



L-Università ta' Malta
Ġ.F. Abela Junior College

Symposia Melitensia

Volume 18
2022

SYMPOSIA MELITENSIA
Volume 18 (2022)

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Journal edition: © University of Malta Junior College

Design and Layout: Duncan Gatt

ISSN: 1812-7509

Published by:
University of Malta Junior College
Msida
Malta

Celebrating the Local Historian: Kollezzjoni Programmi tal-Festa at the Junior College Library

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Keywords: *Libraries – Special collections – Local history / Subject headings – Malta / Cataloguing of special collections in libraries / Malta – History / OAR@UM / Melitensia*

Introduction

The *Kollezzjoni Programmi tal-Festa* within the University of Malta Junior College Library is made up of publications and pamphlets published annually by local parishes and *festa* organisations. These publications have proven to be an excellent source of information about local heritage, historical events, history, art, culture, folklore and biographies of local personalities. The aim of this commentary is to highlight the project being undertaken by the Junior College Library. The goals of this project are twofold: to enhance the *Melitensia* collection within the Library, both in print and online; and to better equip librarians, by enhancing the local authority lists to better suit the needs of the local scene. This collection has also contributed to the standardisation of local subject headings used by librarians.

Assembly

Currently, the collection is made up of over 6000 catalogued entries which researchers can view by appointment. As a collection it was mainly assembled by means of social media which has played an important role in the collation of said collection since many organisations were contacted through their group page. It was decided that a Facebook group should be created in order to communicate and network with other enthusiasts and also showcase the collection. Since the collection is reliant on donations from the public, parishes and organisations as well as the band clubs, the Facebook group proved to be a very important tool to gather such material. In fact, after a public call for donations of said publications, the response from individual collectors was positive, with many donating their duplicate copies to our collection. At present, the collection development is aimed at obtaining the publications published in the late 60s and early 70s as well as to fill in any lacunae.

Authority Lists

This collection has made an impact on how librarians at the University of Malta work. Prior to 2017, the concept of maintaining local authority lists was not a priority. This project has helped to significantly shift more focus to these lists. Subject headings form part of a library's authority list. An authority list is a set of terms used by librarians in catalogue entries to facilitate searching by providing consistent terminology as access points. The UM Library follows and uses the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). The LCSH are flexible to use and have been translated into many languages, which makes them more attractive for librarians and special collections such as ours.

Subject authority lists enrich the metadata used when cataloguing new entries. The metadata of the uploaded articles contains points of access such as the author and subject headings. The latter helps to indicate what the subject matter of the article is and consequently allows for a better browsing experience. A 2005 (Gross, Taylor 2005) and subsequent 2015 (Gross et al. 2015) study have shown that between 27% (Gross et al. 2015, p. 31) and 35.9% (Gross, Taylor 2005, p. 212) of "hits would be lost if the subject headings were not present in the records" (Gross, Taylor et al. 2015, p. 31). These studies continue to state that in some cases, from eighty to up to a hundred percent of the record would not be retrieved. Rather than having an endless number of results to sort through, subject headings allow for more relevant hits to the search in question (Gross, Taylor 2005, p. 224). Additionally, the presence of subject headings in the metadata records allows the grouping together of alternative spellings and synonyms, links together obsolete terms, helps to differentiate between variant meanings of terms (Gross et al. 2015, p. 31) and provides "searchable text for non-textual resources" (Gross et al. 2015, p. 31). Consequently, subject headings provide a shorter results list, but with a higher relevance to the research being done (Chan 2000, p. 5).

Melitensia Subject Headings (MSH) are used "to access and express the topic content of documents" (Library and Archives of Canada 2019) on Malta and Maltese topics. Apart from the lack of local subject headings, there are also inconsistencies which need to be addressed in relation to anything local such as church names, localities and personal names. The large influx of *Melitensia* which this project has brought with it increased the demand of locally related subject headings. These include a range of material, such as cultural, historical, geographical, literary, political and social topics.

Subject headings also help to increase the specificity of the article's subject. For example, in a sample of 219 articles uploaded on OAR@UM, the University of Malta's Institutional Repository (University of Malta Library 2021), and published by Soċjetà Filarmonika Santa Marija of Mosta, the term 'Mosta' is listed 826 times either as a main term or as a subdivision. This helps to refine searches by locality and enforces the concept of 'Localensia' (Cilia 2011).

Besides the MSH, additional authority lists were established from this project. These include a list of all the local band clubs together with a list of religious orders present on the islands. The third list consists of an extensive inventory of cathedrals, churches and chapels on the Maltese islands. The majority of these churches are Catholic, however churches belonging to other Christian denominations and other faiths are also listed. This list of approximately 900 entries also includes deconsecrated and lost churches.

The Maltese Biography List is another comprehensive list representing historical and current personalities. This list was especially helpful to correct inconsistencies in variations of name spelling used in subject headings. The variant used was listed in Schiavone's two volume work *Dictionary of Maltese Biography* (Schiavone 2009). This dictionary provided a good foundation for this list, however it required substantial updates. These updates included, where necessary, the year of birth and/or death together with the addition of more current personalities. Additionally, this project has provided ample new entries by way of musicians, artists, historical figures, politicians and clergy, amongst others.

All of these lists are works in progress, with updates and new additions happening on a regular basis. Suggestions are encouraged, and if they meet the criteria required then they are added to the MSH list. These in-house lists are available to all the UM Librarians to use.

The print collection is organised alphabetically by locality and then according to the respective organisation, which facilitates searching for both the researcher and the librarians. Furthermore, Junior College librarians were able to create an alphanumeric classification schedule for each of the associations and/or feasts present in the collection. This classification schedule was built as a hybrid between two established systems, namely the Lynn and Library of Congress.

Material from this collection is also accessible online through OAR@UM. After going through an evaluation process, articles with specific *Melitensia* material are scanned and uploaded. Uploading at article level allows librarians to create richer metadata which provides a higher degree of discoverability. New material uploaded on OAR@UM is periodically harvested by Google and Google Scholar. This helps to make these articles discoverable through a simple Google search. In addition, Google Scholar also helps to direct researchers to these articles and others written by University of Malta academics, allowing a wider range of access.

As a concept, the *Kollezzjoni Programmi tal-Festa* is not the first of its kind. There are several private collections of such publications on the islands. Moreover, as per the 1925 Act no. II, and subsequently the Malta Libraries Act of 2011, a Legal Deposit is imposed on all Maltese authors and publishers to provide two copies of their publications for the National Libraries of Malta and Gozo (Malta Libraries 2015). The holdings available on the Malta Libraries catalogue are haphazard at best, which makes it difficult for a researcher to locate or browse a certain publication.

Conclusion

The assembly and organisation of the *Kollezzjoni Programmi tal-Festa* is the first of its kind in the local academic library context. What makes this particular collection unique is its accessibility. Having this collection of publications grouped in one place, both in print and online on OAR@UM (Slonina 2018, p. 5), allows for better access to all researchers. This not only enhances the visibility of the author's work but also creates a greater impact and allows for further dissemination. The creation of a consistent controlled vocabulary, such as the MSH list, further enhances the browsing and discoverability of the collection.

This collection has by far exceeded expectations when it comes to *Melitensia* material which has enhanced both the digital and print collections of the University of Malta Library. The librarians' role in this project is not only to collect and organise these publications, but also to provide access on as many levels as possible.

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The Human Body In Sculpture: From Glorified Idealism, Stark Realism To Pathological Nihilism

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Abstract

From the glorified idealism of Classical Antiquity and the perfect proportions of the Renaissance, to the stark realism and bio-morphic surrealism of the Modern period, and the blood-stained nihilism of contemporary body-pain art, the human figure has been the subject and inspiration of art works from time immemorial. The human figure offers a common vehicle for the expression of aesthetic judgement alluding to how humans are, and should be, both inwardly and outwardly. Apart from its depiction of physical attributes, the human body provides a vehicle for deliberation on the human condition and the existential nature of reality. This paper explores the representation of the human figure throughout the history of sculpture by tracing its metamorphosis and transmutation from its former glorified idealism to its contemporary distortion and disfiguration. This historical analysis questions conventional conceptions of beauty which to a large extent still pervade aesthetic taste and judgement through idealised representations of the human body and romanticised views of the human condition. This idealisation, envisioning aesthetics as to what is pleasing to the senses hinders us from the full acknowledgement and realisation of the fragility of our bodies and the precarious conditions of reality; the bleak reality that after all; “we are born and we die, and that’s it... we are potential carcasses” (Bacon, 1966).

Keywords: *Human Body, Sculpture, Idealism, Realism, Nihilism*

The Human Body: A Medium of Inspiration

Humanity and the existential human condition have preoccupied artists since time immemorial. Such preoccupation has often translated itself into various representations of the human body in both sculpture and other artistic media. From the heroic Classical and Hellenistic sculptures to the reclining nudes of the Renaissance and flamboyance of Baroque, to the stark realism and surrealism in Modern art and the blood-stained contemporary installations and performance art, the human figure has been the subject and the inspiration of art works from all

periods and movements. As a result, the human figure is observed to be utilised as a common vehicle to express aesthetic judgement on the human condition across time and space.

The human figure, particularly in its nude form, remains the pre-eminent subject for art. The persistence of the human form in sculpture from pre-historic to post-modern times argues for humanity's need to define and re-create itself. Throughout history, sculpture has granted to the human body an infinite variety of interpretations. As a result, the human form has been as flexible as human imagination and taste, and history seems to both support and negate absolute and eternal standards of the good, the true and the beautiful. Until recently, the human body was idealised in such a way that humanity was portrayed not as it is but as it should be. This idealisation extends to the existential condition, which through its anthropocentric symbolism tends to hide the frailty and the more sombre aspect of humanity's existence. Yet, as attested by the following brief historical overview of the main artistic stages which have been influential in the transmutation and metamorphosis of the human figure and the human condition in sculpture, from its glorified idealism to its stark realism and subsequent pathological nihilism, this revered representation was not to last. This paper provides an exposition of this metamorphosis and transmutation with the aim of providing a contextualised commentary on aesthetics; a concept which remains elusive till the present day. On the basis of this discussion and in critique to dominant conceptions of aesthetics, the paper postulates for the legitimisation of an aesthetics of anti-aesthetics.

The Human Body: Its Metamorphosis and Transmutation

The Classical Period is renowned for the triumph of idealistic anthropomorphic representation. The human body was studied specifically for its aesthetic value, with the object of art being the body itself. Figures often depicted representations of deities utilising the human body in its most glorious form.

Archaic rigid statues were replaced with bodies in dynamic poses, rendering a more realistic rendition of the human form. Suppression of emotions was held as a noble characteristic, depicted through solemn facial expression that betray no displays of barbarism.

Beauty depended on harmony, "the proportion...of the parts and of all the other parts to each other" (Galen n.d. cited in De LaCroix and Tansey 1986, p. 161). The classical Apollo (c.460 B.C.) by Phidias offers the ideal representation of the human figure according to the classical Greek tradition; perfect proportions, solemn facial features, and qualities of youth, rationality and moderation, a harmonious counterpoise between spirit and form.

Hellenistic art developed a more realistic representation, such that while retaining visible idealised traits, compared to the Classical Apollo, the Hellenistic 'Apollo

Belvedere' (late 14th century B.C.) is more human and less godly. While Classical figures are uniformly beautiful, Hellenistic statuary became more concerned with individualisation through ethos and the expression of pathos. This trend continued in the Roman period, such that while the Greeks idealised their images, the Romans preferred the verisimilitude of subjects.

Art in the Medieval period was inseparable from religion. The domination of the Church in both the Romanesque and Byzantine styles led to the repudiation of the pagan idealisation of the human figure of the Classical period, flattening it into a two-dimensional linear style that de-emphasised the flesh, focusing instead on the spirit. The human representation in sculpture consisted mainly of religious figures, which as a form of icon veneration and idolatry, during the iconoclastic controversy was banned or destroyed.

Notwithstanding the disregard towards the body, yet the tomb effigy often attempted to present an idealised image of the deceased, as if the person was asleep. Despite its gradual development towards greater realism, the human figure in the Middle Ages still did not evoke pathos, retaining instead a sense of serene dignity and rigidity. This move towards greater naturalism became more pronounced in the International Gothic style of the late 14th century, culminating in the rebirth of the Classical era.

Through its rediscovery of humanism and the rebirth of the Classical tradition, Renaissance led to a more realistic yet highly idealistic rendition of the human form. Humanism elevated the human to a higher being. The human figure was ascribed as the tangible manifestation of a higher beauty, that of divine splendour. Beauty was conceived on the basis of laws of proportion and symmetry and aspired not only to imitate nature, but also to correct and surpass it.

Michelangelo (1471-1564), historically renowned for the complete mastery of the human body emulates the Renaissance aesthetic in his grand portrayal of the human figure. The greatest master for Michelangelo was God, the Creator and Michelangelo regarded sculpture, as the ideal means by which one could surpass nature's own composition. Yet, as attested by 'The David' (1501-1504) physical beauty was not an end in itself but intended to reflect spiritual beauty, embody virtues and elevate the thoughts of the beholder above material things. Through body posturing, Michelangelo enriched the figure's expressive repertoire to convey interior states such that even in death, as in 'The Dying Slave' (1514-1516), the human figure retains its splendour and glory.

In Mannerism, classical canons of perfect proportions and harmony were 'naturally extended' through the elongation of figures and exaggerated musculature resulting in undue elegance and inflated emotional drama. Baroque, coinciding with the Counter-Reformation and Period of Absolutism took idealism over realism to new heights, emphasising detail, movement, emotional drama and flamboyance in the search for beauty and grandiosity, as in Bernini's (1598-1680) 'Apollo and Daphne' (1622-1624).

As time passed, the ostentatiousness of Baroque and Rococo was discarded in favour of the earlier, simpler art of the Classical style. Neoclassicism, as the artistic component of the Enlightenment, was similarly idealistic, attributing the human figure, as evinced in 'Cupid and Psyche' (1793) by Canova (1757-1827), a sense of purity, serenity, calm grandeur and rational and noble spirituality.

Just as Neo-Classicism rejected the flamboyance of Baroque, so did Romanticism reject the aesthetic notions of Neoclassicism and the rationalism of the enlightenment. Romanticism led to a deepened expression of emotion and passion as reflected in the relief sculptures of Preault (1809-1879) in pre-emption to Realism.

As life became drastically transformed by industrialisation, the representation of humanity was also radically reformed by Realism through a more truthful representation of bodies and everyday realities. The human figure was stripped down of its idealism, nobility and 'calm grandeur' as evidenced from the hesitant and despairing gestures of Rodin's (1840-1917) 'The Vanquished', (1877), the physical imperfections of 'Honore' de Balzac' (1897) and the brutish execution and dehumanisation of 'The Thinker' (1880-1885). Even heroes are defrocked of glorification, as unlike traditional war memorials, 'The Burghers of Calais' (1894-1886) express emotional trauma and melancholy. The headless and armless 'Walking Man' (1878-1880) proclaimed the partial figure as a self-sufficient entity, challenging classical ideals of beauty and perfection based on proportion, harmony and completion.

Beauty converted to the truthful depiction of inner and outer states, rather than ideal representation. Rodin's truthful representation of the human figure indeed led to the accusation of life-casting the sculptures and of creating "the first authentically 'ugly' work of modern art" (Hamilton 1967, p. 68). Similarly, Degas' (1834-1917), 'Little Dancer of 14 Years' (1881), displayed with real hair and actual clothing was deeply disturbing to its first audiences due to its disdain for beauty and realistic representation.

Realism renounced allegory and symbolism by depicting the actual rather than the ideal, yet it remained still largely loyal to the traditional representation of the human form, a move which was brought forth with the abstraction of modernity.

The rejection of traditional subject matters, styles and techniques led to the creation of forms for their own sake and drastically revised traditional conventions of aesthetics. It also led to the embracement of other influences, such as primitive cultures, which had previously been considered derisive by traditional aesthetic standards.

In the nineteenth century, technological innovations radically altered society, inspiring hopes for a better future. By the beginning of World War I, the situation changed drastically, spoiling the hope of a more humane humanity. The war did not inspire the most renowned sculptors to hide reality by idealising heroism or calls for patriotism, conversely, they exposed its horrors and devastation. The focus moved from capturing appearance to the expression of intuitive inner feelings. As carrier

of pathos, the human figure was frequently exaggerated, distorted and disfigured. Lehmbruck (1881-1919) for example, produced various moving sculptures of disillusion and dying. In his 'Seated Youth' (1918), 'Standing Youth' (1913) and 'Fallen Youth' (1916), it seems that "Faith and love are all destroyed, and death lies on every path!" (Lehmbruck 1918).

Yet, the expressiveness of the human figure was still considered too figurative and representational by other emerging artistic movements, such as Dadaism, Cubism, Vorticism, Futurism and Surrealism which aimed to make works of art more abstractive and self-sufficient.

In the post-world-war I period, art for the Dadaists became a remonstrance at the insanity of the war which rendered existing moral and aesthetic standards meaningless; a protest against the art establishment and its conventional aesthetic criteria. During the same period, Cubism broke away from these criteria, by embodying the principle that a work of art need not be restricted to the phenomenal appearance of the represented object. In Cubism, the human figure lost its curvature and became geometric as in Picasso's (1881-1973) 'Head of a Woman' (1909-1910). Lipchitz's (1891-1973) 'A Standing Person' (1916) dispenses altogether with the human body's resemblance to appearance becoming; "less attached to Mother Nature...a pure invention of the human imagination" (Elsen 1981, p. 349).

The Futurists, Constructivists and Vorticists developed further this geometric rationalisation, with the human body becoming "often entirely non-vital and distorted to fit into stiff lines and cubical shapes" (Hulme 1924 cited in Hamilton, 1967, p.295). The human figure became restructured to represent the rationalisation and technologisation of modernity, emulating the appearance of machines as in Epstein's (1880-1959) 'The Rock Drill' (1912-13), else reshaped into its more elementary primitive forms as in Gaudier-Brzeska's (1891-1915) 'Red Stone Dancer' (1913). The striding figure in the 'Unique Forms of Continuity in Space' (1913) by Boccioni (1882-1916) represents "not the construction of the body, but the construction of the action of the body" (Hamilton 1967, p.286), symbolising how the human body will be reshaped by the fast pace of modernity, transforming into a 'superman of the future'. The 'Gondolier' (1914) by Archipenko (1887-1964) defined how a modern human sculpture should look; simplified, geometric and mechanistic, smooth and streamlined since in "the intersection of the planes ... there is more truth than in all the tangles of muscles, in all the breasts and thighs of the heroes and Venuses" (Boccioni 1921 cited in Hohl 2002, p. 978).

Surrealism, flourishing in the 1930s breached further the historical tradition of rendering the human form by introducing the idea of fusion, through the creation of organic, hybrid forms in the process of metamorphosis; 'biomorphs'. In critique of anthropocentrism Arp's 'Growth' (1938) highlights the analogies in nature and makes no definite distinctions between plant, animal and human form, in the belief that; "Man should once again become part of nature" (Arp 1938 cited in Elsen 1981, p. 292). Similarly, Brancusi's works (1876-1957) challenged classical conceptions of

beauty based upon the harmonious relationship of parts by creating forms through a continuous unbroken whole, in the process uncomplicating art through simpler geometric forms, as in 'Torso of a Youth' (1922), Pogany' (1912) and 'New Born' (1920).

The aftermath of World War II led to a return to the expressive potential of the human figure. The departure from external appearance to a more in-depth psychological exploration, moved the human form further into metaphorical imagery. The figure in sculpture, like the human body became attributed to have its own psychological presence. Influenced by the existentialist movement of the 1950's, many works sustained the view that life was inherently meaningless, evoking disturbing anxieties suggestive of fear, devastation and physical and emotional trauma. In rejection of the ideal as it might be, in favour of what it really is, many sculptors of the era such as Marini (1901-1980), Manzu' (1908-1991), Zuniga (1912-1998) and others, depicted figures through distorted and disfigured anatomy "not to reproduce reality, but to create a reality of the same intensity" (Giacometti n.d. in Park Adam 2020). Whilst Giacometti's (1901-1966), 'City Square' (1948-49) conveying anonymous figures of exaggerated length and thinness portrays a sense of existential indifference, other works of his portray a more disturbing and disfiguring imagery, as can be observed in 'Woman with her throat cut' (1932). Due to its disturbing presence, Lipchitz' 'Figure' (1926-1930) is indeed renowned for having been returned back by its patron as it was 'unbearable' to live with.

By the 1960s, the ideas and styles that had transformed modern art begun to wane, and artists started reacting against the metanarratives of modernity. In protest to sculpture's place as a commodity, conceptualism gave precedence to the artist's ideas, often dispensing with tangible creations through performance art and minimalist work. During the 1980s, sculptors began moving away from the austerity of minimalism and conceptualism. Whilst several styles co-existed leading to a wider and more inclusive approach, the post-modern era is defined by the 'determination to belong to no movement' (Read 1964, p. 230). The human figure re-emerged in a multitude of shapes and forms to express an endless array of ideas, emotions, moods and narratives, but mostly conveying a cynical commentary on existence. For example, Shea's 'Post Balzac' (1991) depicts Balzac's attire without its being, a wry commentary on the spiritual emptiness of the post-modern era. Conversely, by taking plaster casts as in 'Man Walking' (1966), Segal (1934-2021) attempted to capture as faithfully as possible the human impression, such that the "disembodied spirit, [remains] inseparable from the fleshy corporeal details of the figure" (Elsen 1981, p. 356).

Performance artists, utilised their own bodies as a direct medium of disillusionment and protest, through exhibitions of public pain and the use of blood as a creative force. The body became itself the work of art, as declared by Bourgeois; "For me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture" (cited in Chadwick 1998, p. 13). Similarly, feminist artists such as Sherman (1954-) mobilised the female body as

an emblem of sexual and cultural revolution, using the body to deconstruct the male gaze and challenge patriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality.

An installation which has caused much controversy for breaking down with traditional representation of the human body is Von Hagens' (1945-) exhibition of preserved mutilated human corpses, 'The Worlds of the Body' (1995). Criticised for being offensive, undignified and distasteful, its objective is to make people become aware of both the beauty and the fragility of the human body (Von Hagen 1995) - an apt signifier of the human body's metamorphosis and transmutation, and its unadulterated unification of glorified idealism, stark realism and pathological nihilism.

Aesthetics: Idealism, Realism or Nihilism?

This brief exposition of the metamorphosis of the human figure in sculpture shows that its descent from its pedestal of idealisation and heroism, ensued through a steady evolutionary process.

The classical Greeks defined and perfected the depiction of the human form as idealised embodiments of aesthetic values. The function of art was that of shaping the environment in a pleasant way and create canons of exemplary ideations of existence typified by beauty, harmony, unity and perfection, and a romanticised and glorified view of the human condition. This was the general praxis in aesthetics previous to the Modern period as exemplified by the resonance of these canons in the Renaissance, Baroque and Neo-Classical eras. Until this time, the human being was the measure of all things.

Modern sculpture aimed at reversing this trend. The shift from androcentrism towards a more world-centred view, permitted a more subjective approach to the representation of the human form and human condition. Realism broke off with the classical tradition by depicting the figure realistically and without allusion to romanticise reality. Modern sculpture strove to represent the hero and the ideal in its own terms, rather than through previous aesthetic criteria, gradually coming to refute the ideal and heroic, to favouring the victim and antihero, the ugly and deformed. This celebration of unheroic disfiguration led to the development of more expressionist styles, a trend sustained by post-modern and contemporary artistic movements.

However, what the figure lost in terms of idealisation and glorification, it gained in terms of realism, expressionism and symbolism, widening interpretations of human form and substance. By reinventing the figure according to personal rather than established aesthetic criteria, the ideal is deconstructed and subjectively re-enacted. The body becomes a medium of contradictions, challenging distinctions between the physical and spiritual, intellect and sentiment, reality and hyperreality and between beauty and the grotesque.

Today, virtually no ideal subject is feasible and any interpretation is tenable, when it comes to the representation of the human form and the human condition in sculpture.

An Aesthetics of Anti-Aesthetics

The evolution of the human form in sculpture indeed illustrates that aesthetics cannot solely be based on ideal representations of beauty and harmony and what is pleasing to the senses. The criterion of beauty would eliminate great masterpieces, some of which have been referred to in this brief historical overview. But if not beauty, what then defines art?

As the human form was subjected to metamorphosis and transmutation, so has the meaning of beauty mutated throughout history. Plato (n.d. in Richter 1967, p. 28) described beauty as 'unity, integrity and clarity'. Similarly, Battista Alberti argued that beauty could only be attained by "a kind of harmony and concord of all the parts to form a whole which is constructed to a fixed number and a certain relation and order as symmetry the highest and perfect law of nature demands" (cited in Blunt 1940, p. 15). This aesthetic concern with harmony, symmetry and perfection exemplifies pre-modern representations of the human form.

Yet, the move from idealisation to a more realist and conceivably nihilist representation of humanity coincides with a bleaker definition of aesthetics. In repudiation of the beauty of perfection, for example, Bacon (1625) upheld that; "There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion." Similarly, Baudelaire (1930 cited in Isherwood 2006, p. 41) claimed that; "That which is not slightly distorted lacks sensible appeal; from which it follows that irregularity; that is to say, the unexpected, surprise and astonishment, are an essential part and characteristic of beauty". Moving further away from classical canons of beauty, of both harmony and perfection, Breton stated; "La beute' sera convulsive au ne sera pas" - "Beauty will be convulsive or will not be at all" (Breton 1935, p. 5). Beauty has now turned to being violent, sudden and frantic, a far cry from St. Aquinas' (n.d. in Richter 1967, p. 9) idea that "Beauty is that which gives us pleasure when we behold it."

These shifting definitions of beauty highlight the relativistic and subjective nature of aesthetics, such that beauty not only lies in the eye of the beholder but permeates beyond corporeal appearance. Such view proposes that, at that point that something raises one's sensibilities and consciousness, it becomes a work of art. Thus, other than beautification, a more 'useful' function of art is that of providing insight into the nature of existence. Such insight might be one that questions and challenges the validity of our present perceptions and which helps us come to better terms with reality through a more truthful depiction of that same reality. This reality also includes the representation of bodily imperfections and some of the disturbing and distasteful facts of life that we are all, unfortunate enough to have to come to terms with.

Many artworks referred to in the previous section have in their own time been described as ugly, offensive and without any aesthetic and artistic value. However, such terms belie the value laden and subjective nature of aesthetics, since despite the fact that Classical idealism has created a durable and influential aesthetic norm, it never had complete hegemony. Indeed, apart from the fact that the inherent creative impulse of art tends to deviate from the expected norm, even influential artists of the era, defied the same aesthetic criteria they themselves helped to establish. For example, some of Michelangelo's later works paradoxically deconstruct the representation of beauty and perfection and demonstrate significant concern with human frailty and fallibility as exemplified through 'The Rondanini Pieta' (1552-1564). Objective standards of truth and beauty belie the subjectiveness and dynamic nature of aesthetics. In this regard, Constable said, "I never saw an ugly thing in my life; for let the form of an object be what it may, light, shade and perspective will always make it beautiful" (cited in Leslie 1843).

A growing number of modern and contemporary artists have come to recognise that aesthetics is not an obligatory or intrinsic aspect of art. Rosenthal (2012) holds that these "artists have a 'totally new and radical attitude to realism,' and even 'a new and radical attitude to life itself.'" Through its bleak and pessimistic commentary on contemporary life and society, and its repudiation of romanticism and idealism, such attitude conveys a more realistic and meaningful narrative of humanity's existence.

The search for beauty as to what is pleasing to the senses, thus might cause us to miss more elusive, and by implication, more profound aspects of our existence. According to Rosenthal (2012), artists "have a responsibility to draw attention to that elusive thing we call reality, which may, when fused with fantasy and personal obsession, bring forth something which may be recognised as art." Through this perspective, the role and responsibility of the artist becomes the "conquest of new territory and new taboos" (Rosenthal 1997). For a long number of years in the artistic field, portraying non-idealistic and un-romanticised views of humanity have been considered such a taboo.

The violation of these taboos has indeed led to enwidening conventional criteria of aesthetics, epitomising a deeper and more insightful appreciation of reality. As stated by Moore; "Beauty, in the later Greek or Renaissance sense, is not the aim of my sculpture...Because a work does not aim at reproducing natural appearances it is not, therefore, an escape from life, but may be a penetration into reality" (in Read and Bowness 1957, p. xxxi). This 'penetration into reality' presumes a more critical analysis of the crises of existence, in a way that the meaning and meaninglessness of life, the hard daily struggle for survival, decline, disintegration and death, alienation and isolation, emptiness and silence emerge as prominent themes. The dying, the isolated, the lonely, the searching and the struggling human being thus became a focal point for the development of an aesthetics of anti-aesthetics, where beauty traverses the visible and material world.

Yet, in spite of these vital developments, it remains the case that we are still greatly influenced by Classical standards of beauty, and anything else is judged on the basis of these canons. Indeed, despite the evolutionary metamorphosis and transmutation of the human figure in sculpture, even in the post-modern era, ideal and romanticised representations of the human figure and human condition permeate and remain dominant, if not totally hegemonic, as evinced from the objectification, commercialisation and commodification of the human body in mainstream and commercial media.

Many contemporary artworks remain severely criticised and abhorred for their style, technique and subject matter, disparaged by both critics and the public as being ugly, repulsive, offensive and without any aesthetic value. Yet, the fact that such works and concepts are not appreciated by most people does not render them invalid. On the other hand, whether most people like it or not, the fundamental and undeniable truth about the human condition are, at their core often very disturbing. Throughout history, humanity has and is still witnessing several wide-scale horrors apart from unending personal and existential turmoil, in a way that the denial of this aspect of reality portends a total denial of the fundamental constitution of life. A very important aspect of art thus lies in uncovering these partial and false representations, through the portrayal of a more truthful and critical analysis of reality. Confronted with the critique of his work as ugly and horrendous, Bacon (n.d. cited in Hinton 1985) replies;

“What horror? What could I make to compete with what goes on every single day?...Except that I have tried to make images of it. I have tried to recreate it and make, not the horror, but I’ve tried to make images of realism.”

An aesthetics of anti-aesthetics through art works which represent disturbing and disfiguring representations of the human body and existence can thus provide us with truth and insight about our human condition, by acting as reminders of our fragile structure through which we experience the daily condition of existence: our body. Embracing an aesthetics of anti-aesthetics thus provides an avenue for confronting the taboos of our fallibilities and imperfections, whilst more serenely endure the reality of the terrors and insults of life. From this aesthetics of anti-aesthetics, the idealisation of the human body and the human condition in sculpture, and in art in general, thus hinders us from coming to terms with the circumstances of life; the bleak reality that after all; “we are all meat...We are born and we die, and that’s it” (Bacon 1985 cited in Pearce 2021, para. 2).



David (1501-1504)
Michelangelo Buonarroti



The Vanquished One (1877)
Auguste Rodin



The Worlds of the Body (1995-)
Gunther Von Hagens

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Lecturers' perspective of Inclusive education at Further and Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the lecturers' experiences and reflections on the environmental, educational and social enabling and disabling factors of inclusive education faced by students with physical and sensorial disabilities at Further and Higher Education levels in Malta. Critical disability theory was utilised in conceptualising the social disabling barriers that emerge from the lived experience of individuals while the social model of disability was employed in getting an insight from different lecturers about the oppression created by the socially constructed disabling barriers. In accordance with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner 1994), this research revealed that over time, social relationship between different stakeholders, namely, the individual, family, friends, school community and society at large affect the lived experiences of diverse learners in educational institutions whether they are enabled or disabled. This shift is influenced by the extent to which a rights-based approach is adopted. The significance of this paper is to show the salient role of lecturers within a pro-inclusion model of inclusive education consisting of a nested system of intersecting relationships. The findings underline that lecturers have an important role in creating a transformative momentum that impacts the quality of inclusive education both on a philosophical and on a pragmatic level.

