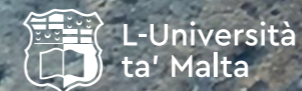


Over the past forty years, the Faculty of Education, University of Malta, has established itself strongly both locally and internationally. Several members of staff have achieved recognition both through publications in their respective fields and by means of their outreach initiatives. Contributions have been made in various fields, from the Sciences to the Arts, and also through textbooks for schools, engagement in the community and collaboration with stakeholders. Over the years the Faculty has invested heavily in its initial teacher education programmes, to the extent that today practically all fully-qualified teachers in Maltese schools, including the State and non-State sectors, are alumni of the Faculty. It has also branched out into various sectors of education, offering courses in different areas of specialization, at all levels of tertiary education.

This volume, "Teacher Education Matters. Transforming lives ... transforming schools", is a collection of papers written by academics from the Faculty of Education. It celebrates the Faculty's 40th anniversary while providing a comprehensive view of research carried out by the authors and their engagement in their respective educational fields. The common thread is represented by the Faculty's involvement in society and by the contribution that academics make to educational developments, in line with the principle that education is a lifelong and lifewide journey.

**Teacher Education Matters:  
transforming lives... transforming schools**  
Christopher Bezzina and Sandro Caruana

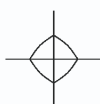


Faculty of Education  
1978-2018



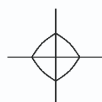
**Teacher Education Matters:  
transforming lives... transforming schools**

Edited by:  
Christopher Bezzina and Sandro Caruana





Faculty of Education  
1978-2018





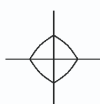
# Celebrating our Faculty's 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1978-2018

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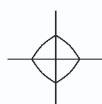


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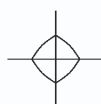
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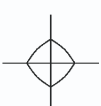


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***The classroom has the elements of the theater, and the observant, self-examining teacher will not need a drama critic to uncover character, plot, and meaning. We are, all of us, the actors trying to find the meaning of the scenes in which we find ourselves. The scripts are not yet fully written, so we must listen with curiosity and great care to the main characters who are, of course, the children.***

Vivian Paley (Author, Teacher and Early childhood researcher)

## PREFACE

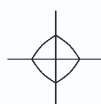
The title of the book - *Teacher Education matters: transforming lives transforming schools* - represents two main beliefs that the Faculty of Education has upheld since its inception and which, we would argue, were already central to teacher education during the days of the teacher training colleges. On the one hand, we have always believed that teachers matter, that teachers are those who ultimately make a difference in peoples' lives. And, secondly, that through our programmes, whether our teacher education programmes or our varied courses at all levels, the intention is one – to improve professional practice in all its facets. Whether one is an education graduate teacher in class, a school leader, an adult educator or a learning support educator, whatever calling one pursues, the Faculty has always endeavoured to ensure that rigorous programmes are provided in order to leave an impact, not only on the course participants as individuals, but also to improve the profession.

The preparation of today's teachers is highly specialised because of the complexity of school life. Continuous professional development is also a must. Providing educators with sound preparation and giving support throughout their career are hallmarks of a sound profession and, over the past forty years the Faculty has endeavoured to nurture its students and to collaborate with stakeholders and employment providers in our field.

This publication aims to celebrate the work of colleagues who are engaged within the Faculty, or who have supported it over the years. The contributions explore our knowledge base, test our theories and enhance our practices. They provide an opportunity to take stock of what the Faculty of Education represents as we go about our daily duties and carry out our research. It is far from comprehensive or representative of the work that has been carried out over the past forty years. However, it provides a noteworthy glimpse into the myriad of activities that we are involved in, together with the educators and the institutions that we serve.

The volume, therefore, includes papers authored by teacher educators who provide insights into teaching methodologies, leadership, language education, ethnicity, diversity and other topics which are very much at heart to the Faculty. They are penned, in most cases, by academics, who through their contribution show their passion for the profession, while expressing their concerns and hopes. The various chapters provide insights into research carried out in diverse areas, while underlining the importance of taking decisions which are evidence-based and which stem from what research tells us in its relation to daily practice in different fields.

*Christopher Bezzina and Sandro Caruana*



**Section IV**  
**IMPACTING ON PRACTICE... EXPLORING CURRICULA  
AND PEDAGOGICAL ISSUES IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS**

**Multilingualism and the inclusion of migrant learners in Maltese schools**

**Sandro Caruana, Stefania Scaglione and Phyllisienne Vassallo Gauci**

Caruana, S. & Scaglione, S. 2017, "Multilinguismo e inclusione dei migrant learners nella scuola maltese: scenari e prospettive", *Symposia Melitensia*, vol. 13, pp. 25-40.

