Approaches to Early Literacy and Learning: A Comparative Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Novice and Experienced Teachers in Malta.

Ruth Bonello Gellel

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of Education, University of Malta for the degree of Master of Arts

(Comparative Euro-Mediterranean Education Studies)

December 2024

L-Università ta' Malta

University of Malta Library – Electronic Thesis & Dissertations (ETD) Repository

The copyright of this thesis/dissertation belongs to the author. The author's rights in respect of this work are as defined by the Copyright Act (Chapter 415) of the Laws of Malta or as modified by any successive legislation.

Users may access this full-text thesis/dissertation and can make use of the information contained in accordance with the Copyright Act provided that the author must be properly acknowledged. Further distribution or reproduction in any format is prohibited without the prior permission of the copyright holder.

Abstract

This study investigates the beliefs and instructional practices of novice and experienced early years teachers teaching Year 1 and Year 2 in Maltese primary schools. Ten participants teaching in schools from the three school sectors shared their insights on literacy education, particularly the teaching of reading in English. A qualitative research methodology, incorporating an online questionnaire, lesson observations, and semi-structured interviews, facilitated a comparative analysis between the two teacher groups.

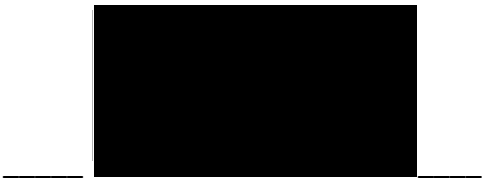
Framed by cognitive and sociocultural theories of literacy development within a constructivist-interpretive paradigm, the research explores the alignment between early years teachers' stated beliefs and classroom practices, and how teaching experience shapes these dynamics. The findings indicate that both novice and experienced teachers prioritise fostering a love for reading and advocate for a balanced approach, integrating phonics and whole-language methods. However, rigid curricular mandates and institutional policies often constrain teachers' ability to address diverse classroom needs. This highlights the necessity for greater flexibility in schools, enabling teachers to adapt instructional methods to support student learning better. Additionally, the study emphasises the pivotal role of school leadership and literacy support services in fostering professional growth. It underscores the need for targeted teacher training in literacy instruction and continuous professional development that bridges theoretical knowledge and practical application. Despite its small scale, the study provides valuable insights into the early literacy practices in Malta and underscores the importance of adapting instructional approaches to enhance literacy outcomes for young learners.

Keywords: Teachers' Beliefs and Practices, Early Literacy, Emergent Reading, Novice and Experienced Teachers, Cognitive and Sociocultural Theories.

Declaration of Authenticity

I, Ruth Bonello Gellel, 425074M, declare that this dissertation titled "Approaches to Early Literacy and Learning: A Comparative Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Novice and Experienced Teachers in Malta" is my original work. All sources of material have been properly acknowledged. I confirm that this work has not been submitted to satisfy the requirements of any other course at the University of Malta or any other institution.

This dissertation has been carried out under the guidance and supervision of Professor Josephine Milton, who certifies that it is ready for submission.



Ruth Bonello Gellel

Prof. Josephine Milton

December 2024

Dedicated to my late father, George.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Josephine Milton, for her invaluable guidance and professional advice throughout this research journey. Her insights and support were indispensable, making this study possible.

I also extend my heartfelt thanks to the late Professor Ronald Sultana, who inspired and guided me during the early stages of my academic journey. His mentorship left a lasting impact on my work and my approach to research.

My sincere appreciation goes to all the teachers who participated in this study, as well as their school administrators, for their time and cooperation. Without their valuable contributions, this research would not have been completed.

Last but certainly not least, I wish to thank my husband, Simon, for his unwavering patience and support over the past two years. I am also deeply grateful to my son, Kane, my mother, Doris, and my dear friend, Sonia, for their constant encouragement and moral support throughout this journey.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Abbreviations

CoPE – Community of Professional Educators

CPD – Continuous Professional Development

DLAP – Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes

DQSE – Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education

ECEC - Early Childhood Education and Care

EFL – English as a Foreign Language

EO – Education Officer

IFE – Institute For Education

LOF – Learning Outcomes Framework

LST – Literacy Support Teacher

MCAST – Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology

MEYR – Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation

NCF – National Curriculum Framework

NLA – National Literacy Agency

NQT – Newly Qualified Teacher

PD – Professional Development

PIRLS – Progress in International Reading Literacy Study

PISA - Program for International Student Assessment

RQ – Research Question

RWI – Read Write Inc (phonics programme)

SDP – School Development Planning

SEC – Secondary Education Certificate

SfCE – Secretariat for Catholic Education

SLT – Senior Leadership Team

TA – Thematic Analysis

UoM – University of Malta

ZPD – Zone of Proximal Development

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The inception of language development takes place during infancy and advances as the child matures, encountering oral language and written text across diverse daily contexts. Children commence their exploration of language and its utilization at an early stage. Notably, language development plays a pivotal role in fostering various facets of overall development, encompassing cognitive, social and literacy domains (Eadie et al., 2022; Snowling & Hulme, 2012). Literacy, generally defined as the proficiency in reading, writing, speaking and listening to facilitate effective communication and comprehension of the surrounding environment, is integral to this multifaceted developmental process (Frankel et al., 2016; Griffith et al., 2008) During the initial years of schooling, mastery of spoken language and the development of literacy skills are especially critical. Many researchers link these abilities to lifelong outcomes, such as academic success, interpersonal relationships and prosocial skills (Eadie et al., 2022; Puglisi et al., 2017; Snowling & Hulme, 2012). However, there are conflicting views regarding how best to teach literacy, especially the teaching of reading in English. This has always been a controversial issue that has sparked numerous debates over the most effective methods of teaching reading (Campbell, 2020; Castles et al., 2018; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022).

This research aims to investigate teachers' stated beliefs and instructional practices about the teaching and learning of literacy in the early years, more specifically, the teaching of reading in English, and whether these differ for novice or experienced teachers. This chapter introduces the study by first providing an overview of the background and context, followed by an exploration of the research problem, aims,

objectives and questions, the theoretical framework, the significance of the study, my professional positionality, and the structural outline of this dissertation.

1.2 Background to the study

The instruction of literacy, particularly the teaching of reading in the English language, has constantly been a contentious subject, giving rise to extensive debates over the optimal pedagogical approaches. The debate stems from the intricacy of the English language. Jeanne Chall (1967), a renowned reading researcher, famously referred to the discussion over the most effective methods of teaching reading as 'the great debate.' This later became recognised as 'the reading wars' (Bowers, 2020; Pearson, 2004; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022, p. 3). This great debate centred around the most effective methods for teaching reading. This prolonged dispute primarily contrasts the 'top-down' approach where teaching is based on the reader's prior knowledge to comprehend a written text versus the 'bottom-up' approach which focuses on the development of basic skills like matching sounds with letters, syllables and words used in writing the text.

The main distinct alternatives have since narrowed down to three main orientations to the teaching of reading, namely, Synthetic Phonics, Whole-Language Instruction, or Balanced Instruction (Bowers, 2020; Castles et al., 2018; Pearson, 2004; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). Synthetic Phonics is a teaching method that focuses on breaking words down into individual sounds, or phonemes, to teach learners how to decode and encode written words. On the other hand, the Whole-language approach emphasises teaching children to recognise entire words as complete units of language. Influenced by the constructivist theory, proponents of the whole-language methodology believe that children use their perspectives and previous experiences to create a foundation for learning. Whereas, Balanced Instruction as the name suggests is a balance between the

whole language approach and the systematic teaching of the alphabetic code. Educators choosing this approach would need to create a balance of the appropriate practices and skill-based activities according to the needs of the students in a given teaching and learning activity (Bowers, 2020; Pearson, 2004; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). Further elaboration on these different approaches and the protracted yet ongoing dispute about which is the most effective approach, will be provided in the subsequent chapter.

Carlman (2004) holds that early childhood educators should reflect on their teaching practices and make informed decisions that best support their students' literacy development. Additionally, Schull et al. (2021) emphasise that teachers' comprehension of language acquisition theories enables them to determine the most effective ways to interact with and expose children to language. It is vital for educational practices to be informed by research-based theories to enhance children's learning processes, ultimately improving teaching skills and supporting children's literacy development. The effectiveness of educators' instruction is significantly influenced by their teaching strategies and methods, given the diverse range of language and cognitive skills upon which literacy relies. Theoretical perspectives on literacy development, elaborate on how literacy evolves in tandem with children's cognitive and linguistic advancements, crucial for both reading and writing processes (Breadmore & Carroll, 2019; Chall et al., 1990; Tunmer & Chapman, 2012).

In the Maltese context, early years education is segmented into two discrete yet inherently interconnected sectors. The non-compulsory sector encompasses two components: child-care services catering to those under three years old and kindergarten (KG) programs designed for three to five-year-olds. Concurrently, the initial two years of compulsory primary education are dedicated to children aged five to seven years

(Ministry for Education and Employment, 2012). Teachers in Malta are required to teach two languages in a context where Maltese is the national and official language of the Maltese islands, with English being the second language (The Constitution of Malta, 1964). Both official languages are introduced as early as kindergarten (ages 3 -5) (Centre for Literacy UoM, 2014). Vella et al., (2018) explicate that language use in classrooms is closely linked to the specific school sector, where generally, independent schools are recognised for their predominant use of English whereas Maltese holds greater prominence in state schools. Language dynamics in Church schools are perceived as more diverse, with a student population from both Maltese and English-speaking backgrounds. Mifsud and Vella (2020) explore the historical and social ramifications of early childhood education and their impact on early language education (age 0-5). They concede that the substantial rise in immigration has led to the emergence of additional languages in the sociolinguistic landscape, significantly influencing early language education in the context of multilingual classrooms. This also entails that state schools, in particular towns, experience situations where some classes host a majority of non-Maltese students who do not speak Maltese. This shifts the balance in these state schools towards more use of English than Maltese, to be able to communicate more effectively with the students and their families.

Findings from a study by Mifsud and Petrova (2017), reveal that educators often face challenges such as insufficient teacher training on multilingual and multicultural issues, lack of comprehensive multilingual curriculum and limited school resources. Consequently, teachers resort to employing visual aids and non-verbal communication methods to interact with young migrant students. The Language policy for the early years (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016) advocates for early-years educators to

cultivate a favourable disposition towards multilingualism. It further emphasises the imperative to identify and provide support to children, including migrants, encountering difficulties in mastering both the Maltese and English language.

1.3 Research Problem

Undoubtedly, literacy development and the acquisition of reading skills stand as paramount milestones in a child's early school journey. Malta's National Literacy Strategy for All considers literacy as an important element in the field of social inclusion and seeks to implement concrete measures to ensure that every citizen has the opportunity to obtain the skills required for them to fully participate in society (Centre for Literacy UoM, 2014). Teachers play a significant role as key contributors to the macro environment shaping a child's development, exerting considerable influence on their learning and growth. Reflective teachers have the ability to analyse the effects their decisions have on both their teaching and their students' learning. Teachers are viewed as professional agents, who hold decision-making authority in the classroom and thus require ongoing professional education and support (Vella et al., 2023).

Researchers concur on the importance of understanding how teachers' knowledge, beliefs and values influence their teaching practices, particularly in literacy education where such insights are crucial (Al-Arfajr, 2001; Bezzina, 2000; Mayo, 2010). Several studies have explored the reported beliefs or intentions of teachers and compared them to their actual instructional practices. Findings from studies, such as those by Bills (2020), Milton (2011), Panzavecchia (2020), and Schacter et al. (2016) highlight inconsistencies between the beliefs and practices of teachers. Conversely, other research, including Carlman (2004), and Mayo (2010) suggest that a majority of teachers

exhibit consistency in their beliefs and practices. Other research like Bezzina's (2000) and Carlman's (2004) suggest that teachers frequently shape their beliefs and teaching practices based on personal and professional experiences rather than relying on established educational theories. Bezzina's (2000) study suggests that teachers' beliefs are frequently formed according to the practice in their classrooms and that due to gaps in their knowledge they tend to adopt practices that appear most effective in real classroom settings. Carlman (2004) argues that basing practices solely on experience, without a solid foundation linking practice to theory, can be detrimental to literacy instruction, particularly in early childhood education.

While research has extensively examined various facets of education, there is a notable gap in the literature concerning the impact of teaching experience, or lack of it, on teachers' beliefs and actual instructional practices for teachers of reading in the first years of primary schooling. I will elaborate on this gap in literature, in section 1.6. Consequently, conflicting perspectives and an overall scarcity of research, especially locally, exist in this domain. Exploring early years teachers' favoured instructional methods and strategies through research may provide enhanced insights, particularly in discerning potential variations between novice and experienced teachers. The outcomes of such investigations carry significant implications for both preservice and in-service teacher training programmes.

1.4 Research aims, objectives and research questions

The primary objective of this comparative study is to investigate the professed beliefs and actual instructional practices of teachers regarding the instruction and acquisition of literacy in early years education, with a specific emphasis on the teaching

of reading in English. This study will also explore whether teachers are consistent and put into practice what they state they believe are the 'best' ways to teach and learn literacy, and whether these differ for novice or experienced teachers.

This study seeks to address these research questions (RQs):

RQ1: To what extent are teachers' stated beliefs and instructional practices congruent, or is there a discernible mismatch?

RQ2: If a mismatch is identified, what factors contribute to this misalignment between beliefs and practices?

RQ3: Does the level of teaching experience among teachers influence their professed beliefs and instructional practices?

RQ4: What specific forms of support or professional development do teachers identify as necessary to enhance their instructional approaches in literacy education?

1.5 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework chosen for this study aims to explore the alignment between teachers' stated beliefs and their classroom practices, considering how teaching experience influences these dynamics. This framework guides the study by informing and underpinning the selection of research methods and providing a foundation for data analysis, interpretation and discussion in light of the chosen theories. By situating the study within the broader body of knowledge on literacy education, the framework also provides a comprehensive basis for analysing and interpreting the research findings (Cohen et al., 2018; Kivunja, 2018; Lederman & Lederman, 2015). The framework chosen for this study incorporates multiple perspectives, including the Cognitive Theory of Literacy Development, the Sociocultural Theory of Literacy Development and a Constructivist-Interpretive framework. While theories such as the Emergent Literacy

theory, Schema theory, and Self-determination theory could have provided valuable insights into how children learn literacy skills, the Cognitive and Sociocultural theories of Literacy Development were deemed the most suitable for addressing the study's aims and research questions.

The Cognitive Theory focuses on the mental processes involved in learning to read and write, such as phonological awareness, decoding and comprehension. The Cognitive Theory of Literacy Development provides crucial insight into the cognitive skills that underpin literacy development and how these skills are taught and assessed (Davidson, 2010; Ehri & McCormick, 1998; Purcell-Gates et al., 2004). In contrast, the Sociocultural Theory of Literacy Development posits that literacy learning is deeply embedded in social and cultural contexts, emphasising the role of interaction, language use, and cultural tools. This perspective highlights the influence of social interactions and cultural practices on literacy development, offering a broader context for understanding teachers' practices (Beach, 1999; Davidson, 2010; Perez & McCarty, 2004).

The Constructivist-Interpretive approach underscores the importance of understanding 'the subjective world of human experience' (Cohen et al., 2018). This approach gives priority to individual perspectives and seeks to comprehend situations through the participants' point of view. Data is gathered in natural settings and presented through excerpts from transcripts of lesson observations and interviews. I will elaborate more on the theoretical framework in the following chapter.

1.6 Significance of the study

As noted in section 1.3, there appears to be a significant gap in the local literature concerning the beliefs and practices of novice and experienced teachers within the early

years of primary education. A comprehensive review of the University of Malta database and Google Scholar revealed that most research in the Maltese context has focused on teachers at the junior primary level (ages 8-11), or at the secondary level (ages 11-16). In contrast, studies addressing early years (ages 3-5), are notably fewer, and no research has specifically examined literacy instruction in early primary years (ages 5-7).

While some studies have explored teachers' beliefs and practices, these have largely been outside the scope of early primary education. For example, Calleja (2021) examined secondary school mathematics teachers in a blended continuing professional development programme, while Xerri (2018) explored the interplay between teachers' beliefs and practices in the teaching of poetry in Malta. Milton (2011) investigated the tensions between stated beliefs and practices of student teachers during English lessons. Similarly, Simon Borg (1998) focused on the role of grammar teaching in an experienced EFL teacher's classroom practices. Bezzina (2000) explored teacher beliefs and practices related to reading comprehension instruction, and more recently, Noella Borg (2023) compared the beliefs and practices of male and female pre-service and in-service kindergarten educators. Although smaller-scale studies, such as those by Agius and Busuttil (2010) have explored teachers' beliefs and practices, none have compared novice and experienced teachers in the early years. Morales (2014) came closest to my area of interest, comparing the beliefs and practices of novice and experienced primary literacy teachers, though her focus was on teachers' sense of efficacy in literacy instruction for teachers of Years 2, 3 and 4. The absence of research specifically targeting early primary years teachers (ages 5-7) underscores the need for further investigation, providing the impetus for this study, which focuses on early literacy instruction in this critical educational phase. This gap motivated the present study, which aims to address

the underexplored area of early years literacy instruction by investigating the beliefs and practices of both novice and experienced teachers in this field.

In recent years, the early years of primary classrooms have faced increased diversity and complexity, presenting considerable challenges for teachers. The introduction of an Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) curriculum, which advocates for "planned and spontaneous experiences, emerging from children's play and interactions" (Ministry for Education, 2021, p. 15), coupled with a rising number of immigrant students (Cefai et al., 2019; Council of Europe, 2015) has fundamentally transformed the teaching and learning dynamics for both students and teachers.

This research study aims to analyse whether the teachers' beliefs align with their instructional practices and whether these differ between novice and experienced teachers. Furthermore, the study seeks to explore the preferred approaches to teaching reading among the compared teacher categories and the justification underlying their preferences. Hypothetical differences between novice and experienced teacher categories as well as mismatches or discrepancies between the participants' self-professed beliefs and actual practices bear significant implications for both preservice and in-service teacher training (Akiri & Dori, 2021; Basturkmen, 2012; Bills, 2020; Borg, 1998, 1999; Luft et al., 2022). Consequently, this study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on teachers' perceptions, knowledge, and beliefs regarding reading instruction for very young learners, providing practical and valuable insights for stakeholders in the education field, particularly those involved in teacher training and mentoring.

1.7 My professional positionality

As an educator with over 20 years of teaching experience in primary church schools in Malta, encompassing early years and junior years, this field of research is familiar and close to my heart. Over the years I have seen students flourishing and becoming fervent readers and extraordinary writers while others struggled to master basic literacy skills. This has consistently motivated me to delve into existing research and experiment with various methods, approaches and strategies.

My journey into teaching has been a lifelong aspiration, rooted in a deep-seated passion for education. Prior to formal teacher training, I seized an opportunity to enter the teaching profession. Initially embarking on this path without formal pedagogical training, I was granted a teaching role owing to a shortage of qualified teachers, facilitated by the Education Department's enrolment of 'instructors' on a temporary teaching warrant. Assuming responsibility for a class of thirty, Year 4 students in a small church school marked the commencement of my teaching career. Gratefully, I benefitted from the guidance of experienced colleagues during my first years, concurrently engaging in extensive research and pursuing professional development opportunities. Eager to enhance my pedagogical repertoire, I pursued ongoing professional development (PD) initiatives across various domains of the primary curriculum. Subsequently, completing my initial professional teacher training course culminated in the attainment of my Permanent Teacher Warrant. Over the course of 24 years as a primary school teacher, I have taught Year 2, Year 4 and Year 5 in two church schools. Additionally, I have honed my expertise in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), undertaking requisite EFL training courses and instructing in several language schools. My professional growth has been fortified through participation in esteemed professional development endeavours,

notably including the Malta Writing Programme's 6th Invitational Writing Institute, the CPD Award in Mentoring and the Let Me Learn Professional Learning Process. Transitioning from a novice instructor to an adept educator has been a testament to diligence and unwavering commitment to continuous learning. Moreover, in my capacity as a Literacy Support Teacher (LST) with the Secretariat for Catholic Education, over the past five years, I have further enriched my pedagogical expertise through attendance at various professional development courses, both locally and internationally, including those facilitated through Erasmus projects in the U.K.

Throughout my tenure as both a class teacher and in my capacity as an LST, I have had the opportunity to explore diverse pedagogical approaches to literacy instruction. Commencing my teaching career in the junior years, I initially employed the Whole Language Approach, utilizing a singular book for all students. Subsequently, as I transitioned to teaching in the early years, training in the Phonics Approach was provided to me. Over time, through accumulated experience, ongoing professional development endeavours, and personal research, my perspective on literacy instruction has evolved. I now advocate for a Balanced Approach to literacy, drawing upon the strengths of both Synthetic Phonics and Whole Language methodologies. I firmly believe that Synthetic Phonics offers invaluable benefits, particularly in enabling children of varying abilities to develop early reading proficiency and the capacity to decode unfamiliar words. While initially perceived as somewhat artificial, the structured phonic sequence inherent in Synthetic Phonics schemes engenders reading success and fosters confidence from the outset. However, it is imperative to supplement this approach with authentic literature that resonates with young learners' interests, cultural backgrounds and social contexts. Moreover, fostering a love for reading entails engaging children through immersive

storytelling experiences and exposure to a rich array of literature. Encouraging active participation in reading activities, both in the classroom and at home, serves to broaden vocabulary, model proper sentence structure, and deepen comprehension skills. By adopting this Balanced Approach, the significance of understanding written language is harmoniously integrated with the development of essential skills and knowledge acquisition (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). As an educator, I remain steadfast in my dedication to lifelong learning, continually, exploring innovative teaching methodologies and refining my instructional practices. Embracing a collaborative approach, I recognise the invaluable contributions of colleagues and the significance of sharing best practices as integral components of professional development.

In my present role as a Literacy Support Teacher within the Literacy Team of the Secretariat for Catholic Education (SfCE), I provide support to several church schools in Maltese and English literacy, with a primary focus on the early years. My collaborative efforts are primarily directed towards working with the Senior Leadership Teams and their teaching teams, assisting in the formulation of school development plans, conducting teacher professional development sessions, facilitating student assessments, and organising informative sessions for parents. Additionally, I contribute to the development of literacy-related resources, designed for both classroom use by teachers and LSEs and adapted resources for parental use at home. These resources encompass a variety of activities related to phonological awareness, reading instruction, comprehension, spelling and writing, in both Maltese and English. They include literacy games, lesson plans with printable materials, instructional videos on teaching phonics, reading, or spelling, audio recordings of listening comprehension texts, and adapted resources for students with special needs.

Given this professional relationship with certain schools, serious consideration was given to the recruitment process of participants for this study. It is noteworthy that only two out of the ten participants were teachers with whom I had previously collaborated. These participants were explicitly informed that I was not present in my usual professional supportive role but as a researcher. Throughout lesson observations and interviews, I have consistently maintained a researcher stance. Although I could never completely detach myself from my role as a literacy support teacher when interacting with participating teachers, my positionality was made explicit from the beginning.

1.8 Structural outline of the dissertation

Chapter One establishes the study's context, outlines research objectives and questions, and advocates for the significance of the research. Additionally, it addresses my professional positionality and acknowledges the study's limitations. The forthcoming Chapter Two will present the theoretical framework and existing literature will be reviewed to identify key themes within this area of study. In Chapter Three, the focus shifts to exploring and presenting literature relevant to the local context. Subsequently, Chapter Four will detail the research design, methodology and rationale for such choices. Moving forward, Chapter Five will expound on the findings, while Chapter Six will engage in a discussion of the results. The conclusive chapter will draw insights from the entire study, offering a summary and reflections on the research findings.

1.9 Conclusion

Ongoing discussions surround various approaches to teaching literacy, with no apparent consensus among experts in the literacy field regarding a singular best

approach or strategy. Consequently, as I started this research I was motivated to delve deeper into this area of study, seeking insights directly from participating teachers. My objective was to enhance my understanding of teachers' conceptualisations of literacy, particularly in the context of teaching and learning reading in English. This exploration has equipped me, as a Literacy Support Teacher, with a more nuanced understanding, enabling effective collaboration with early years teachers in the schools I support. Potential variations between novice and experienced teachers along with disparities between participants' stated beliefs and actual practices, carry substantial implications for both preservice and in-service teacher education and support. Findings from this research provide practical implications for stakeholders in education, especially those engaged in teacher education, development and mentoring.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter delves into the key literature pertinent to the comparative study of teachers' beliefs about the teaching and learning of literacy in the early years, and the consistency of these beliefs with their actual classroom practices. The primary aim of this research is to explore how novice and experienced teachers' beliefs align with their instructional methods, informed by cognitive and sociocultural theories of literacy development and a constructivist-interpretive framework.

This literature review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the foundational and contemporary research that informs this study, situating it within the broader body of knowledge in the field. It examines historical debates surrounding literacy instruction, specifically the 'reading wars' and the evolving methodologies of synthetic phonics, whole-language instruction, and balanced approaches. By critically analysing existing studies and theoretical frameworks, this chapter aims to highlight key variables, concepts, and the complex interplay between teachers' pedagogical orientations and their classroom practices.

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: To what extent are teachers' stated beliefs and instructional practices congruent, or is there a discernible mismatch?

Research Question 2: If a mismatch is identified, what factors contribute to this misalignment between beliefs and practices?

Research Question 3: Does the level of teaching experience among teachers influence their professed beliefs and instructional practices?

Research Question 4: What specific forms of support or professional development do teachers identify as necessary to enhance their instructional approaches in literacy education?

Literacy instruction is an inherently complex area of study, encompassing various dimensions of communication, both oral and written. Literacy acquisition serves as the cornerstone for a child's future learning, personal development, and professional success (Centre for Literacy UoM, 2014; Council et al., 2015). Consequently, it is essential to provide children with the skills and resources necessary to become literate, while also nurturing a passion for reading. Willingham (2017) emphasises that we often overlook how challenging it can be for children to choose reading over other competing leisure activities. To facilitate this choice, he suggests that not only should suitable material, valued by the children, be provided, but it should also be readily accessible. So much so that books should not just be available, but virtually falling into children's laps" (p. 151).

The review in this chapter will focus on early childhood literacy, and teachers' practices in teaching reading in English, excluding unrelated areas such as the impact of digital media on early literacy, or the development of early writing skills. This chapter will begin with an exploration of theoretical perspectives, followed by a review of the literature on the interlinking key concepts, and will conclude by reaffirming the research gap that this study aims to bridge.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study investigates approaches to early literacy teaching and learning in Malta, focusing on the beliefs and practices of novice and experienced teachers in the teaching of reading in English. Central to this investigation are the concepts of teachers' beliefs and

instructional practices, guided by cognitive and sociocultural theories of literacy development, within a constructivist-interpretive framework.

A theoretical framework in research is a conceptual structure comprising concepts and theories to guide the study. It serves as a model to help researchers select appropriate research methods and it forms the basis for data analysis, interpretation and discussion of the findings, in light of existing theories (Kivunja, 2018). In this study, the framework explores the alignment between teachers' stated beliefs and their classroom practices, considering how teaching experience influences these dynamics. By situating this study within the broader body of knowledge on literacy education, the framework establishes a robust foundation for analysing and interpreting the research findings. The framework also supports the comparative nature of the study by facilitating comparisons between novice and experienced teachers' beliefs and instructional practices, thereby enhancing the significance and scope of the research (Cohen et al., 2018; Lederman & Lederman, 2015).

2.2.1 Cognitive Development Theory and the Cognitive Theory of Literacy Development

Developed by Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, the cognitive development theory is a comprehensive framework for understanding how children develop cognitive abilities and how they acquire knowledge about the world. Jean Piaget's (1964) cognitive development theory proposes that children go through four main stages of development. Starting at the "sensory-motor, pre-verbal stage" up to the 18th month of life, followed by the "pre-operational representation stage" where language and thoughts or representations begin. In the third stage, the child can do concrete operations of mathematics, geometry or even physics but cannot yet express a hypothesis. Finally, in

the last stage, called by Piaget the “formal or hypothetic-deductive operations stage” the child can now reason on hypothesis and construct new operations (pp.177-178).

Reading researchers, theorists, and curriculum developers who identify with the cognitive perspective have invested a great deal in the stages of early reading, breaking this period down into smaller bits of learning (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004). Cognitivist perspectives in early reading trace back to the 1920s when William S. Gray presented the first developmental or stage theory of reading in the United States (Indrisano & Chall, 1995). In 1947, Gates introduced a stage theory on reading instruction, while in 1961 Russell based his research on child development. Jeanne Chall, in 1979, presented a theory, suggesting that individuals, regardless of their special needs, undergo distinct stages of reading development during specific age intervals and in a particular sequence (Davidson, 2010) . Continuously evolving over 50 years of teaching and research, Chall’s theory delineates six stages spanning from Pre-reading (birth to age 6) to Construction and Deconstruction (age 18 and beyond) (Chall et al., 1990; Davidson, 2010).

According to cognitivist learning theories, the primary objective is academic success achieved through effective knowledge acquisition and the employment of beneficial cognitive strategies. Cognitive development experts suggest that the process of learning to read print, including decoding and word recognition, commences before a child begins formal schooling, and is typically concluded by third grade (Chall et al., 1990; Purcell-Gates et al., 2004). Throughout this learning process, children are exposed to written and spoken language, acquire phonemic awareness and the alphabetic principle, and ultimately develop automaticity and fluency in reading. Although comprehension is a crucial component, it is widely acknowledged that true comprehension cannot be fully achieved unless a reader has first attained mastery of decoding (Ehri & McCormick, 1998;

Purcell-Gates et al., 2004). Cognitivists believe that literacy is largely taught and learned. In alphabetic languages, print functions as a code representing phoneme[1]-grapheme[2] correspondence; therefore, learning to read and write begins with learning this code (Davidson, 2010; Purcell-Gates et al., 2004). Compton-Lilly (2013), explains that cognitive theorists focus on the mental processes, the 'in-the-head' processes, that students use to decode and encode print. She adds that, according to these theorists, children may possess a range of reading-related abilities, experiences and knowledge, if they are deficient in these areas, it is the teacher's responsibility to assist them in acquiring these skills.

The stages of literacy development proposed by cognitive theorists assist teachers in gauging individual students' development and tailoring their instruction accordingly. Cognitive literacy assessments evaluate various skills like phonemic awareness, word and non-word reading, fluency, oral language and reading comprehension. These assessments may be formal and standardised with established norms for comparison. Cognitivists believe that challenges in print literacy are often attributed to factors like inadequate instruction (Buckingham et al., 2013; Snow, 2020) and or individual differences related to medical, sensory or cognitive factors (Dion et al., 2011; National et al., 1998).

While the cognitive theory of literacy development has its advantages, it has faced criticism for its limited understanding of how individuals acquire reading and writing skills in social and cultural settings. Critics argue that a narrow focus on cognition

[1] Individual speech sounds that make up words
[2] Individual letters or groups of letters that represent the individual speech sounds

may further perpetuate social disparities and hinder students from diverse backgrounds with distinct literacy practices outside the classroom. Despite this criticism, cognitive theories remain valuable in fostering print literacy. Teachers frequently utilise cognitive perspectives to guide their instructional methods, and specialists assert that targeted skills instruction is crucial for successful literacy attainment (Compton-Lilly, 2013; Davidson, 2010; Rosenshine, 2001).

In this study, teachers' beliefs and instructional practices will be examined to evaluate their alignment with the Cognitive Theory of Literacy Development. Teachers who prefer a bottom-up approach to literacy, prioritising sound correspondence, blending and decoding of words, through primarily holding teacher-led lessons, will be categorised accordingly. Furthermore, it is essential to consider alternative perspectives, such as the Sociocultural Theory of Literacy Development to gain a comprehensive understanding of literacy development.

2.2.2 Sociocultural Theory of Literacy Development

The Sociocultural theory of Literacy Development offers a distinct perspective compared to cognitive theories, viewing literacy as embedded within social and cultural contexts (Davidson, 2010; Eun, 2019). Originating from the work of Lev Vygotsky, this theory emphasises that cognitive development is deeply reliant on social interactions and cultural engagement (Grageda et al., 2022; Gray & Macblain, 2012). Vygotsky (1986) posits that language acquisition is a crucial component of cognitive development, which does not simply occur through a sequence of pre-determined stages post-speech acquisition. Rather, cognitive development primarily unfolds through a process of apprenticeship learning. Interaction with teachers or peers enables students to progress through their zone of proximal development (ZPD), which refers to the between what

learners can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with guidance and support from others.

Gray and Macblain (2012) explain that Vygotsky believed that children are born with an innate ability to learn but do not construct knowledge autonomously. Instead, learning occurs as they actively engage with their cultural environment, shaped by social interactions with parents, peers, educators and cultural artefacts such as nursery rhymes, music and toys. Vygotsky further emphasised that learning is deeply historical, based on real-life experiential learning that primarily takes place before formal education begins. In line with this, Beach (1999) defines the sociocultural perspective as a collection of theories highlighting the reciprocal influence between learners and the social organisations they engage with. From this perspective, learning is seen as a social practice in which societal norms and interpersonal interactions shape language acquisition and literacy development.

A sociocultural approach to literacy, rooted in Vygotsky's general theory, has significantly enhanced our understanding of early literacy acquisition. Goodman and Martens (2007) note that over a century of research has demonstrated that children embark on their literacy journey long before their formal schooling with development deeply embedded in their engagement with family and community literacy experiences. Within these sociocultural environments, children develop intricate notions about literacy, its roles and functions, and develop attitudes and beliefs regarding who is considered literate, and the extent of their own literacy skills.

This perspective gained momentum in the 1980s following Giordano's (1975) argument that teachers should take a more scientific approach to teaching reading, He

believed that effective teachers need to be well-versed in research and responsive to individual differences rather than relying solely on intuition. Quick (2023) in her article about socio-cognitive research in literacy, credits this shift in literacy studies primarily to the work of Street (1984) and Heath (1983). Street's ethnographic research, spanning from 1984 to 2011, explored literacy ideologies and practices across diverse communities, revealing the importance of culturally specific and contextually relevant literacies. Similarly, Heath's 1982 case studies underscored the varied use of literacies across three different settings, where the middle-class community demonstrated more coherence between home and school literacy practices.

Literacy theorists analyse the social, cultural and cognitive aspects of literacy in a society. As Warschauer (1997) notes, "Once literacy is understood as a complex social practice, literacy instruction is viewed as apprenticing students into the discourses and social practices of literate communities" (p. 90). Davidson (2010) expands on this by explaining that the sociocultural theory of literacy development advocates for integrating collaborative student interactions, expressive communication, deep engagement with texts, and exploration of significant questions. In this model, the teacher's role shifts to that of a facilitator, and, occasionally, an expert resource.

Sociocultural theorists, such as Perez and McCarty (2004) reject the notion that literacy consists merely of isolated skills transferrable from one individual to another. Instead, they view literacy as a social and cultural phenomenon influenced by social values, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and relationships. Teachers applying sociocultural theory create collaborative learning environments by pairing students with peers of higher skill levels or by fostering group rather than individual tasks. As explained by Eun

(2019), by leveraging the zone of proximal development, the more capable peer or teacher can provide guidance and support to help students reach their learning goals. The sociocultural perspective emphasises the influence of mentors, including parents, teachers, community leaders and other role models, in shaping individual development. Recognising their role, teachers understand their impact on the children's growth in their care. Teachers adhering to the sociocultural theory of literacy development promote a holistic, whole-language or top-down approach to teaching.

2.2.3 Integrating cognitive and sociocultural theories of literacy development

The interconnection between language development and cognition is undeniable. Both Piaget and Vygotsky emphasised the importance of psychological "tools" that children use to interact with the world, with language being the primary tool for understanding and navigating their environment (Miller, 2016). Griffith et al. (2008), discuss how Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories elucidate the ways children learn, with child development research further highlighting their competencies in various developmental domains. Three developmental areas which are considered particularly crucial for emerging literacy are given importance in their book - physical-motor development, language and communication, and cognitive development. Additionally, the development of symbolic thinking, a key aspect of cognitive development, is vital for literacy learning, as language itself is symbolic.

As detailed in *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (National Research Council, 2015), research across developmental biology, neuroscience and psychology has deepened our understanding of child development and learning, revealing its complex, interrelated nature. Factors such as emotional regulation and sustained attention are central to maintaining learning

engagement, enabling the acquisition of new ideas and skills. Furthermore, a child's learning journey is significantly influenced by evolving relationships with adults and peers to such an extent that a secure physical and relational environment provides the foundation for effective learning. Additionally, physical well-being, including food security and promoting physical activity, has been linked to enhanced academic performance (McCarty, 2006; National Research Council, 2015; Purcell-Gates et al., 2004).

Recognising the multifaceted nature of literacy development, several reading researchers and educators now advocate for harmonising cognitive and sociocultural perspectives (Compton-Lilly, 2013; Davidson, 2010; Dyson, 1995; Freebody & Luke, 1990; Purcell-Gates et al., 2004; Quick, 2023). These experts, quoting Compton-Lilly (2013), are addressing the challenge of acknowledging and valuing children's 'in-the-head' and 'in-the-world' experiences (p. 5). In their chapter *Sociocultural Perspectives on Literacy and Learning*, O'Brien and Rogers (2016), emphasise examining literacy within its specific context, where learners engage as both cognitive and sociocultural participants. They assert that a holistic approach, incorporating both psychological and sociocultural viewpoints can enhance our understanding of literacy processes and teaching, potentially leading to more comprehensive learning theories. They argue that neither a purely cognitive nor purely sociocultural perspective can fully account for the potential of diverse literacy practices, policies and teaching approaches in various contexts and over time.

Educators as well as scholars face the imperative task of harmonising both cognitive and sociocultural perspectives in their approach to reading and literacy, to effectively access the diverse range of knowledge that children possess. Gutierrez et al.

(1997) and Davidson (2010) contend that exclusive adherence to either of these approaches falls short of adequately addressing the language needs of all children in diverse classrooms. Gutierrez and her colleagues (1997), advocate for a “radical middle, ….. a new theoretical and pedagogical space in which learning takes precedence over teaching” (p. 372).

In research investigations, there may be instances where a singular theoretical framework may prove most advantageous for scrutinising specific phenomena. For instance, in studies where the researcher’s conceptualisation of literacy is congruent with the approach or program under investigation, a singular theory may suffice. Nevertheless, adopting a socio-cognitive perspective to scrutinise literacy phenomena, allows for a comprehensive perspective that encompasses both skill development and the social contexts of literacy learning and usage among the study participants. In my research, a dual understanding of sociocultural and cognitive theories will facilitate a deeper understanding of the beliefs and practices exhibited by both novice and experienced teachers involved in the study.

This section throws light on how the Cognitive Theory of Literacy Development and the Sociocultural Theory of Literacy Development drove my interest in scrutinising the evidence pertinent to my chosen subject matter. Additionally, these theories aided me in delineating the research parameters that shape this research study. The theoretical framework selected is particularly aligned with the comparative nature of this study, which focuses on novice teachers’ beliefs and practices in comparison to their more experienced counterparts. This investigation explores teachers’ preferred theoretical orientations, encompassing instructional models such as ‘teacher-directed’, ‘child-

centred,' or a 'balanced approach', as well as methodological divisions within phonics and whole language approaches to reading instruction. Hypothetical differences between novice and experienced teachers along with discrepancies in participants' own beliefs and practices, hold significant implications for teacher training, making this area of study worthwhile. The subsequent sections within this chapter present a review of the literature on the concepts of 'approaches to teaching reading', 'teachers' beliefs and practices', 'teaching experience impact on practices' and 'continuous professional development.'

2.3 Teachers' beliefs and practices

2.3.1 Defining Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

Defining teachers' beliefs is crucial, as it forms a primary comparative element of this study, which focuses on literacy teaching and learning, with a special emphasis on reading instruction in English. As Kagan (1992) notes, in her study, *Implication of Research on Teacher Belief*, the term "teacher belief" is sometimes referred to as "principles of practice, personal epistemologies, perspective, practical knowledge or orientations" (p. 66). Pajares (1992) also highlights the complexity of defining beliefs due to inconsistencies arising across research fields that lead to varied interpretations. He focuses on the interchangeably used terms beliefs and knowledge and suggests an artificial distinction: "belief is based on evaluation and judgement, while knowledge is based on objective fact" (p. 313). Similarly, Borg (2011) argues that while definitions of teachers' beliefs vary, the term generally refers to evaluative propositions that are held consciously or unconsciously by teachers, accepted as true, and are resistant to change. These beliefs encompass teachers' personal principles, values and understandings regarding teaching and learning, forming the foundation of their instructional practices

(Pajares, 1992; Wang et al., 2008). They influence decision-making, instructional methods, and the nature of teacher-student interactions (Carlman, 2004; Silvern & Isenberg, 1990).