Keywords: *Inclusive Education, Further Education, Higher Education, Disability, Bronfenbrenner*

Introduction

This paper focuses on the lecturers' experiences and reflections on the enabling and disabling factors of inclusive education faced by students with physical and sensorial disabilities at Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) levels in Malta. This research was part of a broader mixed methods inquiry (Tashakkori, Teddlie 2010). The aim of this article is to understand the inward and outward relationship of lecturers within school communities as represented in Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner 1994). The analysis focuses on the lecturers' perspective who are main stakeholders in the implementation of inclusive

education both in the teaching and assessment components (Shek, Wu 2014). The findings consolidated the salient role of lecturers within the developed pro-inclusion model of inclusive education that stemmed from Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

Students' diversity conveys the need to renew the lecturers' commitment to teach all learners regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, socioeconomic status and ability (Gordon 2009, Burgstahler 2010a). Thus, a pro-inclusion culture that reinforces accessible and equitable quality learning and assessment practices that respect student diversity and the students' right to education are essential for the implementation of quality inclusive education. Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Systems Model encapsulates five types of nested systems. At the epicentre of Bronfenbrenner's taxonomy (Bronfenbrenner 1994, pp. 39-40) there is the "microsystem" that includes "pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations" that a person experiences in settings with specific physical, social and symbolic aspects such as "family, school, peer group, and workplace." One also finds the "mesosystem" consisting of "the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings" that a developing person lives in or the "system of microsystems." Additionally, the "exosystem" comprises "the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings" whereby the developing person is not directly involved in at least one of the settings. Furthermore, the "macrosystem" incorporates "the overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and exosystems characteristic of a given culture or subculture" while the "chronosystem" adds in the evolution of the external systems over time.

Quality inclusive education calls FE and HE institutions to be proactive rather than reactive in mainstreaming inclusive education. This implies a reconstruction of the 'learning landscape' (Portelli 2010) that involves an evaluation of "the physical architecture, the formal and informal relationships, the processes of teaching, learning and assessment, the deployment of technology and the other factors that combine to shape the nature of the student experience in higher education" (Stevenson, Bell 2009, p. 1). Equity in the provision of quality inclusive education including accessible assessment promotes democracy and social justice that liberate disabled students from being oppressed. Similarly, Portelli (2010) claims that our educational system should apply the principles of democracy by valuing equity over a 'one size fits all' mentality. This would also sustain social justice towards fulfilling the needs of all. Portelli (ibid.) proposes critical open discussions and advocates for the widening of possibilities "rather than an attitude of fatalism and deficit mentality" (p. 1). Additionally, Pinto et al. (2012, p. 2) argue that, "critical democracy necessarily leads to requirements of inclusion and empowerment, with particular attention to those who are often marginalised." Dialogue and collaboration are means to empowerment if those involved position themselves with an open mind towards understanding the reality of others and are ready for change and growth.

Methodology

Titchkosky (2006) considers that the experience of disability is a social inquiry as it extrapolates how a culture includes and excludes disabled persons in daily matters. The interpretive framework of critical disability theory was utilised in conceptualising the theoretical understanding of social disabling barriers that emerge from the lived experience of individuals while the social model of disability was employed in getting an insight from different lecturers about the oppression created by the socially constructed disabling barriers.

'Snowball sampling' was used to enrol eleven full-time academics teaching at the University of Malta for a semi-structured interview (Collins 2010). The selection process was established on their rigour in inclusive education and in the disability sector and on whether they have a physical/sensory impairment. Each interview was approximately an hour long. A "convenience scheme" was applied to recruit eleven members for the Further Education lecturers' focus groups (Collins 2010). The selection process was based on their experience in teaching students with physical/sensory disabilities. Since the group of eleven members could not attend all together, the group was divided into four small groups. To manage the complexity of the data, the number of participants representing the lecturers was kept small, but it was enough to obtain saturation of themes (Creswell 2007). Owing to the small sample of each group of participants, generalisations could not be formulated.

In this study, thematic analysis was carried out following the 'similarity principle' that entailed looking for "commonalities in the data" (Teddlie, Tashakkori 2009, p. 353). Data analysis was carried out manually as this allows one to familiarise oneself with the complexity of the data (Braun, Clarke 2013). During interpretation, meanings of reality from direct experiences of participants in specific contexts at a given time were extrapolated (Cohen et al. 2010). For the interviews with the academics, the process of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al. 2010) was applied. The focus groups were analysed using "a classic analysis strategy" (Krueger, Casey 2009, p. 118) which highlighted the 'critical incidents' of events, actions or situations that created enabling or disabling contexts influential to the participants (ibid. p. 125). To identify the participants, next to each quote, a code was given, whereby 'Ac' stands for Academic 'and 'Fg' stands for Focus Group. In order to facilitate understanding quotes in Maltese were translated into English.

Findings

This section discusses two themes, namely the politics in the provision of quality inclusive education and the politics in implementing inclusive practices.

The politics in the provision of quality inclusive education

Shek and Wu (2014) deduce that students are grateful towards lecturers who are caring and supportive and their enthusiasm affects the learning process. The academics participating in this research argued that there is a lack of consistency among educators in having a pro-inclusion culture. The educators' motivation, expertise and attitude towards disability influences whether inclusive education is implemented in a positive way:

Attitude can be a huge barrier that prevents even physical barriers from being removed. You will find really good examples of inclusion. There is still a significant chunk of not so good examples which need to be addressed. (Alexandra, Ac)

The academic interviewees indicated that Malta needs to provide quality inclusive education rather than merely placing students in mainstream classes. The challenge is in having educators taking responsibility of all students and providing them with quality education from a rights standpoint. Some participants argued that a charity approach still prevails as inclusive systems are not yet in place. The creation of an inclusive system across the educational system that transposes to employment is underdeveloped:

Inclusive education! Maybe on paper we're good, but I don't know in practice. ... We still depend on the good-will and charity of people. We haven't arrived at rights yet. At primary and secondary level we moved a lot but at tertiary level we started to dwindle. It is even worse when they come to do the transition to employment. (Veronica, Ac)

Disabled students as a minority group pose a new 'learning landscape' at FE and HE (Portelli 2010). Inclusive education should not only be equated with the number of services provided, but also with the quality of the services and the type of culture that all stakeholders uphold with regard to the inclusion of diverse students:

Disabled people are a minority group. The dominant group do not understand your situation. So it's a struggle. They don't understand that it's the dignity of a person, that people have equal entitlement whatever their needs. (Peter, Ac)

I think that the discourse of the social model has helped. I believe that we haven't yet started to live it. ... There are different inclusive systems. You won't need to talk about inclusive education as it is part of it. We made it equal to the amount of services. (David, Ac)

There was a dichotomy between participants who indicated that out-of-class support is needed and those who expressed that inclusion does not mean

creating structures where students will be pulled out of the mainstream class. Some participants indicated that Deaf students (Deaf to uphold the Deaf culture) (Deaf People Association, Malta 2020) need specialised training. Positive stories of inclusion rely on the educators' commitment to overcome the problems that students face due to their impairment and the environment. The participants agreed that the major benefit of inclusive education is social development which is one of the aims of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006, Article 24):

We have to be realistic. The social aspect isn't everything. Nevertheless, we have students at university because of inclusion. ... I don't believe that the best place for the Deaf child is in a mainstream class 100%. I believe in inclusion, but I believe in maximising the child's ability. (Marianne, Ac)

The academics claimed that to increase the chances for disabled students to complete courses, FE and HE institutions need to widen accessibility. This entails training administrators, lecturers and parents on how they can support students appropriately. The environment and courses need to be designed for a diverse population of students. The Universal Design for Learning framework could instil a paradigm shift towards creating inclusive learning environments (Imrie 2007, Burgstahler 2010b):

We've moved a lot, but are we really including them or are they placed? We need to put strategies in place, training the parents too. (Rachel, Ac)

Each one of us should have access to the curriculum so that we learn in the mode that suits us most. (Eleonora, Ac)

The analysis of the focus groups transcripts showed that investment in specialised training such as sign language interpreters and ongoing training to support lecturers in finding ways of how to implement inclusive education is needed:

There are very few people who offer sign language in classes. There's a great need. If training is done, there could be certain days allocated for it, maybe in September before the students start. (Matthias, Fg)

The members preferred short training sessions that focus on the needs of the students whom the lecturers would be teaching rather than on general instruction that should be part of the teacher training course. Similarly, Golder et al. (2009) reinforce the importance of initial and professional development training in the field of learning difficulties and disabilities for all teachers:

I think at university, inclusive education shouldn't be an option. Tell me a bit what I have in my class and that's it. (Audrey, Fg)

To reflect integrity and due diligence, the strategies in implementing inclusive education have to be evaluated and monitored by experts in the field of quality assurance and in the respective subjects. There has to be a consensus on the type of support that is available in class. Having learning support assistants/educators or teacher assistants in the class encapsulates a political debate:

Another teacher in class with me, I think that I would become confused as a ship sails with one captain. When I had the LSA (Learning Support Assistant), the roles were defined. I'm the teacher and he is helping the student. (Manuel, Fg)

Keating et al. (2012, p. 254) state that “an educational institution needs to take into account students’ learning needs to make assessments more inclusive.” This implies “effective communication between students, academic support staff, technical support staff and academic tutors.” The participants in this research remarked that methods of assessment have to reflect strategies that enhance and consolidate inclusive education. Participants maintained that assessment controls what and how lecturers teach:

Why should the 100% of the mark depend on the two-hour exam? It should be part assessment and part exam. (Rupert, Fg)

As type of assessment, it should be formative. This wouldn't just help disabled people, but everyone and there would be an oral part, written part, and more visuals. (Matthias, Fg)

The focus group members debated that a pro-inclusion culture renders different stakeholders open to alternative solutions that help students access learning and assessment. It also encourages individuals to question one’s beliefs and practices and the status quo of educational institutions and examination boards. The use of technology was regarded as problematic as there is a lack of standardisation in its use and in the training on how different stakeholders can use new technologies that enhance teaching and assessment:

Technology always helps out and if you have disabled people, there is a whole range of technologies which can make life easier. (Maureen, Fg)

What we need is to help everyone access learning, using technology. We need to look at the person holistically. (Charles, Ac)

The politics in implementing inclusive practices

The academic participants revealed that there is a distinction between schooling that refers to the acquisition of qualifications and educating which means personal development towards good citizenship (Rioux 2008). The quality of education at primary and secondary levels influences students' success to further their education:

Our understanding of human rights is not yet so strong in terms of that everyone is entitled to respect as a human person. (Peter, Ac)

It should be inclusive schooling not inclusive education because our system does not focus on education if by education we mean that you'll become a better person than you are now. (David, Ac)

Human rights, democracy and social justice which correspond to the values of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006) were the three pillars that participants considered salient throughout the educational system in terms of inclusive education policy and implementation. There is the need for ongoing investment against an "educational system that creates apartheid among children" (Charles, Ac). This shackles the extent disabled students can reach in FE and in HE:

On a philosophical level, we have many people who don't believe in inclusion. You have a level of competence and specialised training which is lacking and few who are truly competent, trained and specialised, but are buried in work. (Charles, Ac)

According to the participants, student diversity is respected by creating more opportunities at FE and HE levels where students can access learning at their own pace and in the mode that matches their learning style (Giangreco 2017):

University is not the only place where you can have lifelong learning. Inclusivity means respecting diversity. (Rachel, Ac)

It was agreed that the involvement and participation of disabled people is a contributory element in implementing inclusive practices successfully:

Disabled students have a good contribution to make. They come with a different point of view of life and a rich experience of interactions that didn't work or that worked despite difficulties. (Marianne, Ac)

Small class groups were favoured by the participants as they create a learning environment that promotes social cohesion and access to learning. Lyon and Lagowski (2008, p. 1575) signpost that "students in a large-class environment modified to accommodate small learning groups achieve at a higher level using the conventional academic measures of achievement":

I prefer small classes. When it's a small community, they get more help. (Jack, Ac)

The participants stressed that the implementation of inclusive education poses great challenges on a day-to-day basis. They recognised that accessible educational practices for disabled students amongst other minorities is protected by anti-discrimination legislation (Laws of Malta 2000). The promotion of environmental, information and educational access supported by positive attitudes towards persons with specific educational needs are key to enhancing the quality of inclusive education:

The way courses are designed doesn't help those who have a disability. We have to be convinced that people deserve the chances and everyone has his own way and rhythm. We won't have one model of inclusive education. There has to be flexibility. (Alan, Ac)

Collaboration amongst staff, flexibility and adaptability in educational programmes ensure that all students are reached and supported accordingly (Björnsdóttir 2017). Lack of access increases the propensity that disabled students drop out of courses. The Universal Design for Learning framework was regarded to complement inclusive education on a theoretical and practical level:

You are always going to need specific arrangements for specific people. The system, facilities, buildings, educational materials should be based on the Universal Design. (Alexandra, Ac)

Pro-active planning was regarded as crucial to minimise the need for persons to disclose their impairment as the environment, systems and practices would be already accessible:

I don't know what students I have in front of me and if they need support. Even the numbers we have are big. (David, Ac)

The participants indicated that lecturers and other staff need to be supported about developing more inclusive practices from a rights-based standpoint and on different levels (Albertyn et al. 2016):

There needs to be more awareness perhaps among lecturers of what they can do, more awareness of the ADSU (Access Disability Support Unit), allowing recordings and sending notes. (Alexandra, Ac)

Large groups of students and lack of information about students' educational needs hamper the extent to which educators can reach out to students. Distance learning opportunities are needed for those students who would not be able to attend lectures whereas blended learning enhances the quality of inclusive education as it accommodates different learning styles:

With today's technology, if you have someone with a mobility problem, he doesn't even have to come to university if the Moodle platform works well and if we'll have blended learning. (Alan, Ac)

Self-help strategies that disabled students develop to be autonomous learners were believed important (Lifshitz et al. 2007):

Disabled people need to have a sense of responsibility for their own life, not all the time expecting things from people, including fighting for your rights. (Alexandra, Ac)

Participants argued that a cultural change is needed when it comes to the type of support that is to be requested at FE and HE. Environmental accessibility reduces students' dependency on peers or the risk to quit by the first year:

If the campus is not going to become more user friendly, we won't see students with disability who will continue the course up to the last year. (Veronica, Ac)

The academics indicated that persons with activity limitations are more likely to access the curriculum as they need very few reasonable adjustments. Secondly learners with visual and hearing impairment. Individuals with intellectual disability and learning difficulties are further down the hierarchy. The participants agreed that the integrity of the subject and examination boards should be maintained:

We have to ensure that the students get the access arrangements that they need, but the integrity of the examination is retained. (Marianne, Ac)

The focus groups members claimed that the dissemination of information about the students' learning needs was inconsistent. They revealed that medical reports are valued as a means of information to lecturers on the students' abilities and limitations, particularly when it is a hidden impairment (Lovett et al. 2015). Adolescence makes students very sensitive towards disclosing their needs but developing a positive relationship with students was regarded useful as it encourages students to express their requirements openly. However, this support could be inconsistent across institutions (Molina et al. 2016):

There are students who have disabilities that are not so obvious and they don't say anything. You get to know about them during the year. Maybe the problem has to do with adolescence and that they are in a new school. (Maureen, Fg)

Disclosure is very important. When they apply, they'll ask them if they need help. They explain to them that they're not going to be prejudiced, on the contrary. (Dennis, Fg)

The involvement of disabled people in the consultation process prior to entering a post-secondary institution and during the course enhances the quality of the teaching and learning experience:

Even giving a voice to the student, that's already helping the student learn more about him or herself. (Christine, Fg)

Synergy and consultation reduce pressures arising from power tensions between students, lecturers and administrators, and enhances empowerment across stakeholders:

We need to improve communication with all the stakeholders. The sharing of information. I do feel isolated. I don't have an idea of what's going on outside here. (Sean, Fg)

The participants pointed out that the lecturers' difficulty to implement inclusive education also arises from a lack of knowledge and resources when supporting the learning process of people with different educational needs. Although improvisation and trial and error could work, it does not render quality inclusive education. For example when addressing a class with a student with visual impairment, a participant remarked that:

At the beginning, I used to catch myself saying, for example, "All of you open page 15," or, "Look at the board." I felt my lack of professionalism to meet her needs, but eventually I tried to cater as much as I could. I think, we ought to be trained. (Rupert, Fg)

Evidence from this research indicated that dialogue, active participation and collaboration among disabled students, peers and lecturers improve group dynamics as they would become sensitive to the needs and the realities of others. Continuation of school support at home by care givers would reinforce learning and independence. Both students and lecturers have to adapt to each other by going through a process of personal, professional and social adjustment to create a successful experience of inclusive education (Lifshitz et al. 2007). When reflecting upon the group dynamics that could be created between lecturers and students as well as disabled and non-disabled students, a participant pointed out:

I'm teaching the same group. She's not part of the group anymore, and the group is not as connected as it was last year. She was an opportunity for other people to practise virtue. (Rupert, Fg)

The participants remarked that a student should be in mainstream education if it is best for the student but in competitive FE institutions, there is a lot of pressure. Lecturers indicated that they are committed to adapt to the students but the examination system and how courses are designed create limitations. Thus, different

types and levels of support could enhance students' success in an inclusive setting (Armstrong et al. 2010):

It's not enough to tell the teacher, "Listen you have this student, lead him to this." You have a class of thirty. How am I going to manage? (Carl, Fg)

We all have a right to education, but as long as no one is suffering. However, if you have a deadline, what type of compromise are you coming up with? I would much rather teach them separately, but at least I know no one is frustrated. (Rupert, Fg)

The focus group members remarked that environmental disabling barriers on campus prevent lecturers from implementing teaching strategies that reflect inclusive education. When the syllabus demands that lecturers organise outdoor activities like fieldwork, the Maltese natural environment creates an accessibility problem:

He was in a wheelchair. It was difficult for him to come to the fieldwork at Għajn Tuffieħa. I wouldn't just take them to a place like that, at random, I'm restricted myself. (Audrey, Fg)

Discussion

Reflexivity emerged as an important notion in inclusive education as by reflecting on their practices, the participants became conscious of whether they were enabling or disabling the students. The quality of inclusive education also relies on whether the educators embrace a pro-inclusion approach that corresponds to the social model of disability where the onus of disability is on society and not on the person (Shakespeare 2013). In order to make lectures more meaningful, Roberts (2009, p. 46) points out that staff had to make an effort to ensure that there is an "added value" to attending lectures which goes beyond acquiring lecture notes while trying to accommodate the needs of those students who cannot attend. This focus on empowering lecturers is a vital element in creating an inclusive pedagogy (Corbett 2008).

Data analysis showed that when lecturers positioned themselves as learners and showed their interdependence on the disabled students' participation, both experienced growth. Social partnerships amongst different stakeholders such as students, lecturers, administrative and governing bodies are essential in enhancing collegial transformation towards a pro-inclusion culture (Fernie, Henning 2006, Coffield et al. 2008). Social partnerships are also essential to inculcate consciousness about the importance of creating welcoming and engaging campus environments that are accessible to all (Nicholas, Quaye 2009). It is suggested that educational

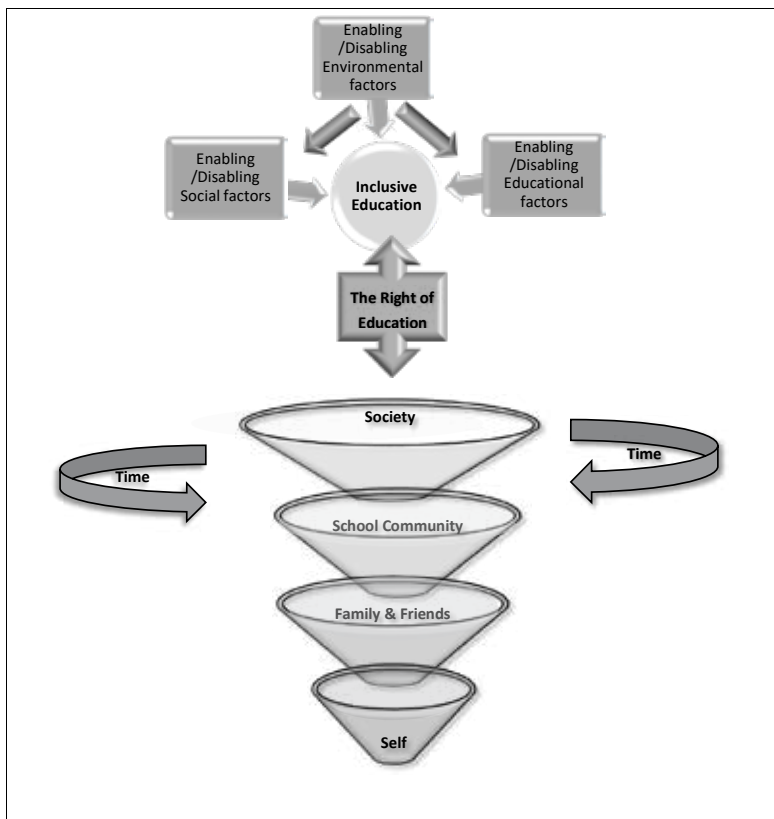
programmes directed towards the general public and courses within schools targeted towards care givers should be organised to eliminate prejudice against disability and its disclosure.

Evidence reinforced that lecturers have an impact on the quality of the experience of inclusive education provided. However, time constraints, a busy workload and restrictions from examination boards limit the extent to which lecturers manage to create accessible teaching and assessment while also giving individual attention. The analysis unveiled that although lecturers have the power to enable the classroom context, unless they consciously make an effort to be catalysts and to get informed, disabled students would remain merely integrated rather than included. Molina et al. (2016) remark that faculty members are not consistent in displaying appropriate attitudes with disabled students and “in many cases, it seems lecturers feel that curricular adaptations of any kind are a form of favouritism” (p. 1048). Standardisation in the systems across FE and HE in the provision of inclusive education is essential so that disabled persons would not have to rely on the good-will of individuals who give them support on voluntary basis. Lack of training on diversity and disability affects the lecturers’ confidence in reaching out to all students (ibid. 2016). Therefore, it is suggested that teachers in training are given ample theoretical background and practical experiences in inclusive education. Organising professional development courses to FE and HE educators would enable them to feel secure in facing student diversity and to reach out to the students in a way that befits them. For a successful continuum of inclusive education across different sectors, it is essential that the principles of inclusive education would be an integral part of the ethos and the lived reality of each educational institution. This would benefit the students when shifting from one educational institution to another and during the transition period between one level of education and another. Consultation with the respective Access Disability Support Unit would ensure that the right approach is taken in the development of courses, assessment procedures and recruitment of educators.

The data underscored the need of developing more flexibility in the way students can follow courses. These include methods such as blended learning, e-learning or by using real time distance learning facilities. This realisation became more apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, Seale (2006) also claims that as much as e-learning can liberate, it can also confine; particularly when issues regarding equity and accessibility are not addressed. With regard to online distance education programmes, Goodrich (2016) suggests that educators should have appropriate training on the Universal Design for Learning in order to design distance education courses that are accessible and that meet the needs of diverse students. The data showed the importance for good quality of life and for one to find a suitable pace of learning. Thus, to be sustainable there have to be different learning opportunities that protect the quality of life of the learners while sharing common foundations based on the pillars of respecting one’s human rights, democracy and social justice.

In accordance to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner 1994) that presents multi-level nested systems, the research conducted revealed that over time, the social relationships between different stakeholders, namely, the individual, family, friends, school community and society at large affect whether the lived experiences of diverse learners in educational institutions are enabled or disabled. This shift is influenced by the extent to which a rights-based approach is adopted. Thus, vis-à-vis inclusive education, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner 1994) was further developed into a Pro-inclusion model of inclusive education consisting of a nested system of intersecting relationships which is represented in Figure 1 (Marić 2018). As the findings of this research suggest, lecturers have an inherent and central role in creating a transformative momentum within the nested system that impacts the quality of inclusive education both on a philosophical and a pragmatic level.

Figure 1. Pro-inclusion model of inclusive education consisting of a nested system of intersecting relationships. Source: Marić (2018, p. 245).



Conclusion

This paper brought to light the lecturers' authentic reflections. The research revealed that development in inclusive education at FE and HE is ongoing and that it is a process of "becoming" that reinforces the principles of an inclusive culture, democracy and social justice (Bhaskar 2007, p. 583, Ainscow et al. 2006). This is a prerequisite since, as Neary and Thody (2009) claim, for a 'learning landscape' to remain engaged on a practical and theoretical level, it should be "constantly reviewed and reinvigorated" (p. 41). Thus, the challenges ahead are daunting, but if there is a collective and consistent political activism to transform the ideology of inclusive education, there is hope. Nonetheless, it is essential that policy-makers value evidence from current research as insightful knowledge that can be utilised to improve current policies and the lived experiences of different individuals. In bridging Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and the Pro-inclusion model of inclusive education as developed from the transdisciplinary study carried out, it is evident that the lecturers' input is central to the implementation of inclusive education from a rights-based perspective so that learners will have a positive inclusive learning experience at FE and HE levels.

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Traditional Textbooks and Their Multimodal Nature: From Misconceptions to Pedagogical Suggestions

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Abstract

In this paper, the author intends to contribute to the field of pedagogical knowledge by answering the question students frequently ask, at some point, once their original uninformed definition of multimodality is challenged: Are traditional paper-based textbooks also multimodal?

To answer this research question, adopting purposeful sampling (Teddlie, Yu 2007) the author has analysed the *Ġabra ta' Ward* book series published in 1933 in Malta and which were used in primary schools to teach Maltese. The original social-semiotic MIRROR framework (Cremona 2017) was used as the main analytical framework through which the author could interpret the content of the book series.

The findings of the paper suggest that these books, while including very few images, still include layout, size, colour, and spacing which frequently are the modes also used in modern pedagogic texts. A second finding indicates that while several social ideas have changed over time, these can serve to initiate various discussions through which students can gradually develop their critical skills. Therefore, the paper concludes that a 1933 textbook is multimodal and when used creatively and critically can still serve, together with modern digital texts, as effective pedagogical tools in contemporary classrooms.

Keywords: *Traditional Textbooks, Multimodality, Pedagogic Resources, Ġabra ta' Ward.*

Introduction: Defining Multimodality

A frequent challenge I encounter almost daily while conducting my work as a senior lecturer at the University of Malta is having to explain the meaning of the at first incomprehensible term 'multimodality'. Year after year, I encounter situations where students read the term on study unit course descriptions and end up questioning what this term means.

Over time, I have managed to explain the term by breaking it down into two main words. I start by explaining what mode is, namely defining it as a culturally-shaped semiotic resource having specific potentials through which it can produce certain

communicative effects and not others (Stein 2008). I define mode as a cultural channel through which a message is transmitted (Kress 2012). Adopting Norris's (2004) perspective, I suggest that these channels can be split up into two broad categories. Embodied modes include the message transmitted through channels like gesture, gaze or posture which are manifested by the human body. With these, other modes that are not directly produced by the human body, thus called disembodied modes. These include 'among others music, print, layout, colour, clothes and any other mode deriving from the setting or material world where the interaction is happening' (Norris 2004, p. x).

After this definition of the term 'mode', I move on to focus on the prefix (i.e. multi-) forming the term multimodality. I refer to words such as 'multitasker', 'multibillionaire' and 'multilingual' and lead those asking me to explain what the term means to themselves conclude that multimodality refers to 'the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event' (Kress, van Leeuwen 2001, p. 20). Therefore, as Jewitt (2009) elaborates, 'multimodality describes approaches that understand communication and representation to be more than about language, and which attend to the full range of communicational forms people use – image, gesture, gaze, posture, and so on – and the relationship between them (p. 14).

From Limited to a Broader Understanding of the Definitions

Experience suggests that, once this definition of the term 'multimodality' is explained, most of those at the receiving end immediately start linking the term only to contemporary digital texts (Beach, O'Brien 2008) which 'increasingly likely express ideas using different semiotic modes, including print, visual, and audio modes, and create hybrid texts that defy typical associations between modes and what they traditionally represent (Wood, Blanton 2009, p. 476). This is understood since "the new realities of the semiotic landscape are primarily brought about by social and cultural factors which include the intensification of linguistic and cultural diversity within the boundaries of the nation-state, the weakening of these boundaries due to multiculturalism, electronic media of communication, technologies of transport and global economic developments. (Kress, van Leeuwen 1996, p. 34).

Because of this, those at the receiving end of the definition frequently limit the term multimodality to include only the modern, very frequently digital texts, which are available both in class and out of class. The general assumption of many is that traditional textbooks which have been used for years within learning contexts are not multimodal, because, in their view, these textbooks only include chunks of text as their predominant modality. These texts are sometimes also accompanied by several images.

Research questions

In light of this, to contribute to the field of research, the two main research questions this study intends to ask are:

1. Are traditional textbooks also multimodal in nature?
2. Based on the outcomes of the first research question, can these traditional textbooks still be valid pedagogic resources in contemporary educational contexts?

Methodology

To answer the two research questions, since the exercise required an analysis of as many characteristics as possible of these traditional textbooks, the paper adopts a qualitative purposeful approach (Creswell 2013). While modern textbooks are so much more appealing to the contemporary pupil, based on the nature of the research question, of all the textbooks which have been used to teach in Malta, the *Ġabra ta' Ward* series (Vella 1933a, Vella 1933b, published by Oxford University Press in 1933) was selected. I did my choice adopting purposeful sampling (Creswell 2013) since this was the only series written at that time designed specifically with children (i.e. students) as their target audience (Žahra 2002).

The series includes six volumes, two for children and four aimed for adolescents (Grech 2010). Since multimodal research exercises look for depth rather than width, I opted to focus on the first two volumes only. While one volume only would already provide ample space for interpretations, including insights from the second volume would help the reader to obtain more complete and informed interpretations (Norris 2004). Book one includes 39 chapters and book two includes 30 chapters.

Each chapter of the two volumes was analysed using the original socio-semiotic text analysis Mirror framework (Cremona 2017). This text analysis tool includes the following steps:

The Mirror Framework – An Overview

Monitoring of available texts (in this case in the *Ġabra ta' Ward* series) and choosing the actual texts (the *Ġabra ta' Ward* series and chapters) to be included as part of the text analysis exercise;

- Which are the sources available at hand?
- Which are the most quoted (the most popular) texts at hand?
- How are they similar?
- In what way do they differ?
- Do any of the available texts possess a particular/special feature that deserves particular attention? Why?

Initial descriptive interpretation (for each chapter in *Ġabra ta' Ward*);

- Which topic(s) are being presented and/or discussed?
- Who is the ideal reader of the text? For whom was it originally designed? Which genres are used? What are the expectations linked to these particular genres and how do these expectations contribute to set/ affect the students within the particular classroom?
- Which representations do the selected texts appear to imply after a first reading (i.e. the preferred reading)?

Representational multimodal semiotic interpretation (for each chapter in *Ġabra ta' Ward*);

- Which particular sections of the selected texts appear sequential (i.e. not as separate entities)?
- Identify all the modes – embodied and disembodied (see Introduction) - building up the text.
- What representations does the reader perceive through the embodied modes included in the particular text?
- What representations does the reader perceive through the disembodied modes included in the particular text?

Represented social interpretation (for each chapter in *Ġabra ta' Ward*);

- Are particular social features and practices preferred/disfavoured by the representation in this particular text?
- Are particular discourses preferred/disfavoured by the representation in this particular text?

Table 1: The Social Features included in the fourth level of the MIRROR Framework

<p>Are particular social features preferred/disfavoured by this particular text?</p>
<p>Answers the question in terms of the following social features and practices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Identity and Social Groups • Social Interaction • Belief and Behaviour • Social and Political institutions • Socialisation and the life-cycle • National history • National geography <p style="text-align: center;">Adopted from Byram (1993, pp. 36-37)</p>
<p>The attempt to answer the above question also aims to highlight possible discourse types, which may include discourses linked to:</p>

- Class
- Race
- Gender
- Media language, advertisements and promotional culture
- Institutional Discourse: in institutional practices and communications
- Education: an area for reproduction of social relations, representation and identity-formation.

