that group facilitators be skilled in moderating the group with care, compassion and develop good relationships with the child participants. In the study by Lewis et al., (2012), establishing a safe and trusting relationship was emphasised to enable children to endure the stress of delving into their memories, facilitating the collaborative creation of new narratives.

Empowerment, choice and ownership over the narrative

In this sub-theme, the principles of empowerment and choice are portrayed as crucial features of the helping relationship (Salloum et al., 2009; Corrado, 2023; Powell & Blanchet-Cohen, 2014). In one study, several creative expression modalities were offered to support children's choice about how to express themselves best (Southwell, 2016). In another study, the facilitators gave children choices on whether to express themselves by writing a prayer, song, or poem. Furthermore, they practised from a strengths-based perspective highlighting the participants' strengths throughout (Salloum et al., 2009). In Corrado's (2023) description of a trauma-narrative intervention, youth ownership over the narrative was emphasised. The young people were supported to honour their strength and resilience as well as the contribution of traumatic aspects to their story. In this study, facilitators discussed the young people's preferences over what to do with story boxes they created. In support of these practices, participants reported that focusing on their strengths and having ownership over their narrative contributed to feeling that the process gave them a voice in the way they wanted it to be heard (Corrado, 2023).

Powell and Blanchet-Cohen (2014) and Corrado (2023) applied the strengths-based approach by providing children with resources to understand and cope with the emotional overwhelm brought about by traumatic experiences. Participants of Corrado's (2023) study specifically mentioned feeling more in control as a result of meditation and breathing exercises and focusing on positives and strengths.

This theme underscores the importance of responsive human relationships in the therapeutic process, highlighting child-centred approaches, the therapeutic alliance, and a strengths-based approach as crucial. This foundation of supportive relationships creates the safety required for the next critical phase of the therapeutic process described in the theme of encouraging and processing narratives.

Encouraging and processing narratives

Encouraging the expression, processing and development of coherent, healing narratives was found in several articles and considered central to the therapeutic process of healing from trauma (Anderson & Cook, 2015; Caouette et al., 2021; Cherian, 2021; Corrado & R., 2023; Farina & Mancini, 2017; Southwell, 2016).

Strategies to support the creation and expression of the narrative, as discussed earlier, included teaching parents/caregivers to create special stories to relate to the children at home (Friend, 2012). Cherian's (2023) case-worker interviewees revealed the importance of allowing open dialogue and co-construction of meaning, allowing time for disclosure, and overcoming shame, guilt and fear of confrontation through externalisations such as story-telling and creative expression. Similarly, Anderson and Cook (2015) referred to employing digital storytelling to support the development of the trauma narrative. Corrado (2023) introduced the concept of a box or container to hold the story through various mediums such as writing, speaking, painting, collage, photography, sand tray, and film. Southwell (2016) portrayed creative arts, play, and sandplay, as a framework that allows children to use symbols and metaphors. This approach helps to externalise unconscious or traumatic material safely, fosters the creation of new meanings, and adaptively integrates traumatic experiences.

Providing safe exposure to traumatic material

The importance of safety during the emergence of narratives is emphasised and described by Salloum et al. (2009) as helping children retell traumatic memories in a restorative manner and helping them create a coherent narrative. Farina and Mancini (2017) investigate an intervention using drawing as a safe way to express traumatic material and identify thoughts, feelings and body sensations. Through these drawings, the intervention provided the possibility of narrative processing. As a way to provide safety, Caouette et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of having a clinician who is trained to work with trauma supporting children to talk

about trauma.

As seen above, an essential skill in encouraging the expression of narratives in view of processing is to provide safety by using externalisation, preparatory work on strengths, resources, emotional regulation and coping and providing symbolic containers, concrete supports and caregiver preparation. Once narratives become expressed, children can be supported to integrate these in a more coherent and adaptive way and create new meanings.