Silvern and Isenberg (1990) explain that teachers' decisions and instructional practices are not arbitrary but are deeply rooted in their beliefs about how children learn, effective teaching strategies, child development, and the instructional setting. These beliefs provide a framework for interpreting events and understanding their actions. Grossman (1990) adds that when teachers understand how their students grasp and struggle with specific subject matter, they are empowered to select instructional approaches that meet the unique needs of their students. Reflective teachers can analyse how their decisions impact both their teaching and their students' learning outcomes. Furthermore, Rex and Nelson (2004), emphasise that personal beliefs, experiences as students and teachers, and ongoing professional development play significant roles in shaping the teachers' teaching philosophies. Other researchers emphasise the importance of understanding how teachers' knowledge, beliefs and values influence their teaching practices, particularly in literacy education (Al-Arfajr, 2001; Bezzina, 2000; Mayo, 2010).

Broemmel et al. (2021), examined novice teachers' literacy-related beliefs and instructional practices of reading instruction, throughout the formative stages of their teaching careers. They investigated how these beliefs and practices developed over time, the factors that influenced and impacted the teachers' instructional choices, and the extent to which teachers internalised and utilised their beliefs in practice. Their findings indicate that while teachers' core beliefs remained relatively stable, their instructional practices often shifted. Factors such as changes in context, curriculum mandates, and

lack of teaching autonomy sometimes pull teachers away from their central beliefs about literacy (Broemmel et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2008). However, most of the teachers in Broemmel's study reported that over time, their practices became more aligned with their beliefs, supporting other research like Gupta (2004), Parsons et al. (2017) and Risko et al. (2008) suggesting that beliefs, in general, are resistant to change.

Contrastingly, Borg (2011) found that in-service courses could variably impact teachers' beliefs especially when these courses encourage reflection on personal beliefs in light of previous training and classroom experience. Similarly, Meirink et al. (2009), suggest that changes in teachers' beliefs are possible when positive collaborative experiences with colleagues are fostered within a powerful learning environment. These findings underscore the potential for professional development and collaborative practice to influence and align teachers' beliefs and instructional practices effectively.

2.3.2 Alignment of Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

Up to the 1980s, research predominantly focused on developing reading and writing in young children, with limited attention to specific instructional strategies employed by teachers in early childhood classrooms. However, in the late 1990s, partly due to a national emphasis on literacy, researchers began investigating literacy from an instructional perspective (Griffith et al., 2008). In recent years, numerous international studies have investigated various instructional methods and approaches to early literacy from teachers' perspectives, encompassing their knowledge, beliefs, and practices. These studies have delivered contrasting results, giving diverse reasons for misalignment between teachers' beliefs and practices, while others state that there was consistency.

Several studies have identified discrepancies between teachers' reported beliefs and their actual instructional practices, leading to inconsistencies. Schachter et al.(2016),

observed that while teachers report holding research-aligned beliefs, the actual practices observed do not always reflect these beliefs, indicating a lack of correspondence in some areas. These discrepancies can sometimes stem from a lack of necessary knowledge to implement effective instruction (Bills, 2020). Additionally, teachers may overestimate their expertise, leading to a false sense of efficacy in their classroom practices (Hammond, 2015).

Teachers frequently struggle to balance accountability demands with their professional beliefs about effective curricular practices, particularly in the context of regulated curricula and standardised testing (Bauml, 2010; Goldstein, 2007). This pressure can affect even early years teachers, causing anxiety, as a narrow focus on academic standards can compromise holistic child development. Moreover, teachers report that external factors beyond their control significantly impact their literacy instruction, often leaving them caught between their knowledge and the expectations set by their schools (Broemmel et al., 2021).

Conversely, other studies have found that many teachers maintain consistency between their beliefs about developmentally appropriate practices in literacy instruction. Mayo (2010) highlights a strong correlation between teachers' beliefs and their instructional practices when teaching young children to read. Similarly, Borg (2003) and Whyte et al. (2022), suggest that teachers' beliefs, shaped by their personal experiences as students, and their educational background, strongly influence the activities they are likely to present in the classroom. Carlman (2004) found that many teachers attempt to determine effective teaching practices without first reflecting on their theoretical beliefs. She argues that by closely examining their own beliefs regarding teaching and learning, teachers can better align their instructional practices with their beliefs.

In the local context, research on teachers' beliefs and practices has produced varied outcomes. Some studies highlight a mismatch between teachers' stated beliefs and intentions, and their classroom practices. Milton (2011) found that although teachers believed they should expose students to English to enhance their language proficiency, they often struggled to consistently use English during lessons. This was due to either their personal experiences or the need to accommodate students' language needs. Similarly, Panzavecchia (2020) revealed that teachers in bilingual and multilingual Maltese classrooms recognised the benefits of multilingual strategies but used them sparingly, primarily due to a lack of confidence in implementing these practices effectively.

Conversely, other studies suggest a general alignment between teachers' declared beliefs and their actual classroom. Bezzina (2000) noted that teachers' beliefs are often shaped by their classroom experiences. In situations where there is a lack of understanding of how reading skills develop, teachers may rely on practices that they find effective in their classrooms. This gap in understanding, according to Bezzina, may reflect inadequate teacher preparation. Morales (2014) observed that while teachers' beliefs and practices were coherent and shared a common pedagogical core, they employed a variety of teaching strategies beyond those mentioned in interviews, indicating a broader application in practice.

In summary, research findings (Al-Arfajr, 2001; Bezzina, 2000; Carlman, 2004; Matsumoto & Tsuneda, 2019; Morales, 2014) suggest that teachers often develop their beliefs and practices through personal and professional experiences rather than relying on established educational theories. Mitchell (2005) elaborates that the six teachers in his study noted that their personal experiences in learning and teaching foreign

languages influenced their beliefs to some extent. Although several of these teachers expressed interest in available research, they struggled to locate studies that provide practical guidance for implementing new techniques.

This body of evidence suggests that teaching experience could significantly influence whether teachers' beliefs and practices align or diverge. Subsequently, the next section will delve into an exploration of the relevant literature on this topic.

2.4 Teaching experience impact on teachers' beliefs and instructional practices

This study seeks to get deeper insights into the comparisons between novice and experienced teachers, with a focus on how varying levels of teaching experience influence their instructional beliefs and classroom practices. Research indicates that teachers' beliefs are often shaped by the extent and quality of their experiential knowledge (Anderson, 2018; Morales, 2014) and that greater teaching experience enables teachers to consistently implement their beliefs in practice (Axisa, 2021). Anderson (2018) found that novice teachers, in contrast to their experienced counterparts, faced significant challenges in reading instruction, particularly in areas such as communication, using assessment during instruction, and responding to student needs. Furthermore, Danielson (2007) argues that it can take up to five years for teachers to achieve automaticity and flexibility across all instructional domains.

Mitchell (2005) observed that the more experienced teachers' beliefs were more consistently reflected in their classroom practices than those of less experienced teachers. Basturkmen (2012) further suggests that the beliefs of experienced teachers may become deeply ingrained in their practices over time, making them more adept at articulating the rationale behind their instructional decisions. Danielson (2007) also

noted that at the beginning of their teaching careers, teachers tend to rely heavily on materials provided by the school. However, as they gain experience, they begin to seek out and introduce supplementary resources to enrich their students' learning experiences.

Despite having considerable practical experience, experienced teachers may still encounter challenges due to evolving instructional practices and external pressures (Basturkmen, 2012). Consequently, as teachers gain more experience, teachers become increasingly aware of areas in their teaching they wish to improve and are often more proactive in seeking professional development opportunities (Schachter et al., 2016).

2.5 Approaches to Teaching Reading

Reading is fundamental to children's learning, providing access to all areas of the school curriculum as they progress through their educational journey. As a key measure of educational quality, schools are held accountable by parents and society for children's progress in reading. The significance societies place on children's reading is evident in the extensive interdisciplinary research, with the majority focusing on improving reading instruction and shaping effective curriculum policies (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022).

As discussed in section 1.2, the long-standing debate known as the 'reading wars' has led to a narrowing of the main approaches to reading instruction. These approaches can now be categorised into three primary orientations: Synthetic Phonics, Whole-Language Instruction, or Balanced Instruction (Castles et al., 2018; Pearson, 2004; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022).

2.5.1 Synthetic Phonics

Synthetic phonics is a systematic instructional method that focuses on breaking words down into individual sounds, or phonemes, to teach learners how to decode and encode written language. This method prioritises the direct instruction of phonemes and their identification within new words, contrasting with strategies that rely on pictures for word recognition or guessing (Roshan, 2019). Proponents of synthetic phonics argue that mastering the skill of decoding enables learners to apply this knowledge to unfamiliar words, thereby enhancing their reading abilities. Phonics instruction aims to support children in developing an understanding of the alphabetic principle, which is crucial for reading success in an alphabetic system like English (Campbell, 2020; Wyse & Styles, 2007).

The synthetic phonics approach systematically introduces learners to over 40 phonics sounds and the various letter combinations that represent each sound (Roshan, 2019). Initial reading materials in synthetic phonics programs typically include decodable books, which are specially designed with controlled phonemes and graphemes that children have been taught, facilitating effective practice (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). Fleer and van Oers (2017), refer to the soviet psychologist El'Konin, who posited that effective literacy learning progresses from understanding phonemes and their systems to recognising letters and whole words. He emphasised that phonemic analysis is essential for familiarising children with the sound system a crucial precursor to reading. Phonemic awareness, in turn, is fundamental to understanding phonemic decoding and phonemic spelling.

Castles et al. (2018), describe reading as a challenging task, especially in alphabetic writing systems like English, where acquiring the alphabetic principle is

essential. This principle involves associating arbitrary visual symbols with sounds. To take advantage of the alphabetic nature of the English language, a child must understand that words are composed of sound segments represented by letters in print. Without at least emergent levels of phonemic awareness, the rationale for learning individual letter sounds and 'sounding out' words is not possible (Brady & Shankweiler, 1991; Hammond, 2015; Phillips & Torgesen, 2005).

Snow and Juel (2005) concluded that explicit instruction in alphabetic coding skills is 'helpful for all children, harmful for none and crucial for some' (p. 518). Similarly, Ehri and Roberts (2006), found that children's knowledge of the alphabet is a key predictor of later reading success. The development of early reading skills also requires a clear understanding of the alphabetic principle, which is the awareness that words consist of graphemes representing phonemes (Campbell, 2020). Phonics instruction supports children develop the alphabetic principle by teaching the relationships between phonemes and graphemes (Ehri & Roberts, 2006).

2.5.2 Whole Language Approach

The Whole Language approach emphasises teaching children to recognise entire words as complete units of language. Rooted in the constructivist theory, proponents of the whole-language methodology believe that children use their perspectives and previous experiences to create a foundation for learning. This holistic approach eschews the breakdown of sounds into individual units, instead, it encourages children to understand words as whole units and associate them with their prior knowledge (Clark, 2013). The focus is on engaging with entire texts, typically from 'real' books, under the premise that reading for meaning will motivate and engage children more effectively (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). Children identify unfamiliar words in the text by relying on

sentence-context cues and developing an understanding of the text's meaning. Beginning readers are encouraged to use prior knowledge, the possible meaning of the text, sentence structure, and visual cues such as the size of words or letters. Letter-sound information should be used only very sparingly and mainly to confirm word predictions based on the context (Clay, 1991).

According to influential proponents of the whole language approach, such as Smith and Elley (1995) and Krashen (2002), learning to read is akin to learning to speak, it occurs naturally. They argue against explicit instruction in word-level skills and strategies, suggesting that any necessary word analysis should stem from the child's oral reading errors and primarily focus on initial letter sounds. Literacy instruction in their view, should prioritise meaning construction over the abstract structural units (such as phonemes) that link print with spoken language. Jeynes and Littell (2000) contend that many exponents of the whole language approach frequently argue that enjoyment is central to effective learning. They maintain that because whole language represents a more natural method of acquiring language, students will find the process more enjoyable and as a result, will learn more effectively.

2.5.3 Balanced Literacy

As the name suggests, Balanced Literacy is a balance between the whole language approach and the systematic teaching of the alphabetic code. An equilibrium is created between the importance of understanding the written language and the acquisition of a range of skills and knowledge. Educators make explicit links between phonics teaching and other linguistic aspects using whole texts, from a combination of real and decodable books (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). This is a decision-making approach through which educators would need to make thoughtful choices each day, to create a balance of the

appropriate practices and skill-based activities according to the needs of the students in a given teaching and learning activity (Mayo, 2010).

Spiegel (1998) defines Balanced Literacy as a versatile approach that is not constrained by or reactive to a particular philosophy. It is responsive to new issues while maintaining what research has already shown to be effective. It empowers teachers to be reflective decision-makers and to fine-tune and modify their methods to meet each child's needs, acknowledging that not every child learns the same way and that different teachers have different strengths. Balanced Literacy combines explicit skill instruction with authentic texts and various literacy instruction methods. It involves gradually transitioning responsibility from the teacher to the students through a comprehensive assessment-based programme (Centre for Literacy UoM, 2014).

In this research study, I seek to explore early years teachers' perspectives on the most effective approaches to teaching reading and to assess whether these approaches are incorporated into their daily classroom practices. Teachers were asked to share their beliefs and preferences regarding reading instruction, as well as to describe their preferred methods for teaching reading in English to early learners. For clarity, the terms 'phonics' or 'synthetic phonics' are used interchangeably throughout the study.

2.6 Defining Novice and Experienced Teachers

Teachers in their first years of teaching, following the completion of their pre-service teacher education, are commonly referred to as novice teachers. These teachers face numerous challenges upon entering their teaching positions and require quality preparation to succeed (Balsamo, 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Scales et al., 2018). Cherubini (2008) describes novice teachers as functioning 'in a mode of sustained

experimentation' (p. 22), where they face the challenge of balancing numerous professional responsibilities while adapting to accountability standards. Novice teachers may encounter both academic and social challenges in classroom interaction (Burger et al., 2021; Toom & Husu, 2021), as well as exceptionally high-stress levels and attrition rates (Dicke et al., 2015; Serceki, 2021). Teacher attrition is a significant issue, with Callahan (2016) and Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2011) noting that almost up to 40% of teachers leave the profession within their first five years. In this context, the OECD (2020) *TALIS 2018 Results*, set goals that include retaining teaching professionals by providing fulfilling and rewarding work conditions, reducing stress, and enhancing well-being. The aim is also to build teachers' resilience in order to reduce stress and attrition. Additionally, the focus is on providing tailored mentoring and support for novice teachers, and better planning for the distribution of novice teachers to schools, with an emphasis on retaining teachers in the most challenging school environments.

Anderson's (2018) research indicates that novice teachers face greater challenges in reading instruction compared to their experienced counterparts. Andersen recommends that aspiring teachers enter the profession equipped with the essential instructional skills needed for effective reading instruction, which can be achieved through comprehensive teacher training programs that combine theoretical education with practical teaching experience. Indeed, many countries prioritise practical exposure in schools during initial teacher education while recognizing the value of higher education in teacher preparation (Daniels et al., 2009). Teacher preparation is a critical variable. In a study by Giallo and Little (2003), the relationships among self-efficacy, behaviour management, discipline, and classroom experience were assessed, including

the variable of preparedness. Participants in this study were novice teachers with less than three years of experience, as well as student teachers in their final year of teacher training. The results revealed a significant positive association between self-efficacy in behaviour management, preparedness and classroom experiences. Furthermore, preparedness and classroom experiences significantly predicted teachers' ratings of self-efficacy in behaviour management. However, both graduate and student teachers reported feeling only moderately prepared and self-efficacious, with 83.5% of the total sample indicating they would like additional training in the area of behaviour management. These results resonated with other researchers, like Bowsher et al. (2018) who reported that only half of novice teachers felt that they were adequately prepared to differentiate instruction for their students and only 56% felt prepared to implement effective classroom behaviour strategies. To support novice teachers in overcoming challenges, many studies recommend implementing a mentoring program during their initial years of teaching. This programme aims to assist with teacher integration into the education system and increase teacher retention (Akiri & Dori, 2021; Attard Tonna, 2008; Kutsyuruba & Bezzina, 2024).

Experienced teachers, on the other hand, benefit from years of teaching experience and ongoing in-service training and professional development. The dynamic nature of the teaching profession necessitates continual development, contributing significantly to teachers' empowerment. This development process can be initiated by teachers themselves or prescribed by managerial or education authorities (Dehghan, 2022). The role that teachers play in their own professional development is crucial for their growth (Akiri & Dori, 2021).

Ferguson's (2002) study suggests that teachers construct individual belief profiles, forming carefully constructed practices based on knowledge, skills, and experience. The experienced teachers in his study demonstrated that their practice was informed by core beliefs about teaching, choosing processes and strategies that aligned with those beliefs. Despite using different strategies, sometimes at opposite ends of an instructional spectrum, they all aimed to ensure that every student learns. Axisa's (2021) research on the perspectives of novice and experienced English teachers in Malta indicates that teaching experience enables teachers to consistently apply their beliefs in instructional practices. Similarly, Altun (2010) in his study on the questioning techniques of novice and experienced university teachers in Turkey, found that both groups differed in their techniques, with experience and training influencing their questioning behaviours.

2.7 Teachers' Professional Development

Professional Development (PD) is essential for both personal and social transformation, as well as professional improvement (Sachs, 2016). Bezzina (2002) explains, that teacher PD typically occurs in three phases: pre-service, induction, and ongoing professional development. Effective PD programs evolve by recognising that teachers, as professional educators, seek meaningful opportunities for growth. Bezzina suggests that PD is most successful when carried out in environments characterised by mutual support, trust and respect. Sachs (2016) further argues that professional development must serve both a political purpose and a capability one, as performance management and performance cultures are deeply embedded in educational policies and practices. In response to increasing demands for accountability and transparency, performance indicators are used to measure both student learning outcomes and teacher performance.

Bell and Gilbert (1994) propose that the professional development of teachers is a process where they learn about how they learn and change. They state, “In learning, the teachers were developing their beliefs and ideas, developing their classroom practice, and attending to their feelings associated with changing” (p. 493). Early career teachers often experience distress as they navigate the challenge of reconciling theory with practice. Admiraal et al. (2023), suggest that effective initial teacher education, induction programs, and professional development can alleviate this distress by providing the necessary support. Additionally, fostering a collaborative culture in schools, together with decreasing the stressful working conditions can help retain new or experienced teachers. For novice teachers, engaging in meaningful dialogues and discussions with colleagues and school support staff can be greatly beneficial for addressing anxieties and enhancing professional growth (Cherubini, 2008).

It is important to view teacher growth as an ongoing journey rather than a one-time event, with an emphasis on professional growth rather than evaluation. Reflective practice and self-analysis are essential components of effective PD, and opportunities for professional growth should be tailored to meet the specific needs and interests of teachers (Bezzina, 2002). “Teachers’ professional growth occurs through a variety of experiences, including teaching training, PD programs, taking on additional responsibilities in school, and interacting with their peers or students” (Akiri & Dori, 2021, p. 132).

2.8 Chapter Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has explored key literature surrounding the comparative study of novice and experienced teachers’ beliefs and practices in early literacy instruction. By examining both cognitive and sociocultural theories, the chapter has

highlighted the complexity of literacy development and the different pedagogical approaches teachers may adopt. The review of research on synthetic phonics, whole language approaches and balanced literacy has provided a comprehensive understanding of the methodologies shaping early literacy education, particularly, the teaching of reading. Furthermore, the chapter explored the complex interplay between teachers' beliefs and instructional practices, highlighting how these elements are influenced by experience, professional development, and external factors. The literature revealed varying findings, explaining the divergencies or convergencies between the beliefs and practices of the two teacher categories. It has also addressed the challenges novice teachers face and how ongoing professional development and collaboration can bridge gaps between belief and practice. This chapter concludes by reaffirming the identified research gap: the need for further exploration into the alignment between early years teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices, with a specific focus on the Maltese context. Additionally, it highlights the necessity to investigate potential similarities and differences between novice and experienced early years teachers of reading.

The subsequent chapter will provide a deeper insight into the Maltese educational landscape, situating the study within the broader context of the Maltese educational system. This will enhance the understanding of the data presentation and analysis.

Chapter 3: The Maltese Context

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed exploration of Malta's educational system, providing a comprehensive understanding of its structure, policies, and the bilingual context within which it operates. It also delves into the provision of pre-service and in-service teacher training, mentoring, and continuous professional development. The aim is to set the context and provide the necessary backdrop to facilitate the interpretation and discussion of the data presented in subsequent chapters.

3.2 The Education System in Malta

Education in Malta is regulated by the Education Act of 1998 along with its subsequent amendments. Every individual of a compulsory school age residing in Malta is entitled to access education without discrimination based on age, sex, religion or belief, economic status, race or ethnic origin, political opinion, disability, colour, sexual orientation, or gender identity. It is the responsibility of parents and caregivers to ensure that minors attend school throughout each scholastic year and for the entire duration of compulsory school-age (Education Act (Cap. 605), 2022).

The Maltese education system is a comprehensive and multifaceted framework that spans from early childhood education to tertiary education, incorporating various types of schools and educational institutions. This section aims to provide a detailed overview of this system, highlighting the structure and components of each educational phase, the roles of different stakeholders, and the policies that guide educational practices in Malta. Subsequent sections will delve into the specifics of, compulsory education, early childhood education, and the different school sectors operating within

the Maltese context. Further discussion on national policies, strategies and frameworks, particularly those governing literacy in the early years, will be elaborated in section 3.3.

3.2.1 Compulsory Education in Malta

Education is compulsory for children between the ages of 5 and 16 and is regulated by the DQSE within the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR). It consists of an 11-year programme, beginning with the first 6 years of Primary school, followed by 2 years of Middle school and concluding with 3 years of Secondary school. At the end of Year 6, students take the National Annual Examinations (formerly known as National End of Primary Benchmark Assessment), to determine their level of education. These exams are mandatory for state schools but optional for church and independent primary schools. At the end of Year 11, students have the option to sit for the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) exam. Figure 1 below is a visual representation of the different cycles of the Maltese Educational System.

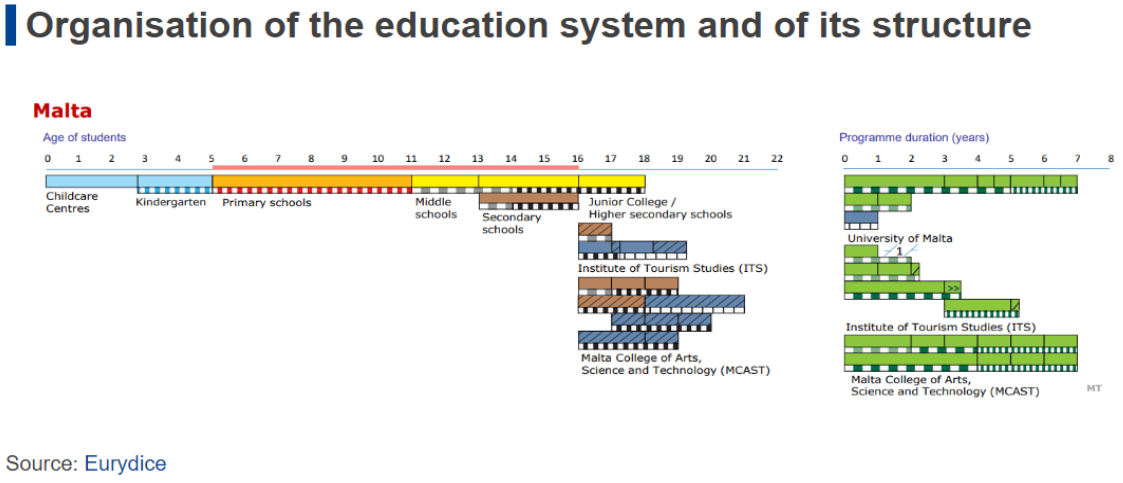


Figure 1 - Organisation of the education system and its structure

Most students attend mainstream schools, with a small percentage attending Resource Centres for specialised programmes for severe disabilities. Primary, Middle and Secondary State schools are grouped into 11 Colleges, with education provision

throughout the years of compulsory schooling aimed at achieving learning outcomes set by the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF) (Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education, 2015a). The LOF has been developed from the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) and is aligned to the four objectives of the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024, while also reflecting the values expressed in the Respect for All Framework and the recommendations of the Education for All Review (European Commission, 2023c). Church and independent schools are regulated in the same way as state schools.

3.2.2 Early Childhood Education

The study undertaken for this dissertation focuses on the early years sector, specifically involving Year 1 and 2 teachers. Consequently, I will provide a more detailed description of the early years sector to help the reader understand the context better.

Early childhood education in Malta serves children up to 7 years old. This educational stage was officially recognised as a distinct cycle, separate from the junior years (ages 8-10) and the secondary years (ages 11-16), in the National Curriculum Framework for Malta (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2012). The Ministry of Education in Malta strives to ensure the availability of safe, high-quality early childhood and care (ECEC) services to support the holistic development, learning, and well-being of children and their families. This is guided by the Early Childhood Education and Care (0-7 years) National Policy Framework for Malta and Gozo (Ministry for Education, 2021) and the national standards for childcare and kindergarten settings, as outlined in the 2021 National Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care Services (0-3 years) (Ministry for Education, 2021c) and the 2023 National Quality Standards in Education (3-16 years) (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2023c). Since 2016, ECEC

services have been the responsibility of the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) within the Ministry of Education, which aims to provide a cohesive learning and care experience for children, ensuring a coordinated governance framework (European Commission, 2023b).

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Malta is divided into three phases, where children under 3 years of age attend Childcare centres, and those aged 3 to 5 attend Kindergarten centres over two years (kindergarten classes 1 and 2). Nearly 100% of children participate in kindergarten education (Mifsud & Vella, 2020). Children then move to the last phase of the ECEC cycle, the initial two years of compulsory Primary schooling, catering to students aged 5 to 7. These phases in a child's developmental journey are considered foundational for a successful lifelong learning experience. The Ministry for Education, Youth, Research and Innovation is responsible for Early Childhood Education and Care and it is committed to promoting a high-quality educational provision. As indicated in the Early Childhood Education and Care (0–7 years) National Policy Framework for Malta and Gozo, the Government considers these years as the starting point for successful lifelong learning and an integral aspect of addressing sustainable development goals (Ministry for Education, 2021).

At such a tender age children depend entirely on their parents or caregivers. Therefore, in ECEC policies, services and practices should be planned, developed and implemented with the understanding that parents and caregivers are the most significant stakeholders. This approach aligns with the National Curriculum Framework (2012) and the ECEC National Policy Framework which identify parental interaction as a key factor in learners' successful educational development (Ministry for Education, 2021; Ministry for

Education and Employment, 2012). Parents, caregivers and educators play a vital role in fostering oral language development in children from birth. Children who participate in conversations gain a significant advantage in their later reading and writing development. Parents and early childhood educators need to create enriched learning environments that promote and enhance literacy exposure (Mifsud et al., 2021).

Malta, an island nation with limited natural resources, invests significantly in human capital, recognising it as its most valuable resource. The commitment of the government is to invest in young children, protect and realise their rights in practical ways, and ensure a solid foundation for their well-being, learning and development (Ministry for Education, 2021). Consequently, the Ministry of Education and the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) within the ministry, ensure the provision of safe and high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services to support the holistic development, learning, and well-being of children and their families (European Commission, 2023b).

3.2.3 School Sectors

Malta's education policy emphasises equity and quality, as demonstrated by inclusive policies across all educational levels (Vella, 2014). The Maltese school system comprises three providers: the state, the church and the private independent sector.

Free education, from kindergarten to tertiary education, has always been provided by the state, and since the introduction of the Free Childcare Scheme in April 2014, free childcare has been offered to all working parents or those pursuing further education. Most of the childcare centres are privately owned with a few run by the Church. The Ministry of Education regulates the curricula in State, Church and

Independent school sectors. At the same time, the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education supports, guides and monitors the teaching, assessment and administration process in all schools (European Commission, 2023d). Church schools, although partially state-funded, request donations from parents, while private schools are privately owned and charge tuition fees. Parents decide on their preference in sending their children to state or non-state schools, where enrolment in state schools is based on the locality one lives in, whereas Church and Independent schools accept students from all over the island. Students are admitted to Church schools through a ballot system, where admissions are at Kindergarten 1 and 2, at Year 1 Primary and Form 1, according to year of birth.

While state and private schools typically offer co-education, some church schools remain single-gender. All three school sectors provide schools from Kindergarten to Post-Secondary level. According to the National Statistics Office (NSO) (2023), in the 2021-2022 academic year, 58,337 students were enrolled in pre-primary, primary and secondary education, marking an increase of 0.6 percent over the previous academic year. Approximately 60 percent of students in compulsory education attend State Schools, another 26 percent attend Church Schools, and around 14 percent are enrolled in Independent Schools.

Similarities and differences among the three school sectors will be further examined in sections 3.4, 3.5 and 3.6, highlighting the language preferences, approaches to literacy instruction, and teacher training and support, respectively.

3.3 National Policies, Strategies and Frameworks Governing Literacy in the Early Years

This section will provide a chronological overview of the development of key policies, strategies, and frameworks that shape early years literacy instruction in Malta. These documents are fundamental to understanding the educational landscape and will be explored in detail, highlighting their objectives and significance.

3.3.1 National Curriculum Framework For All

The National Curriculum Framework For All (2012) advocates that the emphasis in the Early Years should be on developing general competencies through cross-curricular themes and establishing foundations for lifelong learning. It advocates for fostering a love for learning and holistic development, by introducing programs that seek active involvement and experiential learning to help children acquire social, communicative, and intellectual competencies. These competencies are translated into learning outcomes that children are expected to achieve by the transition from early years to junior school. The NCF also recommends integrating teaching and learning around learning areas rather than stand-alone subjects, ensuring a comprehensive entitlement for all pupils. The NCF makes recommendations regarding bilingualism and emphasises the importance of students achieving a high level of proficiency in both the Maltese and English languages (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2012).

3.3.2 The National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo (2014-2019)

Back in 2012, in light of the results obtained by Malta in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Maltese Government set to reconsider literacy education in the Maltese islands and provide everyone with the best opportunities to acquire the required literacy skills. Consequently, the government launched the National Literacy Strategy for

All together with a National Literacy Campaign to target different sectors of society, not just through schools (Centre for Literacy UoM, 2014).

The primary objectives for the Early Years (KG1 to Year 2) focus on recognising the importance of oracy as a foundation for literacy, promoting book-rich environments, emphasising meaningful adult-child dialogue, and implementing Balanced Literacy teaching. Additionally, they aim to provide extended reading opportunities across the curriculum, enhance screening and profiling for timely intervention, support parents and caregivers in fostering literacy skills, expand class and school libraries, and establish clear school policies for literacy instruction in both Maltese and English. Since the launch of the National Literacy Strategy for All (2014), the National Literacy Agency (NLA) has been established to implement the recommendations detailed in the Strategy Document. Key milestones of NLA since 2015 include promoting a literate community through reading for enjoyment programmes, establishing reading intervention initiatives in the Early Years, building classroom libraries in primary schools and promoting a balanced literacy approach through the College Literacy Teams in state schools. Although most of the services offered are delivered in state schools, all children and educators in Malta can avail themselves of many of the services and resources the NLA provides.

3.3.3 Learning Outcomes Framework

The Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF) (Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education, 2015a) aims to support the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), which was enacted into law in 2012. The NCF promotes universal education entitlement across eight Learning Areas, inspired by the EU's eight Key Competences Framework. It positions the LOF as the cornerstone for learning and assessment throughout compulsory schooling. Together, the NCF and LOF aim to underpin educational programs and serve as

national benchmarks of excellence (Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education, 2015a). To better assist educators in early years classrooms with the implementation of the five learning outcomes guiding the overall pedagogy of the Early Years Cycle, the DQSE published the document *Toolkit for the Early Years Cycle*. This guide provides educators with strategies for pedagogy and assessment within a learning outcomes approach. Levels of Attainment 1 to 4 of the Learning Outcomes Framework are intended to guide educators in the early years, from childcare to Year 2 of primary school (Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education, 2015b).

3.3.4 The Language Policy for the Early Years in Malta and Gozo

> The Policy promotes the bilingual development, in Maltese and English, of young children (0-7 years) in Malta and Gozo. It is intended to provide national guidelines for bilingual education. Schools are to be supported to develop their own language plans and strategies to meet the needs of their learners within the framework of the Policy. (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016, p. 3)

The Language Policy for the Early Years in Malta and Gozo encourages and offers direction to early years educators, parents and caregivers, managers of early years education settings and early years teacher educators, to cultivate a favourable disposition towards Maltese, English and other languages. This policy is integral to the National Literacy Strategy for All 2014-2019 (Centre for Literacy UoM, 2014), which emphasises the development of comprehensive literacy skills in both Maltese and English enabling learners to switch seamlessly between the two languages. Given the increasingly diverse socio-linguistic context in Maltese schools, particularly with the rising number of migrant children and their families, teachers need to be equipped to support

these learners in overcoming language and learning challenges. The advancement of plurilingualism significantly relies on the pivotal role schools play within the national education system. The policy stresses the importance of identifying and supporting children, including migrants who face challenges in mastering both Maltese and English.

3.3.5 The National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo (2021-2030)

> The National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo (2021-2030) consolidates and extends further the strategic goals and actions of the 2014 Strategy. It is committed to consolidating and building on the successful actions, recognises the challenges of an ever-evolving world, and addresses ways in which these can be overcome. The NLS continues to seek to reduce the number of individuals who are socially excluded because of a lack of or a low level of literacy skills. (Mifsud et al., 2021, p. 4)

The National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo (2021-2030), aims to support the Government's Economic Vision, launched in August 2020, which identifies education as one of the five foundational pillars and a critical success factor for achieving its objectives (Mifsud et al., 2021). The National Literacy Strategy (NLS) is founded on eight goals and four pillars designed to ensure that all individuals achieve their full literacy potential. The NLS advocates for a Balanced Literacy teaching and learning approach, emphasising the integration of the technical aspects of reading and writing with the broader context of making meaning through text. It underscores the significance of the College Literacy Teams, which consists of professionals specialising in literacy, digital literacy, specific learning difficulties, inclusion, and assessment, providing crucial

support to state schools. Additionally, the strategy recognizes the vital role of parents, child caregivers and the local community in fostering literacy among children.

3.3.6 National Education Strategy 2024-2030

In commitment to fostering a culture of continuous improvement and innovation within the educational landscape, the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, has published the National Education Strategy 2024-2030. The strategy embodies a commitment to fostering continuous improvement and innovation within our educational landscape, by enhancing the existing education system while embracing the opportunities of a rapidly evolving world. The strategy has stemmed from an evaluation of the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 which addressed the perceived needs and priorities at the time. The 2014 Strategy 'was built on the belief that quality education and equal opportunities for all are pivotal to Malta's economic success, two concepts which will remain crucial in the National Education Strategy 2024-2030 ' (Vella & Borg Saliba, 2023, p. 13).

This strategy also aims to improve the quality of life for both educators and students, focusing on three pillars: Well-being, Growth & Empowerment, and Equity & Inclusion. It initiates a paradigm shift aimed at transforming education to better meet the needs and aspirations of learners, educators and society. This shift paves the way for a more inclusive, equitable, and empowering education system (Vella & Borg Saliba, 2023).

The development of early years literacy in Malta is underpinned by a robust framework of national policies, strategies, and standards that aim to provide comprehensive and inclusive education. The documents outlined in this section,

represent a critical subset of the broader array of policies and frameworks that shape the educational landscape of the Maltese islands.

3.4 A Bilingual/Multilingual Landscape

The Maltese islands have a rich history of multilingualism due to the prolonged periods of occupancy and colonisation. 'The Maltese language came into the picture as early as 1822 when John Hookham Frère was appointed President of the University Council' (Brincat, 2017, p. 169). During this period, journals and pamphlets were published in Italian, English and Maltese. In 1934, Maltese was declared an official language alongside Italian and English, and later, 'the MacDonald Constitution of 1939 proclaimed English and Maltese alone as official languages' (Brincat, 2017, p. 179). Over centuries of foreign rule, the Maltese people endeavoured to forge a national identity that integrated the indigenous language and religion, ultimately achieving independence from Britain in 1964 (Sciriha, 2013). Malta's linguistic heritage has significantly influenced its bilingual status and educational system. In Malta, the national language is Maltese, while both English and Maltese are considered official languages, and may be used in all situations and domains except for the Parliament and the Courts of Law (unless foreigners are present) (The Constitution of Malta , 1964). Additionally, Maltese Sign Language was officially recognised in 2016 as the third official language for the Maltese islands (Maltese Sign Language Recognition Act (CAP 556), 2016).

Bilingualism manifests to varying degrees across different contexts. The use of Maltese and English spans most domains, making an accurate representation of their usage complex, as code-switching between the two languages is a common practice (Vella, 2013). The linguistic situation in Malta is characterised by societal bilingualism and there is a strong political and societal desire to maintain balanced bilingualism (Council of

Europe, 2015). Moreover, the substantial increase in migration has introduced a variety of other languages into the sociolinguistic landscape, impacting early language education (Mifsud & Vella, 2020). A news release from the National Statistics Office (NSO, 2024) states that the resident population of Malta grew by 28.6% from 2012 to 2022, with the increase in population being attributed to the growth in the foreign population. Additionally, the Final Report for the Census of the Population and Housing - 2021 (National Statistics Office, 2024), it is stated that:

> Maltese emerged as the most prevalent language spoken from early childhood across all age groups of Maltese nationals, at the same time, the data indicated that nearly one-fourth of children under 10 years and around 15 percent of individuals aged 10 to 19 years considered English their primary language from early childhood. (p. 8)

Both Maltese and English, as official languages, are introduced to children in schools as early as kindergarten (ages 3-5) (Centre for Literacy UoM, 2014). As referenced in the Introduction Chapter, although both languages are taught in schools and spoken in pre-school, the exposure to each language depends on that particular school. Research by Vella, Mifsud and Muscat (2018) indicates that classroom language use is closely linked to the specific school sector. Independent schools predominantly use English, whereas Maltese holds greater prominence in state schools. Church schools exhibit more diverse language dynamics, reflecting a student population of both Maltese and English-speaking backgrounds.

Therefore teachers, depending on the school they are teaching in, tend to predominantly use one of the languages or code-switch between English and Maltese.

Research within the local context has shown that switching between languages is beneficial for effective teaching (Camilleri Grima, 2013), however, the teacher must make cautious use of code-switching (Council of Europe, 2015).

Moreover, the evolving school population are also creating shifts in language use, presenting additional challenges for educators. Mifsud and Petrova (2017) attribute these challenges to factors such as insufficient teacher training on multilingual and multicultural issues, lack of comprehensive multilingual curriculum or limited school resources. Brown (2014) emphasises the importance of early childhood educators understanding their students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. To effectively address the challenges of a diverse classroom, Brown suggests that "all educators and administrators need to have both pre-and in-service training opportunities in linguistic and cultural diversity and in principles of first and second language acquisition" (p. 45).

3.5 Contemporary Approaches to Learning and Literacy

The principles, aims, objectives and the regulation of education in Malta are laid down in the Constitution of Malta and the Education Act Chapters 327 and 605 of the Laws of Malta. These are substantiated by various policies and circulars. Chapter 605 grants the state the right to regulate education in Malta (European Commission, 2023b).

The State regulates all educational settings in Malta. However, it also acknowledges the rights of non-state schools to preserve their unique character, identity, ethos and autonomy, without infringing upon the rights of the State (The Constitution of Malta , 1964). This autonomy is reflected in the diverse approaches to literacy instruction both within and across the three school sectors.

3.5.1 Approaches to Literacy Instruction

In Malta, all schools adhere to the NCF and the LOF but the specific ways in which these guidelines are followed may vary. Approaches to literacy instruction also differ across schools. There is no single, uniform method for literacy instruction across sectors, as each school has the autonomy to develop its literacy plan and select resources it deems most appropriate. Some schools implement comprehensive literacy programmes across all year groups, while others grant teachers the autonomy to choose their preferred instructional methods. These approaches may change to comply with new policies and may also be influenced by the vision of the Senior Leadership Teams in schools. The school's vision must be embraced by the teachers to ensure their commitment to effectively implementing it in the classrooms (Moraal et al., 2024).