Adopted from Blommaert (2005, pp. 26-27)

Overview of the representations observed: This involves presenting a detailed write up of the representations obtained per individual text. Later, where possible, this level compares individual trends with common trends derived from the texts as a whole.

Reorganising the representations derived from the MIRROR Framework: This step includes the reorganising of ideas (i.e. those presented in the above-mentioned steps) in the best way to serve the particular learning/teaching context they are going to be applied to.

Results and findings

In this section, I will now present the outcomes (i.e. the most salient features) derived from my socio-semiotic interpretation of *Ġabra ta' Ward* based on the questions of the MIRROR text analysis framework¹. As in the case of similar socio-semiotic interpretations, it must be noted that these results and findings are being presented so that other readers of this paper are prompted to make their own interpretations.

The first finding derived from this socio-semiotic interpretation suggests that the *Ġabra ta' Ward* series are multimodal because the two volumes predominantly amalgamate written text mode and image mode. Written text tends to be the main superordinate mode used in the textbook. The superordinate mode is accompanied by a font that helps to guide the reader while reading through the included material. These include less evident features such as the font type, font colour and font size. Punctuation also serves as a mode through which the reader can be helped and assisted while reading the printed graphics. Through punctuation, the reader is directed and guided about pauses, intonation and volume. Furthermore, another mode that the superordinate written text mode is genre. There are three predominant literary genres included in the book. These are short stories using paragraphs as their main layout, poems using stanzas as their main layout and short jokes using sentences and interjections.

¹ A detailed definition and explanation of each italicized multimodality-related word can be found in the glossary of multimodal terms on mode.ioe.ac.uk

Both volumes (i.e. volumes 1 and 2) also include a collection of images accompanying the content presented through the abovementioned written graphics. These images tend to choose one particularly salient point from the chapter. This means that each image frames one of the moments explained through written graphics in the chapter and presents an image of this particular moment. There are two different types of images: the first type of images includes reproductions of photos or paintings of inanimate participants (which include places or objects) or animate participants (which include people or animals) mentioned through words in the particular chapter. More frequent in the volume are drawings depicted using black and white colour. Furthermore, in the first volume, there are only two drawings that include colour. The first of these include black, white, green, brown, orange and yellow hues. The second drawing includes a set of shapes filled with different colours. These refer to written graphics and invite the reader to see what is being explained through words i.e. which colours form when several colours are mixed.

A second finding indicates that the abovementioned modes (i.e. written graphics and images) frequently lead to several inconsistencies and contradictions. These happen particularly when one compares the contents of different chapters. On the one hand, the written graphics of several stories and poems included in the series highlight environmental care and protection. This features in volume 1 chapters '*Is-Sebħ*', '*Il-Lejl*', '*Il-ħdura tal-art*', '*ħamiema bajda*', '*Roy*' the dog and volume 2 chapters '*Kewkba*', '*Il-Ġnien t'Edgar*' and '*Lis-ħħab*'. On the other hand, almost in a simultaneous parallel manner, through written text, the reader finds many examples of careless people who harm and disrespect the environment, who are depicted as normal, according to the mentality prevalent at the time of publication. In volume 1, these include the bird hunter in the story '*lċ-ċajtier*', the bird shooter in '*Nixtieq*', the boy who hit the dog in '*La taħqarx il-bhejjem*', the fisherman who catches a lot of fish in '*Sajjed ta' xewqtu*', the father who keeps a bird in a bag and buys a cage as a present for his son in '*Ġiġi u l-ġojjin*'. In volume 2 these careless or unthoughtful people feature again in the way Ġaħan burns the chickens alive and how Ġaħan kills the pig and cuts it in pieces.

Moreover, similar contrasting ideas which seemingly feature in the way written graphics are placed, also seem particularly evident when one compares images of the same character. While through written graphics the character has the same characteristics in different chapters, the same animated participant looks different in the accompanying images featuring in different chapters. Two examples of this include the features of Ġaħan in the image of volume 1 '*Ġaħan u l-bieb*' and the features of the same character of the two images in '*Ġaħan u l-flieles*' and '*Ġaħan u l-ħanżir*' included in volume 2.

These identified contradictions are viewed by Kress (2010) as an essential and natural feature of Multimodal texts since:

Signs and ensembles of signs are read conjointly so that the contradictions which inevitably exist in such ensembles provide

readers with the means of making sense of any one sign and of the sign-complex overall. [...] This complex relation of signs (and ensembles of signs of often quite different kind) is encapsulated in the notion of the logonomic system (Hodge Kress 1988), itself a complex of signs that give readers means of reading, 'navigating', of 'placing' the interrelations and valuations of signs in sign complexities: means for reading contradiction, tension, opposition and apparent or real incoherence as well as irony, humour, degrees and kinds of realism, fictionality and facticity, and so on. In that context, the contradiction of one sign with others in a sign-complex is in no way dysfunctional but supplies essential information for an accurate reading of the social/communicative environment, which includes the maker of the sign (Kress 2010, p. 74).

Furthermore, with these first two findings, a third finding derived from my socio-semiotic interpretation suggests that while written graphics and images seemingly are the most predominant and obvious modes included in the *Ġabra ta' Ward* series, there are other (at times less evident modes) included in the two volumes which seemingly serve to ratify (i.e. sustain and mention again) the ideas expressed by the two most predominant modes.

These subordinate modes include:

- non-verbals such as facial expressions, gaze, gestures and posture of the animate participants which feature in each image included in the two volumes;
- clothes which these animate participants are wearing;
- proxemics of the animate and inanimate participants included in the images;
- Intentionally chosen written graphics that serve to transduce (i.e. moving meaning across modes) to sounds that are usually associated with participants (especially animals) featuring in images. Some examples of this include: '*Żirr, żirr, żirr, żirr,*' to refer to the sound of the cricket in the poem *Il-Lejl* volume 1 and all the onomatopoeia included in *Fl-Arka* also in volume 1.

A fourth last finding which this socio-semiotic interpretation tends to point to is that both the superordinate predominant modes and the other subordinate modes when seen together as a multimodal ensemble, to some extent, indicate that the *Ġabra ta' Ward* includes each one of the seven biases which Sadker, Sadker (2010 cited in Banks) identify as characteristics of textbooks used in classrooms. These include:

1. Invisibility or Group exclusion where not all racial, ethnic, gender, religious groups are equally represented.
2. Stereotyping where all members of a group are presented as all the same and uniform.

3. Imbalance where only one interpretation of an issue, situation or group of people is mentioned.
4. Unreality through the glossing of unpleasant historical events and facts often ignoring prejudice, racism, discrimination, exploitation, oppression, sexism, and inter-group conflict.
5. Fragmentation where a group is physically or visually isolated and frequently ends up usually represented as non-dominant and as peripheral.
6. Linguistic bias where the language used – visibly or subtly – treats different races/ethnicities, genders, accents, ages, (dis)abilities and sexual orientations equally.
7. Cosmetic bias where through its presentation (i.e. such as its covers, colour, posters etc.) the text gives a modern bias-free impression and an “illusion of equity”.

Seen in this light, the detailed and extensive socio-semiotic interpretation of the two volumes of *Ġabra ta' Ward* indicates that the society presented in all the chapters is one that is predominantly Catholic. This idea is sustained both by reference to stories from the Old Testament (such as Moses, volume 1 and Solomon in volume 2) and from the New Testament (such as the Nativity Story and Jesus calming the tempest, volume 1; Jesus healing the paralysed man and St. Paul's shipwreck in Malta in volume 2). With these, there are other subtler references such as the school day starting with the sign of the cross ('*L-iskola*' volume 1), the fact that a beautiful garden reminds the author of how beautiful God is ('*Il-Ġnien*' volume 1), Ġaħan's mother going to church for mass ('*Ġaħan u l-bieb*', volume 1) and the prayer asking God to save the Queen ('*Hares Mulej lir-Regina*', volume 1). Volume two opens with images of the Catholic Cathedral in Malta and the Catholic Cathedral in Gozo. The two churches are both fortified and remind the Maltese nation of the Great Siege (mentioned in '*Żball u Mħux*' in volume 2) where Knights and the catholic Maltese people fought and won against Muslim Turks.

Apart from presenting a predominantly Catholic society, the contents of the first two volumes of *Ġabra ta' Ward* tend to sustain the idea of a society led predominantly by males where the role of females is to learn at school and to serve at home. This is clear from the suggestion of a mother who tells her daughter:

'Binti, jaqbillek tisma' mill-ktieb u mill-fardal; il-għaliex mill-istudju titgħallem ħafna ħwejjeg meħtieġa, u mix-xogħol tal-idejn tidra tkun mara tinqala' u li taf iddur bid-dar. (Excerpt from '*Il-ktieb u l-fardal*', volume 2, page 26).²

² Translated: My daughter, you should follow the advice of the book and the apron; if you learn and study you learn a lot of needed things, and doing manual work you learn how to be an efficient woman, able to take care of the house.

Females are presented as well behaved (such as Maria in *'Iż-żatat'* and Rożina in *'Rożina u Kelinu'* and *'Wara d-daħk jiġi l-biki'* in volume 1) and emotional (such as the grandma of Toninu and the kissing mother of Pisani's poem in volume 1). These characteristics seemingly are expected of them even when females are in pain. In such moments males tell them to downplay their emotions, to keep in mind that nothing happened and to be more careful so that next time they will avoid getting hurt (*'Nuqqas ta' Ħsieb'* in volume 1). Because of this, females end up assuming the role of silent passive followers of their male counterparts, at times even accepting unjust punishments to cover up for the mistakes of their male siblings (such as in *'Qlub t'aħwa'* in volume 1).

Also related to this is the seemingly very common idea presented in the *Ġabra ta' Ward* volumes where older people are presented as wiser, while the younger generation is expected to listen and learn from the advice of those who experienced life before them. One of the stories even suggests that older people should be worshipped by the younger generation (as in *'Qima lix-xjuħ'* in volume 2). This is particularly seen each time there are interactions between adults and younger people. The latter include interactions between parents, grandparents or adult relatives and children (such as Ġaħan following his mother's words literally in volume one and two, *'L-iskola'*, *'Il-bewsa tan-nanna'*, *'Il-ktieb u l-fardal'*, *'Il-Ħlas tal-ħsara'*, *'Ġiġi u l-ġojjin'*, *'L-Indafa'* in volume 1 and *'L-indafa wara t-tjieba'*, *'Il-Ġnien ta' Edgar'*, *'Nies bla ras'* in volume 2), teachers and their students (such as in *'Żball u mhux'* in volume 1) and adults who guide children they do not know and tell them what they are expected to do (such as in *'La taħqarx il-bhejjem'* in volume 1). All these outnumber the only three sparse occasions where children's suggestions are well received by their parents or by the adult generation. These include the boy of *'Sajjid ta' Xewqtu'* in volume one who goes fishing and gives the fish to his mum to fry them for lunch. The other two children whose voices influence the adults around them are the only two non-Maltese children mentioned in the volumes. These non-Maltese children are Gustavu Vaża who is Swedish (in *'Tifel Svidiż'* in volume 2) and partially follows what his father tells him and kills the very harmful serpents on his initiative and British Horatio Nelson who as a child used to tell his mother:

*"X'jiġjiferi tibża' mamà?" wieġeb it-tifel. Ma nafx x'inhu l-biża"*³.
(*'Ma nafx x'inhu biża'*, volume 2, pp. 50-52)

Maltese people are represented as white Caucasians. There is one time where dark skin features are mentioned throughout the two volumes. This happens in the Aesop fable *'Il-Qattus u l-Ġrieden'* (volume 2) where the evil cat who made all the mice afraid is called Nigru and is described as *'qattus iswed bellu'* (cat with a black velvet skin).

³ Translated: 'What does being afraid mean mum? the boy answered. 'I do not know what fear is'.

Furthermore, there are a selected number of Aesop fables translated to Maltese which all tend to hint at what the younger generation should learn to become as strong and mature as the older generation. The stronger lion teaches the younger more agile mouse how to face life (in '*Il-Ġurdien u l-iljun*' in volume 1), the more agile rabbit loses against the less energetic tortoise (in '*Il-Fenek u l-Fekruna*', volume 2) and of all the mice trying to solve the problem of the watching cat, the old mouse comes out with the best suggestion ('*Il-Qattus u l-Ġurdien*' in volume 2). The two big frogs tend to end up lost at the end of the story because they have no guidance from a more mature and older frog (in '*lż-Żewġ żrinġijiet*' in volume 2).

Throughout the two *Ġabra ta' Ward* volumes, society tends to be predominantly presented as consisting of people who can afford to pay for things they like such as toys ('*Il-Pupa tiegħi*' in volume 2), pets ('*Ġiġi u l-Ġojjin*', '*Roy*' in volume 1 and '*Praspar ta' Xadin*' in volume 2) work of arts ('*Moqli f'żejtu*' in volume 1), birthday parties ('*Għeluq Sninu*' in volume 1), gifts for their relatives ('*Rożina u Kelinu*', volume 1) and things which need to be replaced ('*Qlub t'Aħwa*' in volume 1). These very frequent references, together with the way participants are seen wearing smart or formal clothes, outnumber the less frequent cases where poverty-stricken people are mentioned (such as the stories of Ġaħan in volume 1 and 2, '*Sajjed ta' xewqtu*', '*Il-#las tal-#sara*' and '*L-Indafa*' in volume 1). Furthermore, through the modes used in '*Il-gawwija, il-kokka u l-gallozz*' (volume 2) the reader is directed to the message that those whose businesses fail should find ways how to do their best to recover from the losses so that they can recuperate from financial turmoil.

Discussion

The findings of this qualitative multimodal text analysis exercise serve as an answer to the first research question. These suggest that the *Ġabra ta' Ward* volumes (1 and 2) are multimodal pedagogic texts even if at first glance they are just seen as very traditional textbooks published way back in 1933. This, in itself, is a contribution to the field suggesting that while many scholars and students attribute the term multimodality to technological and modern pedagogic tools only, the abovementioned findings indicate that even traditional pedagogic tools are multimodal (sustains ideas of Anstey, Bull 2009, Callow 2013) and their multimodal nature is as valid as the multimodal nature of the more recently produced resources. Therefore, these traditional texts are multimodal. Aiming to offer a further contribution to the field, the next focus of this discussion should ask whether these traditional 1933 multimodal textbooks can still serve as valid pedagogic resources in contemporary educational contexts such as classrooms and schools.

Before further discussion, I wish to point out that the fair answer to the second research question should acknowledge that these shared insights should be seen together with the pedagogical benefit of many modern textbooks. Furthermore,

one should also highlight that any content presented in class from *Ġabra ta' Ward* should be included only if students are encouraged to look at it through a critical eye in that it reflects the realities of the 1930s society.

Furthermore, since *Ġabra ta' Ward* was designed to teach Maltese as a native language (L1), to answer this second question, each of the four findings mentioned in the previous section (i.e. Results and Findings) will be put in light of the contemporary methodologies being used in today's language classrooms. These include two predominantly used contemporary L1 methodologies:

- the communicative approach (Portelli, Camilleri Grima 2002) where language is put in a context and students learn languages through texts presenting language as used in daily situations;
- task-based learning approach (Kramersch 2003 cited in Lange, Paige 2003) where students are the main protagonists of the lesson and the teacher involves the students in hands-on activities through which they use the language so that through this active participation they can learn the target language.

On the one hand, while one needs to acknowledge that the mentality at the time of the *Ġabra ta' Ward* (volume 1 and 2) publication was different, the contents included in the book, to some extent, acknowledge similar lines of the trends used in today's L1 classroom. A case in point that goes close to the nature of the currently applied communicative approach is how modes are placed together and through this multimodal ensemble, the written Maltese language is presented in contexts with which the target audience is familiar. Similarly, also intending to put students at the centre of the lesson (i.e. similar to the contemporary task-based learning approach), throughout both volumes, there are '*Kieku x'kont tagħmel?*' (translated to What would you have done?) presenting a common daily situation and asking students to take a stand about the situation. An example is reproduced below:

Pinu kien ġej lura mill-iskola. Ra xi flus jaqgħu lil raġel li kien miexi quddiem, u li baqa' sejjer bla ma kien jaf x'għara. Kieku int kont flok Pinu, x'kont tagħmel? (Ġabra ta' Ward, volume 1, page 76)⁴

Moreover, in this section, I will share further insights which could serve as a proactive reaction to the findings derived from the socio-semiotic interpretation. I will provide these insights and conjectures based on the experiences I have obtained since I started teaching Maltese (as L1) in both secondary and primary learning contexts in 2004. Although the *Ġabra ta' Ward* series was designed as a reading textbook, I will give suggestions that could be used when teaching each of the four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking.

⁴ Translated: Pinu was returning home from school. He saw a man who while walking, without realising, lost some money which fell on the ground. What would you do if you found yourself in Pinu's position?

Table 2: A summary of the findings and suggestions about how *Ġabra ta' Ward* can serve as an effective pedagogic tool for the contemporary Maltese (L1) classroom.

Summary of finding	Suggestion for contemporary L1 learning context
<p>Finding 1: The two predominant (superordinate) modes are written graphics and images.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written words should be revised according to the new grammar spelling rules (Kunsill Nazzjonali tal-Ilsien Malti 2008). • Images can be more varied ranging from static and moving images also including online or self-made videos (similar to Cornett 2003). • Colour can be also added to the images either by the teacher or by the students as a reaction to what they are reading. • Students can also be asked to supply images or videos they feel adequate according to the content of the particular story or chapter (similar to Potter 2010). • The teacher can arrange several games where part of the picture leads to an activity where students guess how the story will continue or end.
<p>Finding 2: There are contradictions and inconsistencies across chapters.</p>	<p>These contradictions can serve to initiate a discussion with students suggesting what they think about the contradictions and how they would react to these. The students' reactions can be presented either through words or using other modes which they feel comfortable working with (Bezemer, Kress 2016).</p>
<p>Finding 3: Several subordinate modes ratify the message transmitted by the superordinate modes.</p>	<p>These subordinate modes can be also used to serve as tools through which students either react or present the content being read. Instead of 'just' reading the text, teachers and students can use their body language to mime, act, dramatize, sing, draw and animate the text being presented (Rowse 2013). This gives the 'modern' dress to a 'traditional' text and puts the student at the centre of the lesson.</p>

<p>Finding 4: This multimodal ensemble presents a homogeneous Catholic white Caucasian male dominant society where old people are respected and guide the younger generation about what they are expected to do.</p>	<p>Students should be encouraged to first read the content and later observe these trends which present a limited perspective of society. These readings and lessons, apart from helping students to learn the L1, should also encourage them gradually to look at these limited perspectives adopting critical cultural awareness where the multiplicity of social realities is understood, embraced, promoted, expected and tolerated (Guilherme 2002). Many modern newspaper articles, texts from social media and other recent mundane printed or audio-visual texts (Rao 2019) can be brought regularly in class and their content is compared and contrasted with that presented in <i>Ġabra ta' Ward</i>. While some of these social ideas are contested today, at times they still feature around us and thus through the <i>Ġabra ta' Ward</i> text, students can get both a historical perspective of things as well as an understanding of contemporary views and perspectives.</p>
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Conclusion

A valid conclusion summing up the insights obtained from this *Ġabra ta' Ward* volume 1 and volume 2 socio-semiotic interpretation would be, as the saying goes, never to judge a book by its cover.

What appears to be a 1933 traditional old-fashioned outdated textbook still offers a rich multimodal ensemble through which pedagogical benefits may be reaped.

Furthermore, one can also conclude that such multimodal texts can only be effective if educators treat these not as neutral ready-to-use resources but as resources that require interpretation through a critical reflective eye. This applies both to the traditional 1933-published *Ġabra ta' Ward* series, as well as to the modern recently published textbooks. The latter appear to have more value and to have an invaluable pedagogic effect on today's contemporary classroom.

These conclusions should serve not just as eye-openers but also as an encouraging invitation to us all involved in language teaching through which we can aim to be more effective when using both traditional as well as modern texts in class.

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The emergent inequities and inequalities resulting from lockdown and social distancing measures taken to stop the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic within a Maltese scenario

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Abstract

The COVID-19 measures of lockdowns and social distancing impact the wellbeing of different groups of people across populations, even in small countries such as Malta that enjoys free health care. This paper uses a mixed method approach to explore which aspects of the social determinants of health created new inequities and inequalities amongst the Maltese inhabitants during the first wave of the COVID-19 period; it determines who the groups of people mostly being affected by the pandemic measures are; explores the complexity of experiences during the partial lockdown measures; determines which neighbourhood contextual environments are likely to cause harm to people's wellbeing; and understands the effect of the social distancing measures within a cultural context of outdoor social interaction. Age, gender and neighbourhood landscape environment are significant determinants of the experience of COVID-19 measures. Yet, when looking in depth it became evident that the personality, marital status, housing type, family environment, employment type and conditions, access to social media, contextual social norms and neighbourhood contexts of individuals determined the experienced inequities and inequalities, in complex ways. It emerged that these aspects experienced during the pandemic highly determined the wellbeing of different groups of people.

Keywords: *Social Determinants of Health, SDH, Inequities, Inequalities, Malta, Therapeutic Landscapes, Health and Wellbeing*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions related to it are causing drastic changes and disruptions to all populations across the world, altering the way communities and societies operate, putting clinically vulnerable people at high risk and limiting social activities that impinge on aspects that were enabling people to improve their wellbeing. Due to the fear of the virus' contagion, people's mental health and wellbeing

have also been highly affected. This paper recognises that those experiencing pre-existing inequalities before the pandemic are now more vulnerable and at risk to mental ill-health. However, this study, using the case of Malta, aims to focus more on how the COVID-19 pandemic related measures aiming to stop the spread of the virus can have effects on the health and wellbeing of people too. These new groups of individuals may start experiencing inequities and inequalities in relation to the social determinants of health and thus the secondary effects of the pandemic may create lifecourse consequences on the mental and physical health of these groups of people.

The World Health Organisation (WHO), in their review on the 'Social determinants and health divide' (2008) within the European regions, drew attention to the need of taking a lifecourse approach towards health and wellbeing. This is important as it recognises that the setbacks experienced by people at a given point in time such as the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to remain or accumulate across an individual's lifetime. Health and wellbeing across the life course of a person are determined by the economic, environmental, social conditions of where one is born, grows up, works and lives (Dahlgren, Whitehead 2007, World Health Organisation 2015). Across history, sudden economic shocks such as the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, the collapse of communism and the Great Depression have led to an increase in morbidity, mental ill-health, alcohol and substance abuse and suicide rates amongst disadvantaged groups (Corcoran et al. 2015). Therefore, understanding the experiences of the effects of the measures taken during this COVID-19 can help policy makers and researchers to better address the emerging inequities and inequalities amongst these new groups of people and the effects of negative experiences on their wellbeing.

Studies including Coronini-Cronberg et al. (2020), Gauthier et al. (2021), Chakrabati et al. (2021), Whitehead et al. (2021) and Burström and Tao (2020), have analysed how much the pandemic is likely to create augmented negative health effects on individuals who were already experiencing inequalities and inequities before the pandemic. People living in disadvantaged neighbourhood conditions are at risk of experiencing chronic material and psychosocial stress which also lead to immunosuppression (Segerstrom, Miller 2004). These people are also more likely to experience underlying critical conditions such as hypertension, obesity, diabetes and lung problems due to smoking (Bambra 2016) which, with COVID-19, are considered as risk factors to severe ill-health conditions or mortality. Those individuals living in poorly maintained areas even if they may not suffer from underlying health conditions are vulnerable to contract the virus due to poor housing conditions, hazardous employment, repetitive or low-income jobs, and little access to adequate professional healthcare (Whitehead et al. 2016, Bambra et al. 2020).

Other studies such as Bavli et al. (2020), Fortier (2020), Warren and Bordolio (2020), and Mc Quaed et al. (2021) have emphasised that measures taken in relation to the spread of the pandemic may put some groups of people at risk of mental health problems. Bavli et al. (2020) call for the need of studying the effects of the measures and interventions taken and their unintended negative impacts

on health and wellbeing. They also highlighted that authorities within the context of the US have politicised this pandemic and have disregarded the serious effects these limitations may have on health. Warren and Bordolio (2020) also emphasise the need to understand how the pandemic has exacerbated certain inequities and how this is impacting on people's wellbeing. Mc Quaid et al. (2021) explore who is most likely to experience feelings of loneliness within a Canadian context where it emerged that loneliness is experienced mostly by those with low annual income and young female adults. In her study, Frontier (2021) furthermore stressed that women are negatively and disproportionately being affected by the COVID-19 due to their employment conditions and marital status.

Yet, to our knowledge, none of these studies have analysed the multiple, in-depth experiences of how the measures taken to stop the spread of the pandemic are related to the various social determinants of health, and how they are impacting people's wellbeing. Furthermore, the local neighbourhood context and the presence or the lack of therapeutic landscapes in the neighbourhood have been rarely looked at as determinants of people's wellbeing during these lockdown periods of the pandemic.

Research on the wider and social determinants of health within a local Maltese context (with the exception of Deguara et al. (2017) and Satariano and Curtis (2018)) together with research on inequality and inequity in Malta is limited. Georgakopoulos (2019) pointed this out in his analysis on what determines inequality in Malta and it emerged that although income inequality is slightly on the rise, wealth is a stronger determinant of inequality. Indeed, residential home ownership is the aspect mostly equalising wealth while self-employment is the aspect mostly creating income inequality. Age, education and inheritance may also be considered as determinants of inequality. In another study Betti et al. (2015) mapped economic poverty and inequality amongst children of different age groups. This is the only study that analyses inequality at a localised level. When the authors stratified the data according to children of different groups it emerged that inequality is not experienced consistently among children of different age groups within the same localities. This indicates that the experiences of income inequality of the Maltese children are highly variable across families and across different localities. In their research on the Social Determinants of health, Deguara et al. (2017) mention that these aspects are rarely considered as important in the national health policy agenda in Malta. Another study pointed out that there are neighbourhood socio-geographic conditions related to the role of the family, social norms and social participation practices that are highly important for people's wellbeing, as these act as a buffering effect especially in deprived neighbourhood conditions (Satariano, Curtis 2018). Therefore, this study takes the context of Malta as a useful case study as:

- (i) inequality tends to be on the homogenous side, yet there are specific groups who may be experiencing income or wealth inequalities and the COVID-19 measures might accentuate this;

- (ii) the Social Determinants of health are rarely taken into consideration in Malta and therefore understanding the secondary effects of the pandemic is highly important for the Maltese population;
- (iii) within the first wave, Malta experienced very low rates of COVID-19 cases because it took strict lockdown measures to limit the possibility of the spread yet might have disregarded the secondary effects of these measures and their impact on wellbeing;
- (iv) Malta is a very densely populated country with very limited amount of open spaces;
- (v) Maltese people, due to climatic conditions and cultural factors, highly depend on outdoor social interaction as a form of relaxation and a buffering effect for their wellbeing.

Methodology

This study applied a mixed method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data as well as a case study approach (Van Wynsberghe, Khan 2007) to reveal the complexities related to the social determinants of health that have been generated by the pandemic and the related restriction measures.

Data Collection

Due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic the data was collected through a questionnaire that included closed-ended and open-ended questions distributed between the 20th March and the 20th April 2020, using online platforms (such as Facebook and the University of Malta notifications channel). The questionnaire consisted of 26 questions focusing on various themes related to the social determinants of health and the participants rated and explained how the changes in the measures of the pandemic were affecting their wellbeing.

Prior to dissemination, the questionnaire underwent ethical approval from the University of Malta. The target representative population sample was 400, however we received 973 valid responses. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics that characterise the population sample under study together with the national data, indicating the level of representation of our sample in relation to the national population.

Malta is the smallest and most densely populated country in the EU (National Statistics office, 2019). It enjoys several coastal environments; however, it has a very limited number of green inland spaces and the majority of the population live in urban areas. The first reported case of the virus in Malta was on the 7th March 2020 and by the 12th March, with 12 positive cases recorded, Malta started

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enforcing measures of a partial lockdown such as the physical closure of schools, non-essential shops and offices. Moreover, anyone with the possibility of working from home was encouraged to do so (Baldacchino 2020). During this period, Italy was the country with the highest number of cases and deaths (Makowiecki et al. 2020). The proximity Malta has with Italy and the fact that the Maltese follow Italian television stations might have greatly alarmed the public and authorities. Due to this, the health authorities in Malta succeeded to control the spread of this disease and the number of deaths during the first wave of the pandemic when compared to other nearby countries such as Italy and Spain. This paper analyses the experiences of people during the partial lockdown of Spring 2020.

Table 1: Descriptive data of research study sample in comparison to the national Census data of Malta

Variable	Details	Percentage Questionnaire	National
Gender	Male (M)	30	50
	Female (F)	70	50
Age*****	18-29	47	17
	30-39	21	15
	40-49	19	13
	50-59	8	13
	60+	5	25
Landscape type where the participants live	Highly urban (HU)	25	25****
	Rural with green (RG)	8	9****
	Rural with green & blue (RGB)	15	20****
	Urban with blue landscape (UB)	24	27****
	Urban with green space (UG)	28	19****
Occupation*	Legislators & senior officials (L)	3	11
	Professionals (P)	34	19
	Technicians and associate professionals (T)	4	14
	Clerks (C)	16	11
	Service workers & shop & market sales workers (SW)	3	20
	Student (S)	35	3***
	Retired (R)	3	15**
	Other (O)	2	16
<i>n</i> = 973			

*NSO 2020 News Release, Labour Force Survey Q4/2019

***NSO 2019 Regional statistics

***Tertiary enrolled students NSO 2020 Post-Secondary and Tertiary Student Enrolments Academic year 2017-2018

****Census 2010

*****NSO 2018 Population Statistics Revisions 2012-2016

Data Analysis

The analytical method consisted of two phases. In the first phase we analysed the relationships between variables and subsequently developed a cluster analysis. The Pearson Chi-Squared test with results of a p-value <0.05 were presented, followed by a two-step Cluster Analysis which was carried out to identify the group profiling of the participants. This analysis served to identify the composition of our sample and discover in more detail the groups experiencing an increase in tension levels, so that the individuals mostly being affected by the pandemic measures are better understood. Since Cluster Analysis groups' data have similar characteristics, the visualisation and exploration of groups of participants is facilitated (Sinharay 2010). The outputs of the clusters were then used to create cross-tabulations with the socio-demographic and geographic variables that were originally identified at the beginning of this statistical procedure. Considering that previous research (Betti et al. 2015) pointed out that inequalities in Malta are not strongly related to regions, we decided to cluster localities according to the type of neighbourhood landscape environment, as the lockdown measures limited people's mobility outside their neighbourhood area and therefore the type of environment found close to their home may be important. The densely built-up neighbourhoods lacking public gardens or coastal open areas were grouped as Highly Urbanised (HU). Those neighbourhoods which are highly urbanised but have coastal areas were classified as Urban with Blue landscape (UB), while those urbanised neighbourhoods with public gardens were classified as Urban with Green spaces (UG). The rural neighbourhoods without coastal areas were classified as Rural with Green spaces (RG) while those localities which have both coastal areas and green spaces were classified as Rural with Green and Blue spaces (RGB).

During the second phase, we applied elements of grounded theory approach (Glaser, Strauss 1967) and analysed the qualitative open-ended questions in order to investigate how the wellbeing of different groups of people was being affected in relation to the various social determinants of health. We explored how the restrictive measures related to the pandemic were impacting people's wellbeing through a number of themes related to age, marital status, family environment, housing

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conditions, employment prospects and conditions, the need for socialisation and the neighbourhood environment. The in-depth responses written by the respondents describing their experiences during the pandemic were extracted and uploaded on NVivo9 and an open coding approach was used where sentences and phrases were grouped under codes of themes and topics (Bryman 2008). Through these accounts we could understand in more detail the experienced inequities and inequalities of the respondents, and how these impacted their wellbeing during this period.

