

INSIGHTS2019 Proceedings

Multi-disciplinary Conference – 1st Edition

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Conference Proceedings

Insights

*Edited by
Mario Pace, Randolph Peresso & Etienne Cordina*

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The *Insights* proceedings, edited by Mario Pace, Randolph Peresso and Etienne Cordina, published by St Ignatius College, is a collection of the college's peer reviewed multi-disciplinary conference held in February 2019. St Ignatius College is committed to uphold the highest standards of publication ethics.

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Message by the Hon. Minister for Education and Employment

One of the greatest accomplishments in research is the ability to structure knowledge and make it accessible for others to build on. Knowledge and academia have paved the way forward for new horizons and insights in various educational fields.

The INSIGHTS multi-disciplinary conference provides the necessary tools needed to break barriers and develop the human potential. Such initiatives make it easier for researchers to build on the work of their predecessors. This rich exchange of philosophies creates a healthy chain reaction, thereby instigating further knowledge.

Collaboration amongst educators is key for successful learning. Innovation in pedagogical methods and approaches enhance the learning experience at all levels of education, not only for students, but also for educators. This calls for the need of research within the local context, therefore emphasising the importance of such an initiative as set forth by St Ignatius College.

Whilst I wish to congratulate all participants, I encourage and look forward to further editions of the INSIGHTS conference.

Evarist Bartolo
Minister for Education and Employment

Foreword by the Principal, St Ignatius College

Ut Simul Discamus et Adolescamus - Learning and Growing Together, our college's motto, inspired us to embark on this new venture as a College, the first edition of 'Insights', a Multi-Disciplinary Conference, held at St Ignatius College, Siggiewi Primary in February 2019.

This collection of academic papers is the product of the research carried out by College professionals who invested in their professional development by continuing their studies in their areas of interest at both Masters and Doctoral levels in the educational field. These papers bring together a myriad of topics including Educational Leadership with specific reference to Invitational Leadership; Women in leadership and the challenges they face; Culturally responsive education in Malta; The origins of pedagogy in primary state schools in Malta; E twinning as a motivational tool in the learning of foreign languages; What constitutes dyslexia friendly practice; Contemporary issues in early childhood education; The potential of moving images in assessing learning in History and The use of virtual learning environments. The diversity of the subjects presented highlight the strong interest there is in research and the insights which emanate from it. This is very commendable and as a College Principal and an educator, I strongly believe in encouraging and sustaining this interest.

I am sure that the readers of these conference proceedings will have the opportunity to delve into the various interesting research findings in these academic papers. I invite one and all to enjoy learning and growing from the insights provided. I thank all paper presenters for sharing their learning with all participants who attended the conference. As the American poet, Wendell Holmes said: *'A moment's insight is sometimes worth a lifetime's experience'*.

Organising such a conference involves a lot of work, energy and determination. I would like to heartily thank all the members of the Conference Organising Committee, the Scientific Committee and the support team from Siggiewi Primary and the College.

My gratitude also goes to the Honourable Minister Bartolo, Minister for Education and Employment who accepted to officially open the Conference and Dr Francis Fabri, Permanent Secretary, for the financial sponsorship together with the Institute for Education.

I augur that the insights shared will serve as a beacon of light in our professional experiences!

Maria Pace
College Principal – St Ignatius College

WHAT CONSTITUTES DYSLEXIA-FRIENDLY PRACTICE? A CASE STUDY OF A MALTESE PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Abstract

Students with diverse needs, including students with dyslexia, struggle to succeed in a one-size fits all regular-education curriculum [1]. The purpose of the study was to fill in the gap in the knowledge of the best possible dyslexia-friendly practice in Maltese primary schools. A qualitative research methodology was used to capture the views and experiences of the participants in relation to dyslexia. A key finding was that a multisensory approach is the most useful dyslexia-friendly strategy in helping students with dyslexia. The study established that the use of multisensory strategies benefit learners with dyslexia as well as other learners without dyslexia. A multisensory approach within the framework of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) was explored. The study may benefit Maltese primary schools as it may serve as a model of dyslexia-friendly practices and may thus contribute to devise an effective dyslexia-friendly policy within the Maltese primary educational context.

Keywords: Dyslexia, multisensory approach, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), inclusion.

1 INTRODUCTION

Dyslexia-friendly schools are educational environments in which dyslexia is seen as a learning difference rather than as a learning difficulty [2]. Viewing dyslexia as a learning difference emphasises “how all lessons are planned, resourced and taught and also on the way teachers are supported through school policy, practice and ethos” (p.5). Pavey [3] sustains Mackay’s notion by pointing out the importance of adopting the social model of disability which argues that it is the social context that disables the person rather than the

individual's impairment. Both Mackay and Pavey suggest that it is crucial to change the learning environment to suit individual learning needs. Taking the perspective of the social model of disability, the impairments associated with dyslexia only become difficulties in a society where illiteracy is linked to 'negative connotations' [4].

By illustrating effective strategies that can be implemented in the classroom environment, the present study encourages, as Pavey [3] puts it, a change of approach that empowers teachers to support students with dyslexia rather than to feel that such work is solely the role of dyslexia specialists, teaching assistants or other professionals. Specifically, the study sought to establish the strategies that make a school dyslexia-friendly in the area of teaching and learning for primary age students.

The theoretical framework of UDL, as presented by the Centre for Applied Special Technology, is highlighted since this framework helps educators to understand how to create curricula that address the needs of all learners at the initial stage of lesson planning [5] [1]. According to Rose & Meyer UDL outlines the following three key principles that offer:

- 1) Multiple means of representation, to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge;
- 2) Multiple means of action and expression, to offer learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know;
- 3) Multiple means of engagement to tap into learners' interests, challenge them appropriately, and motivate them to learn [6].

A multisensory approach within the framework of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) was explored as this approach to teaching and learning enables children to access learning, increase their learning engagement and express their knowledge through multiple modalities such as visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and tactile modalities [7]. The implementation of multisensory strategies together with the principles of UDL may promote dyslexia-friendly environments as the combination of both allows students with dyslexia to participate actively, offering them an inclusive learning experience.

2 METHODOLOGY

The case study approach was selected for this research as this study explores the phenomenon of dyslexia in context. The chosen school was one of three Maltese primary state schools forming part of a pilot study of dyslexia-friendly schools in Malta. The Senior Management Team (SMT), class teachers and Learning Support Educators (LSEs) were being trained about dyslexia-friendly practice and emphasis on this being implemented was emphasized as a whole-school approach. This made it possible to explore the participants' views based on real-life experiences in the school context.

Semi-structured interviews were held as these, as Denscombe explains, allow the researcher to prepare a set of questions on issues to be addressed and the interviewee can elaborate on these issues through open-ended answers [8]. Interviews with 2 class teachers and 2 LSEs, 3 pupils with dyslexia and their parents were carried out to gain insights from their perspectives and experience related to dyslexia. Questionnaires were also sent out to the school's SMT, class teachers and LSEs to obtain further data about dyslexia-friendly practice in the school context. A purposive sampling was used in this study as, according to Denscombe, it involves the selection of the sample based on the person's experience and expertise [8]. Class teachers and LSEs with at least five years teaching experience and pupils with a profile of dyslexia and their respective parents were selected to participate in the study. In this way, insights from the participants' experience of dyslexia were gained and this informed the focus of the research effectively.

3 RESULTS

The findings of this study show that all the participants agreed that dyslexia-friendly strategies benefit pupils with dyslexia and also those without dyslexia. The participants emphasized the importance of early intervention.

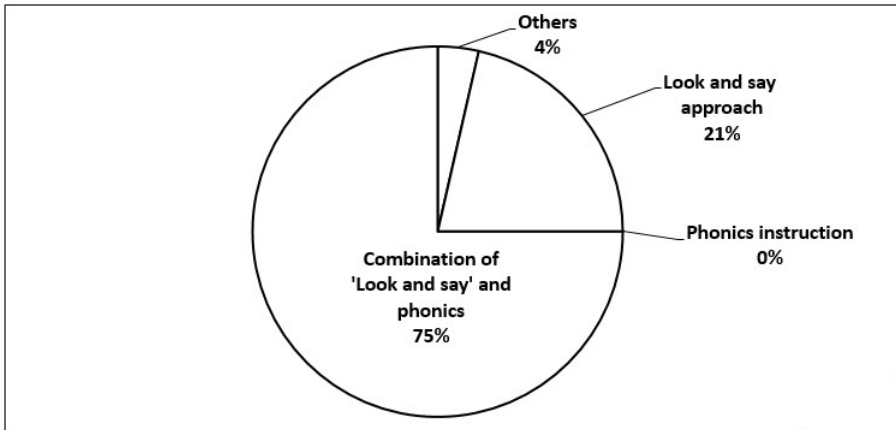


Figure 1: Result of the study with regard to approaches to teach reading to pupils with dyslexia.

Figure 1 shows that 75% of the participants agreed that the 'Look and say' approach together with 'Phonics instruction' is the most helpful reading approach to students with dyslexia. About 21% responded that the 'Look and say' approach is more effective than the 'Phonics method'. None of the participants responded that the 'Phonics instruction' on its own helps students to develop reading skills.

The participants' responses relating to dyslexia-friendly strategies were set within the three themes that emerged: Differentiated Instruction, Multisensory Approach and Information Communication Technology (ICT). Table 1 shows examples of dyslexia-friendly strategies within these themes which the participants of the study reported useful in supporting pupils with dyslexia.

Table 1: Examples of differentiated instruction, a multisensory approach and the use of ICT reported by the participants.

Differentiated Instruction	Multisensory Approach	ICT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support Intervention <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Phonics instruction ○ ‘Look and say’ approach ○ Complementary teaching ○ NWAR programme ○ Explicit and systematic teaching • Exam Access Arrangements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provision of a reader, scribe etc. • Adaptations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provision of adapted worksheets ○ Provision of dyslexia-friendly books • Structured teaching <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Display of visual timetable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visual strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Highlighting key words and important phrases ○ Using spelling strategies such as ‘Look, say, cover, write and check’ ○ Using mind maps ○ Providing visuals of ‘b’ and ‘d’, ‘p’ and ‘q’ • Auditory strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Using audio-cassettes during story-telling ○ Teaching initial letters through a song • Kinaesthetic strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Making an action associated with the sound of letters • Tactile strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Writing letters on sand tray ○ Making up words with magnetic letters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Computer educational activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ On-line educational games ○ Video clips related to topics ○ Interactive e-books ○ Use of Interactive Whiteboard to adjust change of font, font size, line-spacing, background colour and font colour • Use of Websites to access information <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Use of Websites to access information • Word-processing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Options such as spell checker, word prediction etc. ○ Use of a word processor to produce writing tasks

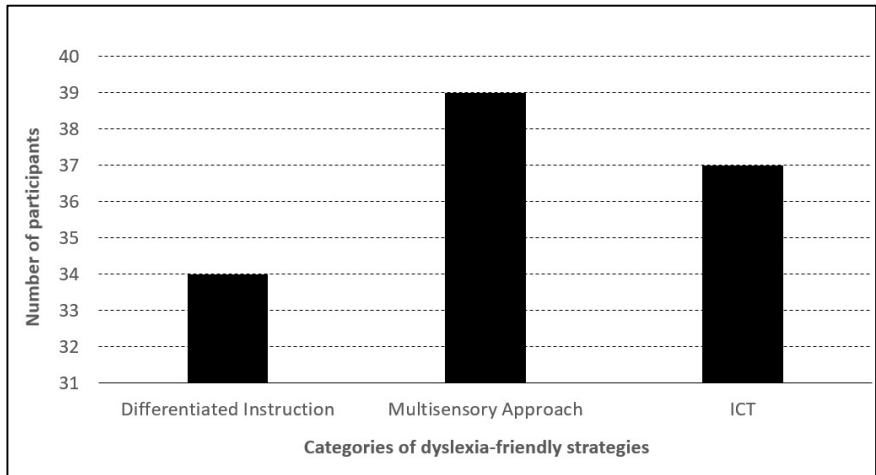


Figure 2: Number of participants that reported differentiated instruction, a multisensory approach and ICT as dyslexia-friendly practice.

Figure 2 shows the number of participants that reported differentiated instruction, a multisensory approach and ICT as dyslexia-friendly practice. 34 participants out of 42 (81%) identified differentiated instruction as dyslexia-friendly. Figure 2 also shows that 39 participants out of 42 (93%) agree that a multisensory approach is crucial in supporting pupils with dyslexia and that 37 participants out of 42 (88%) reported ICT as a useful tool in dyslexia-friendly practice.

4 DISCUSSION

In line with Mackay's assertions that dyslexia-friendly strategies increase school effectiveness, the study established that such strategies meet the needs of a wide range of students [2]. The importance of providing more than one approach to reading accessibility reported in the study concurs with MacDonald's conclusion that a combination of the 'Look and say' approach and 'Phonics instruction' may improve pupils' reading competency which allows students to access the curriculum [9]. The participants reported that small-group withdrawal tuition is useful as a means of providing differentiated instruction and individual attention for students with significant reading difficulties. This conforms to Anderson's finding that withdrawal tuition helps pupils to acquire basic literacy skills [10]. However, both Anderson's paper

and the findings of this study reveal that out of class tuition is effective if 'sensitively timetabled' so that students do not miss out on class activities. In view of this, the present study explored the possibility of providing a dyslexia-friendly environment to increase support in the classroom and thus promote an inclusive learning experience for students with dyslexia.

The study proposed the implementation of the UDL framework as this helps to differentiate instruction at the initial lesson planning stage and thus helps to promote the inclusion of all students [1]. García-Campos et al. stated that the results of their study show that UDL eliminates barriers to students' learning and participation and provides guidance for classroom practice [11]. UDL's implementation emphasizes proactive action to create learning environments for students with learning difficulties, such as Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and Dyslexia, and promotes the ability to learn for all students, making it possible to cater for students' diverse needs in the classroom context [11]. In this way, all students, irrespective of their diverse learning abilities, are provided the opportunity to actively participate alongside their peers in an inclusive learning environment.

4.1 Dyslexia-friendly strategies within the UDL framework

Given that the study aims to establish a systematic approach that incorporates dyslexia-friendly strategies within the UDL framework, these strategies have been organised according to the three UDL principles as identified in CAST [5]. A multisensory approach was emphasized given the study highlighted multisensory strategies as the most useful dyslexia-friendly practice in supporting students with dyslexia.

4.1.1 Multisensory strategies aligned with the first principle of UDL

The first principle of UDL is to provide multiple means of representation to help students access content. Students with learning difficulties, including dyslexia, access learning differently and thus require various ways of representation to help them access content. A multisensory approach to teaching and learning enables children to access learning through multiple modalities such as visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile modalities. Thus a multisensory approach may offer multiple means of representation and aligns well with the first principle of UDL.

In accordance with Courey et al., the study highlighted the use of visual and auditory representations, such as video clips, to help students access content [12]. Corroborating with Narkon and Wells, graphic organisation of

information including mind maps was reported as a useful means of representation to help students access learning [13]. It is also important to provide options for perception such as customising the display of information by offering a choice of fonts as children with reading difficulties are more likely to experience visual stress and this makes them more sensitive to visual aspects such as the contrast of black print on white paper and font [14] [15]. Although Zikl et al. concluded that the font Open Dyslectic which was created specifically for individuals with dyslexia to reduce their difficulties, for example, the confusion of letters of similar shapes, was not proved to be statistically better than the common Sans-Serif font, the same study found that some pupils preferred the Open Dyslectic font [16]. This finding may indicate the need to offer different fonts to cater for individual needs. Similarly, the present study reported that the use of ICT facilitates learning for students with dyslexia and other learning difficulties as it allows them to select the font, background and text colour they are most comfortable with and can read most easily.

Among other options available through the use of ICT to help students access learning, the findings of this study show that interactive e-books and software are beneficial to teaching and learning. Similarly, Marino et al. found that educational computer games which included a virtual dictionary with a read aloud option improved students' comprehension [17]. Students with dyslexia participating in the study remarked that they found ICT helpful in reading comprehension as it provided the option, among other possibilities, to define words. In this way, pupils are more able to access texts and therefore, it can be argued, that ICT is a potentially useful means of representation that benefits pupils with dyslexia and other students with learning difficulties.

4.1.2 Multisensory strategies aligned with the second principle of UDL

The second principle of UDL is to provide multiple means of action and expression to help students demonstrate their knowledge and skills through various responses. Students also differ in the way they interact with learning and in the way they express their knowledge [14]. As both CAST and Reid state, learners with dyslexia may be able to relate a story in conversation but struggle to put it down in writing [7]. CAST suggests the use of multiple media for composition apart from writing text, such as speech, drawing, and the use of software that allows spell checking among other options. Davis and Deponio state that an increase in the use of ICT is associated with a multisensory approach as they both offer options to pupils to interact with

learning and to express their knowledge in their preferred modality [18]. Consequently, it is clear that combining the second principle of UDL by providing options for interaction and expression together with a multisensory approach through ICT usage may help to create inclusive learning environments for all students.

In consistence with Reid et al.'s finding that ICT allows pupils to present material in different ways, the present study reported word processing as a useful means for students with dyslexia as it gives them an alternative way to complete assignments instead of using paper and pencil [19]. Additionally, the study reported that e-books and educational software aid students' interaction and provide varied opportunities to respond. This concurs with Coyne et al.'s finding that unlike printed text, e-books provide multiple opportunities for students to respond to embedded reading comprehension strategy prompts as they viewed, listened to, read and interacted with the software [20]. Evidently, ICT can make a huge difference in the lives of students with dyslexia as it enables them to participate during learning activities and to present their knowledge successfully.

4.1.3 Multisensory strategies aligned with the third principle of UDL

The third principle of UDL is to provide multiple means of engagement to help students maintain their focus on learning. Learners may also have problems to engage themselves in learning activities [21] [7]. A multisensory approach is crucial to aid children's engagement in learning as this approach involves using the senses simultaneously and hence all the senses are stimulated which may help students to maintain their learning engagement [18] [7] [19]. Davis and Deponio [18] suggest that a multisensory approach enables learning to be personalised by providing opportunities for pupils to use their strongest senses to compensate for their weaknesses in other senses. In concurrence with Davis and Deponio, Neanon argues that the computer motivates pupils to learn and is multisensory as it gives visual and auditory feedback simultaneously [22]. ICT can offer various means of engagement to pupils with dyslexia and also those without dyslexia [23] [17]. Evidently, the third UDL principle that offers multiple means of engagement aligns well with the use of multisensory strategies that have been found useful to pupils with dyslexia and to other students with different learning needs.