The literacy approaches employed often dictate the variety of reading schemes and resources used for teaching reading in English. For example, some schools adopt the Guided Reading Approach, where students are grouped by ability to work with the same text. Reading may be done independently or as part of a group, facilitated by teacher-led discussions. In Shared Reading, students engage in reading aloud with the guidance of a teacher using a 'big book' or e-book projected on a screen. Other schools follow a Synthetic Phonics Approach - such as My Letters and Sounds, Jolly Phonics or Read Write Inc. - which includes prescribed strategies and resources. In some cases, teachers are given greater flexibility to select books and instructional methods, often blending elements from different schemes.

State schools are supported by the National Literacy Agency (NLA), through Literacy Support Teachers and a range of intervention programmes, such as Reading Recovery, a targeted initiative for struggling readers in Year 2. The NLA also offers

initiatives like The Magic of Stories, Nwar, and Reading Stars, which are available to students in non-state schools. Additionally, the NLA provides a digital library and a physical library with resources that are available to all educators in Malta (*National Literacy Agency.*). Church schools, by contrast, receive support from the Literacy Team within the Secretariat for Catholic Education (SfCE), which offers resources, guidance, and support for implementing various literacy programmes. Resources created by this team are available on the SfCE online platforms and easily accessible by educators across all school sectors (SfCE, 2024).

3.5.2 Approaches to Learning - The Emergent Curriculum

Since the introduction of the NCF (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2012), the curriculum has transitioned from a prescriptive, knowledge-based curriculum to one centred on knowledge, attitudes, and skills-based learning outcomes. This framework provides schools with internal flexibility, allowing for individualised student-centred learning while clearly outlining expected achievements for each primary school year. In the Early Years cycle, the NCF emphasises developing general competencies through cross-curricular themes, which translate into specific learning outcomes that prepare children for the Junior Years cycle. The phased implementation of the Learning Outcomes Framework began in 2018 (European Commission, 2024).

Early Years teachers are encouraged to cultivate a learning environment that prioritises children's well-being, fosters positive behaviour and promotes active participation through play-based pedagogies. They are urged to 'embrace a balanced and emergent approach to the use of different language systems, symbols, patterns and digital practices' (Ministry for Education, 2021, p. 16). The Emergent Curriculum (EC) is based on the sociocultural philosophy of teaching where the relationship between the

child, the educator and the community is considered the basis for learning and development. When children fully participate, they gain access to information, engage in decision-making, and drive change. The emergent curriculum encourages authentic participation through community involvement, especially the parents, who are encouraged to participate in their children's learning, making it more inclusive and culturally diverse (Ciezczyk, 2021). This approach is flexible, with curriculum planning continuously evolving rather than being pre-determined. While framed by the teacher, it is child-initiated, fostering collaboration between children and teachers, where teachers are responsive and build on the child's interests. The Emergent Curriculum builds upon theories from Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky (Stacey, 2009).

This significant reform required kindergarten educators in Malta to shift from prescriptive theme-based programs to a child-centred emergent curriculum. This shift posed a challenge for educators, requiring them to strengthen their values, knowledge, and skills to confidently co-construct curricula with their students (Bonello et al., 2022). As teachers face numerous challenges, particularly when new curriculum changes are introduced, they require 'timely information, training and resources to fulfil the roles and tasks expected from them' (Flores, 2005, p. 409). The shift to an emergent curriculum, which emphasises a more child-led approach than a teacher-led one, has created uncertainty among educators (Bonello et al., 2022). This uncertainty and tension can impact their sense of professionalism during periods of change. Consequently, it is crucial to support teachers and understand how they interpret and manage the change process, as well as the impact of these initiatives on their beliefs and values (Flores, 2005). To support this transition, educators in the state sector began participating in mandatory Community of Professional Educators (CoPE) training sessions. These sessions aimed to

enhance their ability to implement interactive and reflective learning processes and provided clarity on new expectations. Educators were able to reflect and start embracing the necessary changes to enhance the educational rights of each child (Bonello et al., 2022). The emergent approach was introduced to KG1 students in state schools in 2018, and the following year KG2 educators also implemented the approach. Church and independent schools were given the discretion to decide whether to adopt this approach, and several schools have chosen to do so in their classrooms (Baldacchino, 2021). The Church School Sector (2022) has committed to aligning early years classes in church schools with the LOF and NCF. For Kindergarten 1 and 2, it recommends a blended approach that integrates an emergent curriculum with elements of literacy and numeracy programmes in a seamless manner.

While a fully emergent approach is advocated in childcare and Kindergarten settings, a more balanced approach is now being recommended for the early primary years. Through the DLAP Circular 092/2023 (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2023), early primary school teachers in Malta are encouraged to adopt a pedagogy that emerges from the interests, strengths and needs of the children. This approach emphasises moving away from a prescriptive curriculum in Years 1 and 2, or stand-alone subject teaching. The Circular promotes an Emergent Curriculum, where the child is the starting point and teachers scaffold learning to help children reach their potential, preparing them for formal education.

> As children progress from Kindergarten to Year 1, the relatively unstructured learning experience in the Kindergarten years will transition gradually to some degree of structure as teachers follow the teaching and learning guidelines,

> increasing further in Year 2, that will eventually lead to the more structured curricular implementation in Year 3. (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2023, p. 3)

For Years 1 and 2, the Church School Sector (2022) recommends a blended approach that incorporates structured literacy and numeracy programmes along with an emergent curriculum. This approach aims to facilitate a smooth transition from the early years to the junior years of primary education. Teachers in Church and Independent schools took an active role in the consultation and decision-making process for the implementation of the Emergent Curriculum. In contrast, teachers in the State sector went through a mandated change resulting in less autonomy and flexibility due to directives from a central authority. Baldacchino's (2021) study highlights these contrasting experiences: State sector educators felt constrained by top-down directives, while those in Church and Independent schools reported more positive experiences due to practitioner-led curriculum changes.

During curriculum changes, many educators experience doubts and question the rationale behind these changes. In a study by Scerri (2022), early years teachers in Malta highlighted the importance of more targeted training for themselves, parents, and senior leadership teams as they transitioned to an Emergent Approach. They emphasised the need for better support, noting that senior leadership teams often lack sufficient knowledge about the implementation and implications of the emergent curriculum in their schools. Correspondingly, the first objective of the National Education Strategy 2024-2030 (Vella & Borg Saliba, 2023), focuses on educators' well-being, emphasising the need for training and continuous professional development to address current

challenges. The strategy recommends revising initial teacher training programmes in Malta and updating continuous professional development programs for educators. This leads to the next section, which explores teacher education, training, and development in Malta.

3.6 Teacher education, training and development

Initial teacher education in Malta is tailored to the specific educational levels at which prospective teachers aim to work. Prospective teachers intending to teach at the primary level receive specialised training for this age group, while those preparing for secondary education receive training pertinent to teaching older students. Prospective secondary school teachers can choose to specialise in the pedagogy of one or two subjects. Teaching staff in state pre-primary, primary and secondary schools are career public officers. In contrast, teachers in church schools, although funded by the government, are employed with the Secretariat for Catholic Education, whereas Teachers in Independent schools are directly employed by the respective institutions.

3.6.1 Pre-service teacher training

Initial teacher education in Malta is primarily provided by the University of Malta (UoM) and more recently also by the Institute for Education (IFE). UoM offers a two-year postgraduate degree, the Masters in Teaching and Learning (MTL), which enables graduates to teach at the early years, primary, and secondary level, according to the area of specialisation chosen. It also offers a BA (Hons) in ECEC and a BA (Hons) in Primary Education. IFE provides a four-year undergraduate degree in Education (B.Ed), a three-year postgraduate Master's degree (M.Ed.) for prospective teachers, and a Postgraduate Diploma for individuals holding a Bachelor's Degree who need additional qualifications in

Education to be eligible for regular teaching positions under the current Education Act (European Commission, 2023e).

For those intending to teach at the pre-primary level, a two-year Advanced Diploma in Children's Care, Learning and Development is available from the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). Since the 2015/2016 school year, teachers in the Early Years Cycle (encompassing Kindergarten and the first two years of primary education) are required to hold a B.Ed in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), or a Bachelor's Degree in ECEC along with a Master's in Teaching and Learning (MTL) in ECEC, or an equivalent qualification. Teacher training at the graduate level includes field placement with observation periods and teaching in schools. These student teachers are supervised, visited and assessed by a team of examiners appointed by the Faculty of Education. Persons with a teaching qualification are employed as full-time teachers on an indefinite contract basis.

However, due to a shortage of teachers in particular teaching sectors or subjects, Supply Teachers are engaged on a definite basis. Persons with a first degree (not in teaching) are given preference. Applicants having a minimum of two subjects at Advanced Matriculation Level or an Award at MQF Level 4, in the subject/area applied for, together with MQF Level 3 in English language, Maltese Language, Mathematics and another subject can also apply for the selection process. All supply teachers without a teaching qualification are requested by no later than their second consecutive year of teaching, to attend and participate actively in an obligatory introductory course issued by the Education Authorities. This Introductory Course for Supply Teachers (Award) (MQF6, 15 ECTS) is to be carried out outside school hours.

3.6.2 Induction and Mentoring of new teachers

Newly appointed teachers start their first year of full-time teaching and are assigned roles and responsibilities equivalent to their more experienced colleagues. These initial years serve as a critical period for teachers to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and to pinpoint areas for development (Attard Tonna, 2019). Research indicates that the quality of a teacher's early experience significantly influences the application of knowledge and skills acquired during initial teacher training, and helps in cultivating a positive attitude towards teaching as a career (Kutsyuruba et al., 2019; Kutsyuruba & Bezzina, 2024; Luft et al., 2022).

Newly appointed teachers in state schools are required to attend an induction seminar spanning over three half-days, which provides an overview of the various functions of the Directorates, relevant legislation, and their roles within schools. A similar induction seminar is organised by the SfCE for teachers in church schools, while for Independent schools, it is up to the Head of School to prepare an induction programme for the new members of staff. Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) must complete a two-year induction and mentoring programme during their probationary period before being awarded a permanent teacher warrant. An Induction coordinator, selected from the same school as the NQT, serves as a mentor during the first two years. This role is typically assigned by the Head of School to an assistant head of school or an experienced teacher. The mentor supports the NQT through observation, discussion and fostering critical thinking, rather than merely providing advice and solving problems. NQTs are also required to keep a personal reflective journal, attend a group mentoring session with the college principal, participate in two formal meetings with the college mentor, and attend

a national concluding seminar at the end of the scholastic year organised by the Quality Assurance Department (Attard Tonna, 2019; European Commission, 2023e).

While induction programmes are vital, Shanks et al. (2022), in their comparative study of induction contexts in Denmark, Malta and Scotland, found that 'school context and mentoring are more important than any induction framework per se' (2022, p. 761). Findings by Admiraal et al. (2023), suggest that investing in a supportive school culture leads to greater teacher satisfaction and reduces distress, which in turn enhances teacher retention rates.

3.6.3 In-service Training and Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

For policymakers aiming to enhance educational systems, it is crucial to develop policies that support the lifelong professional development of teachers, starting from the initial teacher education and continuing until retirement (Snoeck et al., 2010). In Malta, teachers are required to actively participate in Management-driven Community of Professional Educators (CoPE) sessions and are also encouraged to engage in self-sought continuous professional development (CPD) activities, which can be undertaken during or outside normal regular school hours.

Management-driven CoPE sessions must include 12 hours dedicated to School Development Planning (SDP) and up to 28 hours for CPD sessions conducted during school hours. In contrast, self-sought CPD allows teachers to choose areas of interest or relevance to their teaching role. This can encompass professional learning opportunities in a school or college setting, externally designed programmes or self-development activities. As an incentive, teachers who accumulate 360 hours of recognised self-sought CPD over six years receive accelerated progression in their salary scales. Additionally,

teachers can also benefit from paid study leave schemes offered by the Ministry of Education (European Commission, 2023a).

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a comprehensive overview of the Maltese educational context, emphasising the critical stages of early childhood education, the structure of compulsory education, and the diverse sectors of the school system. By detailing the national policies, strategies and frameworks that govern literacy and early years education, the chapter has highlighted the robust efforts undertaken to foster a bilingual and inclusive learning environment. Furthermore, the discussion on teacher education, training, and continuous professional development underscores the importance of well-prepared and supported teachers in achieving educational excellence.

The insights presented in this chapter set the stage for a deeper understanding of the data and analyses in the subsequent chapters. They illustrate the interconnectedness of policy, practice, and educational outcomes in Malta, providing a solid foundation for interpreting the findings and discussions that follow. The contextual background is crucial for appreciating the nuances of the Maltese educational landscape and for recognising the efforts made towards a more inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education system. Through this examination, it becomes evident that Malta is committed to continuous improvement and innovation in education, aimed at meeting the diverse needs and aspirations of its learners, educators, and society.

With this contextual understanding in place, the following chapter will delve into the research design and methodology employed in this comparative education study. It will detail the sampling strategies, data collection procedures, and research tools utilised,

while also addressing the study's limitations and ethical considerations. This methodological framework will provide the necessary rigour and clarity to interpret and discuss the findings presented in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 4 – Methodology

4.1 Introduction

As delineated in previous chapters, this comparative study aims to analyse stated beliefs and instructional practices of Maltese primary school teachers in early years education, discerning whether disparities exist between novice and experienced teachers. Through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and a purposeful sampling strategy, the study endeavours to unravel the beliefs and instructional practices of early years teachers in the context of teaching and learning literacy, providing a comprehensive understanding of their pedagogical approaches within the Maltese schools' context.

In the ensuing sections, this chapter expounds upon the qualitative naturalistic research design selected and the constructivist-interpretive stance adopted for this comparative education study. It delineates the intricacies of the research design, justifies the sampling strategies and explains the data collection procedures. Subsequently, the chapter addresses the study's limitations and ethical considerations, concluding with an exploration of the chosen data analysis techniques.

4.2 The research design

The domain of Comparative Education is not autonomously defined but rather exists within the purview of broader social sciences, drawing upon varied disciplinary perspectives including history, philosophy, sociology, economics, psychology, political science, science education, research methods and education policy as delineated by Bray et al. (2014) and Cowen (2006). As asserted by Suter et al. (2019) research endeavours in Comparative Education are aimed at either enhancing academic theoretical constructs or informing practical implementations within educational institutions and governmental

programs. This field entails a systematic scrutiny and juxtaposition of educational phenomena, aimed at discerning commonalities, discrepancies, recurrent patterns, and evolving trends.

The researcher's interest in the phenomenon under investigation, the employed approaches, the underlying principles, and the rationale for selecting a particular research approach are encompassed in the methodology (Cohen et al., 2018). The methodology delineates the type of study to be conducted, the methods utilised and the procedural details entailing the execution of the research. The core of any research project lies in its methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). It is the guiding framework that shapes the research design and directs the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data. A research design places researchers in the empirical world, also addressing the pivotal considerations of 'representation and legitimation' (p. 58).

To gain deeper insights into the beliefs and practices of teachers in the Maltese early years classroom, it is essential to focus on acquiring, examining, and interpreting data pertaining to their concepts and experiences within this social context. Qualitative research as emphasised by Wilkinson and Dokter (2000) relies on the richness of people's testimonies and the depth of data obtained. This approach aims to uncover meanings that may not be readily apparent in quantitative studies, as highlighted by Burnard et al., (2008). Birmingham and Wilkinson (2003), further argue that a qualitative, holistic approach facilitates the identification of themes and issues more effectively than advanced statistical techniques commonly employed in quantitative research. They caution against relying on quantitative data, as it 'so dilutes the quality of the information collected' (p. 49).

Consequently, this comparative education study employs a qualitative naturalistic research design to explore the intricacies of teaching and learning literacy in the early years. Qualitative research is designed to acquire, scrutinise, and interpret data, relevant to people's concepts and experiences of their social world (Gonzalez et al., 2008). By adopting a qualitative approach, this researcher aims to delve into complex issues and gain a comprehensive understanding of the narratives and observations gathered.

In this study, a naturalistic research design and a constructivist-interpretive stance are employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' beliefs and approaches to teaching and learning literacy in the early years of primary school. The study employs participant observation in class during literacy lessons and semi-structured interviews to collect data. The naturalistic approach provides a means for exploring attitudes, intentions, and practices beyond simply the presentation of behaviours and actions, and it aims to give the participants a voice (Chandler et al., 2015; Cohen et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 1999). On the other hand, one cannot assume that the presence of an observer or an interviewer does not affect the participants' performance or their responses to his/her questions (Cohen et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 1999). Employing both naturalistic and controlled data, qualitative research is recognised for its subjective and exploratory nature, oriented towards discovery and process, the research endeavours to explore phenomena without preconceptions and predetermined variables (Schwartz, 2022). It seeks to understand the perspectives and experiences of participants without imposing predefined categories or variables, instead enabling themes and patterns to emerge organically from the data. Qualitative inquiry is dedicated to capturing the richness and delineating the intricate complexities inherent in the data.

Moreover, the constructivist-interpretive researcher typically emphasises the perspectives of the participants and acknowledges the influence of his/her background and experiences on the research (Creswell, 2003). Reflecting on my experience, as a primary school teacher for over two decades, predominantly teaching in the early years, I often identified with the participants' experiences and struggles. However, my job responsibilities shifted in the past five years towards that of a literacy support teacher, assuming more of a mentoring position. Through this transition, I have acquired the skills to effectively observe and guide teachers in overcoming their challenges with sensitivity and empathy. Nonetheless, throughout this process, I maintained an observer perspective and refrained from intervening during the sessions. Despite instances where I was tempted to offer assistance or commentary during lesson observation or interviews, it was imperative to uphold my role as an impartial observer during the data collection process. Berger (2015) emphasises the importance of the researcher's reflexivity in terms of familiarity with participants' experiences. To avoid projecting my own experiences onto the interpretation of participants' experiences, I remained vigilant throughout the process.

The constructivist paradigm, as explained by Denzin and Lincoln (2017), is grounded in a relativist ontology, acknowledging the existence of multiple realities. Its epistemology is subjectivist, emphasising the collaborative process between the knower and the participant in creating understandings. The methodological procedures employed in this paradigm are naturalistic, focusing on studying the participants in their natural context to provide an extensive and detailed understanding of their beliefs and approaches (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006).

Alternatively, the interpretive paradigm is founded, in part, on a subjectivist and interactionist ontology, recognizing that reality is socially constructed. Its epistemology acknowledges the presence of multiple realities, agentic behaviours and the significance of understanding situations from the perspectives of the participants involved. Cohen et al. (2018), define the interpretive paradigm as focusing on the individual with its central aim to delve into the internal perspective of the individual and comprehend the subjective world of human experience.

Through this constructivist-interpretive approach, this study aims to explore how the teachers' stated beliefs and practices about teaching and learning literacy in the early years align, whether there is a mismatch or consistency between them and whether these differ for novice and experienced teachers. This qualitative research design aims to provide a rich description and understanding of the teaching and learning of literacy in the early years in the Maltese schools' context.

4.3 Ethical Process

Ensuring ethical conduct in educational research is paramount, with Cohen et al. (2018) emphasising the responsibility of researchers to consider the impact on participants and 'preserve their dignity as human beings' (p. 112). Transparency regarding the ethical dimensions of the research, including the disclosure of private or sensitive data and the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity when required, is imperative.

In obtaining necessary clearance for planned questionnaires, observations and interviews for this research, ethical protocols were rigorously followed. Approval was first sought and granted by the University Research Ethics Committee at the University of Malta, (FREC 16.10.23), then for church schools from the Secretariat for Catholic

Education (SfCE 26.10.23), for state schools from the Directorate for Education (MEYR 06.11.23) and the Director of the participating Independent School (08.11.23). All approvals were sent back to FREC (UoM) for final approval, which was issued on the 23rd of November, 2023, giving the go-ahead to start collecting data (see Appendix A). To select the schools for my research, as these need to be included in the approval request, I conducted inquiries among acquaintances within the education sector to gather insights regarding institutions where early-career teachers were engaged in teaching early primary grade levels. I have included these schools in my applications but extended the list to additional institutions to ensure a comprehensive sample size of 10 teachers. Subsequently, once research clearance from the respective departments was granted, I sent formal requests for permission to the administrative heads of selected schools, aiming to secure participation from novice and experienced teachers. Upon approval, the school administrations disseminated my Information Letter (see Appendix B) to all teachers teaching Year 1 and Year 2 in their institutions. Following expressions of interest from teachers willing to partake in the study, communication was established via email. Subsequently, explicit informed consent was sought from each teacher who opted to participate. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research, and they retained the freedom to withdraw from the study without justification. Participants were requested to provide their informed and voluntary consent by signing a Consent form (see Appendix C) indicating their agreement to the audio recording of both lesson observations and interviews. Additionally, participants were afforded continuous opportunities to provide consent throughout the pre-fieldwork phase (in our communication by email and during a brief introductory meeting), fieldwork phase (throughout the data collection process, consent was requested for

participation and audio recording), and post-fieldwork phase (interview transcript sent to participants for validation and approval) in line with established ethical guidelines (Klykken, 2022).

Participants were guaranteed that recordings from interviews and lesson observations would be exclusively used for the intended purposes outlined in the consent form. Additionally, they were informed of their rights under the General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (GDPR) and the Malta Data Protection Act 2018 (Cap 586), namely the rights to access, rectify, and where applicable, request the erasure of their data. Furthermore, participants were informed that all collected data would be securely stored in an anonymised form and erased within two years of completion and publication of results. To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant and consistently applied to all notes and data collected throughout the stages of data collection, in adherence to ethical standards (Allen & Wiles, 2016).

The ethical considerations were heightened due to the qualitative commitment to a reflective and comprehensive exploration of the research process, encompassing intellectual, emotional, and political dimensions. This methodology focuses on understanding power dynamics between the researcher and participants, and the concern of ethics becomes even more critical (Bresler, 1995). The researcher determines the agenda, methodology, the timings and the extent of the research and consequently is often seen by the research participants to be in a more powerful position (Cohen et al., 2018). Given my dual role as a literacy support teacher and a researcher, navigating potential conflicts of interest was crucial. I strove to maintain a researcher stance by maintaining awareness of this dual role throughout the process of recruitment, and data

collection and analysis. Thus recruitment strategies were carefully devised, acknowledging my familiarity with the field and some of the potential participants. However, only two participants had previous professional interactions with me, at some point, in previous years, so explicit clarification of my role was provided from the outset. This involved maintaining a researcher stance during observations and interviews, distinctly separate from the supportive role of a literacy teacher while emphasising the absence of any representation of the Secretariat for Catholic Education during these research activities. To further delineate this distinction, I took a year-long sabbatical leave to disengage from my professional role and responsibilities.

4.4 Sampling

This comparative research is carried out with a purposeful sample of ten (10) early years teachers, representing the three school sectors: State, Church and Independent. Initially, I aimed for diverse representation to capture potential variations in teaching approaches. However, since teaching approaches were not compared across different school sectors, equal representation was not necessary.

Participant recruitment encountered challenges attributed to a prevalent "research fatigue" phenomenon as highlighted by Schembri and Sciberras (2022, p. 58). This fatigue emanates from the demand for school-based research from numerous educational institutions, both local and international, that require students to conduct research for their dissertations or research projects, within the limited number of schools on the Maltese islands. Some heads of schools declined participation citing existing involvement in other research studies. Ultimately, the enrolled teacher participants comprised one from Independent schools, three from State schools and six from Church schools as may be seen in Table 1 below.

The participants in this study are stratified into two distinct categories, namely Novice and Experienced teachers, constituting the primary comparative element of this research study. Novice teachers, as defined by several studies (Barrett et al., 2002; Caspersen, 2013; Liston et al., 2006; Sha et al., 2022), are identified as individuals in their initial years of teaching, encompassing a period of three or fewer years of teaching experience. Consequently, within the scope of this study, teachers with 0-3 years of teaching experience are considered Novice Teachers, while teachers with teaching experience of four (4) years or more are considered Experienced Teachers. The objective was to secure an equitable representation of novice and experienced primary school teachers presently teaching Year 1 or Year 2 classes. This goal was achieved with the successful participation of five novice and five experienced early years teachers. The study participants are teachers in six distinct schools across three separate districts in Malta. Although attempts were made to engage schools in additional districts, no participants from these regions were secured for inclusion in this study. However, it is worth noting that only state schools enrol students from the same town the school is in, the catchment area for church and independent schools is from all over Malta.

Data collection commenced once a sufficient number of participants, five teachers from each identified category, had been enrolled. The educator sample exclusively comprises female teachers, which aligns with expectations given the limited representation of male teachers in early years education. According to the National Statistics Office (NSO) (Debono, 2023; National Statistics Office, 2024), only 13.6% of primary school teachers, spanning from year 1 to year 6, are male. To further protect the privacy of participants, assumed names have been given to ensure anonymity. Table 1

below, is a visual representation of the information outlined above, representing the research participants.

Teacher Pseudonym	***Category***	***Teaching experience***	***Currently teaching***	***School sector***	***Maltese District Area***
Kya	Experienced	10 years	Year 1	Independent	Western District
Mary	Experienced	30 years	Year 2	State	Southern Harbour
Anna	Experienced	9 years	Year 2	Church	Southern Harbour
Demi	Experienced	8 years	Year 2	Church	Southern Harbour
Sam	Experienced	7 years	Year 1	Church	Northern Harbour
Lisa	Novice	0 years	Year 2	State	Southern Harbour
Yana	Novice	2 years	Year 2	State	Southern Harbour
Kate	Novice	2 years	Year 1	Church	Southern Harbour
Nina	Novice	1 year	Year 1	Church	Southern Harbour
Eve	Novice	0 years	Year 2	Church	Northern Harbour

Table 1 - Participant Teachers: Experience, Teaching Roles, and School Sector

4.5 Data collection

4.5.1 Pilot study

In the preliminary phase of this research, a pilot study was conducted aiming to validate the selected research methods, refine the research instruments and streamline procedures (Hassan et al., 2006). The pilot study participants were selected based on convenience and accessibility as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2016), and consisted of three experienced early years teachers. The pilot sample included a colleague, a Literacy Support Teacher with over 25 years of teaching experience and two early-years teachers who had been teaching for four and eight years respectively. These

early years teachers, currently teaching Year 2 in a non-participating church school, volunteered to take part in this pilot study. These three teachers offered valuable insights on the initial questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to the teachers via email and administered through Microsoft Forms, enabling them to complete it at their convenience and pace during their free time. Most respondents found the questions to be clear and well-defined, although the term “whole language approach” proved unfamiliar to two of the three participants. One teacher also encountered difficulty interpreting the content of Question 10 which inquired about the reading strategies commonly used during the reading lessons, giving multiple choice answers such as “prediction and questioning” or “summarisation and visualisation”. Following reflection on the feedback, consultations with my supervisor and further information through my literature review, minor adjustments were implemented to enhance the questionnaire. These revisions included incorporating brief definitions for terms such as Phonics Approach, Whole Language Approach and Balanced Literacy. Additionally, Question 10 was reconfigured into an open-ended format with suggested responses, such as “teacher modelling reading” and “focus on meaning and context”, to elicit clearer and more informative feedback.

In tandem with the questionnaire refinement, two classroom observations of literacy lessons were conducted to assess the functionality of the audio recorder and the lesson observation sheet. These observations served as a critical field test for the research instruments, involving the rigorous testing of logistics, such as entering classrooms, identifying strategic positions for me to sit as an observer, being as unobtrusive as possible, minimising distraction, and successfully recording observations (Birmingham & Wilkinson, 2003; Cohen et al., 2018). This phase played a pivotal role in

refining the research methodology and ensuring the effectiveness of data collection procedures. The subsequent analysis and comparison of data obtained from both questionnaires and observations yielded valuable insights. The process facilitated the identification of areas requiring modification or adaptation in my research tools, providing constructive feedback for refinement. The pilot responses were then filed separately to ensure there would be no confusion with data collected from the actual study participants.

Pilot testing is crucial to refine interview questions and procedures, as recommended by Sampson (2004), therefore even though the interview component was not piloted during the preliminary stage, it was later conducted after observations were completed. This decision was informed by the necessity to formulate questions based on participants' questionnaire responses and observed lessons. Consequently, preceding the actual interviews, a question piloting session was undertaken with the same colleague who answered the questionnaire in the pilot study. This session aimed to rehearse the interview process and identify potential issues requiring attention. This provided an opportunity for reflection on question clarity leading to necessary rewording to avoid intrusiveness. Additionally, it allowed a preview of potential challenges that could arise during the interview process, enabling better preparedness and the development of strategies to maintain the interview flow. Furthermore, the trial enhanced my awareness of personal shortcomings and facilitated improvements in my interviewing skills, such as allowing sufficient time for responses and sometimes leaving longer pauses to encourage the interviewee to explain further. Given the interviewee's tendency to code-switch between Maltese and English during our session, I made a deliberate effort to advise

research participants to predominantly utilise English during our interviews. This decision was motivated by the realisation that it would facilitate transcription on my part.

This pilot study was necessary and useful in providing the groundwork for my research project (Hassan et al., 2006; Sampson, 2004), enabling the development of all my research instruments. This field testing also allowed me to reflect and become more aware of any bias I might have as an observer, the framing of my research questions, the collection of background information, and the adaptation of the research procedure (Sampson, 2004).

4.5.2 Data Collection Procedures

Initially, the research design contemplated beginning by doing an introductory interview to acquire preliminary background information about the participants, followed by one or two lesson observations, culminating in a final interview. However, subsequent consultation with my supervisor led to the decision to substitute the initial interview with a questionnaire to mitigate participant burden. The questionnaire afforded participants the flexibility to complete it at their convenience. Nonetheless, before distributing the questionnaire, brief introductory meetings were set up either in person or online to introduce myself to the participants, explain the rationale behind the research study and answer any queries the participants might have. During these meetings, participants were also informed that data collection would begin immediately via an online questionnaire. Nevertheless, organising these sessions proved challenging, particularly with some teachers, whose schedules were heavily packed with teaching duties, leading to communication primarily occurring through email.

4.5.2.1 The Questionnaire

Despite the qualitative nature of this research, this study initiated data collection through a brief questionnaire disseminated to participants via a Microsoft Forms link, aiming to acquire pertinent background information. The questionnaire comprised 21 inquiries across six distinct sections, comprising both multiple-choice and open-ended formats. The multiple-choice questions offered the participants the flexibility to choose one or more responses, and an additional "Other" option was provided to encourage participants to provide supplementary information that would help explain their responses. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix D, but here is a brief overview of the different areas explored and the justification for each section

The questionnaire was structured into several sections to comprehensively explore various aspects related to teachers' beliefs, practices, and experiences in teaching reading in the early years. Section 1, titled "Demographics," focused on gathering information about participants' teacher training, teaching experience, and tenure in the early years sector. This data holds significant importance in situating participants' responses within the context and discerning potential correlations or trends based on their professional experience, which constitutes a primary comparative dimension of this research study.

Section 2, "Teacher Beliefs about the Teaching of Reading in English," delved into participants' perspectives on essential components of early reading instruction, theories on children's acquisition of reading skills and the significance of fostering a love for reading. These beliefs directly influence teachers' pedagogical strategies and methodologies in teaching reading, underscoring the necessity of documenting their perspectives in this area.

Section 3, “Teaching Practices,” examined the reading strategies employed during lessons, methods of differentiation to accommodate diverse student needs, techniques for promoting class participation and approaches to assessment. Understanding the participants’ preferred teaching practices allows for a deeper analysis of the alignment between beliefs and actions.

Section 4, “Reflections on Effectiveness,” consisted of a single question prompting participants to reflect on the most efficacious instructional methods, drawn from their professional experience, for enhancing reading proficiency among early years students. This data serves to enrich discussions on effective pedagogical strategies and aids participants in critically evaluating their teaching practices.

Section 5, “Professional Development and the School Culture,” explored participation in professional development sessions relevant to the teaching of reading in the early years and the school’s approach to literacy instruction. This investigation into professional development endeavours and institutional educational paradigms helps contextualise individual instructional practices and beliefs.

The final section, “General Questions,” addressed challenges encountered in teaching reading and strategies for fostering a positive and inclusive reading environment in their classroom, aimed at capturing a holistic view of the factors influencing teachers’ experiences and practices. Additionally, the final open-ended question provided an opportunity for participants to share additional insights, thus enriching the qualitative data collected. Encouragingly, out of ten participants, eight offered further observations in response to this invitation.

It is worth noting the varied approaches participants took in completing the questionnaire. While one participant swiftly completed the activity in just 6 minutes, another opted for a more gradual approach spreading her response over several days. On average, participants dedicated approximately 22 minutes to the completion of the questionnaire. This variability underscores the flexibility afforded to participants in engaging with the research instrument according to their individual preferences and schedules.

4.5.2.2 Lesson Observations

Subsequently, drawing on insights garnered from the questionnaire responses, I conducted two direct lesson observations with each participating teacher. Observation is a potent method for understanding situations, although, similar to other data collection techniques, it prompts considerations about validity and reliability (Cohen et al., 2018). However, observation circumvents certain challenges encountered when attempting to interpret interview responses as indicative of actual behaviour (Murphy et al., 1999). For this reason, I decided to use both observation and interviews in my data collection process.

Participants were asked to deliver two regular curriculum-based English literacy lessons chosen from their planned scheme of work. The flexibility was granted for teachers to select any literacy lesson as long as there was an element of teaching and learning reading in English. The lessons encompassed a diverse range, including storytelling, the teaching of new phonics sounds, guided reading sessions, spelling, grammar, writing tasks and topic-based instruction. Each teacher presented two distinct lessons with most carried out with their respective class students. Whereas in schools where students are grouped by reading ability for literacy lessons, teachers conduct the

lessons with their specific reading group. These reading groups are typically comprised of students at a similar reading level within the same grade. Notably, in two schools, teachers led groups consisting of learners from both Year 1 and Year 2 who had achieved the same reading level as determined by a standardised assessment aligned with the phonics program implemented by the school. Most lessons observed were 40 to 50 minutes in duration, with the shortest lesson lasting only 30 minutes and one particular lesson lasting 1 hour and 20 minutes. Lesson observations were carried out over several weeks, starting on the last day of November 2023 and ending with the last session on the 18th of March 2024. A detailed timetable of these sessions is in Appendix G.

During these direct lesson observations, I positioned myself inconspicuously at the rear of the classroom to minimise distraction for the students. My role involved meticulous observation and the recording of field notes about various aspects of the lesson delivery and the instructional materials utilised. These notes encompassed a comprehensive overview of the lesson, including the articulation of objectives in the introduction of the lesson, the progression of the lesson and the incorporation of pedagogical approaches such as phonological awareness, phonics, whole-language or emergent curriculum strategies. Additionally, I documented whether the lesson was teacher-led or child-centred, whereas meticulous attention was directed towards strategies employed to foster student engagement and participation. Furthermore, the integration of sociocultural elements and language use, together with classroom management techniques, and teachers' methodologies for lesson closure and assessment, were noted to capture the holistic nature of literacy instruction. My goal was to understand how teachers implement their theoretical principles by observing their lessons directly.

In addition to scrutinizing the actual instructional content, I assessed the classroom layout, the overall environment, and the extent to which it exhibited literacy-rich and print-rich characteristics. Furthermore, I ascertained the availability of reading materials accessible to the students. Relevant documents, such as lesson plans, story texts and handouts, voluntarily provided by the teachers, were also gathered during these sessions. To ensure comprehensive documentation, the observations were discretely audio-recorded using a small digital voice recorder strategically placed within the classroom, with minimal distraction to both teachers and students. Through meticulous documentation of these observations, my objective was to capture the complexities of classroom instruction while assessing its congruence with sociocultural and cognitive theories of literacy development. This comprehensive approach ensures that the findings are grounded in both theory and practice, contributing to a deeper understanding of effective literacy instruction in the early years classrooms. By incorporating lesson observations as a data collection method, the aim is to enhance the validity and authenticity of the study, mitigating reliance solely on second-hand accounts acquired from online questionnaires and interviews.

4.5.2.3 Semi-structured Interviews

After the conclusion of the lesson observations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participating teacher. These interviews were designed to correspond with their questionnaire responses and observed lessons, aiming to elaborate on and enrich the data collected through the questionnaires and lesson observations.

Interview questions were organised into four sections. Sections A and B contained questions tailored to each participant based on their questionnaire responses and observed lesson practices. As the interview progressed, the teacher's responses led to

additional questions. Section A, “Re: Questionnaire” sought clarification or further elaboration on their questionnaire responses, occasionally referencing aspects observed during the lessons. Given the limited number of observed lessons, certain strategies mentioned in their questionnaire responses required elaboration. Section B, designated “Reflection on Teaching Practices observed,” probed into the teachers’ perceptions and beliefs regarding teaching strategies mandated by the school management team, and the rationale behind incorporating additional activities into their lessons despite specific program requirements. Understanding teachers’ perspectives on imposed strategies and conversely, their flexibility in incorporating additional activities enriches the analysis of teaching practices from both sociocultural and cognitive perspectives.

While the subsequent sections contained standardised questions for all participants, additional inquiries were included based on the teachers’ responses during the interview process. Section C, labelled “Beliefs about Literacy and Reading,” addressed the teachers' beliefs and challenges associated with teaching in bilingual or multilingual classrooms. Additionally, it explored how they plan and structure their English literacy lessons to support young children’s reading development. Another question specifically inquired whether they take into consideration the diverse social and cultural backgrounds of their students when planning literacy lessons. These inquiries were intended to deepen the understanding of how teachers perceive and address challenges related to literacy instruction.

In section D, “Teaching Experience and Professional Development,” participants were prompted to introspect on whether their teaching experience influenced their beliefs and practices. Furthermore, teachers were requested to reflect on their teacher

training and assess whether they felt adequately equipped for teaching reading to young learners. Consequently, they were asked about their need for further training and their willingness to attend such training sessions. These questions were designed to address the research questions and contribute to a holistic understanding of the research subject.

Throughout the interview, participants were encouraged to provide detailed explanations regarding the connections they make between ideas, values, opinions and behaviour, as emphasised by Cohen et al. (2018). During these interviews, if and where necessary, the teachers could listen to parts of the recordings from the observed lessons and engage in discussions about the instructional delivery. They were encouraged to provide insights into any perceived disparities between their beliefs and actual teaching practices if such discrepancies were observed. The teachers' insights on their beliefs and actual practices were crucial.

Interviews were audio-recorded and concurrent notes were taken, capturing non-verbal cues from the participants to enhance the depth of the transcripts (Billups, 2020). The interview phase afforded a more nuanced understanding of participants' beliefs and practices in the context of literacy instruction within their early years' classrooms. Subsequently, transcripts of the interviews were shared with the participants for validation, further clarification or additional discussion as needed. Teachers were given the option to participate in either face-to-face or online interviews, based on their preference and schedule availability. Of the participants, only two teachers opted for face-to-face interviews, while the remaining chose the convenience of an online interview. Due to the demanding schedules of primary school teachers, only four interviews were conducted during school hours, with the remaining six teachers opting

for online interviews conducted outside school hours. On average, interviews lasted between 30 to 40 minutes, with variations depending on the depth of questions and individual responses. Face-to-face interviews were documented using a digital voice recorder, while online interviews were captured through the online platform utilised. Subsequently, all these recordings were saved on a computer, allowing flexibility in playback speed, and facilitating multiple listens for transcription purposes. Both lesson observations and interviews underwent 'ad verbatim' transcription using an online transcription service followed by a meticulous manual review. This manual review was particularly crucial, especially for lesson observations, where the presence of multiple voices and code-switching between Maltese and English necessitated careful handling that automated transcription tools could not accurately accomplish. It is essential to translate the Maltese portions of the data into English for the write-up to avoid potential confusion and misinterpretation. Therefore I am committed to ensuring that all pertinent data is meticulously translated to facilitate understanding for the readers.

The data collection phase extended over four months between November 2023 and March 2024, encompassing 10 questionnaires, 20 lesson observations, 10 interviews and extensive hours dedicated to transcription. A detailed schedule of all appointments set for data collection can be found in Appendix H. Qualitative data as shaped by the social context of its collection, necessitates a thorough understanding and contextualisation by researchers to provide accurate explanations and interpretations. As outlined by Aspers and Corte (2019) qualitative research is an iterative process that advances scientific understanding by making novel distinctions through a closer examination of the studied phenomenon. As such it is essential for researchers to fully understand and contextualise the data they collect to accurately explain and interpret the

multiple perspectives and unique experiences present within it. This involves identifying and describing the various interpretations of a situation and understanding the factors that contribute to these diverse perspectives (Cohen et al., 2018).

