

*Do I belong? Psychological perspectives and educational considerations of young immigrants' school experiences*

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**Abstract**

This article contributes to the investigation of refugee and immigrant education from a psychological perspective and could be said to be the first of this type locally. Within the context of the public debate that surrounds the immigration issue in Malta, as the number of arrivals continues to rise, this paper showcases the narratives of school experiences of three students who attend local mainstream State secondary schools. All of these children came to Malta accompanied, though irregularly by boat from the north coast of Africa ("klandestini"). The school experiences of these students are generally positive although it is also clear that they face the challenge of schooling without adequate preparation and support where individual resilience seems to play a decisive part. On the other hand, schools need to be prepared to teach student populations that are culturally and linguistically diverse by implementing practices that are inclusive and that reflect multicultural forms of education. This study also indicated that, in addition to the expected struggles that any immigrant child would face when starting school, the experience of these children is to some extent shaped by the fact that they are 'klandestini', due to the negative manner in which this category of migrants is generally perceived.

## **Introduction**

In Malta, until relatively recently, there was little public debate on immigration. Although there have always been a number of foreigners living in our midst, their presence went largely unnoticed. In recent years, the situation changed and, today, immigration is, without a doubt, one of the most widely debated and contentious issues on the national agenda.

### **Migration: political rhetoric and public debate**

The increase in the number of irregular immigrants arriving in Malta by boat, usually from Libya, since 2002 has been described as “the most important social and cultural challenge it [Malta] has faced for a long time” (Borg, 2006).

In fact, “boat people” make up just a portion of the immigrant population. At any given time, there are always a considerable number of non-EU nationals who are legally present in Malta for various purposes, including study, work or family reunification. Over and above this, there are always a number of immigrants staying illegally in Malta. Although it is impossible to determine the true extent of this phenomenon, reports carried in the local media often shed some light on this otherwise hidden reality (Amore, 2005).

In spite of this bigger picture, national debate on immigration is almost completely dominated by the challenges presented by the annual influx of “boat people”. It is clear that this new reality has led to a significant change in public perception of immigrants and immigration.

This category of immigrants is colloquially referred to somewhat pejoratively as “*klandestini*,” a term that refers to the “clandestine”, i.e. hidden, or irregular way in which they travel. In addition to the negative undertones of the nomenclature adopted, they are generally perceived as a burden on Malta’s very limited resources, taking what rightfully belongs to the Maltese, and presenting a threat to Malta’s social cohesion, security and economic stability (Texeira, 2006). This negative perception has led to an increase in public hostility towards immigrants and the rise of right wing political movements in Malta.

This has a determining effect on immigrants’ eventual inclusion into Maltese society, as integration “relates to both the conditions for actual participation in all aspects of life in the country of durable asylum as well as to refugees’ own perception of acceptance and membership in the host society” (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 1999).

## **Methodology**

This study was designed to research the school adjustment of children aged 11-16, from families of irregular immigrants, who are now living in Malta. It was aimed to provide a much-needed window on the initial adaptation of children and adolescents traversing the abrupt, often involuntary, transition that immigration entails.

A qualitative research approach was used, namely Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), chosen because it is aimed at exploring and describing lived experience in a meaningful way.

As is typical with IPA studies, non-probability, small and fairly homogeneous sample sizes are considered optimal. Hence purposive sampling was used to select three young (minor) participants on the basis of the following criteria:

- the manner in which they traveled to Malta (by boat from Libya);
- their age - they had to be between the ages of 11 and 16 years
- the length of their stay in Malta – at least two years, having arrived any time between January 2002 and end 2004.

Three students from different ethnic backgrounds were actually selected<sup>1</sup>:

- Tesfai, a 15-year-old Ethiopian boy;
- Metin, a 13-year-old Kurdish boy;
- Elize, an 11-year old girl, from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

All the participants in this study went through the asylum procedure but not all were granted protection in Malta. Given their relatively recent arrival in this country, these youngsters could be said to be in their first post-migration years.