In agreement with Malatesha Joshi et al.'s findings [24] that first-grade children performed well on tests of phonological awareness, decoding and reading comprehension through being provided a multisensory teaching

approach, participants of the study reported that multisensory strategies such as writing words in sand tray, improved the pupils' learning engagement. In line with Neanon's [22] proposition that a tool kit with basic items, for example, reading rulers, helps pupils with dyslexia to become independent learners, teachers reported that the availability of the necessary resources help students with learning difficulties to engage themselves in learning activities.

The findings revealed that ICT also benefited students in this regard which is in line with Reid *et al.* stating that the use of mobile applications (apps), such as those in the form of reading games which make learning enjoyable, helps to engage students during learning activities. Mobile technology, as highlighted by Reid *et al.*, includes smartphones, mp3 players such as the iPod and tablet computers and "aligns well with UDL as it can provide multiple means of representation, engagement and expression". Apps can be downloaded on devices and customized according to the students' individual needs thus providing them the opportunity to learn in the modalities they are strongest in which in turn engages their interest and promotes learning success [19].

5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study would have better captured a wider description of dyslexia-friendly strategies carried out in the classroom context through observations but the allocated time-frame for this study did not allow the researcher sufficient time to conduct observations. Future large-scale research may explore dyslexia-friendly strategies carried out in other Maltese primary schools to gain further insights about dyslexia-friendly practice on a national level. In addition, longitudinal studies may examine the effects of including dyslexia-friendly strategies in lesson planning to better capture the outcome of incorporating a dyslexia-friendly approach within the UDL framework in the context of inclusive education in Malta.

6 CONCLUSION

Similar to Davis and Deponio's finding that dyslexia-friendly strategies, such as multisensory strategies, support pupils beyond the dyslexia area, all the participants of the study reported that dyslexia-friendly strategies benefit learners with dyslexia as well as other learners without dyslexia [18]. This finding is important as it implies that since such strategies cater for the needs

of students with different levels of abilities, pupils with dyslexia can be provided with the opportunity of participating fully in mainstream educational settings and thus experience an inclusive learning journey. Increasing the participation of pupils in mainstream schools is paramount in creating inclusive environments [25].

However, teachers and LSEs reported that time constraints make it difficult to implement dyslexia-friendly practice in mixed ability classes. To this end, Katz [26] advocated the importance of collaborative planning time. If adequate time is provided for planning lessons based on UDL and dyslexia-friendly practice, the amount of time required to provide individualised teaching and learning for students with dyslexia and other learning difficulties may be considerably reduced. This is because, as highlighted throughout the study, both UDL and dyslexia-friendly practice are useful in supporting a wide range of learners and can be used to provide effective instruction for all students.

This study set out to establish what constitutes dyslexia-friendly practice in Maltese primary schools. By considering the views and experiences of pupils, parents and educators within the school being studied and synthesising these with the literature review, the study has shown how UDL is helpful in developing dyslexia-friendly schools specifically within the Maltese context. The study concludes that dyslexia-friendly strategies, such as the use of differentiated instruction, a multisensory approach and ICT, need to be aligned with UDL and that such strategies are specified within lesson plans. This may require a dyslexia policy that specifies a UDL approach which according to Meo makes it possible for educators to cater for the diverse learning needs of pupils at the design stage rather than in retrospect [1]. According to Norwich *et al.*, an effective dyslexia policy includes explicit principles about teachers' awareness of dyslexia through specialist support, specialist provision to pupils with dyslexia within the mainstream setting, teaching strategies such as multisensory techniques and ICT usage and communication with parents about how they can contribute to help their children gain literacy skills [27]. The school being studied may also benefit if a dyslexia policy is established based on the above-mentioned principles. This type of dyslexia policy and the practices that participants reported useful may serve as a model to other Maltese primary schools of how to facilitate the inclusion of pupils with dyslexia in mainstream education.

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CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION IN MALTA

CHILDREN'S STORIES FOR RECOGNITION AND REPRESENTATION

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Abstract

The characteristics of the Maltese classroom are changing constantly due to migration. Teachers are trying to deal with this reality with little, if any, training or support on becoming more culturally responsive. The educational system, with its vast curriculum, leaves very little time for the teacher to invest in the learners' prior experiences and cultural richness. Many learners are left feeling helpless and worthless in this system which is not investing enough in cultural diversity in schools. In this study, children took part in a participatory project aimed at validating and representing children in all their diversity. The children took part in focus groups in which they discussed the themes which they considered most important in their life. Some participants wrote their stories and these were then compiled in a book. The stories describe the children's families, their pets, friendships, fleeing war, and future dreams, among other topics. The book is a resource which would enrich any classroom which is open to diversity. This study highlighted both the commonalities and the differences in childhood in order to promote a positive outlook towards diversity. All children have a right to a curriculum which is more representative of the diversity present in schools today.

Keywords: Culturally responsive education, focus groups, children's experiences, validation, commonalities and differences in childhood, primary state school, curriculum.

1 INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of the Maltese classroom have changed dramatically over the past decade. At the beginning of my teaching career, in 1999, the class was

composed mainly of local learners (making it somewhat a homogenous group), while now every classroom will definitely have at least one foreign learner. Darmanin states that 3% to 4% of the population are non-Maltese, out of which, 74.7% are European [1]. The Commissioner for Children, Miceli [2] states that out of a child population of 83,000, 9% are foreign. The reasons for the increase in global mobility are various: some leave their country to seek employment while others leave to escape war and to seek refuge as asylum seekers [3]. This shift in the classroom composition leads teachers to a feeling of helplessness because most are not equipped to cater for all the learners in class so as to help develop their full potential, as suggested by The National Curriculum Framework [4].

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definitions

2.1.1 Prejudice

This study looks at the way children see themselves as belonging to specific groups, and as having characteristics which are similar to, as well as different from, their classmates. Even at a young age, children already manifest prejudice towards others who are depicted as posing a threat [5].

Prejudice is a 'generalization' which makes us dislike another group of people who do not belong to our group. This kind of behaviour helps the preservation of the dominant group. [6]

2.1.2 Stereotypes

We may see people differently because of the stereotypes which we have impressed in our minds [7]. Lippmann states that stereotypes create expectations or lack of expectations and they encourage discrimination [7]. Discrimination is the 'treatment' given to particular groups whom we consider as outsiders [6]. This kind of treatment helps keep the dominant group in place, while the other groups are kept in place because they are given a different kind of experience (or lack of it).

2.1.3 Racism

Outright racist behaviour is unaccepted by society, but subtle forms of everyday racism have emerged which are just as harmful; amongst these is

'cultural racism' [8]. Subtle racists lay emphasis on cultural differences and preserve traditional values, hence not showing any positive attitudes towards other racial groups.

2.1.4 Tolerance

Triandafyllidou states that tolerance implies that one person (or a group) has the power to tolerate and to exercise power over another who is inferior. He cites Galeotti's new concept of tolerance which involves the 'acceptance and recognition of cultural diversity' [9].

2.1.5 Assimilation

Through assimilation immigrants adjust to the traditions and culture of the host country in an effort to be accepted [9]. This process leads the immigrants to gradually let go of their culture and traditions in order to blend in with the dominant culture of the receiving country.

2.1.6 Integration

Integration is a process which involves both the immigrants and the host country in making an effort to adapt the newcomers to the reality which is already in place. The host country welcomes the changes needed in order to have a diverse society [9].

2.2 Childhood, Education and the Politics of Difference

Childhood is a state mainly determined by age, yet it should not denote conformity in the effect of social circumstances experienced by children in their everyday lives [10]. Commonality and diversity should be aspects of childhood to be celebrated as assets for any group that the children might belong to. The social group in which one is born should not be the determining factor of what the future will be for every child [11]. Children can sense difference from a very early age and from an early age they start to imitate and reproduce behaviours and attitudes manifested by those around them, even by their educators.

Education always features high on the political agenda, nonetheless it is a global fact that education is not providing equal opportunities for all [12]. Education should be the key to be passed down the generations in order to fight racism and other forms of oppression. I.M. Young states that unequal

educational accomplishment and unequal opportunities will persist in diverse societies, even if all students have access to education [13]. Giving equal access to education will not address all the kinds of injustice that have an effect on students from disadvantaged groups. Our educational system uses standardised tests which use norm cultural values and practices as standards, while considering difference as having less value [13]. This is then reflected in the scores given to students for particular answers. The solution offered by the politics of difference is that institutions should not reduce differences but aim at including differences in decision-making [13]. Importance should be given to including group differences and incorporating group representation. Rorty agrees with I.M. Young's ideas that we should not give crucial importance to our membership to particular groups but focus on building trust within the diverse community [14]. Taylor states that we can no longer categorise people on the basis of their social hierarchies; instead, we need to recognise that every individual is composed of multiple identities, making every person unique [15]. Fraser also argues that for there to be social justice, there needs to be redistribution and recognition [16]. For redistribution, there must be a fair distribution of resources and goods. For recognition, the aim is to have 'a difference-friendly world, where assimilation to majority or dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect' [16].

3 METHODOLOGY

This research study is of a qualitative nature and it includes a curriculum development project with children, aiming to foster cultural recognition and respect. Qualitative analysis was chosen because it gives the ability to notice important perceptions, less visible in large scale studies [17]. The focus group interview method has been used to support the development of this project as it is an innovative way to appreciate children's experiences [18] [17] [19]. The curriculum development project includes children's narratives representing their cultures to develop a resource which embodies both cultural similarities and differences.

3.1 Children in Research

Until the 1990s, children were seen as immature and incompetent [20], leading researchers to depend on adult recollections of children's experiences. In recent years there has been a significant move from research on, to research with, children [22].

Children as a group included in research must not be considered as a homogeneous group. Many factors such as age, nationality, language, upbringing, social status, gender and physical ability can position children in diverse groups. Depending on the children's age, there will also be a varying degree of children's ability to use clear language to express their thoughts [23]. The United Nations adopted the 'Convention on the Rights of the Child', a document which deals with the children's right to be protected, to be provided with basic needs and to be able to contribute in their society and in aspects which might affect their life:

Article 12. 1) State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own view the right to express those views freely in all matter affecting the child; the view of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. 2) For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided with the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Article 13. The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice [24].

3.2 Focus Groups with Children

Recently more emphasis has been put on children's rights as stated in Article 12 of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: 'children and young people have a right to be involved in decisions that affect them' [24]. This has led to a shift from research on children to research with children [25]. As human beings, children have the same rights as all people and hence they have a right to be heard.

The researcher conducting research with children must adapt the research methods to apply to the children's cognitive, linguistic, social and psychological development [22], while also considering their cultural differences [26]. Garbino and Stott state that the researcher must have personal experience with children similar in age to the participants [27].

3.2.1 Focus Groups: Advantages and Disadvantages

There are many advantages when considering focus groups as a research method. The researcher has the ability to create a natural and familiar setting where children talk to their peers about specific topics in a free, nonthreatening environment [28] [22] [29] [30]. When children relate to their peers they are more comfortable than in a one-on-one interview with an adult researcher [31] because there is less emphasis on the adult-child relationship when children of similar ages share their experiences [32].

The researcher must also be careful as the setting created in a focus group session might lead the children to share very personal information, which might put them in a vulnerable position if other participants choose to break their confidentiality [33] [34]. It is important to remind all the children participating to think about consequences before sharing sensitive information and to retain any information shared during the session as confidential – what is shared in the group should stay within the group. Another aspect which must be observed during the sessions is peer pressure. Children should not be more than two years apart, as younger children might be apprehensive of older participants [35] [19]. There might also be the risk that children might want to conform to their peers' responses [27].

3.2.2 The Moderator's Role

The moderator must be aware of her/his positionality over the children [31] – children should not feel that the moderator is embodying a sense of power and authority during the session but must keep herself/himself on equal grounds with the children. The moderator can achieve this by sharing personal experiences during the focus group session [31] [22]. In this way they can build a bond with the friendly adult. The language used must be familiar to the children [31] [26], while at the same time making sure that the children's use of language is clearly understood by the moderator [26].

Gibson [22] suggests five ground rules when including children in focus groups. The children must be reminded not to answer questions which make them feel uncomfortable. They should take their time to reflect before giving an answer. Should they feel the need, they should go back to clarify their answer if they feel that there was a misunderstanding. They should use the language they feel comfortable with and they should only provide serious replies.

3.2.3 The Recruitment of Participants

At the time of this study, I was teaching Year Two in a primary state school. It was an advantage to conduct the research in the same school as all the children were already familiar with me. During the second week in November 2015, I (the researcher) went to every class from Year Four to Year Six and told the children about the study. The children were told that those who were interested in writing about their real life experiences would meet once weekly for three weeks to discuss a number of topics chosen by them. This project would then lead to the publication of a book with the children's real life stories.

Those children who were interested in participating were given information sheets and a consent form for their parents or care givers to sign. The consent form was to be brought back to school in the next couple of weeks. Those children who returned the signed consent form were subsequently asked to fill in an assent form during the first meeting. There was a total of 39 participants who were then divided into four groups, according to their age group – the children in Year Five were asked to join one of two groups, as there were 19 participants in this age group.

4 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Book Development Process

The purpose of the Focus Group sessions was for the children to meet and to discuss the topics which they deemed most significant in their life. During the first meeting, the ground rules were set and the children chose the following topics (Fig. 1), listed according to importance: family; pets and/or animals; school; growing up; festivities and celebrations; friends and bullying; games, sports and keeping healthy; the environment, the future and worrying things about the future.

Four themes were common to all four groups: family; pets and/or animals; school/teachers; and growing up (including describing myself). The other themes have been clustered according to similarities: festivities and celebrations; friends and bullying; games, sports and keeping healthy; the environment, the future and worrying things about the future (including things happening in the world).

Through the children's discussions many similarities surfaced. Every child will live a unique life experience with unique opportunities and hurdles to overcome, yet all these children showed that belonging to a family was very important for their sense of identity. Pets were also at the top of the list of important things in these children's lives, as animals gave them the certainty of always finding someone to trust and who will greet them with unconditional love. All the topics showed that these children want to be accepted for what they are with all their similarities and differences and they want to grow up in a world of acceptance and not conflict.

<u>Year 4</u>	<u>Year 5 Group 1</u>	<u>Year 5 Group 2</u>	<u>Year 6</u>
Family	Family	Friends	Pets/animals
Animals/pets	Animals/pets	Family	Family
School	School/teachers	Animals/pets	Friends
Growing up	Growing up	Games	Keeping healthy
The environment	Things happening in the world	School	Sports
Things happening in the world	Celebrations/festivities	Growing up	School/teachers
The future		Things happening in the world	Growing up
Games		Celebrations/festivities	Festivities/celebrations
Describing yourself			

Figure 1: Topics Chosen by the Children

5 CONCLUSION

This project involved a process which was transformational in nature. It is not often that children are given the opportunity to discuss and to create a resource which could be used in class. The fact that the children's stories will be recognised as a resource for the classroom is already a validation in itself.

This project highlighted the need for a more inclusive educational system. Although many efforts are made to be more inclusive, the efforts to date seem to resort to pulling children out of the classroom in order to give them what they lack. Such interventions are generally staggered and the children who benefit from these programmes do not get what they need to succeed in school. This leads to the conclusion that the change needed has to come from within the system – the need for a transformational curriculum which supports teachers in acknowledging differences in race, culture and gender [36]. The intervention cannot be another add-on which the children are given to the detriment of their full participation in classroom activities.

The curriculum needs to change in order to represent the changing classroom dynamics. Teachers have to be equipped with the information and resources needed to be better able to include all the children in class. Culturally responsive teaching should be disseminated throughout all the schools in Malta and Gozo.

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Bio-note

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ETWINNING AS A MOTIVATIONAL TOOL IN LEARNING ITALIAN AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Abstract

In learning Italian as a foreign language very often students tend to lose interest in the language and give up. The teacher has to find ways to keep students motivated by adapting his/her methodology. Technology is crucial in our students' lives and therefore teachers must integrate technology in their teaching methods. The student becomes central in the learning process and this leads to an increase in motivation. In my research I used eTwinning as a tool to increase motivation amongst my students who were learning Italian as a foreign language. By observing the students' behaviour and looking at their work during the eTwinning sessions I got a clearer picture of the students' level of motivation. By comparing the two questionnaires handed to two separate groups of students who participated in my study I could notice the differences and similarities between them before and after the eTwinning project. The teachers' opinions gained by means of an interview gave me the possibility to see different experiences of other participants when using eTwinning in their teaching process. In this research I made use of five important indicators which helped me identify an increase in the students' motivation to learn, thanks to the use of eTwinning. Students became more autonomous, persistent in their work, made more effort in the project, gained self-confidence in what they were doing and showed a desire to communicate with their foreign partners.

Keywords: eTwinning, motivation, L2 Italian, second language acquisition.

1 INTRODUCTION

As a teacher of Italian I always wondered what I could do to motivate my students further when in class. In today's world, students are constantly using technological devices. So I tried to find something which is interesting to the students. I came across eTwinning and decided to do some learning events in order to understand what it entails. ETwinning started its way in

2005 and consists of a European platform where teachers share resources with other teachers from Europe. Students have the opportunity to upload materials from their projects. Thanks to eTwinning, the students can experience other cultures and communicate with students from other countries. I based my work upon 3 research questions. The first one is if eTwinning helps to motivate Maltese students to learn Italian as a second language. The second one is if eTwinning, when compared to the traditional way of teaching, helps to motivate students to learn Italian as a second language. The third question is what challenges teachers encounter when using eTwinning during their lessons. To answer these questions I used the triangulation method where I observed a group of students during 10 sessions using eTwinning, I handed questionnaires to these students and to another class in order to compare the results. I also interviewed 5 teachers who used eTwinning in their teaching approach in order to see what difficulties they encounter when using eTwinning.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Italian language in Malta

During the 1800s the Italian language was given a lot of importance thanks to immigrants. Infact statistics show that in 1842, 11% of the Maltese population knew how to speak Italian while 4.5% spoke English [1]. The majority of Maltese were against introducing the English language because they identified themselves with the Italian culture. In 1920 both the Italian and English language were declared as official languages. Looking back at Maltese history, one can say that the Maltese people used to communicate with foreigners using code switching and they were proud of this multilingualism. The most important medium for spreading the Italian language in Malta was the television [2]. In fact most of the Maltese students sat for Matsec Italian exam without even studying the language at school.

2.2 Motivation when learning a language

When learning a second language, motivation is a crucial factor because it shows the desire to communicate with other native speakers [3]. They speak about the importance of giving specific duties to students and let them free to decide and reflect. When using eTwinning the students are motivated to learn the language because they wish to communicate with their partners.

2.2.1 *Indicators of motivation*

During my readings I found out five main indicators of motivation. The first indicator is autonomy. Kane [4] states that when using the Twinspace at home students continued their learning at home without the help of the teacher. Another indicator is the effort that the student makes to learn the language. This is related to persistence which is another indicator of motivation. One can notice this when a student makes extra work at home besides that given by the teacher. Self-confidence is also considered as an indicator of motivation. Very often students are not so confident when speaking and writing in Italian. ETwinning helps a lot in increasing self-confidence. This also helps in becoming less dependent on others. When using eTwinning, students showed a desire to communicate with their foreign partners. They communicated orally and in writing with students whom they had never met personally.