4.6 Rigour of my research design

The concept of rigour in qualitative research is essential as it safeguards the research integrity, enhances the authenticity of outcomes, imposes accountability on researchers and allows users to systematically evaluate the relevance of findings (Daniel, 2019). Therefore, adhering to the foundational principles of qualitative inquiry, several criteria were employed to evaluate the robustness of this qualitative research. As Yardley (2000) delineates, the characteristics of good qualitative research encompass aspects such as “sensitivity to context”, “commitment and rigour”, “transparency and coherence”, and “impact and importance” (p. 219). Consequently, this chapter transitions to addressing the trustworthiness of the study and identifying methods used to increase credibility, validity and reliability. References to validity and reflexivity have already been underscored in the preceding sections of this chapter.

Johnson et al., (2020) elucidate that “The goal of rigour in qualitative research can be described as ensuring that the research design, method, and conclusions are explicit, public, replicable, open to critique, and free of bias”(p. 145). Therefore, a repertoire of data collection instruments was employed to broaden the scope and depth of inquiry in the proposed study. Data was collected over a concise timeframe, utilizing questionnaires, lesson observations, and interviews. These data collection methods were piloted to make sure they were effective and mitigate bias. All lesson observations and interviews were transcribed ad verbatim, interview transcripts were also provided to participants for review and examination, enhancing the validity and trustworthiness of

conclusions (Cohen et al., 2018; Morse, 2015). Validity in qualitative data can be ensured by attaining honesty, depth, and richness of data. Cohen et al. (2018) advocate that these strategies can be instrumental in addressing validity concerns in qualitative research. Additionally, verification strategies aid to "identify when to continue, stop, or modify the research process to achieve reliability and validity and ensure rigour" (Morse et al., 2002, p.17). Triangulation from all three data collection tools further strengthened the robustness of conclusions.

As a reflexive researcher, I drew upon existing literature and empirical studies to inform the investigation, ensuring interpretations are firmly rooted in observed phenomena (Harley & Cornelissen, 2022). The socio-cultural context surrounding the study, including normative, ideological and linguistic influences on participants' beliefs and behaviours was duly considered. Moreover, the social context between myself, as the researcher and the participants warranted careful consideration as Johnson et al. (2020) assert that a researcher's reflexivity, particularly the ability to recognize biases and decision-making processes, is crucial for study rigour.

4.7 Data Analysis

In this qualitative naturalistic design, a systematic approach was utilised for data analysis, using coding to identify and categorise the key concepts relevant to the research inquiry. Thematic Analysis (TA) proves valuable, particularly for exploring subjective information, such as participants' experiences, beliefs, opinions, and reality of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ozuem et al., 2022). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), one of the benefits of thematic analysis is its flexibility, providing a useful research tool that can present a comprehensive, yet complex, description of data.

Data coding commenced early in the data collection phase, encompassing responses from a brief questionnaire, lesson observations, and semi-structured interviews, which facilitated a streamlined analysis of the accumulated data (Cohen et al., 2018). Early commencement of analysis upon data collection, ensured a timely and comprehensive examination. Close-ended responses from the online questionnaire were automatically processed and analysed using the Google Forms platform, during the data collection phase. Concurrently, graphical representations, such as pie charts were dynamically updated to reflect the statistical outcomes associated with each response. In contrast, the open-ended responses were subsequently integrated into the dataset within the designated computer software to be used for thematic analysis. This allowed for a deeper analysis that complimented insights garnered from other data collection methods.

Once the data was transcribed and participant approval obtained, I reviewed all data multiple times searching for meaning and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006), noting down themes to be later inserted in the software program for organisational purposes. Parts of the transcripts which were in Maltese were meticulously translated to ensure the authenticity of meaning remained intact during this process.

To facilitate the data analysis process, the computer software NVivo 14 was used to assist with the categorising and coding. Although NVivo offers auto-coding capabilities, due to my limited experience with the software, I chose to conduct all coding manually to ensure accuracy and control. Transcripts of both lesson observations and interviews, alongside questionnaire data, were inputted in NVivo 14. A case was created for each teacher and manual coding was carried out to identify key themes. NVivo 14 was

instrumental in not only storing my coding but also providing a clear visual representation of categorised data and emerging themes. The software provided a quicker and easier retrieval of the coded information during analysis.

The analysis was guided by a constructivist-interpretive framework and employed an inductive methodology. This approach encompassed both semantic and latent levels of analysis (Ozuem et al., 2022). This comprehensive approach aimed to fully explore the depth of participants' experiences and perspectives. At the semantic level, explicit themes related to teachers' beliefs and practices concerning literacy education were identified. At the latent level, the analysis extended beyond surface-level observations to explore deeper meanings, underlying assumptions, and contextual factors that influenced these beliefs and practices. This dual focus allowed for a nuanced understanding of the social and cultural influences shaping teachers' beliefs and practices.

By adopting an inductive approach and conducting analysis at both semantic and latent levels, the study aligned with the principles of constructivist-interpretive inquiry, allowing for an in-depth exploration of teachers' perspectives on literacy education (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2003). The analysis process was not linear, requiring continual movement back and forth through the phases to refine the coding and ensure thorough examination. Data from interviews, lesson observations and the questionnaire were coded, themed, and integrated to ensure the findings comprehensively addressed all research questions.

For clarity in presentation, field notes and verbatim transcripts presented in the next chapter, are followed by abbreviations that indicate the distinct data collection document and participant. Codes are structured as follows: each code begins with the

initial of the teacher's name, followed by the code for the research instrument (Q for Questionnaire, I for Interview, and O1/O2 for Observation lesson 1 or 2), and the number or timestamp as applicable. For example (A.Q.8) refers to Anna's answer to Question 8 of the online questionnaire, (N.I.@02.35) refers to Nina's interview at 02.35, while (Ky.O2.@15.42) refers to Kya's second lesson observation at 15.42.

The structured analysis will be presented in the next chapter, followed by an integrated yet distinct Discussion Chapter where the findings will be contextualised and discussed in relation to existing research. Chapter 5, will organise the findings into primary themes, some predetermined and linked to the research questions, while others emerged directly from the raw data. A comparative analysis was conducted between novice and experienced teachers, examining their respective beliefs and practices. This analytical process adheres to established methodologies in qualitative research (Burnard et al., 2008).

4.8 Challenges and limitations

All research encounters challenges and ethical issues. This research is characterised as a small-scale study, presenting constraints in terms of both resources and scale. The short duration of data collection over three to four months reflects the deliberate focus and time constraint inherent in this investigation. To address these limitations posed by the small-scale nature of the study, efforts were made to ensure a focused and efficient investigation within the given time frame.

Additionally, this study represents my first academic research at the Master's level, suggesting an approach to research design and execution informed by a novice perspective. Despite this, the guidance of the research supervisor played a crucial role in

transforming this endeavour into a valuable learning experience, impacting the chosen methodology and subsequent interpretation of findings.

The adoption of a naturalistic approach in the data collection underscores my commitment to attaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation in its authentic context. However, the acknowledgement that any teachers could have staged the lessons introduces a layer of reflexivity. Instances were observed where specific aspects of lessons delivered deviated from practices familiar to the students in class. This recognition prompts a nuanced examination of the authenticity of observed instructional practices, as it acknowledges the potential influence of teacher consciousness during observations. Participants' awareness of being part of a research study may also lead to altered behaviours, known as the Hawthorne effect, which can affect the external validity of findings (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019; Sedgwick & Greenwood, 2015). It is plausible, nonetheless, that these instructional approaches had not been utilised with these students earlier in the academic year potentially explaining why the employed strategies appeared unfamiliar to the young students.

To address the aforementioned limitations, I actively sought guidance from my supervisor, leveraging her expertise to navigate the challenges associated with conducting a study at the Master's level. Furthermore, acknowledging potential staging in lessons prompted a transparent and reflexive stance throughout data collection and analysis. As emphasised by Yardley (2000), the social dynamics between investigators and participants are pivotal, prompting me to foster open communication with participants, and encouraging candid reflections on their instructional decisions. Moreover, the triangulation of data from various sources, including questionnaires, observations, and

interviews, aimed to enhance the robustness of findings and mitigate the impact of potential biases or staged behaviour. The rationale for each decision and the transparency in describing them, grounded in the research objectives and my positionality (Dodgson, 2019), are detailed in the preceding section about Data Collection Procedures.

4.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, this methodology chapter outlines a comprehensive and well-considered approach to investigating the complexities of literacy teaching and learning in the early years within the distinctive context of Maltese schools. The research design, data collection methods, and analysis techniques were carefully chosen to align with the study's objectives, ensuring a rigorous and credible inquiry. These were all presented in this chapter together with the study's limitations and ethical considerations which were thoughtfully addressed, reinforcing the credibility and rigour of the research process.

The next chapter, Chapter 5 will present the research findings, organised into key themes and sub-themes. These findings will offer rich insights gained from the data analysis, providing a nuanced understanding of the research questions. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to the broader academic discourse in comparative education by offering a nuanced understanding of the alignment of beliefs and practices of early literacy teachers in Malta.

Chapter 5: The Research Findings

5.1 Introduction

This comparative study investigates the alignment between teachers' professed beliefs and actual instructional practices regarding literacy instruction, particularly focusing on reading in English within early years education. It aims to explore consistency in teachers' implementation of their stated beliefs and potential differences between novice and experienced teachers. The research questions (see section 1.4) delve into the congruence between beliefs and practices, factors contributing to any mismatch, the influence of teaching experience, and teachers' perceived needs for professional development. Furthermore, the study examines whether teachers' instructional approaches are characterised as child-centred, teacher-directed, or a synthesis of both models, along with exploring preferred methods for teaching reading and the reasoning behind these preferences. Employing a qualitative naturalistic research design, the study utilises a combination of methods including a short questionnaire, participant observation during literacy lessons, and semi-structured interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of literacy instruction in early primary school.

This study will compare two groups of teachers, the novice and the experienced. Each group comprises five individuals and I aim to gain insights into their unique perspectives and a better understanding of their realities. A brief write-up about the ten participants, will provide details about their professional backgrounds and teaching contexts through 'teacher profiles'. This is done to set a backdrop of who the individuals in this study are, despite the comparative nature of the study where a group will be compared and contrasted against another group. Subsequently, this chapter will

delineate the identified themes and sub-themes coded through a thematic approach analysis.

5.2 Teacher Profile

The background and professional environment of the research participants play a significant role in shaping their beliefs and practices in the early-years reading instruction. To provide a deeper context for their beliefs and practices I have chosen to present a 'teacher profile' for each participant. These brief profiles will be primarily based on their responses to the introductory questionnaire, supplemented by insights from my observations and follow-up interviews. This approach allows me to introduce each participant as an individual, helping to contextualise their responses. It also facilitates the presentation of results through cross-thematic categorisation of themes and sub-themes. As explained in detail in section 4.7 of the previous chapter, for the sake of clarity of presentation, field notes and verbatim transcripts are referenced by abbreviations that indicate the distinct data collection document as per participant. Data collection tools can be found in the Appendices, as Appendix D - Questionnaire, Appendix E - Lesson Observation Sheet, and Appendix F - Semi-Structured Interview.

As this study examines the differences between novice and experienced teachers, I begin by introducing the experienced early years teachers. In this categorisation, as explained in detail, in section 4.4 of the previous chapter, teachers with four or more years of teaching experience are classified as experienced while those in the initial stages of their careers with three years of experience or less are considered novices. Following the introduction of experienced teachers, the profiles of novice participants will be presented.

5.2.1 Experienced Teachers

This cohort of experienced teachers under study is distributed across five distinct schools in three administrative districts in Malta. These schools encompass a variety of educational sectors, including state, church and independent institutions, with some being co-educational, and others catering exclusively to either boys or girls. Given the considerable tenure of these teachers, ranging from seven to thirty years of teaching experience, many have practised in multiple sectors within the educational landscape.

5.2.1.1 Anna's profile

Anna, a Year 2 teacher at a church school boasts nine years of teaching experience across various age groups from early childhood to upper primary years. Her expertise spans both state and church educational settings, complemented by a post-graduate degree in education. Embracing a pedagogical philosophy, Anna champions the notion that children develop reading proficiency by attending closely to print, alongside exposure to authentic literature. She underscores the significance of fostering a passion for reading, citing its pivotal role in nurturing cognitive growth, stimulating imagination and enriching vocabulary and states that: "In my opinion, the most important practice is to create an environment that fosters a love for reading and writing as early as possible, by incorporating interactive storytelling, multisensory activities, and technology-enhanced learning tools" (A.Q.21).

Anna fosters a welcoming and diverse reading atmosphere within her classroom, offering an array of reading resources. In her classroom, she has created a book corner with books in both Maltese and English. Identifying parental involvement as a crucial factor influencing children's educational advancement, Anna perceives a notable obstacle in the form of limited parental engagement or support (A.Q.18).

5.2.1.2 Kya's profile

Kya is an experienced educator teaching a Year 1 cohort at an independent school. Her classroom comprises a diverse mix of abilities and genders, with approximately half of the students coming from foreign backgrounds. Initially entering the teaching profession as a supply teacher after graduating from university, Kya pursued additional courses, including a teaching program, to supplement her qualifications. With a decade of teaching experience spanning both state and independent educational settings, Kya has also served in roles as a Learning Support Educator and Kindergarten Assistant throughout her career.

She posits that children acquire reading skills through exposure to authentic literature and sight words. Furthermore, she advocates for promoting a love for reading in the early years as follows:

> I think it is important because I believe that we need to teach that reading can be fun, you have a world of imagination to explore, and it is important that children understand when they are young that reading is not done because it has to be done for exams and homework only (Ky.Q.9).

In order to address the individual needs of her students, she implements individualised reading plans. Moreover, for assessment purposes, she maintains reading logs and reflections, which are sent to parents on a weekly basis. She explained that when she reads with children on a one-to-one level, she keeps a record and writes: "I read with M…. up to page 12. She did very good. She had a bit of difficulty with the words …. and I list the words" (Ky.I.@08.19).

5.2.1.3 Demi's profile

Demi is a year 2 teacher in a church school where she has taught for the past eight years. She has a post-graduate degree in education, and she advocates for a balanced instructional approach, integrating both Phonics and Whole language methodologies. Her instructional focus encompasses phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary enrichment and comprehension skills, reflecting her belief in the importance of equilibrium in education (D.Q.7). She believes that "Instilling a love for reading early, is very important, as it helps children enhance their vocabulary, expand their imagination and build their self-confidence" (D.Q.9).

Employing various reading strategies in her classroom, she prioritises activities that centre on word meaning, phonetic blending, personal connections to text, critically reflecting on the text and making predictions (D.Q.10). To foster a positive reading environment, Demi celebrates diverse cultural diversity, provides a variety of reading materials, and fosters respectful dialogues among students through facilitated discussions in pairs and groups (D.Q.19).

5.2.1.4 Mary's profile

Mary, a Year 2 educator in a state school, boasts an extensive three-decade tenure primarily teaching Year 1 and Year 2 cohorts within the same educational institution. Her formal teacher training ensued after several years of teaching, upon successful completion of this program and fifteen years of teaching experience, Mary acquired a permanent teaching warrant. Continual professional development was sustained over the years. Her educational philosophy, centres on advocating for a Balanced Approach to literacy instruction. This approach encompasses traditional teaching methods, including both look-and-say techniques and phonics. Mary advocates for "old-school teaching"

where grammar instruction constitutes a fundamental aspect of her pedagogical approach, characterised by thorough explanations of rules alongside ample illustrative examples (M.I@3.15). She justified her position in terms of the children's success in learning and stated: *"*I do believe that there should be a structured format of teaching. And as I told you, I believe that scaffolding from one step to another, building up; the children will succeed more" (M.I.@30.00).

5.2.1.5 Sam's profile

Sam brings with her seven years of teaching expertise gained across two distinct state schools. At the beginning of this academic year, she transitioned to a teaching role within a church school setting where she is currently serving as a Year 1 educator. Possessing a specialised teaching degree tailored for early years education, she advocates for the adoption of a Balanced Approach in early reading instruction. Within this pedagogical framework, Sam emphasises the pivotal role of exposing children to authentic literature as a means for fostering the acquisition of foundational reading skills. She states that "Promoting a love for reading is very important because reading helps them develop their language, their creativity and their knowledge amongst other developments" (S.Q.9).

Sam explains that she is still in the process of adjusting to the new school culture and implemented systems. While both the state and church school environments share similarities, such as co-educational settings and mixed-ability classrooms, Sam notes that the diverse geographic origins of students have introduced nuances in class dynamics.

5.2.2 Novice Teachers

Transitioning to the introduction of the subsequent five participants, all of whom are novice teachers, it is pertinent to note their varying levels of experience, with some

individuals embarking on their inaugural year of teaching while others have accumulated up to two full scholastic years of practice and are now in their third scholastic year. These novice teachers are situated within either state or church schools, as no novice teachers from independent schools have accepted the invitation to participate.

5.2.2.1 Eve's profile

Eve, a recent graduate with a post-graduate teaching degree, embarks on her inaugural year of full-time teaching. Presently, she instructs Year 2 students within a church school setting, having garnered prior experience teaching Year 2 and 3 during her teaching practice. She advocates for an instructional approach with integrated phonics instruction alongside the teaching of sight words and memorization, supplemented by interactive read-aloud sessions.

In her view, fostering active student involvement and engagement in lessons necessitates incorporating peer/group discussions, interactive reading activities, and games, as well as facilitating role-play scenarios. She states that:

> I personally feel that if they're enjoying it, and it's a game, they're going to learn it much better than if they're just sitting down and they're going to stretch through steps one by one, it's going to get boring. And then you're going to lose them (E.I.@02.28).

She expresses a personal belief that employing enjoyable and game-like elements in the learning process enhances comprehension and retention, contrasting with traditional step-by-step instruction methods, which she perceives as potentially inducing boredom and disengagement among students.

5.2.2.2 Kate's profile

Kate, a novice educator, in her third year of teaching, holds a post-graduate teaching degree and is currently teaching Year 1 within a church school. Her classroom environment is characterised by a plethora of printed materials encompassing rich letter cards, and flashcards featuring both decodable and tricky words displayed on classroom boards, alongside various instructional charts. Additionally, she has established a cosy reading corner in her classroom, adorned with decorations that interest her students. She holds that "Promoting a love for reading is very important because students will encounter a nice positive experience with books and reading from a young age" (K.Q.9).

She maintains the belief that children develop reading skills through diligent engagement with print materials and comprehensive word study, including sight words, and also through exposure to authentic literature. She advocates for making lessons fun by incorporating games in her lessons. She expressed this strongly as follows*:*

> I believe that daily revision of what we have done so far is essential, and most of all, making these literacy reading lessons fun! The kids can get easily distracted or bored of hearing things over and over, so it is very important to incorporate new activities and games to help motivate them (K.Q.21).

5.2.2.3 Lisa's profile

Lisa is a recent graduate with a post-graduate degree and is in her inaugural year of full-time teaching in a state school setting. Currently assigned to instruct a Year 2 class, she brings prior experience, mainly through teaching practice in upper primary years, to her new role. Within her classroom, seating arrangements are organised to facilitate pair work, with students having the flexibility to easily transition into group configurations. Visuals such as flashcards outlining shapes, numbers, and vocabulary words are

prominently displayed in the classroom. In addition, a class library and clusters of guided reading books are available for upcoming sessions.

She emphasises that increased exposure to spoken language correlates with heightened learning outcomes, underscoring the pivotal role of auditory experiences in language acquisition. Lisa states that once children are exposed to language, even as they start to blend words, they may remember certain words. She believes that this will help improve their reading skills significantly (L.I.@2.35). She states that “promoting a love for reading is very important as it makes learning more enjoyable and also widens their general knowledge” (L.Q.9).

At the core of her pedagogical approach lies the conviction that children enhance their reading proficiency not only through active interaction with printed materials and immersion in authentic literary texts but also through exposure to language via auditory activities.

5.2.2.4 Nina’s profile

Nina is a young novice educator, with one year of teaching experience and is currently in her second year teaching Year 1 students in a church school. She holds a bachelor’s degree in early education and care and is currently pursuing a Master’s in Education. Her classroom environment is characterised by a wealth of print, with prominently displayed classroom rules and educational resources such as a phonics sounds chart, alphabet letters paired with handwriting prompts, numeral-word association cards, and tricky word flashcards. Additionally, a dedicated classroom library enriches the learning environment. She believes that “promoting a love for reading is very important because reading helps children to be more creative, expands their

vocabulary and increases memory. There are various benefits that reading offers to children" (N.Q.9).

Nina advocates for the incorporation of phonics instruction as a fundamental element of early reading pedagogy, emphasising the importance of exposing children to authentic literature for reading skill development. She endeavours to allocate time daily for engaging activities such as storytelling sessions, nursery rhymes, morning songs, or math-focused stories to further enhance student learning (N.I.@01.20).

5.2.2.5 Yana's profile

Yana is a novice educator who is currently teaching Year 2 students in a state school. This marks her third consecutive year teaching Year 2 in the same institution, supported by a post-graduate teaching qualification. While her classroom exhibits a notable absence of print-rich resources or literacy materials, including the absence of a class library, Yana compensates by creating a comfortable environment for storytelling sessions, providing cushions for her students to sit at the front of the classroom. She believes that promoting a love for reading is "Very important because if they love to read they can conduct any given instruction. Moreover if they know how to read they can search for information and learn more" (Y.Q.9).

She endorses a pedagogical approach rooted in the whole language method, which incorporates sight words and memorisation techniques. Additionally, she recognizes the importance of students engaging closely with printed material and undertaking word study as integral facets of developing reading skills.

5.2.3 Conclusion for teacher profiles

These profiles are by no means exhaustive but serve as an introduction to the participants. Certain details have been omitted to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. This information will be included anonymously in the presentation of results. The chapter now proceeds with an analysis of the data set, employing triangulation of the data collected through the three research instruments.

5.3 Thematic Analysis

Data from interviews, lesson observations and online questionnaire responses were coded and thematically analysed as described in the previous chapter. The findings were then integrated to ensure comprehensive coverage of all research questions. The primary themes encompass teachers' beliefs about the teaching and learning of literacy in the early years, as well as their professed and observed practices during my visits. Another theme addresses the perceived challenges and limitations faced by teachers in Maltese schools. Subsequently, I will recount the teachers' reflections about how their teaching and personal experiences influence their beliefs and practices, if they do. I will conclude with the types of support or professional development they deem necessary to enhance their instructional approaches to literacy education.

The subsequent figure presents the themes and sub-themes derived from the data, showcasing the identified five primary themes along with their respective sub-themes. These themes are not rigidly compartmentalised, as coding is not always precise and certain elements may fall under multiple themes. During the coding process, some statements were assigned to multiple categories. For instance, some codes under Challenges and Limitations could also fit under Teachers' Beliefs. However, due to the

predominantly negative or perceived limiting nature of the feedback, they were categorised under Challenges and Limitations.

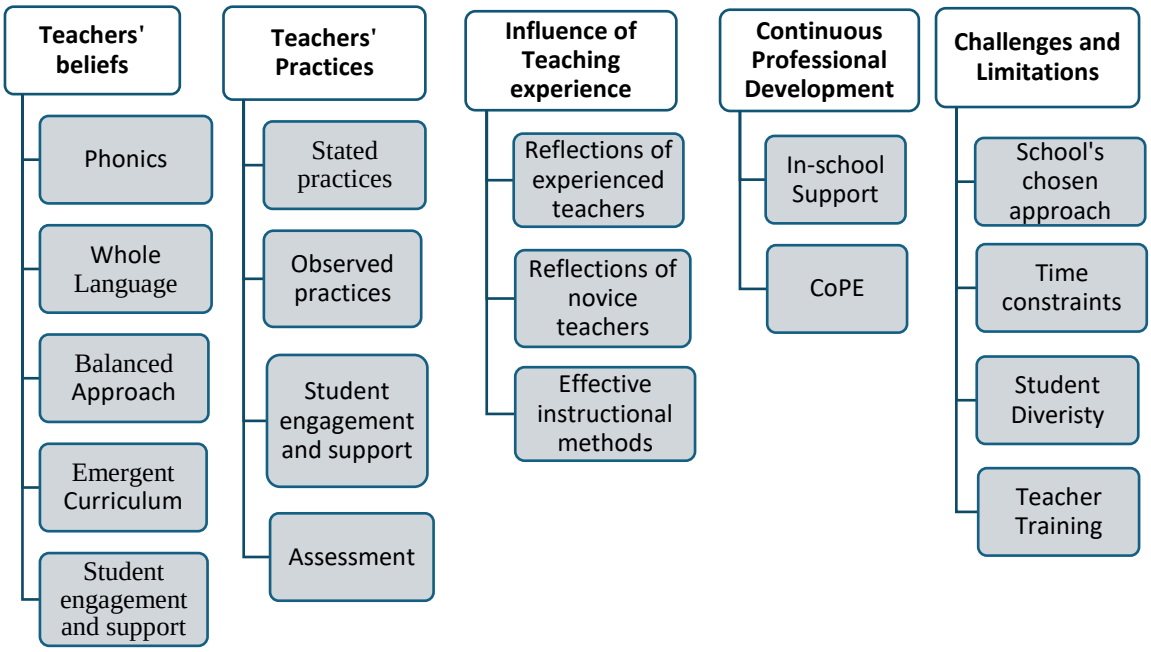


Figure 2 – Themes and Sub-Themes identified from the data

5.3.1 Teachers' beliefs

Teachers hold individual beliefs about literacy instruction, especially regarding teaching reading in English, which shape their pedagogical approaches and decision-making processes during lessons (Pajares, 1992; Wang et al., 2008). These theoretical beliefs inform educators' selection of preferred teaching methodologies (Carlman, 2004; Silvern & Isenberg, 1990).

In the initial phase of data collection, teachers were prompted to complete a questionnaire (see Appendix D) with Section 2 specifically addressing their beliefs regarding the instruction of reading in English. The questionnaire responses to questions 7 and 8 have been visually represented in Table 2 below. The table first represents

responses by novice teachers, followed by those of experienced teachers. Each check mark denotes the response of an individual teacher. Furthermore, several teachers probed these subjects in greater detail during the interview phase, and their elaborate responses will be expounded upon in the subsequent sections.

Q7 What do you believe are essential components of early reading instruction?					Q8 How do you think children acquire reading skills?			
	Phonics Instruction	**Whole Language Approach**	**Balanced Instruction**	**Sight words & memorisation**	**In the same natural way as they acquire oral language**	**Attending closely to print and word study**	**Exposure to authentic literature**	**Sight words**
Kate	✓					✓	✓	✓
Nina	✓						✓	
Yana		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
Eve	✓			✓		✓	✓	
Lisa			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mary			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Anna	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓
Sam			✓				✓	
Kya			✓				✓	✓
Demi	✓	✓	✓	✓*	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 2 - Responses to Q7 and Q8 in Questionnaire

* Experienced teacher Demi, added to her response to Q7: Phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

The table indicates a diversity of beliefs among teachers regarding the most effective methods for teaching early reading. Some teachers advocate for specific approaches such as phonics or the whole language approach, while others support a combination of methods and creating a balance. The inclusion of additional components by some participants such as sight words, fluency and phonemic awareness, suggests that teachers also consider a variety of skills and strategies essential for effective literacy instruction. Furthermore, all participating teachers expressed the belief that children acquire reading skills through exposure to authentic literature, such as storybooks, poems, menus, etc. Additionally, Demi and novice teacher Lisa, believe that children acquire reading skills in the same natural way as they acquire oral language. Demi elaborated on this perspective stating that the more children are exposed to the oral language, the more they develop their phonemic awareness. She states that "Most children develop phonemic awareness naturally, over time. Activities such as frequent readings of familiar and favourite stories, poems, and rhymes can help children develop phonemic awareness" (D.Q.8).

Their responses are further analysed in the succeeding sub-themes, which include predetermined themes from the questionnaire as well as additional themes that emerged from the data, as illustrated in Figure 2.

5.3.1.1 The Phonics Approach

This teacher-controlled approach involves direct instruction at each step and emphasises the development of fundamental skills. Teachers focus on teaching the connections between letter patterns and their corresponding sounds, as well as the syllables and words used in writing. All teachers, except one, believe that a Phonics

Approach should be employed, either as the primary method or integrated into a Balanced Instruction approach. Novice teacher Kate, strongly supports the phonics programme, noting that her students are more advanced in reading skills compared to those taught by teachers not using this methodology.

> And when I speak to them, I notice how these boys have advanced much more than their boys. It's literally just me telling them, listen, because right now they're reading phrases. She's like, what? They're reading phrases. I'm still managing to try and get them to read certain CVC words (K.I.@12.53).

Experienced teacher Kya, advocates for the school to adopt a phonics program emphasising the need for students to master phonic sounds before introducing letter names. She asserts that “I would stick to the phonics at least in Year 1” (Ky.I.@23.51). Similarly, experienced Anna supports a Phonics Approach citing that in her experience it is more effective in teaching children to read, and maintains that:

> When I started my teaching experience, and I used to work in state schools, we didn't use to follow a phonics program. And now that we use a phonics program, I can compare the difference in the reading level and the children's reading ability, then how it improves (A.I.@00.55).

Conversely, novice Yana, contends that exposure to phonics confuses some children who already know the letter names, and maintains that phonemic skills are only beneficial in the early years. She suggests that these students would benefit more from learning to write words through a whole language approach. She thinks that:

> So I think that there are some programs that, for example, phonics, um, that although I teach it because I have to, I don't think that it's very effective. Um, Some students, as I see, they are getting more confused when writing words. .... And sometimes I'm afraid that when they go to year three, they won't use phonics anymore. So they have to know how to write, basically, the words (Y.I.@19.00).

Contrastingly, in her answer to Q8, Yana indicated that she believes that children acquire reading skills "by attending closely to print and word study", a statement that fits within a Phonics approach to reading (Y.Q.8).

5.3.1.2 The Whole Language Approach

This child-centred approach leverages the reader's prior knowledge to comprehend written texts and avoids direct teaching of word decoding skills and related activities for breaking down the sound meanings of letters. Instead, it emphasises understanding the context and meaning of texts as a whole.

A total of six participants believe that the whole-language approach should be an integral part of early reading instruction. The majority would integrate it in a Balanced Approach, however, novice Yana believes it is the most essential component. Teachers observe that students learn best through real text and literature. Novice Nina believes that daily exposure to literature is very important and she integrates stories in other areas of curriculum as well. She mentions that:

> If I don't find time to do a storytelling session, erm, we listen to nursery rhymes. It's a must that every morning they listen to the nursery rhymes, either a good morning song or, for example, today during our maths lesson, I did a maths story.

So I read a book about the concept of weight, heavy and light ..... I usually integrate stories in Maths lessons (N.I.@01.45).

Experienced teacher Anna, explains that through authentic text, grammar rules are explained “in context”, where students are invited to explore and understand the rules and thus are directly involved in their learning. She states that:

I find that the girls understand it much more when it's in a context rather than I do a lesson’ . ..... So like that they could see even from the story .... or from the sentences that they came up with and they could see the difference ... Because I like to involve them, I don't like to just tell them, this is the way we use it and that's it! I like them to explore and understand why we use it that way (A.I.@09.35).

5.3.1.3 Balanced Instruction

As the name suggests, this approach combines elements of both the whole language approach and the systematic teaching of the alphabetic code. Teachers using balanced instruction must create a balance between appropriate practices and skill-based activities tailored to the needs of the students during a given teaching and learning activity. This approach aims to integrate the strengths of both phonics and whole-language methods to provide comprehensive literacy instruction.

Five out of the ten participants indicated their belief that the essential components of early reading instruction are encompassed in the Balanced Approach. Among these participants is Mary, the most experienced teacher in the sample of

participants. She states that: “I do believe in look-and-say methods. I do believe in phonics. Phonics somehow, yes, they help. And that's why I do believe in the balanced teaching, the balanced way of teaching” (M.I.@02.14).

She asserts that oral language, phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension constitute the five fundamental components of literacy development. Mary emphasises that children must develop skills in these areas to become successful readers and “that children learn best through everyday activities such as singing, socialising and playing games” (M.I.@21.35). Similarly, experienced Demi believes that like “in everything, education should be a balance” (D.I.@01.00).

Additionally, all teachers except for novice Nina and experienced Sam agree on the importance of teaching sight words through whole-word memorization. These sight words are high-frequency words commonly found in texts and stories, that beginning readers are expected to recognise instantly, to make reading more flowing. Furthermore, participants interviewed emphasise that the focus should be on students being able to read sight words rather than write them as dictation.

5.3.1.4 Emergent Curriculum

The Emergent Curriculum approach requires teachers to conscientiously design the learning environment for children, providing a range of opportunities tailored to the students’ abilities and needs. Teachers carefully observe the children and use these observations combined with their expertise, to inform their planning. As delineated in Chapter 3, a fully emergent approach is being implemented in childcare and kindergarten settings (ages 0-4). For early years in Year 1 and Year 2 (ages 5-7), literacy instruction is structured within a balanced literacy approach, integrating literacy programmes with

communicative language practices, thus emphasising the four language skills equally (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2023).

Some of the teachers raised their concerns about the implementation of an emergent approach to teaching in Years 1 and 2. Experienced Sam is concerned about time constraints and the difficulties in planning and coordinating activities, especially since so many L.O.s also need to be covered. She states *"*Unfortunately, the emergent curriculum, we're not... I don't think we can do it as easy as they explain. I mean, as easy as they mention, because there's a lot of things that we still need to cover*"* (S.I.@11.25).

Lisa, who is a newly qualified teacher (NQT) and still in her probationary period, is being observed by an Education Officer (EO). The officer seems to be asking for a fully emergent approach, even though Lisa is teaching a Year 2 class. She believes in a balanced approach and tries to implement it in her teaching. She mentions:

> The school wants a balanced approach, whereas the EO wants a fully emergent.....So, I'm trying to balance both sides. So, what I'm doing is, I'm trying to take an emergent approach, but when it comes to the tricky words and to the sounds, I try to stick to the scheme of work (L.I.@06.20).

She feels that it is unfair for her to be caught between meeting the school's expectations and the education officer's assessment of her performance.

Experienced teacher Mary, believes that the emergent curriculum should be implemented with younger students, in kindergarten classes only, as children are younger and can *"*absorb knowledge and vocabulary." She believes that "at primary level like year ones and year twos, there should be a structured format of teaching I

believe that scaffolding from one step to another, building up, the children will succeed more than with the emergent curriculum" (M.I.@30.08). Hence, the above indicates that Mary is very adamant in her belief that a balanced approach to literacy utilizing more teacher-led strategies, is better.

Drawing from her past experiences, Sam strongly supports a cross-curricular teaching approach that emphasises the integration of various subjects. In addition, during the allocated time for the emergent curriculum, she makes a conscious effort to incorporate literacy in a more flexible and organic manner. "I'll try to use that time for free creative writing, reading, storytelling, whatever. Whatever I can link with the topic" (S.I.@19.25). She believes in connecting lessons to students' interests, such as planning to relate a story from their literacy lesson to an upcoming science lesson on the topic of flowers. She mentioned, "I'm going to tie it in with our next lesson, which will revolve around the subject of flowers. They mentioned the... what did they call it? The yellow part inside the flower" (S.I.@20.02).

5.3.1.5 Student engagement and support

Teachers must cultivate student engagement and motivation while encouraging active student participation during lessons. Most of the teachers believe this should occur in a learning environment that is inclusive, safe, orderly and enjoyable. They emphasise presenting lessons in an engaging manner, often through activities or games, otherwise "they can get very bored." Experienced teacher Anna, incorporates a fun, hands-on activity related to the book they are reading or the phonics sound they are learning to make it more enjoyable for the students. She believes that this approach helps the students engage more with the lesson and maybe "help them to actually remember the sound or the story that we're talking about" (A.I.@12.10).

Novice teacher Eve believes that if students are enjoying the lesson, they are more likely to engage and learning takes place. She stated that:

> If they're enjoying it, and it's a game, they're going to learn it, much better than if they're just sitting down and they're going to stretch through steps one by one. It's going to get boring and then you're going to lose them. (E.I.@02.45)

Eve holds that with very young students, the teacher needs to be *'flexible'* and do whatever is needed to keep the students engaged and "make them see that learning is fun, so again, fun, games" (E.I.@16.40).

Experienced Anna believes in creating an environment that "fosters a love for reading and writing as early as possible by incorporating interactive storytelling, multisensory activities, and technology-enhanced learning tools" (A.Q.21). To foster a positive and inclusive reading environment, teachers advocate for providing a variety of reading material, grouping students by reading levels or as Anna indicated, "Trying to prepare activities that include the different levels and abilities" (A.Q.19). Inclusion also involves celebrating diverse cultures and backgrounds and encouraging respectful discussions. Consequently, novice teacher Yana, highlights the importance of teaching students to navigate a multicultural society, stating, "It's not just about learning, but they have also to learn how to be, ... to live in a different multicultural society, at the end of the day" (Y.I.@12.19).

To keep all students engaged, experienced Sam prefers to group children and give each group a task, while she provides one-to-one support in a small group. "My idea was to keep the others engaged, hmm…, engaged in something else while I focus on reading with one small group, and then they switch" (S.I.@06.25). Experienced Kya also supports

grouping students, however, she finds grouping students in Year 1, more challenging. She states that since they are emergent readers, at different reading levels, “It's very difficult to group them. I mean, the best solution at the moment with reading, is one-to-one” (Ky.I.@03.54). Thus, she believes that whenever possible, she should try to support each child on an individual basis.

5.3.2 Teacher’s Practices

Describing teachers’ practices in the teaching of literacy in the early years involves detailing specific actions, methods and strategies that teachers employ to develop young children’s reading and writing skills. For the purpose of this study, I have categorised the teachers’ practices into 4 sub-themes as listed here:

i) the teachers’ stated instructional practices;

ii) the observed instructional practices;

iii) practices to motivate, engage and support students; and

iv) assessment strategies.

The categorisation of teachers’ practices into these four sub-themes aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the various dimensions of literacy instruction in the early years. Each sub-theme focuses on a distinct yet interconnected aspect of teaching practices, allowing for a detailed and structured examination of how teachers develop young children’s reading skills. This categorization allows for detailed analysis and comparison across different dimensions of teaching, highlighting strengths, areas for improvement, and the complex interplay between teachers’ beliefs, actions, and the learning environment. I will detail each of these sub-themes in the following sections (5.3.2.1 to 5.3.2.4).

5.3.2.1 Stated instructional practices

This sub-theme captures the instructional methods and strategies that teachers report using in their classrooms. Understanding what teachers say they do, provides insights into their pedagogical beliefs and intentions.

In response to the questionnaire, participants reported their preferred instructional practices for teaching literacy, particularly in the teaching of reading in English. Regarding the reading strategies employed during lessons, novice Kate responded that she models reading for her students, by decoding the sounds and then blending them to read the words. She follows these steps:

> Teacher modelling reading; using my turn your turn, reading a new set of words using 3 steps: first we blend it out together, then we use "Fred in Our Head" (mental blending) and read the word, then we read it straight away (K.Q.10).

Newly qualified teacher Eve indicated adherence to a very structured phonics program (E.Q.10). She holds lessons with her reading group, four days a week. Since at her school, they are joining Year 1 and 2 students together as per reading ability, this term she is teaching a group made up of Year 1 students, who are now already learning more complex sounds (E.I.@14.10). Both Kate and Eve have declared adopting a phonics-based approach to reading instruction. In response to the same question, both novice teachers Lisa and Yana underscored the significance of "focus on meaning and context" within their classrooms, in conjunction with "teacher modelling reading" sessions (L.Q.10; Y.Q.10). This indicates that both teachers stated they implement whole-language strategies in

reading instruction. Conversely, novice colleague Nina solely referenced her practice of modelling reading in the classroom.

All experienced teachers endorsed the strategy of "teacher modelling reading." Mary and Sam supplemented their responses including "phonemic awareness games" indicating a more balanced instructional approach. Other experienced teachers similarly adopt a balanced approach, integrating diverse strategies. For instance, Kya, in addition to "focusing on meaning and context," includes activities such as "building words, finding words that rhyme and bingo" (Ky.Q.10). Demi, who emphasises "reading words using sound blending" also included "relating the text to personal knowledge, critically reflecting on the text and making predictions" (D.Q.10). Anna highlighted the use of 'questioning, predicting what the story might be about, and guided reading" along with "teacher modelling reading and phonemic awareness activities" (A.Q.10). The variety in strategies reflects a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction.