Assisting integration, coherence and new meaning

The skill to help children and adolescents develop more accurate and less threatening narratives of their traumatic experiences involves providing support to identify and challenge or clarify unhelpful beliefs or interpretations associated with guilt and shame. This approach aids in helping them reframe and gain a different perspective on the events and circumstances of the trauma (Caouette et al., 2021; Salloum et al., 2009; Farina & Mancini, 2017).

Through its relational approach, storytelling by the caregivers in Friend's (2012) intervention, was also aimed at promoting growth, processing the experience and the creation of a more coherent autobiographical narrative for the child. Corrado's study (2023) used note cards in a group intervention. The youth placed the cards of their story creating a sequence to form a coherent narrative whilst encouraging integration through the process. Finally, Corrado (2023) also discussed reminding youth that their life story is dynamic and will continue to develop even after the group process. This prompts them to think about their future vision and envision personal actions and ways to achieve this.

Enhancing Coping and Emotional Regulation

The theme of coping and emotional regulation appeared as elemental across the articles. Particularly, nine articles discussed the use of the strategies to empower children through the naming, normalisation, and cognitive reappraisal of emotions, engaging in body-based and co-regulatory activities to expand capacity for emotional regulation and attachment security

(Caouette et al., 2021; Eads, 2023; Farina & Mancini, 2017; Hobbs et al., 2019; Mancini, 2020; May-Benson & Teasdale, 2020; Powell & Blanchet-Cohen, 2014; Salloum et al., 2009).

Naming, normalising and reappraising emotions

This foundational competency involves recognising, normalising, and supporting the reinterpretation of cognitions tied to the emotional responses to trauma. Cognitive reappraisal requires reframing thoughts about distressing events that help replace negative feelings with more positive affect. Hobbs et al. (2019) found that the use of cognitive reappraisal was related to diminished PTSD symptoms. Powell and Blanchet-Cohen (2014) emphasise understanding and normalising key emotions as a preliminary step towards emotional regulation and exemplify helping youth understand and gain insight into how to cope with emotions using stories. Based on these, workers in this study prompted discussions on emotions and the way participants related to them. Caouette et al. (2021) advocate for emotion regulation competencies as crucial for promoting healthy ways of addressing traumatic events, underscoring the importance of naming and regulating emotions.

Incorporating co-regulation activities

The same study by Caouette et al. (2021) attributes the reduction in symptoms observed in children to the parent's increased availability toward the child's emotional needs and their involvement in the therapeutic process. Involving parents from the start, May-Benson and Teasdale (2020) introduce a multidisciplinary program encompassing a sensory-rich environment. This program includes simultaneous intervention from OT and mental health professionals for children and caregivers. These researchers conclude that such an approach promotes the development of body-centred regulatory capabilities together with the co-regulation and shared experiences offered by the involvement of parents. Such co-regulation, they argue, can deepen attachment bonds and enhance emotional security.

Using body-based relaxation, grounding, resourcing and release activities

The emphasis on emotional regulation being inextricable from the body is another identified sub-theme. May-Benson and Teasdale (2020) observed that when using body-based regulatory activities both parents and therapists expressed an eagerness for more parent education on such sensory integration activities.

Farina & Mancini (2017) describe ‘body resources’ as movements that induce calm sensations that can be used during stressful times. Mancini's (2020) research introduces a school-based intervention focused on somatic soothing that aims to alleviate dissociative and dysregulatory symptoms in children who have reported experiencing war, interpersonal violence, and neglect, in addition to the stresses related to migration, displacement, and resettlement. This study provides rich examples of various body-based interventions, including creating space and boundaries, relaxation, grounding, movement, somatic and releasing strategies. Examples include warrior breath, placing a rope on the floor to mark their personal space while using exercise balls to try to ‘invade’ the child’s space so that they can

> “use their body to prevent the balls from entering their space; yoga activities, stretching, self-defence moves, hugging oneself, and feeling heart rate; lightly tapping on extremities and putting feet firmly on the floor and pretending they are stuck in the mud to counteract dissociation; playing soccer with large exercise balls or squeezing a large ball” (Mancini, 2020, p. 290).