This version is updated and elaborated further. The original paper was first translated into English in collaboration with Dr Ivan Grech (American University of Malta)

**Abstract**

*In Malta, like in several other Southern European countries, the migratory flows of recent years has led to a situation which has rendered schools much more multi-ethnic and multilingual than they ever were. The presence of migrant learners requires language policies as well as inclusive didactic measures that could lead to their inclusion while valuing their personal experiences. This would be of benefit for all learners, including those born and brought up in Malta. In this contribution Maltese schools are viewed in the light of some linguistic and social considerations that result from other contexts in the Mediterranean. We observe that the growing number of migrant learners has led to considerable efforts from the local educational authorities in order to develop policies related to their integration and to the appreciation of their languages. However, more practical measures are required in our schools, both to raise awareness of the benefits that may result through the inclusion of migrant learners and to help educators address their needs professionally.*

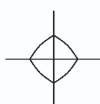
**Keywords:** Multilingualism, Migrant learners, Linguistic policies, Inclusion, Language education

**Introduction**

In the last few decades, the significant increase in migratory fluxes towards southern European countries has resulted in relevant social changes, which are the more evident if one considers that, up to the 1960s, many of these states had not experienced similar situations. On the contrary, these were countries from which people emigrated.

Due to this sudden inversion in the direction of migration and, above all, in view of the cultural, linguistic and religious 'super-diversity' (Vertovec, 2007), which are distinctive features of several new immigrant communities, the public debate on migrants in the southern European countries has been conditioned by phobias which accentuate problems, at the expense of calm and reasoned reflection on possible solutions (EUMC, 2005). Even at institutional level, the discourse on the contribution to cultural diversity by migratory fluxes often is conditioned by stereotypes and prejudice.

Therefore, it is particularly interesting to analyse the dynamics within educational institutions,



where the needs of schools, which are becoming ever more linguistically and culturally heterogenous, require urgent, innovative, and efficient pedagogic measures.

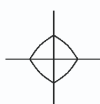
Students face plurilingualism and linguistic diversity resulting from immigration on a daily basis, and it is precisely at school that they are to learn to appreciate the value and potential of diversity. However, in the absence of institutional discourse which legitimises and favours the progressive phasing out of the monolingualistic *habitus* (Gogolin, 1994) and of the traditional homoglottic ideology (Lüdi, 2011) nurtured in many educational systems, individual and collective linguistic resources which are different from those included in the traditional repertoire of the national community, are still largely untapped by scholastic communities. Often, these are considered as obstacles to be overcome, while only European foreign languages taught at school are given acknowledgement and, as a result of this, gain prestige. In Malta schools struggle to teach foreign languages to Maltese and English speakers and, even though studying a third language is compulsory, results often leave much to be desired to the extent that major curriculum revisions are deemed necessary (Pace, 2015). Bilingual programmes which form part of some school curricula are largely conducive to the teaching of English, while other languages are practically excluded, despite the fact that they may be widely spoken by the students who have settled in southern European countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017). With reference to schools in the U.S, Cummins (2005) refers that foreign students should be encouraged to use and maintain their heritage language/s, and avoid the risk of losing it/them, thereby becoming monolingual English speakers. The necessary precautions and measures should also be taken in Europe, where there is an increasing number of students in schools whose mother tongue/s is allochthonous, i.e. a language which is not used regularly in the country which receives them. This is not only the result of new arrivals, but is also due to the presence of foreign children born in receiving countries.

In order to collect empirical data, between 2009 and 2011 seven research entities from six Euro-Mediterranean countries (Italy, Malta, Spain, Portugal, Slovenia, and Romania) worked on the MERIDIUM project (Caruana, Copesescu and Scaglione, 2013), the ultimate aim of which was to study multilingualism in Primary schools, and to analyse critically how different educational systems react to this new reality. The project stemmed from the realisation that, despite the fact that in some of these countries educational policies include intercultural dialogue among the main schooling objectives, and envisage specific measures for the integration of pupils with different L1s from the language/s used as a medium for instruction, such documents generally refer very vaguely to the need to promote the languages and cultures of origin of migrants and, by and large, ignore the indications of the Council of Europe for the development of policies and curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education (Council of Europe, 2007).

While a summarised analysis of the single national situations was published in the conclusion of this project, in this paper we update – a number of years after the formal end of the MERIDIUM project – some considerations related specifically to Malta. The rapid changes in the immigration fluxes, together with the distinctive nature of the use of both Maltese and English in schools<sup>1</sup> make Malta a particularly interesting case study.

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<sup>1</sup> Although Maltese is the L1 of the vast majority of Malta's population, several textbooks in English are used in Primary schools, and the need to understand and to express oneself in English increases as pupils progress from one scholastic year to the next. In Secondary schools, teacher-student interaction is carried out through code-switching between Maltese and English, with specific functions. For example, English is often used to explain technical aspects of certain subjects, such as Mathematics and the Sciences, while Maltese is also used in these lessons for informal exchanges or to impart instructions. The frequency of use of either of the two languages varies according to the individual teacher





Basing ourselves on the comparison between the different tendencies that emerged from the data collected for MERIDIUM, apart from recent demographic indications (§ 2), we will analyse the latest developments of the regulatory framework concerning the integration process of the pupils of migrant origin (§ 3). The conclusion of the study (§ 4) will be dedicated to problems which still hinder – on an ideological and organisational level – the exploitation of the linguistic resources that result from immigration. The analysis will be supported by results derived from didactic experiences, including materials produced within the MERIDIUM project.