In exploring the strategies of how teachers differentiate their reading instructions to meet the needs of individual students, all participating teachers indicated employing some form of grouping in their classrooms. Nine teachers reported that they "grouped students by reading levels." In contrast, experienced teachers Kya and Mary along with novice teacher Kate mentioned utilizing "flexible grouping for targeted instruction." Furthermore, both Kya and Mary indicated that they 'provide individualised reading plans' for their students. Sam, on the other hand, noted her current use of a "buddy system," a strategy endorsed by the phonics program being implemented at her school (S.Q.11).

5.3.2.2 Observed Instructional Practices

This sub-theme focuses on the actual instructional practices that were observed during classroom visits. It provides concrete examples of how teachers implement their literacy instruction, offering a realistic view of classroom dynamics and interactions.

As outlined in the Methodology Chapter, I conducted two separate lesson observations with each participating teacher. I requested to observe any regular English literacy lesson, to examine the methodologies used in teaching reading. I accepted all the invitations the teachers proposed. The following table delineates the lessons observed with each teacher. Teachers proposed two different lessons, so I could observe the various strategies they implemented with their students.

Teacher	**Lesson observed**
Lisa	1. Guided reading lesson 2. New phonics sound 'oi'
Anna	1. RWI[3] – 1st read – Pink level book 2. Introduction of new High-frequency words through storytelling
Eve	1. Storytelling + drawing & writing activity to change the ending of the story 2. New phonics sound 'igh'
Kate	1. New phonics sound 'sh' with her mixed ability class 2. New phonics sound 'ay' with a new reading group
Kya	1. Grammar lesson – verbs 2. Reading games – rhyming words & matching sentences to pictures
Mary	1. Shared reading with differentiated writing tasks at the end 2. Grammar lesson – Adjectives

[3] RWI - Read Write Inc Phonics is a literacy programme that teaches reading and writing through a systematic phonics approach

Teacher	Lesson observed
Demi	1. New phonics sound 'oo' 2. RWI – 3rd read - Pink level book
Nina	1. Revise reading of words + spelling the words (RWI set 1 sounds) 2. RWI phonics - Ditty lesson
Sam	1. Reading stations – Green RWI book or matching flashcards with pictures activity 2. Storytelling + drawing/writing a new ending to the story
Yana	1. Storytelling using Big Book the Gingerbread Man + online activities + writing of 2 sentences about the story 2. Writing task – Our Body (topic of the week)

Table 3 - Observed Literacy Lessons

Most lessons were conducted with the teacher's respective class students, however, some sessions with Nina, Demi, Kate, Eve and Anna were exceptions. These teachers work in schools that implement a specific phonics program, which encourages assessing and grouping students by reading ability. Consequently, students from different classes within the same year group are grouped to form literacy groups taught by these teachers. In some schools, these groups include students from different year groups, grouped according to their reading levels. This grouping approach was evident in the literacy groups led by Nina, Eve and Anna, where students were from Year 1 and Year 2.

All 20 lessons were meticulously planned and consistently teacher-led, with none of the participating teachers adopting an emergent approach to teaching literacy. Experienced Anna stated "Our emergent curriculum, we only follow it for religion, science, and social studies, so English is not part of the emergent

curriculum" (A.I.@13.10). Similarly, experienced Sam commented, "We're doing Maltese, Maths and English as Maltese, Maths and English. And then the rest of the subjects, they can be cross-curricular" (S.I.@12.47). Other teachers such as novice teachers Kate, Eve and Lisa expressed similar sentiments, indicating a clear delineation between literacy instruction and other subject areas within their teaching practices.

Through the field notes and lesson transcripts, the primary themes that emerged were the various approaches teachers employed to teach early reading skills to very young children. I will present these approaches in the next subsections. For the reader's convenience, quoted text from the transcripts will distinguish between references to letter names and letter sounds. Letter names will be presented in capital letters and hyphenated (eg: C-A-T), while letter sounds will be shown in lowercase and separated by slashes (eg: c/a/t). To further enhance clarity, each instance will be annotated with (names) or (sounds) to indicate the specific reference.

5.3.2.2.a Teaching Reading Through a Phonics Approach

As illustrated in Table 3 above, all teachers except for experienced Kya and Mary, and novice Yana, presented at least one phonics lesson as part of their two chosen lessons. However, even during the lessons of the named teachers, phonics-based strategies were referred to at various points by the teachers or their students. Here are some examples:

Mary asked the students to identify sounds, referring to digraphs, in the title of the story, *The Three Little Pigs*. The students identified 'ee' in *three* and 'th' in *the*.

Teacher: We have a sound there, which is the sound?

Child: 'ee' (sound)

Teacher: Hm, 'ee' for three. Yeah, very good.

Child: the T-H (letter names)

Teacher: the T-H (letter names) very good, very good. 'th' and 'ee' (sound) (M.O1.@06.14)

Kya introduced new phonetic sounds as the need arose, to help students write the words in the task at hand. For instance, she introduced the digraph 'sh' when they had to write the word *'shout'*. She explained as follows:

Teacher: We are going to learn a new sound. When we have s/h (sound), S-H (name) together, it makes the sound of 'sh' like shout.

Child: shout

Teacher: You hear it as 'sh' 'sh' 'sh' (sound)

Child: like shush

Teacher: Exactly like 'shush'. OK, but it makes a sound of 'sh' but we write it s/h (sounds), S-H (name). (Ky.O1.@16.19)

During their lessons, Yana, Kya and Mary, also focused on phonemic awareness by asking students to listen for the sounds in a word and identify the sounds they could hear. However, these teachers were inconsistent in using letter sounds and letter names. Whereas other teachers consistently used the sounds when decoding or encoding decodable words and letter names to decode tricky words (irregular

words). For example, Anna used letter names to teach students how to read and spell the tricky word w*e.*

Teacher: What is the tricky part of the word ‘we’?

Child: e (sound), E (letter name)

Teacher: That is tricky, okay. So, we're going to say the letter names. When we come to say the tricky part, we're going to say it in an angry way. Okay? because it's trying to trick us.

Teacher & Children: We (dragging the ee sound, Wee) W-E (letter names, saying the letter E in an angry voice)

Teacher: One more time. W-E

Teacher: Very good. So, that spells the red word (tricky word)

Child: we (A.O1.@59.57)

In their phonics lessons, the teachers employed a range of strategies to help students in learning to read. Experienced Demi demonstrated saying and blending sounds using flashcards projected on the screen. Similarly, experienced Lisa used an online video, introducing new sounds and reading words with pictures illustrating their meanings. Novice Eve assessed students' ability to read words with the covered sounds by presenting "silly words" (nonsense words) for them to read. Novice teachers Kate and Nina used other strategies. Kate incorporated activities that provided students with access to words and phrases for reading practice, while Nina guided students through saying the sounds and reading the corresponding words, with the students repeating

after her. Experienced teacher Sam encouraged peer assistance by having one student say the sounds and their partner read the word.

5.3.2.2.b Teaching Reading through Read-Aloud/Storytelling

Another instructional practice commonly used in the early years is the teacher reading stories to a group of students. These read-aloud sessions may also incorporate audiobooks or videos. I observed four sessions with different teachers, each aiming to teach various skills to the children during these storytelling sessions.

Novice teacher Yana utilised the Gingerbread Man story to model fluent reading, actively engaging her students and assessing their comprehension. She frequently paused to pose questions, thereby encouraging higher-order thinking. For example:

> Teacher: So what does the little old woman do to surprise her husband? What do you think she is going to do?
>
> Child: gingerman
>
> Teacher: You think she is going to do him a gingerbread man? Why?
>
> (Y.O1.@04.31)

Through this approach, Yana aimed to develop her students' listening and comprehension skills, as well as their critical thinking abilities. By asking several probing questions and prompting students to justify their answers, she fostered deeper understanding and reasoning among her pupils.

During her storytelling session, novice Eve animated the narrative by modulating her tone and voice as required. She effectively set the scene, discussed print, and explained new vocabulary.

Child 1: Miss Eve, if it's humongous, it says, "Hello Sam," really loud.

Teacher: Really loud! Look, in fact it says, "He boomed." (spoken loudly)

Child 2: And it says, "Hello Sam," really giant in the words.

Child 1: And it echoed.

Teacher: It echoed. Look, it's big, (referring to the print on the book) so if it's big, it shows us that it was loud. And it says, He boomed, he boomed, meant it was really loud (E.O1.@04.05).

After reading the story she asked the students "So imagine you were writing this book imagine you were the author. What would you have done if this elephant was so naughty?" (E.O1.@27.34). After collecting some responses, she asked them to change the ending, draw their version and write about it. Her teaching focus in this lesson was to enhance the children's vocabulary and print awareness, as well as to foster a love for reading by making it an enjoyable and interactive activity.

Conversely, during her storytelling session, experienced teacher Sam, focused on phonemic awareness to help her students recognise that the story was a narrative poem with rhymes. She paused the story, asked the students to predict the ending and then asked them to draw their prediction and write their own ending. She worked on their listening skills and provided a model for fluent reading with the appropriate intonation, pace and rhythm.

Experienced Anna, on the other hand, used the story to introduce a set of new high-frequency words. She had previously covered these words in the story, with a tiny piece of paper, and asked students to predict the hidden word based on the context or

flow of the narrative. Subsequently, she engaged the students in activities where they used these words in context, and as a class, they constructed a whole new story using these high-frequency words. Her focus was on vocabulary development, comprehension skills, and enhancing their narrative skills.

5.3.2.2.c Teaching Reading Through Guided Reading and Shared Reading

Guided Reading and Shared Reading are two practices that provide students with opportunities to engage with texts at different levels. In Guided Reading students are given books they could read independently or at a slightly higher level. They are grouped by ability and provided with the same book. For instance, novice Lisa regularly implements Guided Reading with her students, listens to them read, discusses the text, and asks questions to enhance comprehension.

> Child: Wilf was cro..... (child couldn't read the word, so teacher read it for him)
>
> Teacher: cross! And what did we say that 'cross' means? What do you think, from the two boys' faces? We read Wilf was cross. Who do you think is Wilf? (L.O1.@04.21)

The teacher was checking for understanding, and she gave the child tips on how to get the meaning, for example, by looking at the picture. Lisa listens to each child individually, intervening when they struggle by starting the word for them or suggesting they look at the picture for a visual cue.

In Shared Reading, the teacher and students read a text together, often using a large book or projected text. Experienced teacher Mary, for example, conducted a shared reading activity where the story was initially presented through a video with subtitles. Subsequently, with the students' input, she

constructed a story map highlighting the characters, events and details of the story. For the second reading, Mary utilised an e-book version of the same story allowing her to control the pacing. The teacher asked each child to read a page aloud, providing support as needed. Throughout the activity, she paused to ask questions and drew the students' attention to punctuation and appropriate intonation when reading. For example:

Teacher & Child: Once upon a time there lived three little pigs ...

Teacher: I have a comma here, What should you do with a comma?

Child: stop a little bit

Teacher: Stop a little bit. So let's read this again together.

Teacher & Child: Once upon a time, (pause) there lived three little pigs. (M.O1.@13.27)

Both Guided Reading and Shared Reading allow students to engage with texts at their level of proficiency while receiving the necessary support to further develop their reading skills.

5.3.2.2.d Teaching Reading Through Reading Games and Rhymes

Reading games and rhymes are effective strategies for teaching reading, particularly in early childhood education. These activities make learning to read enjoyable and reinforce key literacy skills such as phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, and reading fluency. For example, in her second lesson, experienced Kya used both strategies effectively. She prepared a rhyming game where students 'fished'

for a card and then had to read and match the word with its rhyming counterpart on the board.

Child: c/o/p (sounds)

Teacher: c/o/p what is it?

Child 1:cat

Child 2: c/o/p

Child 3: cop

Teacher: Cop. Very good. Where it goes? Cop. With? What is this?

Child: pop

Teacher: Pop, very good. So we write, cop. (teacher writes cop underneath pop on the board) Very good. (Ky.O2.@05.46)

Following this, Kya conducted another activity where she guided students to read phrases and match them to corresponding pictures. Similarly, experienced Sam has also used the matching of phrases or sentences to pictures as part of her reading activities, with students working in groups.

By incorporating reading games and rhymes into their instruction, teachers create a dynamic and supportive learning environment. These methods encourage active participation, foster a love for reading and build essential literacy skills in an engaging and enjoyable manner.

5.3.2.2.e Classroom environment

During these visits, I also assessed the classroom environment to determine whether it was print-rich or literacy-rich and if there was a designated area where children could explore books independently. Unfortunately, not all classrooms had enough space for a reading corner, and some teachers may not have prioritised creating one. Only experienced teachers Anna, Demi and Mary, together with novice Kate, had a designated reading corner equipped with a mat or cushions and a selection of books. Novice teachers Nina, Eve and Lisa had a class library, while experienced Sam and Kya, and novice Yana had neither. Most classrooms were print-rich, featuring numerous written words, including labels, charts, letter cards, flashcards with decodable and tricky words, and phonics sound charts.

In most of the observed classrooms, seating was arranged in groups of four or more, with desks clustered together to facilitate student collaboration and participation in activities. Only novice Yana and experienced Sam had students' desks arranged in a U-shape layout. This configuration also promotes active participation, collaboration, and interaction, creating a conducive environment for effective teaching and learning. During some of the observed lessons, students were encouraged to work with a peer or participate in group activities.

5.3.2.3 Student engagement and support

This sub-theme examines the strategies teachers use to foster student motivation, engagement, and support. Motivation and engagement are critical components of effective literacy instruction, as they directly influence students' interest and participation in learning activities. To engage and motivate students, teachers may employ various strategies, such as storytelling, read-aloud sessions,

and literacy games. Question 12 of the questionnaire explored how participating teachers encouraged active student participation and engagement during reading lessons. Most teachers indicated that they used interactive reading activities and games as well as peer or group discussions. Six out of the ten teachers said they used role-play to engage their students, while experienced Demi added "questioning" as a supplementary technique to maintain student focus. Experienced Anna specified that she includes "hands-on activity related to the story, for example, creating our own clay pots after reading a story about clay pots" (A.Q.12). Whereas, during the interview, novice Yana mentioned that to further engage the students, she tries to incorporate the students' interests into the school-mandated topics that need to be covered throughout the scholastic year (Y.I.@14.46).

In Question 14, teachers were asked to recall a specific instance where they had to modify their teaching approach to better support a struggling reader. Their responses aligned with the three multiple-choice answers provided in the question. Teachers were able to select multiple responses, but only three teachers indicated two different strategies they have used to support struggling readers. Six respondents provided individual tutoring, while four teachers chose to use multisensory activities. During the interview, Yana explained that last year a student in her class struggled with reading so she used multisensory tools to help him. She mentions: "At first I started by giving him magnetic letters. So he will learn to identify them first. ..... Then we start building CVC words to see if he will be able to blend the letters together" (Y.I.@04.47).

Out of the ten teachers, only three have adjusted the children's reading material to match their interests. For instance, Kya explains that based on insights gained from her teaching and personal experience, she selects books that align with the student's interests to foster a love for reading. She comments that:

> ... not everyone likes reading .... we try to make it something that's interesting .... So if I see, for example, that a boy is struggling .... because he's not enjoying it. I try to find another book, maybe, you know, a book about cars, if he likes cars (Ky.I.@11.10).

5.3.2.4 Assessment

This final sub-theme addresses the methods and tools teachers use to assess students' literacy development. Assessment is a fundamental aspect of teaching, guiding instructional decisions and providing feedback on student progress. Teachers continuously assess their students using a variety of strategies and methods. Ongoing assessment occurs during activities and tasks, while more formal assessments are conducted at specific times throughout the academic year. Participants were asked how they assess student's reading progress and learning outcomes, and their responses were almost equally distributed among the three provided options. Demi, Eve, Mary and Anna indicated a preference for standardised tests, whereas Kate, Yana and Sam favoured teacher-made assessments. In contrast, Kya, Lisa and Nina preferred to use reading logs and reflections. Novice teacher Nina added "I go around the students and listen to them reading. I focus on 4 students in each lesson" (N.Q.13). Experienced teacher Kya explained that when she reads with children on a one-to-one level, she keeps a

record and writes: “I read with M…. up to page 12. She did very good. She had a bit of difficulty with the words …. and I list the words” (Ky.I.@08.19). This log is then sent to parents to follow up at home.

These methods outlined above may not necessarily be the teachers' preferred type of assessment but are being implemented as part of a whole-school approach.

5.3.3 Influence of Teaching experience on Literacy Instruction

During the interviews, teachers were explicitly asked whether their teaching experience had influenced their beliefs and practices regarding teaching literacy, particularly reading. To ensure a clear presentation and focus on the main theme of experience, I have organised their responses into two sections, one outlining reflections by experienced teachers and the other outlining reflections by novice teachers.

5.3.3.1 Reflections of experienced teachers

The experienced participating teachers in this study have at least seven years of teaching experience, with the most experienced teacher having taught early primary students for 30 years. All teachers expressed that their experiences have shaped their beliefs on the best way to teach reading, reflecting on their practices and performance in the classroom.

Anna, with nine years of teaching experience, has practised diverse teaching approaches in different school sectors and can compare these methods and their effects on students’ reading levels. She emphasised that experience has taught her what works and what doesn’t work, necessitating adaptation for each group of students. She states that “all children are different, maybe these children struggle in this part of literacy, and

maybe next year's group will struggle in another part of literacy." She highlighted the importance of adjusting to different literacy struggles each year, demonstrating how experience informs effective teaching strategies (A.I.@17.11).

Demi, with eight years of practice, has employed different techniques and approaches leading her to evaluate the different strategies. Her beliefs have evolved from a rigid reliance on workbooks to a more flexible approach that goes beyond using books from cover to cover. She now values integrating diverse materials in literacy instruction to achieve better results (D.I.@04.14).

Kya, drawing on her ten-year tenure in teaching, has highlighted the gap between teacher training and real classroom experience. She noted that while theoretical knowledge is important, actual teaching requires significant adaptation and change. She recognises that each year brings different challenges, and her experience guides her in implementing varied strategies with diverse students, particularly in a multinational classroom (Ky.I.@32.35).

Mary, the most experienced, with 30 years of teaching in the early years' classroom, asserts that her beliefs have impacted her teaching practices over time. Influenced by various administrative approaches, she tries to incorporate the best elements from each experience into her teaching (M.I.@28.58). She believes that her ability to deliver effective instruction is largely due to her extensive teaching experience, supplemented by professional development sessions (M.I.@31.52).

Sam acknowledges that her seven years of teaching experience in various schools have influenced her teaching approaches. She states, "It did influence me, how I think, how I plan ahead," (S.I.@22.38). However, she also stressed the need to align her

practices with the school's chosen approaches and expectations, highlighting the challenge of balancing personal beliefs with institutional requirements (S.I.@24.58).

These insights reveal that teachers' experience significantly influences their beliefs and practices in literacy instruction The need for adaptability, the importance of diverse teaching materials, and the challenge of aligning personal teaching philosophies with school mandates are recurring themes across the teachers' responses.

5.3.3.2 Reflections of novice teachers

Eve, an NQT, in her first year of teaching, is beginning to form opinions on what works best in literacy instruction. She has observed the effectiveness of a particular phonics program through her personal experience with her daughter and her brief time in the classroom. However, she has noticed that the program's potential was hindered by inadequate implementation at her school. Eve also believes that dividing students into reading groups based on their abilities is unnecessary, as she thinks differentiated instruction can be provided within a single classroom. She acknowledges that she is still in her first year of teaching and has limited experience recognising that her views might change in the future (E.I.@27.35).

Lisa, also in her first year of teaching, has expressed that she did not feel adequately prepared to teach literacy and was still refining her approach. Despite observing some student improvement, she is committed to exploring different methods to enhance her teaching effectiveness. Lisa believes that through experience, she will be able to adjust her practices to better support her young learners (L.I.@23.19).

Kate with two years of teaching, experienced a shift in beliefs from her structured teacher training to practical application in the classroom. She acknowledged that her

beliefs evolved as she adapted theories to real classroom settings, eventually coming to support practices she initially questioned. She states that “eventually my beliefs were, .. I had to amend them. But now I’m here, I’m in favour of them. So yes, it (experience) does influence” (K.I.@12.10).

Yana with two years of full-time teaching experience, initially believed that every student had the potential and will to progress. However, her experience showed her that other factors influence a child’s academic progress. She observed that for example without parental support, students might not achieve their full potential. She affirms that *“*now my beliefs changed a little bit because I know that even parents are very important in education, and if they do not bother to help their child, the child will not progress as much” (Y.I.@18.02). She is aware that she is still in her first years and that through experience her beliefs and practices might keep changing.

Nina, with only one full year of teaching experience, has already started revising her approaches based on classroom experience. Initially, she followed advice from teacher training, but she is now adapting different strategies to make her teaching more engaging. She is aware that she is only in her second year of teaching and continues to experiment with different methods to teach reading, highlighting the ongoing process of finding effective strategies (N.I.@15.17).

These insights from novice teachers reveal a common theme of adapting and evolving their beliefs and practices based on real-world classroom experiences. They highlight the gap between theoretical training and practical application, emphasising the importance of continuous learning and flexibility in teaching literacy.

5.3.3.3 Effective instructional methods based on experience

Further insights were gathered from the entire group of participating teachers through their responses to the questionnaire. Teachers provided the following responses when asked to recall from experience what instructional methods have been the most effective in improving reading skills among their young learners. The accompanying Figure 3 illustrates the choices made by teachers among Phonics-Based Activities, Whole Language Activities, Interactive Read-Aloud Sessions, and any other strategy they wished to add. Teachers selected from the given options, with some opting for just one approach and others choosing two or more. Notably, experienced Kya added a comment stating "Children learn mainly through play, if they are interested in the activity they will perceive it as a game, not a reading session" (Ky.Q.15). This suggests that practical classroom experience has influenced Kya to prioritise engaging, play-based learning methods over more traditional reading sessions.

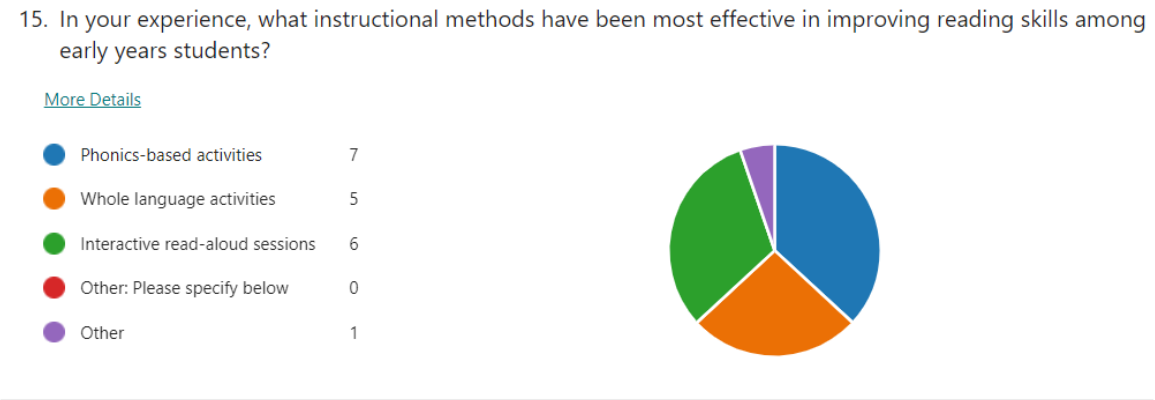


Figure 3 - Effective instructional methods based on teachers' experience

Most teachers' responses to this question confirmed their beliefs as indicated in questions 7 and 8 in the questionnaire (refer to table 2 in section 5.3. 1). However, Lisa and Sam did not align with their previous choices. Both had previously identified a

Balanced Approach as essential for early reading instruction, yet in question 15, they indicated that Whole Language activities were the most effective instructional practices. It is important to note that Lisa is a novice teacher, while Sam has been teaching for seven years.

These findings highlight teachers' varying perspectives on effective instructional methods, influenced by their classroom experiences and the dynamic nature of teaching literacy. The responses underscore the importance of adapting instructional strategies to meet the diverse needs of students, while also reflecting on and evolving personal teaching philosophies based on practical experiences.

5.3.4 Continuous Professional Development

Continuous professional development and support for teachers is essential for several reasons: remaining up-to-date and current with educational research and best practices, adapting to curriculum changes (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2012), enhancing teaching skills and encouraging collaboration and networking (Admiraal et al., 2023). Continuous professional development (CPD) ensures that teachers remain informed, skilled, and motivated. It supports their ability to provide high-quality education, adapt to changing circumstances, and meet the diverse needs of their students (Ministry for Education, 2021).

In this study, participating teachers were asked about their experiences with CPD and their willingness to participate in future sessions. Specifically, the introductory questionnaire inquired whether they had participated in any professional development related to teaching reading in the early years, and to describe the most impactful

sessions. Only experienced teachers Kate, Demi and Anna responded positively, while others indicated they had not participated in literacy-related CPD sessions. Kate described sessions where they could observe different practices implemented in class through recorded videos. Demi mentioned RWI training and support sessions, highlighting those where teachers acted as students, as particularly impactful. Anna recounted attending an RWI training course in the UK.

During later interviews, teachers were asked if they felt the need for further support or training in teaching literacy and reading and if they would be willing to attend such sessions. All teachers expressed a need for further training and a willingness to participate in informative sessions. Their responses underscored the various types of support and professional development sessions they desired. Anna emphasised the importance of keeping abreast of the latest educational research and pedagogical methods, expressing keen interest in conducting her own research on relevant subjects (A.I.@19.35). The participants' responses are presented in the two separate sections that follow: In-school support (section 5.3.5.1) and Community of Professional Educators (CoPE) sessions (5.3.5.2).

5.3.4.1 In-school support

Several teachers highly valued in-school support which is readily available during school hours and regularly. This support is typically provided by members of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) or the Literacy Support Teachers (LSTs). The Literacy Support Team from the National Literacy Agency supports state schools while the team from the Secretariat for Catholic Education supports church schools. Independent schools may employ a literacy specialist to support their educators.

Novice teacher Kate noted she received substantial support and training from the school's SLT and Literacy Support Team when introducing a new phonics program. She found these sessions particularly relevant as she could immediately apply the strategies in her classroom (K.I.@03.40). Experienced Anna and novice Eve mentioned the Literacy Support Teacher (LST) at their school, who provided demonstration lessons for them to observe. However, Eve added that she would appreciate it if the LST observed her lessons and provided constructive feedback (E.I.@29.00).

Experienced Mary valued in-school support but was disappointed when she requested assistance from the SLT for implementing new strategies, like Guided Reading, and they did not provide it. She states that "the first thing I asked was; when we were told that guided reading should not be more than 20 minutes maximum, …I said can you demonstrate please?" (M.I.@31.38). She had the same experience when they introduced the Emergent Curriculum, she asked for demo lessons but '*they showed us videos of foreign schools, which for me it's not what I want'* (M.I.@33.00). Conversely, experienced Sam appreciated the support from her school administration, who would sit with her and answer her queries. She asserts that "At school, they offer support, and when I ask them, they explain" (S.I.@28.40). However, she would appreciate feedback on her lesson delivery, especially since she is implementing strategies based on the school's chosen approach, of which she is unsure and not confident. She declares that sometimes "I start doubting myself. Am I doing it right? Am I saying the correct sound? Am I explaining it well?" (S.I.@27.41).

Yana, although in her first years of teaching, emphasised the need for ongoing learning and development, particularly due to continuous curriculum changes. She also

wished that authorities would “hear the teacher’s concerns” (Y.I.@21.05). She praised the LST who helped her implement new strategies to assist a student with learning difficulties, last year, but noted that this scholastic year no such support was provided to her school.

Novice teacher Lisa, mentioned the support students receive from the Complimentary and Reading Recovery teachers who work with struggling readers in small groups. This helps the teacher, as the students are receiving extra support which would not be possible in a whole class. However, she expressed her concerns that not all students received the necessary help due to time and manpower constraints (L.I.@24.30). Regarding in-school support for her as a practitioner, when she asked the SLT for an actual demonstration of a new approach, she was disappointed to find that no member of the leadership team was available to help. Opportunely, an experienced teacher in her grade invited Lisa to observe her during her lessons (L.I.@26.23).

5.3.4.2 Community of Professional Educators (CoPE) sessions

Management-driven Community of Professional Educators (CoPE) sessions include School Development Planning (SDP) and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) sessions. Teachers are required to participate in these sessions organised by the school and are further encouraged to seek other Professional Learning Opportunities in areas of their choice, outside school hours (Eurydice).

Novice teacher Nina found that the CoPE sessions on teaching strategies implemented at her school were highly beneficial (N.I.@19.25). Likewise, Kate appreciated the CoPE sessions organised by her school, which allowed her to seek guidance and feedback on her classroom practices. She describes the sessions as “really

relevant because now that I'm working (teaching), I can relate to certain things, better than before" (K.I.@14.34). As a newly qualified teacher, Eve was looking forward to her first CoPE session on literacy, which would be her first official training on literacy since she started teaching (E.I.@28.05).

These CoPE sessions are organised by the school management team and may target different aspects of teaching, such as CPD on adapting to technological advances or improving safety in schools. Although highly valued, teachers expressed a preference for sessions that address their immediate needs. For example, Kya took an interest in a session about Artificial Intelligence, carried out at her school, but would have preferred training on literacy or how to work with children with diverse abilities, finding these topics more directly helpful (Ky.I.@38.28). Similarly, experienced Mary and novice Yana commented on a recent CoPE session, regarding using a new Student Resource Book introduced at their school. However, despite providing feedback that the book's level was too high for their students, during this session, their concerns were not addressed (M.I.@35.40; Y.I.@21.54).

CPD provides opportunities for teachers to develop new skills and refine existing ones. These sessions can include training in specific instructional strategies, encourage reflective practice for personal and professional growth, and build teachers' confidence in their abilities.

Accordingly, novice teacher Eve's remark at the end of the interview encapsulates the importance of ongoing professional development: "I think as teachers you should never really stop because things are changing every day. I think we start failing once we stop learning ourselves" (E.I.@32.15).

5.3.5 Challenges and Limitations

Understanding the challenges and limitations perceived by teachers in teaching literacy in the early years is crucial for gaining a comprehensive view of the educational landscape. Through qualitative data collected from teacher interviews and questionnaires, several key themes have emerged. These themes reflect the practical difficulties and systemic issues teachers perceive as hindrances to effective literacy instruction. This section will present these themes in detail, including challenges related to curriculum constraints, student diversity and limitations of teacher training. The impact of external factors such as the children's social background and parental involvement will also be discussed.

5.3.5.1 School's chosen approach to literacy

The research participants identified several obstacles in their literacy instruction, particularly when required to implement approaches or strategies they do not consider most effective. For instance, novice teacher Yana who advocates for a Whole Language Approach to literacy, teaches in a school that has adopted a Combination of Phonics and Whole Language. She regularly teaches phonics lessons as per the school's scheme of work, introducing new phonic sounds. However, she feels that some students become more confused when writing words, as they struggle to connect the sounds to the corresponding letters. Yana explains:

> What I, um, observe is that some students, for example, the word 'moon'. They know that the letter, the sound 'oo' is the letter O, but ..... when it comes to writing, they just write the letter U. ..... So what I do, um, we basically say the sounds, and then we spell the letter names (Y.I.@08.16).

To address these challenges, Yana encourages students to spell out decodable words using the sounds and then the letter names. To aid the memorisation of tricky words, she incorporates movement into her lessons, asking students to march around the room while spelling out the words. She believes that introducing physical activity can enhance students' ability to remember the spelling of words.

Experienced teacher Sam, works at a school that employs a one-book-for-all approach to teaching reading. Given her mixed-ability class, she does not support this methodology, as some students are not yet prepared for the level of the book presented to them, leading to their struggle and frustration. Additionally, she highlighted the challenges associated with the accompanying workbook, which includes writing tasks that are too difficult for students who struggle to read the story, making it even more challenging for them to write about it. Despite her disagreement with this approach, Sam is compelled to implement it because the students' parents have purchased the workbooks, necessitating their completion (S.O1.@27.14). Despite being in her first few months of teaching at the current school, Sam along with another teacher proposed to the school's administration to reduce the number of textbooks and workbooks as she believes there is a significant amount of repetition. However, her suggestion was not accepted. The administration argued that the variety of books provides students with different opportunities and helps them familiarize themselves with essential concepts from multiple sources.

At another school, experienced Mary and novice Lisa are requested to ensure students engage in daily writing activities, whether it be a creative writing task or copying notes from the board (L.I.@00.15). The administration believes that copying from the

board aids in developing coordination and trains children to become faster writers. Additionally, the senior leadership team (SLT) mandates the inclusion of 'word games,' which are essentially dictations of high-frequency words - a practice both teachers would prefer to avoid (M.I.06.45).

At experienced teacher Kya's school, the literacy program promotes a combination of Phonics and Whole Language, allowing individual teachers to create their balanced approach using the strategies they value most. However, Kya would prefer the school would adhere strictly to a phonics programme in the early years to ensure a consistent development of skills and strategies, while still incorporating Whole Language practices (Ky.I.@20.18). Meanwhile, novice teacher Eve's school has students divided into literacy groups based on standardised tests associated with the phonics programme being implemented. Although Eve believes this practice is beneficial, she is concerned that young learners might feel intimidated by the assessment used for grouping, potentially leading to underperformance and being labelled as part of a weaker group. Furthermore, she is concerned that due to the limited number of teachers, students are grouped with peers of varying skill levels but then work at the level deemed appropriate by the school. She feels this approach hinders the potential maximisation of students' abilities (E.I.@11.43).

5.3.5.2 Time and size constraints

Time constraints emerged as a significant limitation reported by teachers. Novice Eve remarked, "We're so full, you know, it's a constant catch-up with time. We don't have time!" (E.I.@15.50). Similarly, experienced Anna voiced concerns about the fast-paced nature of the school day, stating, "You know how life is in class, we do everything straight after the other to try and fit in as much as possible" (A.I.@04.35). Novice Yana

expressed a desire to incorporate more engaging activities into her literacy lessons but noted: “However, this is not always possible. Especially when you are tight in time” (Y.I.@05.40). Experienced Kya echoed these sentiments, expressing concern that parents’ busy schedules limited opportunities for at-home reading, prompting her to prioritise in-class reading sessions whenever feasible. She lamented that, “When it's possible, because there are some times when it's not, you know. I don't have the time” (Ky.I.@14.43). Demi who integrates peer practice in her lessons, acknowledged the challenge of monitoring each pair effectively, stating that, “it's very difficult ... to listen to all of them you know, but at least I try to find some time to go around because not everyone has learned the skill yet” (D.I.@07.55).

In her responses to the questionnaire, novice Lisa expressed her concerns about the volume of content mandated to be covered during the school year, limiting time dedicated to developing reading skills. She advocates for a reduction in content as follows: “Content should be lessened, in order to have more time to dedicate to the reading skills” (L.Q.21).

Another limitation, highlighted by several participants, is the large class size. Experienced Demi underscores this challenge in her responses (D.Q.21), while novice Yana concurs, noting that the high number of students leads to daily “struggles” (Y.I.@04.17). Experienced Sam observes that managing a large number of mixed-ability students in a confined space imposes constraints on the types of activities she can facilitate. This issue is compounded by the small size of her classroom. Reflecting on her experience, she remarks that, “if I had the same number of students in a bigger classroom, it would be easier to give them, for example, stations ..... where children

could move around while I still focused on reading individually" (S.I.@09.06). The confined space was also limiting her from providing a class library or a reading corner, where students could take a book and read when they had some free time (S.I.@10.28).

5.3.5.3 Student Diversity

Student diversity can be characterised by a variety of factors, including linguistic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, as well as differing abilities and learning needs. As discussed in Chapter 3, Malta's bilingual education system, with Maltese and English as official languages, results in students often coming from homes where one or both languages are spoken. Additionally, with an increasing number of immigrants, many children might also speak other languages at home, adding to the linguistic diversity within the classroom.

Participants were asked about the dominant language in their classrooms and the challenges of teaching in a multilingual setting. Half of the teachers at church schools and the teacher from the independent school reported that English was the dominant language. Conversely, two of the three teachers from state schools along with one teacher from church school, reported that Maltese was the dominant language in their classrooms. The remaining three teachers observed no dominant language this year. During English literacy lessons, English was predominantly used in most classrooms, but significant code-switching between English and Maltese was observed in state schools. Experienced Sam commented that, although bilingualism offers significant challenges, communication becomes easier as students learn the basics of the language/s. Teaching Year 1, she introduces the alphabet sounds, and new vocabulary daily, gradually reducing the language barrier (S.I.@14.37).

When asked about the challenges posed by language barriers, all teachers acknowledged the challenges, providing diverse examples. Experienced Kya, who teaches a class with many nationalities, noted that half of her students were foreigners, making the language barrier more pronounced when teaching Maltese. Some of her students and their parents also struggled to communicate in English requiring an interpreter for communication on Parents Day (Ky.I.@27.58). Novice Kate mentioned similar difficulties with migrant families, primarily in teaching Maltese, as many parents did not know the language. To support these parents, she translated the Maltese books and provided copies to help them assist their children (K.I.@.09.50). Experienced Mary echoed these struggles and suggested that teachers need training in teaching Maltese to foreigners (M.I.@19.22).

While acknowledging the challenges of a multilingual classroom, novice Yana was more positive, believing that exposure to diverse languages and cultures benefits students (Y.I.@09.57). Four participants declared celebrating diverse cultures and backgrounds to foster a positive and inclusive reading environment in their classrooms. For instance, Kya recounts organising a *'nation's party,'* where parents prepared food, from their countries of origin (Ky.I.@30.51).

Student diversity also includes social backgrounds, family structures, parental involvement, and varying learning abilities and needs. Experienced Anna described the family and social diversity of her students, noting that: *"*not all children have the same people in their family" (A.I.@14.36). Novice Eve recounted a child in her class explaining about her adoption and bringing a book about the subject, which Eve then read to the class to better explain the concept of adoption (E.I.@24.00). Understanding their

students' social backgrounds is crucial for holistic support and helps the teacher provide for individual needs. Novice Lisa mentioned that a student's performance might be affected, for example, by seeking attention at school due to a lack of attention at home (L.O1.@29.10). Similarly, experienced Sam noted the need to "plan ahead and try to adapt" for a child who spends most of the time with his grandparents who struggle to help him (S.I.@23.35). Conversely, teachers sometimes capitalise on students' diverse experiences, creating learning opportunities for the students in class. For example, novice Yana discussed different religious backgrounds when a Muslim girl in her class came to school wearing a veil, during Ramadan (Y.I.@13.04). Experienced Demi, used a child's experience of living on a farm as a learning resource, as children relate better to their peers (D.I.@02.09).

Teachers also need to be aware of their students' needs and varying abilities. They identified several causes for reading difficulties, including learning difficulties, hearing or speech impairments, and short attention spans. Novice Nina elaborated on the inhibiting factors she observed this scholastic year, emphasising the importance of parental involvement and the complexities of teaching students with speech problems. She states that:

> I have various children with speech difficulties, because of this, they find it hard to read and say certain words. Also, the home environment is another factor. If children are not reading and being exposed to books at home it will be more difficult to make them fall in love with books and reading (N.Q.20).

Furthermore, most teachers noted that the key challenges in teaching reading in the early years are the students' short attention span and learning difficulties. Additionally, half of

the teachers also noted that learning to read might be hindered by hearing or speech impairment.

This section aimed to provide valuable insights into the challenges and limitations identified by teachers, highlighting their beliefs and practices in teaching literacy. Kya's comment encapsulates the importance of accommodating diverse needs: "There are so many different people in this small classroom that either you have to adapt, you have to see what you can do, ... or you lose some of them" (Ky.I.@36.28).

5.3.5.4 Teacher training

The preparation and training of teachers play a crucial role in the effectiveness of literacy instruction in the early years. This section explores findings related to teacher training, focusing on the extent to which participants feel prepared to teach literacy and identifying areas where they perceive gaps in their training.