Through the first-hand narratives of these children, this study sought to gather insights into their adaptation, or lack of it, to a new reality including local culture, language and school environment. Critical theorists contend that student voice can become an organising force to negotiate and construct multiple interpretation of school life within the reality of institutionalised ways of being in school (Roberts & Locke, 2001). Of particular relevance are their experiences of prejudice and/or discrimination, school and/or cultural barriers, school success, adaptation to curricular demands, relationships with peers at school and in the community, their relationship with teachers and other school personnel, and the role played by family members that potentially contribute to or otherwise hinder these youths' adjustment to local school contexts.

Interviews were carried out with the three minor immigrants, with one or both of their parents, and with a teacher who taught the child during the scholastic year the study was conducted. Based on literature findings, the interview schedule with children and parents focused in the following issues: experience of displacement; arrival and initial adaptation; school experiences; issues related to cultural and ethnic identity; experience of racial abuse or discrimination; and future aspirations.

In the teachers' interview, questions centred on their perception of the child in terms of social inclusion, school performance and success.

This schedule was used as a guide, allowing the interviewer to be open to follow the respondent's direction when necessary and explore areas of particular interest and concern as they arose.

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<sup>1</sup> The names used are entirely fictitious, albeit typical of their country of origin, in respect of their right to privacy and to maintain confidentiality.

### Findings: Individual narratives

In this section, we start by presenting a brief analysis of each individual participant's narratives, and from this analysis we go on to extrapolate significant themes. Major themes, concepts and processes of each narrative were identified to develop an interpretative discussion. Cumulative comparisons of individual accounts and relevant discussions were used to generate overarching common themes across narratives, which are then discussed in greater depth. The aim is to try and understand the content and complexity of those meanings rather than measure their frequency.

#### *Child 1: Tesfai*

Tesfai, a 15-year-old boy from Ethiopia, arrived in Malta at the age of 12. His family fled Ethiopia when he was 2 years old, for political reasons, and sought refuge in Sudan. Some eight years later, Tesfai, his mother and his two younger sisters made the perilous journey across the desert to Libya, where his father had gone some time before. They left Libya by boat and ended up in Malta, where they were kept in detention for around a month and a half before they were released to await the outcome of their asylum application in the community<sup>2</sup>. At the time the study was conducted, Tesfai's family was still awaiting a final decision on their asylum application.

Tesfai went to school in Sudan until the age of 10; in Malta he attended a Form 3 class in a local Boys' Secondary School.

Tesfai and his parents accepted to participate in the study without hesitation and they willingly shared their experiences of immigration and life in Malta. The following major themes emerged from Tesfai's narrative:

- fear, including the fear of losing his life
- lack of 'fit' – unclear roots and poor ethnic identity development
- finding a 'fit' – the need to belong and school inclusion
- the courage to be a '*klandestin*'
- identity issues and successfully adapting to Maltese culture
- insecurity in relation to future prospects

Tesfai had many vivid memories of his journeys across the desert between Sudan and Libya and then again across the sea from Libya to Malta. He often referred to intense fearful experiences and almost looking at death in the eye:

[About the desert crossing] First of all, to go from Sudan to Libya we had to cross the desert, I remember it was a problem for me, because there was nowhere to stay, you don't even see a single tree, or animal, or anything at all, just nothing. Water was also a problem; we could only drink at timed intervals. It was a big problem for us to cross... especially in that sun. In ten days we arrived, but the road to get there was tough, we suffered...however it was suffering which we had to live with.