Children in this study were supported to notice how their body and internal states felt in relation to their emotions and how to respond to negative affect through modifying movement, posture or facial expressions.

The example of a "trust circle" from Powell and Blanchet-Cohen (2014) illustrates the application of an experiential activity engaging the physical movement of holding on to a rope and leaning back into the circle to embody and envision developing coping mechanisms. These activities assist in emotional regulation and foster a sense of community and trust among

participants, highlighting the interplay between physical sensations and emotional states.

Salloum et al. (2009), Eads (2023) and Caouette et al. (2021) point to relaxation and grounding exercises as vital for achieving calm and managing emotions. Techniques such as meditation, breathing exercises, and focusing on strengths are recommended for their effectiveness in facilitating states of relaxation and emotional control toward expanding the children's capacity to process and heal from trauma.

Salloum et al., (2024) similarly include deep breathing and muscle relaxation in their study on parent-led processes. They describe instructing children to fill up their bellies like a balloon for deep breathing, making a tight fist, and letting their arms go like 'noodles'.

Identifying triggers and developing coping strategies

The development of coping strategies is crucial for managing trauma-related stressors. Salloum et al. (2009) and Powell and Blanchet-Cohen (2014) described group interventions identifying trauma triggers and recognising and developing positive coping strategies. An example from the latter case was prompting youth to think about a potential problem situation, such as a bullying situation, playing out ways to come up with healthy solutions and using group discussion to support reflection.

Psychoeducation

Finally, both articles by Powell and Blanchet-Cohen (2014) and Salloum et al. (2009) emphasise the value of psychoeducation for children to learn about grief and trauma reactions and skills for emotional regulation, suggesting that understanding the nature of one's experiences can, be empowering and facilitate emotional regulation.

Discussion

This paper provides insight and examples of how TIP is being translated from general principles into specific therapeutic skills across disciplines. The results support the notion of

developing TI therapeutic competencies of helping professionals working in child and adolescent welfare settings. This review does not claim to provide an all-encompassing overview of skills nor does it claim to comment on the effectiveness of these practices. The relatively small number of methodologically diverse, qualitative articles found, indicates a significant need for more research on interdisciplinary TI therapeutic practices in these settings. We suggest that future research actively seeks to include practices from a broader range of cultures.

The synthesis of therapeutic TI skills clearly reveals the confluence of interdisciplinary knowledge. The skills, categorised as: interweaving embodied and creative expression, TI conceptualising and intervening systemically, nurturing relationships, encouraging and processing narratives and enhancing coping and emotional regulation, constitute an overview that marries theory with practice across disciplines and across systemic and therapeutic dimensions of practice in child welfare settings.

In this review, a common process that starts with the establishment of safety and moves toward narrative expression and processing is observed as taking place within containing and supportive relationships. This review indicates that the identified skills align with the broad application of the practice-based model for complex trauma involving: safety/stabilisation, trauma memory processing, and reconnection/integration (Herman, 1992). The practices reviewed combine this model with expressive arts therapy techniques echoing the healing process in art therapy for veterans described in Smith's (2016) systematic review. The themes also resonate closely with the work of master therapists such as Levine and Kline (2006) that outlines: building trust and safety; body awareness and regulation: play and creativity; incorporating caregivers in the process; gradual exposure and processing of traumatic memories; and resilience and empowerment as foundational aspects of TIP with children.

Across the presented themes, a process of weaving from the languaged to non-languaged expression and back to languaged articulation transpires. This is clearly displayed in the use of

invitations using play, the body, metaphor and creative expression to engage with personal and collective narratives of children. This process seems to tap into the opportunity of creating connections between the expressed non-languaged parts of children's experience and those that are languaged. It is noteworthy that invitations for engaging with narratives are not only directed to trauma but also to strength and resilience. These invitations, expressions and re/elaborations are carried out in the context of key relationships at various systemic levels spanning across relationships that are intra-personal (relationship with self) and inter-personal (caregivers, helping professionals, community).