In response to questions about their preparation to teach literacy, all participants expressed concerns about the sufficiency and relevance of their training. Experienced Anna, for instance, remarked on her readiness to teach literacy in the early years: "When I studied at university, always, even when we did the primary years, most of the lectures were focusing on the grade fours, fives, and sixes rather than the actual early years" (A.I.@18.18). She didn't feel adequately prepared to teach the early years. Conversely, novice Lisa noted that her teacher training was more centred on the early years, particularly from kindergarten to year 1, and highlighted a need for better preparation for teaching early primary years. Considering that her teacher training placements were mainly in

Years 2 and 3 classes, she stated that: “It is basically based more on the early (years)..... more kinder till Year 1. Because I believe that in year 2 even though it's an early year, students need to be prepared for year 3” (L.I.@21.34). She acknowledges her training in using the emergent curriculum, however, she believes it is important for students in Years 1 and 2, to learn the letter sounds, reading, and writing in context (L.I.@22.30).

Teachers commented on specific areas where they felt unprepared. Novice Yana provided further insight into the nature of her teacher training, explaining that it focused more on understanding children's backgrounds, bilingualism and theoretical aspects. She expressed a significant gap in practical examples and strategies and that she wasn’t given the tools to face a classroom with diverse needs. She questioned: “How can I face multicultural and different students with different abilities? How can I help them to progress all at once? That's what I struggle the most” (Y.I.@20.08). Experienced Kya shares a similar concern, believing that Maltese classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse due to the presence of students from different nationalities and with differing abilities (Ky.I.@34.10).

Novice Eve praised university lecturers for recommending storybooks for classroom use, noting that she successfully used these books with her children and now integrates them into her teaching. However, she highlighted a significant gap in her phonics training, which she only received once she had to implement it in her classroom. She stated, “For example phonics, there are so many different types, we here use RWI (Read Write Inc), ... Jolly Phonics,.... there are many others. I actually got the training and the experience through my teaching practice by using it hands-on” (E.I.@27.45).

This sentiment was echoed by novice teachers Demi, Nina and Kate, who acknowledged that without the support of their current schools, they would not be adequately prepared to teach phonics. Kate elaborated, “So we had a topic on English, but it was very brief, where phonics wasn't really emphasised. We just had a brief idea, but I never really got the good idea of it” (K.I.@03.30). She advocates for universities to provide student teachers with comprehensive training on various phonics approaches to better prepare them for their future classrooms. Nina finds that compared to teaching practice during training and having her own class “is a different world.” She finds teaching very hard and struggles with assessing her students, therefore she seeks input from other teachers to validate her assessment (N.I.@16.50). Experienced teacher Sam had a similar experience and she ended up feeling “shocked” during her teaching practice, as she felt that reality in schools was much different than what she was being trained for. She thanks the “patient teachers” at the schools where she practised. She said, “During my teaching practice I learned a lot because I, I’ve met teachers, patient teachers, who taught me how to teach certain stuff” (S.I.@26.10).

5.4 Conclusion

The findings of this study offer a comprehensive view into the complex landscape of early years’ literacy instruction in Malta, highlighting both commonalities and divergences in the beliefs and practices of novice and experienced teachers. Through the detailed exploration of teacher stories and thematic analysis, several key insights have emerged. The study reveals teachers’ professed beliefs about literacy instruction and delves into their instructional practices. Both novice and experienced teachers emphasise the importance of fostering a love for reading and integrating phonics and whole-language approaches. However, the extent to which these beliefs are translated into

practice varies. The presentation of these findings identifies significant challenges and limitations faced by teachers, including time constraints, curriculum demands and the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of students.

Furthermore, the study highlights the influence of personal and professional experiences on teachers' beliefs and practices. Teachers' reflections indicate that their instructional approaches are shaped not only by formal training and professional development but also by their day-to-day interactions with students and the practical realities of the classroom environment.

In conclusion, the presentation of these research findings underscores the importance of considering the contextual factors that influence teachers' beliefs and practices. The alignment between teachers' beliefs and practices in early instruction together with the factors contributing to any mismatch will be interpreted and discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 6 Discussion

6.1 Introduction

Building on the results presented in Chapter 5, this chapter further examines the findings by drawing on insights from the analysis and interpretation of the results, and a review of both international and local literature. This chapter presents an in-depth discussion of the findings from this study, centred on the beliefs and practices of early years teachers in literacy instruction, specifically the teaching of reading in English, within early primary classrooms in Malta. Drawing on the data collected through questionnaires, twenty lesson observations, and semi-structured interviews, this chapter critically examines the alignment between teachers' beliefs and instructional methods, comparing novice and experienced teachers. This discussion is structured to explore how teaching experience influences these beliefs and practices, identifying the specific factors contributing to any observed misalignments between professed beliefs and actual instructional practices in the teaching of reading in English. Additionally, it addresses the support and professional development needed to bridge these gaps. These findings are critically discussed in relation to the research questions outlined in section 1.4 of this dissertation and are elaborated upon in the subsequent sections.

This chapter begins with a concise overview of the key findings, leading to a detailed discussion that directly addresses the research questions, aims and objectives. Adopting a comparative approach, it systematically analyses and compares the data from the two primary teacher categories - novice and experienced teachers – thereby providing a comprehensive comparison of these two groups.

6.2 Overview of Key Findings

The findings of this study, presented in the previous chapter, offer an in-depth overview of early years literacy instruction in Malta, elucidating key themes and divergencies in the beliefs and practices of novice and experienced teachers. Detailed narratives and thematic analysis reveal several critical insights pertinent to the research questions. The study delves into teachers' expressed beliefs about literacy instruction and their actual instructional practices. Both novice and experienced teachers underscore the importance of fostering a love for reading and integrating phonics and whole language approaches, although the extent to which these beliefs are implemented in practice varies.

Significant challenges and constraints faced by teachers are highlighted, including time limitations, curriculum demands, and the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of students. Additionally, reflections from teachers indicate that their beliefs and instructional approaches are influenced by personal experiences, formal training, professional development, day-to-day interactions with students, and the practical realities of the classroom environment. These findings introduce a discussion on the alignment between teachers' beliefs and practices, addressing the research questions. They emphasise the dynamic nature of literacy instruction and the ongoing need for professional growth. The data suggest that teaching experience and continuous professional development (CPD) significantly influence teachers' beliefs and practices, highlighting the necessity for the provision of structured, relevant, and practical professional support throughout their professional teaching careers. The findings show specific differences between the preferred teaching approaches of experienced and novice teachers and similarities in their professional development needs.

6.3 Discussion of Key Findings

This chapter explores the key findings of this study, directly addressing the research questions, aims and objectives, outlined in section 1.4 in Chapter 1. The discussion is organised into four sections, each dedicated to a specific research question, thereby ensuring a focused and structured analysis. This approach was chosen to clearly highlight the comparative aspects of the study, particularly in relation to the differences and similarities when comparing the results for novice and experienced teachers. The discussion not only focuses on addressing the research questions but also contextualises the significant findings within the broader literature reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3. By adopting a comparative approach, this chapter systematically analyses and discusses the data from the two primary teacher categories: novice and experienced teachers, and subsequently compares these groups.

6.3.1 RQ1: To what extent are teachers' stated beliefs and instructional practices congruent, or is there a discernible mismatch?

The data from this study indicates that teachers hold diverse and individualised beliefs about literacy instruction, particularly concerning the teaching of reading in English. Some teachers advocate for specific approaches, such as phonics or the whole language approach, while others support a combination of methods to create a balanced approach. These beliefs significantly shape their pedagogical approaches and decision-making processes during lessons. This finding aligns with the work of Silvern and Isenberg (1990) and Grossman (1990) who argue that teachers' chosen instructional practices are deeply rooted in their beliefs. Rex and Nelson (2004) further suggest that how teachers interpret the impacts of education on their lives significantly influences their role as educators for their students. This belief drives their confidence in their educational views and motivates them to implement these beliefs in their teaching practices.

The data collected and analysed in this study, presented and illustrated through the very specific responses, shows how participants' beliefs align with their practices. This is discussed per teacher category in sections 6.3.1.1 for novice teachers and 6.3.1.2 for experienced teachers below, while section 6.3.1.3 draws comparative insights between both categories.

6.3.1.1 Are Novice Teachers' beliefs and practices congruent?

For novice teachers, despite their limited experience and some inconsistencies, there appears to be a general alignment between their stated beliefs and instructional practices. This correlation is evident in various examples, and I will elaborate hereunder, including any inconsistencies related to each teacher, individually.

- Kate's practice of using a phonics program aligns with her belief that phonics instruction is essential for early reading instruction as it advances reading skills. She also believes that children should be exposed to authentic literature and taught sight words to aid in reading fluency. All of these strategies were observed in her lessons.
- Nina believes in integrating a phonics approach with literature across the curriculum, emphasising the importance of daily exposure to authentic texts. Her classroom is well-stocked with print materials, educational resources, and a class library, reflecting her beliefs. Nina finds that phonics-based activities and interactive read-aloud sessions are the most effective teaching methods, and she also prioritises listening to students read individually. This was consistent with what I observed during her lessons.
- Yana's approach to teaching focuses on comprehension and real texts while encouraging students to engage deeply with texts through questioning and

reasoning. These strategies were observed during her lessons, aligning with her preference for whole-language methods. However, inconsistencies were found in her responses. She stated that children acquire reading skills by focusing on print and word study (aligning with a phonics approach), but during the interview, she claimed that exposure to phonics can confuse children and that they will eventually stop using phonics skills by the time they are in junior primary school.

- Eve emphasises the importance of integrating phonics instruction with exposure to authentic literature and interactive read-aloud sessions for early reading development, which is consistent with my observations in her class. She has some reservations about the school's rigorous focus on phonics instruction for teaching literacy. As a result, she integrates interactive and game-like elements into her lessons to align with her beliefs. Despite her limited experience, Eve also believes that the potential of the phonics program is hindered by the inadequate implementation at her school and expressed scepticism about ability-based reading groups.
- Lisa advocates for a balanced approach to teaching reading, emphasising that children learn to read naturally through exposure to authentic literature and through focused attention on print and word study. The strategies she employed in the observed lessons were consistent with these beliefs. However, some inconsistencies emerged in her questionnaire responses, such as her selection of 'whole language activities' as effective instructional methods without including 'phonics-based activities', to match her preference for a balanced approach.

Despite being in the early stages of their teaching careers, these novice teachers generally demonstrated alignment between their beliefs and practices, as evidenced by their responses and lesson observations. It is important to consider the influence of personal experiences on their professional development. Notably, Eve and Lisa, who are slightly older than their counterparts, have drawn upon their experiences as mothers in helping their own children learn to read, as well as observing their children's teachers. Research indicates that both personal and professional experiences play a significant role in shaping teachers' literacy beliefs and classroom practices (Al-Arfajr, 2001; Bezzina, 2000; Rex & Nelson, 2004). The other novice teachers, Kate, Nina and Yana, despite their limited experience, also exhibited strong convictions about their instructional approaches. This observation is consistent with Hammond's (2015) findings, which suggest that teachers often believe they possess the necessary understanding of literacy skills, yet many overestimate their knowledge, leading to a false sense of security about the effectiveness of their classroom practices. In fact, minor inconsistencies were observed in these novice teachers' responses to the questionnaire, between their stated beliefs and practices indicating potential gaps in their professional preparation. During the final interview, when asked to reflect on their professional preparation, all novice teachers acknowledged feeling inadequately prepared by their teacher training programs in the area of reading instruction. However, Kate, Nina and Eve, noted that their schools have provided additional training aligned with the school's chosen approach to English reading instruction. These discrepancies will be critically examined in section 6.3.2, where the underlying causes will be explored in greater depth.

The next section will evaluate the other teacher category in comparison – the experienced teachers – and whether their beliefs and instructional practices align.

6.3.1.2 Are Experienced Teachers' beliefs and practices congruent?

The experienced teachers in this study typically demonstrated a clear alignment between their professed beliefs, as shared in their responses to the questionnaire and during interviews, and their self-reported and observed teaching methods. They seem to have adjusted their strategies to correspond with their beliefs about what is most effective for their students. As suggested by Basturkmen (2012) and Mitchell (2005), experienced teachers are more likely to hold beliefs deeply rooted in their practical experience, leading to a pronounced correspondence between their pedagogical beliefs and classroom practices. The beliefs and practices of each experienced teacher will be analysed individually, including any observed inconsistencies.

- Mary's holistic inclusion of various literacy components (oral language, phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension) matches her balanced instruction, shaped by many years of teaching experience. Her preference for a structured approach at the primary school level is consistent with her practices.
- Anna's teaching practices are closely aligned with her evolved beliefs, which developed through her teaching experience in several schools. She champions the notion that children develop reading proficiency by attending closely to print and being exposed to authentic literature and this is reflected in her instructional methodologies.
- Demi maintains a balanced educational approach, integrating multiple methods, including phonics, phonemic awareness, whole-language activities, and comprehension. In addition to following the structured phonics programme being implemented at her school, she incorporates group games and role-play,

providing opportunities for students to interact and express themselves. Her classroom was rich in print and featured a designated reading corner with a diverse selection of books. These activities and resources showcase her commitment to providing a balanced literacy instruction.

- Kya advocates for a balanced approach to literacy, that includes phonics-based activities, interactive read-aloud sessions, and game-like elements. Matching her stated beliefs, during the two observed lessons, Kya included rhyming and matching games as well as group activities. However, some inconsistencies were observed in her phonics approach, where she sometimes used letter sounds and letter names interchangeably.
- Sam believes in a balanced approach to literacy where she considers that the most effective instructional method in improving reading skills among early years students is through whole-language activities. She trusts that collaborative work and tasks tailored to individual abilities can significantly impact student achievement. Despite some limitations, she remains committed to aligning her teaching practices with these core beliefs.

In summary, while the experienced teachers in this study generally exhibit a strong alignment between their beliefs and practices, the minor inconsistencies observed suggest that even experienced educators may encounter difficulties in consistently translating their beliefs into practice. These inconsistencies could stem from various factors, including the complexity of the classroom environment, the pressures of adhering to school-wide programs, or the lack of enough in-service professional development to keep abreast of the natural evolution of teaching practices, new approaches or schemes introduced in schools over time. Another contributing factor

might be that when teachers transition to different schools or school sectors, they may be required to adapt their teaching approaches. Consequently, their experience in utilising a specific approach might be limited. Therefore, while experience often leads to a more pronounced correspondence between belief and practice, it is crucial to recognise and address the subtle challenges that may disrupt this alignment, ensuring that teachers can continue to refine their practices to better serve their students (Axisa, 2021; Ferguson, 2002).

The following section provides an overall comparative insight into the two teacher categories under study, comparing and contrasting these findings with previous studies in this research area.

6.3.1.3 Comparative insight

Overall, the data from the two distinct categories shows that for the majority of teachers, both novice and experienced, there is a notable congruence between their individual beliefs and instructional practices. This aligns well with international and local literature suggesting that teachers' declared beliefs and actual classroom practices were generally aligned (Bezzina, 2000; Borg, 2003; Mayo, 2010; Morales, 2014; Whyte et al., 2022). The discussion in this chapter examines the alignment between teachers' stated beliefs and self-reported and observed practices across twenty lessons. It is important to acknowledge that teachers were given the autonomy to select the two lessons for observation. This likely influenced their choices, as they may have deliberately chosen lessons that highlighted their strengths and preferred instructional methods. Consequently, this selection bias may have resulted in observed lessons that generally aligned with the teachers' beliefs about effective literacy instruction, as they

predominantly chose to showcase aspects of instruction that reflected their educational perspectives (Schachter et al., 2016).

In this study, alignment is more pronounced in the experienced teachers' category, likely due to their deeper practical experience, although this is not always clear cut, as observed by Basturkmen (2012) in her review of research into the correspondence between language teachers' stated beliefs and practices. The differences between the two groups might not solely be attributed to experience but also to other factors that influence teachers' beliefs and practices. Novice teachers show enthusiasm and conviction but occasionally overestimate their literacy skills, leading to gaps between their beliefs and practices (Hammond, 2015). In contrast, experienced teachers are more adept at integrating these beliefs into practice but may still encounter challenges due to evolving practices and external pressures (Basturkmen, 2012). These findings are further explored in comparison to previous studies in the following section, starting by describing the similarities and then the differences between the two teacher categories under investigation.

The data suggests several similarities in the two teacher categories being compared, where both novice and experienced teachers have developed classroom practices that they believe would better support their students' learning journeys. Teachers often incorporate these strategies into their daily lessons alongside the school's chosen approach, highlighting the influence of their teachers' beliefs on their practices (Carlman, 2004; Pajares, 1992; Silvern & Isenberg, 1990; Wang et al., 2008). Additionally, teachers who disagreed with school-mandated strategies frequently voiced their objections during the lessons I observed and elaborated on these concerns in subsequent interviews. Despite feeling compelled to comply with the school leadership's directives,

both novice and experienced teachers found ways to incorporate their preferred instructional methods outside these mandates. This aligns with Broemmel et al. (2021) who contend that external factors beyond the teachers' control can significantly impact literacy instruction, often forcing teachers to navigate the tension between their professional knowledge and institutional expectations. As a result, teachers integrated strategies consistent with their beliefs to create what they acknowledged as more interactive and engaging instruction.

The two teacher categories share a similar approach to the emergent curriculum, as several participating teachers expressed concerns about the implementation of the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF) in Years 1 and 2. As detailed in Chapter 3, the LOF proposes a shift from stand-alone subjects to a framework based on learning outcomes, emphasising child-centred pedagogy through an Emergent Curriculum (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2023). Experienced teachers were more opinionated about this shift, where Sam and Lisa, attributed their concerns to a lack of training and time, while Mary believed that the emergent curriculum should be limited to kindergarten.

Notably, during lesson observations, neither novice nor experienced teachers fully adopted an emergent approach to teaching literacy. This aligns with Mayo's (2010) research, where teachers expressed a preference for a combination of different approaches which they believed to be suitable for children's development. Furthermore, some teachers also indicated a preference for a more structured approach with direct instruction for learning, once children start primary school. This resistance to employing an emergent curriculum reflects literature that suggests that while instructional practices may adapt to curricular changes, teachers' core beliefs remain consistent, ultimately

guiding their practices back in line with their beliefs (Broemmel et al., 2021; Gupta, 2004; Parsons et al., 2017; Risko et al., 2008). Both novice and experienced teachers maintained a clear delineation between literacy instruction and other subject areas, often relying on school-mandated literacy programmes such as RWI or the guided reading approach, leading to predominantly teacher-led, pre-planned lessons. However, some teachers, such as experienced teacher Sam, endeavoured to implement a cross-curricular teaching approach, integrating literacy in a less structured way during emergent curriculum time. Similarly, novice teacher Yana indicated that despite having pre-planned topics, she made efforts to tailor activities, vocabulary, and stories to match the children's interests. All lessons observed for this study, conducted by novice and experienced teachers alike, were primarily teacher-led and previously planned, indicating that both teacher categories resist fully adopting an emergent curriculum for literacy and are instead employing a balanced literacy approach that integrates literacy programmes into their curriculum. This is in line with what has been suggested by the Ministry for Education in DLAP 092/2023, which states that:

> *The teaching of literacy is to be framed in a balanced literacy approach where literacy programmes can be used in collaboration with communicative language practices. In language teaching and learning, equal weighting should be given to the four language skills. A good command of oracy is the foundation on which reading and writing skills can be built.* (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2023, sec.2).

The consistency between the two groups was also observed in the grouping strategies used in their classrooms, irrespective of whether the teachers were novices or experienced. However, this mainly reflected the approach chosen by the school rather

than the teacher's level of experience. As discussed in Chapter 3, schools vary in their approaches to literacy instruction, leading to diverse grouping strategies. For instance, schools using RWI typically group students based on their reading ability, creating somewhat homogeneous groups that include students of a similar level from different classrooms or grades. In these classrooms, teachers implement the 'buddy system,' pairing students to work or read together. In contrast, schools employing a guided reading approach, grouped students by reading ability within the same class, providing differentiated instruction through level-appropriate books. Other strategies, such as flexible grouping, are used for targeted instruction. At the same time, experienced teachers, Kya and Mary emphasised the importance of 'individualised reading plans' to cater to the specific needs of their students. As indicated in several previous studies, teachers often develop their beliefs and practices through personal and professional experiences rather than relying solely on established educational theories (Al-Arfajr, 2001; Bezzina, 2000; Carlman, 2004; Matsumoto & Tsuneda, 2019; Morales, 2014). In this study, novice teacher Eve and experienced teacher Kate reflected on their personal experiences with learning to read or teaching their children, acknowledging that these experiences shaped their beliefs and practices. This finding is consistent with Al-Arfajr's (2001) assertion that various factors including family, school, and professional experiences, as well as the teaching context, influence beliefs and instructional practices. Borg (2003) and Whyte et al. (2022), concur that teachers' prior experiences as students, along with their educational background, shape their initial perceptions of teacher training and continue to influence their professional development throughout their careers.

While minor differences were observed between teachers' preferred strategies to support struggling students, these strategies were largely similar across the two teacher categories. The same number of novice and experienced teachers stated that they provided individual tutoring or used multisensory activities, while other novice and experienced teachers adjusted children's reading materials to match the student's interests. A distinct difference, between the two teaching groups, was noted in the strategies used to encourage student participation and engagement. While all experienced teachers indicated a preference for interactive reading activities and games, all novice teachers indicated a preference for peer or group discussions.

Differences in preferred assessment methodologies between novice and experienced teachers were also apparent. Experienced teachers tended to favour standardised tests while novice teachers leaned towards teacher-made assessments and reading logs. Standardised tests provide data that allow teachers to track the academic skill development of individual students, though these assessments do not address other domains such as emotional, social, physical, or cognitive development (Bauml, 2010). In contrast, teacher-made assessments and reading logs can be more adaptable to individual students' abilities and can offer a more holistic view of their development. These differences suggest that experienced teachers may place greater value on the data obtained through formal assessments to inform curricular decisions, whereas novice teachers may prioritise a more holistic approach to assessing children's development. Novice teachers seem to align more closely with the LOF (Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education, 2015a), which advocates for ongoing, authentic assessments that celebrate children's learning, as an integral part of curriculum planning and instructional strategy (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2021; Ministry for Education, Sport,

Youth, Research and Innovation, 2023). It is important to note that the assessment choices stated by novice and experienced teachers, in this study, may also be influenced by school administration mandates, depending on whether specific programmes were being implemented. In effect, all of the teachers in this study - except for the teacher in the independent school - were expected by their school management, to administer some form of standardised reading assessment. As observed by Bauml (2010), using standardised assessments could make teachers experience anxiety while struggling to balance management expectations in addressing standard content in specific timelines.

When comparing the literacy teaching approaches of novice and experienced teachers, the data from this study reveals that experienced teachers tend to favour a more balanced approach to reading instruction. This observation aligns with Mayo's (2010) study, which examined a sample of 410 teachers in the U.S. teaching students aged 4 to 8. Mayo found that the majority (90.3%) of experienced teachers, defined as those with four or more years of teaching experience, favoured a blended or balanced approach, prioritising practical over strict adherence to a particular teaching theory. Mayo concludes that experienced teachers tend to adopt instructional practices they consider most effective in a given instructional circumstance. Similarly, Davidson (2010) argues that "An integrated *(balanced)* approach appears to be much more inclusive and respectful of all students, and it would seemingly result in a more equitable provision of literacy instruction" (p.254). Through this balanced literacy approach, experienced teachers integrate multiple perspectives, offering students diverse authentic reading and writing experiences to enhance comprehension and writing skills. As informed and reflective decision-makers, teachers adapt their methods to address the varied needs of

their students, ensuring flexibility and responsiveness in their instructional programs (Spiegel 1998).

In contrast, novice teachers exhibited a wider range of instructional preferences. For instance, Yana favoured a whole language approach, while Lisa leaned toward a balanced approach. The other three novice teachers favoured a phonics-based approach, emphasising letter patterns, sounds, syllables and words. These teachers adopt a bottom-up approach to literacy, with lessons primarily being teacher-led and focused on the cognitive processes involved in decoding and encoding print (Campbell, 2020; Roshan, 2019; Wyse & Styles, 2007). Nonetheless, all novice teachers integrated authentic literature, such as stories, songs, and rhymes in their literacy instruction.

In conclusion, in addressing the first research question regarding the extent to which teachers' stated beliefs align with their instructional practices, this study found that both novice and experienced teachers generally align their beliefs with their practices. However, some minor discrepancies exist, which will be further explored in the following section. The primary differences between the two groups pertain to the teaching approaches and strategies they employ. Experienced teachers are more likely to implement and advocate for their preferred instructional methods, while novice teachers, whose beliefs are still developing, acknowledge that these may evolve with experience. This reflection underscores the complex interplay between teachers' beliefs, practices, and the external factors influencing their instructional decisions, highlighting the need for ongoing professional development and support to bridge gaps between theory and practice.

6.3.2 RQ2: If a mismatch is identified, what factors contribute to this misalignment between beliefs and practices?

Previous studies have identified discrepancies between educators' reported beliefs and their actual instructional practices, leading to inconsistencies (Bauml, 2010; Bills, 2020; Goldstein, 2007; Schachter et al., 2016). Schachter et al. (2016), note that while beliefs are theoretically linked to instructional practices, the actual relationship is complex and influenced by various factors, including knowledge, experience, and contextual elements within the classroom. This study also found some minor inconsistencies, which will be explored, including the different factors that contribute to such misalignments. A comparative insight into these inconsistencies as per teacher category, will be given at the end of this section.

6.3.2.1 The Impact of School Mandates and Policies

The collected data showed that some teachers' responses did not fully align with their previously stated beliefs. For instance, novice teachers Lisa and Yana, along with experienced teacher Sam, initially identified a preference for specific approaches to teaching reading but later indicated a preference for instructional practices that contradicted their previously stated beliefs. Despite their endorsement of a balanced approach, Lisa and Sam teach in schools that prioritise phonics instruction, leading to a conflict between their declared educational philosophy and the school's instructional mandates. This observation is consistent with Mayo's (2010) and Broemmel et al.'s (2021) findings, which highlight that teachers reported experiencing limitations in implementing their preferred literacy instruction models due to external constraints.

Similarly, Yana who advocates for a whole language approach and believes that phonics can confuse some children, contradicted herself by later suggesting that students acquire reading skills through close attention to print and word study, therefore aligning

more with a phonics-based approach. This inconsistency could stem from the influence of her school's literacy strategy, which integrates both whole language and phonics methods. Interestingly, Yana chose not to invite me to observe any of the phonics lessons mandated by her school administration, which further highlights the tension between her beliefs and the instructional practices required by her school. These findings correspond with Broemmel et al.'s (2021) research, which indicates that while teachers' beliefs tend to remain consistent over time, their instructional practices often change in response to shifts in context, curriculum mandates, or restrictions on teaching autonomy. Both novice teachers, Yana and Lisa, acknowledged feeling unprepared to teach literacy effectively, with Lisa expressing a willingness to explore various strategies, and Yana recognising the need for further training, particularly in addressing diverse student abilities and multicultural backgrounds. Sam, despite having seven years of teaching experience, encountered challenges in aligning her beliefs with the requirements and expectations of her new school during her first year in a different educational sector. Similarly, teachers in Broemmel et al.'s (2021) study admitted that when transitioning to a new school, they reverted to practices deemed adequate in the new setting until they regained confidence in the new setting.

The inconsistencies in their responses and the misalignment between their beliefs and practices are likely attributable to the conflict between their educational philosophies and the school's mandated instructional approaches. This aligns with Wang et al.'s (2008) findings, which suggest that teachers sometimes struggle to implement their beliefs due to structural constraints, such as the need to adhere to national objectives, assessment criteria, or directives from school leadership.

6.3.2.2 Gaps in Knowledge

Inconsistencies in teaching practices appear to be linked to insufficient teacher training or ongoing in-service professional development. Both novice and experienced teachers identified gaps in their training, expressing concerns about the adequacy and relevance of their preparation. Despite having completed diverse teaching courses and certification pathways, novice and experienced participants did not feel adequately prepared to teach literacy in the early years. The focus of their training was often misaligned with their teaching needs, some courses emphasised upper primary education, while novice teachers reported a focus on early childhood education that centred on children's backgrounds, bilingualism, and emergent curriculum, rather than on literacy instruction. Consequently, they felt unprepared to teach very young students to read and become literate. This sense of unpreparedness aligns with findings from other studies, where teachers reported feeling inadequately equipped, but had to quickly adapt to the curriculum upon starting their teaching careers (Balsamo, 2020). The perceived feeling of preparedness is closely tied to teachers' self-efficacy and confidence in meeting their teaching goals (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002).

All teachers in this study taught phonics, as their schools have adopted either a phonics-based or a balanced literacy approach. However, four of the five teachers in both novice and experienced categories, highlighted significant gaps in their teacher training, particularly in phonics instruction. To compensate for this deficiency, many teachers relied on mentorship from knowledgeable colleagues, conducted independent research, or participated in in-service training provided by their institutions. According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2002), induction programmes, support from colleagues and leaders, and opportunities for professional development can equip new teachers with

essential skills, temper the negative effects of inadequate preparation, and alleviate feelings of distress. However, the data from this study revealed that not all teachers received such support, and at times a gap in teachers' skills or knowledge was evident during the lessons. For instance, novice teacher Yana and experienced teacher Kya, who teach at separate schools, inconsistently used letter names and sounds when teaching spelling. The novice teacher prioritised whole language strategies and only used phonics selectively, but her inconsistent use of sounds and letter names suggested a lack of knowledge and training in phonics instruction. This is particularly concerning given the school's requirement for regular phonics teaching and the consequences of imparting wrong information to the children, leading to potential confusion. During the interview, the teacher explained that while she used phonics sounds during the phonics lessons she also had children practise spelling words using letter names believing it would aid their spelling.

The experienced teacher, who advocated for a phonics program at her school, believed that a phonics approach would significantly benefit the students. She explained her inconsistency, in using letter sounds and names, as an effort to accommodate students' prior knowledge. However, her guidance was not only inconsistent but occasionally incorrect, as she sometimes presented digraphs as two separate sounds or accepted Maltese letter sounds when students decoded English words. This inconsistency may reflect a gap between the teacher's beliefs and her instructional practices, potentially stemming from a lack of the necessary knowledge to implement effective phonics instruction, as suggested by Bills (2020).

6.3.2.3 Challenges in Providing Authentic Literature

Another inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and their daily practices was observed in the availability of authentic literature within the classroom. Scholars like Willingham (2017) recommend that reading material is highly visible in the classroom to maximise the chance that children become curious and choose to read. All teachers emphasised the importance of students developing reading skills through exposure to authentic literature and recognised that fostering a positive and inclusive reading environment necessitates a diverse range of reading materials (Castles et al., 2018; Snow, 2020; Willingham, 2017). To facilitate this exposure, three novice teachers, Nina, Eve and Lisa, provided a variety of books as part of a classroom library, while experienced teachers, Anna, Demi and Mary and novice teacher Kate, created a reading corner where the students could sit and read. In contrast, one novice and two experienced teachers, Sam, Yana and Kya, did not provide any reading texts in their classrooms. The primary reason cited for this shortfall was limited classroom space, where in some cases the classroom was particularly small, while in other cases, the large number of students in class limited the space available. These limitations were acknowledged by both novice and experienced teachers. To mitigate this gap, teachers reported frequently leading storytelling sessions to ensure students were exposed to more authentic literature. Snow (2020) highly recommends that educators and adults read a variety of texts to children, including those with complex vocabulary, grammar, and narrative structures. This practice supports language development, builds background knowledge, and enhances reading comprehension. However, this presented another difficulty as finding time for more reading sessions or literacy activities in class is also challenging. Teachers have

expressed concerns about the fast-paced nature of the primary school day, finding it difficult to cover the entire curriculum within the school timetable.

6.3.2.4 Comparative insight

When examining these inconsistencies through a comparative lens, exploring the differences between the two teacher categories under observation, it became evident that teaching experience did not significantly influence the limitations observed in both novice and experienced teachers. Teaching experience only played a side role where teacher training was insufficient, as throughout the years teachers experimented with different approaches and received guidance from their mentors and colleagues. However, teaching experience did not fully address the gaps in knowledge, particularly in the implementation of specific methods such as phonics instruction (Bills, 2020; Schachter et al., 2016). This finding underscored the necessity of targeted ongoing professional development and training to ensure effective teaching practices.

Similarly, teaching experience was not a decisive factor in the difficulty of providing authentic literature in the classroom, rather the primary constraint was the availability of space. In classrooms lacking a library, limited physical space – either due to the small size of the room or the large number of students – was a significant barrier. These findings suggest that consideration should be given to the number of students assigned to a classroom relative to its size. To ensure that teachers can provide the necessary resources and effectively organise their teaching practices, the teacher-student ratio and classroom dimensions must be carefully considered, as they are crucial to maintaining high-quality professional practice (National Research Council, 2015).

In summary, the inconsistencies identified in this study can be attributed to several factors, including gaps in knowledge and training, conflicts between personal

beliefs and institutional mandates, and practical or logistical limitations such as classroom space. Addressing these challenges through professional development and better alignment of instructional practices with teachers' beliefs could help mitigate most of these discrepancies or mismatches.

6.3.3 RQ3: Does the level of teaching experience among teachers influence their professed beliefs and instructional practices?

This study employed a naturalistic approach to explore teachers' attitudes, beliefs and practices, aiming to give educators a voice in the research process (Chandler et al., 2015; Cohen et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 1999). Prior research indicates that teachers' beliefs are often shaped by the extent and quality of their experiential knowledge (Anderson, 2018). To investigate this, novice and experienced teachers were asked to reflect on whether and how their teaching experience has shaped their beliefs and instructional practices, particularly in the context of teaching reading in English. Does their status as novice or experienced teachers influence these beliefs and practices? These reflections were presented in section 5.3.3 of the previous chapter and will be discussed in the following sections.

6.3.3.1 Reflections of Novice Teachers

Novice teachers, with less than three years of experience, provided insights into how their emerging beliefs and practices were shaped by their initial classroom experiences. Their reflections revealed common themes:

a. Adaptation and evolution based on practical experiences: Novice teachers are in the process of forming and refining their beliefs and practices, and they acknowledge that these evolve with more experience;

b. Gap between theoretical training and real-world application: They highlighted the challenges of translating theoretical knowledge into practical teaching strategies; and
c. Continuous learning and flexibility: Novice teachers emphasised the necessity of ongoing professional development to enhance their knowledge and skills in the area of literacy instruction.

These novice teachers expressed feelings of inadequate preparation for teaching reading, aligning with Anderson's (2018) findings that novice teachers face significant challenges in reading instruction compared to their experienced counterparts. They identified gaps in their teacher education programs, particularly in practical strategies for addressing diverse student needs and in teaching through a phonics-based approach. Some noted that their training focused more on the early years prior to formal schooling or on understanding children's backgrounds, bilingualism or theoretical aspects, and was less focused on literacy instruction. As detailed in section 3.6.1 of this study, teacher training at the graduate level varies across institutions, typically including field placements with observation periods and teaching practice in schools. However, these placements may have occurred in junior primary or early childhood classes, or a different school sector than where they now teach, potentially exposing them to different literacy instruction approaches. As a result, pre-service teachers may have prioritised the immediate needs of their practicum rather than fully engaging with the broader literacy curriculum provided during their training. However, these novice teachers are now eager to explore different methods to enhance their teaching effectiveness, use assessments effectively and respond to students' needs.

This finding is consistent with Danielson (2007) who posits that it can take up to five years for teachers to achieve automaticity and flexibility across all instructional domains. Given that the novice teachers in this study had less than four years of teaching experience, they all fall within the developmental time frame outlined by Danielson. These novice teachers acknowledged the significant challenges in today's classrooms, posed by language barriers and diverse family backgrounds. With experience, teachers become more aware of the competencies they need to improve, enabling them to seek further training and professional development opportunities. Several novice teachers in this study mentioned revising their approaches based on classroom experience and moving away from strict adherence to teacher training advice, towards what they felt were more engaging strategies. One teacher, for instance, reconsidered her personal beliefs about practices she initially questioned, particularly those related to teaching reading through a phonics approach, after implementing them and observing their effectiveness in her classroom. As observed by Broemmel et al. (2021), teacher development is neither fixed nor sequential, each teacher follows a complex developmental path in their early years of teaching. Key influences on their growth included guidance from experienced colleagues, mastery of student assessment, and the autonomy to make instructional decisions based on learners' needs. Furthermore, the NPF for Early Childhood Education and Care (Ministry for Education, 2021), encourages educators to become reflective individual practitioners able to build on their professional knowledge and experiences and regularly attend professional learning programmes.

6.3.3.2 Reflections of Experienced Teachers

Experienced teachers, with teaching tenures ranging from 7 to 30 years, underscored the significant impact of their extensive experience on their instructional practices. Their reflections highlighted three major themes:

a. Adaptability: Experienced teachers emphasised the importance of adapting their teaching strategies to meet the diverse needs of their students each year;
b. Integration of Varied Strategies and Materials: They discussed the evolution from rigid lessons to more flexible approaches, incorporating diverse materials to enhance literacy instruction; and
c. Balancing Personal and Institutional Philosophies: These experienced teachers often negotiated a middle road between their own beliefs and the mandates of their schools.

These insights indicate that experienced teachers rely heavily on their accumulated knowledge and adaptability in literacy instruction. They continually reflect on past practices and adjust their methods, demonstrating a dynamic and responsive approach to teaching. This observation is consistent with Axisa (2021), who found that extensive teaching experience empowers teachers to more effectively align their practices with their beliefs. Similarly, Basturkmen (2012) argues that over time, teachers' beliefs become deeply ingrained in their practices, making them more adept at articulating the rationale behind their instructional choices. Experienced teachers reported that as they gained more experience and became more reflective practitioners, they were able to compare and evaluate different methods and strategies. This enabled them to transition from rigid lesson structures to more adaptable approaches tailored to meet their students' abilities and needs. They acknowledged that over the years, the Maltese

classroom has changed, with a greater number of children from immigrant families, introducing new linguistic and cultural realities. Experienced teachers' professional growth was further supported by exposure to different school environments, guidance from various administrations, and ongoing professional development opportunities.

6.3.3.3 Comparative Insights

The reflections of both experienced and novice teachers, given during interviews, underscore the evolving nature of instructional beliefs and practices. I have observed that experienced teachers exhibit greater confidence in their teaching approaches and are more convinced of their beliefs, even when these misalign with what the school mandates. This observation aligns with Mitchell (2005) , who noted that experienced teachers' beliefs are more consistently reflected in their classroom practices than those of less experienced teachers. Overall, the findings highlight that teachers' beliefs and practices evolve with experience. Schachter et al. (2016), suggest that since over the past few decades, there has been a strong focus on the importance of reading instruction through professional development programmes and awareness initiatives, more experienced teachers have become more aware of the need to engage children in early reading activities. Both novice and experienced educators indicated that their instructional methods and beliefs shifted based on what they observed to be effective in their classrooms. Teachers from both categories emphasised the importance of flexibility, adaptation, and reflective practice, which leads to more professional growth.

Classroom experience fosters ongoing evaluation and modification of teaching strategies to better suit students' needs. Teachers value understanding and celebrating student diversity, whereas the wide spectrum of learning difficulties requires teachers to

constantly adapt their practices to meet individual student needs, highlighting the importance of flexibility and personalised teaching. Multiculturalism in the classroom is seen as both a challenge and an opportunity with some of the teachers finding creative ways to foster inclusivity. This iterative process of teaching, observing, and adjusting helps teachers develop more effective and responsive literacy instruction methods (Bezzina, 2000). As supported by Rex and Nelson's (2004) and Bauml's (2010) findings, teachers' approach to teaching is determined by their sense of who they are and their unique professional identity as novice or experienced teachers.

6.3.4 RQ4: What specific forms of support or professional development do teachers identify as necessary to enhance their instructional approaches in literacy education?

All participating teachers in this study expressed the need for further support and training, and a willingness to participate in ongoing professional development sessions. Teachers identified several forms of support and professional development essential for enhancing their literacy instruction and these will be discussed per teacher category hereunder.

6.3.4.1 What were the novice teachers' requests?

All novice teachers emphasised the importance of continuous on-site support. Three of them specifically valued the assistance provided by the Literacy Support Teachers at their schools, while one also highlighted the support from the school's leadership team and another appreciated guidance from an experienced colleague. Such collaboration with school administration and experienced colleagues is highly valued by novice teachers. This aligns with Cherubini's (2008) study, where novice teachers recognised the impact of engaging in meaningful dialogue with their colleagues, resulting in enhanced professional growth and self-esteem.