2.3 **eTwinning in the Maltese classrooms**

In 2008 eTwinning started its rise in the Maltese islands. Teachers started doing projects together with their students and others from other European countries. ETwinning gives a unique opportunity to students to communicate with foreign ones. Students become more active rather than passive. This new tool can be considered as Project Based Learning¹ (PBL) because the teacher presents a problem and the pupils using technology have to find a solution [5]. Related to this, one can mention also the Inquiry Based Learning² (IBL) where the teacher explains and helps students to acquire certain skills to solve problems. The key for success in an eTwinning project is having fun. Working on a project helps for the integration of the language because it's an eLearning model. Students take part in a cooperative learning environment where they develop their speaking skills. For them it is like going on a virtual trip to that particular country. They exchange cultural information, see photos, chat, talk through Skype and write in a forum, thus becoming closer to native speakers of the foreign language.

¹ PBL is a new teaching approach which concentrates on the learning from difficult experiences, oriented to reach a specific goal.

² IBL is a type of learning based on exploring simulations where the pupils have to question a situation.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 My research

My research was based upon the observation of 10 lessons of Italian. I wanted to check if using eTwinning in my teaching approach helped to increase the motivation level of my students. I decided to start an eTwinning project with a class of around 20 students. At the same time I continued with my usual lessons with another class who were of the same age of my experimental group. I did this in order to compare the motivation level of both approaches. I wrote the observations in my diary. I distributed also 2 sets of questionnaires to both classes and conducted interviews with 5 teachers who have used eTwinning in their teaching. Therefore I used the triangulation method. By using this type of method I could compare and discuss results.

3.2 The sample chosen

The sample was chosen randomly from the classes which I was teaching. I used two classes who were of the same age of my partner school students. The partner school was chosen from a list of Italian schools who had the same interests I had. The teachers who were interviewed were chosen randomly from the eTwinning portal. I tried to vary age and gender so as to get different experiences.

3.3 The study

3.3.1 Ethical procedures

While I was observing my students everything was confidential in order to keep the students' identities protected. Since I had 2 roles in this research, that of the researcher and that of the teacher, a critical friend was present during my sessions to make sure I didn't put any pressure on my students. Before starting my research I gave consent forms to both my students and their parents. I also asked permission to my head of school, the college principal and to the teachers interviewed. Once permissions were obtained from DQSE³ and FREC⁴ I could start my study.

³ Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education

⁴ Faculty Research and Ethics Committee

3.3.2 *The questionnaire*

The questionnaire was formulated in a way as to measure the motivation level before and after doing the eTwinning project. I based the questions in the questionnaire upon the 5 indicators of motivation: autonomy, effort, persistence, self-confidence and desire to learn the language. The students had to mark an answer on a Likert scale according to their preference. The questionnaires were then analysed through SPSS in order to compare the opinions of both classes before and after the project.

3.3.3 *The lessons*

I conducted 10 lessons of eTwinning of 40 minutes each. In the computer lab the students worked on the project, commented on others' work and communicated with the Italian students. The topics discussed during the lessons were related to cultural content like Italian food, free time, Italian cities, music etc. In most instances, unfortunately, the students had to continue their task at home because of lack of time. Those who couldn't work at home used the pc at school during breaks. During the lessons the explanation was done in Italian and in Maltese or English. Students worked alone or in groups on the computer. The use of the computer helped to reduce the distance between the teacher and the student. It also created a sense of competition among the students. Some of the students were really afraid to write in Italian because they thought they would make a lot of mistakes. From my observations I also noticed that students lack knowledge of Italian music.

3.3.4 *The diary*

During the sessions I observed my students and wrote down notes in my diary about their behaviour, their difficulties, and their participation in the forum and on Twinspace. Thanks to these observation notes, I could see what needed to be worked upon further. The students were kept anonymous in order to maintain confidentiality.

3.3.5 *The interviews*

The interviews were done to 5 Maltese teachers who have used eTwinning as part of their teaching approach. I recorded each conversation for transcription purposes. The interview was a semi-structured one where each interviewee was free to answer the questions which were related to the

indicators of motivation. The answers from the interview helped me to understand what difficulties teachers encounter when using eTwinning.

4 RESULTS

In this section I will discuss the results that were collected from the questionnaires and from the interviews.

4.1 Results of the questionnaire

In my research I distributed 2 questionnaires, one to the experimental group and the other to the control group. The results were analysed using the SPSS software. The questions were in a multiple choice format to help the students answer them quicker. The results showed clearly that after participating in the eTwinning project, the students answered that they were watching more television. They also said that they understood more of what they were reading. It was also clearly shown that they felt more comfortable buying from Italian websites. After completing the project, the students answered that they were taking less time to finish their Italian homework when compared to prior to starting the project. They wrote that they even feel more satisfied with their Italian marks and said that the Italian language is not so difficult to learn.

In the questionnaire I also included 4 open-ended questions. In the first question I asked the students why they were studying Italian. The majority of the students said that they were studying it because they like it. Others answered that they were influenced to choose this language or because they simply like the language.

In the second question students were asked to mention the thing that they liked least in the Italian lesson. Students answered that they hate speaking activities and the text book. After doing the eTwinning project, there was a change in the answer to this question because the experimental group answered that they liked everything in the Italian lesson.

The third question was if they preferred to work in groups or alone. About 70% of the experimental group before doing the eTwinning project answered that they prefer working in groups. This percentage rose to 90% after finishing the project.

The fourth and last open-ended question was about how students can communicate with foreign students. In the first questionnaire the

experimental group answered that they can do it through email, messenger or by post. After the project they answered that they can do so by using eTwinning. The control group answered that they don't communicate with foreign students.

4.2 Results of the interview

During my research I interviewed 5 teachers that have used eTwinning in their lessons. The questions were based upon the five indicators of motivation. I did this in order to help me check if there was any change in the level of motivation of the students. These teachers were chosen randomly from the eTwinning portal and the interview was recorded to make it easier for me to transcribe later on. The sample used for the interviews consisted of 5 teachers who had quite a vast experience in eTwinning. When asked what convinced them to use eTwinning, all the teachers answered that they wanted an innovative way to teach. Apart from this they also wanted to shift from a traditional approach to a technological one. They became curious about eTwinning and started doing learning events to get more acquainted.

As an advantage they mentioned the competition among the students, who also became autonomous because they continued working at home. They developed the speaking skills because they communicated with foreign students and enhanced their computer skills. On the other hand, they mentioned some disadvantages such as, the lack of internet connection, finding a lab available, not having enough time to finish certain tasks at school and the negative opinions other teachers have about them since they see eTwinning as an extra load.

During the interview the teachers said that students learned to work in a team, they developed a sense of creativity, they overcame their shyness and had a sense of ownership of the project since they created and developed their own eTwinning project and enhanced their technological skills. They said that eTwinning helped to create a stimulating environment in order to use the Italian language. Related to this they also mentioned the auto-learning and learning how to learn because students do their utmost to communicate with their partners. In fact some of the teachers mentioned that the eTwinning experience helps to encourage students to participate in other future projects because it's an experience that they will never forget.

One of the teachers stated that one of the students overcame his school phobia and got more motivated to go to school. The students felt prouder of their competence in the Italian language because they succeeded in

communicating with their Italian partners. In the interview the teachers confessed that they encourage other teachers to participate in such initiatives because it is a fruitful experience both for students as well as for teachers.

The students increased their self-esteem because when working on the project they made new friends, and felt a sense of belonging in a group. The fact that the students upload their work on the Twinspace and can be seen by foreign students, helps them to feel proud. All the teachers gave importance to autonomous learning and according to them students modify what they find. They criticise their work, reflect on their product and become self-learners.

Working on a project requires a lot of effort from the students, which includes preparing at home for the coming tasks. Some of the students worked during breaks in order to continue their task. Others preferred working on an eTwinning project rather than participating in another extracurricular activity. They also showed a desire to communicate with their partners. They were eager to get to know their partners and were very careful to what they wrote on Twinspace. One of the teachers admitted that thanks to eTwinning the desire to learn the language and the motivation increased and that this was also reflected in exam results.

From the interview I could notice clearly the fun that students have when using eTwinning. I could easily understand the positive and negative experiences that teachers have when using eTwinning in class. They were useful to help me understand better how eTwinning can be used to enhance my teaching approach.

5 ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

5.1 Analysis of questionnaire

Through a thorough analysis of the results of the questionnaire one can see that the experimental group showed a slight increase in the interest towards the learning of Italian. Corda and Marelo affirm that involving students in the lesson is a fundamental tool to motivate the learning of the language [3]. This ties well with my first research question. According to the data collected from the questionnaire, using eTwinning during my lessons helped to motivate my students in the learning of the language. This motivation is clearly shown in the number of hours that these students spent watching Italian television

which is also related to one of the indicators of motivation; the desire to learn the language (see section 2.2.1).

The statistics clearly indicate that after doing the eTwinning project, the experimental group started to write more in Italian when compared to the control group. In fact the students felt much more at ease writing in Italian. Gardner states that if the students are more motivated, they have a higher self-esteem which is also one of the indicators of motivation mentioned in my study (see section 2.2.1) [6]. The students said that they feel more comfortable in speaking Italian after finishing the project. From the questionnaire one can notice a slight increase in the stress level when doing a particular task. This is the result of their not wanting to commit any mistakes when writing in Italian.

The last question of the questionnaire was about how easy the Italian language is. The answers did not change a lot. One can recall my second research question which was if eTwinning helps to motivate more the students compared to the traditional teaching approach. When taking into consideration the experimental group, eTwinning helped to increase the self-esteem and the autonomy in the students when compared to the control group.

5.2 Analysis and reflections of eTwinning sessions

My analysis is grounded on the observations I wrote in my diary. During the 10 sessions in the lab I wrote down the students' reactions, their comments and my opinions. This helped me a lot because I could contrast my notes with the results of the questionnaire and the comments from other teachers. These notes also helped me when answering the third research question which is about the challenges that teachers face when using eTwinning. After these sessions I could notice that some of the challenges mentioned in the interview were in fact faced by myself as well like for example finding a free lab, internet connection and time constraints. I started to notice my students' reactions when I introduced the concept of eTwinning. I noticed that they were curious and eager to start working. They were also afraid however because they thought of it as an extra thing to do. I have to admit that I felt a bit uncertain of the success of this project because I did not know if the students would participate in or resist the project.

I noticed that some of the students were afraid of continuing the work at home on their own because they needed my assistance. For this reason I tried to limit the tasks in the lab in order to be able to assist my students. Some of

the students hurried to arrive to the lab because they wanted to start working without any waste of time, some others lacked interest and took more time to arrive. One of the students asked me continuously to check for her the written work because she wanted to leave a good impression on her partners. Prior to the study, both in class and at home she had never cared about what she wrote.

I could see that the students were motivated because they were curious to get to know their partners. They also competed between themselves when presenting their work. I noted that they often spoke to each other on how fun and different the Italian lesson was from the usual lessons. When seeing students losing interest in the session I gave them boosts such as good marks. When tablets and smartphones were brought to class, the level of motivation increased because they enjoyed working with these technological devices. This showed me how important it is in our students' life to integrate technology in the lessons.

When the students were asked to create a logo, I could see that they were very curious to know who the winner will be and they felt proud of their work. During the Skype session I noticed that the students were anxious to speak to their Italian partners.

I can say that on the whole the students worked autonomously at home when commenting on the forum or researching about their city. They made an effort especially in the speaking and writing tasks. They developed a desire to learn the Italian language to be able to communicate with their partners. Persistence was also indicated in these sessions because they tried to improve their work at home. Last but not least they increased their self-esteem especially when writing and speaking in Italian.

5.3 Analysis of interviews

When looking at the results from the interviews, the teachers confessed that using eTwinning helps to teach in a different and innovative way. It opens new opportunities to teachers to communicate with other European teachers. Challenges were unfortunately also mentioned, among which internet connection, lab availability and negative comments from other teachers. It is very important that the members of the project make an effort to work together. Despite all the challenges, these teachers encourage other teachers to use eTwinning because there are a lot of advantages.

6 CONCLUSION

The students who participated in the eTwinning project all agreed that these sessions helped them increase their desire to further their studies in Italian. They were curious and tried their best to communicate in Italian even though at first they gave up. ETwinning helped them to read more in Italian, watch more Italian television, and write more quickly because they had to finish their writing task quickly. They also consider the language not to be so difficult anymore. During the eTwinning sessions I could see that they had fun working on this project and made new friends. They felt proud of their work and competed with each other. The teachers prefer this teaching approach because it's different and it offers an interactive way for the students to learn, helping the student become more active in the lesson. It helped to eliminate tension from school and increase the motivation in learning. They became more creative and improved their speaking and writing skills. Overall the students have fun doing eTwinning projects because they are learning in an indirect way, they are motivated, their self-esteem improves and they become more autonomous and persistent in their work.

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Bio-note

Graziella Brincat holds a Masters of Education degree, a Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) and a Bachelor of Arts in Italian from the University of Malta. She is a qualified teacher and has taught Italian for these past 12 years in various educational levels such as Subject Proficiency Assessment (SPA), Core Curriculum Programme (CCP) and Foreign Language Awareness Programme (FLAP) in Primary and Secondary schools. She currently works at St Ignatius College, Middle School Handaq where she has been involved in the communication with other European countries through different projects such as eTwinning and Erasmus+. In December 2018 she was appointed as an eTwinning ambassador from the NSS in order to promote and support eTwinning in Maltese schools. She has also been recently appointed Head of Department for Digital Literacy with the Directorate of Digital Literacy and Transversal Skills within the Ministry for Education and Employment.

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS BLENDED LEARNING VS TRADITIONAL LEARNING: THE USE OF VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract

Various research studies claim that advancements in technology have had great impact on the teaching and learning in schools. Lately, Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) have been recognized by educators as innovative and effective web based learning platforms. This paper proposes a tried and tested study performed with 17 eight to nine year olds. They have shown preference to a blended learning environment rather than the sole use of a VLE or traditional 'pen and paper' learning. This therefore suggests that success in teaching and learning depends on pedagogies used as integrated with the use of technology. Practitioners need to ensure that digital technologies are used in parallel with traditional pedagogies not only to enhance the learning experience but also to cater for the diverse learning preferences on students.

1 INTRODUCTION

Nowadays technology, most especially the online part of it, effects every aspect of life and offers unlimited opportunities both in terms of learning and communication. Among the most inveterate are children.

Recent literature on the importance of incorporating the use of technologies such as eLearning and virtual learning environments together with traditional teaching emphasises the urgent need for learners to take a more active role and be more actively involved in their learning process [1].

The aim of this paper is to present a tried and tested study with special focus on students' behaviours, perceptions and attitudes towards 2 different teaching methods: the traditional 'pen and paper' one in comparison to the 'flipped classroom' method of teaching [2]. In order to include 'student voice' [3], the

students' opinions on these two methods of learning approaches (virtual versus traditional) was explored.

2 MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

The Maltese Government is focusing on enhancing the eLearning experience in the primary and secondary classroom. To enhance the teaching and learning process it has proposed to invest in the use of emerging technologies and digital content. All teaching grades are encouraged to use a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in order to deliver non-traditional teaching and make personalised learning and assessment more accessible for all students.

The overall aim of the study was to explore the pros and cons of the aforementioned teaching and learning strategies whilst at the same time understanding the students' preferred method of learning through the different teaching and learning situations. Which method of learning – traditional 'pen and paper' method, the flipped classroom or the combination of both will have a positive or negative impact on student learning?

3 eLEARNING

"eLearning is the employment of technology to aid and enhance learning" [4].

eLearning mainly involves the exploitation of interactive technologies and systems of communication to improve the learning experiences. The Australian Department of Fire & Emergency Services (DFES), define eLearning as 'the use of educational technology that electronically or technologically supports learning and teaching, including training delivery and assessment' [5].

Berge states that the learning environment has to be designed in a way that situates learning in a context, is learner-centred and includes planned pre-learning activities [6]. These 3 factors are encompassed within the eLearning environment. Individualised learning, where learning is shifted from the teacher to the learner, is becoming more important. In this learning-centred environment, in other words through eLearning, students can learn at their own time, pace and in their own space. The learning path also becomes of their choice driven by the learner-centred perspective. The interaction

between active and reflective learning allows for a dynamic learning process to occur.

4 VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

VLEs are defined by Wilson as “computer-based environments that are relatively open systems, allowing interactions and encounters with other participants and providing access through a wide range of resources” (p.8) [7].

VLEs are technologically mediated learning environments that may include a combination of audio, video, online interactions with teachers and learners and access to instructional material and learning websites. They are accessible anytime and anywhere given learners have an internet connection and an appropriate device. VLEs are structured and have built-in software whereby an entire course or syllabus is placed online. No personal interaction between lecturer and student is required as communication is only done through email, where assessments are submitted electronically. This kind of eLearning is beneficial as learners can learn from anywhere and whenever they want to. It can be cost effective and allows students to enjoy learning on their own initiative. Nevertheless this learning approach lacks face-to-face interaction and knowledge sharing, less technologically competent students might not perform well and they might not be motivated to study alone.

5 THE FLIPPED CLASSROOM

Another model of implementing technology into the classroom is the Flipped Classroom. The flipped classroom inverts traditional pedagogies. Bergmann and Sams explain that:

“The idea of the flipped classroom is really quite simple. Direct instruction is done through video, or some other digital learning object, which students can use individually before they come to class. This time shift allows the teacher to use class time for work that is either better done as a large group or requires individualised attention by the teacher. That's it!” (p.xii) [2].

The flipped classroom approach intends to make the most of face-to-face time in classrooms for discussion, sharing and deepening of the gained knowledge. It also enables students to access online content outside of the classroom. Many educators perceive this approach to be innovative and effective [8]. It changes the roles of both the student and the teacher. Instructions are forwarded online outside of class and 'homework' is given in class. The teacher creates and/or uploads materials such as videos, documents, presentations or screen casts for the students. The students then access and study the materials and resources as a self-learning activity at their own pace outside of the classroom. While doing so, in the following lesson the students identify areas of difficulty and issues encountered with.

6 BLENDED LEARNING

Blended learning is one particular way of integrating technology into a classroom environment. There are many definitions of blended learning. Garner and Oke define blended learning as 'an instructional environment that intentionally unites the best features of face-to-face and online learning venues in a synergistic manner for the purpose of achieving student-learning outcomes'. In the dynamic digital learning environments that surround us blended learning has evolved into developing engaging, interactive learning experiences [9]. Learners have different learning preferences and abilities and therefore a blend of different learning approaches is required. Through blended learning 'the right content is presented in the right format to the right people and at the right time' [10], hence different learner needs are catered for. It also allows for individualised learning and self-regulated learning to occur. In addition to this, learners can decide for themselves when to access and submit material as the system allows for online correcting, making the life of teachers easier.