Limitations

Given that the questionnaire was conducted online, more females, professionals, and students participated, while people who are deprived, illiterate and digitally illiterate might not have been able to participate due to the lack of resources and ability. Therefore, the emergent findings were identified from the available population sample, which may have excluded the experiences and data of some groups who might have been already vulnerable to various aspects of inequalities and inequities.

Results and Analysis

The first part of the analysis profiles participants according to their increase in tension levels using a two-step Cluster Analysis. Following this an understanding of the emergent inequities and inequalities related to the social determinants of health are analysed through in-depth qualitative responses explaining why certain groups of people were experiencing an increased level of tension during this time.

Profiling participants through Cluster Analysis

The two-step Cluster Analysis enabled the profiling of participants, grouping them according to their increase in tension levels with the start of the pandemic and according to their age, gender, location and employment. The model indicated a good cluster quality, and eleven cluster groups were produced as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Cluster groups of participants showing the proportion of the population sample and description of classes

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Combined
Values in brackets are %	47(5)	90(9)	144(15)	127(13)	174(18)	109(11)	76(8)	37(4)	71(7)	65(7)	33(3)	973(100)
Gender												
Male	8(3)	39(13)	52(18)	52(18)	48(17)	39(13)	14(5)	5(2)	10(3)	14(5)	8(3)	289(100)
Female	39(6)	51(7)	92(13)	75(11)	126(18)	70(10)	62(9)	32(5)	61(9)	51(7)	25(4)	684(100)
Age												
18-29	18(4)	37(8)	58(13)	47(10)	107(23)	52(11)	34(7)	20(4)	40(9)	32(7)	15(3)	460(100)
30-39	12(6)	16(8)	22(11)	36(17)	38(18)	26(13)	16(8)	8(4)	10(5)	14(7)	8(4)	206(100)
40-49	12(7)	18(10)	39(22)	23(13)	19(11)	15(8)	18(10)	7(4)	13(7)	9(5)	7(4)	180(100)
50-59	2(3)	13(16)	14(18)	13(16)	7(9)	10(13)	6(8)	2(3)	4(5)	7(9)	2(3)	80(100)
60+	3(6)	6(13)	11(23)	8(17)	3(6)	6(13)	2(4)	0	4(9)	3(6)	1(2)	47(100)
Feeling tense before the introduction of COVID-19 in Malta												
Not at all	47(12)	73(19)	144(37)	127(32)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	391(100)
Somewhat	0	17(5)	0	0	174(46)	109(29)	76(20)	0	0	0	0	376(100)
Moderately	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3(2)	71(41)	65(38)	33(19)	172(100)
Very much	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	34(100)	0	0	0	34(100)
Feeling tense after the introduction of COVID-19 in Malta												
Not at all	0	90(93)	0	0	0	0	0	7(7)	0	0	0	97(100)
Somewhat	0	0	144(49)	0	0	109(37)	0	5(2)	0	0	33(11)	291(100)
Moderately	0	0	0	127(34)	174(47)	0	0	3(1)	0	65(18)	0	369(100)
Very much	47(22)	0	0	0	0	0	76(35)	22(10)	71(33)	0	0	216(100)
Landscapes												
Highly urban	13(5)	21(9)	26(11)	30(12)	37(15)	33(14)	21(9)	10(4)	20(8)	20(8)	12(5)	243(100)
Rural with green	3(4)	3(4)	9(11)	8(10)	21(26)	9(11)	8(10)	4(5)	6(7)	7(9)	4(5)	82(100)
Rural with green and blue	4(3)	8(6)	28(20)	26(18)	31(22)	16(11)	10(7)	2(1)	5(4)	8(6)	3(2)	141(100)
Urban with blue promenade	12(5)	37(16)	37(16)	28(12)	33(14)	25(11)	17(7)	9(4)	19(8)	10(4)	5(2)	232(100)
Urban with green space	15(5)	21(8)	44(16)	35(13)	52(19)	26(9)	20(7)	12(4)	21(8)	20(7)	9(3)	275(100)
Statistically significant p-value = <0.05												

This Cluster Analysis clearly showed that the groups with a higher percentage of males (i.e. 2, 3, 4) were those least likely to experience high levels of tension before COVID-19. Cluster 2 indicated that even with the pandemic measures they were not experiencing any feelings of tension even though a high percentage of this group were retired elderly men and were therefore considered as clinically vulnerable to the virus (Jin et al. 2020). Cluster 3 indicated that their tension levels have somewhat increased with the start of the pandemic measures, however their tension levels did not increase as much as those of cluster 4. Cluster 5 was mainly composed of young adults including students who indicated that before the COVID-19 pandemic they were already feeling somewhat stressed. Cluster 7 and 9 were composed of participants who were predominantly females, of different age groups predominantly living in urban spaces. These clusters were already experiencing moderate levels of tension and with the pandemic these tension levels increased. Cluster 8 and 11 who were also mainly composed of females were very stressed before COVID-19 yet with the partial lockdown of the pandemic, were now feeling the same amount of tension or less tension than before. Cluster 6 and 10 were composed of an almost equal percentage of males and females, who live in different neighbourhood environments and were employed in different employment sectors. The tension levels of these clusters remained the same before and during the partial lockdown. The cluster group with the highest level of increase in tension levels was cluster 1 composed of predominately females, of different age groups but mainly aged in their 40s and 60+ who reside in urban environments.

The Cluster Analysis showed that there are specific groups of people, including young adults, women and those living in urban areas, whose wellbeing has been negatively affected. Through qualitative responses, this Cluster Analysis will be given a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and how the pandemic and the restrictive measures impacted on their wellbeing due to the various experiences related to the social determinants of health.

Inequalities in Gender, Age and constitutional factors

As observed in the Cluster Analysis, age and gender were strong determinants of the experience of the measures taken in relation to the pandemic and their effects on wellbeing. Women were experiencing higher levels of tension when compared to men (Table 3). Women were already feeling somewhat tense before the COVID-19 and even more so with the start of the partial lockdown during the pandemic. *'I have to remind them [other members of the family] to be careful, to continuously wash their hands and everything else. I am washing and cooking all the time as being locked inside is making everyone hungry all the time and besides that there is schooling. This is so stressful...'* (F, 42, C, HU).

Table 3: Feelings of tension before and during COVID-19 pandemic according to gender

Before COVID-19	Not at all tense	Somewhat tense	Moderately tense	Very tense
Males	51%	36%	11%	1%
Females	36%	40%	20%	4%
During COVID-19	Not at all tense	Somewhat tense	Moderately tense	Very tense
Males	14%	35%	40%	12%
Females	8%	28%	37%	27%

Age

Due to their risk of mortality, the elderly were experiencing a high increase in tension levels (Table 4), while adults (30-39 and 40-49) whose parents are elderly were experiencing increased levels of tension in comparison to the 50-59 age group. This may be so as they are the age group with dependent children and possibly with parents alive yet dependent also on them. Within the Maltese context the extended family members have an important role in supporting their adult children physically, materially and psychologically. In order to keep social distancing, the young adults felt that they were abandoning their parents in this time of need, yet if they visited them they might have passed the virus to them. *'I am very worried - worried for ourselves and for our immediate relatives, seeing that they are elderly and one of them is also immunodeficient... it stresses me'* (F, 38, P, RGB).

As observed in cluster 5 of the Cluster Analysis, young adults and students claimed that they were already feeling tense in relation to their studies. However, because of the pandemic, uncertainties about the progression of their course, future employment opportunities and lack of socialisation with friends increased. *'Unmotivated to study and it's a routine which is unbreakable at this point. Wake up, sit, sit at my desk, eat and sleep. Repeat'* (F, 22, S, UG).

Table 4: Percentage of sample experiencing tension before and during COVID-19 pandemic according to age groups

Age groups	Not at all tense		Somewhat Tense		Moderately tense		Very tense	
	Before	During	Before	During	Before	During	Before	During
18-29	34%	8%	43%	28%	19%	41%	4%	23%
30-39	40%	10%	40%	28%	16%	43%	3%	19%
40-49	49%	11%	31%	34%	17%	28%	3%	27%
50-59	49%	18%	33%	33%	18%	34%	1%	16%
60+	53%	13%	30%	38%	17%	30%	0%	19%

Personality

From the in-depth responses, it emerged that personality was an important factor that determined the experience of the partial lockdown and how this affected wellbeing. According to those who are introvert, staying inside away from people was enjoyable. *'I've always enjoyed staying indoors before the virus. It's what I prefer'* (F, 44, C, UG). While extrovert individuals felt that staying inside for long periods was negatively impacting on their mental wellbeing. *'I am not used to spending so much time at home alone not meeting anyone'* (F, 38, P, RG). Those individuals who have a sense of self-control were not letting their emotions take over and affect their mental health and wellbeing. Some explained that one can easily get carried away with negative emotions during this time, however realistically they accepted the situation and tried to make the best of it. *'Staying at home can be depressing but that is what is required from us to end this pandemic as early as possible'* (M, 22, S, HU).

Status, household composition and environment

The marital status (married, single, engaged, widowed) and the household composition of individuals (parents of young or old children etc.) highly determined one's experience during lockdown.

As can be observed in cluster 10, it emerged that, for some parents, staying inside was not only preventing the contraction of the virus, but was relieving them from the stressful daily errands and activities which used to impact negatively on their wellbeing. Therefore, some married couples were regarding this situation positively. *'This is the life I want – less travel less hectic timetable, less binding schedules, flexibility – allowing for more self and family care... healthy eating and personal care'* (F, 45, P, UB).

Yet, other married couples remarked that they were not used to spending so much time at home together, which was proving to be very difficult and frequently the family environment ended up being hostile. *'We are not used to staying so much time together inside and we frequently end up fighting on silly things'* (F, 32, C, RG).

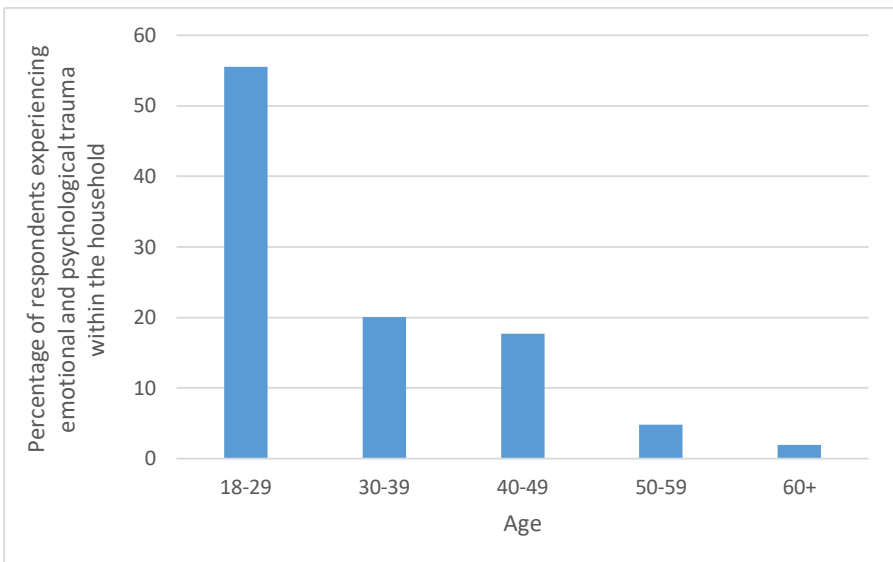
Respondents who live on their own have explained that spending so much time inside created feelings of loneliness. *'Living alone makes it tough especially in the evening'* (F, 54, P, UG). Similarly some separated or divorced parents experienced loneliness as social distancing measures were limiting them from seeing their children since they live in another household. Widowed individuals too have indicated that the social distancing measures have rekindled aspects of mourning and grief. *'Since the time my husband died... I am feeling down and lonely again'* (F, 82, O, RG). Observing other families spending time with their immediate family while they were alone affected their mental health and wellbeing.

Those adults who reside with their elderly parents felt anxious that unknowingly they may be spreading the virus to their parents when they returned home from work. They were constrained to spend less time with different groups of people in order to protect their parents. *'To protect my parents I am not meeting anyone besides my family and I miss my boyfriend and friends very much'* (F, 21, S, UG).

Parents of young children commented on the difficulties of keeping their children occupied with enjoyable activities inside. *'Staying too much at home with a young child to attend to is a bit tiring'* (F, 43, C, RG). Parents of secondary school-aged children showed different concerns as their children were spending long hours of screen time playing and learning. *'We are super busy with home schooling our older son, whilst entertaining both our boys throughout much of the day, as we do not want to avoid having them attached to a screen all the time'* (M, 38, P, HU).

Young adults complained that they preferred the company of their friends rather than that of their family members. Some do not feel compatible with their family and the fact that they were not interacting physically with their friends made them feel lonely. As observed in Figure 1, the young adults were those who mostly expressed that they were experiencing emotional and psychological trauma at home during the pandemic. *'I don't really get along well with my family and I am frustrated that I can't leave the house for a few minutes'* (F, 20, S, UB). *'Since my family members are spending most of their time indoors, we're clashing more and it's contributing to my feeling tense and giving me panic attacks'* (F, 21, C, UG).

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents experiencing emotional and psychological trauma within the household according to age groups



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The family environment can also be damaging for the health and wellbeing of people who were in abusive relationships at home. Spending long hours inside put these victims at further risk of physical and mental abuse and loss of good health and wellbeing. *'Women who were already suffering at home are now suffering more' (F, 55, P, UB)*

Schooling

The experience of online schooling created an increase in stress for some parents as well, who may have been less digitally literate and could have been concerned about being unable to help their children. This occurred because teachers and children were not digitally trained or equipped for online synchronous teaching and thus the teachers depended greatly on the digital literacy of the parents. This created inequalities amongst children and the success in children's learning was determined by the parents' digital literacy.

Working parents found it very hard to juggle between the digital schooling demands and their online work at the same time. Although this method enabled children and adults not to be exposed to the virus, mismanaged online schooling put pressure on parents, especially mothers. *'On top of that children's school and explanation work has mostly been shifted on parents, who besides, have to cope with all the housework and shopping for vulnerable members of the family etc.'* (F, 44, P, UG).

Housing conditions

Some respondents have commented that their housing environment does not enjoy enough space as it was not planned and designed for all members of the family to work and study together at the same time in one space.

'Today's apartments are quite small and families might be feeling more stressed and claustrophobic and difficult to control the children. At this point the apartment feels overcrowded and this might cause further distress' (F, 34, T, UG).

Other respondents explained that their house lacks good natural lighting due to recent erection of higher buildings taking place close by, which to some extent was formerly tolerated as one could spend time outside. However, being forced to stay inside impacted on these dwellers' mental health and wellbeing. *'Our elderly have lost privacy of their homes because of a neighbourhood construction of flats. Their internal yards have become service yards and lack light especially those who live on the ground floors and now having to stay inside in the dark is depressing them'*

(M, 23, SW, UG). Those individuals whose housing environment lacks outdoor space such as a balcony, a roof, a courtyard or a garden were also being negatively affected as they had to spend long hours inside and were not able to enjoy a daily dose of fresh air. *'I live in a very small flat with a very small balcony. I also have a very small child. It feels like we live in a prison....I will definitely consider a larger household in the future with a large garden, balcony etc.'* (M, 30, P, UB).

Furthermore, those living in apartments were experiencing high levels of tension as they feared that they will contract the virus from shared common parts within the building block. *'At the moment we are living in a block of apartments, every time we need to go out we have to touch lift buttons and door handles which may have been touched by others, infected with the virus'* (F, 42, P, HU). Those living in households with shared common parts who formerly were experiencing wealth inequality in comparison to those living in houses ended up experiencing an increased level of inequality with these measures, as their living environment made them more prone to contracting the virus too.

On the other hand, those who are owners of houses enjoying outdoor space were not feeling aspects of inequality but were grateful that their house is comfortable and airy. Hence their level of stress is lower. *'I am lucky that I do not have a substandard house built cheap[ly]'* (F, 47, P, UG). *'The few minutes of relaxation I get are when I'm in the garden or on the roof with some fresh air. That's bliss'* (F, 20, S, UB).

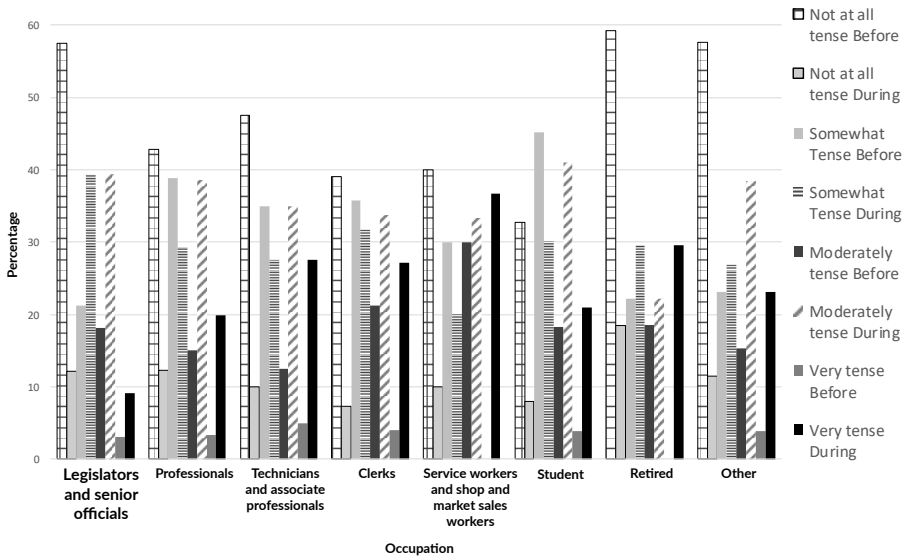
Employment conditions and opportunities

As observed in Figure 2, those engaged in low income employments such as service workers, shop assistants, students as well as retired people were experiencing higher levels of tension during the pandemic.

The fear of facing unemployment due to the pandemic was making some groups of people experience an increase in stress and tension, as they were concerned that they might not be able to maintain their family's financial needs. *'I am more worried about the long-term effects ... so many are and/or will be in dire financial difficulties. My moderate income will probably half'* (F, 56, SW, HU). Female employees were more likely to feel tense due to the possible employment changes (74%) in comparison to male employees (26%) indicating that due to familial demands women are more likely to be employed on part-time basis or in less stable employment positions in order to take care of the family. Furthermore, some students have studied to be qualified in certain types of jobs that with the pandemic were in decline. This uncertainty in future employment opportunities created levels of stress to these group of participants, making them experience anxiety since they were feeling that the time invested in their studies has been wasted. *'I am worried about how long things will be this way, how this will impact our country economically, how this could affect my family (health wise and financially) and my studies'* (F, 22, S, UG). Yet,

The emergent inequities and inequalities resulting from lockdown and social distancing measures it also emerged, interestingly, that although retired persons expressed a drastic change in tension levels, they were also those who were mostly not feeling tense at all during the pandemic. This may explain that employment and income inequalities were causing adults and young adults to experience higher tension levels. The retired were feeling tense in relation to the virus but were not feeling inequalities due to the side effects of the pandemic. This indicates that the increase in stress and tension amongst adults was high as they were concerned about both the pandemic itself together with its likely repercussions.

Figure 2: Levels of tension experienced before and during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic according to their economic activity status



Another aspect causing feelings of inequity and inequality was the type of work and its exposure to the virus. The family members of people who are either front liners or have to go out to work were mentally strained, as were the workers themselves. *'My mum can't work from home so she is at the biggest risk.'* (F, 19, S, UB). It was explained that when members of the family returned home from work, they felt stressed and anxious for fear of spreading the virus to their family members. *'I am worried that my husband still has to go to work and might catch COVID-19 and transmit it to the rest of us'* (F, 36, P, HU).

On the other hand, those working from home had a better sense of security in relation to the contraction of the virus as their work could be done from home. *'I am glad to stay at home and not go to work and risk catching something from there!'* (F, 24, C, HU).

Access to social media and features of social capital

Previous studies focusing on the local Maltese social determinants of health operating at a neighbourhood context (Satariano, Curtis 2018, Satariano 2019) emphasised that people experiencing features of social capital, social participation and social interaction, experienced positive features of wellbeing. Yet the measures of social distancing put people who depended on social interaction for improved wellbeing at risk of mental ill-health. *'I am not used to spending so much time at home and with each passing day I become even more anxious of having to stay inside not meeting anyone'* (F, 38, P, RG). The majority of countries, including Malta, adopted policies of social distancing to stop the spread of COVID-19. However, this was stopping other features of social capital which used to help in protecting mental health and wellbeing. *'I cannot meet my friends and loved ones who usually support me mentally and emotionally during difficult times'* (F, 19, S, UB).

Due to the Mediterranean climatic conditions, the local norms typically encourage the Maltese population to socially interact and spend time outside in squares or in the streets (Satariano 2020). *'You need that time where you just go get a coffee and meet different people'* (F, 20, O, HU). The lack of social interaction and face-to-face communication emerged as one of the aspects that was mostly yearned for and needed for mental health and wellbeing. *'I am a bit worried about the long term implications of staying inside especially in summer'* (F, 18, S, UG).

Access to social media gives the possibility of virtual social interaction, thus helping to reduce the impact of social isolation on mental health and wellbeing, while limiting the spread of the virus. *'It's an uncomfortable situation not to be able to enjoy the outdoors and meet friends and family but at the same time, I am keeping in touch with everyone through social media'* (F, 24, P, UB).

It emerged that the younger age groups, even though they are the age most likely to make use of social media, were more likely to experience feelings of isolation. *'Not meeting close friends and family, affects one's mental health'* (M, 26, L, HU). *'There are some moments when I greatly miss the social aspect of going out to meet loved ones - and these moments are becoming increasingly frequent as time inside goes by'* (F, 31, P, UB). Furthermore, those who had limited access to social media were not only feeling excluded physically but also virtually and were therefore at high risk of social exclusion and loneliness. *'I miss mostly my grandparents who have to stay inside and we cannot visit them. They don't know how to use social media. This makes me so sad'* (F, 22, S, UG).

However, over dependency on social media caused some to experience anxiety due to the continuous exposure of news of the high rate of mortality and infections. *'It is inevitable that you worry. This is especially true if you follow social media'* (F, 48, P, RGB). Although this information on social media helped people realise and be aware of the severity of the virus, it also caused these individuals to experience anxiety, fear and stress.

The neighbourhood environment and its therapeutic spaces

The fact that safety measures issued by the health authorities limited mobility for shopping of goods within the immediate neighbourhood environment, meant that the type of neighbourhood one lives in emerged as a very important determinant for people's wellbeing. The natural open therapeutic landscapes such as the sea and/or the greenery in the countryside emerged as highly important and beneficial during this period of the pandemic, as these environments could help individuals improve mental health and wellbeing due to contact with nature. *'Being out there in the countryside is so good for mental health care. I wish I could have a walk in the countryside'* (F, 45, P, UB).

However not everyone lives in neighbourhoods that have green or blue open spaces. Indeed, the wellbeing of those individuals who live in highly urbanised neighbourhoods were negatively affected as living in densely populated neighbourhoods not only puts them at higher risk of contracting the virus but also lacks the much-needed therapeutic experiences provided by open spaces (Figure 3 and Table 5). *'I also know that outdoor living experiences are important physically and emotionally and hence my concern is how to achieve this new balance while respecting social distancing'* (F, 45, P, UB).

On the other hand, some of the participants living in rural environments with open spaces in the countryside and near the sea were less likely to experience an increase in tension during the COVID-19 pandemic. *'I can go outside, especially to walk or jog'* (M, 34, P, RGB).

Respondents have also commented that there are inhabitants who live in neighbourhoods where the residents do not show respect towards each other and therefore create a hostile environment. *'I worry about the mental health of some friends who live in poorly built houses in urban ghetto neighbourhoods where there is hostility and lack of cooperation'* (F, 47, P, HU).

This indicates that the pandemic measures experienced within an urban neighbourhood environment with a high population density were highly damaging for wellbeing. These measures hindered inhabitants from going outside due to the fear of lack of social distancing, the knowledge that there are no therapeutic environments nearby and the fact that their neighbours might be disrespectful towards them.

Table 5: Feelings of tension experienced by the sample respondents before and during COVID-19 pandemic according to the neighbourhood environment

	Not at all tense		Somewhat Tense		Moderately tense		Very tense	
	Before	During	Before	During	Before	During	Before	During
Highly urban	36%	9%	38%	30%	22%	36%	4%	25%
Rural with green	27%	4%	48%	28%	20%	44%	5%	24%
Rural with green and blue	45%	6%	42%	33%	12%	46%	1%	14%
Urban with blue promenade	47%	16%	35%	29%	15%	31%	4%	23%
Urban with green space	40%	9%	38%	29%	19%	40%	4%	22%

Figure 3: Percentage of individuals experiencing stress and tension due to their neighbourhood contextual environment

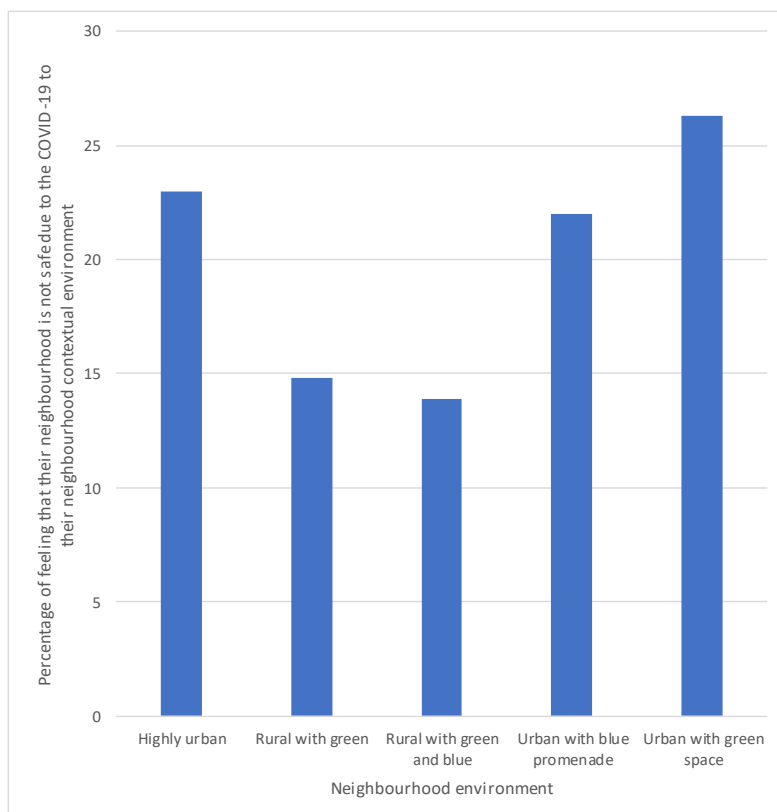
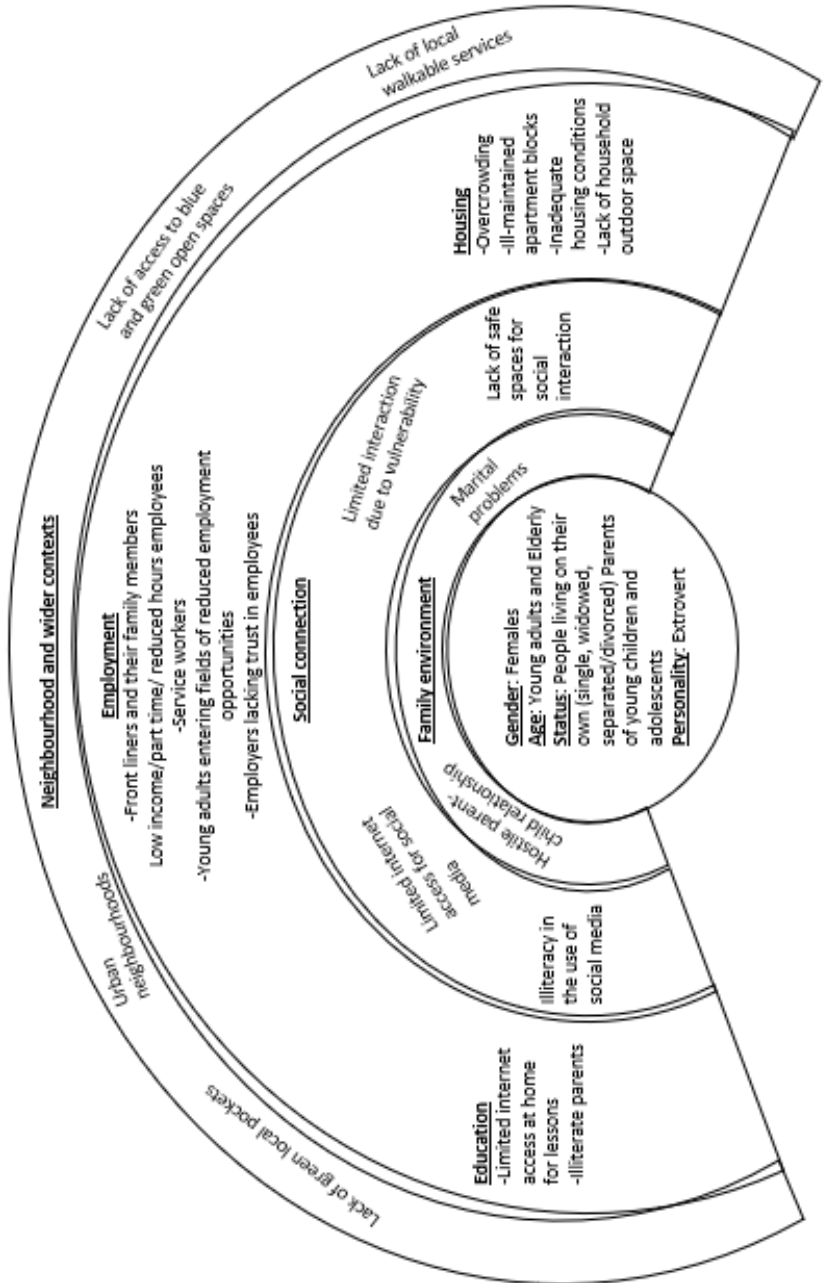


Figure 4: The model of inequalities experienced across the Social determinants of health due to the COVID-19 with the Maltese context. (Adapted from Dahlgren and Whitehead, 1991)



Recommendations and Conclusions

This study has enhanced the understanding of who was experiencing emerging inequities and inequalities within a Maltese Mediterranean context during the first wave of the pandemic in relation to lockdown and social distancing measures. Moreover, it has contributed internationally to the knowledge of how the experience of these lockdown measures impact on wellbeing in variable ways in relation to the social determinants of health. As summarised in the model in Figure 4, a number of groups of people including women, young adults, elderly and people employed in unstable, low income jobs, those lacking IT skills, those living in densely built housing environments, and in neighbourhoods lacking therapeutic green and blue open spaces were and may still be experiencing higher levels of inequities and inequalities and so their wellbeing has been negatively affected. The repercussions of this pandemic and the lockdown measures are likely to continue being experienced across the lifecourse of these groups of individuals, if policies are not directed to help them improve their health and wellbeing.

This study highlighted the importance of giving attention to the social determinants of health within the context of a pandemic and within the Maltese context where social determinants of health are rarely studied and given importance. It has emphasised that the experience of the measures taken in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic created new inequities and inequalities related to the social determinants of health. From the emergent experiences, the impact on mental health may continue being felt across the lifecourse of these individuals.

Following the period of data collection for this study, Malta experienced a high rise in cases (Cuschieri et al. 2020) attributed to the lack of observance of measures of social distancing which may be considered as a reaction to the authorities' lack of understanding of the health damaging experiences of the lockdown measures within specific neighbourhood environments. This paper therefore emphasises the importance of policy planning in relation to the emergent inequities and inequalities and an understanding of how these impact on the mental health and wellbeing of different groups of people across the social determinants of health.