Consequently, helping professionals must be equipped to utilise these skills within a therapeutic process supported by a personal and professional formation for a deep understanding of relational and ethical aspects essential to trauma work. Such skills should be taught within the context of broader training on the therapeutic relationship and needs to be integrated into professional training.

Based on the review, we suggest that the interweaving of embodied and creative expression are not mere techniques but clearly the language through which children and adolescents articulate their trauma, paving the path toward healing. One of the main implications of this semi-systematic review is the elemental value of training helping professionals envisaged to work in child welfare settings, in practices that include the body and language of children's creative expression. Acknowledging the importance of embodied practices and creative expression, facilitated through diverse modalities like movement, art, and culturally grounded practices, reflects a growing openness toward more holistic frameworks over traditional Western approaches. This highlights the importance of maintaining an open mind when determining what constitutes effective TI practice.

Conclusion

Although the cultural breadth of this review is limited, the emerging importance of

integrating systemic interventions underscores interconnectedness of the individual and the environment, advocating for a more empowering, collaborative and inclusive approach to TIP. This implies that welfare services have a duty to collaborate with grassroots, non-governmental and community initiatives that honour the cultural location and heritage of the children they serve.

The centrality of responsive human relationships and the empowerment of narratives speak to the core of the helping relationship with the implication that various policy-prescribed formulae are null without the human relational aspect.

Finally, coping and emotional regulation highlight the challenge of equipping children with tools to navigate affect and establish the safety required for the healing process.

This review does not merely catalogue interventions but calls for a constant renewal of the practice of helping professionals. Consequently, we propose a practice that embodies the principles and skills of TIP in the 'language' of children. Such practice advocates for environments that honour the value of human relationships and the complexity of the experiences of children, adolescents and their families.

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Studies in Social Wellbeing, Volume 3. Issue 2: 135-142

ISSN 3007-4479 / https://www.um.edu.mt/ssw

Living and Working with the Personal and the Political in Disability Studies: A Conversation with Shahd Alshammari

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A CONVERSATION WITH SHAHD ALSHAMMARI

Dr Shahd Alshammari is Assistant Professor of Literature at the Department of English Language and Literature, College of Arts and Sciences at the Gulf University for Science and Technology, Kuwait. She teaches a variety of literature classes and creative writing. Her passion for disability studies is channelled through her academic work in literature as well as her own literary output.

Shahd Alshammari: I am passionate about disability studies; I am one of the first scholars working on Disability Studies in the Middle East region. My work began more than a decade ago and I have been constantly trying to change the stereotypical research and writing about disability and the Global South. For example, I teach 19th century literature with a focus on Victorian understandings of the body and mental health. I expand this to include new readings of Victorian texts (such as the Brontës' work) to consider whether characters like Jane Eyre were actually neurodivergent or perhaps autistic. I also focus on the collective obsession of the body and what it symbolises (the nation, deterioration of the nation) and how we can relate this to other cultures today. Drawing on classical texts, we can always find parallels today in various cultures and how society is still stigmatising disabled bodies. Another course I teach is Adolescent Literature and we look at various depictions of disability and otherness in fairy tales as well as Disney's depiction of disability and the lack of representation.

Working in disability studies entails, among others, remaining in touch with the personal experiences of individuals with disabilities, which is what disability studies has stemmed from.

Shahd Alshammari: Remaining embedded in that personal experience is really important. We cannot separate the personal from disability studies. The body is what we use to navigate the world – of course it is personal. It cannot be mainly theoretical or non-disabled people writing about disability, because that would be a very partial and limited view. I believe in narrating the body.

As someone living with disability, it is a completely different experience. It is the body that we live with that gives us more in-depth insight, raw, and real. It allows us to have our voices represented by ourselves, not by non-disabled others. Theoretical work and work by non-disabled scholars still has its place. But I still really believe that the body offers the best understanding of the most vulnerable experiences of living with disability and the stigma that we can suffer from (emotional, physical, social, and even self-rejection).