7 THE CASE STUDY

The specific task related to the research was learning about a famous Maltese personality. To guide eight-nine year old students in their learning about this famous Maltese personality – Dun Karm Psaila – the children had to access Fronter iLearn Virtual Learning Environment. This was part of their Social Studies syllabus and curriculum [11]. Throughout this learning experience a range of Web 2 tools were used. The learners were of age-appropriate ability and were used to working in collaborative groups. All learners were competent at using technology and always showed a strong interest in its use in class. All students had access to internet at home.

In the traditional 'pen and paper' learning situation, instructions were restricted to study notes and the projection of YouTube videos on the Interactive White Board (IWB), whereas in the flipped learning situation, the learners were encouraged both in class and at home to create material related to the topic of study and embed it on the VLE.

In this flipped classroom situation time was utilised to encourage individualised learning, as learners could access material both from home and from school, learn at their own pace and create their own content online. Being their teacher, I only acted as a facilitator and assistant to direct my learners while they process their thinking and discuss the knowledge encountered throughout this learning experience. Nonetheless, instructional material was still available. In contrast to the traditional learning 'pen and paper' situation, I spent most of my teaching time lecturing and reading notes.

7.1 The flipped classroom experience rationale

17 children logged into their VLE account using their own personal login credentials. They entered the 'Social Studies' subject section and opened the 'Dun Karm Psaila' topic of study. From home they read the learning objectives and watched online videos related to the topic using YouTube. They then completed a quiz and answered questions about the information they had seen and heard, finally clicking 'submit'. Videos were discussed with their teacher the following day. Children could afterwards access a website with information about the topic. Following this they had to work in groups to create a Google Slides presentation about the topic. When this task was ready, in groups again, the children had to create a learning application. Finally ideas learnt were presented on a Popplet. Communication was allowed face-to-face and online via the forum tool throughout the whole period of the research. To revise the topic the children played a quiz on Kahoot.

7.2 Context and objectives of the study

Through this research I intended to examine and explore the effect on student motivation and performance in virtual learning versus traditional class format situations. I wanted to investigate the extent at which it was beneficial to use the Fronter VLE through a flipped learning approach. Can it completely replace the traditional classroom as an educational medium? This research also investigated the children's acceptance and adoption of

this eLearning system as well as its practicality. Personal capabilities and personal innovation and adaptation of its use were also analysed.

7.3 Research methods and strategy

This qualitative research took place in what is sometimes called a 'natural' setting. This enabled me to observe children in what Patton calls a location or state of "emphatic neutrality" [12]. In this way the research was conducted at a place where the participants were most comfortable. The research took the form of a case study with the aim of analysing eight to nine year old students' interpretation of the use of VLE, called Fronter, on Learn Pads and computer desks in both traditional and flipped classroom learning situations. It provided a unique example of students working in real classroom situations. This helped establish a cause and effect while observing the students in a natural context. It portrayed what it is like to be in these two different learning situations [13]. The flipped classroom situation comprised of a reverse form of the traditional role of classroom time. While in a traditional setting, time is mostly spent on teaching and reading notes, in the flipped classroom activity time was utilised to encourage individualised learning. While instructional content is still available, this can be accessed outside the class in a varied way and enables students to learn at their own pace while creating their own content.

I included a qualitative research design as this was most appropriate for exploring participants' attitudes, behaviours and experiences of their VLE use. This research took the form of a small-scale study given the scope of this research was not to obtain statistical data but rather a qualitative approach which was more suitable to the present study.

7.4 Data collection

I employed a triangulated design which brought together varied but complementary data on the same topic. I collected and analysed qualitative data during approximately the same period of time. The research design included a pre-study questionnaire prior to the delivery of the flipped learning activities which were then followed by a post-study questionnaire. At the end of the study focus group interviews were used. Interviewing a small group on a particular topic helped to gather data and then compare it to the data collected through the questionnaires. This technique was also efficient since it allowed members in the group to hear what others had to say. This stimulated the participants to rethink their views and express other opinions [14]. The answers given to the Focus Group questions also allow for

narrative data to be elicited thus allowing me to investigate the participants' views further. In contrast to answers provided in questionnaires, no probing is involved.

8 RESULTS

8.1 Comparing pre-study to post-study questionnaires

Before the actual study, when the participants were asked whether they were able to use a tablet or computer, the majority seemed to agree while a few somewhat disagreed. After the VLE activities were implemented, this same minority seemed to somewhat agree when asked whether they felt more able to use a tablet or a computer. This clearly shows that participants have become more competent at using technology for learning purposes.

When in the pre-study questionnaire participants were asked whether they enjoy using technology at school and at home, the few that somewhat disagreed in the pre-study questionnaire seemed to have changed their mind in the post-study questionnaire as they rated it as agreed or somewhat agreed.

In the pre-study questionnaire the majority of the participants said that they didn't know what a VLE is, while after the implementation of the activities it seems that only 1 still stated that s/he didn't know what a VLE was. All of the participants clearly agree or somewhat agree to know how to access the VLE obviously due to the fact that they had to log in to participate in the online activities.

8.2 Semi-structured focus groups

To provide a deeper understanding of the research questions, group interviews were conducted. Participants were divided into four groups who were purposefully mixed having a variety of abilities. Out of the 17 participants, 7 were girls while 10 were boys. All participants were asked approximately the same set of questions but at times other questions arose since they were open discussions. The open-ended questions allowed the participants to express their views about the two different learning approaches. To make them feel more comfortable, the participants were allowed to answer either in both English and Maltese (their native language). Although this research approach was time-consuming and needed several probing and prompting, it was invaluable to the study in question as it

provided rich, in-depth information that helped the researcher understand the participants' views related to their experience in both learning situations.

The data was transcribed verbatim and coded. After transcribing and reading through the data, it was chunked into smaller meaningful parts which were coded and grouped by similarity. From the data the following themes emerged: motivation, learning through play, challenges encountered, flexibility in learning, the learning culture and preference of learning medium.

8.2.1 Motivation

It was evident that the participants felt they were motivated to participate in the iLearn VLE activities as when they were asked to express their views about their experience in using iLearn all of the participants said that it was fun, easy, good and enjoyable. 1 particular participant even expressed the fact that it made her want to do more of it. This was mainly due to the fact that they took pleasure in playing the games, chatting and working in groups. They also felt proud that they were able to create their own work. Very few participants said that the 'pen and paper' method was fun or good. Those who did so said that this method was mostly beneficial as they could refer to the notes when they were studying for their examinations and to check understanding of the topic. 1 particular participant stated that such a method can be boring and makes you get fed up of it.

8.2.2 Learning Through Play vs Challenges Encountered

'Playing games' was a frequent statement which clearly indicates that while the participants were involved in the activities on the VLE, they enjoyed learning through play. Watching the videos, doing the quiz, researching online, creating the presentation and the games online were constantly mentioned to be quite useful in their learning as they were 'fun' to do even though some participants felt that these tasks were a bit challenging or found them difficult especially at the start since they were required to do quite a bit of research. Participants found that collaborating in groups was also a bit challenging at times especially when roles were settled. In comparison to this, when asked about the challenges met in the 'pen and paper' method, some participants said that notes were hard and that they were too much. Others stated that they were a bit complicated or inadequate because they still felt the need to refer to internet research – hence they were not enough.

8.2.3 Flexibility in Learning

It is clearly understood that the flipped learning approach on the use of the VLE provided for flexible learning as some of the participants expressed the fact that they could choose to work either from home or from school, while others stated that they could learn the topic in different ways. Some said that they could even access a lot of 'things' whenever they wanted to as the teacher uploaded everything on the VLE for them.

8.2.4 Theme 4: Learning Culture

With reference to the 'pen and paper' method, 1 participant stated that with the use of notes and exercises, reading and writing makes you remember more while others said that notes were limited and complicated. On the other hand, with reference to the use of the VLE, participants said that when they referred to the uploaded material they could learn from other learners' work too. Whenever activities in question were mentioned most, particularly the videos, some participants mentioned the fact that they could listen to them as many times as they wanted to and material could be read to you. They also said that they could create their own work contrary to the other traditional methods where information was ready made. It was mentioned that Popplets, for instance, were useful in creating stories.

8.2.5 Preference of Learning Medium

3 participants, of whom 2 were boys, prefer to use the VLE only (Fig. 2) to learn while the rest of the 14 participants of whom 8 were boys and 6 girls, claimed they prefer both methods combined (Fig. 3). None of the participants claimed to prefer just the 'pen and paper' method (Fig. 1).

Preferred Method of Learning

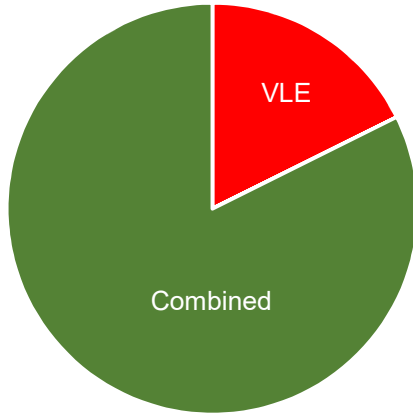


Figure 1

Preferred the Use of the VLE only

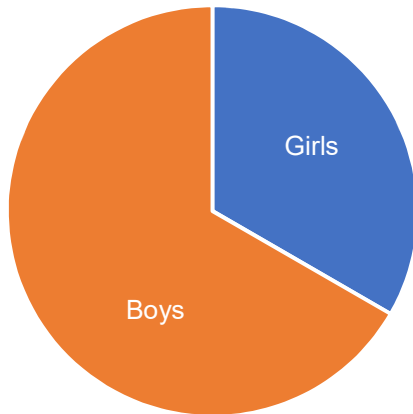


Figure 2

Preferred the Use of Both Methods Combined

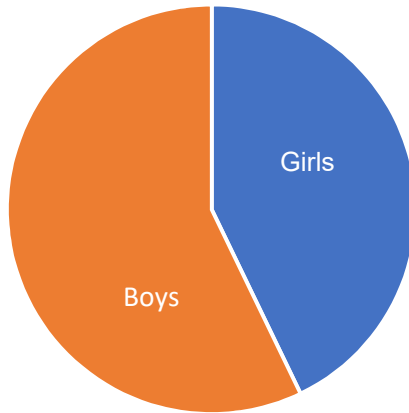


Figure 3

8.2.6 Summary of Findings

The data clearly indicates that participants prefer a blended classroom learning approach whereby participants learned with the use of the VLE combined with the 'pen and paper' method. Some of the reasons include that they can learn at their own pace and they can learn with their classmates. Ultimately it appears that the flipped learning approach is more student-centred because as mentioned by the same participants they can learn independently through games, learn interesting things and helps them control how they learn with less teacher direction. Notwithstanding this however, given the learning culture they are used to, they still prefer to have notes available for reference.

The findings also indicate that the VLE proved to be a valuable tool to help the children keep in touch and communicate while working from home. Although some participants still found the 'pen and paper' method very useful, these same participants showed preference for a combination of both methods to learn since delivery of material outside formal class time and being able to use formal class time for teacher-student contact proved to be far more beneficial. Consequently students' perceptions are far more positive towards the flipped classroom approach.

9 CONCLUSION

This study tried to explore the children's interpretation of the use of a VLE in a flipped classroom situation in comparison to a more traditional teaching approach. The results of this study indicate that learners would greatly benefit from an effective blended learning environment because such an environment brings together the advantageous aspects of traditional and face-to-face learning with eLearning methods. This implies that the integration of different learning methods makes it possible for learning objectives to be achieved more easily especially since all learners vary in their learning style and technological capabilities. The integration of eLearning with traditional learning methods ensures flexibility, efficacy as well as social interaction [15].

It also shows that when compared to the traditional teaching environment, students can greatly benefit from the use of VLEs because they are convenient and flexible [16]. It is important that practitioners do not mistake blended learning with digitising content. True blended learning enables the learners to gain both content and instruction via 'pen and paper' methods i.e. traditionally, as well as online. Furthermore, the learners need to own content as teacher-driven content is not full blended learning. Giving the students "agency over their own learning" [17] is an important step forward but greatly dependent on the teacher's way of teaching. This study has also proven that learning definitely needs to be more student-centred and less teacher-driven. Planning and designing a blended learning environment requires great planning as the more acquainted the students are with the use of technology the less of a shock it will be for them to adapt.

The results of this study suggest that future teachers and education stakeholders, including parents, need to be prepared to adapt their role and improve their educational practices, shifting power to their students and letting them experiment to attain their learning goals. Educators need to see the benefits of a flipped and blended classroom approach where learners are not only in charge of their own learning but are also allowed to engage repeatedly with their own material to gain understanding as well as to have their questions addressed in class. This can only be accomplished when teachers are ready to assist students in difficulty online outside school hours. The final requirement needed to maintain a holistic approach is to keep parents in mind. Parental engagement leaves a great impact on student learning. When content is shared with parents and the learning approach is explained to them, collaboration with teachers is enhanced and parents tend

to support their child's learning more, leading in turn to better outcomes and positive relationships.

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Bio-note

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EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF MOVING IMAGES TO ASSESS LEARNING IN HISTORY: A FOCUS ON CLASSROOM TALK

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study involving the use of moving images in the history classroom, defined in terms of broadcast images of twentieth and twenty-first century historical events. Focusing on assessment, the paper explores the potential of using moving images for assessing learning in history. Drawing upon data from a Year 11 history option classroom, evidence shows that issues concerning motivation, engagement and historical understanding raise the possibility of using moving images for assessment purposes. Findings indicated a lack of autonomous student work, highlighted the importance of classroom talk for developing historical understanding and showed that a key feature of understanding was a consideration for the big historical picture. It is argued that in a classroom involving dialogic pedagogy, assessing learning should involve multimodal expressions, particularly student talk. It is suggested that foregrounding classroom talk is beneficial to students.

Keywords: History, moving images, classroom talk, assessment, multimodal, dialogic pedagogy, secondary.

1 INTRODUCTION

The subject of this paper is the use of classroom talk in history lessons involving the analysis of moving images for assessment purposes. This paper is derived from a Ph.D study investigating moving images in a Maltese secondary history classroom in terms of motivation, engagement, and understanding [1]. Moving images are defined as footage extracts of historical events shown on newsreels, television broadcasts and documentaries and considered as non-fictional representations of the past. Moving images constitute an important record of historical events whose critical analysis offers necessary tools for students to make sense of the

past. This creates varied opportunities for history teachers to develop students' historical thinking.

Spurred by technology, teaching has been marked by a shift from print to multimodal formats [2]. A multimodal pedagogy goes beyond mere writing as a form of communication and expression to include various modes such as media and technology [3]. Moving images are multimodal because they bring sound, vision and text together. Underlying a multimodal pedagogy is the need to create meaning [4]. In this study, classroom talk is considered to be one way how students create meaning from moving images.

Embedded in the teaching and learning process is assessment [5]. In this paper, I foreground classroom talk when using moving images for assessment purposes. It will be argued that issues of motivation, engagement and understanding highlight the importance of using moving images to assess learning and that in a classroom involving dialogic pedagogy, assessing learning should involve multimodal expressions, particularly classroom talk. Knowing about, and acting on issues about assessing classroom talk when analysing moving images is important to engage students in critical historical thinking, which is an important skill in history education [6], and help them reach sophisticated levels of understanding.

2 ASSESSMENT IN HISTORY

Learning history involves developing an understanding of the substantive and procedural knowledge about the past. Substantive knowledge refers to the content of history and includes knowledge of concepts (e.g., war), particulars (e.g., the Cold War) and individuals (e.g., Mikhail Gorbachev). Procedural knowledge is concerned with how that knowledge comes about and includes second-order concepts like evidence, causation, change and significance, whose function is to problematise the content and realise the interpretative nature of historical knowledge [7]. Essentially, understanding history as a discipline involves thinking historically, defined as the ability to analyse sources in ways that take account of the context in which they were produced [8]. Both forms of historical knowledge constitute the backbone of the discipline and proceed together in teaching and learning. Therefore, assessing learning in history necessarily involves assessing this dual nature of knowledge.

Developments in the field of history education have reflected current emphases on formative assessment, or assessment for learning. The assessment for learning paradigm involves being responsive to student

learning by drawing on evidence to identify where the students stand vis-à-vis educational goals and criteria and to inform them how best to progress [9]. Assessment evidence includes pieces of writing, oral presentations and verbal contributions, and observations of classroom interactions [10]. Of these, students' verbal contributions are the least used for assessing learning [11] [12].

Assessing students in history is about developing students' historical thinking, exploring interpretations and carrying out historical inquiries all of which involve disciplinary concepts [10]. At the basis of these assessment targets is the idea that "assessment should be regular, encompass a variety of learning styles and provide prompt and accessible feedback for the pupil to make use of" [13]. In this light, this paper explores the potential of classroom talk involving moving images for assessment purposes.

3 METHODOLOGY

The syllabus of Year 11, which deals with twentieth and twenty-first century history, allowed for instances where moving images could be used as historical sources during lessons spanning the scholastic year. This was a single-site study drawing upon principles of case study methodology. The site consisted of an all-ability history option classroom in a Maltese state secondary school. Three cohorts consisting of 22 male-only students took part. There were no co-ed Year 11 classes in state schools at the time of research. Data consisted of transcribed teacher-student classroom dialogues, students' written work and semi-structured group interviews, collected over a period of 3 scholastic years. Each cohort was taught by me for a scholastic year. Being a teacher-researcher meant attending to issues like following ethical considerations, being as objective as possible and narrowing the teaching-research gap. The choice of moving-image extracts was guided by certain criteria: relevance to the topic of the lesson, appropriateness to students' ability level, trustworthiness, duration, and visual and language clarity. Different types of moving images were identified: speeches, newsreels, news broadcasts and documentaries (Fig. 1). Lesson transcripts were segmented into chunks of meaningful content, each containing an expounded idea, argument or concept, and coded following emergent data and the literature.



Figure 1: Screenshots from a newsreel showing people among the debris during World War II, Malta (left) and a documentary about 1980s Poland showing Lech Walesa, leader of *Solidarność* (right).

4 FINDINGS

This section presents the findings in relation to motivation, engagement and understanding. These areas are interwoven in the learning process but are here presented separately in order to understand them more fully.

4.1 Motivation

Motivation is the students' drive to learn, work and achieve to their potential [14]. Motivation was investigated in terms of four dimensions: interest, competence, relatedness and autonomy [15]. Interest is created when students see the value for completing a task. Competence refers to students' belief that they are capable of doing something. A sense of relatedness is achieved when students feel respected and cared for by the teacher and therefore participate in class activities. Autonomy was taken to mean students' ability to carry out self-directed research outside the classroom context. For a student to be motivated, at least one of these dimensions must be satisfied [15].