This study contributes to public health policy makers by highlighting who the groups of people mostly in need of help and support are, why they need it and where they need it. The experience of the measures of the lockdown are highly complex as some aspects can be experienced positively by some groups of people yet negatively by others. Therefore, this study shows that during this period of time, the protection from the deadly COVID-19 virus can also cause lifecourse effects on those whose wellbeing has been negatively affected due to feelings of inequality and inequity.

This paper also contributes to research by highlighting that the experiences of the social determinants of health during this pandemic are highly relational to the individual's status, age, gender, personality and economic stability together with housing and neighbourhood environment. This study suggests that researchers and

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policy makers may need to be more aware of the complexity of the experiences linked to the measures of the lockdown which although they limit the spread of the virus, can also greatly harm the wellbeing of different groups of individuals. Public health strategies should aim at increasingly addressing these needs at a personal, social, economic and neighbourhood therapeutic level and should be sensitive to the variable experiences of the measures taken to stop the spread of the virus. This would help policymakers and public health officials not only to target the public health aspects related to the virus itself, but also to address the secondary effects of the measures and their impact on health and wellbeing. Thus, public health officials should not only take a strict stance on the spread of the virus but also on the experienced inequities and inequalities which may have public health repercussions throughout the lifecourse of individuals.

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Malta's Cultural Diplomacy

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Abstract

Cultural diplomacy is the promotion of one's culture while understanding that of others. It is more focused on building relations between communities of different countries while embracing the notion that every citizen can be the actor or recipient of cultural diplomacy. This diplomacy has been in practice in Malta for a number of centuries with a perfect example being the St John's Co-Cathedral.

Cultural diplomacy evolves with time and today, it is more focused on building cultural relations and strengthening mutual understandings rather than highlighting only the promotion of one's culture. In this regard, this paper will analyse the work done by Malta, especially during the last six years, to enhance its cultural relations such as during the CHOGM 2015, the Maltese Presidency of the Council of the European Union-2017 and Valletta - European Capital of Culture 2018. It will also serve to highlight how Malta has been instrumental in serving as a cultural hub for foreign artists to promote their work in Malta.

This paper will refer to interviews with several personalities involved in cultural diplomacy so as to provide a more in-depth analysis of the work done by the country. It will also suggest how Malta can enhance its cultural relations in a constantly changing world.

Keywords: *Malta, Identity, Cultural Diplomacy, Cultural Relations, Foreign Affairs*

Introduction

Cultural diplomacy uses culture as a means of dialogue between two or more countries. In contrast to traditional diplomacy, cultural diplomacy is more focused on building relations between people of various nationalities, thus reaching a vast array of people.

Since its independence in 1964, Malta has an active role in the international scene engaging in various bilateral relations, including numerous cultural agreements that led to the establishment of Malta's cultural diplomacy. In later years, events such as the CHOGM (2005 and 2015), the Malta's Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2017 and Valletta - European Capital of Culture in 2018, were all important platforms for Malta to promote its identity beyond its shores. Today, Malta has an important role: that of continuing the legacy of these events whilst seeking new

opportunities where to make its presence felt. While as a country, Malta is very small compared to other nations such as France and the United States of America, the island has an outpouring history and culture that strike many. Its colonial past has yielded in return historic buildings and monuments sought by tourists. It also gave the island the opportunity to use its shared history as a bridge for further diplomatic relations and economic ties. The local government also has a crucial role to play in ensuring that Malta takes advantage of these opportunities and in giving incentives and guidance to local artists to be successful internationally. In this context, one must acknowledge that Malta's resources are limited in comparison to other larger countries and thus, it is important to have a well-built strategic approach to guarantee that the country's message reaches the targeted audience. One must however be cautious not to politicise culture and to give artists the freedom to communicate without any political barriers or constraints.

The aims of this paper are to provide a detailed account of what constitutes Malta's cultural diplomacy, to assess recent cultural policies so as to identify what is being proposed by the government and to propose which measures can be improved.

Diplomacy and Culture

Diplomacy can be defined as the 'the profession, activity, or skill of managing international relations, typically by a country's representatives abroad' (Oxford Reference n.d.). Through diplomacy, countries can enhance their economic relations and strengthen their ties in other fields such as technology and culture. 'As today's world is more linked and interdependent than ever before, effective and skilful diplomacy is vital to ensure that humankind can navigate an ever-growing list of shared challenges such as climate change, pandemics, transnational terrorism and nuclear proliferation that may be our undoing if left unresolved.' Furthermore, diplomacy is not limited to states but it also embraces other actors such as international governmental and non-governmental organisations, two of which are the European Union and the United Nations (McGlinchey 2017).

Diplomacy has not been spared the effects of time. While ambassadors are still important figures for their countries, technology has enabled easier communication between them and their homeland. Moreover, nowadays, ministers or Heads of state can engage directly in communicating with other countries, in some instances even without the need of having a diplomatic representative. However, the role of the diplomatic corps remains essential as witnessed during the Covid-19 pandemic where embassies had to intervene to assist their citizens and organize repatriation.

Diplomacy is crucial especially for island states like Malta since it gives them a platform in the international arena. As a country, Malta had several important events which enabled the country to show its diplomatic expertise, one of which

was Dr Arvid Pardo's speech at the United Nations in 1967 which led to the adoption of the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade Promotion, 2017a). Another important event was the Malta Summit, a meeting between the President of the United States of America George Bush and the Soviet Union leader Michael Gorbachev in 1989, that marked the end of the Cold war (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC] 1989). Then, in 1997 Malta hosted the second Euro-Med Conference, where the country served as a leader in the continuation of the Barcelona process launched in 1995 (MEDAC – University of Malta 2020). The Barcelona process aim was to bolster relations between Europe and South Mediterranean countries, which eventually led to the establishment of the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008 (Union for the Mediterranean [UFM] 2020). Such important events are an example that every country, irrespective of its size, can be crucial in maintaining peace and stability.

Since diplomacy is centered on relationships, it cannot be separated from all that constitutes the country where the diplomat is working, including culture, defined by Joseph Nye as a 'set of values and practices that create meaning for a society' (Nye 2004, p. 11). Culture affects how we behave, think and feel; it also influences how we perceive and interact with the world (AFS-USA n.d.). It is therefore crucial for a diplomat to understand the host country's culture so as to avoid embarrassing incidents: it is not appropriate to give a Chinese a clock or watch since it is interpreted as if the person is running out of time on earth. In certain parts of South Africa, a ceremonial sword is seen as a sign of power while in Switzerland, it is interpreted as a symbol of aggression. Similarly, knives are not given as a gift in the United Kingdom as they believe that '[it] could cut through friendship' whereas in Japan, it is a symbol of suicide. Another example of different cultural meanings are flowers: while roses generally symbolise love and appreciation, the significance of their colour varies: yellow roses in France are interpreted as a sign of infidelity whereas in Mexico, they are seen as a sign of death (BBC 2015). Dining etiquette is also culturally influenced: in Egypt, it is not customary for a person to refill one's own glass but one has to wait for others to do so (Willard 2014). Culture is thus a complex phenomenon and it is vital to understand the differences that exist among various cultures in order to build a strong inter-cultural dialogue.

Cultural Diplomacy

When diplomacy and culture become entwined, they give rise to the phenomenon of Cultural Diplomacy or the 'exchange of ideas, values, traditions and other aspects of culture or identity' through which the public and private sector or society at large reinforce relations, engage in social-cultural cooperation, promote national interests and others (Institute for Cultural Diplomacy n.d.). Scholars tend to associate cultural diplomacy with soft power. Whilst the latter has several advantages over hard power,

one of its weaknesses is that results cannot be quantified. Consequently, it could take years until a country reaps its benefits. This means that cultural diplomacy cannot be considered as one-off event but is a process of relationships that nourish over the years.

While for many this may be a new approach, cultural diplomacy has been in practice locally for a number of centuries. One such example is St John's Co-Cathedral, completed by the Knights of St John in 1577, with eight chapels pertaining to different languages, mirroring the respective countries' opulence (*A Maltese Gem of Baroque Art – Explore St John's Co Cathedral Malta* n.d.). While today this magnificent cathedral serves its original function as a religious seat, it has also become a cultural centre connecting Malta to the various countries that have formed part of the historic legacy of the Knights of St John.

Professor Vicki Ann Cremona, former Ambassador of Malta to France (2005-2009) and to Tunisia (2009-2013), comments that 'in a sense, long before the 20th century, Malta was the seat of a union of European nations through various nationalities that made up the Order of St John'. As a result of these shared histories, in 2008, during the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, an exhibition entitled *Between the Battlesword and the Cross: Masterpieces from the Armoury* was held at the Hôtel des Invalides in France (Cremona 2008). The aim of this exhibition was to portray the historical connection that exists between France and Malta, especially since eleven Grand Masters of the Order were French, among whom Jean Parisot de Valette, the founder of Malta's capital city, Valletta. The exhibition showcased several weapons and armours of the Order of St John together with a selection of fine paintings (Gonzi 2008). On this occasion, a book was published with texts both in French and English, thus providing further insight on the Order of St John, on the items exhibited and on the link that bound the two countries.

In 2015, as part of the preparations for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) to be held in Malta during the same year, the island launched its external cultural programme. Several events were held across the Commonwealth countries such as performances by *ŻfinMalta* in India and Malaysia, recitals and a photographic exhibition in Australia to strengthen Malta's relations with these countries (Times of Malta 2015a).

Malta's Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2017 was another important event that attracted the attention of several European countries. It was also a great opportunity for Malta to show its diplomatic prowess to the other EU Members States. During the six-month period of the presidency, Malta was not only active in continuing the work at Council level but also in promoting its identity. Whilst several activities were held in European countries such as Belgium, Germany, France, Spain, Poland, Luxembourg, Greece, Austria and the United Kingdom, others were held in Israel, Russia, Turkey, Australia, China and India (Arts Council Malta 2018).

In 2018, Valletta was chosen as the European Capital of Culture, another golden opportunity to project its image in Europe and beyond. Several events were held

in the Maltese capital and throughout the whole island giving the opportunity to foreigners to experience Malta's true identity while allowing them to participate in a number of cultural exchanges such as during the Valletta Film Festival and the Malta International Jazz Festival (Valletta 2018 Foundation 2017).

The benefit of cultural diplomacy for Malta is twofold: that of promoting its culture beyond the Maltese shores while understanding the culture of other countries. In return, foreign countries will work hard to influence and attract Maltese citizens especially youths who are eager to travel and visit the world. Everyone can be an agent of cultural diplomacy and thus, education is crucial in order to ensure that our citizens appreciate their own culture and that of other countries.

Artists and organisations

Maltese artists are important in building cultural relations, with several of them becoming successful in the international arena and two being nominated Malta's cultural ambassadors: Joseph Calleja, a widely renowned Maltese tenor, and Francis Sultana, a Gozitan interior designer living in London. Joseph Calleja has a vast repertoire and was even nominated for a Grammy award in 2011 (Recording Academy 2012). This Maltese tenor's success has in return been pivotal for the promotion of his homeland whereas Mr Sultana was instrumental for Malta's return to the Venice Biennale in 2017; he is also a member of the Malta International Contemporary Art Space (MICAS) board, a project set to open its doors in 2023 (Olson 2018).

Although some artists may not be officially promoting the Maltese identity, the fact that they are Maltese already makes them ambassadors for their country. One such example is Emma Muscat whose career took a turn when she participated in the Italian television programme *Amici* in 2018. Since then, she has never looked back and today, she is well renowned in Italy. While Emma's songs are mainly in Italian, the fact that she is Maltese, has a Maltese surname and some of her music videos are filmed in Malta, indirectly helps in the promotion of her country.

Artistic creativity can take various forms, either independently, in groups or in organisations. An important actor that is perhaps neglected by the Maltese are the band clubs that play an important role in Malta's social fabric: they are not only protagonists in training new musicians but they are also instrumental in organising the festivities of the village *fešta*. According to the President of the Republic of Malta Dr George Vella, band clubs have three main roles: to provide informal education in various areas such as in organisation, in administration and in music; to instill a sense of community and to keep Maltese traditions alive, 'the same traditions that make us, the Maltese people, unique' (Vella 2021a). Furthermore, several Maltese band clubs have direct contact with other foreign band clubs and they showcase their work abroad. This is a true example of cultural relations at its best since citizens engage directly with another foreign country to exchange their cultural ideas.

Several musicians who started their career in a band club continued to improve their talents and occupied important national posts such as within the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra. One such example is Joseph Vella, a Maltese conductor and composer who passed away in 2018. Joseph Vella was not only the band master of La Stella Philharmonic Society, Rabat, Gozo and of Count Roger Band Club, Rabat, Malta, but he also gained international success throughout his career by performing in several countries such as Japan, the United States and a number of European countries (Joseph Vella n.d.).

Maltese identity in the fashion industry

The fashion industry is another important element in culture, with some describing clothes as ‘the social skin’ since they define us both as individuals and as a society (Burns 2002). While the Maltese clothing and fashion industry is limited, with the majority of products being imported, in recent years we have seen an increase in Maltese designers interested in experimenting with the Maltese identity in the fashion industry. One duo who is a pioneer in this sector is Charles and Ron, whose fashion and exhibitions are successful not only locally but also in big cities such as New York and Los Angeles. These designers select aspects from Maltese culture and turn them into fashionable clothes and bags, some of them worn by several famous artists such as Ally Brooke, Kelly Rowland and Jessie J (Charles and Ron n.d.). Another artist who gained fame both locally and internationally is Luke Azzopardi, who was awarded the ‘Premio Cultura e Moda 2016’ by *L’Istituto Italiano di Cultura* (Luke Azzopardi – a). He provides a fresh look on the Maltese fashion industry with some of his designs even featuring Malta’s historical aspects. One of his projects includes scarfs designed in collaboration with MUŻA whilst another project was a collection for the Three Palaces Festival (Luke Azzopardi – b,c). Luke’s studio has also been curating a collection of Maltese Victorian and Edwardian jewellery from the Frank Zampa’s archives. Frank Zampa was established as an Italian-Maltese family run jewellery since the early 19th century and Azzopardi’s aim is to transform these jewellerys into contemporary designs to be worn nowadays (Luke Azzopardi – d).

By time, other artists became even more interested in tapping into this niche, especially in the jewellery sector, limited until recently to the Maltese cross or the traditional eye found on the Maltese *luzzu*. Recently, brands like ‘Mvintage’ have been a catalyst in bringing a fresh look to what is defined as Maltese: their collections such as ‘*Maduma*’, ‘*Habbata*’, ‘*Ta’ Pinu*’ and ‘*Munita*’, all embrace the Maltese identity in elegant jewellery that can be worn by women throughout the day and on various occasions (Mvintage n.d.). Another brand that is also exploiting the benefits of the Maltese characteristics is Carisma. Similar to Mvintage, Carisma creates jewelry that showcases Malta’s iconic features but it also manufactures

bags, belts and scarves inspired by the Maltese identity (Carisma n.d.). Both local brands have been so successful that they have expanded their collection to the male sector.

In the cultural diplomacy arena, the success of these brands is of great importance for Malta because they make the islands' identity easily recognisable and accessible to foreigners in an elegant and fashionable manner.

The Maltese Language in Music

When music is accompanied by lyrics, this also impacts a nation's branding and can help in promoting a language. Countries like Italy, Spain and places in Latin American succeed in using their charming beat to entice a vast audience and give a platform to their language to travel across the globe. Their songs are constantly on the international top charts even though many do not understand the language. As John Blacking (1987) writes, 'the growing popularity of non-European music in Europe and America and of 'Western' music in the Third World, suggest[s] that the cultural barriers are somewhat illusory, externally imposed, and concerned more with verbal rationalizations and explanations of music and its associations with specific events, [rather] than with the music itself'. Up to a few years ago, songs in Maltese were either limited or unpopular amongst the population with several Maltese artists resorting to the English language since they believed that this was the passport to success. However, groups like 'The Travellers', one of the most successful modern groups in Malta, took a great leap of faith and eventually proved this theory wrong. When listening to their songs in Maltese, one can easily enjoy the use of the language together with the freshness of their music. Other Maltese groups who choose to compose their songs in Maltese are *Sterjo Tipi*, *Brikkuni*, *Brodu*, *Kapitlu Tlettax*, *Skald* and 'Bernie and Pod'.

The success of these bands is of huge importance to Malta's identity since it continues to add to Malta's cultural heritage while promoting the language even among foreigners. Music in Maltese can truly act as one of the cornerstones of Malta's cultural diplomacy because if we, Maltese, do not promote our language, already limited only to the island and to the Maltese diaspora, who else will?

The Maltese Film Industry

Malta is known for attracting film producers such as those of *Gladiator* (2000), *The Count of Monte Cristo* (2002), *Munich* (2005), *World War Z* (2013), *Assassin's Creed* (2016) and others (Malta Film Commission). Such productions, together with other television series, have increased the island's exposure throughout the world, especially amongst those involved in this domain. Moreover, Maltese film

producers have become interested more than ever to venture into this lucrative sector, sometimes also with feature films in Maltese.

One film that has made a name for Malta is *Simshar*, released in 2014. A fictional film inspired by true events about a fishing boat accident, it was submitted as Malta's first entry for the 87th Academy Awards for the Best International Feature Film and won several international awards, one of which being the best dramatic film at the Edmonton Awards in Canada (Times of Malta 2015b). Another film in Maltese featuring once again the fisheries sector is *Luzzu*, released in 2021, narrating the fictitious story of a struggling fisherman. The film gained numerous awards, one of which was the Sundance Film festival's Special Jury Award (2021) bestowed to the main actor, Jesmark Scicluna, a fisherman from *Sigġiewi*. Moreover, the film was chosen as Malta's entry in the 94th Academy Award for the Best International Feature film (Times of Malta 2021), thus marking a significant progress for Malta in this sector since in a span of few years, two films were presented at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science.

There are several other Maltese productions that have been screened in other countries. Such productions continue to help in promoting Malta and its artists across the globe. Moreover, the fact that some of these productions were in Maltese, continues to help in making the language accessible to a larger audience beyond Maltese shores.

Maltese Diaspora

The Maltese diaspora is another important pillar in Malta's cultural diplomacy since thousands of Maltese live abroad in countries like Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and the United States. Moreover, since 2004 when Malta became a full member of the European Union, a good number of Maltese travelled to Belgium and Luxembourg in order to work in the various European institutions (National Cultural Policy 2011).

Mr Toni Attard, former director of strategy at Arts Council Malta from 2014 till 2017,¹ commented that when one talks about the Maltese diaspora, one has to differentiate between the Maltese community and the artists within that community. He believes that whereas with the Maltese communities, it is best to use cultural relations rather than cultural diplomacy, with regards to artists, it is important to find ways how to connect with them especially since they know the community and have contacts with whom they can then open up conversations (T Attard 2018, pers. comm. 27 March).

Hon. Dr Owen Bonnici, former minister for Culture, comments that the Maltese diaspora plays a curial role in helping Malta 'speak louder on the international scene'.

¹ As from 2018, Toni Attard started working as director of Culture Venture, an enterprise founded by himself.

While, according to him, sometimes the first generation continues to think that Malta has remained fixed in time, he believes that the second and third generation can provide a great opportunity for Malta's cultural diplomacy (O Bonnici 2018, pers. comm. 10 May).

On the other hand, Prof. Cremona mentions the need of an independent cultural diplomacy policy. She notes that in France, there are a number of Maltese descendants who migrated from Algeria and Tunisia following the revolutions in the late 1950s. Prof. Cremona remarked that third generation Maltese onwards were no longer feeling any link with the islands because they have amalgamated with the French society. She believes that in 2004, when Malta became a full member of the European Union, the island should have used this opportunity to organise cultural productions such as concerts and exhibitions, to help them retrieve their identity. These cultural ties are important especially when one notes that amongst these people, there are businessmen and companies that can give rise to economic relationships (V Cremona 2018, pers. comm. 21 March).

The two National Cultural Policies of 2011 and 2021 state that the Maltese diaspora plays a significant role in promoting our Maltese culture. It is thus essential that we continue engaging in a constant dialogue with the Maltese living abroad, getting in touch with their needs and making them feel closer to their homeland. One good initiative was the establishment of the Council for Maltese Living Abroad that works to promote and safeguard the interest of Maltese citizens living in foreign countries. Established by Act XX of 2011 and following the recommendations of the Emigration convention held in 2010 (Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade Promotion 2018), the Council, chaired by the Minister for Foreign and European Affairs, is currently composed of 14 Maltese members living in several countries and two members living in Malta (Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs, n.d.). As of 2014, the Council also presents an annual report of the items discussed.

One particular item of interest is the voting rights for Maltese living abroad and the type of processes that could be set up in order to have representation in the national parliament and in the European Union without affecting the current existent mechanisms (Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2015). Another proposal discussed was that of keeping the Council informed of the activities held in Malta in order to be able to promote them amongst the Maltese diaspora (Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2016). It also explored the possibility of setting up a radio station broadcasting from Malta to the Maltese diaspora. However, this proposal was deemed unpractical and a suggestion was made to encourage existent radios to give more space to programmes dedicated to these communities beyond the Maltese shores (Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade Promotion 2017b). The Council also proposed subtitles in English to be included in Maltese news broadcasted in Australia on SBS TV once a week to help reach a wider range of people, especially given that the knowledge of the Maltese language is nowadays limited. While this suggestion was minuted by the Public Broadcasting Services (PBS), in 2020 the PBS announced that a decision

on this item will be taken at the opportune time (Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs 2020).

Another issue discussed is how Maltese of the second or any subsequent generation can get to know some basic information about Malta before applying for Maltese citizenship, in line with the Maltese Citizenship Act of 2007 (Community Malta Agency n.d.). It was however clarified that this cannot be obligatory and needs to be done on a voluntary basis (Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade Promotion 2017b). The Council also discussed the need for the Maltese diaspora to be informed of the latest changes in the Maltese language.

The National Cultural Policy 2021 has called for better synergies between the Ministries responsible for Foreign Affairs, Culture and Education ‘to rescue the Maltese language from a sure natural death among the diaspora communities’ to encourage third and fourth generations, together with non-Maltese, to learn the Maltese language. The policy also recommends the teaching of Maltese cultural aspects and the creation of artistic and cultural projects that connect more the Maltese living abroad with Malta and its citizens (National Cultural Policy 2021).

These suggestions indicate that this Council has been instrumental in providing the Maltese government with concrete proposals that reflect the needs of the Maltese diaspora. Furthermore, it is encouraging to note that the recently published National Cultural Policy 2021 takes into consideration the urgent need to promote the Maltese language amongst this Maltese community. It is important that the Maltese government continues to invest in the Maltese living abroad since it is only through them that the Maltese culture and the Maltese language can be kept alive across the globe.

Cultural Relations

Another aspect of cultural diplomacy, described by Maurits Berger (2008) as a method that focuses on ‘understanding the other by looking at the variety of ways that the other expresses itself [in]’, is the acceptance and understanding of other cultures to create meaningful interactions. In view of this, Malta has numerous activities that empower foreign artists to exhibit their work in Malta in order to strengthen its cultural ties with different countries.

In 2021, the President of the Republic of Malta launched ‘The Presidency Culture Symposia Series’, a series of meetings to explain and understand better the cultural bonds that exist between Malta and other countries. The first symposium was held on 7 May 2021 entitled ‘Malta and France: Shared Histories, New Visions’, attended by the President of the Republic of Malta, the Minister for Foreign and European Affairs Evarist Bartolo, the French Secretary of State for European Affairs, Clément Beaune, the Ambassador of the French Republic to Malta, Brigitte Curmi, the Ambassador of Malta to France, Carmelo Inguanez and other distinguished guests

(Department of Information – Office of the President 2021a). In this symposium, the aspect of shared histories was highlighted since the presence of the French in Malta dates back several centuries, particularly to the period of the Knights of St John. On the other hand, a considerable group of Maltese descendants are now present in France where they have moved as a result of the wars of independence in Algeria and Tunisia (Department of Information – Office of the President 2021b). The aim of these symposia is to explain and explore Malta's cultural ties with important actors and to foster 'dialogue and cultural exchanges between peer experts and researchers in both countries and beyond' (Department of Information – Office of the President 2021a). The other symposia scheduled will focus on other countries and organisations, especially those that occupied the island, those that provided good economic opportunities, others where the Maltese diaspora found refuge and those countries whose citizens found refuge in Malta (Vella 2021b).

Being open to other cultures also means the ability to act as a cultural hub for various foreign artists interested in displaying their creativity in the country. One such example are arts residencies that give accommodation and space to foreign artists to showcase their work. The Blitz organisation founded in 2013 is one such independent non-profit contemporary art space aiming to reach artists beyond Maltese shores. In 2015, the Blitz launched its residency programme and received around 200 applicants from cities like London, Wroclaw, Athens, Berlin, Paris, Kuwait and Istanbul (Blitz n.d.).

Spazju Kreattiv is another artistic hub, founded by the government entity Fondazzjoni Kreattività in 2000, and situated in Valletta within the St James Cavalier, a fort that dates back to the sixteenth century. *Spazju Kreattiv* serves as a creative hub for artists while offering various facilities exhibition spaces and possibilities: a cinema, a theatre in the round, an artist in residence programme and also run a number of festivals (*Spazju Kreattiv* n.d.). Whilst it is open to both locals and foreign artists, *Spazju Kreattiv's* programme gives foreign artists a good platform to exhibit their work especially by hosting foreign film productions.

Another creative hub is the Valletta Design Cluster, a newly established cultural space that opened its doors in 2021. It is a project of the Valletta Cultural Agency and part of the legacy of the Valletta 2018 European Capital of Culture, aimed at creating a space for artistic creativity both for Maltese and foreign artists. Close to the Valletta Design Cluster, one can find two town houses that form part of this project and that can accommodate up to 11 persons. These accommodations can be utilised both as residences for foreign artists and also for other artists involved in the activities run by the Valletta Design Cluster. This place is equipped with the latest cutting technology in woodwork, metalwork, electronics and textiles in order to facilitate the artists' work together with a kitchen with a traditional Maltese oven to allow them to experience the traditional way of cooking. It also has fifteen studios, a place for co-working and a conference room. This project includes a roof garden which is another open space that can be utilised both by the artists involved in the

design cluster and also by the public at large. The Valletta Design Cluster project was instrumental to the regeneration of the old abattoir built in the 17th century and saved it from a total state of disrepair (Valletta Cultural Agency n.d.).

Several other activities organised by Malta give a platform to foreign artists such as the Valletta Film Festival, The Malta International Fireworks Festival and The Malta International Organ Festival. One new event was the Malta India Film Festival, held between the 14th and 16th December 2018, where a selection of Indian movies were shown at *Spazju Kreattiv*, St James Cavalier Valletta (Spazju Kreattiv 2018). Unfortunately, the local cinema is rather limited to either Hollywood or other western European studios, thus leaving several other foreign productions unnoticed. This festival gave the Maltese audience the opportunity to view Bollywood's blockbusters such as *Raazi*, *Sanju* and *Thugs of Hindostan* that was partly shot in Malta. In return, the festival displayed also six Maltese productions: *Kannizzati*, *Marbut*, *Hemm Dar il-Qala*, *Id-Destin*, *The Boat* and *Toxicity* that were simultaneously shown in India, thus enabling Maltese artists to access such a prestigious market (Times of Malta 2018).

Besides art residencies, there are various other platforms where foreign artists can exhibit their work in Malta, one such example being the cultural centres of their respective countries. Italy, China and Russia have their cultural centres in Malta that help in the promotion of their culture with the Italian and Chinese cultural centres being probably the two most active ones, organising activities all year round. France has the *Alliance Française de Malte-Méditerranée* that works to promote the French language and culture in Malta. The Alliance acts both as a linguistic centre and as a cultural one, organising cultural activities such as wine tasting, the annual launch of the Beaujolais wine in November and the French Film Days (Alliance Française n.d.). Another organisation is the German-Maltese circle and like the other institutions, it organises several activities such as film shows, exhibitions, lectures, concerts and others, with the aim of bringing closer the German culture to the Maltese shores. This organisation is also the only recognised centre by the Goethe Institute in Germany to hold all Goethe's examinations (German-Maltese Circle n.d.).

Furthermore, in 2021 EUNIC Malta or the European Union National Institutes for Culture that brings together a network of European cultural centres and organisations to 'bring to life European cultural collaboration in more than 100 countries worldwide with a network of 132 clusters' was launched (EUNIC n.d.). Malta's cluster currently incorporates the following partners: Arts Council Malta, the Embassy of Austria, the Italian Cultural Institute, the British Council in Malta, the Embassy of Spain, *Alliance Française de Malte-Méditerranée*, the Embassy of France, the Embassy of Poland and the Embassy of Hungary. In return, Malta is active in a number of clusters in various cities: New York, Warsaw, Brussels, Vienna, Rome, Netherlands and Tunisia (Arts Council Malta 2021).

Pandemic

The cultural sector was heavily impacted by the Covid-19 Pandemic with activities being either cancelled or postponed. The pandemic was a huge blow, especially in the organisation of cultural events that form an integral part of cultural diplomacy.

In this regard, Malta had to re-think its policies and despite the various difficulties encountered, Malta still managed to gain publicity while continuing to promote its culture in a virtual format, thanks to the Internet and to various television channels that broadcasted features on the Maltese islands. One such programme was entitled 'Wonders of Malta' aired on BBC World News, consisting of two programmes giving an overview of the history of Malta (BBC World News 2021). The French channel 'TV5Monde' also aired a similar programme 'Destination francophonie - Destination Malte' that gave a brief overview of the history of Malta (TV5Monde 2021). On the other hand, 'Españoles en el mundo' aired on the Spanish TV station RTVE, showed members of the Spanish diaspora living in Malta outlining the cultural identity of Malta: its history, places to visit, food and entertainment. Apart from a few historical inaccuracies, this programme embodies the essence of cultural relations, where Spanish people share with others their detailed knowledge of Malta's culture. The 2021 edition of this programme also made use of songs sung by Maltese artists either in Maltese or in English (RTVE 2021), bringing the viewer even closer to the island despite travel restrictions.

Way forward

The National Cultural Policy 2021, published for public consultation during the first months of the said year, continues to build on the previous cultural policy and strategies while identifying eight priorities as its foundation, amongst which that of 'Advancing International Cultural Relations'. The policy has several positive outcomes such as the creation of a joint work plan between the Ministry responsible for Culture and that of Foreign Affairs that take into account the 'EU strategic approach to international cultural relations.' It also calls for Arts Council Malta to employ an internationalisation strategy in order to set up representative offices abroad with the aim of reinforcing Malta's participation within the EUNIC clusters. The policy advocates for a stronger Cultural Diplomacy Fund in order to help Malta's embassies abroad create cultural policies and for a funding mechanism to contribute to the implementation of bilateral and multilateral agreements. Another positive measure is the mobility of artists in 'Malta, to and from, Southern Europe and Northern Africa as a two-way mobility priority, through showcasing, co-production and artist residencies'. The policy also comments on the role of the Maltese diaspora in Malta's cultural development through co-production and language learning (National Cultural Policy 2021).

Whilst all these positive measures continue to build on other cultural policies and strategies, there is always room for improvement. One suggestion is to take the proposals mentioned in the new cultural policy and create a separate cultural diplomacy policy that will help in giving the required attention to this area. This will also contribute to a more strategic approach while working to consolidate all the activities held by Maltese artists abroad. Such a policy should help create a holistic approach and give better guidance to artists on how and where they can exhibit their art. This will still allow artists to choose independently with whom to establish cultural relations while at the same time providing guidance to those who would like to find out more about the most adequate cultural hubs for their art.

Being a small island state, Malta cannot afford to carry out cultural diplomacy simultaneously across the globe, especially given the lack of funding compared to other bigger countries, so it is vital to embrace a more strategic approach such as that of the use of themes. This thematic approach will surely be beneficial to Malta to publicise a particular area such as architecture or fashion for a definite period of time. Malta also needs to invest heavily in its citizens: it cannot have a successful cultural diplomacy if Maltese citizens themselves do not appreciate it. This can be achieved by ensuring that the necessary importance to history, languages and to other artistic subjects is given in schools. Furthermore, as a country Malta needs to continue to work on its cultural identity irrespective of any political and commercial rivalry. It is only in this way that Malta can have an identity that unites its citizens and strengthens its nation branding.