[About the sea crossing] When we got there we all thought it was over, however it all started again, when we had to cross by sea. I would say that the sea crossing was even

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<sup>2</sup> All irregular immigrants arriving in Malta by boat, including women and children, are immediately detained in terms of the Immigration Act. Since 2004, vulnerable immigrants, such as families with minor children, are released from detention once their case is assessed, medical screening is conducted and accommodation is found in the community. In practice this may take days, weeks or even months, in exceptional cases.

more problematic..... Your life is at risk; you don't even know if you're going to arrive or not, but your will tells you to try, not to give up..... at the end it was particularly ugly when we arrived in Malta.... It was a big problem.

After arriving in Malta, Tesfai was totally unaware of his whereabouts. Despite the confusion and the fact that he was detained, he was grateful that he had survived the ordeal of the journey by sea:

Detention is like a prison... But at that time, when you remember all you passed through you thank God... You say: the main thing is that we are alive and you need to put up with it to get there.

This proactive attitude and desire to belong was especially evident when Tesfai began to attend school. He clearly longed to go to school again and live the life that any regular child does: "I felt happy to go to school. They gave us satchels and so on. When I started school, I went in and I was all right. Not as bad as I thought it would be."

This last sentence shows that he was very apprehensive about starting school, his main concern being whether he would be able to finally find an environment where he belonged. There was a sense of relief that school did not turn out to be as threatening as he feared it would be. To him, the main obstacle he needed to overcome was the language barrier. "The first thing which really got to me was that I did not know Maltese." However the language problem did not prove insurmountable also thanks to the support from teachers and friends.

Tesfai also fitted in with his friends; he proudly mentioned his best friends by name one by one, those at school, in the neighbourhood and at the football nursery. He stated that he never had experiences of racial abuse at school. On the contrary, he felt he was popular. This was confirmed by his form teacher, who believed Tesfai fitted in totally with his Maltese peers: "For me it's like he is Maltese!" [*Ghalija qisu Malti!*], both on the level of behaviour as well as academic performance.

Tesfai's ability to fit in with his peers and the system at large stemmed from his strong determination to belong, on one side, and the welcoming stance of both peers and teaching staff, on the other. His craving to belong, so characteristic of any adolescent, was further fed by a need that was never satisfied in his childhood years and was therefore more urgent. From his own account, it is clear that it was in Malta, for the first time, at the age of 12, that Tesfai finally found a place where he felt comfortable to be himself and able to develop a healthy self-identity without struggling against culturally alien norms and practices.

Valtolina (2004) states that the level of school inclusion is favourably enhanced by the individual's good use of the native language. Despite the initial difficulties, Tesfai was soon able to speak Maltese extremely fluently, as was also evident from the interview I carried out with him. Valtolina goes on to say that those who are competent with the language also enjoy better peer relationships. This finding seems to be reflected in Tesfai's experience of school inclusion.

What is also particularly striking about Tesfai is his courage to be totally honest about his origins, who he is and where he came from:

Yes of course I tell my friends and teachers. They ask me, 'How did you arrive?' I tell them that I came through the desert and then the sea. They tell me you must have had a problem to arrive then, and I tell them, 'Yes, I had many problems.'

Despite his audacity to share the truth about his origins and status, Tesfai had no problem in identifying with Maltese people and he felt he was living a life like any regular Maltese adolescent: "I have everything. I feel just like them. I do not mind that I am not Maltese. I feel Maltese because I have the same things they have. I have the same education they have. I have the same friends they do."

Tesfai also said that he was happy to retain certain customs or traditions that belonged to his people, however, the need to belong and merge with his Maltese peers also emerged clearly during the interview. "I really wish to eat like my friends, but my father doesn't work... it's like I'm shy to eat differently from my friends... I would like to have the same things as my friends."

Tesfai was possibly engaged in the assimilation process whereby his ethnic and cultural traditions were being permanently replaced by new social norms and practices learnt in the new country through a process of acculturation (Portes, 1996; Zhou, 1999). Considering that Tesfai had never really lived in his country of origin, there was always a gradual diffusion of his ethnic identity as a result of living in alien lands that were not at all welcoming. In Malta, Tesfai was taking hold of an identity that was not only convenient for him to adapt at this stage of his life, but also guaranteed sufficient stability and was not in conflict with prior patterns of self-concept.