The most present dimensions were interest, competence and relatedness (Table 1). Whereas students found moving images to be enjoyable and useful to learning history, and helped them develop particular competencies, moving images did not appear to have motivated them to find out more on their own. Further analysis showed that some students did watch moving images of a historical nature at home. Others said that they would watch the same moving image viewed in class again at home or search for others related to the topics. However, during the second interview carried out towards the end of the scholastic year, nobody confirmed that they actually did so.

Table 1: Dimensions of motivation

Dimension	Students' comments	No. of coded references
Interest	When you are watching these [moving images] you can see what was there and you would interest yourself more.	214
Competence	It may be that what you are watching is from one side and so there may be things that might not be seen.	119
Relatedness	About what Clive is saying, I don't think Hungary had as much power as Poland.	126
Autonomy	I [would watch another moving image] to see things from a different angle and to learn something new.	21

4.2 Engagement

Linked with motivation is engagement, an indicator of which is student's overt contributions to learning activities [16]. A way of deriving evidence for behavioural engagement is to analyse students' discourse [17]. Thus, students' verbal inputs represent utterances during whole-class dialogues and are taken to indicate how much engaged students were throughout the duration of the lesson, including the time spent discussing moving images, which covered the most part of the lessons.

Table 2 shows different indicators of students' behavioural engagement. Asking questions was the most frequent indicator of engagement. The 622 questions made in relation to moving images amounted to 51.7% of all students' questions. This indicates that the majority of questions by students were made when analysing moving images. Spontaneous utterances were made while the moving-image extracts were being shown, not when they were paused for discussion. These consisted of: asking questions ($n = 129$), passing instant descriptive ($n = 143$) and wonderment ($n = 58$) comments, and repeating phrases verbatim ($n = 16$). Another frequent indicator was peer interaction. Four types of peer interaction could be distinguished: picking up on a previous comment ($n = 59$), answering peer questions ($n = 51$), sharing a divergent opinion ($n = 8$), and correcting each other ($n = 8$).

Engagement was also revealed when students established an association between something viewed or heard in the moving image with something they already knew. Most associations concerned a historical event. For example, in the lesson ‘The Berlin airlift’, 2 students from different cohorts expressed the connection between the planes airlifting goods to West Berliners and the convoys delivering goods to Malta during the Second World War thus: “It was like our [Maltese] convoy but using the plane instead”, and “So these aeroplanes were very much like the convoys”. Other connections were made with, for instance, historical figures and current events and were sometimes expressed in the form of analogies.

Another expressive behavior involved students making inserting comments. A representative comment, made in the lesson about Terrorism, was: “Given what’s happening, they [journalists] look really calm. She is there and I would have panicked more”. Such comments revealed how students were sometimes putting themselves in the event being covered by the moving-image extract.

Table 2: Indicators of students’ verbal engagement with moving images

Indicators of verbal engagement	Description	No. of coded references
Questions	Questions asked by students	622
Spontaneous observations	Comments made without teacher elicitation while watching moving images	346
Making associations	Linking elements in the moving images with prior knowledge	86
Making inserting comments	Placing oneself in the situation	18
Peer interaction	Being responsive to and building on peer comments	126

4.3 Historical understanding

Historical understanding results from a complex process of thinking historically [18]. Developing historical understanding not only involves making increasing use of substantive and second-order concepts but also, crucially, setting this knowledge in a wider historical framework [19]. In this way, students get to think increasingly in terms of long-run themes separately and in relation to each other. All 3 forms of knowledge therefore contribute towards historical understanding. Table 3 shows how these came into play in classroom dialogues.

Table 3: Frequency of forms of historical knowledge deployed in whole-class dialogues

Forms of historical knowledge	Description	No. of coded references
Substantive knowledge	Knowledge of historical content (e.g., concepts, people, location)	757
Procedural knowledge	Knowledge of historical second-order concepts (e.g., evidence, significance, causation)	300
Overview knowledge	Knowledge of the wider historical context	58

Forms of substantive knowledge were deployed more frequently than forms of procedural knowledge in whole-class dialogues. The most verbalised form of substantive knowledge involved people ($n = 303$). The moving images made it possible for students to watch, for instance, the daily life of the Maltese during World War II or the Hungarians taking to the streets in 1956 Hungary. Students could also get to see speeches made by Winston Churchill and Ronald Reagan and watch interviews made to Lech Walesa and Mikhail Gorbachev. Regarding disciplinary knowledge, a significant number of units of data were coded for evidence ($n = 122$). This meant, among others, discussing the status, purpose, reliability and significance of moving images and also involved comparing and contrasting the moving images with other sources. Segments of data considering the wider historical knowledge ($n = 58$) were few when compared with forms of substantive and procedural knowledge. Nevertheless, they show students

taking on a broad view of events, spanning time and context. Typical comments were: “Didn’t the European Union do anything in the case of Hungary?” and “It’s like in the West – they had to learn English. And these [Polish] had to learn Russian”.

Units of data were also analysed for how students used discourse to develop their understanding (Table 4). It resulted that students sought to develop historical understanding by describing, explaining, speculating, inferring and asking questions. When describing, students were found to be referring directly to what was seen in the moving-image extracts. When explaining, students offered reasons or brought to the classroom discussion or writing tasks additional personal information. By speculating, students were making comments without firm evidence. Inferences were made when students formed an opinion or reached a conclusion based upon facts. Students also asked questions when wanting to enquire about something.

Table 4: Approaches to developing historical understanding

Approaches to historical understanding	Students’ comments	No. of coded references
Describing	People are going inside the shelter.	226
Explaining	To show they [Hungarian demonstrators] were capable of putting up resistance.	317
Speculating	Conflict would still have arisen even if Berlin lay in the Western zone.	90
Inferring	Therefore the Western side was encircled by the communists.	92
Asking questions	So how come they [Soviets] continued shooting at people, killing their own people?	189

5 DISCUSSION

Three issues can be identified: lack of autonomous student work, the importance of whole-class teacher-student dialogues and developing a big-picture understanding. Firstly, findings have shown that while there were motivational gains in terms of interest, competence and relatedness, the dimension of autonomy was lacking. Despite data showing students being adept at using the Internet for watching moving images related to their personal interests, they failed to take the initiative to find out more moving images on their own. It is known that as students progress through schooling, their motivation declines [20]. Year 11 students' concern seemed to be, partly, the end-of-secondary school examinations as evidenced in such interview comment: "The last bit, you know, you want to finish things", revealing, in turn, 'a need for closure' [21]. On a broader level it could be speculated whether assessing moving images alongside other sources would entice students to carry out self-directed research.

Secondly, this study has identified various indicators of students' verbal engagement with moving images. Underlying this behavioural engagement were 3 features: knowledge co-construction, dialogic discourse and thinking aloud. Co-construction of knowledge is a central tenet of constructivist teaching which, essentially, involves the teacher and pupils working together to create understanding through an interactive pedagogy [22]. Dialogic discourse is characterised by Alexander as being collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful [11]. Analysis showed how these features played out when discussing moving images: students were found to be explaining, acting and building upon answers, speculating and exploring ideas. This supports van Drie and van Boxtel in noting that dialogic discourse involves classroom talk that encourages challenge and debate [24]. Also, while in this study students were not requested to think aloud, making spontaneous observations in whole-class dialogues revealed a lot of students' ideas about the topics and some of their prior knowledge. Given that students cannot be forced to talk, teaching should perhaps encourage the habit of talking through what they are doing during certain activities in the history classroom. Even so, students may still not say everything that they think [24]. But it seemed that in a constructivist setting the think-aloud approach may go some way towards instilling in students the confidence to express themselves verbally in class.

Thirdly, further to the development of substantive-procedural understandings, analysis suggests the importance of developing a large-scale understanding of historical events. The importance of developing an understanding of topic- and century-wide knowledge reflects long-standing concerns in history education that students finish secondary school without a coherent framework of the past [25]. Having a big picture of the past is

necessary for developing historical consciousness and interpreting historical events [25].

Although not a study in discourse analysis, data further revealed students describing, explaining, speculating, inferring and asking questions to develop historical understanding. This suggests that talk lies at the heart of teacher-student engagement [11] and that understanding is constructed by the learner [24].

As shown, classroom talk is a way of communicating knowledge and understanding. The idea that seems to emerge is that in a classroom involving dialogic pedagogy, assessing learning involves classroom talk. There has been criticism that assessment relies exclusively on writing [11] and creates obstacles for certain students [27]. This context implies that there is scope for assessment to be multimodal in character. Multimodality refers to “the act of bringing together more than one mode to communicate” [27]. Indeed, this is our natural way of communicating. Focusing on classroom talk, how many opportunities does teaching create for students to think about discourse for communication purposes? How much confident are students in delivering a presentation?

6 IMPLICATIONS FOR ASSESSMENT IN HISTORY

Assessing classroom talk is important to develop students’ historical understanding. Based on the above, a possible framework of classroom assessment involving moving images is presented in Figure 2. The bottom strand consists of subject-specific content which, in history, involves placing both forms of historical knowledge in a wider framework [19]. A dialogic approach involves collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful teacher-student exchanges [11]. Depending on the assessment purpose, this talk can be organised both formatively (giving students feedback) and summatively (end-of-topic evaluation). It is possible to organise and assess a variety of classroom talk involving moving images in different contexts: teacher-student dialogues, think-aloud approach, voice-over commentary, concept maps and student presentations. With an explicit focus on such forms of talk, and success criteria developed beforehand, students would still communicate their understandings. Collaboration, communication and critical thinking are key underpinning features. The core idea is that through talk, teachers engage students’ interest, allow instances for students to show competences in analysing sources, provide opportunities to relate between peers and teacher and encourage autonomous actions.

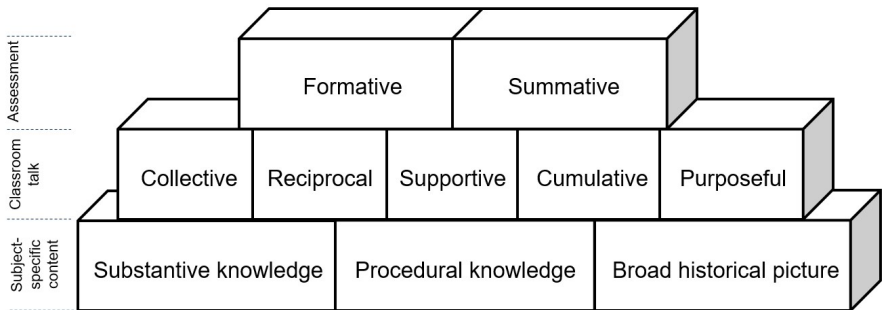


Figure 2. A framework for organising and assessing classroom talk.

This framework should assist students in different ways. In terms of motivation, classroom talk provides students with immediate feedback. By setting clear criteria in advance, students would know what is expected of them. This will help increase both standards and achievement and instil habits of self-directed learning. Regarding engagement, teacher-student interaction may spur students to engage in productive talk, perhaps in a think-aloud fashion, and be responsive to peer comments. A sense of relatedness fosters a positive classroom environment and leads to better learning. Concerning historical understanding, discussing substantive and disciplinary knowledge in the context of a big-picture framework will instil in students a critical approach and make looking at the broad historical picture a feature of the analysis of moving images. While this form of assessment occurs in real time, it generates one kind of evidence which, as important as it is to the learning process, other ways of assessing students need to be factored in.

7 CONCLUSION

As an assessment tool, classroom talk is a way of activating and checking prior knowledge and of developing understanding. As Ford-Connors et al. remark, dialogic teaching and assessment feed into each other; through the knowledge gained from dialogic exchanges, teachers get a view of students' evolving knowledge and understandings which, in turn, inform their next steps in teaching [12].

This paper emphasised using moving images as a practical way of organising classroom talk seriously and purposefully in history lessons and argued that assessing students on their ability to write, although a steadfast tradition in mainstream education, should be balanced with other forms of assessment, among them classroom talk. The proposed framework of

assessing classroom talk adds to the debate about organising multimodal assessment. The suggestion is that a tighter focus on talk for assessment purposes is beneficial for students in terms of motivation, engagement and understanding. In light of the current technology-based culture, there has never been a more appropriate time than now to develop communication confidence through talk.

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Bio-note

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EXPLORING INVITATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN STATE PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The key purpose of this paper is to present the findings of a study which tried to investigate in what ways invitational leadership impacts on the primary school setting. The study also focused on the leadership qualities and characteristics which the school leaders exhibit. It also tried to identify if there is any difference between the leaders' and the teachers' perceptions of the impact of invitational leadership. This study was conducted in 1 local college. The population for this study consisted of 39 participants for the quantitative part and 3 school leaders and the college principal for the qualitative part. The tools used to collect the data were the 'Teacher Perceptions of Leadership Practices' survey which was used to gather data from the teachers and the leader perception of leadership interview protocol which was used to gather data from principal and school leaders.

Keywords: Invitational leadership, schools, leaders, teachers.

1 INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership is challenging, complicated and while of extreme importance to student success, it is often overwhelming to school leaders. Leadership has taken different models throughout time. The aspects of leadership have changed over the years and will continue to change as demands placed upon them grow [1]. Lopez implied that the historic image of a leader is developing from one who is in oversight of the organisation, an authoritative leader, to one who possesses a compelling vision that influences others to follow [2].

The competence to build a healthy organisation is yet another component crucial to the needs of overall leadership success. Yukl defines the term organisation as a "complex social system of patterned interactions among

people” and argues that the cooperation among people is crucial to the success or failure of creating a healthy organisation [3]. Prevailing literature also greatly supports this need for a leadership model that is caring and ethical in nature.

The author chose to undertake the study mentioned in this paper after an anecdote that happened to a friend of hers who works as a teacher in a local primary school. In the past, various leadership models have been designed to meet the leadership needs of the past several decades [3]. The impact of invitational leadership theory has been examined in dissertations to support the argument that invitational leadership positively impacts school leaders and culture [4].

A number of academics and researchers have worked together over the years to develop an understanding of some complex principles and every day facts that seem to relate to one another and which seem to effect human success or failure. This perception has resulted into a model of practice called invitational theory. Invitational theory tries to interpret phenomena and contribute by way of intentionally inviting people to recognise their relatively immeasurable potential in all areas worthwhile of human struggles [5].

On the same line of thought Paxton insists that the intention of invitational leadership is to constitute an environment that intentionally invites people to realise their full potential [6]. An inviting school is described as one which is caring, trusting, respectful, optimistic and intentional and it is all revealed through the five Ps: people, places, programmes, processes and policies. Invitational leaders know that leadership is about relationships and value everyone’s contribution for the collective good of the organisation.

Invitational leadership encourages others through invitations which Purkey and Siegel illustrate as the process of extending positive messages both to oneself and to others [7]. The manner in which the leader leads and invites others into the process can be seen through people, the physical space, the programmes offered, policies actualised, and the processes in which it all comes together, all of which were further explored in the study carried out.

Invitational leadership theory sounds like an astonishing positive and supportive idea, but anyone who works in schools understands that present schools present a profusion of challenges and obstacles routinely. Invitational leadership seems as the perfect model in theory, but does it work in practice? Can it make an impact on current schools? Is it possible to live

and lead invitationally when challenged with the realities of schools today? It is within this backdrop that this study has been undertaken.

1.1 What is Invitational Leadership?

Invitational Leadership stems from Invitational Education Theory (IET), which serves to establish an inviting environment in schools. Invitational leadership aims at “inviting” all interested stakeholders to succeed. It involves sending positive messages to people, making them feel valued, able, responsible and worthwhile. Purkey and Novak describe invitational leadership as a comprehensive model that may serve as template for successful educational leadership during these times of enormous educational change and increased accountability [8].

Purkey and Siegel on their part, describe invitational leadership as one that “encourages leaders to pursue more joyful and more meaningful personal and professional lives, and to invite their colleagues, family, friends, loved ones, and community to do the same” [7]. Invitational leadership proposes that effective leadership invites others to use their talents to contribute to the amelioration of the school. Invitational leaders invite others and work collaboratively with their heart, heads and hands. This is done by adhering to four basic guiding principles: respect, trust, optimism and intentionality. Day et al. [9] described these four principles as follows:

1. **Trust** – Possessing confidence in the abilities, integrity, and responsibilities of ourselves and others.
2. **Optimism** – The belief in people’s untapped potential for growth and development.
3. **Respect** – The recognition that every person is an individual of worth.
4. **Intention** – A decision to purposely act in a certain way to achieve and carry out a set goal.

Invitational leadership works on the structure of five areas which contribute to the success or failure of individuals. According to Purkey and Siegel [7],

“The five Ps are highly significant for their separate and combined influence on Invitational Leadership. The combination of these five Ps offers an almost limitless number of opportunities for the invitational leader, for they address the total culture or ecosystem of any organization” (p.99).

1.2 The five Ps:

1. *People* – Purkey and Siegel believe that nothing is more important in life than people. “Invitational leadership is based on working cooperatively with others” (p.101).
2. *Places* – refers to the physical environment of an organisation. “The physical environment is a socially constructed support system in which people develop ideas about themselves” (p.108).
3. *Policies* – refer to the procedures issued by government and executive boards and communicate a powerful message of trust or distrust, respect or disrespect, optimism or pessimism (p.111).
4. *Programmes* – according to Purkey and Siegel, being able to develop and manage programmes is an essential part of any leader’s responsibility.
5. *Processes* – reveals in countless ways the function of the other four Ps. It is the way things are planned and actualised. Process can be described as the way that people, places, policies and programmes are visible in a school [7].

2 METHODOLOGY

This paper presents part of the findings of a study that was carried out in local primary schools. The research for this study took place in 1 college in Malta. All the primary schools of this college were invited to participate, of which only 3 accepted the invitation. The number of teachers in these 3 schools amounted to 49. The 3 school leaders together with the college principal also took part in this study. For the qualitative part, the college principal and the respective leaders of this college’s primary schools were interviewed. The interview protocol contained 11 semi-structured, open-ended questions. The eleven-question interview protocol was based precisely on the invitational leaderships’ 4 assumptions, as well on the 5 Ps of invitational leadership.

For the quantitative part, a questionnaire was distributed to the teachers serving in these primary schools. The cohort chosen consisted of teachers teaching from grades 1 to 6. An electronic survey method was chosen as an instrument for the quantitative data collection. The electronic surveys were sent to the respective head of schools who in turn emailed the letter explaining the purpose of the study and inviting the teachers to access the link and answer the survey.