Diplomacy cannot live without culture and thus, cultural diplomacy is the natural way forward in promoting a country and in establishing ties across the world. As a neutral country, Malta depends on soft power more than any other country and cultural diplomacy is crucial for it to extend its clout beyond its shores.

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Factors influencing Students' Subject Choice in Year 8 within the Maltese Education System

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Abstract

In a neoliberal era, where the community is continuously distressed over social and economic issues (Braedley, Luxton 2010), the Maltese education system requires students in the second year of Secondary School to choose 'Option' subjects which automatically channel them into career-oriented mode. The important decision will eventually put them on a "path to a job" (Robert 2015, p. 5). Studies claim that between the ages of 11 and 12 individuals are too young and too inexperienced to make crucial choices (Sultana, Sammut 1997). Adolescence is that period during which an individual's mind "is most susceptible to influence" (Hashim, Embong 2015, p. 1). This paper reflects on the main factors that influence students' approach towards their choice of the 'Option' subjects in Year 8, with particular reference to the subject of Geography. This study employed the mixed method research approach, utilizing a triangulation made up of an extensive survey among students in three different schools; three interviews to Guidance Teachers and three interviews to Geography Teachers. Analysis of the findings showed that the main factors that determine the students' choice include the career-orientation of the students and parental influence. Other factors also emerge, including the students' own learning experience of the subject which is often determined by pedagogic choices of the teacher. This paper will discuss these influential factors, integrating Geography as an example.

Keywords: *Students' Attitudes, Subject Choice, Influential Factors, School Geography, Guidance teachers*

Introduction

The Maltese educational system requires twelve-year-old adolescents to face a subject choice at an age when an individual's mind "is most susceptible to influence" (Hashim, Embong 2015 p. 1). According to Bartram (2010) young people are easily influenced while thinking and reacting to particular situations. Although there are findings which show that children at that age (11-12 years) can also think critically in a way that they are able to assess experiences or ideas and "weigh arguments

before reaching a balanced judgement” (Fisher, Binns 2016, p. 53), other studies claim that at that age individuals are too young and too inexperienced to make crucial choices (Sultana, Sammut 1997). Adolescents would be highly influenced by a number of factors, including what other people say about them and what friends think of them (Bornstein et al. 2010) and therefore they are easily carried away by “social forces” (Stables 1996, p. 225). These include traditional influences such as parents’ positions, family and peer groups’ attitudes (Salisbury, Iddell 2003).

The objective of this research was to identify influential factors that determine the students’ approach and attitude towards the ‘Option’ subject choice when they are in Year 8 of their compulsory schooling. According to research, 50% of students choose to continue with the same subjects they have opted for in Year 8, albeit at a higher level once in sixth form (Ministry for Education and Employment [MEDE] 2017). This indicates that the decision related to the choice of the ‘Option’ subjects taken by students in Year 8 may have life-time implications on their academic progression. The aim of the study is to identify how best to support the students to make an informed decision beyond their perceptions and possible misconceptions of the subjects and other factors that may be conditioning their choice.

Literature Review

The psychological and sociological perspective of attitudes is highly complex and very difficult to define (Gardner 1986). Attitudes relate to one’s own mindset (Harrell 2000), what is also known as the “evaluative judgement” towards a person or an object (Maio, Haddock 2009, p. 4). Braedley and Luxton (2010) claim that in this neoliberal era, where the community is continuously distressed over social and economic issues, students are automatically pushed into career-oriented mode. It is assumed that the most important aspect of education is the choice of a subject which will eventually put the students on a “path to a job” (Robert 2015, p. 5). Research indicates that most students base their subject choice on “economic interest” (McNay 2009, p. 56, Adey, Biddulph 2001). We are thus nowadays dealing with persons who are being viewed more as enterprises, who can be economically managed (McNay 2009 cited in Kelly 2016). Neoliberalism in education reflects on the students as customers who are purchasing products that might increase the students’ capital and “thus allow the student to secure a better job, as defined by salary and wealth” (Saunders 2007, p. 5).

Other studies indicate that parents are also highly involved in their children’s subject choices (Gardner 1986) and in most cases, they are considered to be the “primary source of advice” (Salisbury, Riddell 2003, p. 125) for pupils of that age. According to different studies carried out in Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden and the USA, parents tend to communicate their interests to their children and the same children consequently opt for subjects which relate to their parents’ interest, beliefs

and occupations (Davies, Guppy 1997, Dryler 1998, Van de Werfhorst et al. 2003). Although there are studies which state that parental involvement in the academic progress of their children tends to decrease drastically during the secondary school years (Belenardo 2001), other findings indicate that certain parents, especially those having a higher level of education, tend to “dictate” to their children which subjects they should choose, without leaving their children the freedom to make their own decisions (Akintade 2012, p. 2). Students may also be influenced to choose a subject and not another if one or both parents are proficient in a specific subject and therefore would be able to help their children in their studies and homework (Chambers 1999). One important factor which should also be taken into consideration is the perception of parents towards the subject. For example, in the case of Geography, parents would have themselves experienced a totally different didactic methodology than what is used today. Because of this experience, some may conclude that studying Geography consists entirely of learning facts and maps or general knowledge (Holt-Jensen 2009, Gersmehl 2014).

Attitudes, beliefs and feelings towards a subject are closely related to the perception towards the subject, which may also influence an individual during his/her subject choice (Heinzmann 2013). These can either block learning and therefore the student will not choose the given subject or else, these perceptions may influence the individual positively and lead to successful learning of the subject (Korth 2005). In fact, another issue which tends to influence students' choices is the concept of integrative motivation, which explains whether a pupil “identifies” himself/herself with the subject (Cook 2001, p. 115). If the individual rejects or does not identify himself or herself with the subject, then probably the individual would have a rather negative attitude towards the subject (Klein 1986) and it is more likely that the individual would not make that particular choice.

Educators must also develop inspiring and relevant pedagogic choices to promote the subject and to make the subject significant to students' lives, which consequently helps to “increase student's interest” (Jeronen 2017, p. 150). This is corroborated in literature which claims that teaching styles can have an essential influence on the pupils' short-term and long-term educational experiences, as it involves the way teachers transmit the subjects to the students (Smith 2005, Killen 2006). Furthermore, Poskitt and Bonney (2016) found out that students like and tend to choose subjects taught by teachers who make learning fun. The importance of teachers' enthusiasm and professionalism in high quality and engaging pedagogic choices has been sustained for decades by many research projects including: Bandura (1977), Barsade (2002), Carbonneau et al. (2008) and Senior et al. (2018).

There are also other findings which reveal the relationship between subject choice, attitudes and self-concept. Our own attitudes give us the opportunity to communicate our own values and beliefs towards different situations (Pratkanis et al. 2014). In turn, said values and beliefs lead us to formulate thoughts, perceptions, behaviour and choices.

Subject Choice in the Maltese Educational System

The subject choice process in Year 8 has always been an important aspect in Maltese Educational Systems. Nowadays, through the implementation of *My Journey* project, it is being given more importance in a different way. Through the *My Journey* project, students are now being supported to proceed their studies through different paths: the academic path, the vocational path and the applied learning opportunities (MEDE 2016, MEDE 2020). The academic learning programme aims to prepare students to further their studies in post-compulsory institutions. The vocational programmes facilitate learning of technical skills and knowledge and allow students to progress to post-compulsory educational institutions, whereas the applied learning path provides practical hands-on learning whilst allowing them the option to progress to post-compulsory educational institutions. All routes will equip the students with the necessary employability skills (MEDE 2016). The introduction of *My Journey* is considered within the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all students.

Before the introduction of *My Journey*, students in the upper secondary classes followed the core subjects and 2 (two) Optional 'academic' subjects¹ that they would have chosen at the end of Year 8. Through the introduction of the new structure in 2019 apart from studying the core subjects, students progressing to the upper secondary classes have the possibility to choose even from the list of the vocational or the applied subjects as provided in Figure 1. The new structure has broadened students' opportunities. The choice of subjects the students have to consider may lead to routes that they and their families may be less familiar with. This makes the choice towards the end of Year 8 more crucial since the young adolescents are not only choosing subjects but they are also defining more specifically their career paths. Identifying what influences the students' choice would allow the system to equip itself better about how best to support them to take an informed decision.

The 3 (three) learning programmes lead to qualifications at Malta Qualifications Framework [MQF] Level 3 to ensure parity of esteem and equivalence of qualifications. The Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC) Examinations Board runs the MQF Level 3 examinations which are popularly known as SEC and SEAC. The Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) route encompasses all the academic and vocational subjects. The Secondary Education Applied Certificate (SEAC) includes the applied subjects. The applied subjects are taught through a more practical hands-on approach. The third option is the SEAC/SEC route and this allows the student to choose a selection of SEC subjects and SEAC subjects.

¹ Arabic, Art, Accounts or Business Studies, Biology, Chemistry, Chinese, Computing, Design and Technology, European Studies, French, Geography, German, Graphical Communication, History, Home Economics, Italian, Music, Physical Education, Spanish, Social Studies.

**Figure 1: The three routes of *My Journey* Choice of Subjects
(Ministry for Education and Employment [MEDE] 2020)**

<p>Core Subjects English, Foreign Language, Geography, History, Information and Communications Technology (ICT), Maltese or Maltese as a Foreign Language, Mathematics, Physical Education, Physics, Personal, Social and Career Development (PSCD), Religion or Ethics and Social Studies.</p>
<p>Optional Subjects SEC Route: Arabic, Art, Accounts or Business Studies, Biology, Chemistry, Chinese, Computing, Design and Technology, European Studies, French, Geography, German, Graphical Communication, History, Home Economics, Italian, Music, Physical Education, Spanish, Sports Career Development Programme, Social Studies, VET Agribusiness, VET Engineering Technology, VET Fashion and Textiles, VET Information Technology, VET Hairdressing and Beauty, VET Health and Social Care, VET Hospitality, VET Media Literacy, VET Retail. SEAC Route: Applied Agribusiness, Applied Engineering Technology, Applied Information Technology, Applied Hairdressing and Beauty, Applied Health and Social Care, Applied Hospitality, Applied Media Literacy, Applied Retail, Applied Fashion and Textiles, PTI Achieve.</p>

During Year 8, students are involved in a number of school-based activities aimed at supporting them in their subject choice. In some state schools, students and parents are also given the opportunity to visit the Secondary School of the College and attend transition meetings and talks on different subjects including on 'new' subjects such as the vocational and the applied subjects (MEDE 2019). These meetings usually include a brief presentation on each subject and college counsellors and the guidance teachers are present to assist with any questions. One-to-one meetings between students and career guidance teachers are also held to discuss issues related to subject choice to help students resolve their mixed feelings and concerns (Debono et al. 2007). The aim of these initiatives is to support the students in their choice of the 'Option' subject. Statistics show that about 44% of the students in Maltese secondary schools make use of the service offered by the guidance teachers or counsellors (Debono et al. 2007).

The data generation structure

The research method chosen for this study was the triangulation method based on a mixed methods approach: an extensive survey among students in three different schools; three interviews to Guidance Teachers and three interviews to subject teachers. The methods allowed the application of both qualitative and quantitative methods in order to enable a broad analysis and a representative interpretation of the data generated. The quantitative data generated through the questionnaires was further analysed through the Chi-Squared statistical test, whereas the feedback

from the interviews and responses to the open-ended questions from the surveys supported the thematic analysis. The research is based on the context within State Schools, as this sector accounts for the largest population of children in Malta and it offers the widest range of possible 'Option' subjects and possible combination of 'Option' subjects that students may consider through the *My Journey* programme.

The research took the subject of Geography as a case study since it has been noted that the number of students choosing Geography as an 'Option' subject varies considerably from one school to another and the pattern related to the number of students who choose or who do not opt for the subject in particular schools is consistent over a number of years. Considering the trend, it is hence assumed that it would be easier to identify factors that might be influencing the students' choice of subject. The popular choice of Geography as an 'Option' subject in some schools and/or the scarcity in the choice of the subject in other schools provided varied scenarios ideal to explore the objectives of this study. Moreover, School Geography has always been an 'Option' subject for the senior years in secondary schooling and it sustains a tradition which elicits a perception towards the subject that may influence how it is understood by different generations including the parents of the cohort of adolescents who participated in this study. The choice of the three state schools was also based on purposive sampling; the method which is based on selective and subjective sampling chosen by the researcher to include schools which have students who tend to choose Geography as an 'Option' subject, and schools where students do not tend to do so. This enabled a better insight of different experiences at different schools and allowed for the investigation of the possible factors that influence the students' choice.

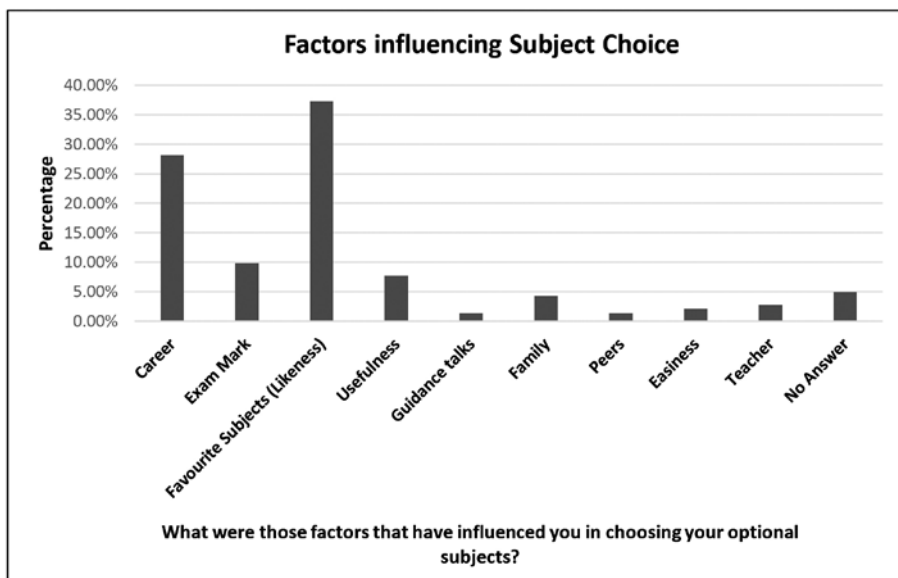
The survey among 103 Year 8 students served as a baseline study. Their response was analysed in the light of the insights provided by 3 (three) Guidance teachers and 3 (three) teachers of Geography.

Ethical clearance to proceed with the questionnaire and the interviews were obtained from the following entities: Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) University of Malta, Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) and University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) University of Malta. Written consent was requested and later granted from all Heads of College Networks and Heads of Schools where the study was to be conducted. All those who were contacted to take part in the research were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason. Since all the students in the research were minors, consent had to be granted by their parents. The students themselves were also notified through an information sheet that their feedback was to be kept confidential. Consent forms and information sheets were provided in both Maltese and English.

Factors influencing the Students' Subject Choice in Year 8

The students taking part in the study mentioned various factors which tend to influence them during the subject choice. Figure 2 includes the feedback provided and the percentage weight for each influential factor listed by the students. The dominant factor in the students' choice of subject is their enjoyment of the subject. This response is backed by the response related to the 'exam mark' and 'teacher' which reflect a positive experience of the students' engagement with the subject. The career path is one of the main factors that influences students' choice. This response is complemented by what the students consider as the usefulness of the subject which implies the importance given to the utilitarian aspect of the educational trajectory. It is evident that the popular belief that students may be greatly influenced in the choice of subject by their peers is challenged by the representative cohort participating in this study. The importance given to the talk offered by the Guidance Unit is likewise questioned.

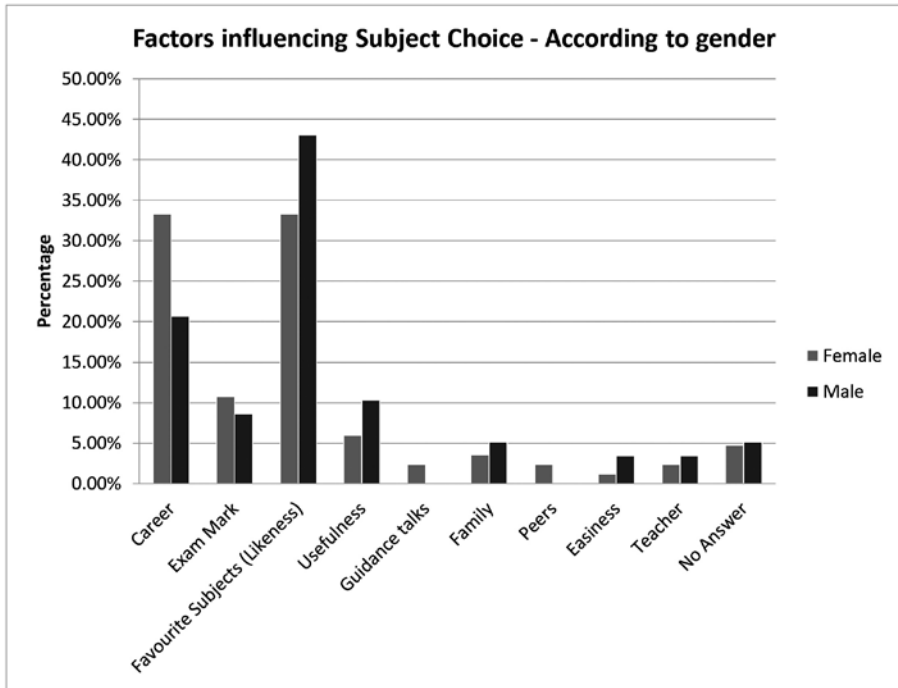
Figure 2: Factors influencing Subject Choice



As evident in Figure 3, it is interesting to note that the trend of the influential factors for the choice of the 'Option' subjects is the same among males and females. Therefore, there is no noticeable gender difference. The most common answer given by both males and females was 'the personal liking of the subject'. However, when one considers the combined percentage weight of the responses for 'Career'

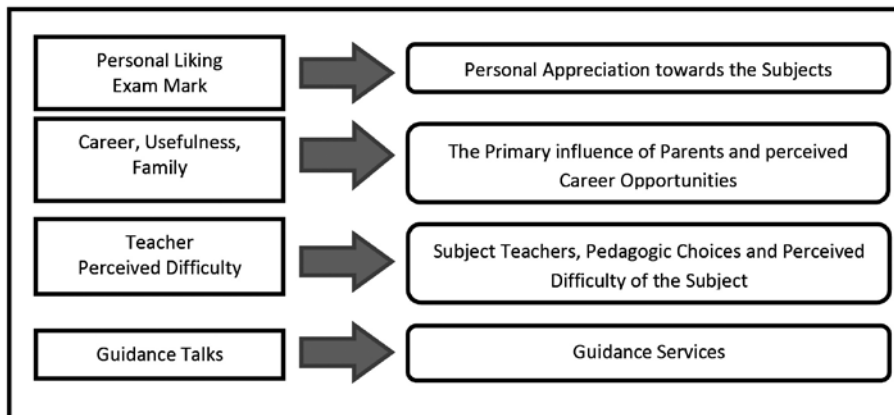
and 'Usefulness', females were more aware of these factors, when compared to their male counterparts. This implies that female students might be more career oriented. On the other hand, the influence of the family seems to play a more important role for boys rather than girls. One questions if this might be related to the traditional role of the family breadwinner associated with boys that the family might be pushing for.

Figure 3: Factors influencing Subject Choice – According to Gender



The factors that determine the students’ choice of ‘Option’ subjects in Year 8, as identified in this study through the quantitative and qualitative responses can be grouped into 4 main themes as summarised in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Grouping of Influential Factors



Discussion

The research discussion focuses on the main aim of this study – the major themes which have been identified as the factors influencing students' attitudes towards the choice of 'Option' subjects. These include: the students' personal appreciation towards the subjects, the influence of perceived career opportunities and related parental involvement and employability, the subject's content, the teachers' pedagogic choices and the consultation with the Guidance Teachers. The discussion will take into account the dynamic context within the educational structures in Malta.

Personal Appreciation towards the Subjects

The Personal Enjoyment of the subject was the most influential factor mentioned (mentioned by 37.32% of the respondents). Most of the respondents who considered Geography as one of their potential option claimed that they really enjoy Geography lessons. The second most common answer was that they achieved a good mark in the subject. This indicates that students prefer to opt for subjects which they are good at. This factor is particularly relevant when considering that the students would not have experienced a number of 'Option' subjects offered for the upper secondary especially the new vocational and applied subjects in the list of choices. This sheds light on the importance of providing students an adequate explanation/exposure of what it entails to study specific subjects. One questions if the 5 to 10 minute presentation of the subject teacher or the guidance teacher to the students and the parents are enough to explain the educational value and associated outcomes that

a specific subject encompasses and to iron out any misconceptions related to the study of a specific subject.

Notwithstanding the general claim by the students that their personal appreciation of the subject is one of the factors that determines their choice of the 'Option' subjects, when exploring their position on specific subjects as Geography, they take into consideration other factors for the final choice. The research findings indicate that the majority of students have a positive attitude towards school Geography, with 80% of the respondents ranking it amongst their favourite subjects. There were many positive remarks of students about Geography including that Geography "is useful for life" and that "one can apply the knowledge to everyday life". However, despite these comments and results, most students who like Geography have also claimed that they have not considered the subject as one of their potential optional subjects (76.83%). This indicates that the positive view towards Geography does not necessarily correlate to the rate of students considering Geography as one of their potential optional subjects. This might reflect external pressures, including parents' advice and the employability factor predominant in a neoliberal economic system. A Year 8 student participating in this study stated: "*Nixtieq insir tabiba u kelli naghzel il-Bijoloġġija u l-Kimika għalkemm xtaqt naghzel il-Ġeografija ukoll*"² Another student claimed that Geography is somewhat limited in terms of career opportunities, stating that: "*il-Ġeografija ma tantx twasslek għal xogħol sew ħafna*"³. This can be a factor which underlines the career orientation approach of the students. This finding within the Maltese context is similar to McCrone et al. (2005) findings in England where the key influential factors that affect students during the choice of subjects, include the pupils' perceptions and preconceptions of the subjects, the enjoyment and interest in the subjects, the perceived usefulness of the subject to a future job or career, the perceived ability at a subject and the influences from family and personal contacts. Similarly, in a study focusing on subject choice in middle schools in Australia, Poskitt and Bonney (2016) found out that students were influenced during subject choice mainly by their interest in the subject itself and their perceived ability at that particular subject. Qualifications and employability was also a determining factor in the choice of subjects in this study.

The Primary influence of Parents and perceived Career Opportunities

According to the results of the questionnaire, students might be partially influenced by the attitude of their parents towards a specific subject, in this example: Geography. In fact, 70.73% of the students who claimed that they love/

² Translation: I want to become a doctor and therefore I had to choose Biology and Chemistry, although I would have liked to choose Geography.

³ Translation: Geography does not help you to find a good job.

like Geography, have also claimed that the attitudes of their parents towards the subject is also positive. Although only 4.23% of the respondents claimed that they were influenced by family members in the choice of the Optional subjects, there were some additional interesting remarks about this particular aspect. A comment, which reveals the feeling of some of the respondents, was: "*lx-xogħol li nixtieq u ommi*"⁴. Adolescents are more influenced by the beliefs and attitudes of parents rather than those of their peers (Bell et al. 2014). One of the Guidance Teachers participating in this study stated that they find a lot of parents who believe that one would not have any career openings when studying particular subjects. The same feeling was expressed by another teacher, who explained that parents have nowadays a very negative perception towards certain subjects, commenting that the Science subjects are often considered as a more valid option. Raising the bar in the Science subjects is also one of the targets of the National Education Strategy 2014-2024 and this applies to literacy, numeracy, and technology competence as a means to increase employability as stated in the same document (MEDE 2014). One may infer that this underlying message in the education system itself, apart from other sectors are conditioning the students' choice of 'Option' subjects. It seems that the neoliberalism and employability is a factor which is affecting a lot of educational systems around the world (Poskitt, Bonney 2016).

During the interviews, Geography Teachers and Guidance Teachers mentioned cases where parents discourage or, even worse, do not allow their children to opt for subjects such as for the Geography option, mostly because of lack of awareness of career opportunities in the subject in particular. Another teacher participating in the study stated that parental attitudes towards subjects can easily be transmitted to children and to future generations which leads us to question whether parents base their advice on the perceived career opportunities rather than on a holistic self-fulfilling education (Adey, Biddulph 2001). This leads us directly to the discourse on the neoliberal approach to education. More than one student claimed to have chosen specific subjects because of a particular career orientation. This is particularly of concern when considering the dynamic occupation employment projection for coming decades when these students will be looking for a job.

Subject Teachers, Pedagogic Choices and Perceived Difficulty of the Subject

The students' perception of the subject depends also on their experience of the subject in class. We have come to believe that students' attitudes towards subjects may vary, depending on different factors including their own experience of the subject at school. There is a very important relationship between the pedagogic choices and passion of the teacher and the enthusiasm of the students towards

⁴ Translation: My dream job and my mother.

learning. The teacher's pedagogic choices may determine the student's level of engagement in the subject. The findings show that 3.78% and 8.69% respectively chose the options "I like the teacher of the subject" and "I do not like the teacher of the subject", when asked why they had or had not considered particular subjects as their 'Options'. These remarks were also confirmed by the interviewed Guidance Teachers, who all agreed that the teacher can be highly influential in the subject choice. Some students also mentioned certain teaching styles, as reasons why they enjoy or do not enjoy lessons.

Likewise, but portraying a different context, it is highly evident from the feedback given by some participants in this study that their experience of the subject is very traditional and that these students still perceive Geography as the subject that teaches them "about our surrounding world" and they do not relate it directly to their living experience. One student remarked that: "One has to learn a lot of maps" and another student felt s/he can learn the topics through experience. Other students even argued that they find the topics common sense or pointless for life. This feedback indicates that these students were not engaged with the educational value and outcomes of Geography as understood in this day and age.

Such contrasting approaches to a subject reflect that the experience and the engagement of the students with a subject is directly related to the teacher. This is particularly significant when considering that students consider their engagement with the subject in Year 7 and Year 8 as a motivation to consider or not that subject as an 'Option' subject in the upper secondary and hence, as stated earlier may therefore condition their academic progression and career paths. As also confirmed by one of the teachers participating in this study, teachers should have a meaningful relationship with their subject by investing time and energy to make the subject relevant and interesting.

As can be seen in Table 1, when analysing the perceived difficulty of Geography together with the attraction of Geography as a subject it was noted that most of the students who claimed that they like the subject, have also remarked that they find Geography to be moderately difficult (78.05%). 20.73% of the respondents in this category claimed that they find Geography to be easy and only 1.22% of the respondents in this category claimed that Geography is difficult. 65% and 30% of the respondents who claimed that they do not like Geography noted that they find the subject to be moderately difficult and difficult respectively. This shows that the perceived difficulty of the subject partially depends on how much the students enjoy the lessons and on the pedagogic choices of the teacher.

Table 1: The perceived difficulty of Geography in a crosstab with the interest in the lessons is statistically significant as confirmed through the Chi-Squared Statistical Test where the: $\chi^2(4) = 22.559, p = 0.000$

			Difficulty			Total
			Easy	Moderate	Difficult	
Interest in Geography lessons	I like	Percentage	20.73%	78.05%	1.22%	100%
	I do not like	Percentage	5%	65%	30%	100%
	I do not know	Percentage	0%	100%	0%	100%

As seen in Table 2, amongst those respondents who claimed that they find Geography difficult, none, consequently, considered choosing it as an 'Option'. 44.44% of those respondents who find Geography easy, declared that they had considered choosing Geography as an 'Option' subject.

Table 2: Difficulty of Geography in a crosstab with the consideration of the subject as a potential option, as also confirmed through the Chi-Squared Statistical Test: $\chi^2(2) = 10.649, p = 0.005$

			Geography as a potential optional subject		Total
			Yes	No	
Difficulty of Geography	Easy	Count Percentage	44.44%	55.55%	100%
	Moderate	Count Percentage	14.10%	85.90%	100%
	Difficult	Count Percentage	0%	100%	100%

This shows that the perceived difficulty of the subject can influence the students during subject choice. This was also confirmed by one of the Guidance Teachers participating in this study, who explained that there are students who choose subjects according to their perceived difficulty. A student stated that: "*Missieri jista' jgħinni fis-sugġett*"⁵. This reflects the struggle of subject choice in relation to the students' perceived access to the subject through additional help, including from parents/guardians. The perception of a subject and what it entails studying that subject once again conditions the students' choice.

⁵ Translation: My father can help me out in the subject.

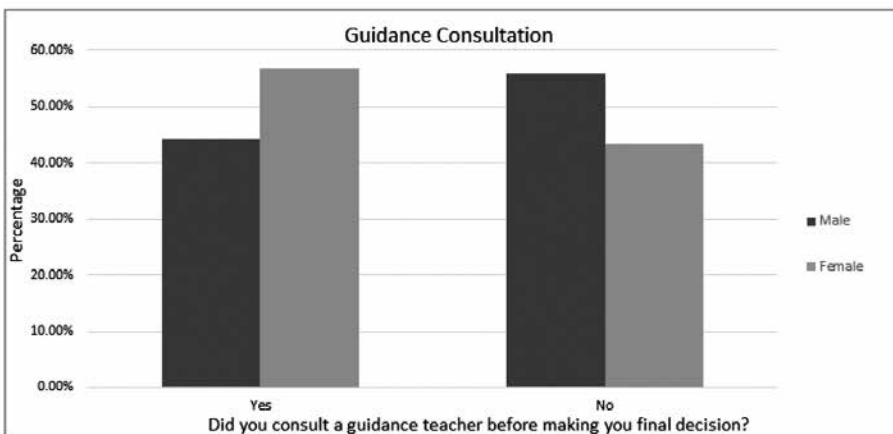
Consultation with Guidance Teacher

Career guidance is given a high degree of importance in Maltese schools. One of the roles of Guidance Teachers is to ensure that all students are given the assistance needed to develop both personally and socially (Debono et al. 2007). As explained above, guidance teachers also offer one-to-one consultation with the students regarding their choice of 'Option' subject.

Despite the fact that very few students mentioned the Guidance Services as one of the influential factors during their subject choice, when respondents were asked if they have consulted the Guidance Teacher before making their final choice, more than half of the students (51.46%) answered in the affirmative. This finding has also confirmed the views of the interviewed Guidance Teachers who explained that a lot of students seek advice from the Guidance Service and that the value of this service is becoming more important, especially during the subject choice period.

In addition, it was found that more females tend to avail themselves of the Guidance Service. As indicated in Figure 5, 44.19% of the male respondents and 56.67% of the female respondents chose to consult a Guidance Teacher before making their final choice. This could reflect the trend that more females than males tend to be career-oriented. This has also been confirmed by one of the Guidance Teachers interviewed, who explained that according to the guidance records in the school, more girls than boys attend the one-to-one meetings with Guidance Teachers. In addition to this, in Figure 3, one can also notice that the only students who mentioned the Guidance Services as an influential factor during subject choice were all females.

Figure 5: Guidance consultation according to gender



One of the Guidance Teachers explained that the system, which aims to help students during the subject choice, is quite extensive. In contrast to this, another Guidance Teacher participating in the study noted that schools are not doing enough to help students in their choice and added that five-minute talks for each subject are surely not enough to help students in their decision. According to most of the interviewees (Guidance Teachers and Geography Teachers), these sessions are not enough to inform the stakeholders about each academic subject, considering that parents will most of the time have to listen to about 24 subject presentations held over two days. Moreover, most subject talks are held in the mornings making it difficult for many parents to attend. While doubting the effectiveness of these sessions, one should not exclude that during these presentations, teachers can be very influential. This has been confirmed by all interviewed teachers, who mentioned that the subject teachers can, during those few minutes, influence students also through their tone of voice and attitude as confirmed by other local and international studies, including Spiteri (2013) and Adeyemi (2009).