When questioned about his future, Tesfai did not commit himself to particular options. Although he reiterated his love for Malta, he brought up a number of factors that could ultimately compel him and his family to look to settle elsewhere. He spoke of Malta being too small to accommodate so many immigrants, a principle reiterated by his father and his mother in the short intervention she made, and the difficult living conditions. Although Tesfai seemed to accept that his stay in Malta would probably not be permanent, his narrative betrayed an overriding sense of insecurity as result of the uncertainty this created.

In conclusion, I believe that Tesfai's inclusion was above all the result of his courage to show himself for what he really was. This, together with his naturally pleasant personality, earned him the respect of his peers, teachers, friends and indeed the entire neighbourhood.

His story is a clear indication that the inclusion of immigrants and refugees is truly possible. He was fortunate to find an inclusive attitude at school that did not stigmatise black people or '*klandestini*', however he deserves the merit for having the audacity to 'push' for his own inclusion, as it were, by being unashamed of his own status that in his mind was ultimately secondary to his dignity as a human person.

#### *Child 2: Metin*

Metin, a 13-year-old Kurdish boy, arrived in Malta from Libya with his family, his parents and six siblings, in 2003. He too attended a local Boys' Secondary school (not the same attended by Tesfai), and at the time of the study he was in Form 4. Metin's

family fled the ongoing persecution that Kurdish people in Turkey were subjected to by the national government. On arrival in Malta, they were detained; 9 months later they were released after they were granted humanitarian protection.

Metin, like his siblings, did not go to school back home in Turkish Kurdistan and received his basic skills from his mother. Therefore school in Malta represented his first experience of formal education.

Metin and his family were initially reluctant to participate in the study; this reluctance was largely symptomatic of an underlying sense of fear and insecurity that emerged as one of the dominant themes in his narrative.

The main themes in Metin's story were the following:

- fear to trust and shame
- lack of 'fit' – school perceived as stigmatising
- passivity and 'learned helplessness'
- the trap of chronic insecurity

Metin's fear, especially to trust others, was noticeable from the beginning of the interview. Many of his answers were short and he avoided describing situations or feelings in detail. When asked about the journey, he immediately claimed that he did not remember anything about it. Although Metin was a young boy at the time, it was hard to imagine that he held no memories of such a gruelling experience: "I remember nothing... I was too young... I was only nine at the time." His refusal to share his story was possibly indicative of his lack of desire to revisit experiences that were hard, painful, ultimately traumatic and possibly shameful. In fact, his parents described their escape from home and the journey across the sea to Malta as very hard and as very disturbing for their children.

However, it is relevant to note that Metin's unwillingness to speak about the experience of his journey and his life before coming to Malta could also be the result of pressure not to speak about this. It is not unknown for immigrant children to be placed under pressure from parents or relatives, not to divulge information that is regarded as sensitive. Metin's response could also be understood in this respect, especially given the family's evident concerns about their personal security and their future prospects in Malta.

His fear to trust others was also manifest in the way he spoke about friendships. He said that he had good friends at school and in the community, however, he had a sense of shame about his origins and the stigma of being an 'illegal immigrant'. He would never speak to his friends about his origins, his land, or his arrival in Malta: "I don't like talking about Turkey and how we got to Malta, and so on...." This could have been an additional source of great psychological strain on the child, which might have potentially led to unwarranted forms of externalized behaviour, with the added risk of the child being stigmatized simply because he is an immigrant.