### **The linguistic super-diversity in Maltese schools**

In 2004, according to the data of the National Statistics Office Malta ([www.nso.gov.mt](http://www.nso.gov.mt)), the Maltese population numbered 402,668, of which 11,999 (3%) were foreign residents. Data from the same office reveals that ten years later, in 2014, this number more than doubled, with 27,476 foreigners residing in Malta. This corresponds to 6.4 % of the overall population, which in the same period reached 429,344. Even more recent figures indicate an even steeper rise in the population of Malta, which in 2018 amounted to 475,700<sup>2</sup>, including 43,000 foreign workers, many of whom originating from Italy, Britain, Bulgaria, the Philippines and Serbia<sup>3</sup>. This considerable increase, as well as indications that the trend has not plateaued and is still on the rise, is also reflected in local schools where recent figures show a substantial presence of non-native students, in Malta normally referred to as ‘migrant learners’. The figure on page 333 shows some statistical data, retrieved through figures provided by the Migrant Learners’ Unit, which reveal how the presence of these learners increased significantly in recent years.

Further to the above, in response to a parliamentary question, the current Minister for Education and Employment referred in January 2018 there are 5,744 foreign students in local schools, with the majority of them – 3,835 – in state schools. The Church school sector has relatively few – 132 – with the remaining 1,777 in independent (fee-paying) schools. Of these 3,389 are in primary school and 2,355 in secondary school<sup>4</sup>.

While data on the schooling population reveals that there are several English-speaking foreign students, as well as learners from bordering EU countries (especially Italy), it has to be underlined that even in these cases, language-related issues may constitute an obstacle for full integration within Maltese classrooms. The same can be said for migrants from Eastern Europe – especially from Serbia, Macedonia and Ukraine – the presence of whom has increased especially in the past two years. Migrant learners, in fact, come face to face with an intricate linguistic situation locally because, as explained earlier, both Maltese and English are used in different domains and choice of one language over another depends heavily on context and interlocutors. These are clear-cut for local learners, but not so for whoever has not lived in Malta for a long period of time.

The situation is even more complex in the case of asylum seekers and of refugees who have often been the subject of debates which, at times, lack both insight and objectivity. Inevitably, opinions

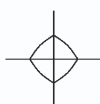
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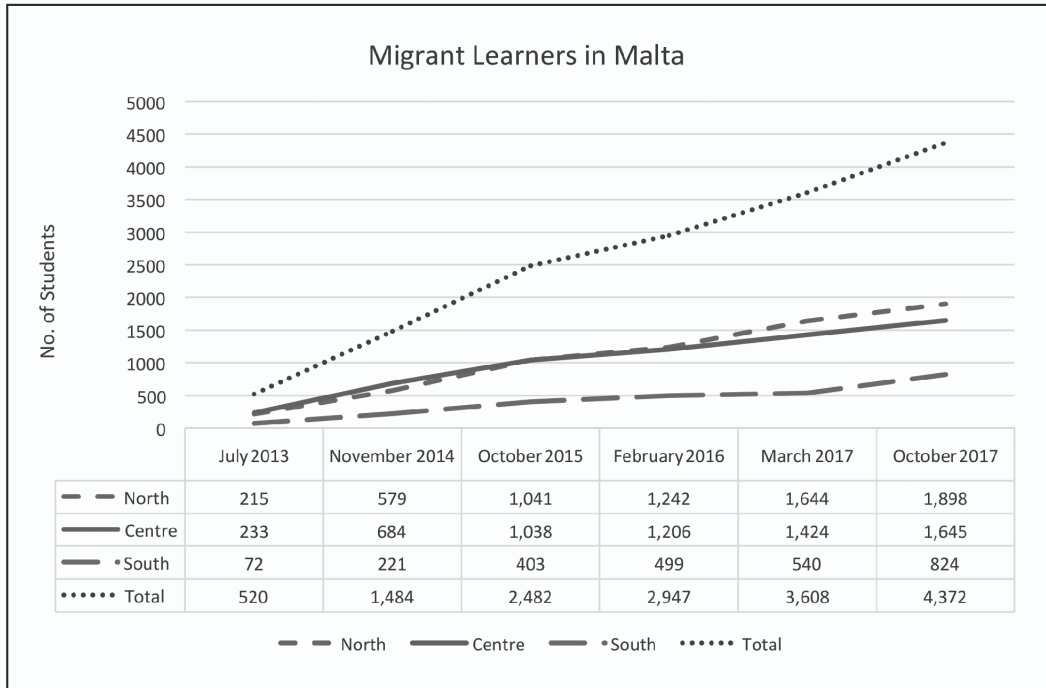
and the school attended. Most written work and exams are carried out in English. At higher levels, including University, almost all teaching and assessment is carried out in English. Since there are significant differences in the use of English and Maltese in schools, and since the former language gains importance as one moves through the educational system, the Maltese educational context is characterised by scholastic diglossia (Caruana, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Times of Malta, June 10th, 2018: <https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20180710/local/increase-in-malta-population-more-than-15-times-that-of-the-eu.684039>

<sup>3</sup> Times of Malta, June 27th, 2018: <https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20180627/local/43000-foreign-workers-in-malta-and-more-are-expected.682918>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20180124/local/church-schools-only-host-132-of-5700-foreign-students.668795>

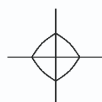




on these issues are divergent, but today there is undoubtedly more widespread awareness on the theme of the reception of migrants and on the need for Malta to be better disposed towards multi-ethnic societies. Linguistic integration is often cited as being of primary importance for inclusion and integration to occur. These migrants, in fact, originating mostly from Libya, Syria, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia, do not speak Maltese and their proficiency in English is generally very limited. Often the lack of formal learning opportunities constrains them to acquire, as best they can and often in a completely spontaneous way, the basic terms and expressions of one or both languages (Caruana, 2008). At times the difficulties encountered to learn the two context languages of Malta hinder both their employment and social integration, and increase the difficulties that children encounter throughout their scholastic life.