The mixed-methodology method was adopted and this allowed the researcher to engage with teachers through a questionnaire survey. This was followed up with a series of interviews with school leaders thus helping both to enlighten the feedback provided by the teachers as well as to highlight differences due to the different roles played.

The focus of this study were the qualities and characteristics manifest by the leaders. After reading the relevant literature, the following 4 questions were chosen as research questions:

1. How is invitational leadership being perceived and implemented?
2. What are the qualities of invitational leaders that characterise a sample of Maltese primary school leaders?
3. What invitational leadership characteristics do leaders implement or exhibit in the way they lead their schools?
4. Is there a difference in the way invitational leadership is perceived by teachers and the school management?

Each leader who participated in the study was interviewed utilising a version used by Burns Principal's Interview Protocol [5]. The protocol for leaders was based on the 5 Ps. The interview protocol was sent to the leaders in advance making it possible for them to ask any questions or seek clarifications. The information obtained through the interviews was then to be compared to that obtained through the survey so as to compare the difference between the way leaders and teachers perceive invitational leadership.

Teachers serving under the interviewed leaders were surveyed as well, utilising Burns' Teacher Perceptions of Leadership practices with relevant modifications so as to take into consideration the local context [5]. These surveys were used to measure the 4 propositions of invitational leadership aspects referred to in 1.1, as well as the aspect of perceived leadership effectiveness. The survey was also utilised to obtain quantitative data that could aid in answering the research questions presented in this study.

Almost all the survey questions were written in a positive manner with the exception of 8 of them. The inclusion of negative answers in the survey was done purposely so as to serve as cross reference to ascertain that respondents were answering in a genuine and rigorous manner. Negative survey items were ranked in reverse order to aid the statistical analysis mechanism. Consequently a response would be graded as a positive 5, whilst a 5 would be graded with a value of 1 on all negative stated questions.

The overall outcome of the survey shows that the leaders of the schools who participated in this study are trying to create schools with a climate that invites everyone to experience success. As Purkey and Novak (1996) [8] sustain, invitational leadership is a type of leadership that offers a systematic approach to the educational process whilst offering strategies for making schools more inviting. Invitational Education Theory equips educators with principles of practising behaviours that seek to coordinate, in creative and ethical ways, research, theory and practice.

Findings from this survey indicate that the educational leaders in these schools as well as the college principal are trying to influence co-workers with a leadership style that promotes collaboration and shows consideration and respect for individuals in the educational system.

This qualitative part of the research served to support the results obtained from the quantitative part adding richness and meaning to the overall study. The college principal and school leaders had more or less the same thoughts about the four qualities of optimism, respect, trust and intentionality. All the respondents agreed that of all 4 assumptions, respect was the most important. The college principal believes that respect “is very important and if there is respect all the other values will come as a result of it”. The principal also states that “I do not think that we can achieve anything without respect”.

Head C thinks that “respect has to be one of the most important pillars on which we build our relationship with our members of staff” and affirms that all relationships need to be based on respect, concluding that “I try to pass this on to all the staff”. For Head B respect is important to help people in his/her organisation grow. “As a leader I like to help people grow, so when for example I try to address something which my staff needs to change and there is respect, they would not take it badly and they are willing to work on it and make the necessary changes”. Head B also states that “being respectful is intentional, so trust will follow. In a school one meets a lot of different people, different characters, so respect is intentional even to pass a message perhaps to those people who are not cooperating. Through respect one wins people over”.

For Head A respect “is not only important but is everything in leadership. A leader cannot pretend the staff to respect him/her if he or she does not show respect towards them. Not only the staff but also pupils. I feel that when there is respect, trust will follow. When there is trust then all the other intentions are easily reachable because when people trust you, they are more willing

to help you reach your goals". All this is in line with what Purkey and Siegel affirm that leadership is an art and that leaders have the responsibility for moral action that influences the lives of people [7]. Novak, on his part, insists that in order to lead invitationally, a leader must respect others [10]. The fact that there was a unanimous consensus that respect is very important augurs well in showing that these leaders embrace invitational leadership characteristics.

An invitational leader trusts others to carry out their responsibilities to the best of their abilities. Tozer suggests that to earn the trust of others we first have to give it. For leaders this means taking a risk and trusting others first [11]. When asked about the notion of trust, the principal stated that "it is a very important value and leaders need to be very wise in this regard; so that is why building healthy relationships is very important". Bezzina and Cutajar believe that leadership is all about relationships [12]. They also believe that leaders can increase a group's productivity by helping everyone in the group become more effective. For the interviewed principal, it is "very important for the leader to take a step back and to allow that person to show and manifest his or her expertise in doing a particular job". Bezzina and Fabri insist that "we are witnessing college principals whose brief calls them to be invitational" (p.88) [13].

All leaders interviewed seem to believe that being optimistic as a leader is very important. They believe that by being optimistic, better futures are possible. A hopeful, positive approach to leadership that actively looks at what is possible rather than at the multitude of obstacles or inhibitions to school improvement. The principal emphasised that "being positive gives a very optimistic view of things in the organisation. Being positive is not always easy, it is a process". According to Novak, when a principal is caring, respectful and optimistic, others are more likely to participate to the community in positive ways [10]. Head B states that at their school they always try to celebrate achievement and look at the positive aspect in everything. "As a leader I believe that it is my duty to create an environment where teachers are happy, so they give their hundred percent. If teachers are not happy, they won't give their best and in the end it is the pupils who will suffer". In agreement with this, Purkey and Novak insist that people become better if optimism and a commitment to the continuous growth and appreciation of everyone in the school is present [14]. Schmidt believes that optimism is basic for creating positive messages [15]. When professionals show an optimistic posture and expect good things to happen as a result of their helping relationships, the people they aim to help will sense this level of confidence and will act on it. One of the points that Head C insisted on when

talking about optimism was that, in the school staff this was instilled by showing them that she knows each and every one of them, and that she knows their abilities and strengths and tries to help them overcome their weaknesses.

For Purkey and Siegel, intentionality plays a key role because it gives all human activities both direction and purpose. It also means that teacher collaboration does not happen by accident. The principal stated that “if a leader does not believe in the intention, then intentions will never be owned by the people around him or her”. The heads interviewed also agreed that intentionality is a relevant key to leadership. Head A believes that being intentional is very important. S/he sustained that “it is very important that the leader is convinced of what s/he is doing so it is easier to convince the staff” (p.19) [7].

The five Ps notify the way in which invitational leadership is illustrated in school leadership. When interviewees were asked which of these, according to them, are the most influential in building efficacious organisations, they answered without hesitation that they believed that people are the most important aspect that must be addressed and brought on board. Of particular interest is a comment made by the college principal, when, with reference to this question she insisted that “I consider myself more as a leader than an administrator”. I think that this consideration speaks volumes on the type of leadership that this college is trying to promote. This resonates with what Bezzina states, that “the paradigm shift that is taking place is one which focuses on the whole person, on people who want to actively contribute towards educational development in their respective organisations” [16].

3 CONCLUSION

The results of the study demonstrate that there is a relationship between the professionally and personally inviting behaviours of the leaders and the perceptions of the teachers in their schools. From the data gathered it is evident that in the college where the study was done, the principles of invitational leadership are present in the way the leaders lead their schools.

This was evident in the results which showed a supreme relationship between the leaders and the teachers. One teacher commented on this saying that “the school leader is a very down to earth person who is easily

accessible to staff members. S/he knows how to lead. S/he has a great authority but at the same time has a great empathy towards staff members”.

The study indicates that the tenets of invitational leadership are applied in these schools and a people-oriented leadership is advocated. People orientation points out to the way the leaders collaborate with members of the organisation and is identified by caring for, empowering and developing others. Interestingly, teachers and leaders pronounced strong conceptions regarding the 4 assumptions (trust, respect, optimism and intentionality) of invitational leadership. The subscale of *trust* is crucial to invitational leadership. Purkey and Siegel advocate that “in invitational leadership, trust is a cooperative, collaborative activity where process is as important as product” (p.24) [7]. They concluded that “the leader who has established trust throughout his or her organisation has come a long way toward ensuring the ultimate success of that organisation” (p.25) [7].

Correspondingly, participants who took part in this study acknowledged that trust was a vital component to leadership. The interviewed principal acknowledged that “trust is a very important value”. When speaking about trust with reference to the college principal, 1 particular teacher said that “she has a very good relationship with all the staff, and I feel I can trust her”. The importance of trust appeared to have a strong consensus among teachers and leaders.

Another essential aspect of invitational leadership is respect, which Purkey and Siegel describe as one of the four influential fundamentals of leading people [7]. On his part, Freiberg identifies respect between teachers and between students and teachers as a meaningful element in positive school climate [17]. The majority of the respondents felt that respect was essential for the smooth running of a school and with regards to this, 1 particular participant, speaking about his/her superior, stated that “s/he is just outstanding; our leader shows respect to each and every person at school”. This is further confirmed by the fact that respect occurred to be a fundamental characteristic that leaders within this college deemed as very important in their leadership.

The study showed how the leaders in these schools “invite” everyone who has a stake in the accomplishments of the school to cooperate, and synergy is developed as all together they work toward a common goal. This was evident in the results obtained from the survey, as when leaders were asked what aspect of their organisation they considered to be the most important,

they all strongly agreed that “people” were the most influential and important factor for an organisation to succeed.

As the survey information was collected, it was noticed that explicit patterns of responses were predominant and showed how leaders are trying to model their school culture through numerous daily interactions by which common norms, relationships, visions, intentions and interpretation of what works are generated, framed, supported and tested. Leaders and teachers were clear about their intentions in caring and supporting each other’s efforts, and this is another trait of invitational leadership. When sharing their beliefs, teachers and leaders felt strongly about the invitational traits of trust and respect as being indispensable for a successful organisation.

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Bio-note

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WOMEN IN EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT.

AN EXPLORATION OF CHALLENGES FACED BY FEMALE HEAD TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS IN MALTESE STATE SECONDARY SCHOOLS.

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Abstract

Despite having the teaching profession largely dominated by women, there is a disrupted continuum when it comes to women in senior management. Few females manage to climb their professional ladder and the higher one goes the less they are represented. This study attempts to identify what helps or hinders women to achieve senior positions. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with female heads and principals in Maltese state secondary schools. Their success stories and silences were reported. Individual, socio-cultural and organisational barriers were identified as the main challenges faced by women in educational leadership. Various strategies to improve the representation of women in senior management were suggested. The report concludes that there is hope for achieving a gender-balanced educational leadership, though change can be slow. It was recognised that having gender-balance is advantageous for the demands of leadership in the modern workplace, so it is encouraged to achieve it.

Keywords: Misrepresentation, discontinuum, educational leadership, semi-structured interviews, female state school heads and principals, barriers and challenges, gender-balance.

1 INTRODUCTION

Despite having the teaching profession highly dominated by women, there seems to be a disrupted continuum when it comes to senior management in education [1]. Teaching is seen as a 'suitable job' for women, with 66.1% of the public and private sector teachers being female (National Statistics

Office, 2004) [2]. Females, however, do not continue to dominate higher ranks in education and their numbers also decline with the age of students. Both educational statistics by the National Statistics Office [1] as well as the Malta Gender Gap Index [3] confirm that we have the majority of teachers in the primary education being females, but numbers drop in secondary and even further in tertiary education. This phenomenon is not only limited to education and the local scenario but it is considered an international phenomenon and across the professional spectrum. Bush and Coleman confirm that women in the UK dominate the teaching profession but are rarely in a position of authority [4]. Although we have seen a change and women have entered the work force not only in professions which have traditionally been linked with males, yet still such increase was not reflected in equal representation in senior positions. The reasons behind this discontinuum are complex and multifaceted and differ across countries, but this study seeks to find out the challenges and barriers which may be the culprits for such misrepresentation. Various studies have been conducted locally to explore this phenomenon, focusing mainly on gender differences in leadership rather than on what the causes are. This study focuses on female educational leadership and assesses the challenges and barriers that women in educational leadership have to confront. It also tries to come up with measures to overcome them. "We want to know and understand in order to be able to act and act 'better' than we did before" (p. 4) [5].

The study was carried out through a qualitative research method since the researcher wanted female educational leaders to speak for themselves to be truly representative of the population under study. This was achieved through semi-structured interviews amongst female heads and principals in state secondary schools, all of whom participated willingly to the study. The researcher also conducted interviews with officials at the Ministry of Education concerning the selection of personnel for senior positions in order to help triangulate the interview findings.

The absence of women in educational leadership and management seems to stem from a variety of factors. Along the years, various researchers like Schmuch, Hall, Coleman, Cubillo and Brown, Shakeshaft et al., all tried to identify and categorise factors that hinder the progress of women's career in educational leadership [6] [7] [8] [9] [10]. They all tried to address the so-called 'syndrome' for women in school administration, meaning that the "higher you go, the fewer you see" (p. 125) [11]. Notwithstanding so many years have passed and several other studies were added to the literature, Neidhart and Carlin still outlined similar barriers which they categorised into individual, socialisation and stereotyping and organisational barriers [12].

2 INDIVIDUAL BARRIERS

It has often been assumed that the major barrier is within the individual, that being a female in itself is the cause of being under-represented in top management [13]. This points to females as often lacking confidence in their capabilities, their qualifications and experience and as not being assertive and ambitious enough to apply for promotions since they fear excessive responsibility and are reluctant to voice their opinion as they fear conflict or negative feedback [9]. It has often been attributed to the fact that the image of leadership in itself is not appealing to women, therefore they are not even interested in furthering their profession to a higher level. This is so as the image of leadership is often perceived as less feminine and that if they opt for such role, they would need to mask their gender and sexuality and walk a fine line. Women fail to aspire for top management as they “see leadership as a formal role and not as a multi-dimensional role that can be undertaken in different contexts by different people” (p. 28) [14]. Their experience of leadership behaviour may not be compatible with their preferred way of leading, thus rendering it unappealing. Successful leaders are perceived to possess characteristics, attitudes and temperament more commonly ascribed to men and therefore women tend to have a negative perspective of leadership and do not aspire to take on such a role [15].

However, this study moved against these perceptions that women avoid leadership roles as all female leaders interviewed were empowered and embraced leadership. They did, however, acknowledge that they needed significant others such as previous female heads who were good role models and/or colleagues to highlight their leadership skills and family support that helped them aspire, achieve and maintain their leadership role. This study also broke the perception that females lack self-confidence and are not assertive and ambitious since all were promoted to educational leaders after a small number of attempts for headship. They all showed confidence in and are qualified and have a good reputation and track record as previously assistant heads or heads. However, they all confirmed research findings that generally women do not aspire for leadership from the start but they climb their career ladder step by step and opt for leadership as their career progresses [16] [17] [18]. This study also confirms previous research regarding the negative image of leadership. All interviewees confirmed that educational leadership is very demanding and taxing, where one is expected to work around the clock, especially due to technology. This can render educational leadership quite challenging and can be disheartening, especially for young females with family commitments. One needs to be organised to work during the week and leave the weekend for family and

personal commitments. On the other hand, all participants said that educational leadership gives them satisfaction and personal enrichment. They all feel that their altruistic value can be exercised as they have a say in the way things run and can influence and support people. They also acknowledged the fact that despite living in quite a traditional culture, the idea of leadership changed over time – from a formal and authoritarian role to a shift in focus on teamwork and relationship building. Having a slight move towards having females in leadership positions brought about a change in values and expectations in the educational leadership role. We have seen the introduction of the notion of ‘care’ in leadership, meaning that there is no longer the need to ‘camouflage’ their style of leadership, but to the contrary they can celebrate it as nowadays it is felt as being much needed [19]. This study therefore concludes that individual aspects are no longer regarded as barriers but have become characteristics that help females seek leadership roles and be successful.

3 SOCIO-CULTURAL BARRIERS

Whereas Shapiro [20] states that women are often blamed for their own apparent career stagnation, Web argues that women are constructed by the norms and values of the society that the individual is embedded into [21]. People are often socialised to act according to socially-defined roles. Despite changes, women are socialised to be submissive and led rather than being leaders in themselves. They are socially constructed to believe that they are not up to what it takes to be leaders. Power and authority is still defined and exercised by men. ‘Think management – think male’ seems to be a global phenomenon, especially in traditional societies like Malta [22]. In such societies, domestic, caring and submissive duties are still expected to be carried out by women, while decision-making and dominance are masculine characteristics [23] [24]. This leads to the myth that leadership is primarily the domain of men [25] and if women manage ‘against odds’ to climb the ladder, these “strong women are labelled difficult and dangerous because they trouble dominant masculinities and modes of management by being different” (p. 3) [26].

The result of this is that women tend to stop at teaching since they are meant to fulfil such a ‘caring’ profession but not expected to climb to management. They also tend to feel guilty to follow a career at the expense of their family. Since they are socially constructed and expected to fulfil domestic and family commitments, they feel they are going against what is expected from them if they give their career priority, or even further seek leadership roles. Things

have changed and the abolishment of the ruling that females have to resign after marriage in order to fulfil their domestic commitments helped more women follow their profession and seek career advancement [27]. However, if they manage to climb their career ladder, they are still expected to fulfil their domestic and family duties, leading to a double shift [8]. This poses difficulties for a woman to combine career with family. For more women, the choice of a management position means choosing not to have a family and so less women are willing to 'pay the price' of being at the top [28] [8]. In the light of this, Coleman's research, substantiated by Mathipa and Tsoka a couple of years later, reveals that women tend to develop a career path as their career progresses, rather than aiming for headship right from the start [17] [18]. According to Evetts, women adopt either a 'modification strategy' by temporarily subordinating their career ambition to other factors related to family circumstances, or a 'postponement strategy' by delaying their career until their children are older [16]. By putting their family commitments first, they find less time to fulfil the role or attend further professional development courses to obtain managerial skills [14]. Coleman explains that even if they juggle between family life and career, opting for career breaks for child birth or child care can be detrimental to one's career development since they lead to rare prospects for promotion or demotion to re-entry to a career whatsoever [17].

This study confirms such research since participants were on average middle aged and own the majority of the domestic responsibilities, including the care of children or old relatives. They feel that the major family responsibility is theirs, with some opting for a maid or carer when they cannot cope. Those interviewed stated that being such a demanding job, they would not have considered leadership if just starting a family or if still young and married with small children, especially if no help or support from the family is available. Those who are single feel that they are 'married' to the school due to their professional commitment. This confirmed what Ruijs and Coleman stated that often women choose management positions instead of having a family and that choosing a top position can be difficult to upkeep in line with one's family commitments [28] [8]. Participants who opted for a career break did so only due to maternity leave, with some taking courses in the meantime to increase chances of climbing the professional ladder. This study confirms that having a career break can otherwise be considered to be detrimental to one's career development as one will be wasting precious time.