Despite his difficulty to trust, the shame, his insecurity and his highly introvert personality, Metin was very clear when describing the difficulties he encountered adapting to school in Malta. He said that "When I started school, I had no idea how to read and write," although his mother claimed that, despite a total absence of formal

schooling, he had acquired rudimentary literacy and numeracy skills. His first experience of schooling was in Year 6 at a local primary school. He felt totally overwhelmed by the pressures of school, both social and academic, and relied entirely on the support that was provided to him by an assistant at that stage:

At the beginning I was very shy, but now not that much... I had a teacher who used to help me to read and write properly..... she used to stay with just me and I began doing well.

He then described how the move to secondary school was yet another challenge, despite the fact that he had made significant strides ahead from an academic point of view. It was especially challenging socially as he struggled to make friends. In his own words:

Form I was very difficult for me.... Very often they used to pick on me... they would say things like 'go back home'.... Or at times they would pick on me for my religion, saying things like: 'Mohammed is a pig'...

Another theme that emerged from Metin's narratives, that was confirmed by those of his parents and teachers, was that of passivity that verged on to a pervading sense of learned helplessness – as in a helplessness to react constructively to adverse situations.

With regard to school, Metin stated that he was not keen to attend, and indeed did not manifest a particular motivation to perform well. It seemed as though he was happy to merely go through the motions of school, and he attended more because it was an obligation than because he was interested in learning.

Despite his apparent inclusion, Metin's perceived different status with respect to his peers could have contributed to a lack of motivation or ability to reach out to teachers who could help him, and to passively accept the barriers which were built by those in charge of educational welfare, as sustained by Roberts and Locke (2001).

The final theme that emerged from my interview with Metin was that of intense and chronic insecurity and a lack of a strong identity formation. His insecurity went beyond his failure to trust but indicated a fear to commit himself, possibly for dread of having his hopes dashed and failure once again reinforced.

He was particularly concerned about the label of 'immigrant' or 'refugee' that he evidently found derogatory and shameful, although this was inferred rather than explicitly stated by him. He seemed to be proud of his identity as Kurdish, rather than Turkish, and also felt comfortable to be called Maltese. However, his insecurity regarding his status was especially clear when he talked about his future. He was very non-committal on the subject and was at a loss when confronted with the question. He said he would like to become a professional footballer, possibly abroad, although the chances for such a dream to become reality looked very remote. The constant hope for a better future elsewhere was also a leit motif that was confirmed in the interview with the parents.

*Child 3: Elize*

Elize, an 11-year old girl from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), arrived in Malta with her mother and two siblings three years previously. Her family escaped war-torn DRC and, after the ordeal of crossing the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean from Libya, they reached Malta. At the time she was aged 9 and her brothers were aged 8 years and two months respectively. Her father was not with them in the sea crossing as he was arrested in Libya just weeks before they left, but luckily he arrived in Malta some weeks after they did.

After spending some time in detention, the family was released and accommodated in a one-room apartment in the Open Centre for immigrants in Hal Far. Their application for asylum had recently been definitively rejected and hence they had no formal legal status although they continued to reside in Malta with a temporary visa.

Elize and her family were very welcoming and accepted to participate in the study willingly. Elize immediately struck me as a quiet, unassuming girl, who did not find it easy to speak at length as she was extremely shy and reserved. Both her parents, who spoke French, spoke openly about their experiences back home, the dangers they encountered on the journey and their life to date in Malta.

The main themes that emerged from Elize's stories were:

- Fear in relation to the experience of escape
- Difficulty to adapt and insufficient self-confidence
- Shame – school perceived as stigmatising
- Insecurity regarding present and future possibilities

Elize claimed she remembered very little about life in DRC although she also went to school there. After the family left Congo they lived in Libya for two years, where, as expected, life was arduous. Elize appeared to have experienced great fear during the crossing by sea from Libya, which seemed to have particularly impressed her, although she still did not divulge many details:

When we came on the boat we make five days...It was very difficult and we went to crash in the big boat...and then the driver he turned. It was dangerous and the sea was rough and we were very afraid!