This situation is in sharp contrast to the situation of the early Noughties, when local schools were practically monoethnic. Furthermore, Maltese kindergartens – frequented by children aged 3-5 years – constantly register a considerable increase in the presence of non-Maltese pupils. This indicates that, in the next few years, Maltese Primary schools will have an ever-increasing multi-ethnic and multilingual imprint and the complexity of recent migration trends, characterised by the afore-mentioned super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007), necessitates a new paradigm when dealing with schools and classrooms.

As indicated by the MERIDIUM survey of 2010, in Malta – as in the other countries which participated in the project – school authorities take note of the citizenship of the students at schools, but do not collect systematic data about their native language, or about the languages spoken by their families. The MERIDIUM survey had shown that from a sample of 164 pupils who attended three Maltese Primary schools when the project was carried out, 14.6% of the respondents spoke neither Maltese nor English in their households. This project was carried out specifically in schools with a high amount of migrant learners. However, this percentage



decreased to virtually zero when the same pupils were asked if they used their own L1 at school, when speaking to teachers and schoolmates: in fact, only one pupil said that s/he did so. This data mirrored a situation where, due to the lack of linguistic and cultural mediators, the only means of linguistic integration adopted with foreign children was prioritising the use and teaching of English. Today, this method – which still commands a fundamental role – is in some cases accompanied by the teaching of Maltese, especially in the case of children whose L1 is Arabic<sup>5</sup>.

The choice of giving English absolute priority is fully comprehensible, if it is taken into consideration that, in Malta, this language is an important medium used, in alternation with Maltese, at school. However, the choice of prioritizing English harbours at least two relevant inconveniences. First of all, knowledge of English is not enough to fill all the gaps, since many interactions, especially informal ones between pupils, are carried out in Maltese. We reiterate, in this respect, that code-switching between Maltese and English is based on complex dynamics and may be very difficult to grasp for migrant learners.

Secondly, this strategy suffocates the preservation and promotion of the languages of origin of migrant learners, exposing the education system to the risk of encountering, in the very near future, cases of delayed achievement, dispersion, and educational failure, which today are already worrying phenomena in many other countries in the South of Europe with a longer, and more established, history of immigration (for example Italy, Scaglione, 2016) when compared to Malta.

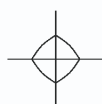
The MERIDIUM survey carried out in Malta, as in the other countries participating in the project, revealed how several teachers complain about the fact that they lack the necessary skills to adapt didactic activities to the needs of non-native pupils. These issues, and other similar ones, have started to be addressed more systematically in recent years, as we explain in the following section. However, further research and action aimed at the integration of the migrant learners are obviously necessary: these can stem from the insights garnered through the MERIDIUM project itself.

### **The evolution of the regulatory framework and initiatives being taken**

The situation of the Maltese educational system in relation to the reception of pupils of a different citizenship has been analysed, and harshly criticised in two reports published in 2011 and 2015, by the Migration Policy Group, a European independent non-profit organisation which, for the past few years, has been drafting a five-yearly Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) for all the countries of the EU and for other extra-European states. Among the MIPEX indicators, the one which deals with education takes into consideration multiple aspects, such as the possibility of access to different levels of education, the answer to the specific needs of migrant learners (support programmes for children and their families, teacher traineeships, standard teaching of L2, etc.), socio-educational integration measures (including the promotion of the languages of origin of pupils whose language/s is/are not used in local contexts), and intercultural education for all students. These parameters were at the basis of the 2010 survey, according to which the integration level of the pupils of foreign origin in the Maltese education system is deemed unequivocally inferior to the EU average (16 points over 100, when compared to the EU average of 39/100)<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> At present migrant learners whose linguistic skills in the two autochthonous languages - Maltese and English - are very limited, attend induction classes until they manage to reach a level which allows them to follow mainstream lessons and to interact with the teachers and their classmates.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. 'Malta' at: <http://old.mipex.eu/countries>



The most critical aspect regards the socio-educational integration measures (0/00), due to the total absence, in 2010, of:

- optional opportunities to teach the languages and cultures of migrants;
- surveillance mechanisms relative to possible phenomenon of scholastic segregation;
- measures favouring social integration, aimed at supporting parent participation in the education of their children.

The evaluation of the answer to the specific needs of migrant pupils (10/100) was also considered rather poor. Apprenticeship courses for teachers seemed to constitute the only moderately favourable factor in this evaluation. On the other hand, it was noted that there are no intensive programmes to introduce the new arrivals to the lifestyle of the country in question and to its education system. Similarly, at the time of the 2010 MIPEX survey there were no measures for continuous educational support for the learning of the languages used for schooling; no measures for the systematic surveillance of the pupils of immigrant origin; and no specific policies regarding the educational situation of the migrants. The results regarding access to education (21/100) and, above all, to intercultural education for all (33/100, when compared to the EU average of 41/100) were relatively better.