Interestingly, none of the novice teachers mentioned a designated teacher mentor who typically plays a key role in guiding NQTs, through their first two years of teaching. As explained in Chapter 3, a mentoring programme aims to assist teachers in their initial years of teaching, in overcoming challenges, by integrating them into the education system and increasing the chance of retaining these teachers in the workforce (Akiri & Dori, 2021; Attard Tonna, 2008; Kutsyuruba & Bezzina, 2024).

Novice teachers identified hands-on support from Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs) and Literacy Support Teachers (LSTs) particularly through demonstration lessons, as essential, especially when new resources or strategies are introduced. They believe that observing a lesson delivered by a more experienced professional is more effective than merely following instructions from pre-planned teacher manuals. Furthermore, one teacher expressed a desire to be observed during lessons and to receive constructive feedback from SLT members or support professionals. Teachers in their first years of teaching often question their performance and would greatly benefit from counselling and instructional support from their mentors. This mentoring role when approached from a constructivist perspective, where the mentor and mentee collaboratively engage in problem-solving and set developmental goals as equals, can be particularly effective (Burger et al., 2021).

Novice teachers also identified in-service professional development (CoPE) sessions as a valuable tool for their professional development. They appreciated gaining new knowledge and guidance while also having their beliefs and practices validated during these sessions. The teachers requested that such sessions focus on topics that directly impact their teaching in the early years classrooms, and emphasised the

importance of having concerns acknowledged and addressed. This aligns with Bauml's (2010) findings, which suggest that novice teachers who engage in meaningful interactions with more experienced colleagues through legitimate participation in communities of practice are more likely to develop decision-making skills and pedagogical understanding. For novice teachers, their schools and classrooms serve as crucial environments for ongoing teacher education and continuous professional development. Attard Tonna (2023), suggests that when NQTs collaborate closely with the mentors adopting a sociocultural approach to learning and development, and fostering positive and respectful relationships, they undergo a transformational experience which ultimately leads to significant professional growth.

6.3.4.2 What were the experienced teachers' requests?

Similarly to their less experienced counterparts, experienced teachers highly valued on-site assistance, during school hours, including demonstration lessons when new tools or strategies were introduced. They also emphasised the need for direct involvement of the school's SLT and support from the Literacy Support Team, although this assistance was not always consistently available. Despite their experience, these teachers continue to encounter challenges when adapting to curriculum changes or implementation strategies, underscoring the importance of continuous professional development in the ever-changing field of education. Flores (2005) supports this perspective, arguing that the dynamic nature of teaching necessitates that educators remain proactive professionals, capable of navigating the increasing complexity and uncertainty of modern educational settings.

Additionally, experienced teachers advocated for management-driven professional development (CoPE) sessions, which are mandatory (European Commission,

2023a), to be designed to address the evolving demands, new curricular projects and institution-mandated approaches. These sessions are generally organised by the school, sometimes involving the entire teaching staff and often cover new topics like health and safety or artificial intelligence, which are highly valued, but these topics do not always align with the immediate needs of early years teachers. Consequently, these teachers have called for PD sessions that directly target their specific and immediate needs.

6.3.4.3 Comparative insight

Ongoing support and collaboration, whether coming from the school's administration or other more knowledgeable teacher colleagues are highly valued by novice and experienced teachers alike. This corroborates what Admiraal et al. (2023) suggest, that after initial teacher education and induction programmes, instilling a collaborative culture in the school that provides professional support, can alleviate teacher distress and keep new or experienced teachers in the profession. Novice and experienced teachers also expressed the need for better responsiveness to their requests by SLTs, since they recounted instances where their requests were ignored, leading to a feeling of disappointment in not being supported by their school management. This resounds in the study by Bell and Gilbert (1994) that states the importance of also attending to the teachers' feelings, especially those associated with change. Additionally, Akiri and Dori (2021) stress the importance of creating a supportive community and providing opportunities for professional development.

Furthermore, both novice and experienced teachers expressed a strong preference for targeted professional development sessions that directly address their immediate classroom needs. This aligns with Bezzina's (2002) recommendation that schools function as learning communities where CPD sessions are designed to encourage

reflective practice and skill enhancement. Ultimately, the comparative analysis reveals that ongoing, practical support and tailored professional development are crucial for both novice and experienced teachers, to enhance their literacy instruction. These elements not only help them stay informed, skilled, and motivated, as their roles expand to include new tasks and responsibilities (Flores, 2005), but also ensure that they can effectively meet these demands, thereby enhancing the learning experiences of their students.

In conclusion, there appears to be little difference between novice and experienced teachers regarding the forms of support or professional development they identify as necessary to enhance their literacy teaching practices. Both groups identify similar needs for targeted, responsive support to strengthen their instructional approaches to literacy education.

6.4 Chapter Conclusion

Upon critically reflecting on the discussion of findings in this chapter, it becomes evident that while both novice and experienced teachers generally exhibit alignment between their beliefs and practices, minor incongruencies were evident in the interview and observational data collected. The inconsistencies, which warrant further exploration, suggest that although teachers may have their preferences in distinct approaches to early literacy teaching, their application in the classroom can be uneven. This is particularly pronounced when comparing the two groups, where experienced teachers demonstrate a greater propensity to implement and assert their preferred methods for teaching reading in English. In contrast, novice teachers, whose beliefs are shaped by their training and limited experience, acknowledge the potential for these beliefs to evolve as they continue to navigate their teaching careers.

A key insight from this reflection is that teaching experience alone does not sufficiently bridge gaps in knowledge or resolve inconsistencies, particularly in the implementation of specific approaches such as phonics. This underscores the critical role of targeted professional development and ongoing training in fostering effective teaching practices. The inconsistencies observed in this study can be traced to several factors, including gaps in knowledge and training, conflicts between personal beliefs and institutional mandates, and practical challenges such as classroom environment constraints. Addressing these challenges through strategic professional development and aligning instructional practices with teachers' beliefs could mitigate these discrepancies and enhance teaching effectiveness.

The reflection also highlights the importance of flexibility, adaptation, and reflective practice in the professional growth of both novice and experienced educators. Experience facilitates a continuous process of evaluation and adjustment of teaching strategies to better address students' needs. The study emphasises the value of sustained support and collaboration from school leadership and colleagues, reinforcing the idea that a collaborative culture within schools can significantly reduce teacher distress and improve retention. Moreover, the need for more responsive support from school leadership emerged as a critical concern, as teachers reported feelings of frustration and lack of support when their requests were unmet.

Both novice and experienced teachers expressed a clear need for ongoing professional development that is targeted and responsive to their immediate classroom challenges. Continuous professional development that promotes reflective practice and skill enhancement is deemed essential for improving literacy instruction. Notably, there appears to be no significant distinction between the two groups regarding the type of

support and professional development they require to refine their instructional approaches in literacy education since both mentioned the same needs. In summary, this reflection underscores the need for ongoing, practical support and tailored professional development to ensure that all teachers, regardless of experience level, become or remain effective, motivated, and capable of delivering high-quality education. Addressing these needs is crucial for fostering a more consistent alignment between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices, ultimately benefitting student learning.

The following chapter is the final one for this dissertation and features the conclusions, discusses the implications of the findings, and addresses the limitations of the study. It also proposes opportunities for further research and practice.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This comparative study aimed to analyse the beliefs and practices adopted by Maltese primary school teachers in early years education, to discern whether disparities exist between novice and experienced educators. Specifically, the research investigated the beliefs and practices related to literacy instruction, particularly the approaches they choose for teaching reading in English, comparing the two groups of teachers. The findings were examined both on an individual basis and across the two categories of teachers.

This study was motivated by an identified research gap, especially locally, pertaining to the impact of teaching experience on teachers' beliefs and actual instructional practices of early years teachers of reading in primary schools. This topic is of particular interest due to my role as Literacy Support Teacher, where I work closely with novice and experienced teachers, recognising the valuable contributions each group can offer through shared best practices.

This chapter will conclude this research study, synthesising the key findings of the research, discussing their significance in relation to the Cognitive and Sociocultural Theories of Literacy Development, and the research aims. It provides an overview of the research, reflects on the outcomes, and discusses the implications of the findings for literacy instruction. This chapter addresses the limitations of the research investigation, and proposes ideas and suggestions for future research and practice, highlighting the importance of continued development in early literacy instruction.

7.2 Overview of the study

This study, situated within the field of Comparative Education, utilised a qualitative naturalistic research design to explore the beliefs and practices of novice and experienced early years teachers regarding literacy instruction. Drawing on the comparative education framework, which integrates perspectives from various disciplines (Bray et al., 2007; Cowen, 2006), the research aimed to understand the educational phenomena concerning academic theoretical constructs and provide practical implementations in schools (Suter et al., 2019). As noted by Suter et al. (2019), the field of comparative education systematically examines and compares educational phenomena to identify similarities, differences, patterns, and trends. A qualitative approach was chosen to acquire comprehensive data about participants' experiences and beliefs (Burnard et al., 2008). Employing an online questionnaire, participant observations, and semi-structured interviews to collect data, the study sought to understand how these teachers approached literacy instruction and the extent to which their stated beliefs aligned with their practices. The study was guided by a constructivist-interpretive paradigm (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2003), which emphasised the socially constructed realities of participants and researcher reflexivity.

The aim was to explore whether teachers' stated beliefs align with their practices and to identify any discrepancies, thus providing insights into the dynamic nature of literacy instruction in Maltese early years classrooms. The study addressed key challenges in teaching reading in English, including curriculum demands, student diversity, teaching in a bilingual/multilingual context, and the support needed to foster professional growth for teachers. By employing this naturalistic approach, the study allowed for themes and patterns to emerge organically from the data, focusing on the social context of teaching

and learning. This design offered a deep exploration of the complexities of literacy education, helping to understand the role of experience, beliefs, and practices in shaping reading instruction in the early years. This research answered four primary research questions, as discussed in section 1.4, related to the congruence between beliefs and practices, the role of teaching experience, and the types of support teachers need to enhance their literacy instruction. The ten novice and experienced early years teachers have been instrumental in generating a large amount of data which was analysed, compared and contrasted per individual participant and across the two distinct groups. The following section gives an overview of the key outcomes in light of the chosen theoretical framework that guided this research.

7.3 Summary of Outcomes in light of the chosen theoretical framework

This study investigated early literacy teaching in Malta by examining the beliefs and instructional practices of novice and experienced teachers, framed by cognitive and sociocultural theories of literacy development (Davidson, 2010), within a constructivist-interpretive paradigm (Creswell, 2003). The focus lay in exploring the alignment between teachers' professed beliefs and their classroom practices, while also considering the influence of teaching experience on these dynamics. By situating the research within established literacy education frameworks, this theoretical approach guided by two key theories of literacy development and a constructivist-interpretive paradigm provided a robust foundation for comparative analysis. Furthermore, this framework enabled a thorough examination of both the internal coherence of teachers' beliefs and practices and the differences between novice and experienced educators (Cohen et al., 2018; Lederman & Lederman, 2015). The results of this study revealed a general alignment between the stated beliefs and practices for both novice and experienced teachers.

Experienced teachers in this study, however, exhibit a stronger alignment and are more adept at explaining the rationale behind their professional choices.

When comparing the literacy teaching approaches, experienced teachers were found to favour a more balanced literacy approach to reading instruction, integrating multiple methods, while novice teachers displayed a broader range of instructional preferences, however, most of them favoured a phonics-based approach.

The Cognitive Theory of Literacy Development highlights the mental processes involved in reading, such as phonological processing, decoding and memory. This theory is concerned with normative patterns of behaviour in literacy acquisition, focusing on internal cognitive operations (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004). Cognitive theorists assert that literacy development occurs in stages, which are important for guiding teaching practices and identifying the developmental competencies and inadequacies in different groups (Chall et al., 1990; Davidson, 2010). In alphabetic languages, literacy is viewed as a coded system, largely acquired through the learning of phoneme-grapheme correspondences (Davidson, 2010; Purcell-Gates et al., 2004). The theory emphasises the central role of phonics and structured instruction in literacy acquisition, a perspective that aligns with many of the findings in this study, particularly in the practices of novice teachers and in the blended approaches adopted by more experienced educators. These teachers often emphasised phonics-based instruction, reflecting their reliance on cognitive approaches to reading. However, inconsistencies in the implementation of these strategies suggest potential gaps in teacher knowledge or training, which may impede the development of cognitive literacy skills in their students. This underscores the importance of enhancing

teacher preparation and providing targeted professional development in phonics instruction to ensure a more consistent and effective approach to literacy teaching.

The Sociocultural Theory emphasises the role of social interaction, cultural context, and community in literacy development. This perspective underscores the reciprocal relationship between learners and social structures, where literacy development is shaped by social norms, values and interactions (Beach, 1999; Quick, 2023). The sociocultural theory of literacy development advocates for collaborative student interactions, expressive communication, and active teacher facilitation, viewing literacy not as isolated skills, but as a social and cultural construct shaped by values, beliefs, and relationships (Compton-Lilly, 2013; Davidson, 2010; Perez & McCarty, 2004; Purcell-Gates et al., 2004). Teachers in this study who adopted a more integrated approach to literacy - incorporating real-world texts, group activities, and discussions to create a collaborative learning environment – aligned closely with the theory's emphasis on context and interaction. One novice teacher, for instance, fully embraced a whole language approach consistent with the sociocultural framework, though phonics instruction remained part of the curriculum due to institutional requirements. Furthermore, all participating teachers adhered to the sociocultural perspective by expressing the belief that children develop reading skills through exposure to authentic literature. Many also highlighted the importance of cultural influences and actively celebrated the cultural diversity of their students within their literacy practices.

The overall findings suggest that to some extent, all the novice and experienced teachers incorporated strategies from various literacy approaches, reflecting a preference for a more balanced approach. Novice teachers prefer to integrate read-aloud sessions

and daily exposure to authentic literature, with phonics instruction, though some exhibit inconsistencies in applying phonics and struggle to effectively balance these approaches. In contrast, experienced teachers employ more structured practices but demonstrate flexibility in adapting to student needs, blending traditional methods with interactive elements, and addressing multiple aspects of literacy.

Experienced teachers are more proficient at balancing cognitive and sociocultural approaches, yet they also encounter challenges in aligning their practices with school mandates and curriculum constraints. Recognising the complex nature of literacy development and the challenges involved in teaching young learners to read, these educators advocate for a balanced approach that integrates cognitive and sociocultural perspectives (Compton-Lilly, 2013; Davidson, 2010; Dyson, 1995; Freebody & Luke, 1990; Purcell-Gates et al., 2004; Quick, 2023). This corresponds with Gutierrez et al. (1997) and Davidson (2010) who argue that exclusive reliance on either of these approaches is insufficient to adequately address the language needs of all children in diverse classrooms.

7.4 Implications of these findings

7.4.1 For Literacy Instruction Practices

The study provides a lens on the preferred strategies, that novice and experienced teachers use to teach reading in English. The findings indicate that both novice and experienced teachers benefit from a balanced approach to literacy instruction, combining phonics and whole language methods. However, rigid curricula and institutional mandates sometimes limit teachers' ability to implement their beliefs fully (Broemmel et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2008), particularly in creating student-centred, interactive learning

environments. Schools should offer more flexibility in allowing teachers to adapt their instructional methods to better serve diverse student needs.

7.4.2 For School Leadership and Literacy Support Services

School leadership and Literacy Support Services play a critical role in fostering teachers' professional growth. Both novice and experienced teachers emphasised the importance of receiving support from school leaders, and literacy support teachers, particularly through demonstration lessons and constructive feedback. If a collaborative culture is fostered by the school administrators, teachers would feel more supported in their instructional choices and are encouraged to seek professional development that enhances their literacy teaching practices (Meirink et al., 2009). Schools should also encourage experienced and novice teachers to create opportunities for peer learning where they observe each other's actual classroom practices and learn from each other. Novice teachers would be able to see how experienced teachers use flexibility in instructional practices and classroom management, whereas experienced teachers could observe modern alternative pedagogies being used by novice colleagues. This exchange of expertise between novice and experienced teachers can serve to create a reflexive and supportive teaching community, where teachers feel valued and supported. This would also help to reduce stress and attrition rates within the teacher community.

7.4.3 For Teacher Training and Continuing Professional Development

The study highlights the need for more comprehensive and targeted teacher training, particularly in the area of literacy instruction. Even though the participants came from different training backgrounds, teachers reported feeling underprepared, which often led to inconsistencies in their classroom practices. Future teacher training programmes should ensure that novice teachers receive direct experience in early years

classrooms during their practicum. Furthermore, in-service professional development programs should focus on bridging the gap between theory and practice, ensuring that teachers receive ongoing, hands-on training that is directly applicable to their instructional needs (Akiri & Dori, 2021; Bezzina, 2002).

7.5 Limitations of this study

Each study has inherent limitations, and being aware of this, efforts were made to mitigate these challenges and ensure a focused and efficient investigation within the given time frame, as outlined in section 4.8 of the Methodology Chapter and expressed briefly below. As with most qualitative research, a small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings to the broader population of early years teachers in Malta. The sample consisted of five novice and five experienced teachers, and while these findings are valuable for understanding the specific participants' experiences, they should be interpreted with caution. However, despite the sample size, the diversity in the participants' demographics provides a solid basis for comparison. The sample of participants comprised teachers from six different schools, across the three school sectors, and three separate districts in Malta. The participants varied in age, ranging from early 20s to early 50s, and in teaching experience, ranging from newly qualified teachers to those with 30 years of expertise. Their teaching qualifications also varied, with some participants having obtained teaching credentials after starting their careers and others holding degrees in teaching at the Master's level. This offers a reasonable representation of the teaching population in Maltese schools. However, a notable limitation is the absence of gender diversity, as all participants were female. This reflects the gender distribution typical of early years teaching in Malta. While factors such as age, gender or

qualifications were not focal points or comparative elements in this study, they may have influenced the findings and should be considered in future research.

This qualitative study employed a naturalistic research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation in its authentic context. A constructivist-interpretive stance was adopted to minimise subjectivity, and reflexivity was rigorously maintained to prevent the projection of my own experiences onto the interpretation of participants' perspectives.

7.6 Recommendations for Future Research

The outcomes of this study provide a foundation for future research in this field of comparative education, particularly in the exploration of early years teachers' beliefs and instructional practices in literacy education. Future research should involve a larger sample size to allow for generalisation of results and explore potential differences across specific variables, such as school sector, school district or teacher demographics. Expanding the sample size would enable a more comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing teachers' literacy practices.

Additionally, future studies should allocate more time for lesson observations to capture a broader range of instructional practices. This would provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their demonstrated practices in the classroom. Further opportunities for teacher observation, coupled with more extensive interviews would offer richer data for analysis.

While this study was an intra-national study, and its findings are valuable for informing local educational practice, comparative research could extend beyond this setting. It would be particularly insightful to investigate and compare Maltese early years

teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching reading in English, with those of teachers in other bilingual countries where English is introduced at an early age.

Finally, as this research took an interpretive approach to understanding educational phenomena, future studies could adopt a causal-analytic perspective to examine the underlying reasons for the similarities or differences identified in the current study's outcomes (Bray et al., 2014). Such an expert approach would offer a more detailed exploration of the causes driving the diversity in literacy practices across different contexts.

7.7 Reflecting on my positionality

Through the experience gained from this study, my role as an educator has evolved significantly, reflecting a deeper understanding of literacy instruction and a more nuanced perspective on teacher beliefs and practices. Engaging with this study has enhanced my ability to critically analyse and interpret literacy practices through theoretical and empirical lenses. Through listening to the voices of the participants, I have solidified my belief in a Balanced Approach that harmonises the strengths of Synthetic Phonics and Whole Language. I am now more committed to fostering professional growth and ensuring that instructional practices are inclusive, evidence-based, and adaptable. This learning journey has refined my perspectives, helping me recognise the importance of collaboration and reflexivity in professional development. As a Literacy Support Teacher, I will promote more peer learning opportunities, enabling novice and experienced teachers to learn from each other within supportive school communities.

My current positionality reflects a more holistic and informed approach, integrating my practical expertise, scholarly insights, and commitment to empowering educators and improving literacy outcomes in our schools.

7.8 Conclusion

Throughout this investigation, the voices of the participating teachers have been the fulcrum of the whole study. This study has explored the relationship between early years teachers' beliefs and practices in the early teaching of reading in English, focusing on the comparison between novice and experienced educators. The findings were drawn from teachers' responses and observations, highlighting the alignment between beliefs and practices while also addressing the influence of experience on instructional choices.

References

References

Admiraal, W., Kittelsen Røberg, K., Wiers-Jenssen, J., & Saab, N. (2023). Mind the gap: Early-career teachers' level of preparedness, professional development, working conditions, and feelings of distress. *Social Psychology of Education, 26*(6), 1759–1787. 10.1007/s11218-023-09819-6

Agius, S. J., & Busuttil, M. (2010). *The beliefs and practices of Form 1 Mathematics teachers* https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar//handle/123456789/2925

Akiri, E., & Dori, Y. J. (2021). Professional Growth of Novice and Experienced STEM Teachers | Journal of Science Education and Technology. *Journal of Science Education and Technology,* (31), 129–142. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10956-021-09936-x

Al-Arfajr, A. M. (2001). *Philosophical beliefs and instructional practices of two effective literacy teachers: A qualitative case study* Available from ProQuest One Academic. (304683103). https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/philosophical-beliefs-instructional-practices-two/docview/304683103/se-2?accountid=27934

Allen, R., & Wiles, J. (2016). Full article: A rose by any other name: participants choosing research pseudonyms. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 13*(2), 149–165. https://www-tandfonline-com.ejournals.um.edu.mt/doi/full/10.1080/14780887.2015.1133746

Altun, G. (2010). *The Differences between Novice and Experienced Teachers in Terms of Questioning Techniques* (M.A.). Available from ProQuest One Academic. (2665128530). https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/differences-between-novice-experienced-teachers/docview/2665128530/se-2?accountid=27934

Anderson, K. (2018). *Understanding the Differences between Novice and Experienced Reading Teachers* (Ed.D.). Available from ProQuest One Academic. (2136286879). https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/understanding-differences-between-novice/docview/2136286879/se-2?accountid=27934

Aspers, P., & Corte, U. (2019). What is Qualitative in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Sociology, 42*(2)10.1007/s11133-019-9413-7

Attard Tonna, M. (2008). *Teacher in-service provision in Malta: Comparative Perspective* https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/72775

Attard Tonna, M. (2019). The benefits of mentoring newly qualified teachers in Malta. *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education, 8*(4), 268–284. 10.1108/IJMCE-02-2019-0034

Attard Tonna, M. (2023). *The Induction of Newly Qualified Teachers: Mentoring as Part of a Coherent Approach Toward Quality Teacher Education*. Emerald Publishing Limited. 10.1108/s1479-368720230000044019

Axisa, E. M. (. (2021). *Communicative language teaching : the perspectives of novice and experienced English teachers* https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/102307

Baldacchino, A. (2021). *The introduction of the emergent curriculum's impact on the professional identity of early childhood educators* https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/102308

Balsamo, J. S. (2020). *Novice Teachers in Primary Grades: Pre-Service and District Induction Experiences* Available from ProQuest One Academic. (2438985024). https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/novice-teachers-primary-grades-pre-service/docview/2438985024/se-2?accountid=27934

Barrett, J., Jones, G., Mooney, E., Thornton, C., Cady, J., Guinee, P., & Olsen, J. (2002). Working with novice teachers: Challenges for professional development. *Mathematics Teacher Education and Development, 4*, 15–27.

Basturkmen, H. (2012). Review of research into the correspondence between language teachers' stated beliefs and practices. *System (Linköping), 40*(2), 282–295. 10.1016/j.system.2012.05.001

Bauml, M. M. (2010). *Toward the wisdom of practice: Curricular decision making among novice primary grade teachers in standards-based schools* (Ph.D.). Available from ProQuest One Academic, Social Science Premium Collection. (748217808). https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/toward-wisdom-practice-curricular-decision-making/docview/748217808/se-2?accountid=27934

Beach, K. (1999). Consequential Transitions: A Sociocultural Expedition beyond Transfer in Education. *Review of Research in Education, 24*, 101–139. 10.2307/1167268

Bell, B., & Gilbert, J. (1994). Teacher development as professional, personal, and social development. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 10*(5), 483–497. 10.1016/0742-051X(94)90002-7

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research : QR, 15*(2), 219–234. 10.1177/1468794112468475

Bezzina, A. J. (2000). *Teachers' practices and beliefs in the teaching of reading comprehension* https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/71141

Bezzina, C. (2002). Rethinking teachers' professional development in Malta: agenda for the twenty-first century. *Journal of in-Service Education, 28*(1), 57–78. 10.1080/13674580200200171

Bills, B. (2020). *Teacher Knowledge, Beliefs, and Instructional Practices in Early Literacy: A Comparison Study* Available from ProQuest Central Student https://search.proquest.com/docview/2492694627

Billups, F. D. (2020). *Qualitative Data Collection Tools: Design, Development, and Applications*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Incorporated. 10.4135/9781071878699

Birmingham, P., & Wilkinson, D. (2003). *Using Research Instruments: A Guide for Researchers* (1st [online] ed.). Routledge Falmer.

Bonello, C., Camilleri, R. A., & Attard, C. (2022). The Emergent Curriculum 'Marries' eTwinning in the Early Years: A Rediscovery of Froebel's Kindergarten Through One

Transformative Learning Experience in 21st Century Malta. *Curriculum and Teaching, 37*(2), 15–38. 10.7459/ct/37.2.03

Borg, N. (2023). *Professional love and gender: the beliefs and practices of male and female pre-service and in-service kindergarten educators in Malta* https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/121890

Borg, S. (1998). Teachers' Pedagogical Systems and Grammar Teaching: A Qualitative Study. *TESOL Quarterly, 32*(1), 9–38. 10.2307/3587900

Borg, S. (1999). The Use of Grammatical Terminology in the Second Language Classroom: A Qualitative Study of Teachers' Practices and Cognitions. *Applied Linguistics, 20*(1), 95–126. 10.1093/applin/20.1.95

Borg, S. (2003). Teacher cognition in language teaching: A review of research on what language teachers think, know, believe, and do. *Language Teaching, 36*(2), 81–109. 10.1017/S0261444803001903

Borg, S. (2011). The impact of in-service teacher education on language teachers' beliefs. *System (Linköping), 39*(3), 370–380. 10.1016/j.system.2011.07.009

Bowers, J. S. (2020). Reconsidering the Evidence That Systematic Phonics Is More Effective Than Alternative Methods of Reading Instruction. *Educational Psychology Review, 32*(3), 681–705. 10.1007/s10648-019-09515-y

Bowsher, A., Sparks, D., Mulvaney Hoyer, K., & National Centre for Education Statistics. (2018). Preparation and Support for Teachers in Public Schools: Reflections on the

First Year of Teaching. . *Stats in Brief, NCES 2018-143* https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2018143

Brady, S. A., & Shankweiler, D. P. (1991). *Phonological Processes in Literacy - A tribute to Isabelle Y Liberman*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bray, M., Adamson, B., & Mason, M. (2007). *Comparative education research : approaches and methods*. Springer.

Bray, M., Adamson, B., & Mason, M. (2014). *Comparative Education Research: Approaches and Methods*. Cham: Springer International Publishing AG.

Breadmore, H., & Carroll, J. (2019,)). *Theories of early literacy development.* The Education Hub. Retrieved Apr 28, 2023, from https://theeducationhub.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Theories-of-early-literacy-development-v2-1.pdf

Bresler, L. (1995). Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research Methodology on JSTOR. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education, Fall, 1995*(126), 29–41. https://www-jstor-org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/40318732

Brincat, J. M. (2017). The language question and education: a political controversy on a linguistic topic. In R. G. Sultana (Ed.), *Yesterday's Schools: Readings in Maltese Educational History* (pp. 161–182). Xirocco Publishing.

Broemmel, A. D., Swaggerty, E. A., Rigell, A., & Blanton, B. (2021). I Felt like My Practice Was Catching up with My Beliefs: A Longitudinal Cognitive Study of Seven Early Career Literacy Teachers and Their Praxis. *Action in Teacher Education, 43*(3), 285–300. 10.1080/01626620.2020.1756528

Brown, C. S. (2014). Language and literacy development in the early years: Foundational skills that support emergent readers. *Language and Literacy Spectrum, 24*, 35–49.

Buckingham, J., Wheldall, K., & Robyn Beaman-Wheldall. (2013). Why Jaydon can't read: The triumph of ideology over evidence in teaching reading. *Policy (Centre for Independent Studies (N.S.W.)), 29*(3), 21–32. https://search.informit.com.au/browseJournalTitle;res+IELHSS;issn=1032-6634

Burger, J., Bellhäuser, H., & Imhof, M. (2021). Mentoring styles and novice teachers' well-being: The role of basic need satisfaction. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 103*, 103345. 10.1016/j.tate.2021.103345

Burnard, P., Gill, P., Stewart, K., Treasure, E., & Chadwick, B. (2008). Analysing and presenting qualitative data. *British Dental Journal, 204*(8), 429–432. 10.1038/sj.bdj.2008.292

Callahan, J. (2016). Encouraging Retention of New Teachers Through Mentoring Strategies. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin, 83*(1), 6–11. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/encouraging-retention-new-teachers-through/docview/1822382396/se-2?accountid=27934

Calleja, J. (2021). *Changes in mathematics teachers' self-reported beliefs and practices over the course of a blended continuing professional development programme*. Springer Netherlands.

Camilleri Grima, A. (2013). A select review of bilingualism in education in Malta. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 16*(5), 553–569. 10.1080/13670050.2012.716813

Campbell, S. (2020). Teaching phonics without teaching phonics: Early childhood teachers' reported beliefs and practices. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy, 20*(4), 783–814. 10.1177/1468798418791001

Carlman, L. (2004). *Literacy beliefs of early childhood teachers: Linking theory to practice* (Doctor of Philosophy).

Caspersen, J. (2013). The valuation of knowledge and normative reflection in teacher qualification. A comparison of teacher educators, novice and experienced teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 30*(1), 109–119. 10.1016/j.tate.2012.11.003

Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K. (2018). Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition From Novice to Expert. *Psychol Sci Public Interest, 19*(1), 5–51. 10.1177/1529100618772271

Cefai, C., Keresztes, N., Galea, N., & Spiteri, R. (2019). *A passage to Malta. The health and wellbeing of foreign children in Malta.* .Commissioner for Children, Malta. https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/44230

Centre for Literacy UoM. (2014). *The National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo 2014 - 2019*. Ministry of Education and Employment. https://nla.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/A-National-Literacy-Strategy-for-All-in-Malta-and-Gozo.pdf

Chall, J. S. (1967). *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. McGraw Hill Inc.

Chall, J. S., Jacobs, V. A., & Baldwin, L. E. (1990). *The Reading Crisis : Why Poor Children Fall Behind*. Harvard University Press.

Chandler, R., Anstey, E., & Ross, H. (2015). Listening to Voices and Visualizing Data in Qualitative Research: Hypermodal Dissemination Possibilities. *SAGE Open, 5*(2), 215824401559216. 10.1177/2158244015592166

Cherubini, L. (2008). A grounded theory analysis of beginning teachers' experiences: Illuminating leadership capacities. *International Journal of Teacher Leadership, 1*(1), 22–38.

Ciezczyk, A. (2021). Emergent Curriculum as a Point of Resistance and an Act of Democracy. *The International Journal of Early Childhood Learning, 28*(1)10.18848/2327-7939/CGP/v28i01/61-72

Clark, A. (2013). *Phonics-based Reading Vs. The Whole Language Approach - Educational Connections.* Retrieved Apr 30, 2023, from https://ectutoring.com/phonics-based-reading-whole-language-approach

Clay, M. M. (1991). *Becoming Literate: The Construction of Inner Control*. Heinemann.

Cohen, L., Manion. L, & Morrison, K. (2018). In Taylor & Francis (Ed.), *Research methods in education* (8th ed.). Routledge.

Compton-Lilly, C. (2013). Building of What Children Bring : Cognitive and Sociocultural Approaches to Teaching Literacy. *E-Journal of Balanced Reading Instruction, 1*(1), 4–11. http://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/jblri/vol1/iss1

The Constitution of Malta , 5, (1964). https://legislation.mt/eli/const/eng

Council of Europe. (2015). *Language Education Policy Profile Malta.* . Strasbourg: https://rm.coe.int/language-education-policy-profile-malta/16807b3c39

Council, N. R., Medicine, I. o., Board on Children, Y., and Families, Success, Committee on the Science of Children Birth to Age 8: Deepening and Broadening the Foundation for, Kelly, B. B., & Allen, L. (2015). *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8* (1st ed.). National Academies Press. 10.17226/19401

Cowen, R. (2006). Acting comparatively upon the educational world: puzzles and possibilities. *Oxford Review of Education, 32*(5), 561–573. 10.1080/03054980600976155

Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.. ed.). Sage.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.

Daniel, B. K. (2019). Using the TACT framework to learn the principles of rigour in qualitative research. *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods, 17*(3), 118–129. 10.34190/JBRM.17.3.002

Daniels, H., Lauder, H., & Porter, J. (2009). *Educational theories, cultures and learning : a critical perspective*. Routledge. 10.4324/9780203379417

Danielson, C. (2007). *Enhancing Professional Practice A Framework for Teaching* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Darling-Hammond, L., Chung, R., & Frelow, F. (2002). Variation in Teacher Preparation: How Well Do Different Pathways Prepare Teachers to Teach? *Journal of Teacher Education, 53*(4), 286–302. 10.1177/0022487102053004002

Davidson, K. (2010). The integration of Cognitive and sociocultural theories of literacy development: Why? How? *Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 56*(3), 246–256.

Debono, R. (2023). *Personnel in Education: 2021/2022.* (No. NR203/2023). Malta: National Statistics Office. https://nso.gov.mt/personnel-in-education-2021-2022/

Dehghan, F. (2022). Teachers' perceptions of professionalism: a top-down or a bottom-up decision-making process? *Professional Development in Education, 48*(4), 705–714. 10.1080/19415257.2020.1725597

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2017). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (5th ed.). SAGE.

Dicke, T., Parker, P. D., Holzberger, D., Kunina-Habenicht, O., Kunter, M., & Leutner, D. (2015). Beginning teachers' efficacy and emotional exhaustion: Latent changes, reciprocity, and the influence of professional knowledge. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 41*, 62–72. 10.1016/j.cedpsych.2014.11.003

Dion, E., Roux, C., Landry, D., Fuchs, D., Wehby, J., & Dupéré, V. (2011). Improving Attention and Preventing Reading Difficulties among Low-Income First-Graders: A Randomized Study. *Prevention Science; Prev Sci, 12*(1), 70–79. 10.1007/s11121-010-0182-5

Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education. (2015a). *Learning Outcomes Framework*. Ministry for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport.

Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education. (2015b). *Toolkit for early years - educators guide for pedagogy and assessment*. Directorate for Quality and Standard in Education.

Dodgson, J. E. (2019). Reflexivity in Qualitative Research. *Journal of Human Lactation, 35*(2), 220–222. 10.1177/0890334419830990

Dyson, A. H. (1995). What Difference Does Difference Make? Teacher Perspectives on Diversity, Literacy, and the Urban Primary School. *English Education, 27*(2), 77–139.

Eadie, P., Stark, H., Snow, P., Gold, L., Watts, A., Shingles, B., Orsini, F., Connell, J., & Goldfeld, S. (2022). Teacher Talk in Early Years Classrooms following an Oral Language and Literacy Professional Learning Program. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, 15*(2), 302–329. 10.1080/19345747.2021.1998938

Ehri, L. C., & McCormick, S. (1998). Phases of Word Learning: Implications for Instruction with Delayed and Disabled Readers. *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 14*(2), 135–163. 10.1080/1057356980140202

Ehri, L. C., & Roberts, T. (2006). The Roots of Learning to Read and Write: Acquisition of Letters and Phonemic Awareness. In D. K. Dickinson, & S. B. Neuman (Eds.), *Handbook of Early Literacy Research, Volume 2* (pp. 113–131). The Guilford Press.

Eun, B. (2019). The zone of proximal development as an overarching concept: A framework for synthesizing Vygotsky's theories. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 51*(1), 18–30. 10.1080/00131857.2017.1421941

European Commission. (2023a, November). *Continuing professional development for teachers working in early childhood and school education.* https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/malta/continuing-professional-development-teachers-working-early. Retrieved Jul 10, 2024, from https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/malta/continuing-professional-development-teachers-working-early

European Commission. (2023b, November). *Fundamental principles and national policies.* https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu. Retrieved Sep 12, 2024, from https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/malta/fundamental-principles-and-national-policies

European Commission. (2023c, November). *Organisation of the education system and of its structure.* https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu. Retrieved Jul 5, 2024, from

https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/malta/organisation-education-system-and-its-structure

European Commission. (2023d, November). *Quality Assurance.* https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/malta/quality-assurance. Retrieved 10.07.24, from

European Commission. (2023e, November). *Teachers and education staff.* https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/malta/teachers-and-education-staff. Retrieved 10.07.24, from https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/malta/teachers-and-education-staff

European Commission. (2024, January). *Teaching and Learning in Primary Education.* https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/malta/teaching-and-learning-primary-education. Retrieved 05.08.23, from https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/malta/teaching-and-learning-primary-education

Ferguson, J. C. (2002). *Teacher beliefs and their impact on classroom practice: Learning from the voices of successful teachers* Available from ProQuest One Academic. (305456334). https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/teacher-beliefs-their-impact-on-classroom/docview/305456334/se-2?accountid=27934

Fleer, M., & van Oers, B. (2017). *International Handbook of Early Childhood Education*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands. 10.1007/978-94-024-0927-7

Flores, M. A. (2005). Teachers' views on recent curriculum changes: tensions and challenges. *Curriculum Journal (London, England), 16*(3), 401–413. 10.1080/09585170500256479

Frankel, K. K., Becker, B. L. C., Rowe, M. W., & Pearson, P. D. (2016). From "What is Reading?" to What is Literacy? *The Journal of Education, 196*(3), 7–17. https://www-jstor-org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/26612624

Freebody, P., & Luke, A. (1990). Literacies programs: Debates and demands in cultural context. *Prospect: Australian Journal of TESOL, 5*(3), 7–16.

Giallo, R., & Little, E. (2003). Classroom behaviour problems: The relationship between preparedness, classroom experiences, and self-efficacy in graduate and student teachers. *Australian Journal of Educational & Developmental Psychology, 3*(1), 21–34.

Giordano, G. (1975). The teaching of reading art or science? *Theory into Practice, 14*(3), 208–212. 10.1080/00405847509542577

Goldstein, L. S. (2007). Embracing Pedagogical Multiplicity: Examining Two Teachers' Instructional Responses to the Changing Expectations for Kindergarten in U.S. Public Schools. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 21*(4), 378–399. 10.1080/02568540709594602

Gonzalez, L., Brown, M., & Slate, J. (2008). Teachers Who Left the Teaching Profession: A Qualitative Understanding. *The Qualitative Report, 13*(1), 1–11. 10.46743/2160-3715/2008.1601

Goodman, Y., & Martens, p. (2007). In Goodman Y., Martens P.(Eds.), *Critical issues in early literacy : research and pedagogy* (1st ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum.

Grageda, C., Tinapay, A. O., Tirol, S. L., & Abadiano, M. N. (2022). Socio-Cultural Theory in the Cognitive Development Perspective. *NeuroQuantology, 20*(16), 1482. 10.14704/NQ.2022.20.16.NQ880145

Gray, C., & Macblain, S. (2012). *Learning Theories in Childhood*. Sage Publications Inc.

Griffith, P. L., Beach, S. A., Ruan, J., & Dunn, A. L. (2008). *Literacy for Young Children: A Guide for Early Childhood Educators*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press. 10.4135/9781483329734

Grossman, P. L. (1990). *The making of a teacher: teacher knowledge and teacher education*. Teachers' College P.

Gupta, R. (2004). Old habits die hard: literacy practices of pre-service teachers. *Journal of Education for Teaching : JET, 30*(1), 67–78. 10.1080/0260747032000162325

Gutierrez, K., Baquedano-Lopez, P., & Turner, M. G. (1997). Putting language back into language arts: When the radical middle meets the third space. *Language Arts, 74*(5), 368–378. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/putting-language-back-into-arts-when-radical/docview/196847020/se-2?accountid=27934

Hammond, L. (2015). Early childhood educators' perceived and actual metalinguistic knowledge, beliefs and enacted practice about teaching early reading. *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties, 20*(2), 113–128. 10.1080/19404158.2015.1023208

Harley, B., & Cornelissen, J. (2022). Rigor With or Without Templates? The Pursuit of Methodological Rigor in Qualitative Research. *Organizational Research Methods, 25*(2), 239–261. 10.1177/1094428120937786

Hassan, Z. A., Schattner, P., & Mazza, D. (2006). Doing A Pilot Study: Why Is It Essential? *Malaysian Family Physician : The Official Journal of the Academy of Family Physicians of Malaysia, 1*(2-3), 70–73. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4453116/

Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words : language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge U.P.

