

Editorial

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These past few months were totally unprecedented for everyone, particularly during the first wave when the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic in March 2020. It disrupted normal life worldwide, shutting down many establishments, among them also schools, placing enormous and unparalleled pressures on educational systems. The pandemic changed the learning landscape drastically across all levels of education: from childcare provision to adult education. It has affected the ways in which we learn, interact, teach, share information, communicate and collaborate.

As educational and training institutions were forced to close their doors, they tried to find alternative means of providing learning and educational experiences that did not involve face-to-face modes, this mainly due to the imposed social distancing measures. Amidst the uncertainty and fear of contagion, and the efforts to ensure the safety and wellbeing of educators, learners and their families, one thing was certain – safe modes of teaching and learning had to be held remotely through digital solutions.

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The challenge was not merely that of providing adequate online learning to ensure quality learning, but that schools continued to reach all learners across all stages, circumstances and sectors. This challenge exacerbated existing social differences, where those who were already living in deprived or adverse conditions prior to the pandemic, were now at an even greater disadvantage. Differences in financial, social and even educational access became more pronounced. It is feared that these gaps will continue to grow particularly for those coming from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

This special issue presents research on how education at different levels was experienced and the ways and rates at which different education stakeholders responded to the new reality brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. At its core, it focuses on the perspectives and experiences of academics, educators and learners at the different education levels, and the intersection between emergency remote work/learning and digital technology solutions.

The special issue includes eight papers, each of which tackles the different experiences of the educational shift to online learning from a unique perspective, depending on the research area. Different methodologies are used ranging from conceptual to quantitative methods such as the use of questionnaires, to qualitative research including case studies and narrative inquiry. Moreover, an international perspective is offered with papers drawing on research conducted in Malta, Scotland and Spain.

In her paper on outdoor learning in the Early Years, Spiteri examines the benefits of outdoor learning in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and presents a theoretical, pragmatic and political argument for the reimagining of pedagogical practices in ECEC as a result of the unparalleled challenges posed by the pandemic. Using Noddings' notion of an 'ethics of care', McLennan, Mercieca & Mercieca present the experiences of three Scottish primary school teachers during lockdown from a dimension of care. The study explores the impact of the lockdown experience on their identity as teachers and the caring relation that some teachers and their students and families developed. Schembri and Sciberras explore remote collaboration between six teaching teams consisting of teachers and Learning Support Educators (LSEs) working in primary state schools in Malta during the

physical closure of school. They analyse the collaborative elements for each team of educators through the lens of a conceptual model developed from a systematic review of literature for the purpose of the paper – the *COACTION* model. Using data gathered from an online questionnaire answered by over four hundred Maltese educators, Busuttil and Farrugia provide insights into teachers' views on their response to the sudden shift to online learning during COVID-19. Their paper captures the experiences of teachers in primary and secondary schools in Malta and the ways in which they rapidly adopted online modes of teaching and learning during the first wave of the pandemic. Said Pace investigates the use of formative assessment (FA) in online teaching and learning during compulsory school closure. This paper offers insights from over four hundred online questionnaire responses by Maltese educators across different levels and sectors on their perceptions of FA possibilities offered by online platforms and modalities and on how and to what extent educators translated and embedded FA in their online practices.

In her paper on distance education in teaching Maltese as a second language (ML2) in adult education, Żammit reports on the benefits and challenges experienced by a group of seventeen ML2 teachers. The adaptability theory is used to examine the appropriateness of the pedagogical measures and changes adopted by the teacher-participants when using distance learning with adult learners. Adopting a communicative approach to research, Valls-Carol, Toledo del Cerro and Gomez-Cuevas carried out a case-study of one adult centre in Spain and conducted interviews with seven adult learners. Their paper discusses the psycho-social effects of the pandemic on adult learners, and argues in favour of participating in virtual learning spaces for adults to help overcome isolation and loneliness during COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, this special edition concludes with a narrative inquiry authored by eight Maltese academics (Bonello, Farrugia, Gatt, Deguara, Milton, Muscat, Said & Spiteri) from the educational field to track the formation and development of an online collaborative research team during the pandemic. Stories that narrate their experiences as they work and research remotely using digital technologies and platforms unfold and identify six core concepts that capture one script of their shared venture. Insights into the ways in which the challenges that an emergency such as a pandemic may be faced and turned into opportunities for collaboration, identity development as well as for personal and professional growth are provided.

With the publication of this special issue on the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning, there is already a clear indication of a light at the end of this long, difficult tunnel. The recent advances in the development of effective vaccines that may reverse the effects of this terrifying pandemic, confirmed internationally bring a hope that in a matter of a few months, the world may return to some degree of normality. This will inevitably lead to a re-evaluation of the ways in which society functions, including education, in an effort to discern and gain valuable insights that will hopefully lead to better educational, social and financial access for all both in terms of everyday life as well as when dealing with similar global emergency circumstances. This issue hopes to contribute to this reflective exercise. We wish you a pleasant read and hope that the insights from these diverse studies can inspire other educators to explore different means and modalities of learning both during and beyond the pandemic.

References

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