In the subsequent survey – which took place in 2014 and was published the following year – the overall figure is slightly higher (19/100, when compared to the EU average of 38/100)<sup>7</sup>; increases were registered in the answers provided to specific needs (20/100) and within the sphere of intercultural education (40/100), which is practically equal to the EU average score (43/100). However, the score regarding measures for socio-educational integration remained unchanged.

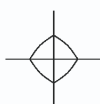
Irrespective of the schematisation of the MIPEX evaluation, one has to point out that, from 2010, the integration policies in favour of migrant pupils and their families have developed at a fast pace in Malta, as we now outline in synthesis.

In May 2011, the then Ministry of Education launched a new National Curriculum Framework (NCF), which has been subjected to a wide public consultation<sup>8</sup> and the results of which led to 'A National Curriculum Framework for All' (MEDE, 2012). In this document, the recommendations of the European Parliament and Council regarding the key competences for lifelong learning<sup>9</sup> are applied to the Maltese educational system, highlighting in particular the respect for diversity and the importance of developing a model in which pupils are placed at the centre of the learning process. It must be pointed out that this curriculum promotes a more open approach towards the integration of those who choose a secular education, with the option to frequent Ethics Education classes for students who do not follow lessons of Religion. As far as language learning is concerned, the NCF stresses the importance of the teaching of Maltese and, above all, English. The formal teaching of foreign languages, as is traditional in Malta, starts at secondary level (at the age of eleven), when the study of a third language is compulsory. However, there are no explicit references in the document to the linguistic needs of migrant learners, as this is limited to the following, thereby confirming the point made at the beginning of this paper, in relation to

<sup>7</sup> Cf. <http://www.mipex.eu/malta>

<sup>8</sup> <http://curriculum.gov.mt/en/resources/the-ncf/pages/default.aspx#Consultation>

<sup>9</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning (2006/962/EC), <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32006H0962>





how official documentation takes a very pragmatic stance on the matter without delving into the complex issues related to language identity:

*...Malta has become a multi-cultural society and that all schools should be in a position to provide children and their parents with language support in Maltese and English so that they achieve a basic working knowledge of these languages at the earliest possible in order to allow them to integrate quickly. (MEDE, 2012, p.4)*

In January 2013, the Ministry of Education issued a letter circular for the inclusion of linguistic mediation mechanisms in the school-family communication dynamics, to the benefit of parents with non-EU citizenship. This is one of the first measures taken to create concrete links between parents of migrant learners and schools, proposing short courses for non-EU parents so that they, in turn, become mediators within educational institutions.

In March 2013, following the political general elections, the then new government set up the Ministry for Social Dialogue, Consumer Affairs and Civil Liberties (MSDC), whose competences include themes related to the integration of migrants<sup>10</sup>. One of the most important initiatives adopted by the new ministry is that of guaranteeing, on equal terms with Maltese nationals, free childcare for the children of non-EU citizens, if both parents work or study in Malta.

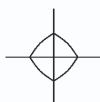
During the same year, the different initiatives for the integration of migrant learners – both EU and non-EU citizens – are concentrated in a single unit established by the Ministry for Education & Employment (MEDE), the Migrant Learners' Unit<sup>11</sup>. The decision on this measure was taken due to the constant increase in the migrant population, which made it necessary to set up an infrastructure capable of managing migrant reception policies, special projects and teacher education courses. Government and European funds were specifically requested for migrant learner education and the professional training of teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). More recently, the necessity to introduce the teaching of Maltese to non-natives has started to be tackled in schools. Through the award of this funding, MEDE has implemented various projects which covered the training of teachers in EFL methodology through the IF 07-11, recruitment of language support educators and parent leaders (through the Language Learning and Parental Support for Integration Projects- LLAPSI 1, 2 and 3) as well as the procurement of focused online materials targeting reading and spelling (RESS Project) and an online core competences' assessment tool (CCOAST project). In October 2016, MEDE through the Migrant Learners' Unit, submitted a proposal for EU co-funding which targets the consolidation and further development of the previous LLAPSI projects, as well as the setting up of new initiatives to support migrant learners. These initiatives include activities focused both on language learning and on inclusion measures.

Apart from this, the Unit has provided clear indications regarding the importance of investing in education in the early years, involving the families directly, and the need to avoid further procrastination:

*The main areas of language-related support should take into account both in-school and out-of-school provision addressing both the learner and the family. Links between what happens during the school time, after school and at home should be*

<sup>10</sup> <http://socialdialogue.gov.mt/en/Pages/default.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> <https://migrantlearnersunit.gov.mt/en/Pages/About%20us/about-us.aspx>



*established since one area influences the other. Studies have shown how investment in the early years pays off by reducing problems faced later on during the schooling lifetime of the learner (Facciol et al. 2015, p.11).*

*Schools need to accept the fact that the phenomenon of migrant non-Maltese learners is here to stay ... Training in this aspect of inclusion, in the handling of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural classes, in the detection of discrimination and xenophobia, cannot be put off any more. (Facciol et al. 201, p.19)*