One of the Guidance Teachers added that students in Year 8 would not be ready to take a crucial decision such as the subject choice. On the contrary, another Guidance Teacher participating in the study believes that most students in Year 8 would be very optimistic towards a new start and that students would be ready to choose, as they would have already experienced this decision-making process in Year 6, where they had to choose a foreign language to study in secondary school.

The contrasting positions of the teachers reflect the different realities that schools face. Moreover, one cannot ignore that students may reach different levels of maturity by the time they have to take such an important decision and hence would require different styles of guidance. Adjustments in the school guidance services offered regarding the choice of subjects should be considered. This is particularly pertinent when considering that the students' choices are based on their perception of the subject and their experience of the subject which might not necessarily reflect the actual engagement they will be expected to experience in the upper secondary.

Any adjustments in the guidance services should allocate time and ways how to adequately present the subject as offered in secondary schools to address any related misconceptions. Any adjustments in the school guidance offered would involve more actively the parents in the discussions with the students. As seen earlier, the students' choice is not determined only by their own perception of the subject but even by that of their parents. At present parents are invited to school to follow the teachers' presentations but one cannot ignore that within that context parents might not always know how to formulate their questions in order to clarify any queries. This would indirectly present a barrier to the educational progression of the students, particularly those who might need more assistance to understand what studying particular subjects entails. In order to overcome this educational barrier for the students, the guidance and counselling services should consider an outreach initiative with the students and their parents. Parents should be made aware that

the globalised economy is also dictating a shift in job opportunities and hence the choice of subject in Year 8 may not necessarily lead to a specific job as we know it now. Guidance services at schools should also be trained to be completely neutral in their approach with students and therefore should not promote specific subjects or else discourage students from choosing other subjects as reported by subject teachers. One has to keep in mind that the guidance service offered at school is the first point of reference for students and parents particularly at this point in time with the introduction of the vocational and applied subjects.

Recommendations

This study set out to discover factors that influence students during Subject Choice in Year 8. It is surely not an end in itself. Considering the greater range of subjects offered through 'My Journey' and the subtle demands of the neoliberal context that the educational system is operating in, it is fundamental to assist the students further in this important decision. Based on these findings, one may consider the following recommendations to support the students further in their subject choice.

The proposed strategies listed below would allow a better understanding and appreciation of the subject's broad educational outcomes by the main educational stakeholders, including students, parents and educators and hence try to stir away from a utilitarian approach in education.

- Through adapted informative meetings, students need to be made aware of the educational value of different subjects, including Geography, irrespective of specific career paths that would otherwise reinforce the utilitarian dimension of education.
- Collaboration should be encouraged between Education Officers, the School Leadership Team, subject teachers and the guidance teachers to organise outreach strategies among students and their parents that would support them in their subject choice.
- Information on the broad educational value of subjects, including Geography should also be effectively communicated to parents and to the general public through community lectures and mass media campaigns.
- Teachers should embrace their professionalism through effective and high quality pedagogic choices that would engage the students in the learning process of the specific subject.
- Guidance teachers should also be regularly offered information sessions to also assist them in helping students during subject choice. These sessions should also provide information about the different opportunities and career advancements related to different subjects not only subjects that may lead to the established professions and career paths.

A number of suggestions for further enquiry have also been reflected upon:

- Considering that some Church and Independent Schools adopt different subject choice processes and offer fewer 'Option' subjects and possible combination of 'Option' subjects, it would be interesting to investigate if there is any relation between the factors that determine the students' subject choice in the 3 schools sectors: State, Church and Independent Schools.
- It would be interesting to investigate further whether the socio-economic background of the students influence their subject choice in Year 8.
- Since the teachers' pedagogic choices in the middle school influence students' subject choice, it would be relevant to have an in-depth study about the pedagogic choices that engage students with specific subjects.
- As evident in the study, since parents influence greatly the students' subject choice, it would be strategically valid to learn about the parents' perception towards specific subjects. This would enable the guidance unit to establish an informed strategy of how best to address students and their parents.

Conclusion

The underlying aim of the study was to trace the influential factors that determine the students' choice of subject. This research was the fruit of a collaboration between Year 8 students, Guidance Teachers and Geography Teachers. As evident from the above results there are several factors that determine the students' choice, all to a different degree. Some of these factors are external to the educational system whereas others emerge from within the system itself. Students do not get influenced by just one factor but rather by a cumulative element of the different influential factors which were discussed in this paper. As can be seen through the research data, while some students consider their self-fulfilment, and personal appreciation of the subject in this important decision, most of them (predominantly females) get influenced by other factors including economic and the possibility of a career path. As most of the students and interviewees confirmed, these influential factors end up having a major impact because of the pressures experienced by students. The research findings in Maltese State Schools are consistent with other studies as presented in the literature review included in the paper. This study highlights the susceptibility of adolescents to various influential factors as asserted in this research and therefore questions whether the subject choice should be postponed to a later stage, when the students would be able to discern better the influential factors discussed. Such a change in the system should be based on further research.

Young people are asked to choose an 'Option' subject that may possibly determine their academic trajectory and their career path. Their choice is determined by their experience of the subject that is often determined by their level of engagement of the subject depending on the teachers' pedagogic choices irrespective of the

educational value and skills provided by that subject or possibly other subjects that the students may consider. The students' choice is also influenced by their own and their parents' perception of what the school subjects are about and the potential career paths that these subjects lead to, ignoring the possible shifting occupation projections. In view of this context, the support and guidance services provided to students and parents should be maintained, sustained and improved so the students will be led to take an informed decision for their wellbeing and overall development as they strive in a dynamic globalised world subject to the demands of the neoliberal economy.

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Disclaimer: Authors abided by the necessary ethics regulations and procedures. Such ethics clearance was obtained from the appropriate institutions bodies before the study was carried out. Any opinions expressed by the authors are their own and do not represent the point of view or opinion of the institutions to which the authors are affiliated.

Needs and Motivations of Adults Learning Foreign Languages. The Maltese Perspective.

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Abstract

Recent studies (Pace 2013; Pace 2018) have shown a dramatic increase in interest in foreign language learning among adult learners in the Maltese Islands. However, to date, there is lack of research about the aspects that determine participation in adult education and about the adult learners' educational needs (Borg et al. 2016, MEDE 2014). In this paper we will first explore the needs and motivations of adults learning foreign languages along with the reasons for which they enrol in such courses at the Lifelong Learning Centres. We will also analyse how different variables, such as their background, prior knowledge of the foreign language, as well as teaching and learning factors, influence their language learning process. By means of two separate questionnaires administered to adults learning foreign languages at the Lifelong Learning Centres in Malta it resulted that intrinsic motivations are the driving force behind the majority of the adults' choice to learn a foreign language. This makes the educators' role in motivating adult learners pivotal during the learning process. Consequently, the latter highlights the need for the implementation of professional training programmes for all educators in this sector.

Keywords: *Foreign Language Teaching and Learning, Adult Learning, Educational Needs, Motivations, Teaching Strategies*

Introduction

With the emergence of a knowledge society, changing employment requirements and a dramatic increase of interest in foreign languages (FL) among adults, the competency in FLs and intercultural understanding have taken on a crucial role among the members of today's society (Begotti 2019, Chao 2009, Pace 2018). As highlighted in the European Strategic Framework for Education and Training (ET 2020), there has been an increase in the need for preparing the adult learners for diverse professional contexts in which the knowledge of FLs and communication skills have expanded in the European labour market.

Adults have a strong need to apply what they have learned in their everyday life. Therefore, research which identifies and understands the intrinsic and extrinsic

factors that positively and negatively affect motivation in these adult learners is essential in aiding educators to provide effective learning experiences (Chao 2009). Notwithstanding this, Borg et al. (2016) and Mede (2014) acknowledge that there is very little local research about the factors that determine participation in adult education and the learning needs of adults. In fact, to date, this is the first research dedicated entirely to discussing the needs, motivations and reasons which push adults to enrol in FL learning courses within the Lifelong Learning Centres (LLC).

This paper aims to explore and discuss the different characteristics of adults learning FLs, their linguistic needs and interests as well as their motivations and reasons for which they choose to learn specific FLs. We will also delve into how these expectations were met, and if not, what where the barriers and challenges faced by the learners. Following that, this paper aims to present suggestions on how to overcome the latter.

The Review of the Literature

The concept of lifelong learning has been the focus of several pedagogic and psychological studies in the modern civilisation that we live in, which is characterised by the emergence of a knowledge society, ever increasing new technology and changing employment requirements (Begotti 2019, Chao 2009). Interest in FLs among adults has also increased dramatically over the years. One of the main reasons for this is that, as Pace (2018) explains, “in the 21st century, competence and proficiency in FLs and intercultural understanding are no longer considered as optional but have become an essential part of being a citizen” (p. 425).

All this implies an ever increasing need to adapt the teaching of FLs to the needs of today’s learners, especially those communicative skills which are most necessary in the ever-growing globalised world that we live in. Such a need is also underlined in the European Strategic Framework for Education and Training (ET 2020).

While language teaching is today considered to be an interdisciplinary field which is linked to other sciences such as linguistics, psycholinguistics, communication sciences and education sciences (Begotti 2010), adult learning is a phenomenon that researchers, such as Knowles et al (2012), find difficult to explain because of its multifaceted understanding; at the same time, this reflects the richness of this type of learning (Merriam et al. 2007). Begotti (2019), on her part, insists that the teaching of FLs to adults should be diverse and consisting of clear objectives that take into consideration the socio-economic background and individual characteristics of the learner, as well as time and resources. On the other hand, Mollica (2009) explains the importance of the communicative approach over more traditional ones, as this provides the adult learner with real communicative contexts where natural strategies for language acquisition are used. In addition, Begotti (2010) also highlights the importance of creating a communicative curriculum, of using a learner centred

approach, by preparing activities that encourage cooperative learning, as they allow adult learners to reflect about the material learnt and then share their new knowledge and opinions with others, helping each other to reach common goals. On the other hand, Frey and Alman (2003) argue that theories about adult learning help the educators to “understand their students and to design more meaningful learning experiences for them. There is not one adult learning theory that successfully applies to all adult learning environments” (p. 8). This explains why, over the years, various educational methodologies were created to teach languages to adults.

Among the most important factors that determine foreign language acquisition (FLA) in adulthood are the adult learners’ characteristics, together with their baggage of experience and cognitive abilities. Mikeladze (2014) argues that such characteristics should not only shape the theoretical grounds for methods and approaches in adult education but they also make the adult learning and teaching environment unique and attractive for both the learner and the educator himself. Another factor that influences FLA is memory. Singleton and Ryan (2004) suggest that adult learners find difficulties in retaining new information and that the decline in hearing sensitivity affects the recognition of speech sounds, thus hindering word memorization and comprehension of teacher instructions. On the other hand, Bosc (2007) claims that adults find it less difficult to concentrate in lessons when compared to younger learners. However, due to the traditional grammatical approaches that they might be used to in previous FL learning experiences, La Grassa and Villarini (2008) suggest that adults might find it uncomfortable to take part in activities that involve a more multimodal approach with the use of songs, videos, language games and others.

Unfortunately, one of the main characteristics of adult learning is the high drop-out rates. Borg et al. (2016) argue that this is due to several factors, among which, work schedules, family responsibilities, costs associated with participation in education or encountering difficulties when searching for a course that matches their interests. Ahl (2006) categorizes the factors that hinder motivation for learning into three types: dispositional, situational and structural. Dispositional variables are related to personal traits such as lack of self-confidence or “negative early school experiences that cause negative expectations of continued education” (Mikeladze 2014, p. 21). Situational factors are closely tied to the learner’s personal life situation, such as having lack of time or money. At the structural level, barriers such as lack of childcare arrangements, work schedule problems and non-suitable teaching pedagogies are identified. On their part, Zammit (2014) and Knowles et al. (2005) state that lack of emotional or financial support is also regarded as one of the main reasons why adults become highly demotivated and decide to quit courses. Apart from this, Wlodkowski (2008) mentions several health barriers that come with aging, making it more difficult for older adults to process information.

Another factor that is key to adult learning is the needs of the learners themselves. Begotti (2019) argues that adults choose to learn either to improve their own competences, to fill in knowledge gaps about new technological and work aspects,

or else as a personal desire to satisfy one's own needs. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) identified, on their part, six reasons why adults engage in learning. These are social relationships, external expectations, stimulation, social welfare, professional advancement, and cognitive interest. Chao (2009) argues that the first three are linked to belongingness, while the rest are linked to the physiological, safety and self-actualization needs of the adult learners. Chao also uses the employment trait to differentiate between the needs of those in employment and those unemployed. He argues that employed adults are most likely to engage in learning due to one's own initiative or through the initiative of the employer, while the unemployed are more likely to gain new competences in order to join the workforce. As a matter of fact, Chao insists that the immigrant learners' needs tend to be extrinsic, because of pressure from the government to integrate into the host country.

The learner's previous educational experience is another characteristic that impacts the learning process (Ivashko 2018). As Borg et al. (2016) explain, "people with lower educational attainment, who left formal education before the age of 19, highly value learning of basic skills such as reading, writing and numeracy" (p. 55). On the other hand, participants with higher educational attainment seem to demonstrate "the greatest interest in transferable knowledge that can be used to find jobs" (Borg et al. 2016, p. 60). It is also interesting to note that, according to the findings of Borg et al. (2016), individuals with incomplete secondary or elementary education are more attracted to learning FLs. Research also indicates that adult learners have a greater intrinsic goal orientation than younger learners (Bye et al. 2007) because of the value that they attach to what is learned. Given their accumulated experience, adults are more likely to use the relevance of the material learnt as a way of sustaining their interest, and can be more critical of what they regard as not useful in contribution to their goal. In fact, Kuklewicz et al. (2018) argue that since adults often choose to learn a language because of the need to communicate with relatives or friends that live abroad, a functional or situational based syllabus that focuses on communicative language functions could be more beneficial to them. On the other hand, when motivations are extrinsic, the linguistic needs of the adult learner tend to be limited to those required by the employment sector, and it often happens that the learner stops attending lessons as soon as he or she reaches his/her goal (Caon 2005). Begotti (2019) however insists that although sometimes adults do have external factors which influence their decision for learning a language, they are more inclined to be intrinsically motivated, contrary to adolescents for whom school is compulsory.

With regards to the local situation, recent data (Eurostat 2016; NSO 2018) has demonstrated a growing interest and level of involvement of adults in lifelong learning, with an increase of 3.8% of the Maltese population participating in education and training (MEDE 2014). Notwithstanding this, the participation in tertiary education in Malta is significantly lower than the ET 2020 average target of 15%, given that according to the Eurostat data for 2018, Malta has 10.8% of adult participation in learning. This increased interest, in recent years, in adult education is due to factors

such as job mobility, the increase in the number of foreigners residing in Malta and mixed marriages. Moreover, Mayo (2012) contends that such an increase is also due to the fact that funds from the European Commission, such as the Grundtvig and Leonardo Da Vinci programmes, started to be utilised to improve the knowledge and employability of adult learners, as well as to promote lifelong learning. Following the EU Memorandum on Lifelong Learning of 2000 and the Resolution for a Renewed European Agenda for Adult learning of 2011, in which the European Council urged the member states to focus on adult learning, the Ministry for Education published a Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 as well as the Malta National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 (MEDE 2014), comprising ten strategies, all focusing on the current challenges in adult learning whilst proposing measures to mitigate them. The second of these strategies encourages the teaching of FLs due to the increasingly multicultural society that is present in the Maltese Islands. And while on the one hand the local situation is worrying when considering the declining number of students who are studying FLs at post-secondary, on the other hand, Pace (2018) argues that “the number of adult learners who have applied to learn a foreign language at a LLC during the year 2018/19 has reached a staggering 1054” (p. 430). This dramatic increase in participation is proof of the ever-growing need for educational opportunities in FL teaching and learning. In fact, Pace (2018) emphasises the fact that “there is an urgent need for a planned, sustained commitment to a programme of change” (p. 432). Some of these much-needed changes are in fact now being implemented. These include the introduction of FL courses at MQF levels 1 and 2 based on proficiency in the speaking, reading, writing and listening competences in real-world situations, a wide array of languages on offer, including Arabic, Chinese, English as a FL (EFL), French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Maltese as a FL (MFL), Russian, Spanish, and Turkish, as well as the provision to equal access to lifelong learning that supports inclusivity in a diverse Maltese society, and that helps the individual in making social advancements, especially when it comes to migrants who require tailor-made courses and support systems that may facilitate their entry in the workplace, including courses in EFL and MFL.

Methodology

For this research, a quantitative methodology has been chosen. Such a methodology not only facilitates the collection of a wide sample of responses intended to represent the rest of the population, in this case of adult learners, but it also allows the researchers to analyse data which can help provide information about future outcomes with regards to the needs and motivations of adult learners following FL courses at LLCs. As stated by Coe et al. (2017), it is considered as a collection of numerical data, where the research takes on a natural science approach with an objective perspective of reality.

The starting point was the testing of the basis of theoretical findings about the type of needs and motivations the adult learners have, which have been divided into categories in the questionnaires. This was followed by the testing of the hypothesis of whether the socio-demographic and academic variables influence the types of motivation that adult learners have. In addition, when quantifying the research, the data gathered has been structured in a clear way, avoiding any ambiguity while making it ideal for large sample studies. Since the research focused on the needs and motivations of adults learning FLs in Malta, it was decided to collect data from the LLCs which form part of the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability (DRLE) within MEDE given that, on the local scene, DRLE offers the biggest and most varied amount of language courses for adult learners, thus being highly representative of the population of adult learners in Malta. In fact, the DRLE offers accredited courses in 12 different FLs with lessons offered both in the mornings and in the evenings from October to June, with a 2 week break over the Christmas and the Easter period. Following consultations with the Assistant Director for the DRLE, it was decided that the questionnaires be administered in the two different LLCs offering the widest range of FL courses and attended by a considerable number of adults.

In order to measure objectively the social reality of adults learning a FL, data was gathered through survey research to a sample of 140 participants. Although most of the questions asked were close-ended with multiple choices, the questionnaire also incorporated several open-ended questions in those instances where further explanations were needed. In order to avoid misunderstandings, the questions were direct, straightforward, and easy to understand, with participants also having the option of choosing to answer either in Maltese or in English. Following a pilot-test, three questions within the questionnaire were restructured as it transpired that they were not coherent or specific enough to the respondents. A total of 2 questionnaires were administered to the same participants. The first one consisted of 19 questions and was distributed at the beginning of the course term in October, while a second questionnaire consisting of 7 questions was distributed towards the end of the same course term in March. The former intended to identify the learners' needs and motivations, while the latter aimed to discover whether the language courses have met the learners' expectations and needs. In order to preserve the anonymity of the participants, the directors of the LLCs were asked to administer the questionnaires themselves to the adult learners. To ensure the reliability and validity of the results obtained, an objective quantitative approach was used, wherein it was assured that the sample chosen consisted of participants who vary in age, gender, and nationality. Other than representing the majority of the population, this variety in the participants' background and choice of FLs helped to generalise the findings and reach the research's aims. All ethical concerns and considerations were taken into account and approval was obtained from all relevant authorities both at University of Malta as well as the Ministry of Education.

Once the distribution and collection of the questionnaires was concluded, a thematic analysis of the data followed, with a more qualitative approach. Themes which emerged include the background of the participants, their knowledge of the FLs, needs and motivations for learning a FL, barriers and difficulties encountered during the course, as well as choice of institution.

Findings

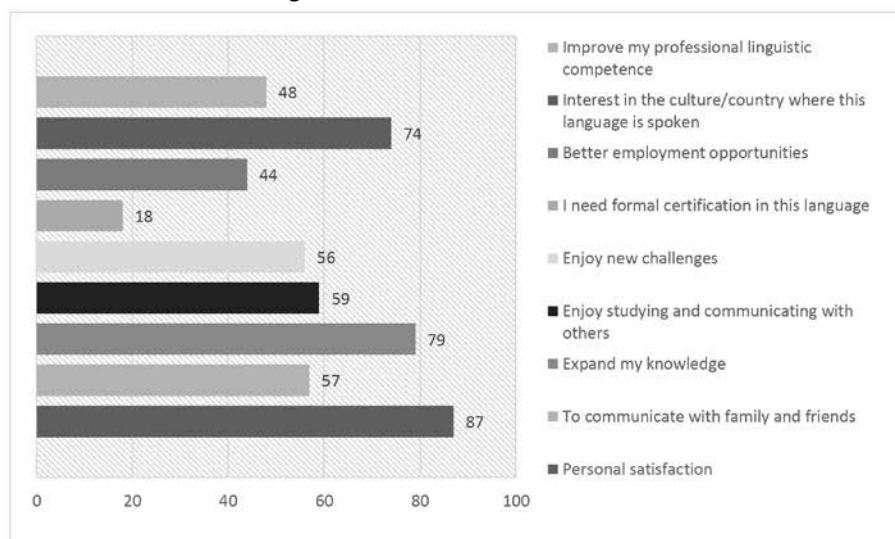
Within the LLCs in Malta, over recent years, there has been an increasing number of adults applying to learn a FL. In scholastic year 2019/2020 the number of applicants reached a staggering 3415, while in 2020/2021, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic situation, the number of applicants reached 1327. The majority of the participants (32%) were following an English as a Foreign language course. This could be due to the fact that the majority (61%) of them were arriving from countries where English is not their L1 and in a bilingual country like Malta, it is essential for them to be able to communicate and understand at least one of the country's official languages. Italian was the second language most chosen by the participants (28%). In Malta there has always been a vast interest in Italian mainly because of the geographical vicinity and the historic affiliations between the two countries apart from the fact that the Maltese lexicon itself is replete with Italianisms (Brincat 2011, p. 401-415). It is interesting to note that there was a considerable number of participants learning languages like Japanese, Turkish, Russian, Chinese, Greek and Arabic, which are either not offered in compulsory education or not popular choices among Maltese students. Diadori et al (2009) argue that most likely, whoever chooses to enrol in a language course in adulthood already has basic prior knowledge of the FL chosen. This is confirmed by 64% of the participants of this study's findings. It seems appropriate to follow the recommendations from the National Research Report (Bugre, Chana 2018) which suggests that Assessment of Prior Learning needs to take place in order to get a clear indication of the level of the skills and competences of the migrant learners. Such an awareness of the previous learning experiences of the learners and their country's school system enables the educators to better analyse their learning styles and motivate them to learn how to learn.

This research is based on the idea that "Knowing how motivated a person may be is important, but equally important is knowing why they are motivated" (Gonzalez Peitado et al. 2017, p. 125), because as soon as that purpose for learning is brought to light, it will be easier to engage the adult learners and widen their participation in lifelong learning (Chao 2009). In L2 and FL acquisition, motivation is fundamental, as it acts as a driving force for the process of learning and influences the different factors that make up the teaching-learning process (Richards et al. 1985, Dornyei 1998; Gonzalez Peitado et al. 2017).

Motivation can be distinguished between intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation

is oriented towards knowledge, when learners are motivated to learn for an internally rewarding satisfaction and focus “on the process rather than the product” (Gonzalez Peitado et al. 2017, p. 126). Several studies (Begotti 2019, Bye et al. 2007; Gonzalez Peitado et al. 2017) have shown that this type of motivation is more common amongst adult learners and it leads to more positive outcomes when compared to extrinsic motivation (Deci, Ryan 2000, Richer et al. 2002). The results of this research confirm all this, given that, as illustrated in Figure 1, the most common motivational factors which have led the participants to choose to learn a FL in their adulthood were of an intrinsic nature. When the participants were asked to mention the reasons and motivations which led them to their choice, 62% of the participants mentioned personal satisfaction and enrichment. The next most common motivational factor, indicated by 56% of the learners, was knowledge acquisition, while 40% argued that they were enticed to learn the language by the idea of embarking on a new challenge. Furthermore, there were others who argued that they chose to learn a new language with the aim of keeping an active and healthy mind. These motivations are quite similar to those that, according to Gonzalez Peitado et al. (2017) and Begotti (2010, 2019), drive adult learners to study FLs in other countries. Having an interest for the culture, the country, and the language itself is considered by Khasinah (2014) as a type of integrative motivation and 53% of our participants mentioned such an interest as their prime motivation for learning a FL. In fact, non-Maltese learners expressed their desire to learn more about the local way of thinking, with the aspiration of being able to integrate better in the host country. Eventually, the learners’ attitudes towards native speakers and their culture will reflect how successful the learning process was.

Figure 1: Motivations of the learners.



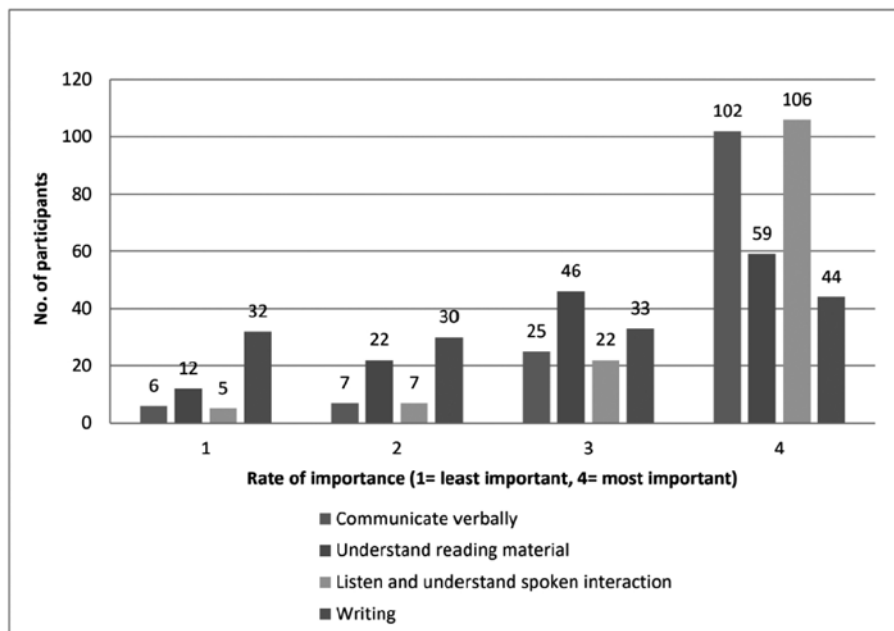
The extrinsically oriented motivations present in the results are significantly lower when compared to the intrinsically oriented ones. The vast majority of the participants (94%) declared to be learning the FL on a personal initiative and out of their free choice, while only 6% stated that they were obliged to do so. According to Gonzalez Peitado et al (2017), when the motivation is purely extrinsic, “the purpose is no longer oriented towards personal satisfaction, but towards external recognition” (p. 129). Learning a language as an adult is often linked to work-oriented or professional reasons, such as “getting a promotion, receiving a higher salary, acquiring a higher qualification, or transferring out of a current job and venturing into a new domain that is anticipated to give greater rewards or better conditions” (Gom 2009, p. 18). In fact, 34% of the participants remarked that their main reason for learning a FL was to improve their professional linguistic competence, while 13% stated that they were required to obtain formal certification in the FL. Moreover, another 34% said that they were driven by the better employment opportunities that a FL could offer.

One has to keep in mind that languages have become crucial in all sectors of today’s global marketplace (Pace 2013, Pace 2018). In fact, the ET2020 framework highlights the rising demand for FLs and communication skills on the European labour market, as well as the need for new teaching methods of FLs that are oriented towards preparing the learner for diverse professional contexts. As Pace (2013) affirms, those who are required to learn a language for work purposes need to learn specific competences that are unique to their job sectors. Given the wide variety of job sectors from which the participants of this study prevail, it might be the case for the DRLE to introduce language courses for specific purposes, to better prepare and support adults in their linguistic needs for work purposes. This should be taken into consideration even in the light of the Malta National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 in which it is stated that “Alternative learning pathways and opportunities – whether it be second chance adult education or more job-related continuing training – need new approaches and new forms of governance” (MEDE 2014, p. 7). Furthermore, non-Maltese participants who took part in this study, stated that their main reasons for learning MFL or EFL were to avoid being discriminated against, to integrate better in the Maltese society, as well as to have better chances at obtaining Maltese citizenship and long-term residence in Malta. Other than reflecting the idea that immigrant learners’ needs tend to be extrinsic, it feels imperative that such needs are given enough thought and consideration when preparing the language learning content.

As illustrated in Figure 2, when the participants were asked to rate their preferences regarding which of the four basic language skills they consider most necessary for their needs, listening and speaking were by far regarded as the most relevant. This is no surprise given that 42% of the 140 participants of this research declared that their main source of motivation to study a FL was related to communication needs. Moreover, the educators commented that some foreign

learners who were at their early stages of learning kept a translator app at hand, as they couldn't communicate neither in Maltese nor in English. This, needless to say, has serious implications on the nature and content to be presented in the course of study, meaning that the learners would benefit most from teaching and learning approaches that are more communicative in nature.

Figure 2: Language skills relevant to the needs of the learners.



It is to be noted that the majority of the participants (76%) who identified the listening skills as being the most relevant for their needs, felt that the course had met their expectations. On the contrary, the majority (73%) of those who considered speaking as the most essential skill felt that the course failed to help them improve their competencies, and thus were not satisfied with the course content and approach. Unfortunately, when the participants were asked how confident they felt to communicate in the FL that they were learning, only 14% felt that they made the highest improvement in their communicative competence, while another 12% expressed their disappointment at not having enough conversation-oriented lessons. In fact, when discussing possible barriers they found to learning, a common shortcoming mentioned by many is that there was not enough importance given and time dedicated throughout the language courses to content that deals with everyday life and to conversation skills. This research's findings are also in line with a similar study held in Krakow, Poland, by Jaroszewska's (2013), as cited in Ivashko

(2018), wherein the adults learning FLs emphasised that it was necessary to lessen the amount of writing and reading during the FL classes and increase the time dedicated to speaking and listening. However, two important considerations need to be mentioned here. First of all, one must keep in mind that from the first to the second questionnaire, only 5 months had elapsed, making it very difficult, if not impossible for learners to gain enough confidence to be able to communicate in the TL. The second consideration is that the FL courses offered by the LLC are not specifically intended for work purposes. In addition, time constraints were another issue that hindered the adults' learning process. In fact, many remarked how their work schedules made it challenging for them to revise what was done in class and to dedicate enough time to individual study.

The way forward

In view of the findings of this research, we are putting forward our suggestions to offer a better learning experience to adult learners.

Firstly, since adults commented on the challenges they face in maintaining a balance between family, work and study, they would become more motivated to participate in lifelong learning when and where they have their employers' support. There could also be the introduction of a flexible schedule of the courses held at the LLCs, together with other incentives similar to the Get Qualified scheme, launched with the scope of inviting employers to help employees develop their knowledge and skills. Such incentives would not only benefit the employees but also the employers, since they would be investing in having more skilled workers. The employers' support is also crucial for non-Maltese adult learners studying MFL or EFL, who probably have no knowledge of either the Maltese or English language prior to the start of these courses. Yet, the only way to communicate with the educator and other classmates would be through one of these two languages. This reveals the importance, as suggested by Begotti (2019), of having educators and an educational system that supports and motivates them. They require a more urgent need to learn the L2 in order to integrate into the host country's society and be able to carry out their work with less communication obstacles between workmates, clients and customers. This is especially needed in places such as hospitals, where there are several foreign health care workers whose patients depend on their ability to communicate well with them either in English or Maltese. Since migrants' linguistic demands are very often work-related and therefore vary according to the different job sectors in which they work, maybe the time has come for the DRLE to consider introducing FL courses for specific purposes to better support their learners in their quest to upskill their linguistic abilities for work purposes.

Following strategy number 9 of MEDE (2014), the education sector must ensure that the educators are equipped with innovative pedagogies and curricula that,

according to Begotti (2010), can aid them to identify the variables that influence FLA. With the feedback presented by the participants, it emerged that there is a need for educators to continually consult their learners about their expectations of the course, by adopting a more learner-centred approach in class and involving in a more dynamic way the adult learners in the teaching and learning process itself. Such an approach would enable educators to become more sensitive to the most relevant language abilities needed by their adult learners.