The trauma of the sea crossing was all the more evident in her mother's words:

We wait night. We don't see something like this. I had baby one month two weeks. I cried too much. I show my baby like this. 'Look, look, look,' I cried. 'Wait. Don't move.' The people from Malta came after one o'clock night. They start from baby, after, me..."

After the ordeal of the crossing they had to face immigration checks before being bussed to Safi detention centre. Among the procedures completed, finger-prints of each immigrant were taken for identification purposes. Elize found this experience petrifying: "I was very afraid. I think that when they take the hand, they are going to cut it off." Elize, her mother and younger brother spent only five days in detention and simply described those days as "difficult".

After their release from detention, Elize soon began to attend a Year 5 class in a local primary school. No supports were provided at all and she was left to her own devices. As expected, the language barrier was a cause of great stress and apprehension (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001):

It was very difficult. I didn't know even to speak English and of course no Maltese too. At least my teacher was speaking French to me because she realised I could speak French. So I speak to her in French.

When describing her first encounter with same-age peers in the school playground, she immediately remembered an incident of racial intolerance and rejection.

In the school with other children it was difficult. I was lost...Some children were nice...and others a bit bad...if when they saw me another was playing with me, they don't want to play. They say 'I don't want to play with you because you are black.'

She also recalled making friends with other girls from the same ethnic background, which helped her feel less singled out with respect to the Maltese children. While in Year 6, she attended some evening English literacy classes offered by an NGO, which she said helped her a lot in comprehension and expression of English.

Despite the move to a larger and potentially more overwhelming Girls' Area Secondary School, things got progressively better. She was now in Form I and she felt happy to go to school. Her friends were perceived as kind to her and she also mentioned one particular Maltese girl with whom she was very close. Her introvert nature however was not an asset in helping her build relationships or take classroom initiatives. Her mother pertinently said: "she don't talk too much." Her form teacher, confirmed that her introvert nature and the fact that small groups or 'cliques' within the school were well established made it harder for her to blend in.

Elize was fully aware of her shyness and said that teachers picked it up and often took the initiative to ensure that she was grasping the lesson: "Sometimes I am too shy to talk and they ask, 'You understand?'...But I find teachers very helpful." This reluctance to seek help might prove disadvantageous in the long run; as she always depended on the teacher to pick up her difficulties, the risk was that many of them would go unnoticed and therefore unattended to. She said that at times some friends helped her especially when the volume of work was overwhelming:

It's a bit hard. I manage English well but Maths and Maltese are difficult. Sometimes someone helps me at school...sometimes a child and sometimes a teacher [or support teacher/facilitator].

She did say that she would like to have more classroom help. Her parents could only provide limited support although they had had contact with her current school. On parents' day her mother said she received positive feedback overall and teachers showed a positive attitude towards her as a parent.

Regarding her self-identity, she said she was happy to be Congolese but now felt more Maltese in some ways, "for example clothes and language". It seems that Elize

was currently exploring her self-identity through a process of identification with her original roots, as is typical of pre-adolescents (Secchiaroli & Mancini, 2002). Furthermore, as she had been in Malta for just two and a half years, Elize was still coming to terms with new ways of being and belonging, which to some extent were still alien with respect to her former cultural milieu, with school only having some effect on self-concept development at this stage. This idea is also congruent with Schimmenti's (2001) findings that indicate that immigrant adolescents who have been in a new country for a little time find it difficult to form new interethnic relationships.

Elize was also going through her school days keeping her history and previous experiences absolutely secret. She said that nobody ever asked her where she came from and how she arrived in Malta. However she also said, "I don't like to say it". This denoted a sense of shame and an overwhelming preoccupation that she might be stigmatised if her peers and teachers knew the truth about her status.

Another interesting point to note is that she was also ashamed to say she lived in the Hal Far open centre for immigrants and told her friends (except her best friend) that she lived in Birzebbuga, which is the closest village to the centre. Apparently she did this on the suggestion of a teacher at school who specifically told her to keep this reality a secret from her peers: "She told me that if they ask you 'Where do you live?' she tell me 'Don't tell them you live in Hal Far. Tell them something else like ...'"