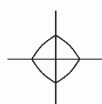
The Unit is responsible for the provision of an induction course for newcomer learners who speak neither Maltese nor English and who would therefore have major difficulties in following lessons in mainstream classrooms (Vassallo Gauci, 2017). Induction classes are held at the same school attended by the learner or, if not possible, in the geographical proximity of the child's receiving school. The induction course lasts for approximately one year or until learners have acquired the language competence deemed necessary, either in Maltese or English, or in both languages, to be able to join the mainstream classroom. Apart from the induction course, the Unit has extended its services to areas such as the provision of language support to migrant learners who are already in mainstream schools through pull-out sessions where students are drawn out of the mainstream classroom and given extra support in Maltese or English as needed in smaller groups. The Unit also organises social activity classes through the *Making Friends, Bringing Friends Club* where cohorts of Maltese and non-Maltese learners are invited to participate through fun activities while making friends during after school hours. Since 2017 the Unit organises *Language to Go* Summer language revision classes in Maltese, English or both languages for students who have completed the induction course or as an introduction for newcomer learners who will be attending Maltese schools in the following scholastic year<sup>12</sup>.

In July 2013, MEDE established the 'Language Policy in Education Committee', in order to draft a country report on the linguistic education policies (MEDE, 2014) which constitutes the first step towards the formulation of Malta's 'Language Education Policy Profile'. The 'Profile' was published in March 2015, in collaboration with experts of the Council of Europe and of the Language Policy Unit of the CoE (MEDE-COE, 2015). The document tackles explicitly themes related to the two languages of schooling and access to education for non-Maltese students (mostly deriving from countries outside the EU) within a wider framework related to opportunities to renew the objectives of linguistic education in Maltese schools. The document also underlines the need to gradually heighten attention towards the adoption of an authentically plurilingual – apart from multi-cultural – approach towards the education of all pupils, including migrant learners. This approach should fully exploit the extraordinary potential inherent in the history and in the geographical location of the island and, therefore, in the linguistic repertoire of its speaking community, in which – a unique case in Europe – Semitic, Germanic, and Romance languages have taken root and mingled.

In the meantime, also in 2015, the restructuring of the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta has led to set up a Department of Inclusion and Access to Learning. One of the objectives of this department is to develop a teacher education model which caters for the needs of all learners, including the children of migrants. Particularly interesting is the fact that the Migrant Learners' Unit and the Department collaborate to create greater awareness – even in Maltese public opinion – regarding the importance to consider diversity, and therefore also multilingualism, as

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<sup>12</sup> Initiatives such as the *Making Friends Bringing Friends Club* and *Language to Go* are part-financed by the European Union, Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund 2014 – 2020.



a precious resource for the entire community, a resource that deserves to be promoted and managed competently, through a unified and organised political effort which involves all the society. The Department is currently involved in preparing and training teachers who will be responsible for the delivery of Maltese culture and language courses for the integration of adult migrants. In the near future it also plans to offer a course in Cultural Mediation and a number of study-units which will serve as Continuing Professional Development courses for in-service teachers. These measures are aimed to address the serious deficiency, which is felt locally, in order to allow migrant learners to be able to receive more in-class and in-school support.

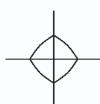
In May 2015, MSDC launched the public consultation ‘Mind D Gap: Together we can make a difference’<sup>13</sup>, within the remit of the elaboration of the 2015-20 national strategy for the integration of migrants (MSDC, 2015). This led, at the end of 2017, to the publication of the Migrant Integration Strategy & Action Plan (MEAE, 2017), which provides clear goals to be reached by 2020 in various sectors of the Maltese society, including education.

In August 2015, the same Ministry established the Forum on Integration Affairs.<sup>14</sup> One of the most important measures included in this strategy proposes a revision of the ‘National Curriculum Framework for All’ (MEDE, 2012), in order to further highlight matters regarding social justice, multi-cultural diversity, inclusion, and the understanding of different religious creeds. Once more, particular emphasis is placed on the importance of strengthening the linguistic skills of the migrant learners, with specific reference to Maltese and English, apart from facilitating the integration of these students at school. The MSDC strategy goes beyond compulsory education. It underlines the importance of permanent education as an instrument which allows total access to different sectors of Maltese society. However, even in this document there are no references to the maintenance and the promotion of the languages of origin of the migrants.

The general impression is that the measures adopted in recent years are encouraging ones, even though – in view of their full implementation – most of the initiatives which today regard linguistic and social integration of migrant learners in schools still depend heavily on the individual teacher or head of school. The creation of the Migrant Learners’ Unit is an important initiative, which shows that the local education authorities are aware of the fact that issues at hand are to be managed more carefully than in the past. Acknowledging the importance of analysing and promoting the good practices which are already taking place in our schools is equally important. A good example of such an exercise is the ‘Compendium of Good Practices on Inclusion and Equity in Schools’ (MEDE, 2018). The report which was presented by MEDE in 2018, sheds light on educators’ perspectives of challenges they face in bringing about social inclusion and equity in the school. It also highlights a number of educators’ suggestions and examples of good practice for social inclusion and equity in the classroom and school. Apart from the general good practices listed in the Compendium, a number of positive initiatives which promote multilingualism are adopted in schools, or at college level, throughout the scholastic year. One such example is the celebration of ‘Mother Language Day’ on the 21<sup>st</sup> of February, when Maltese learners together with learners from a migrant background are encouraged to come up with a song, a poem, a small theatrical performance or anything they wish to share with the rest of the school in their own language (Vassallo Gauci, 2018). Another example is the publication of the book ‘*Kellimni - Let’s Talk*’ (Sciriha & Micallef Cann, 2018) on initiative of St Clare College Pembroke Secondary School. The book identifies topics, words and phrases in Maltese and English that newcomer learners in