One of Shahd Alshammari's writings is 'Manifesto for a lost cause', in which she writes 'This is a collective struggle[1]. It is no longer mine, yet it is almost only mine'. In fact, her work has both a personal and a collective focus. Her own experience of living with multiple sclerosis, of being a woman, and of being of mixed Arab heritage has clearly influenced both her life and her academic and literary work.

Shahd Alshammari: We are all born into a certain geographical location, a certain body, gender, capabilities, and so on. I have turned my life into a career – using autoethnography and the study of the self to reflect on culture and society. I am constantly reflecting on what it means to be living in a body and how society sees us, versus how we see ourselves.

For example, I am the first scholar from the Gulf that uses autoethnography and Disability Studies. I blend the two disciplines because I believe in the necessity of crossing over to narrate our life stories, our bodystories (my word), and how the body does not exist in a vacuum, it is constantly speaking to and listening to society, its stigma, its invasive dialogue. When we are in dialogue with society, autoethnography works best to allow us to reflect on how we navigate and narrate the body, culture, and its surroundings.

I started writing about the body but also how society shames us and how we can use

[1] 'Manifesto for a Lost Cause', *Pomona Valley Review*, Issue 9, Summer 2015, pp. 38-40.

language and poetry to return to a state of narration when we previously were silenced;[2] also about my experience of losing my dog as part of my journey into autoethnography.[3] Disabled people have different relationships that might not fall into the traditional relationships non-disabled people experience. For instance, companion animals serve a way for us to navigate the world and its barriers (physical or emotional). I explored all of this through working with my own experience of multiple sclerosis and its limitations and with my experience as a woman.

The social model of disability shows us that the problems encountered by persons with disabilities cannot be explained only in terms of their impairments. There are some contentions as to whether this idea is adequate or inadequate to explain the difficulties that persons with disabilities usually encounter in the countries of the Global South.

Shahd Alshammari: It is really necessary to think about culture, society, and differences in terms of global disability studies. It is not simply the same model that applies everywhere. When we think of the Global South, that is also such a large umbrella. There are intricate details in different cultures, family and tribal dynamics, that affect how the individual living with disability is treated by their immediate families and society as a whole. There needs to be more work done on Global Disability Studies and actually take into account qualitative studies.

Qualitative studies are important because they narrate life stories, actual interviews with participants and their experiences begin challenging statistics (which, while being informative don't really tell a full story).[4]

Shahd Alshammari has written two books, both of which meld the autobiographical with

[2] Disability as metaphor or resilience: A Palestinian poetic inquiry, *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication, 15*(4), 362-373. 2022.
[3] Narrative reflections on losing a companion animal: in memory of Flake. *Journal of Autoethnography*, *1*(4), 378-387. 2020.
[4] Breteau, M. (2023). On writing about illness in Kuwait. A discussion with Shahd Al Shammari. *L'Année du Maghreb*, (29), 23-37.

the fictional. She introduces her first book*, Notes On The Flesh*[5], as 'partially fabricated, partially the truth' and her second book, *Head Above Water*[6] is classified as 'a work of creative nonfiction'.

Shahd Alshammari: I think that auto/biographical narratives and fictional narratives are equally valuable in highlighting the experience of living with a disability. Personally, I love all genres of literature and poetry – I have dabbled in poetry too, and continue to use various genres in speaking about the body and our experiences. With Notes on the Flesh, I used fiction to create other characters (not myself) living with disability in order to fill the gap of characters living with disability appearing in fiction by Arab women. It was fun because I got to play with gender too – what would it be like to be an Arab man with a disability rather than a woman? What are the limitations there? I address this through fiction. Fiction opens up doors for both the writer and the reader.