Despite society's preference for male leadership, however, Coleman highlighted the advantages of having women in top positions [8]. She argues that the experience of running a household was not dissimilar to that of

managing a school and that handling the demands of family-life in addition to work make women more approachable and more equipped with qualities needed by outstanding leaders [29] [30] [8]. Similarly, the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher used to state that any woman who understands the problems of running a home will be nearer to understanding the problems of running a country.

4 ORGANISATIONAL BARRIERS

Any organisation, including educational institutions, reside within societies and therefore operate within the same norms of the society in which they are embedded. In androcentric societies, men are the gatekeepers at every stage of the career progression, starting from the appointment to the development to promotion. From the interview and selection procedure, there seem to be few, if any, women on interview panels and often interview boards hold a stereotypical view of female heads [16]. Shakashaft indicated that people tend to hire those like themselves; therefore males hire males [11]. Since power and leadership is defined by men, even the job requirements are favourable to men, with the result of in having women being measured against male characteristics, rendering them disadvantaged. This however was challenged by this study since both participants and the department officials confirmed that the interview panel is as balanced as possible, though sometimes they may find difficulty in finding 'appropriate' females to be persons on the selection board. Selection is focused on knowledge, experience, qualifications and skills rather than gender characteristics. According to department officials, they also seek to create gender balance in the school's senior management team and staff, making leadership in schools a reflection of the co-educational system recently introduced in state secondary schools.

Through their socialisation process, women are not prepared for leadership but for the 'care' career of teaching, especially with girls and in early years. In androcentric societies, women are seen as not able to cope with discipline, especially with boys, and in maintaining standards [8]. Therefore, as Newman [31] points out, if female managers seem to be accepted, they are often allotted 'people oriented', caring and pastoral roles as opposed to 'task oriented' positions [6] [17]. Additionally, women often tend to report that the organisation's climate can intimidate them and work conditions can favour men. Studies show that male subordinates were intimidating, at times indicating directly that they do not want to work for a woman [8] [10]. Being expected to work long hours does not favour women wanting to balance

family commitments with work, as society is expecting females to fulfil [32]. Yet this study highlights that generally women are accepted as leaders and due to their good reputation, they do not feel that they need to prove their worth. Only a few traditional males were sceptical towards female leadership, especially if they are still young and coming from the primary sector and with regards to financial, building and maintenance management and disciplinary problems. Some even encountered stereotypical expectations from traditional parents who still prefer male leadership on the belief of being more authoritative and disciplined, though they appreciate the fact that female heads are more approachable. Some traditional parents assume that if a school has a female head, one is a spinster and cannot empathise with child rearing and family matters.

5 REASONS BEHIND THEIR SUCCESS

Unfortunately this seems to be the reality we are still facing, but that does not mean that we have to continue confirming it. We can act to move beyond it, to a more equal representation. Things are changing, especially since various equality policies, both locally and abroad have been introduced, though according to Piterman legislation has not been able to make inroads into deeply rooted cultural practices [33]. Yet, against all odds, these female leaders managed to get and stay in top positions, they managed to break the 'glass ceiling' and gain access to top management. What is the reason behind their success? Contrary to research that portrays females as being 'their worst enemy' and their own culprits, participants attributed their success to their intrinsic motivation, commitment and perseverance, their love for the job and the satisfaction it brings [13]. They feel suited for the job and believe that they have the necessary qualifications. Previous experience sustained them with a repertoire of skills which were key for their successful leadership. Their altruism to have an influential position to improve tomorrow's society was also a driving factor. Various attributed their strength to the co-operation, support and appreciation of others around them – staff and family. Therefore females have what it takes to be potential educational leaders. They only need other factors to encourage and 'exploit' this potential to achieve an equal representation in educational leadership.

6 ADVICE FOR IMPROVEMENT

This study therefore sheds some rays of hope. It showed that there have been some changes and somehow female leadership is on the increase, especially in the field of education, but there is no harm in trying to achieve

a better equilibrium. The participants themselves brought up three main strategies to improve representation of women in senior management. Since sometimes it is the actual image of leadership that puts women off from opting for leadership positions, they proposed that we should be having less vast and more focused headship positions, less administrative in nature and more curricular. This way the concept of leadership can correspond more to the female preferred way of leadership and more relating to what educational leadership is meant to be. Educational leadership will not be an attractive role, especially for females, if it is too vast, having too much to carry, especially if one needs to balance work and family life.

This leads to the second suggestion, that of applying family-friendly measures to headship, such as flexi-hours, teleworking, childcare and sabbatical. These measures are already available for lower teaching positions, so one should seek ways of spilling over these measures to leadership positions as well. If such measures were to be offered, females opting for higher positions will not feel that they cannot reach a work-family life balance or that they had to 'pay the price' of losing such incentives. The importance of boundaries between private and public life was also emphasised, especially with regards to control on emails. Therefore, participants are suggesting changing slowly socio-cultural expectations and providing organisational strategies in order to encourage more women to seek leadership.

The final suggestion is to provide mentoring and support in headship. Having a critical professional from whom one can seek guidance and support and share good practice, will help heads find the required encouragement and stamina to carry on. A critical mentor will help to 'adjust and mould' a head in place and 'recharge' and upkeep the enthusiasm when the energy seems to start diminishing.

7 CONCLUSION

Why all this emphasis to have equal representation in genders in leadership? Various studies on women and leadership by researchers like Cubillo and Brown [9] and Piterman [33], highlight that women have a great deal to contribute to the changing practices of educational management. It would therefore be a waste of human resources if such capabilities are not realised due to various barriers left unresolved. Our traditional preference towards male leadership is a disadvantage in society since the introduction of female leadership reflects the new demands of leadership in the modern place of

work. If we strive to achieve an equal representation in educational leadership, we will manage to create an enriching pool of skills and qualities, counteracting and complementing each other. This is not an easy endeavour but this study helped to bring gender issues on top of the social agenda. It was felt that various studies tackled gender differences in leadership, but this study aimed to move a step forward by trying to gain a greater understanding of the challenges and barriers faced by female educational leaders already in the field, despite being few in number. This study gave voice to female leaders to provide sound advice to future female educational leaders on how common barriers and challenges can be surmounted and maybe encourage more to follow the path they have taken towards leadership. This study also provided insights for policy-makers to take the necessary steps required to incentivise more female educators to opt for leadership roles. As long as there is silence, the phenomenon will lack critical examination that can help in improving the situation [8] [10] and this study brought to light the hurdles faced by a minority of female educational leaders who managed to succeed against all odds. It also gave suggestions on how socio-cultural expectations and organisational structures can be fine tuned in order to achieve a gender-equality in educational leadership.

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Bio-note

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THE ORIGINS OF UNIFORMITY IN MALTESE PEDAGOGY

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Abstract

One of the hallmarks of pedagogy in Maltese state primary schools is uniformity. The author of this paper studied the origins of this trait by adopting a historical approach. This allowed him to trace it to the founding era of primary schooling in Malta (1860-1880). His research confirms the arguments put forward by J. J. Camilleri and the conclusions by J. Fenech that principles, policies and practices adopted by Prof. Can. Paolo Pullicino, the founding father of primary schooling in Malta, a century and a half ago, have a significant influence on contemporary teaching in primary classrooms.

Keywords: Pedagogy, uniformity, primary schooling, history of education.

1 INTRODUCTION

Maltese pedagogy in primary state schools is predominantly teacher-based, solidly underpinned by segmented-collectivism and one that encourages uniformity at all levels [1] [2] [3]. This paper focuses on uniformity. It shows how this belief in uniformity is pervasive across at least two major stakeholders of the Maltese education system – teachers and policy makers. Furthermore, it seeks to identify the origins of this hallmark. The historical lens adopted suggests that the belief on the importance of uniformity in our education system has its origins to the founder of Maltese schooling, Prof. Paolo Pullicino.

1.1 Prof. Paolo Pullicino

Fenech [4] [5], a Maltese scholar, has researched in detail the pedagogic history of Maltese schools and strived to shed light on the roots of

contemporary culture in Maltese primary schools. Fenech is convinced that the foundations were laid by the first director general of the Department of Education and possibly also one of the most charismatic and hard-working personalities in this field, Prof. Can. Paolo Pullicino. Following his own ethnographic study, he came to the conclusion that: "Pullicino's innovative measures...became the origins of cultures of teaching which survived a century and a half" (p. 2) [6]. This is an assessment to which Camilleri [4] subscribes as well: "It would be true to say that much in the present system of education reveals salient features and characteristics for which Pullicino is mostly responsible" (p. 122).

Pullicino's long tenure as director general, from 1850 to 1880, was only one of the factors which contributed to this long-lasting influence. He was a very diligent director general who put all his energy into building up from scratch the very incomplete primary school system he inherited [7] [4] [8] [9]. His term coincided with a historical period that was characterised by pedagogical stability [4]. He enjoyed the trust of the British authorities governing Malta at that time, and while he was at the helm there was a consensus among the Maltese on the pressing need to extend primary schooling in Malta [4] [8] [9]. All these factors had a major contribution to Pullicino's on-going legacy.

Fenech tracks a number of characteristics that are still present in our pedagogical culture that originated in Pullicino's era:

...central decision-making in curricular affairs, heavy prescriptivism, an attitude towards teachers as mere implementers of curricula developed elsewhere and an emphasis on educational outcomes as measured by tests and examinations held at the end of each course (p. 39) [5].

All these characteristics are major contributors to the culture of uniformity that is so pervasive across our pedagogic culture.

2 METHODOLOGY

The arguments put forward in this paper are based on the study, *Malta+5* [2]. It is based on the view that 'Pedagogy is the *act* of teaching together with its attendant *discourse*' (p. 11) [10]. So, even though the act and discourse are distinguishable, they are nonetheless inseparable and interdependent.

But the term *pedagogy* is a contested term. As pointed out by Thiessen et al., there is a whole myriad of definitions of pedagogy.

Some pedagogies seem related to, or derived from critical pedagogy... Some are connected to particular processes or qualities... or to causes and concerns... Still others are associated with particular groups in society... And others sometimes use the terms teaching and instruction as a synonym for pedagogy (pp. 2-3) [11].

Thus, any researcher studying pedagogy needs to be stipulative. I chose Alexander's definition given that it has been adopted by a number of high-profile scholars, such as Dale [12] and Pollard [13]. Another reason for this is that it underlines the link between the *act* of teaching and the *discourse* informing it. It therefore promotes the analysis of the act of teaching by superimposing it on *ideas*, *values* and collective *histories* which not only inform and shape it, but also explain it. In other words it guides us in our analysis of teaching by studying it through a socio-historical lens.

This is a crucial point for pedagogy. Teaching, as any other human activity, cannot be studied in a vacuum, on its own. Even though classrooms are micro-cultures, marked with their own languages, ethos and rule expectations, they are microcosms as well. The cultural baggage of teachers and their students is not left by the school gate or classroom door. In the classroom, culture and teaching (and learning) do not merely meet but become intertwined to such an extent that they become one: pedagogy. Of course, history is a very important aspect of culture. That is why in *Malta+5* [2], I have adopted a historical approach with a specific term of reference to look out for historical continuities.

2.1 Study design

The study had the lesson as its main focus. The bulk of the data was gathered throughout 700 hours of classroom observation conducted between November 2011 and April 2012. They were conducted in 6 classrooms from 3 different primary state schools. Nine from the 15 lessons observed were then selected for greater scrutiny. These were followed by interviews with the teachers observed and their respective heads of schools. Each interview lasted between 90 to 120 minutes. Taking a leaf from the methodology employed by Tobin, Wu and Davidson [14], the interviewees were presented with some of the data gathered and asked to give their

reactions to it. Further triangulation was achieved through the analysis of memos issued by the Directorate for Education and by delving into the history of primary education in Malta. All data gathered was then compared to the pedagogy in England, France, India, Michigan (USA) and Russia as revealed by Robin Alexander [15].

The model used for this study encompasses the *frame*, the *form* and the *act* of teaching.

Frame	Form	Act
Space Pupil organization Time Curriculum Routine, rule and ritual	Lesson	Task Activity Interaction Judgement

Table 1: A generic model for the analysis of teaching, developed by Alexander [15].

The triangulation ‘between’ and ‘within’ [16] the rich data which this methodology yielded has enabled me to claim authenticity and also a certain degree of typicality. Of course, borrowing the old Indian tale of the blind men and the elephant, I am fully aware that I have only managed to touch a few parts of the elephant. However, if researchers are ‘sufficiently searching, to probe beyond the observable moves, and countermoves of pedagogy to the values and meanings which these embody’ (p. 266) [15] they *can* aim at typicality. This is what Tobin et al. [14] and Alexander [15] have done successfully in their influential comparative studies.

The belief in uniformity is a typicality of Maltese pedagogy. This is greatly evident from the way textbooks and examinations are used in Malta.

3 TEXTBOOKS

In the vast majority of lessons observed, the textbook had a very prominent role. Not only during the delivery of the lesson, but also during the planning stage. Indeed, some of the schemes of work of the teachers observed were based on textbooks and all teachers involved placed them high (7 or more), on a scale from 1 to 10, to show how important they are considered as a teaching tool. Notwithstanding this, most teachers showed they were not

happy with some of the textbooks provided. For instance, they argued that the English one, the *Way Ahead*, was not up to standard, while the *Abacus: Number Textbook; and Shapes and Measures* maths textbooks complicated the lives of their pupils to an unnecessary degree. This claim about the maths textbooks was echoed some years later by Lauri [17].

The dependency of Maltese primary teachers on textbooks is also captured in an ethnographic research by Darmanin [18]. In one of her studies, Darmanin [19] focuses on one particular issue: “the text-book problem”. She portrays, in a vivid way, how Maltese teachers reacted to the unavailability of textbooks for all pupils and to the inadequacy of those available. Her account shows that in the last part of the 20th century, Maltese teachers considered the availability of adequate textbooks a prerequisite for good teaching.

The importance of textbooks in the Maltese pedagogical culture is rooted in the origin of the Maltese primary education system itself [4] [8]. In fact, years back, Pullicino had explained in one of his bi-annual reports why all schools had to have the same textbooks as selected by the director general himself:

“Ed affine che l’istruzione sia determinata in modo da non variare secondo il capriccio di coloro che la dirigono, e quindi essere differente nelle diverse scuole di queste isole, uopo sarebbe compilare e fissare alcuni libri, adattati alle varie classi di queste scuole. Questi libri, che chiameremmo libri di classe, conterrebbero tutti quei germi di conoscenze, che devonsi comunicare ai fanciulli.”

(p. 14) [7]

“And for instruction to be determined in such a way as not to vary according to the whims of those who direct it (i.e. the teachers) and, therefore, be different in the various schools on the island, it will be necessary to compile and prescribe textbooks appropriate to the various classes in the schools. These books, which we call ‘books for the classes’, will contain all the rudiments of knowledge which teachers are expected to communicate to the pupils.”

(p. 14)¹ [7]

Pullicino’s decision was partially dictated by the high number of insufficiently prepared teachers during the second half of the 19th century [8] [9] [6]. Similarly, Darmanin [19] remarks that a decade before her ethnographic

¹ As translated by Fenech (1991b)

study was carried out, in 1982, many qualified primary teachers migrated to the newly established secondary schools. Most of those who replaced them were unqualified, so they heavily relied on the textbooks that were prescribed for them by the central authorities. It seems that the problem of unqualified teachers is still an issue, albeit to a lesser degree. The *PIRLS 2011* [20] quantitative study reports that 11% of Maltese primary teachers have completed post-secondary education but do not possess a Bachelor's degree, while another 10% have only completed their upper-secondary education. This issue was also mentioned by one of the headmasters interviewed, who remarked that the relative large number of unqualified teachers was one of the main problems affecting pedagogy in his/her school.

However, as the below extract shows, the way textbooks are selected reflects also the heavy centralisation with which the Maltese education system was and still is governed. In fact, the practice of a number of “experts” choosing textbooks for all Maltese state schools is still used today, as evidenced in one of the circulars issued by the DES in 2011 on such matters.

“Nixtiequ ninfurmawkom li fil-jiem li ġejjin ser jitqassmu fl-Iskejjel Primarji żewġ kotba godda tal-Lingwa Maltija. Dawn il-kotba ntgħażlu mid-Dipartiment tal-Kurrikulu u eLearning fuq ir-rakkomandazzjonijiet ta' Bord ta' esperti maħtura apposta.

...Issa li tlesta l-eżerċizzju tar-reviżjoni tal-kotba tal-Lingwa għas-snin kollha tal-Primarja, il-lista obbligatorja hija din li ġejja: ...”

(CMeLD 144/2011)

“We would like to inform you that two new textbooks for the teaching of Maltese language are going to be given to each primary school. These books were chosen by the Department for Curriculum and eLearning on the recommendation of a board of experts which was appointed for this specific purpose.

...Now that all textbooks for Maltese language teaching for all the primary years have been revised, the obligatory list is the following: ...”

(CMeLD 144/2011)²

As evident from the answers of the tertiary-qualified Maltese teachers to questions on the subject, they do not oppose such a practice. On the contrary, they agree with it as it ensures a greater uniformity in the topics covered and (in the case of mathematics) in how various types of

² The author's translation

calculations are worked out. Uniformity, as pointed out by Darmanin [19] and by 1 of the year 2 teachers interviewed, is important because “at the end of the day they all have to sit for the same exam”.

Indeed, the way exams are administered in Malta is not only the result of a culture of uniformity, but in turn it keeps on re-enforcing it.

4 EXAMINATIONS

Pupils start sitting for annual examinations from the age of 9, in year 4. As things stand today, these exams are set by The Assessment Unit within the Ministry for Education and Employment. So, all pupils attending Maltese state primary schools are given exactly the same papers. This is therefore a strong driving force in the encouragement of uniformity as “it cannot be denied that tests and examinations exert an influence on the curriculum and pedagogy of schools, especially when they are high stakes ones” (p. 207) [21].

Indeed 1 particular year 6 teacher kept on reminding pupils that they were going to sit for their exam at the end of the scholastic year, even though they were still only in the second month. Moreover, s/he started the lesson with a mental exercise that was an exact replica of the one they would have to do during their end-of-year exam. This reflects another characteristic of the Maltese pedagogical culture: teachers teach for the exam. This was also pointed out by Fenech [5] which led him to assert that Maltese teachers “teach to examinations, narrowing the curriculum down to the teaching of examinable material” (p. 38). The same teacher admitted during the interview that before the mental component was introduced into the new examination regime 2 years earlier, s/he had not given much importance to mental strategies in the maths lessons.

As with the use of textbooks, the culture of holding annual examinations to assess the outcomes of teaching and to determine what is taught, can also be tracked to the Pullicino years: “At the end of each scholastic year an examination will assess exactly the learning of the pupils in all the schools” [22].

“Tali esami condotti così regolarmente hanno ancora per iscopo lo sviluppo regolare delle materie prefisse a ciascun corso di studi nei programmi d’istruzione, dati a tutte le classi delle scuole.”