Indrisano, R., & Chall, J. S. (1995). Literacy Development. *The Journal of Education, 177*(1), 63–83. http://www.jstor.org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/42742352

Jeynes, W. H., & Littell, S. W. (2000). A Meta-Analysis of Studies Examining the Effect of Whole Language Instruction on the Literacy of Low-SES Students. *The Elementary School Journal, 101*(1), 21–33. http://www.jstor.org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/1002333

Johnson, J. L., Adkins, D., & Chauvin, S. (2020). A Review of the Quality Indicators of Rigor in Qualitative Research. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education, 84*(1), 138–146. 10.5688/ajpe7120

Kagan, D. M. (1992). Implication of Research on Teacher Belief. *Educational Psychologist, 27*(1), 65–90. 10.1207/s15326985ep2701_6

Kivunja, C. (2018). Distinguishing between Theory, Theoretical Framework, and Conceptual Framework: A Systematic Review of Lessons from the Field. *International Journal of Higher Education, 7*(6), 44–53. https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v7n6p44

Klykken, F. H. (2022). Implementing continuous consent in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research : QR, 22*(5), 795–810. 10.1177/14687941211014366

Krashen, S. (2002). Defending Whole Language: The Limits of Phonics Instruction and the Efficacy of Whole Language Instruction. *Reading Improvement, 39*(1), 32–42.

Kutsyuruba, B., , Walker, K., & Godden, L. (2019). Contextual factors in early career teaching: A systematic review of international research on teacher induction and mentoring programs. . *Journal of Global Education and Research, 3*(2), 85–123. 10.5038/2577-509X.3.2.1057

Kutsyuruba, B., & Bezzina, C. (2024). Teacher Induction and Mentoring in Malta: A Review of the Literature. *Education, 4*(1-2024), 39–59.

Lederman, N. G., & Lederman, J. S. (2015). What Is A Theoretical Framework? A Practical Answer. *Journal of Science Teacher Education, 26*(7), 593–597. 10.1007/s10972-015-9443-2

Liston, D., Whitcomb, J., & Borko, H. (2006). Too Little or Too Much. *Journal of Teacher Education, 57*(4), 351–358. 10.1177/0022487106291976

Luft, J. A., Navy, S. L., Wong, S. S., & Hill, K. M. (2022). The first 5 years of teaching science: The beliefs, knowledge, practices, and opportunities to learn of secondary

science teachers. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 59*(9), 1692–1725. 10.1002/tea.21771

Mackenzie, N., & Knipe, S. (2006). Research dilemmas: Paradigms, methods and methodology. *Issues in Educational Research, 16*(2) https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/research-dilemmas-paradigms-methods-methodology/docview/2393182114/se-2?accountid=27934

Maltese Sign Language Recognition Act (CAP 556), (2016). https://legislation.mt/eli/cap/556/eng/pdf

Matsumoto, H., & Tsuneda, M. M. (2019). Teachers' beliefs about literacy practices for young children in early childhood education and care settings. *International Journal of Early Years Education, 27*(4), 441–456. 10.1080/09669760.2018.1547630

Mayo, J. (2010). *A study of early childhood education teachers' beliefs and practices about early literacy learning* Available from ProQuest One Education https://www.proquest.com/docview/757731948

McCarty, T. L. (2006). *Language, Literacy, and Power in Schooling*. Mahwah: Taylor and Francis. 10.4324/9781410613547

Meirink, J. A., Meijer, P. C., Verloop, N., & Bergen, T. C. M. (2009). Understanding teacher learning in secondary education: The relations of teacher activities to changed beliefs about teaching and learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 25*(1), 89–100. 10.1016/j.tate.2008.07.003

Mifsud, C. L., & Petrova, R. (2017). *Young Children (0-8) and Digital Technology: The National Report for Malta*. University of Malta. Centre for Literacy.

Mifsud, C. L., Vella, L. A., & Muscat, D. (2021). *A National Literacy Strategy For All in Malta and Gozo 2021 - 2030*. Ministry for Education. https://nla.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/National-Literacy-Strategy-2021-2030-Consultation-Document.pdf

Mifsud, C. L., & Vella, L. A. (2020). Early Language Education in Malta. In M. Schwartz (Ed.), *Handbook of Early Language Education* (pp. 841–866). Springer International Handbooks of Education. 10.1007/978-3-030-91662-6_29

Miller, P. H. (2016). *Theories of developmental psychology* (6th ed.. ed.). Worth Publishers.

Milton, J. (2011). *'Speak in English!': The language use of student teachers teaching English in Maltese primary schools: case studies* Available from ProQuest One Academic. (1931611912). https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/speak-english-language-use-student-teachers/docview/1931611912/se-2?accountid=27934

Ministry for Education. (2021). *Early Childhood Education and Care (0-7 years) National Policy Framework for Malta and Gozo*. Directorate for Quality and Standard in Education. https://educationservices.gov.mt/en/dqse/Documents/publications/NPF-Early-Childhood-Education-and-Care-ENG-A4-Oct21.pdf

Ministry for Education and Employment. (2012). *National Curriculum Framework For All.*https://curriculum.gov.mt/en/Resources/The-NCF/Documents/NCF.pdf

Ministry for Education and Employment. (2016). *A Language Policy for the Early Years in Malta and Gozo.*https://nla.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/A-Language-Policy-for-the-Early-Years-in-Malta-and-Gozo.pdf

Ministry for Education and Employment. (2021). *Toolkit for inclusive early childhood education and care - Providing high quality education and care to all young children.* Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/399018

Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation. (2023). *DLAP 092/2023 Implementing the Learning Outcomes Framework in the Early Years (Yr1 Yr2)*

Mitchell, E. W. (2005). *The influence of beliefs on the teaching practices of high school foreign language teachers* (Ph.D.). Available from ProQuest One Academic, ProQuest One Literature. (304993510). https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/influence-beliefs-on-teaching-practices-high/docview/304993510/se-2?accountid=27934

Moraal, E., Suhre, C., & van Veen, K. (2024). The importance of an explicit, shared school vision for teacher commitment. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 137*, 104387. 10.1016/j.tate.2023.104387

Morales, A. M. (2014). *Unravelling Literacy: A comparative study of the beliefs and practices of novice and experienced teachers of literacy in Malta.*(MA-CEMES). https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar//handle/123456789/2789

Morse, J. M. (2015). Critical Analysis of Strategies for Determining Rigor in Qualitative Inquiry. *Qualitative Health Research, 25*(9), 1212–1222. 10.1177/1049732315588501

Morse, J. M., Barrett, M., Mayan, M., Olson, K., & Spiers, J. (2002). Verification Strategies for Establishing Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 1*(2), 13–22. 10.1177/160940690200100202

Murphy, E., Dingwall, R., Greatbatch, D., Parker, S., & Watson, P. (1999). Qualitative research methods in health technology assessment: a review of the literature. *Health Technology Assessment, 2*(16)10.3310/hta2160

National Literacy Agency. . https://nla.gov.mt/.

National Research Council. (2015). *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*. The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/19401

National Statistics Office. (2024). *Census of Population and Housing 2021- Final Report - Health, Education, Employment and Other Characteristics Volume 3.* . https://nso.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/volume3-Census-of-Population-2021.pdf

National, R. C., Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in, Young Children, Board on Behavioral, Cognitive, and,Sensory Sciences, Susan Burns, M., Snow, C. E., Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences, and Education, & Griffin, P. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children: Intellectual Property in the Information Age*. National Academy Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/6023

O'Brien, D., & Rogers, T. (2016). Sociocultural Perspectives on Literacy and Learning. In L. Corno, & E. M. Anderman (Eds.), *Handbook of Educational Psychology* (3rd ed., pp. 325–336). Routledge. 10.4324/9781315688244-35

OECD. (2020). *TALIS 2018 Results (Volume II): Teachers and School Leaders as Valued Professionals*. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/19cf08df-en

Ozuem, W., Willis, M., & Howell, K. (2022). Thematic analysis without paradox: sensemaking and context. *Qualitative Market Research, 25*(1), 143–157. 10.1108/QMR-07-2021-0092

Pajares, M. F. (1992). Teachers' Beliefs and Educational Research: Cleaning up a Messy Construct. *Review of Educational Research, 62*(3), 307–332. 10.3102/00346543062003307

Panzavecchia, M. (2020). *In Other Words : Maltese Primary School Teachers' Perceptions of Cross-Linguistic Practices and Flexible Language Pedagogies in Bilingual and Multilingual English Language Classes* Available from ProQuest One Academic. (2579371808). https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/other-words-maltese-primary-school-teachers/docview/2579371808/se-2?accountid=27934 https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/28807/

Parsons, S. A., Vaughn, M., Malloy, J. A., & Pierczynski, M. (2017). The development of teachers' visions from preservice into their first years teaching: A longitudinal study. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 64*, 12–25. 10.1016/j.tate.2017.01.018

Pearson, P. D. (2004). The Reading Wars. *Educational Policy, 18*(1), 216–252. 10.1177/0895904803260041

Perez, B., & McCarty, T. L. (2004). *Sociocultural contexts of language and literacy* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, N.J. : Lawrence Erlbaum.

Phillips, B. M., & Torgesen, J. K. (2005). Phonemic Awareness and Reading: Beyond the Growth of Initial Reading Accuracy. In D. K. Dickinson, & S. B. Neuman (Eds.), *Handbook of Early Literacy Research, Volume 2* (pp. 101–112). Guilford Publications.

Piaget, J. (1964). Part I: Cognitive development in children: Piaget development and learning. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 2*(3), 176–186. 10.1002/tea.3660020306

Puglisi, M. L., Hulme, C., Hamilton, L. G., & Snowling, M. J. (2017). The Home Literacy Environment Is a Correlate, but Perhaps Not a Cause, of Variations in Children's Language and Literacy Development. *Scientific Studies of Reading; Sci Stud Read, 21*(6), 498–514. 10.1080/10888438.2017.1346660

Purcell-Gates, V., Jacobson, E., & Degener, S. (2004). *Print Literacy Development: Uniting Cognitive and Social Practice Theories*. Harvard University Press. 10.4159/9780674042377

Quick, J. (2023). Socio-cognitive research in action: What can we learn from a single case? *Journal of Language & Literacy Education, 19*(1), 1.

Rex, L. A., & Nelson, M. C. (2004). How Teachers' Professional Identities Position High-Stakes Test Preparation in Their Classrooms. *Teachers College Record (1970), 106*(6), 1288–1331. 10.1111/j.1467-9620.2004.00380.x

Risko, V. J., Roller, C. M., Cummins, C., Bean, R. M., Block, C. C., Anders, P. L., & Flood, J. (2008). A Critical Analysis of Research on Reading Teacher Education. *Reading Research Quarterly, 43*(3), 252–288. https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/critical-analysis-research-on-reading-teacher/docview/212139623/se-2?accountid=27934

Rosenshine, B. (2001). *Book review of The Academic Achievement Challenge: What Really Works in the Classroom? by Jeanne Chall*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. 10.1207/S15327671ESPR0603_13

Roshan, D. (2019). What is phonics?: 'When they leave, they can read and write'. *The Times Educational Supplement,* https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/what-is-phonics/docview/2323829573/se-2?accountid=27934

Ross, P. T., & Bibler Zaidi, N. L. (2019). Limited by our limitations. *Perspectives on Medical Education, 8*(July), 261–264. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-019-00530-x

Sachs, J. (2016). Teacher professionalism: why are we still talking about it? *Teachers and Teaching, Theory and Practice, 22*(4), 413–425. 10.1080/13540602.2015.1082732

Sampson, H. (2004). Navigating the waves: the usefulness of a pilot in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research : QR, 4*(3), 383–402. 10.1177/1468794104047236

Scales, R. Q., Wolsey, T. D., Lenski, S., Smetana, L., Yoder, K. K., Dobler, E., Grisham, D. L., & Young, J. R. (2018). Are We Preparing or Training Teachers? Developing Professional Judgment in and Beyond Teacher Preparation Programs. *Journal of Teacher Education; Journal of Teacher Education, 69*(1), 7–21. 10.1177/0022487117702584

Scerri, C. A. (2022). *Transitioning from a theme-based curriculum to an emergent approach : experiences of four Maltese kindergarten educators* https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/112773

Schachter, R. E., Spear, C. F., Piasta, S. B., Justice, L. M., & Logan, J. A. R. (2016). Early childhood educators' knowledge, beliefs, education, experiences, and children's language- and literacy-learning opportunities: What is the connection? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 36*, 281–294. 10.1016/j.ecresq.2016.01.008

Schembri, H., & Sciberras, C. (2022). A practical guide to conduct research in schools in Malta: Reflections, implications and suggestions. *The Educator,* (7), 55–77.

Schull, C. P., Croix, L. L., Miller, S. E., Austin, K. S., & Kidd, J. K. (2021). 3. Examining Theories that Support Literacy Development. *Early Childhood Literacy: Engaging and Empowering Emergent Readers and Writers, Birth - Age 5*

Schwartz, M., Ed. (2022). Handbook of Early Language Education. Springer International Handbooks of Education. *Handbook of Early Language Education,* 10.1007/978-3-030-47073-9

Sciriha, L. (2013). Which languages for which schools? Issues in language policy in bilingual Malta. https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/96274

Sedgwick, P., & Greenwood, N. (2015). Understanding the Hawthorne effect. *BMJ : British Medical Journal (Online), 351*10.1136/bmj.h4672

Serceki, A. A. (2021). *Seeing the Trees for the Forest: An Analysis of Novice and Experienced Teachers' Self-Efficacy and Stress* https://search.proquest.com/docview/2560880346?pq-origsite=primo

SfCE. (2024). *Secretariat for Catholic Education.* https://www.csm.edu.mt/literacy/

SfCE, & Church Schools Association. (2022). *Church Schools' Position on the Early Years*. Church Schools Association.

Sha, L., Zhang, G., Feng, P., Peng, X., & Luo, L. (2022). Teacher–child interactions during picture book reading in Chinese preschool classrooms: a comparative study of novice and experienced teachers. *Early Years,* , 1–16. 10.1080/09575146.2022.2126442

Shanks, R., Attard Tonna, M., Krøjgaard, F., Annette Paaske, K., Robson, D., & Bjerkholt, E. (2022). A comparative study of mentoring for new teachers. *Professional Development in Education, 48*(5), 751–765. 10.1080/19415257.2020.1744684

Silvern, S. B., & Isenberg, J. P. (1990). Reviews of Research: Teachers' Thinking and Beliefs and Classroom Practice. *Childhood Education, 66*(5), 322–327. 10.1080/00094056.1990.10522549

Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2011). Teacher job satisfaction and motivation to leave the teaching profession: Relations with school context, feeling of belonging, and emotional exhaustion. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 27*(6), 1029–1038. 10.1016/j.tate.2011.04.001

Smith, J. W., & Elley, W. B. (1995). *Learning to read in New Zealand*. Richard C. Owen Publishers.

Snoeck, M., Eisenschmidt, E., Forsthuver, B., Holdsworth, P., Michelidou, A., Dahl, J., & Pachler, N. (2010). *Developing coherent and system-wide induction programmes for beginning teachers - a handbook for policy makers*. European Commission.

Snow, C. E., & Juel, C. (2005). Teaching Children to Read: What Do We Know about How to Do It? In M. J. Snowling, & C. Hulme (Eds.), *The Science of Reading : A Handbook* (pp. 501–520). Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 10.1002/9780470757642.ch26

Snow, P. (2020). Balanced Literacy or Systematic Reading Instruction? *Perspectives on Language and Literacy, 46*(1) https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/balanced-literacy-systematic-reading-instruction/docview/2413997823/se-2?accountid=27934

Snowling, M. J., & Hulme, C. (2012). Annual Research Review: The nature and classification of reading disorders - a commentary on proposals for DSM-5. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 53*(5), 593–607. 10.1111/j.1469-7610.2011.02495.x

Spiegel, D. L. (1998). Silver Bullets, Babies, and Bath Water: Literature Response Groups in a Balanced Literacy Program. *The Reading Teacher, 52*(2), 114–124.

Stacey, S. (2009). *Emergent curriculum in early childhood settings : From theory to practice*. Redleaf Press.

Street, B. V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge U.P.

Suter, L. E., Denman, B. D., & Smith, E. (2019). *The SAGE Handbook of Comparative Studies in Education*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Toom, A., & Husu, J. (2021). Classroom Interaction Challenges as Triggers for Improving Early Career Teachers' Pedagogical Understanding and Competencies Through Mentoring Dialogues. *Teacher Induction and Mentoring,* , 221–241. 10.1007/978-3-030-79833-8_9

Tunmer, W. E., & Chapman, J. W. (2012). Does Set for Variability Mediate the Influence of Vocabulary Knowledge on the Development of Word Recognition Skills? *Scientific Studies of Reading, 16*(2), 122–140. 10.1080/10888438.2010.542527

Vella, A. (2013). Languages and language varieties in Malta. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 16*(5), 532–552. 10.1080/13670050.2012.716812

Vella, L. A. (2014). *Country Report (Malta) - Language in Education Policy Profile.* . Malta: Ministry of Education and Employment.

Vella, L. A., Mifsud, C. L., & Muscat, D. (2018). *Language Use in Early Childhood Education Classrooms in Malta.* .Ministry for Education and Employment. https://www.academia.edu/90301194/Language_Use_in_Early_Childhood_Education_Classrooms_in_Malta

Vella, L. A., Mifsud, C. L., & Muscat, D. (2023). *A Language Policy for the Junior Years in Malta and Gozo*. Ministry of Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation. https://nla.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/A-Language-Policy-for-the-Early-Years-in-Malta-and-Gozo.pdf

Vella, M., & Borg Saliba, R. (2023). *National Education Strategy 2024-2030*. Government of Malta. https://education.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/NATIONAL-EDUCATION-BOOKLET-DEC-2023-2030.pdf

Vygotsky, L. (1986). In Kozulin A. (Ed.), *Thought and language* (Translation newly rev. and edited / by Alex Kozulin.. ed.). MIT Press.

Wang, J., Elicker, J., McMullen, M., & Mao, S. (2008). Chinese and American preschool teachers' beliefs about early childhood curriculum. *Early Child Development and Care, 178*(3), 227–249. 10.1080/03004430600722671

Warschauer, M. (1997). A sociocultural approach to literacy and its significance for CALL. *Nexus: The Convergence of Research & Teaching through New Information Technologies,* , 88–97.

Whyte, S., Wigham, C. R., & Younès, N. (2022). Insights into Teacher Beliefs and Practice in Primary-School EFL in France. *Languages, 7*(3), 185. 10.3390/languages7030185

Wilkinson, D., & Dokter, D. (2000). *The researcher's toolkit: the complete guide to practitioner research*. Routledge.

Willingham, D. T. (2017). *The Reading Mind : A Cognitive Approach to Understanding How the Mind Reads*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.

Wyse, D., & Bradbury, A. (2022). Reading wars or reading reconciliation? A critical examination of robust research evidence, curriculum policy and teachers' practices for teaching phonics and reading. *Review of Education (Oxford), 10*(1)10.1002/rev3.3314

Wyse, D., & Styles, M. (2007). Synthetic phonics and the teaching of reading: the debate surrounding England's 'Rose Report'. *Literacy, 41*(1), 35–42. 10.1111/j.1467-9345.2007.00455.x

Xerri, D. (2018). *Poetry teaching in Malta : the interplay between teachers' beliefs and practices*. Routledge.

Yardley, L. (2000). Dilemmas in qualitative health research. *Psychology & Health, 15*(2), 215–228. 10.1080/08870440008400302

Appendix A

.....

Approval letters from FREC, SfCE, MEYR, and Independent school

L-Università ta' Malta

Faculty of Education
University of Malta
Msida MSD 2080, Malta

Tel: +356 2340 3058/2932
educ@um.edu.mt

www.um.edu.mt/educ

23rd November 2023

RE: Application for Research Ethics Clearance EDUC-2023-00771 Ruth Bonello Gellel

Ruth Bonello Gellel,

With reference to your application EDUC-2023-00771 Ruth Bonello Gellel for Research Ethics clearance, I am pleased to inform you that **FREC finds no ethical or data protection issues in terms of content and procedure**.

You may therefore proceed to approach potential informants to collect data using the tools/documents outlined in this application.

You are reminded that it is your responsibility - under the guidance of your supervisor - to distribute Information Letters and Consent/Assent Forms that are written in appropriate and correct English and Maltese.

Yours sincerely

Dr Joseph Gravina
Chairperson Faculty Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Education

SECRETARIAT FOR
CATHOLIC EDUCATION

16, The Mall, Floriana FRN1472, Malta
Tel. +356 27790060
www.csm.edu.mt

The Head

[redacted]

26th October 2023

Ms Ruth Bonello Gellel, currently reading for a Masters Degree of Arts in Comparative Euro-Mediterranean Education Studies at the University of Malta, requests permission to: distribute a questionnaire to Teachers teaching either year 1 or year 2 classes, observation of two Curriculum Bases Literacy Lessons by each teacher following by an interview with each participant at the above mentioned schools.

The Secretariat for Catholic Education finds no objection for Ms Ruth Bonello Gellel, to carry out the stated exercises subject to adhering to the policies and directives of the schools concerned.

Dr Ian Mifsud
Director General
Secretariat for Catholic Education

MINISTRY FOR
EDUCATION, SPORT,
YOUTH, RESEARCH &
INNOVATION Education
Strategy and Quality Assurance
Department

Tel: 25982743
researchandinnovation@ilearn.edu.mt

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH STUDY

Date: 6th November 2023

Ref: R10-2023 1758

To: **Head of School –** [redacted]
School A From: **Senior Manager – Research Unit**

Title of Research Study: ***Approaches to Early Literacy Teaching and Learning: A Comparative Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Novice and Experienced Teachers in Malta.***

The MEYR Research Ethics Committee within the Office of the Director General, Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department, would like to inform that approval is granted to **Ruth Bonello Gellel** to conduct the research in State Schools according to the official rules and regulations, subject to approval from the Ethics Committee of the respective Higher Educational Institution.

The researcher is committed to complying with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research. The researcher will be sending letters with clear information about the research, as well as consent forms to all data subjects and their parents/guardians when minors are involved. Consent forms should be signed in all cases particularly for the participation of minors in research.

For further details about our policy for research in schools, kindly visit www.research.gov.mt. Thank you for your attention and cooperation.

Claire Mamo
MEYR Research Ethics Committee
Research Unit
Office Of The Director General
Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department

f/Jeannine Vassallo she/her
Senior Manager
Office Of The Director General
Education Strategy and Quality Assurance Department

L-Università ta' Malta

Ruth Bonello Gellel <ruth.bonello-gellel.22@um.edu.mt>

Request for Permission for research with teachers teaching Years 1 and 2.

[redacted] 8
November 2023 at 08:38 Reply-To: [redacted]
To: Ruth Bonello Gellel <ruth.bonello-gellel.22@um.edu.mt>

Dear Mrs Bonello Gelle

I give my consent for you to carry out any necessary research at the below mentioned school

Kind regards

[redacted]

[Quoted text hidden]

Appendix B

Request for permission to conduct research in schools

30th October 2023

Dear Head of School

My name is Ruth Bonello Gellel and I am presently reading for a Master of Arts in Comparative Euro-Mediterranean Education Studies at the University of Malta. I am currently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled 'Approaches to Early Literacy Teaching and Learning: A Comparative Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Novice and Experienced Teachers in Malta'. This study aims to investigate teachers' beliefs and practices about the teaching and learning of literacy in the early years, and whether these differ for novice or experienced teachers. My aim is also to gain better insights into teachers' constructions of literacy with a special focus on the teaching and learning of reading in English. This project is being conducted under the supervision of Dr Josephine Milton, Head of Department, Early Childhood and Primary Education, Faculty of Education, within the University of Malta.

I am hereby seeking your permission to identify one experienced and one novice teacher (0-3 years of teaching experience), teaching either Year 1 or Year 2 classes (5-7-year-old students). My data collection methods will involve the distribution of a short questionnaire, observation of two curriculum-based literacy lessons by each teacher and a concluding interview with each participant. I wish to conduct this research between October 2023 and January 2024.

Participation will be entirely voluntary and participants will be free to withdraw at any point, without any repercussions. Personal data and all research data will be non-identifiable and stored in anonymised form. Data will be erased within 2 years of completion of the study. Only my supervisor and I will have access to this data.

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

Thank you for your kind consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Ruth Bonello Gellel	Dr Josephine Milton
ruth.bonello-gellel.22@um.edu.mt	josephine.milton@um.edu.mt
Mob No.: 99886262	Office No.: 2340 2303

Information letter for teachers

30th October 2023

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Ruth Bonello Gellel and I am a Literacy Support Teacher with the Secretariat for Catholic Education, currently studying at the University of Malta, reading for a Master of Arts in Comparative Euro-Mediterranean Education Studies. I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled 'Approaches to Early Literacy Teaching and Learning: A Comparative Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Novice and Experienced Teachers in Malta.'

Dr Josephine Milton, Head of Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Faculty of Education within the University of Malta, is supervising this study. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study is to investigate teachers' beliefs and practices about the teaching and learning of literacy in the early years, and whether these differ for novice or experienced teachers. Your participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of teachers' constructions of literacy with a special focus on the teaching and learning of reading in English. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be requested to complete a brief questionnaire regarding your beliefs and practices in early literacy teaching and learning. At your convenience, I would like to conduct two lesson observations during your regular curriculum-based English literacy classes. Lastly, we will have a concluding interview to explore the subject further. If you are willing to participate please contact me directly, either by email or mobile phone, for which contact details are provided at the end of this letter. Since lesson observations and perhaps the final interview, will be held in school, the SMT needs to be informed of these sessions taking place, but not about the data collected. Personal data and all research data will be stored in anonymised form. Data will only be available to the researcher and to the supervisor, if necessary.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your participation will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless the erasure of data would render it impossible or seriously impair the achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.

If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to you. Your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.

Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased. After 2 years of completion and publication of the study, all data collected will be erased.

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

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you wish to participate in this research study or have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor by e-mail or phone. All contact details are provided below.

Sincerely,

Ruth Bonello Gellel	Dr Josephine Milton
ruth.bonello-gellel.22@um.edu.mt	josephine.milton@um.edu.mt
Mobile No.: 99886262	Office No.: 2340 2303
18th October 2023	

Information letter to Parent/Guardian

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Ruth Bonello Gellel and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master of Arts in Comparative Euro-Mediterranean Education Studies I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled 'Approaches to Early Literacy Teaching and Learning: A Comparative Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Novice and Experienced Teachers'; this is being supervised by Dr Josephine Milton.

The aim of my study is to investigate teachers' beliefs and practices about the teaching and learning of literacy in the early years, and whether these differ for novice or experienced teachers. Your child's teacher will be participating in this study and will help contribute to a better understanding of the teachers' construction of literacy. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.

This letter is to inform you that I shall be conducting two lesson observations in your child's class, where I shall be audio recording the teacher during the lesson. My main objective is the teacher and I will not be questioning any of the students in class. Should your child's voice be recorded on the audio recording, I am here guaranteeing that his/her identity will be safeguarded. These recordings will only be used for research purposes and NO child will be identifiable while transcribing data or in the final dissertation.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail at ruth.bonello-gellel.22@um.edu.mt.

Sincerely,

_____

Ruth Bonello Gellel

18 ta' Ottubru 2023

Ittra ta' Tagħrif għall-ġenitur/kustodju

Għażiż/a Sinjur/a,

Jiena Ruth Bonello Gellel studenta fl-Università ta' Malta, u bħalissa qed insegwi Master of Arts in Comparative Euro-Mediterranean Education Studies. Ir-riċerka għad-dissertazzjoni tiegħi jisimha: 'Approaches to Early Literacy Teaching and Learning: A Comparative study of the Beliefs and Practices of Novice and Experienced Teachers' fejn it-tutur tiegħi hi Dr Josephine Milton.

L-għan tal-istudju hu li jinvestiga it-twemmin u l-prattika tal-għalliema dwar it-tagħlim tal-litteriżmu fis-snin bikrin, u jekk dan ivarjax bejn għalliema ġodda u dawk b'aktar esperjenza. L-għalliem/a tat-tifel/tifla tiegħek qed jieħu/tieħu sehem f'din ir-riċerka li ħa tgħin biex ikun hemm aktar għarfien dwar l-għalliema tagħna u l-fehmiet tagħhom dwar il-litteriżmu fi snin bikrin. L-informazzjoni kollha li tinġabar fir-riċerka tintuża biss għall-fini ta' dan l-istudju.

Din l-ittra qed tinkiteb biex ninfurmak li jiena ser nidħol fil-klassi tat-tifel/tifla tiegħek biex nosserva lill-għalliem/a waqt it-taghlim tiegħu/taghha. Waqt il-lezzjoni ser jiġi rrekordjat l-awdjo, l-objettiv tiegħi huwa li nirrekordja lill-għalliem/a u bl-ebda mod mhu ħa nistaqsi jew inkellem lill-istudenti. Għal daqstant qed nagħti garanzija li f'każ li leħen it-tfel/tifla tiegħek jinqabad fuq ir-rekording, l-identita tiegħu/tagħha ser tiġi protetta. Dawn ir-rekordings ser jiġu wżati biss għal fini ta' riċerka u l-ebda tifel/tifla mhu ħa jiġi/tiġi identifikat/ha mid-dissertazzjoni finali tiegħi.

Nirringrazzjak tal-ħin u l-kunsiderazzjoni tiegħek. Jekk ikollok xi mistoqsija, tiddejjaqx tikkuntattjani fuq ruth.bonello-gellel.22@um.edu.mt.

Tislijiet,

_____

Ruth Bonello Gellel

Appendix C

Participant's Consent Form

Approaches to Early Literacy Teaching and Learning: A Comparative Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Novice and Experienced Teachers in Malta.

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Ruth Bonello Gellel. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published) unless the erasure of data would render it impossible or seriously impair the achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in this qualitative research in which the researcher will provide a short questionnaire to be filled in, and come to observe me during 2 literacy lessons in order to investigate the beliefs and practices of early years teachers, and finally have a closing discussion during an interview. I am aware that the questionnaire will be filled in at my leisure and convenience, while lesson observations will take approximately 40 minutes each. I understand that the interview which will approximately an hour, is to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.
4. I understand that my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.
5. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study.
6. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
7. I understand that all data collected will be stored in an anonymised form and erased within 2 years of completion and publication of results.

8. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.
9. I am aware that, by marking the first and third tick-boxes below, I am giving my consent for this lesson observation and interview to be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed); and to complete a short questionnaire.

MARK ONLY IF AND AS APPLICABLE

- ☐ **I agree** to this lesson observation and interview being audio recorded.
- ☐ I **do not agree** with this lesson observation and interview being audio recorded.
- ☐ **I agree** to complete a short questionnaire
- ☐ I **do not agree** to complete a short questionnaire

10. I am aware that extracts from my interview may be reproduced in these outputs, either in an anonymous form or using a pseudonym [a made-up name or code – e.g. respondent A].
11. I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Ruth Bonello Gellel

ruth.bonello-gellel.22@um.edu.mt
No.: 99886262

Dr Josephine Milton

josephine.milton@um.edu.mt Mobile
Office No.: 2340 2303

Appendix D

Research Title: Approaches to Early Literacy Teaching and Learning: A comparative study of the beliefs and practices of novice and experienced teachers in Malta.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: _____

Section 1: Demographics

1. Name: _____
2. Years of teaching experience
   - ☐ 0 – 3 years
   - ☐ 4 + years. Please write the number of years below
   - ☐ _____

3. In which school sectors did you teach?
   - ☐ State
   - ☐ Church
   - ☐ Independent

4. Throughout your teaching experience, for how many years have you taught the early years, specifically Year 1 and/or Year 2?

   _____

5. Mark the Grades taught throughout your teaching experience.

   ☐ YR1 ☐ YR2 ☐ YR3 ☐ YR4 ☐ YR5 ☐ YR6

   Other grades: Please specify:

   _____

6. Highest level of qualification held:

   ☐ Graduate ☐ Post-Graduate ☐ Other

Teacher Beliefs about the Teaching of Reading in English

Mark **ONE or MORE** answers in each question. Add any other notes you feel necessary to explain your choices.

7. What do you believe are essential components of early reading instruction?

- ☐ Phonics Instruction (focus is on breaking words down into individual sounds, or phonemes, to teach learners to decode and encode written words)
- ☐ Whole Language approach (focus is on teaching children to recognise entire words as complete units of language and associate them with prior knowledge)
- ☐ Balanced Instruction (a combination of phonics and whole language)
- ☐ Sight words and memorisation
- ☐ Other. Please specify below

_____

_____

8. How do you think children acquire reading skills?

- ☐ In the same natural way as they acquire oral language
- ☐ By attending closely to print and word study
- ☐ Exposure to authentic literature (storybooks, poems, menus, etc)
- ☐ Sight words
- ☐ Other. Please specify below

_____

_____

9. How important do you think promoting a love for reading in the early years is? And Why?

(Not important /Somewhat important/Moderately important/Very important)

_____

_____

Teaching Practices – Teaching Reading in English

Mark **ONE** or **MORE** answers in each question. Add any other notes you feel necessary to explain your choices.

10. What reading strategies do you use during your reading lessons?
(e.g.: teacher modelling reading, phonemic awareness activities; focus on meaning and context, etc)

_____

_____

11. Describe how you differentiate your reading instruction to meet the needs of individual students.

- ☐ Group students by reading levels
- ☐ Provide individualised reading plans
- ☐ Use flexible grouping for targeted instruction
- ☐ Other. Please specify

_____

_____

12. How do you encourage active student participation and engagement during reading lessons?

- ☐ Group discussions
- ☐ Interactive reading activities and games
- ☐ Role-play
- ☐ Other. Please specify

_____

_____

13. How do you assess students' reading progress and learning outcomes?

- ☐ Standardised tests
- ☐ Teacher-made assessments
- ☐ Reading logs and reflections
- ☐ Other. Please specify

_____

_____

Section 4: Reflection on Effectiveness

14. In your experience, what instructional methods have been most effective in improving reading skills among early years students?

- ☐ Phonics-based activities
- ☐ Whole language activities
- ☐ Interactive read-aloud sessions
- ☐ Other. Please specify

_____

_____

15. Can you recall a specific instance where you had to modify your teaching approach to better support a struggling reader? How did you approach this situation?

- ☐ Provided one-on-one tutoring
- ☐ Adjusted reading materials to match their interests
- ☐ Used multisensory activities for reinforcement
- ☐ Other. Please specify

_____

_____

Professional Development & School Culture

16. Have you participated in any professional development related to teaching reading in the early years? If so, please describe the most impactful sessions.

_____

_____

17. Which approach towards literacy instruction, was chosen by the school you presently teach in?

- ☐ Phonics instruction only
- ☐ Whole language approach only
- ☐ Combination of phonics and whole language
- ☐ Other. Please specify below

_____

_____

General Questions

18. In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges in teaching reading to early years students?

- ☐ Limited attention span
- ☐ Developing phonics skills
- ☐ Encouraging a love for reading
- ☐ Other. Please specify below

_____

_____

19. How do you foster a positive and inclusive reading environment in your classroom?

- ☐ Celebrating diverse cultures and backgrounds
- ☐ Providing a variety of reading materials
- ☐ Encouraging respectful discussions
- ☐ Other. Please specify

_____

_____

20. What CAUSES/REASONS for difficulties in children learning to read, do you encounter MOST? Explain.
(e.g.: learning difficulties, home environment, hearing or speech impairment, etc)

_____

_____

21. Is there anything else you would like to share about your beliefs, practices or experiences in teaching literacy in the early years?

_____

_____

Appendix E

Lesson Observation Sheet

Teacher:		Class:	
School:		Time:	
Date:		Duration:	

Lesson Observation: 1st lesson or 2nd lesson

Lesson topic or Reading focus	
Resources used during the lesson	
Classroom environment:	
• Literacy-rich	
• Print-rich	
• Reading material	

Lesson Introduction:	
• Sharing of Objectives	
• Concepts of Print	
• Pre-teaching of Vocabulary	
Lesson Development:	
• Phonological Awareness	
• Phonics	
• Whole language approach	

• Teacher-led	
• Child-centred	
• Socio-Cultural elements	
• Use of language (Eng/Malt)	
• Emergent Curriculum	
Student Engagement:	
• Questions/Questioning	
• Pair work/Group work	
• Encouraging Active student participation	
• Students' reactions/responses to the teacher's instructions	
• Teacher's approach to student disengagement/difficulties	
Closure:	
• Plenary	
• Assessment	

Appendix F

Semi-Structured Interview

A. Re: Questionnaire

Questions were different for each participant, requesting further exploration of the answers given in the questionnaire.

B. Reflection on Teaching Practices after lesson observation

Questions were different for each participant, requesting further exploration of what was observed during the 2 literacy lessons.

C. Beliefs about Literacy and Reading

1. How challenging do you think teaching in a bilingual/multilingual classroom is? Is there a dominant language in your classroom? What are your thoughts/concerns etc?
2. How do you plan and structure your English literacy lessons to support young children's reading development?
3. When planning your lessons, do you take into consideration the diverse social and cultural backgrounds of your students? How does this show in your lessons?

D. Teaching Experience & Professional Development

4. Did your teaching experience influence your beliefs and practices regarding teaching literacy, particularly reading?
5. Reflecting on your teacher training, do you feel you were adequately prepared for teaching reading in the early years?
6. Do you feel the need for further training in teaching literacy and reading? If so, would you be willing to attend training sessions?

Appendix G

Lesson Observation time-table

Teacher	Lesson	Date	Lesson description	Duration
Lisa	1	18.01.24	Guided reading	35 mins
	2	05.02.24	New phonics sound 'oi'	30 mins
Anna	1	30.01.24	RWI – 1st read (pink level) + revision of 2 tricky words	60 mins
	2	07.02.24	Introduction of new High-frequency words through storytelling	50 mins
Eve	1	19.02.24	Storytelling + drawing & writing activity to change the ending	50 mins
	2	27.02.24	New phonics sound 'igh'	60 mins
Kate	1	05.12.23	New phonics sound (sh) with her mixed ability class (set 1 sound)	50 mins
	2	01.02.24	New phonics sound (ay) with a new reading group (set 2 sound)	50 mins
Kya	1	30.11.23	Grammar - verbs	50 mins
	2	11.01.24	Reading games – rhyming words & matching sentences to pictures	40 mins
Mary	1	18.01.24	Shared reading with differentiated writing tasks	60 mins
	2	30.01.24	Grammar - Adjectives	60 mins
Demi	1	05.12.23	New phonics sound 'oo'	50 mins
	2	01.02.24	RWI – 3rd read- writing task	45 mins
Nina	1	06.12.23	Revise reading of words Set 1 RWI & spelling the words	40 mins
	2	31.01.24	RWI Ditty lesson	40 mins
Sam	1	08.02.24	Reading stations – Green RWI book or matching flashcards with pictures	80 mins
	2	18.03.24	Storytelling + drawing/writing a different ending	50 mins
Yana	1	18.01.24	Storytelling using Big Book - The Gingerbread Man + story sequence activities + Writing of 2 sentences	50 mins
	2	02.02.24	Topic of the week - Our Body - Writing	60 mins

Appendix H

Data Collection schedule

Teacher Pseudonym	Returned Questionnaire	Lesson Observation 1	Lesson Observation 2	Semi-structured Interview
Kya	25.11.23	30.11.23	11.01.24	26.03.24
Mary	09.01.24	18.01.24	30.01.24	12.03.24
Anna	09.01.24	30.01.24	07.02.24	11.03.24
Demi	04.12.23	05.12.23	01.02.24	11.03.24
Sam	31.01.24	08.02.24	18.02.24	19.03.24
Lisa	12.12.23	18.01.24	05.02.24	20.03.24
Yana	16.01.24	18.01.24	02.02.24	19.03.24
Kate	30.11.23	05.12.23	01.02.24	11.03.24
Nina	02.12.23	06.12.23	31.01.24	11.03.24
Eve	07.12.23	19.02.24	27.02.24	14.03.24