<sup>13</sup> [http://socialdialogue.gov.mt/en/Public\\_Consultations/MSDC/Pages/Consultations/MDGIntegration.aspx](http://socialdialogue.gov.mt/en/Public_Consultations/MSDC/Pages/Consultations/MDGIntegration.aspx)

<sup>14</sup> <http://socialdialogue.gov.mt/en/Forum%20on%20Integration%20Affairs/Pages/Welcome-Page.aspx>



Maltese schools will need to begin communicating with others and making friends. It also allows space for learners to write the meaning of the words and phrases in their native language and to add other vocabulary, thus promoting awareness of the value of the child's native language and celebrating its importance.

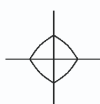
However, two problems underlined in Malta's 'Language Education Policy Profile' must not be underestimated (MEDE-COE, 2015). One is the difficulty to persuade public opinion that immigration is not a transitory phenomenon, but rather a structural component of modern society which is bound to grow. The other is the need to conceptualise a more flexible and transparent organisational model for schools, in which greater attention is given during teacher education to the specific dynamics of learning in plurilingual environments and where teachers are directly involved in action-research projects, which favour self-analyses of didactic methodologies and on the effective needs of students.

The analysis, in fact, highlights the apparent contradiction according to which, in a bilingual educational system, similar to the Maltese one, there still largely exists a homoglottic perspective, which in many ways is similar to the 'monolingual solitudes' (Cummins, 2010) assumption, according to which each language taught at school is to be learnt autonomously, and separately from other languages that learners may know or encounter. In pursuing a supposedly balanced bilingualism, this assumption compromises the possibility of exploiting to the full the potential strategies, such as code-switching, intercomprehension, and explicit interlinguistic reflection which, on the other hand, are fundamental for bilingual speakers. Many Maltese teachers are well aware of this through their daily practice in class. However, up to this day, there is still a lack of opportunities which could allow them to delve deeper into and assimilate these aspects within their teaching, as this is often highly characterised by targeted goals which one has to reach by the end of the scholastic year. Obviously, any progress in the direction of a more multilingual education would be beneficial for the integration of members of linguistic minorities, whose linguistic skills could be exploited to the benefit of the entire class. This would, in turn, constitute the basis for a possible – and augured – widening of the offer of languages that are taught in Maltese schools. In fact, it would be rather inappropriate for a State in the middle of the Mediterranean not to promote extra-European languages of growing global importance, such as Arabic and Chinese, although this would have to be done in a carefully planned manner.

In this respect, the introduction of a re-thought Foreign Language Awareness Programme (FLAP) in September 2017 for Year 3 and Year 4 students of state primary schools is certainly a small step in the right direction. The new FLAP offers an alternative to the programme previously carried out in primary schools in Malta (which consisted in giving a first taste of some of the foreign languages which are taught in Maltese schools at secondary level – Italian, French and German), in such a way to better reflect and implement the principles of plurilingual and intercultural education in the teaching of languages<sup>15</sup>. The new FLAP is in line with the proposals for language education heralded by the Council of Europe, in which the primary focus of language education is shifted from achieving mastery of a single target language to developing proficiency (of varying degrees) in several languages and experience of several cultures. This implies teaching languages in order to foster language awareness wherein one is not to:

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<sup>15</sup> Information retrieved from the unpublished proposal for a re-thought FLAP Programme for the Primary schools formulated by Dr Phyllisienne Vassallo Gauci and Dr Mario Pace and presented to the Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) on the 16<sup>th</sup> of September 2016.





*...keep languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather build up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact. (Council of Europe, 2001, p.4)*

By means of a number of activities and the creation of enriching materials, young learners are being encouraged to reflect on the diversity that characterizes the process of linguistic development and communication. During FLAP lessons, students are exposed to a range of languages, both European and non-European and helped to develop an awareness of and interest in reading and decoding unfamiliar language (new sounds, alphabets, scripts etc...). In this way, the programme helps learners foster plurilingual and intercultural competences from an early age and leads them to develop a better knowledge of languages, skills to learn them, and positive attitudes towards linguistic diversity.

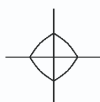
### **Conclusions and prospects**

The geographic dimensions of Malta, which impinge on the organisation and distribution of schools over the island's territory, and the super-diversity which is distinctive of the migratory fluxes towards the island, undoubtedly warrant pedagogical measures and didactic materials which are tailor-made for the local context. The fact that, as can be evinced from the MERIDIUM data, these measures and materials are still inadequate in other neighbouring countries, does not augur well. In fact, it seems that making these instruments available is far from simple, and that the efforts made up to now for research purposes and to create innovative linguistic policies cannot be easily translated into efficient structural measures, which could be used in a practical way in class.