This incident only served to reinforce the idea that school was potentially stigmatising and Elize was clearly afraid of being rejected should her friends know the truth about her.

The current legal status after two rejections was clearly another preoccupation for Elize and her family, posing serious challenges as to what the future might have in store for them. Elize did not commit herself as to how she envisaged her future, although she timidly claimed that she liked Malta. Her father said that he appreciated Malta in terms of education for the children, but it was clear that, despite this, their sights were set elsewhere. Elize's mother said that with the necessary papers she would go to the UK or France.

The lack of security due to problems of status and unavailability of proper documents are an evident source of great anxiety to the entire family as knowledge of the future remained shrouded in uncertainty.

### **Major superordinate themes across individual narratives**

Table 1 below shows the superordinate themes that were chosen on the basis of relevance to the experiences of the people who participated in this study. These themes are directly related to the main subject matters that have commonly emerged from among the narratives that have been recorded.

**Table 1: Superordinate themes across the three individual narratives**

Subject Matter	Superordinate Themes
Experience of displacement, arrival in Malta and initial adaptation	Intense fear of death and trauma Loss and humiliation
School Experience	Hard to 'fit'
	Inclusion: self-acceptance vs shame
Cultural and Ethnic Identity	Negotiating a new self-identity
Racial abuse and/or discrimination	Reactions to verbal abuse, racist taunts (real or feared)
Future aspirations	Vague prospects characterised by instability and insecurity

The analysis of their narratives has indicated a number of issues that are pertinent to the understanding of the psychological well-being of immigrant children and their adaptation to and inclusion in Maltese mainstream schools.

The children commented about their great fear during the journey across the sea, and for many also across the desert, where their safety was highly at risk and their lives severely threatened. After arrival in Malta, the traumatic journey is followed up by other difficult experiences including detention, which is a humiliating experience and exacerbates the sense of loss that runs through their life history – not only of their land and the culture they left behind but also of their freedom and above all their human dignity. Attending school in Malta, although perceived as an overall positive experience, could be very hard to endure initially; though possibly more pleasant for some, adaptation can be a near nightmare for others.

The perception of oneself as 'different' because one is a '*klandestin*' also emerges as an important consideration. One child was able to overcome the shame of the label of an illegal immigrant and audaciously be himself among his schoolmates. Certainly his openness allowed him to enjoy good levels of inclusion in school and also within the local community. The other children preferred to keep this reality hidden. In general it is true to say that possibly as a result of this, these two children found it more difficult to settle at school; they were overwhelmed by the experience, leading to different reactions, including aggressiveness, passivity, or withdrawal.

In spite of this, overall, immigrant children and their parents spoke of satisfactory levels of inclusion in Maltese society and adaptation to local norms and practices. However, for the children concerned, this process required the negotiation of a new self-identity and the gradual relinquishing of their ethnic roots. These children often experienced some form of hostility or verbal abuse due to the different colour of their skin or simply because they were deemed 'different'.

The future of these families was grossly in abeyance and most uncertain. However their narratives were characterised by an overwhelming sense of hope for a better future in spite of the considerable instability and insecurity.

### **Implications of findings**

It is clear that the presence of immigrant children often creates daunting challenges for schools (Mupedziswa, 1997; Perkins, 2000). Educators can do much to help them improve their lives (Pryor, 2001), but they are limited by inadequate resources and preparation (Gopaul-McNichol & Thomas-Presswood, 1996).

Our educators first need support in the development of an inclusive ethos that leads the community to adopt responsibility for creating the conditions for enabling these children to fulfil their entitlement for a quality education (Ogbu, 1986) by asking why schools are not effective in meeting the needs of these students in the first place (Tomlinson, 1991). In this sense, education decision makers should see the school as an ideal “laboratory” where empathy with other cultures can be developed (Fennes & Hapgood, 1997), a bridge between the various cultures can be built and new ways of belonging experimented (Secchiaroli & Mancini, 2002; Roberts & Locke, 2001).