(p. 6) [23]

“Another aim of these exams being conducted so regularly is the proper covering of the predetermined topics of each subject as set in the syllabi, given to all primary school classes.”

(p. 6)³ [23]

This use of exams for such aims has resulted in an education system totally fixated with exams, which drove teachers to teach to examinations. This was strengthened by A. V. Laferla’s decision in the second quarter of the 20th century to introduce half-yearly examinations [5], a practice that has survived till 2018. Even the rashly implemented progressive reforms of 1970, which included the abolition of annual examinations helped in cementing this fixation in the minds of many. In fact, following a national outcry, 4 years later, exams had to be re-introduced. This resulted in Maltese equating examinations with quality education. The introduction of the highly selective 11+ exam in the last quarter of the nineteen hundreds (Grima et al. 2008; Fenech, 2008) [24] [21] has strengthened this view even more.

This obsession with exams is both the driving force and the result of the culture of uniformity. The latest two great reforms in this regard – the replacement of the 11+ exam in 2010 with benchmark examinations, and of the half-yearly examinations with a continuous mode of assessment in 2019 – have not resulted in much, if any, difference in our belief in uniformity.

The changes from the material tested in the 11+ exams to the benchmark exams is considerable, especially in the languages. The former tested the written, and to a much lesser degree, the listening component, placing a great emphasis on grammar. The latter tested the written, reading, speaking and listening components and grammar is only tested in context. But since all pupils at the end of year 6 are required to sit for the benchmark exam, it nonetheless is a major driving force for uniformity in Maltese primary classrooms.

In the case of the most recent reform – the introduction of continuous assessment – it is too early to draw any solid conclusions. However, as an insider, it seems to me that it did not change much from our culture of

³ The author’s translation

uniformity. For instance, during the teacher training sessions on the matter, to which I was present, some education officers and many teachers insisted on the importance that pupils across Malta are given exactly the same assessments and that these are marked in a homogenous way. For this reason, rubrics were issued for the marking of continuous assessment, which are expected to be followed by all Maltese teachers.

5 CONCLUSION

Thus, in synthesis, textbooks and exams are the result of a belief in the importance of uniformity by major stakeholders in the Maltese education system. They are 2 major tools policy makers make use of in their bid to control what goes on within Maltese primary classrooms. But, as already discussed, teachers do not oppose this view, either. On the contrary they endorse it fully. This suggests that this trait is deeply entrenched in the pedagogic culture of Maltese schooling.

The question that needs to be asked here is whether this culture of uniformity falls within the micro-culture dimension or the microcosmic dimension of pedagogy. In other words: Does this reflect the values of the wider culture of the Maltese? Neither this paper, nor *Malta+5* answer such a question. But it is a very pertinent question which pedagogues can, and should, shed light upon.

Through the historical lens adopted, we have followed the historical trajectory from when these education tools were introduced in the system. We have seen that there are a lot of resonances between contemporary views and practices and those practised some 40 years and more than a decade and a half ago. In short, these are historical continuities that span for more than 150 years.

Thus, what Fenech [4] and Camilleri [6] have stated that principles, policies and practices adopted by Prof. Can. Paolo Pullicino, the founding father of primary schooling in Malta, a century and a half ago, have a significant influence on contemporary teaching in primary classrooms, can be confirmed.

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Bio-note

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PERSPECTIVES ON THE SMOOTH TRANSITION INTO KINDERGARTEN

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Abstract

The purpose of this research¹ was to investigate the smooth transition into kindergarten. Literature about what are the needs for an effective transition, which entities help during the transition, what are the concerns of parents and teachers, how to establish and what has to be included in a transition policy were discussed and reviewed. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 4 mothers to view their perspectives regarding the transition and the policy. After analysing the interviews, 4 important themes were developed. The important aspects in the transition to kindergarten, the need of more preparation, the implementation of a transition policy and the different roles in the transition process. The mothers gave different suggestions of activities that could be done.

Keywords: Early childhood education, transition, kindergarten, policy.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the field of early childhood education there are a substantial amount of issues to be discussed, but I decided to focus on the transition from home or childcare to kindergarten. As a guidance teacher in a secondary school, we prepare students from primary to secondary school, and when my own daughter was going to start kindergarten, I was surprised when I discovered that nothing is done for that significant transition. When I started reading and researching on this issue, I found that transition policies exist in other countries, but although the transition policy was discussed and recommended in the document 'Early Child Education and Care in Malta:

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The way forward' by the Ministry for Education and Employment published in September 2013 [1], it was neither written nor implemented in Malta.

Accordingly, this led me to research the different perspectives mothers have about the transition into kindergarten. In the literature review, one can find an explanation of what transition is and why it is important. This will lead to what are the most important aspects of transition, how one can know if a child is ready for the transition, what activities help in the transition process, and if having a National Transition Policy is imperative. The methodology used will be explained and justified. A discussion supported by findings from my research follows, and in the conclusion I will reach a considered outcome and suggest any research and recommendations for the future.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

A transition involves a change from one thing to another. In a three-year-old child's life, following Malta's education system, it is from home/childcare to kindergarten. This change is considered as a significant part in a student's educational path, as it may lead a student in the direction of success or of failure during their formal education [2]. These young children encounter various challenges as they must assume the new role of a student, develop academic standards, and learn school expectations. Moreover, they have to build a relationship with the teachers, know the expectations of the teacher and develop a relationship with classmates and feel accepted as a friend [3]. These demands entail social-emotional and cognitive competence as they have to learn how to participate effectively with other children and adults that are unfamiliar to them, learn how to use the physical and psychological space of the classroom and learn how to cope with the expectations that the school setting generates [4].

2.1 What is needed for an effective transition?

Children must be ready for school, consequently they have to be socially and emotionally competent, possess motor development skills, are physically healthy and have developed some pre-academic skills [5]. Key aspects of school readiness involve competence in preliteracy skills and being able to identify print, having some knowledge of mathematics and being able to count, and having developed skills such as cooperation, pro-social behaviour, and problem-solving [3]. In a research conducted with kindergarten teachers documented by Heaviside and Farris, skills such as alphabet knowledge or counting were found not to be crucial [6]. However,

being physically healthy, rested and well-nourished, being able to verbally communicate needs, wants and thoughts, showing enthusiasm and curiosity to new activities, being sensitive to other children's feelings, taking turns and sharing with others were found to be critical for school readiness.

2.2 Important entities that aid in the transition period

These skills can be developed in children either through their family or through childcare. The latter can offer services intended to enhance school success, as Rimm-Kaufman et al. found that children who had experienced preschool adjust smoothly in kindergarten [7]. Howes discovered that quality childcare led to an easier kindergarten adjustment, enriched preacademic skills, and reinforced social skills [8]. Having children from childcare or the neighborhood transitioning together to the same kindergarten also facilitates the transition process since they will have someone familiar, will feel supported and comforted [9].

Morrison-Gutman and McLoyd stated that families have a vital role in the educational development of their child [10]. Findings suggest that when the family is involved in education, children's school outcomes in early education and beyond improve [11]. Moreover, family involvement during the transition planning affects the child positively and as children transition to kindergarten they would also benefit from activities that promote collaboration between the family and the school [12].

2.3 Concerns of parents and teachers

In a study by Mc Intyre et al., parents showed interest in having more information about the transition, especially about academic and behavioural expectations, the place and the teacher [12]. The parents also expressed apprehension about their child's transition and were eager to be actively involved in the transition planning and help in the preparation for kindergarten. They were mostly concerned that their children would find it difficult to get used to the new school and to understand the directions. Besides, they were worried about them encountering behavioural difficulties and developing the needed academic skills. These concurred with the conclusions kindergarten teachers made in a study by Rimm-Kaufman et al., that some students failed to follow directions, had behavioral problems and lacked academic skills [7].

2.4 Establishing a transition policy

Establishing a transition policy will aid children to adjust and have a smooth transition. Pianta et al. found that it has a positive effect on the academic attainment of students and also on parental involvement through the kindergarten year [2]. From different findings, one can notice that the model most used for developing a transition policy is the one that follows Pianta and Walsh's contextual systems model and Bronfenbrenner and Morris's bio-ecological model, as these not only focus on the child's readiness skills but also highlight the significance of the relationship between the home, school, community and friends to assist the child during the transition to kindergarten [13] [14].

2.5 What should be included in a transition policy

Nelson suggests that every school must develop a transition policy which includes the involvement of the parents, the necessary kindergarten procedures and the exchanging of students' information [15]. An early childhood education coordinator should be assigned, who apart from organising transition activities, would also help kindergarten teachers in planning classroom visits for parents and children and develop programmes to help parents in preparing their child for kindergarten.

During these transition activities, the academic, social and behavioural prospects have to be discussed. These can be explained to the parents during a visit to a kindergarten classroom and/or a meeting with kindergarten teachers [12]. As some children find difficulty in following directions and in managing their behaviour, an intervention programme focusing on social skills can also be helpful in improving children's cooperation, listening skills and behavioural management. Goldstein and McGinnis developed the 'Skill Streaming in Early Childhood' which is a preschool-kindergarten programme to promote listening skills, communication skills, following directions and dealing with negative feelings [16]. The transition policy should also emphasise training the kindergarten teachers about transition practices, as Early et al. found that trained teachers tend to apply transition strategies, although these require a lot of effort and time [17].

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research method

For this small-scale study, I chose a qualitative research method since I was limited in time and I needed in-depth data. Interviews were chosen as the main instrument because more information could be elicited during a face to face interview, and the transferred and collected information would probably be rich. Once the purpose was decided and the main aims were split into distinctive objectives, the designing of the questions commenced. This is a very important stage as the questions have to reflect what has to be found out. The format chosen was a semi-structured one, as it had planned questions but also various prompting sentences or ideas to reach the desired aim. This could have made the research less reliable, as Silverman had noted that to control for reliability a highly structured interview is better, meaning that having the same format and order of words and questions for every interviewee would be ideal. On the other hand, other researchers suggest that words cannot be controlled during the interview, especially on the part of the interviewees. For more reliability, all the interviewees have to comprehend the question in exactly the same way [18].

3.2 Participants

The participants (Fig. 1) were 4 mothers. These mothers were contacted by a message I sent through a social media platform, in which I explained the purpose of my study and that I needed to interview 4 parents about this transition. It did not matter whether or not they had previously attended childcare, as both viewpoints were necessary for my research.

Participant	Child	Transition from	Siblings
Mother 1	Boy	Attended child care twice weekly	No siblings
Mother 2	Boy	Attended child care daily	His mother was pregnant during the transition period
Mother 3	Boy	Never attended child care	No siblings
Mother 4	Boy	Never attended Child care	One younger sister

The sample, although small, is reasonable since it includes viewpoints of first time mothers, some transitioned from childcare and some from home, and some having siblings and others who do not. Obviously, it has limitations as it lacks the opinion of a father, or that of a parent of a girl, as well as the opinion of a school administrator and of a kindergarten teacher. However, had these been included, the sample would still be too small to reflect all the population or to generalise conclusions from the findings.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

The semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were held in a comfortable setting decided by both myself as the researcher and the participants. Each lasted for approximately 30 minutes and was digitally voice recorded. Consequently, all the data had to be transcribed. This helped me listen to the interview again, and whilst reporting everything, data analysis commenced as I jotted down thoughts and comments in the margin. When transcribing one can lose a lot of important information if only the words are being written. That is why I decided to also input the tone of voice, the inflection of the voice, the emphases, pauses, mood, and the speed [18].

3.4 Ethics

After finalising the research question, I applied for ethical approval. This was done through an Online En Bloc Ethical Review process of the University of Sheffield, in which I clarified that I will not talk to people under 18 years of age unless I have their parents' consent, that I would not be harming anyone, and that I would not be using the information for any other use apart from the study. Attached to it was an information sheet that I gave to every participant as soon as they contacted me, since it had an invitation to the participant, it identified the purpose of this research study, the date by when it will be completed, the reason why they were chosen and that they could refuse to participate or to stop participating during the study. I could not guarantee full anonymity to the participants, given that they agreed to meet for a personal interview, but they were promised confidentiality and non-traceability [18].

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Important aspects in the transition to kindergarten

My interest was in knowing how children experienced the transition into kindergarten, thus what were the most important aspects during this period.

From the 4 mothers I interviewed, 2 of them specified the same aspect, routine. Mother 1 described her son as “very resistant to change” and that he cried daily for the first weeks of kindergarten school, even though he used to go to childcare. His mother discovered that, given that he loves routine, the daily process must be the same. Mother 4 also mentioned the fact that her son settled in kindergarten once he “established a quick routine”. Another important aspect which made the transition easier was that he knew what was expected of him and bonded quickly with the teacher. Mother 3 mentioned that socialisation was important for her son. He spent the first 3 years with her at home and he was eager to go to school and meet new friends, which is also reflected in the study by Rimm-Kaufmann et al. in which enthusiasm and curiosity are mentioned as aspects of school readiness [7]. This was also a common factor with mother 2, as her son started to adapt to change when he started making friends.

4.2 In need of more preparation

All mothers reported that their child cried during the first few weeks of kindergarten, regardless of whether they had attended childcare or not. When asked if their sons were prepared for kindergarten, mother 1 and mother 2, whose sons had attended childcare, replied differently. Only the latter found that childcare had prepared him. Mother 1 reported that the carers showed their students how to eat on their own and every child had his own lunch box and own things. They also used to tell them that “the school will be big and with more children”. Mother 2 mentioned that he was fairly prepared as he was used to being separated from her and her husband. But he still cried as it was a new place, a new routine, new friends, new teacher. Then, once he realised that it was a place of fun and he felt safe, he did not cry anymore. The son of mother 3 was prepared and looking forward but he cried for a few days after realising that school was every day and not just for a few days. Mother 4 was unsure if her son was ready or not. Her opinion was that he was still young, as he had just turned 3 years a week before starting kindergarten and the hours were too long, “20-30 hours a week”. Mother 1 and mother 4 mentioned toilet training. They were not sure if their son was going to be toilet trained till kindergarten starts. In fact, mother 4 is unsure whether her son is still having issues in this regard, because he was pushed and probably it was early for him.

When the mothers were asked if they were prepared, they all laughed but at the same time had tears in their eyes. They all confirmed that they were not prepared for the transition to kindergarten. Mother 2 felt that she was prepared for childcare as during the first week she used to spend some time

with him, but for kindergarten it was really hard for her to just leave him alone and wave goodbye. She had talked to other parents who had prepared her and told her that everyone cries, so she felt reassured. And while at school, she also saw other mothers crying and worrying, so she felt that “it is normal”. Mother 3 also used this phrase to emphasise how much she was not prepared: “I felt like I was sending him to a death sentence, not school”. Mother 1 disclosed that she felt she was paranoid and that she used to worry about things that did not happen. She had no one to talk to before kindergarten started, as she did not know the other parents.

The mothers prepared their child by talking about kindergarten. Mother 2 used to tell him that he is going to a big school and that he would make new friends. As he had behavioural problems in childcare, she started to introduce time-outs and they really helped him to behave well in kindergarten class. In this way she was developing another important skill her son needed in kindergarten, as behavioural problems are mentioned as one of the most common problems teachers encounter. This is evidenced in a study by Rimm-Kaufmann et al. [7]. The son of mother 1, is afraid of change, consequently, she prepared him by setting a routine, by showing him how to eat his food and how to use the toilet all by himself. Mother 3 lives near the school, so every time they passed in front of it, they used to show him the school and make it sound very nice by telling him that he was going to “learn and make new friends”. Mother 4 said that her son was very excited as “we spoke about it a lot, we made a big thing with his backpack and lunch box, and picked up the stationery”. These findings are similar to the study by LaParo et al. where parents also stated that they prepared their child for school by showing them the routines, discussing what is expected of them and by talking with other family members and friends [19].

4.3 The implementation of a transition policy to be more prepared

All the mothers supported the idea of having a national transition policy, as although they could have attended childcare, it is still a different place and could be hard. A mother mentioned that though the children are still very young, they can understand what will happen and given that the parents will also be involved, they could explain to them and prepare them better. Another mother stated that it would also have helped her as she was very anxious herself. Indeed, Meisels found that parents will feel more comfortable, informed and aware of their importance if there were transition practices [20]. It also seems that transition activities will make parents feel more comfortable at school, be better informed about activities and have

their involvement acknowledged. These will lead to more initiatives from parents, consequently resulting in improvement on their child's attainment [21].

4.4 The different roles in the transition

A mothers' role during the transition should be one of support and make sure that children know that the school is safe. Moreover, the mother has to get them excited about school and prepare them for it. On the other hand, the head teacher's role should offer discipline and keep up with a schedule. It should also involve communication, especially giving feedback to new mothers so they would feel more supported. LaParo et al. found that communication between everyone involved in the transition process is the best kind of support [19]. Some mothers mentioned that they would have appreciated receiving a note or an email informing them of what happened at school or even post photos daily. The role of the kindergarten educator (KGE) should be both of discipline and support. Moreover, they should also be caring, intuitive and communicative. This concern was also mentioned in other studies by mothers who commented that communicating with teachers will support adjustment in kindergarten.

4.5 Suggestions of other activities

- Visiting the classroom with their child.
- Walk around the school.
- Meet the KGE, other children and their parents.
- Go with them in the classroom at the beginning of the scholastic year.
- Start gradually.
- Have a meeting at the end of the previous scholastic year and one at the beginning.
- Have an orientation day.

The mentioned activities are congruent with other findings quoted earlier from Meisels and McIntyre et al. [20] [12].

5 CONCLUSION

Researching about the different perspectives on the smooth transition through kindergarten has led me to understand how significant the transition period is. The interviews made me realise that my feelings and my perspectives were the same as that of the other mothers. Concurrently, producing other viewpoints, awareness, thoughts, opinions and concepts.

In this study it transpired that mothers view routine, safety, reassurance and socialisation as important aspects in the transition process. Whether or not the child had attended childcare did not make a lot of difference in the transition process. Consequently, the idea of having a transition policy was supported by all the mothers. The mother's role, the head's role and that of the KGE during this transition period have to be a combination of support, discipline and offering stability. It is vital that they all communicate and work together. The mothers had a lot of suggestions for transition activities that could be organised.

This research lacks the perspectives of the head teacher or assistant head and that of the kindergarten assistant. This would have made the research much more interesting and it would also have turned it into a comparative study. In the future one can also do this study by having the opinion of past students recalling their experiences, of fathers, of parents who had already experienced it before and of parents who have daughters in order to be able to study the differences in opinion, if any, that come out.

This study suggests that a national transition policy could be helpful for a smoother transition to kindergarten, both for the children and the parents. Moreover, an assistant head can spearhead transition activities together with the kindergarten assistants who would also benefit from a staff development plan on the subject.

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Bio-note

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