There is no doubt that the cultural and linguistic super-diversity which results from the presence of migrant learners must be tackled, while taking into consideration that, in the eyes of public opinion, the phenomenon is indeed a very sensitive one. Apart from this, significant financial and organisational efforts are necessary and these must be evaluated realistically. However, the challenge is worth taking. Otherwise, there is the risk of an increase in the number of learners who could be excluded from the scholastic system, with inevitable negative consequences not only on their performance at school, but also on their behaviour and their contribution to society in its entirety once they become adults. In fact, the OECD-PISA (2017: 343, Tab. III.7.3) refers that the difference between local learners and first-generation immigrants, as far as their feeling of belonging at school is concerned, is one of the largest among PISA-participating countries and economies: whereas 70.7% of Maltese-born students state that they they feel a sense of belonging to their schools, this only occurs in the case of 51.5% of migrant learners. Although this consideration is based on data collected in 2015, that is prior to a number of measures discussed in this paper, it cannot be disregarded and it would be interesting to verify if the gap has now narrowed. It is also worth noting, that in the same OECD-PISA report the difference between Maltese-born learners and migrant learners is less accentuated in other variables and more aligned to that of other countries, including the one regarding whether one feels lonely at school. This, for example, tallies to a difference of 5.8% between the two groups, thereby indicating that at the level of pastoral care there is a sense of responsibility towards the needs of migrant learners (OECD-PISA, 2017)<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> This result is also included in the highlights of the OECD PISA report, available at: <http://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=MLT&treshold=10&topic=PI>



Many local educational authorities, heads of schools and teachers, are well aware that linguistic and cultural pluralism are valuable assets in educational terms, as they harbour potential advantages for the students born and bred in Malta, which can help them develop their own horizons. The feedback from schools themselves is also important, despite being largely anecdotal and confined to some realities: in those schools where initiatives geared at promoting linguistic and cultural diversity are organised, the attitudes of teachers, families, and children – especially those attending primary schools – is very positive.

Tangible proof of this phenomenon was provided by the European project MERIDIUM. One of the objectives of the project was the production of a simple didactic instrument which can be used in primary classes with pupils of foreign origin, in order to stimulate curiosity and debates on linguistic diversity. The MERIDIUM researchers, therefore, devised a booklet (*Babel and languages*) structured similarly to a travel diary of an extra-terrestrial creature, named Babel, who arrives on Earth from the planet Multilanguage, where the languages of all the other planets are studied in order to communicate with other people of the Universe. In the diary, Babel describes what he learnt about the inhabitants of Earth and on their languages, using the six official languages of the MERIDIUM project (Italian, English, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovenian, and Spanish). Apart from this, Babel asks children to help him process the information he collected<sup>17</sup>.

The text is made up of five sections, each of which deals with a different aspect of linguistic diversity: individual bilingualism, collective bilingualism, linguistic families, the writing systems, and the learning of languages. The sequence of the arguments is organised according to a principle of increasing complexity and its aim is to create a discussion space in which the phenomena of plurilingualism and linguistic diversity are ‘naturalised’, that is they are represented as ‘normal’ and not as a product of extraordinary occurrences. The introduction of each section provides information regarding the general theme and continues with three simple exercises, whose aim is to stimulate in the pupil a reflection which is always based on his experiences and feelings regarding the languages he speaks and to which he is exposed in his environment. With this instrument at hand, the teacher can organise workshops for thematic analysis structured on the characteristics of the class, and on the life experiences and interests of the children.

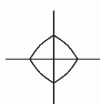
The booklet has been well received, not only by the European Commission experts, but also by the school heads and teachers who participated in the seminars organised by the MERIDIUM research units in Malta, as in the other countries participating in the project. The distribution of the booklet to children was enthusiastically received even by their families and, in many cases, stimulated the creation of other initiatives aimed at creating true and proper didactic modules. One must also point out that the booklet and didactic experimentation that ensued are also useful to promote, among the teaching community, the guidelines for developing (meta) linguistic and educational awareness in plurilingual contexts, such as, for example, the projects promoted and subjected to successful trials by the European Commission, the Council of Europe (for example FREPA)<sup>18</sup> and by several universities in the past few years.

The MERIDIUM experience induces us to endorse the opinion, also expressed in the ‘Language Education Policy Profile’ according to which it is probably more likely that pragmatic solutions will be found at ‘local’ level, rather than through high profile national campaigns which could

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<sup>17</sup> The booklet can be downloaded freely from the MERIDIUM website: [http://meridium.unistrapg.it/sites/meridium.unistrapg.it/files/brochure\\_bambini.indd\\_esecutivo.pdf](http://meridium.unistrapg.it/sites/meridium.unistrapg.it/files/brochure_bambini.indd_esecutivo.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> <https://carap.ecml.at/>

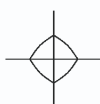


be launched in support of migrant needs, much as this could be desirable (MEDE-COE, 2015, 52). Much hard work is required for the promotion and analysis of good practices, in order to help create a social environment completely favourable to the promotion of the linguistic and cultural diversity resulting from immigration in schools. Furthermore, there are problems which have to be solved with urgency, above all the professional preparation of linguistic mediators and support teachers who could facilitate the integration of migrant learners, also by following some of the more successful models used in other European countries.

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