In reference to the immigrant situation in the US, Szente, Hoot and Taylor (2006) suggest that schools work closely together to provide the best possible support for refugee children and their families. It is believed that with adequate help and support, children could flourish academically, socially and emotionally, as well as develop cross-cultural skills and understanding. Given the newly-established set-up of Colleges in Malta, this model of cooperation among schools can be implemented in a similar fashion in the hope that similar successful outcomes can be achieved.

New interventions leading to political, social and educational change can be enhanced if voice is given to the immigrants themselves (Pasqualini, 2004), as this piece of work in fact has attempted to do. After listening to immigrant families’ suggestions, Szente, Hoot and Taylor (2006) proposed that teachers could respond in three major ways to the unique needs of these children, namely, helping children cope with trauma (see Ajdukovic & Ajdukovic, 1993; Deykin, 1999), supporting academic adjustment and establishing positive parent-teacher relationships.

Providing ad hoc individualised support can be beneficial to the child’s learning, to some extent, as all students in this study testified. One area where this would be particularly useful is in the initial phase where the child needs to acquire fluency in a new language and to adjust to new methods of teaching and learning. However, educational support needs to be provided also within the context of general classroom teaching.

One way to learn about the experience of immigrant children and facilitate their adjustment is through story-telling. Teachers can listen to newcomers and help them tell their stories. The children and adults interviewed found that sharing their stories was enjoyable, cathartic, and affirming. Within the context of the present study, this reality is borne out by Tesfai’s narrative. Beyond the benefits for the immigrant child, the personal stories of immigrants and refugees are also educational and beneficial for

other children to hear (Allan & Toffoli, 1989). Storytelling and listening also can be a school wide project.

This study was a form of pilot study carried out in Malta and therefore opportunities to extend this research are many. For instance, one can study the prevalence and impact of the stigma of being a '*klandestin*' experienced by Metin and Elize among immigrant children. Other studies can investigate the factors that enable immigrants like Tesfai to connect to the Maltese community, and how both stigma and acculturation are affecting the development of these persons' identity and achievement in school and beyond schooling. If Maltese society is concerned with building inclusive communities, then these phenomena should be addressed at both the schools' and community levels. Another issue that was highlighted in this study and needs further investigation was the impact of the traumatic experiences of immigrant children. Such understanding can be lead to the further development of necessary services in this area (Shaw, 2003). Finally, this study has focused on adolescents. There is a need to study also the experience of immigrant children of primary school age.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this small research study has served first of all to give voice to the experiences of immigrant children in Malta. Their presence and their stories present us with the opportunity to recognize the value of living together despite what might seem to divide us at face value. They can also inspire us to strengthen family ties, overcome tragic losses, and endure hardships for the sake of a better future. They can join with us to improve schools and communities.

These accounts have also included descriptions of how some Maltese educators have been successfully supportive with these children. Much more can be done to ensure that our schools become increasingly welcoming communities for all children from all subcultures. Some children are resilient (Benard, 2004), but teachers can contribute towards making a tremendous difference in their lives. However, the nurturing of inclusive schools and communities cannot be left to mere chance but welcoming attitudes and structures need to be put into place so that each immigrant child is made to feel valued and supported in a land that could be initially overwhelming and hostile. We cannot begin to talk of inclusive societies without having inclusive schools: children who learn together, live together.

In this process, we find our inspiration in listening to what the children themselves have to tell us:

...simply listen to the children speaking their own voices about issues and events that are important to them. There is a great deal to be learned and appropriated from their narratives. They teach us the value of listening to children on their own terms without judging them so that their internal voices will become louder in our time. (Bearison, 1991, p.26)

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