My memoir, Head Above Water, is an illness narrative that delves into various genres, and uses diary entries and letters to tackle the idea of 'memory' and its fluidity. This a more vulnerable work, and it is really invested in telling the story of my journey in academia, teaching with a disability, the way that literature has saved me, and the value of feminism and hope in the face of adversity. It challenges my identity as 'professor' and educator in academia, writing about the challenges of teaching, research, and even passing as 'non-disabled' in academic spheres including the classroom. Writing this work was a vulnerable experience for me because I knew that to 'come out' as disabled would change the way many of my students, colleagues, and readers regard me. It is rare for an academic (in this part of the world even more so) to write so candidly and openly about the limitations of the body, but also the limitations of academia for disabled scholars trying to create a career that is successful but also working within the framework of what the disabled body can do with its limitations (for me intense fatigue and

[5] *Notes on the Flesh*. Faraxa Publishing. 2017.
[6] *Head Above Water: Reflections on illness*. Neem Tree Press. 2022.

cognitive difficulties that may limit productivity). It is about how we measure productivity and success within academia, but also about the very personal and non-measurable connections we have within the classroom.

The term 'disability arts' refers to artistic output by persons with disability which is directly informed by their experience of living in a disabling world. Disability arts, therefore, contributes to both the arts and to disability activism and to the arts, for example through disability arts festivals and journals such as Wordgathering*: A Journal of Disability Poetry and Literature*, a journal in which Shahd Alshammari has written several times.

Shahd Alshammari: Journals like Wordgathering are very important in terms of activism but also for offering a platform for real voices to write about their experiences with disability and beyond. It is necessary that the person with disability writers and re-writes the narratives and myths that have been so common in academia, society, and literature. In some of my work, I challenge the notion of prose and poetry as strictly separate genres. In one story, I play with science fiction and disability, through cyborg bodies and different bodies[7]; and in another, I employ prose-poetry to narrate the corporeality of the body[8].

Journals that allow diversity in genres are safe – they allow room for exploration of non-rigid and non-binary genres, hybrid genres between poetry and prose. My work tends to oscillate between both genres and I found that Wordgathering embraced this. Journals that allow essay format for academics rather than full academic articles also challenge our understanding of what counts as valuable insight.

Shahd Alshammari's work taps into disability studies, feminism, and literature, among

[7] Death of the Author. *Wordgathering* 9 (2). 2012. https://wordgathering.com/vol15/issue2/fiction/alshammari/
[8] Ishq and bodies who falter. *Wordgathering* 12 (2). 2018. https://wordgathering.com/past_issues/issue46/essays/alshammari.html

other areas of studies. It also builds on the work of other authors, especially those which have been most influential in her life and her work.

Shahd Alshammari: So many feminist thinkers, like Bell Hooks, Sara Ahmed, Gloria Anzaldua, Audre Lorde, to name a few that have taught me and been my companions in my journey of teaching, living, and healing. Bell Hooks' "Teaching to Transgress" was one of the founding texts in my thinking about what education is all about and what we can do as feminist thinkers within the classroom, giving voice and agency to our students' experiences and thinking. Her other work, "All About Love," made me think about love and self-love in my own life and how disabled bodies can suffer from a lack of self-love or even love in society. I began to think of new ways to feel love in my life through thinking about her stance on love. Also, Sara Ahmed's work on feminist killjoys and how important it is to create change within academia and other spaces that marginalise women became part of my trajectory as an academic and writer. She also refers to the idea of 'companion texts' that help us in our survival in life and in difficult spaces. I started thinking about what companion texts I have carried within me throughout the years, and I realised that writers like Toni Morisson, Arundhati Roy, Audre Lorde, and others are within my toolbox for survival. I continue their work in my own writing and personal spaces.

Further information about Shahd Al Shammari's work and interviews can be found on her website: https://shahdalshammari.com/interviews

Author Bio

Prof. Anne-Marie Callus is Associate Professor in the Department of Disability Studies, Faculty for Social Wellbeing, University of Malta. She is also the Head of the University's Access Disability Support Unit. She lectures, researches and has published on disability rights, empowerment of persons with intellectual disability, inclusive education and disabled children's rights, as well as cultural representations of persons with disability. Her latest publications include the co-edited *International Routledge Handbook on Children's Rights and Disability* and articles from an inclusive research project on video CVs for persons with intellectual disability. She is also Deputy Editor of *Disability & Society*.