It is very clear that the communicative competence is valued by adult learners of FLs, given their strong need to be able to listen, understand and communicate in real-life situations. This is also confirmed by Kuklewicz (2018), who states that a functional or situational based syllabus, together with task-based learning (TBT), can be more beneficial to adult learners, as it promotes a more communicative approach in class which engages the learners in a more meaningful learning process, also through the use of authentic material (Ellis, Shintani 2014). The educator needs to find a balance between the skills and present authentic content that deals with everyday life situations. Presenting new knowledge within familiar contexts would also help overcome the issue of age-related difficulties encountered by the older learners. Indeed, when the skills and knowledge gained in class are useful and supported by authentic examples, the learners will become more stimulated, as their intrinsic needs are more likely to be fulfilled. Further to this, even the National Research Report (Bugre, Chana 2018) proposes that educators should be trained on issues of cultural diversity to be better prepared in creating an environment of mutual respect and inclusivity within the classroom. Introducing Professional Development Courses or a study-unit within the Masters in Teaching and Learning course at the University of Malta that specialises entirely in adult learning, would guarantee having better prepared educators.

Conclusion

The process of learning can be facilitated when the educator makes an effort to understand “who the adult learner is, how the social context shapes the learning that adults are engaged in, why adults are involved in learning activities, how adults learn, and how aging affects learning ability” (Merriam et al. 2007, p. 11). In addition, it is fundamental that courses in FLs for adults should have clear objectives that take into consideration factors such as the socio-economic background and individual characteristics of the learner, together with time and resources.

Adults make a conscious choice of embarking on an educational journey and this is influenced by a number of social, economic and political aspects (Begotti 2019). Hence, identifying and understanding which are the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that positively and negatively affect their motivations, can aid researchers and educators into creating effective learning. This is what this research aims to do. Through the

analysis of data from questionnaires administered to adult learners following a FL course at the LLC, it provides a clearer picture of the needs and motivations of adult learners studying FLs, while also presenting various suggestions which can improve and make the learning experience of these adults more relevant to their needs and interests, from a personal, educational and professional point of view.

The findings of this research, which are also very similar to those of other international studies (Begotti 2019, Bye et al. 2007, González Peiteado et al. 2017), show, among other things, how the main driving forces that attract individuals to learn FLs in their adulthood are of an intrinsic nature, such as personal satisfaction, knowledge acquisition and interest in the culture as well as the country in which the FL is spoken. For these learners, personal satisfaction derives simply from the process of systemising the learned material, linking it to previous experiences and being able to expand one's own knowledge at a mature age (Begotti 2019). On the other hand, other participants were driven by extrinsically oriented reasons for enrolling in the FL courses such as better employment opportunities, integrating better in the Maltese society and obtaining formal certification. These reflected the majority of the migrants' linguistic demands who took part in this study, which were often work-related. Nonetheless, a number of existing conflicts among the adult learners were highlighted, such as maintaining a good balance between work and study schedules, which further confirms the need for having incentives which support both employers and employees to encourage more adult participation.

Another two important aspects that have emerged from our research are the importance of being aware of the previous learning experiences of the adult learners and of the exposure they have to the FLs, as well as the need for educators to be aware of their learners' expectations from the FL course, both at the start as well as throughout the course. It also resulted that the most important language abilities for adult learners are listening and speaking. Unfortunately, a considerable number of participants felt that the communicative aspect was not given so much importance throughout their course of studies. This feedback illustrates the need for having teaching and learning approaches that are more communicative in nature and a more learner-centred approach in class, with the educator acting as a facilitator for learning by involving the adult learner in the process of choosing the content to be covered in class. Hence, having well-trained educators in innovative pedagogies, would help them be more prepared in applying teaching and learning strategies that meet the expectations and needs of adult learners.

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Students' Voice as a Source of Reflection and Growth in the Teaching and Learning Setting at a Post Secondary Institution – Lessons Learnt After Several Months in Pandemic Circumstances

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic changed the teaching and learning scenario in education. The authors of this paper, both lecturers at a post secondary institution in Malta, were determined to understand the students' lived experiences during remote learning. Rich data was generated in two studies through a mixed research method approach using questionnaires with several open-ended questions. One questionnaire explored the students' experiences during the initial three months of remote learning, and, in the second study, a follow-up questionnaire was sent to the same students a year later. This paper focuses on the second study. The students' response indicated a shift from initial chaos and uncertainty to uniformity and relative stability. Some students remained unscathed by this experience, but months of remote learning affected the learning and wellbeing of others. The students' voice confirmed the sensitivities of such a crucial age group, exposing typical personal, academic, familial and social vulnerabilities. Issues of diversity and equity exposed a diverse spectrum of emotional maturity, learning abilities and domestic backgrounds amongst students. Surprisingly, several students reflected on the effectiveness of learning methods in remote and physical classes. The findings in this paper call for valuable lessons to be learnt and applied in a versatile new normal.

Keywords: *Covid-19, Remote Learning, Vulnerabilities, Equity, Wellbeing, e-learning*

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic posed and still poses various threats; however, it also provided educators with unique opportunities resulting in a time of introspection and reflection. As educators, we became curious and preoccupied with the effectiveness of remote learning. Students were not left unperturbed and their concerns disrupted their focus and future plans. While trying to find ways to adapt and evolve in an unprecedented situation, the authors sought to listen to the students' voice. This

study, a follow-up to a previous one (Gatt, Rolé 2021) conducted after the first three months of emergency remote learning (ERL) period (March - May 2020), focuses on the students' experiences of fifteen months of remote learning. In June 2021, the students had completed an academic year in a pandemic situation, where they spent most of it following lectures remotely. There was a short period of time where the students were allowed to attend the institution in small groups; however, learning resumed remotely after cases spiked again in Malta during the month of January 2021.

The authors, still concerned about the students' learning and wellbeing, delved to explore the students' experiences to devise possible strategies for the future. The students who were surveyed in June 2020 (ERL period), then at the end of their first year, were nearing the end of their two-year course and about to sit for their MATSEC exams in June 2021. This study gave these students the opportunity to evaluate their experience with all its strengths and vulnerabilities, vent out and express their views as comprehensively as possible. In fact, it focuses on the challenges that the students faced and how they managed, or not, to overcome them. Surprisingly, the students gave us much more than we expected; they reflected quite deeply on their learning experience and gave us valuable insights, not only on teaching and learning during a pandemic but on what active learning should be all about. While the first study uncovered a myriad of fears of the unknown, this second study revealed how students' perspectives had evolved and how they became more aware of their learning needs. The students provided us with valuable information on how to continue supporting them while also improving our practices and focusing on growth in a new normal.

Several researchers embarked on similar studies, investigating the students' experiences and perceptions during the Covid-19 pandemic. In a case study of around 500 undergraduates, Al-Mawee et al. (2021) reported negative experiences such as lack of social interaction and positive experiences with respect to time-management and comfort. A large-scale study involving 34,000 higher education students from 62 countries, Aristovnik et al. (2020) found that although students talked of anxiety, boredom, lacking computer skills and higher workloads, they were satisfied with the support which was provided by the teaching staff. Similar student experiences were reported in the previous study by the authors of this paper (Gatt, Rolé 2021). In this work, the authors relate the students' experiences to benefits of remote learning, vulnerabilities and equity issues.

Methodology

The authors thought it was opportune to approach the same cohort of students and investigate their lived experiences during their second year at the institution. As in

the first study, a questionnaire, with the same cohort of students, was chosen as the research tool; in the first study, the response rate was 25% and the students had given rich narrations in the open-ended questions. It was also an ideal communicative tool to reach all students remotely and allow them time to reflect and respond to the questions.

Thus, an anonymous questionnaire was sent to all second-year students in June 2021 and it consisted of 27 questions, organised in sections. It included multiple choice, Likert-scale and open-ended type of questions. The questions focused on the following themes: student support (IT and wellbeing), technological issues, learning related issues, the home learning environment and advantages and disadvantages of remote learning. The data generated in the multiple choice and Likert-scale questions was analysed in Google Forms and presented in charts and graphs. Nvivo 12 was used to analyse the open-ended questions where the data was reduced and categorised several times. As in the first study, these open-ended questions resulted in rich narrations comparable to interview responses.

Findings and Discussion

In this second study, the number of respondents was 194 (23% response rate). Similar to the first study, the ratio between female and male participants remained at 3:1. Since the ratio at the institution is 3 females: 2 males, the belief that females are more open to talk about their concerns than males is reinforced. This trend has been observed in other studies (Smith 2008, Curtin 2002). Students from all five subject areas at the institution answered the questionnaire and the percentages were representative of the number of students registered in each area.

The extreme variations in perceptions of the remote learning experience were less evident in the second pandemic period than in the first. In June 2020, 95% of the students had claimed that remote learning posed several challenges. In June 2021 this percentage, though still high, decreased to 80% while 15% of the students stated that they preferred remote learning to face-to-face learning. Yet, the number of students experiencing stress in the second phase was as high as in the first phase (70%). The responses confirmed the authors' perception that although the situation had changed and improved, the majority of the students were still uncomfortable and yearning to return to face-to-face learning. The reduction of data resulted in three main categories, reflecting the students' responses and rich narrations. Thus, three main concepts emerged; these are (1) an appreciation of the strengths and benefits of the experience, (2) a disclosure of vulnerabilities and stressors and (3) insights on what active learning should be about. This gave the authors an impetus to use these responses as a catalyst for reflection and a learning experience directed towards the growth and evolution of professional practice.

Strengths and Benefits

From uncertainty to uniformity

The findings in this research have shown that during the pandemic, most students experienced an academic journey of unpredicted and unexpected circumstances. The students remarked that they moved from a period of somewhat chaos and uncertainty in the ERL period to relative stability in the second academic year. The constant evolving adaptations, and strategies devised by the institution administration resulted in greater structure and uniformity.

The immediate ERL guidelines in the first period, by the administration involved the launching of online IT and Counselling services. These services intensified as the remote learning phases were extended. An increased awareness of these services was reported by several students in the second research phase. Frequent guidelines and updates via email from the a post-secondary institution administration to students and lecturers provided a process of regular communication. This ensured a sense of security among students, and was instrumental to gradually re-build the students' trust in the institution and their motivation to learn.

The sudden closure of the post-secondary institution in March 2020 and the launching of remote learning terrified several students and lecturers alike. The major role of educators is to facilitate and support the students' learning; they are role-models encouraging students to build confidence and self-esteem. During the ERL period, however, some students became aware of their tutors' struggles to cope with technology and the circumstances. On the other hand, most lecturers were setting several learning assignments and provided additional recordings to ensure full academic support to students. Consequently, data showed that this amount of extra work had inadvertently added to insecurities amongst students, and in certain cases aggravating their stress and anxiety. Moreover, during the first three months of the ERL period lecturers used different delivery methods. These had included simple voice recordings and/or the use of different video-conferencing applications such as Skype, Zoom, Hangout and Meet. This had contributed to the chaos which existed in the ERL period.

'It was confusing, even to know where to find everything. One hour would be Skype and the next was Zoom. Some teachers sent us long voice recordings. The work tripled...we had no time for all of this.'

In the second study, 83% of the students commented on greater organisation due to the fact that most lectures were delivered according to a timetable and most lecturers were using the same lecture delivery methods (Zoom). 40% of the students mentioned an observable increase in the lecturers' confidence in remote teaching and familiarity with technology.

'It was more organised and I feel like everyone got used to it more, including the teachers.'

'We were kept updated on everything and not many things were uncertain. Everything seemed to get a bit more natural albeit the current circumstances.'

In the second period, greater co-ordination and understanding prevailed mainly because educators used consistent lecture delivery method. The institution's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE - Moodle 3.5.6-12) was used as a platform to support learning, and provided access for video-conferencing (Zoom) and recordings (Panopto and Zoom). Tools such as asynchronous discussions, wikis and quizzes were available in the VLE. Class tests were regularly carried out via the quizzes tool, and assignments could be posted in the VLE for marking. This adjustment, in the second period, contributed to a uniformity and stability that was greatly appreciated by students.

'All lecturers were using the same methods to teach us and give us notes. As opposed to last year where everyone was doing their own thing.'

In the second period, students observed an increase in the lecturers' familiarity with technology and were grateful for the efforts shown by the majority of the lecturers. A timetable of 45-minute lectures, with a 15-minute break between lectures was followed, allowing students enough time to log on for the next lecture without rushing to make it on time. Voice recordings or Panopto recorded lectures were rarely used and if available, they were shorter than the two to six-hour recordings in the ERL period. The mandatory use of a webcam by students and lecturers also brought stability as some of the student distractions were reduced and more students felt that they were part of the class than in the first period.

'I feel that having the camera on keeps me more alert to what is happening during the lesson.'

The students' responses also indicated that, in general, the home environment became more conducive to learning in the second phase. During the ERL phase, several students were continually engaged in house-keeping tasks, distracting them from following all their lectures and even disturbing them during lectures. The guidelines provided by the administration after the first period, emphasised that students were to be allocated a safe, quiet and undisturbed learning space at home to enhance their learning.

The questionnaire responses also showed a general increase in the availability of basic technological devices at home, such as computers or tablets, printers and

webcams. The first study had indicated that computers were either not available in some homes or else other members of the family were sharing the only available device. In these cases, students either missed lectures or resorted to watching recordings. Very often students who intended to watch or listen to recordings, did not eventually find the time or motivation to do so. In the second phase, the administration and lecturers were more on the alert and ready to solve issues. Student attendance lists for every remote class were kept, a webcam was used and individual technological problems were immediately identified and solved.

The benefits of remote learning

The students' responses showed that remote learning turned out to be beneficial to students in several aspects. Moreover, the remote learning experience exposed some of the daily problems that students usually encounter in non-pandemic times. Students identified no need for travel (69%), home comfort (32%) and availability of recorded sessions and teachers' notes for revision (22%) as the top benefits of remote learning.

Transport issues were associated with traffic jams and the helplessness of waiting for buses, resulting in fears of arriving late for class and missing lectures. Learning from home resolved these issues as students did not have to wake up early to be in class on time, they could rest more and have more time for leisure or study.

'Waking up later than usual, having the opportunity to spend more time with loved ones and above all not taking the bus to school, fearing that I'll be late for the class.'

'Free sessions were used productively rather than wasted settling down at the a post-secondary institution, trying to figure out where to sit or with whom to spend my free time.'

Some students (4%) said that they did not spend money on transport, on new clothes, at the canteen or in nearby shops, and considered 'having no such expenses' as a benefit. Several students mentioned other elements of comfort arising from learning at home. These included not worrying about what to wear, not carrying heavy school bags and their minds were put at rest regarding forgetting assignments at home. At home, students were in a familiar environment, surrounded by books and their daily needs. They could freely and responsibly plan and follow their own schedules, including play and study. They were

Being able to set up your own personal classroom and stay comfortable at home. Having everything such as notes and homework by your side at any time. Also staying in your pjs'

'Learning in the comfort of your home can be better, such as playing music in the background of particular lessons, which help with concentration'

Another benefit of remote learning was the availability of digital notes and recordings for revision purposes. Some students preferred to write and present assigned work and take class notes digitally to using pen and paper as in pre-Covid times.

'Doing tests from home was more comfortable as I could use Word for essay writing rather than use pen and paper, where my work ends up being unpresentable.'

Remote learning resulted in vast amounts of peripheral learning in the use of technology namely, use of digital devices, editing and writing applications and communication software. This study showed that remote learning provided students with opportunities to change and cope with the circumstances. In particular, these were the students who (1) suffered from cyberphobia, (2) considered computers as a barrier to their learning, and (3) insisted on using the Internet for leisure only and not study work. Some of the students also mentioned that they appreciated learning from home to reduce risks of the Covid-19 contagion.

Fourteen percent of students did not answer the open-ended question on the benefits of remote learning and 3 % of the students said that they did not enjoy any benefits. In general, the responses indicated that in the second period, more students were settled to learn from home, when compared to the ERL period. The students eventually realised that the institution was showing genuine care for their learning. They understood that learning during a pandemic was still possible, Matsec and other examinations were still available and that the educational sector in the country continued to function.

Vulnerabilities and Stressors

Various issues made the students feel vulnerable and consequently stressed. Four types of vulnerabilities were identified: personal, social, familial and academic. Altogether, the stressors perpetrated by these vulnerabilities appeared as one huge hurdle in the students' progression, both as individuals and as learners.

Personal Stressors

The students in this study identified personal issues that emerged either for the first time in their life or were accentuated by the pandemic situation. At the foremost

was the concern with personal appearance, now exposed online, for all to see. Exposing their face on a screen was an issue (62%), either because they were aware that others were looking at them or because they felt uncomfortable looking at themselves. This shows that at this particular age, adolescents are more prone to be self-conscious of their appearance and might not feel comfortable with how they look. Somerville et al. (2013) emphasise that students become more aware of how their peers and society in general evaluates their image.

'I feel very self-conscious with the camera on, there is a sense of insecurity. People can scroll to look at me specifically and take screen shots.'

'I was paying more attention to how I looked on screen than to the lesson.'

Self-consciousness also manifested itself when the students felt that through live online sessions, they were exposing their home environment. Some students did not have an adequate private space for learning, and others had families that did not support their need for privacy and focus during lectures.

An issue of diversity and equity emerged; students who lived in cramped small houses/apartments could not avail of the holistic educational experience of online learning, while those who had their own room or space had the opportunity to exploit the advantages that the online experience had to offer. *'I could feel some students snickering at what I had behind me.'*

Some students (12%) felt particularly vulnerable also health wise. The most common vulnerability was the effect of the pandemic on their mental health. Some students experienced mental health problems for the first time in their life (5%), while for others it was a case of exacerbation of prior conditions. Obsessive compulsive disorders, anxiety attacks and depression were the most common conditions. Students also complained on the effect of online learning on their physical health, mentioning deteriorating eye sight and back and neck pain as the main ailments resulting from spending excessive time in front of a computer.

'I had constant panic/anxiety attacks, a newly developed depression.'

'I suffered from the revival of a previous eating disorder.'

Many students were in constant fear of contagion and most were also anxious about the safety of vulnerable relatives. They were afraid of catching the virus themselves and not surviving, but mostly they were concerned that they would expose their vulnerable family members to the virus. This responsibility weighed on their conscience and affected their psychological and emotional wellbeing.

Another main personal stressor was loneliness and consequently also isolation. They missed human contact, not only at the institution but also in extra-curricular activities. Most missed the daily interaction with their friends and their lecturers. Rather than missing the actual activities, they missed the people they used to meet in those activities. Some were not even feeling 'human' anymore, but rather more like robots. The feeling of detachment from society instilled in them a fear of abandonment; a feeling that they were not being thought of or valued. Some felt that even the education system was failing them due to the remoteness of the whole pandemic situation.

'I miss seeing people, being outside and learning in a classroom without a mask to hide our faces and smiles. It might seem it's nothing but in reality, it's everything.'

'No human interaction made me feel more like a learning machine that absorbs information and less of a student.'

Even technology became a means of stress for some students. They were anxious every time they had a lecture and particularly about connectivity issues (51%) and adapting to different modes of technology (46%). Quite a number (45%) felt uneasy due to the lecturers' discomfort or lack of familiarity with the required technology. Lack of access to hardware such as printers and scanners affected 26% of the students.

Another cohort of students (40%) could not come to grips with the reality that their leisure gadgets/Internet were now their learning resources.

'I had never really used it (technology) for educational purposes; the idea was completely alien to me.'

Some students felt that the use of technology for learning invaded their private lives and interfered with their recreational time.

Familial Stressors

Familial Stressors added to all the above vulnerabilities and worsened the situation at home. Crowded houses, often including extended family members were definitely not conducive to learning. The amount and volume of background noises interrupted the students' learning.

'Sometimes I would be answering a question and think that the lecturer was hearing my dad and not me.'

Interruptions and noise from other family members was a major issue for many students (59%). The usual family activity, that at other times felt normal, became a

distraction. Arguments between family members were more irritating than usual as these became more frequent due to the family being at home all the time.

'Sometimes my parents would break into fights, thus the tense environment with no distance between me and them, made me unable to focus.'

Parents and siblings, even in the second period, at times showed indifference to the students' need for privacy and silence. Some students felt that their family members were still insensitive to their needs as learners; they were expected to run errands and do housework when the need arose. At the same time some of these students felt that they had to contribute to the increased amount of housework due to the family being at home. The presence and needs of dependent relatives also weighed on students' conscience and they felt obliged to take care of family members who needed constant care.

'My mother suffers from chronic pain and being at home with her I felt I had to help out as I felt more responsible.'

'Even my pets were a distraction, asking for food and attention and making unnecessary noise.'

The pressures on the students were numerous in the ERL period; however, they persisted to a lesser degree in the second period. Some families were still interfering with the students' learning rather than offering support. The students felt bewildered that their natural home support system was alienating them from their studies.

Academic stressors

The academic stressors in the second period were similar to those that existed in the ERL period, albeit not as harsh and less students were affected by them. Although some students (26%) seemed unscathed by the experience, others struggled and found it difficult to cope with the extended remote learning period. A short break where students were allowed to attend lectures in small numbers was literally a breath of fresh air, but unfortunately, this lasted only for a few weeks in January 2021.

Several students remarked that it was likely to become distracted during class when learning from home. They sat for long hours in front of a computer; a fifteen-minute break between lectures was too short. In some cases, this break was used as an extended lecture time. In fact, tiredness (72%), a lack of motivation to learn (81%) and a lack of focus due to distractions (85%) were the most common academic stressors.

'I felt trapped in my room. There is no change of scenery or environment. It is difficult for one to not only concentrate on their lectures and focus on completing homework, but also to have a motivation to complete the school year.'

The first study had indicated that students experienced three types of distractions – (1) outside the house (70%), (2) in the house (67%) and (3) social media (64%). Noise distractions from neighbours and construction works outside the house persisted to the same extent during both periods of this research, while social media distractions increased during the second phase (80%).

Although distractions related to housekeeping and care of relatives were reported to a smaller extent in the second period, a new distraction surfaced. The mandatory use of the webcam definitely had its huge benefits, but the webcam was also instrumental to divert the students' attention away from class learning; it added to the students' stress and concerns. As previously mentioned, several students spent the lecture time worrying about their appearance and constantly looked at the screen to check themselves. Other students were known to be scrolling, looking at classmates and taking screen shots. This made the former students anxious and stressed. On the other hand, some students were not affected by webcam distractions; they kept the speaker's (lecturer's) view on and were not concerned about appearances. These students showed a sense of responsibility for their learning and the learning of others.

Some students felt that remote learning forced them into passive learning; they felt a lack of interaction with their teachers, especially when lecturers read notes without any discussion. This was also observed in a study with Higher Education students by Radmehr and Goodchild (2021) in Norway. As students became bored and lost focus and motivation, it was easy to use the computer screen or an additional device to look at social media.

'Maybe after every lesson the lecturer could have a set of questions which could be used as a mini test to see if the students have understood what was discussed.'

Some students felt a lack of academic support. The lack of physical face-to-face contact made these students feel uncomfortable to ask questions in the online class or to ask for individual help from the tutors. It was also difficult to discuss with classmates in lecture time. The students who did not have privacy to learn at home resisted asking and were uncomfortable to answer questions because they did not want their family to listen to what they would be saying.

'I could not participate in class or answer questions with my mother always in the same room'

Tiredness, anxiety, boredom, concerns, ease of distractedness and passive learning were challenges faced by students on a daily basis. Consequently, some students lost the motivation to learn.

Social Stressors

Isolation

Wheeler (2020) described remote learning as being together face-to-face at a distance; however, students felt isolated from their a post-secondary institution crowd. In pre-Covid times, the institution, besides supporting curriculum learning, also offered extra-curricular opportunities for learning and socialising with peers of the same age. Enrichment courses, sports activities, social events, concerts, communities, clubs and societies provided a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere with opportunities for students to increase their circle of their friends. Most students formed vibrant groups. They studied together and socialised in the classrooms, library, study areas, canteen, common room, gymnasium and in outdoor garden areas. In the first year of the pandemic, the students had the opportunity to be with their peers for five months before the onset of the lockdown. They had already savored school life and this contrasted greatly with their home learning. Many students (52%) believed that lack of socialisation was the greatest disadvantage of remote learning. Loneliness affected these post-secondary young adults more than any other adult age groups (Luchetti et al. 2020). As Lee, Cadigan et al. (2020) argue, loneliness has an even greater impact on students who had more social connectedness prior to the pandemic or who had relational or social concerns.

'Lectures were more fun when with friends, especially when you have a big group of friends which you loved to hang out with on a daily basis.'

'I lacked social interaction with people of my age and stayed in the house 5 days a week so life got boring and at the end I started losing motivation and the will to study and join lessons more often.'

Several students blamed their lack of motivation to learn, on their isolation and the lack of interaction with lecturers and peers. This isolation also led to fears of lost opportunities to build future friendships. As some of them argued, the number of infections and restrictions were increasing and they could not visualise an end to their distressing experience. Studies show that during the pandemic, tertiary level students have experienced the greatest increase in psychological distress (McGinty et al. 2020, Graupensperger et al. 2021). Some students in this study argued that the lack of face to face interaction, made them feel that their lecturers and classmates

were unapproachable because they had no more opportunities to learn about each other. In fact, some students provided suggestions for improving the quality of their remote education.

'Do fun activities and not only lectures as it could get quite repetitive after several weeks'

'If the pandemic goes on, please allow clubs to meet online.'

Wherever it was possible, the institution's students' clubs kept contact with students and organised online activities. The Youth Hub is one example of such initiatives during the remote learning period.

Students' Insights on Active Learning

One unexpected response from students, in general, was their deep insight on learning. During both pandemic periods, students had the opportunity to reflect on their learning experiences. Remote learning induced them to appreciate the merits of face-to-face learning, while evaluating what works more for them. Most students realised that active learning, whether face-to-face or online, is an effective learning methodology which should be encouraged. It was evident that the students are aware of best practices for learning and show satisfaction when active learning occurs (Hyun et al. 2017). According to some of the students' responses, the remote learning experience limited the extent to which active learning was practised.

'Some lecturers went too fast and did not give us enough time to process, suggest answers and evaluate our own work.'

'Reading notes without any debate and further questions is not effective.'

Nevertheless, students praised and were appreciative of lecturers who did their utmost to overcome the circumstances and keep the learning as active as possible. Remote learning provided the opportunity for the use of learning tools, such as quizzes, polls and breakout rooms in class. Some students' responses show that in certain cases, breakout rooms (in Zoom) were not always used appropriately for effective learning. The students expected educators to be more aware of the efficiency and effectiveness of tools and of applying various teaching methods. Some also said that there is need for educators to evaluate the use of tools in the teaching of different subjects. Maybe such an insight would not have occurred to students if they had not stopped to think and reflect on their learning and diverse methodologies.

'Most teachers encouraged student participation and motivated students to learn...'

'Some teachers would just present worked examples and then these are discussed – this was not effective as everything was ready. We need to work them out ourselves.'

Students also appreciated the role of discipline in active learning. During online lectures it was easier for students to distract others and misbehave; thus students appreciated the fact that no nonsense was allowed and that lecturers kept order. They were aware that the institution's administration was taking steps to stop any form of online misbehaviour and they felt secure. Most students started appreciating the role of discipline in effective teaching and learning, both online and in person. Interaction with lecturers during class and individual attention were another two issues brought up by the students. They felt that when students are not asked questions or are not given the time to articulate their ideas and to contribute to the lectures, they lose focus and motivation. If lecturers do not address students individually and give particular attention, students feel disengaged and on the receiving end of a tedious process.

'With lack of interaction my only motivation was fear of low assessment marks...not to learn.'

Awareness of equity and diversity issues in teaching and learning was also evident amongst many students. They showed a high degree of empathy towards students who were at a disadvantage due to pandemic conditions. The pandemic accentuated learning, financial, emotional and psychological difficulties. Students experiencing these difficulties could not focus and keep up with the increased amount of work. Those students who did not experience any of these difficulties felt that more should be done to support those students who struggled all year round, pandemic or not. Reference to differentiated teaching was also made, requesting adaptation of teaching methods to students' various needs. Students did appreciate the fact that most lecturers were very demanding, tried to keep high standards and promoted autonomous learning, however they were also sensitive towards those students who could not keep up with the work.

'We would like to see some change regarding the teaching methods used towards distressed students.'

Another teaching quality that students appreciated is when lecturers have clear expectations. In normal face-to-face school circumstances issues of unclear expectations do occur but usually these are tackled immediately in class or during contact hours. In pandemic times, whenever this was the case, the students felt lost as it was difficult to ask the lecturers directly in class and by the time they got an answer through emails, it was often too late to reinforce the learning within a context. Students claimed that when they are sure of what is required from them, they feel confident and do better in their tasks.

'Unclear instructions on length and level of detail expected from us confused us even more.'

These insights emphasise the importance of students' voice and its role in the continuous evaluation of teaching and learning. Students are cognisant of how they learn best and their perception of their own learning should continuously be tapped for a more effective education research methodology (Lechner 2001).

The outcomes of the research

The personal and academic stressors, revealed in this research, point towards the need of empowering students to become self-directed learners. This entails the development of self-regulatory strategies in the learning process such as being flexible, responsible, and resilient active learners (Rolé 2020). Thus, the focus on teaching and learning is not only on learning subject content. It also involves the development of resource management strategies which include managing time, managing study environments, monitoring effort, effective focusing, and being determined to learn (Pintrich, DeGroot 1990). The students who were self-directed learners with the above self-regulatory characteristics coped better than the vulnerable others during the pandemic remote learning. Some of the latter displaced the responsibility to learn, claimed that lectures were boring, said that they felt too distant from lecturers and class mates and were inclined to become distracted.

The institution's community has gained insights which could be used in strategic planning. Grajec (2021) discusses the possibility of three main scenarios for a post-pandemic era; institutions may focus on either (1) restoration, i.e., working towards reverting to the old normal, or (2) evolution, i.e., adapting to a new normal or (3) transformation, i.e., focusing on creating an innovative future. Educational institutions must be pushed beyond restoring traditional practices (Gatt, Rolé 2021). Pandemic education, although initially disordered and continuously of great concern, provided valuable opportunities for institutions to evolve and transform. Little (2021) proposes the creation of a plan to identify the institutions' needs and students' needs, the provision of the required digital tools at the institution and at home and the guarantee of equal access to education for all students. Little (2021) argues that a transformative route needs to be based on pedagogy, culture, technological infrastructure and governance.

Conclusion

The students' voices in this research have influenced some of the post-secondary institution's decisions during the remote learning period. Morse and Allensworth

(2015) noted that giving students a voice and placing them at the centre when devising strategies and making decisions is of benefit to the students and also improves the outcomes for the entire institution. Several students highlighted the importance of structure and uniformity at school and shared their visualisation of effective learning. In addition, this research has exposed the personal, social, academic and familial stressors which affected the students' educational journey in the one and a half years of remote learning.

The institution's strategies and direction based on the continuous evaluation of the educational circumstances and above all focusing on students radiated an attitude of genuine care for the students' wellbeing and learning. Latent benefits which are often overlooked when discussing remote learning were revealed. These included transport issues which resulted in more time available for students to schedule their days and less stress regarding fears of arriving in class late or forgetting work at home. Furthermore, the availability of recorded lectures proved useful for revision and studying purposes.

The major stressors impeded the students' learning and also revealed issues of diversity and equity amongst the students. This has provided the institution with a lens on the diverse spectrum of emotional maturity, learning abilities and domestic backgrounds of the students. Moreover, in pandemic times, weaknesses and strengths of institutions were either exposed or accentuated.

The major elements which affect students and highlighted in this study are digital education, active learning and equity matters. Several students considered the video-conferencing in remote learning as an example of an online traditional passive lecture. A shift from passive learning to active learning across all subjects and the design of curricula and assessment methods that support active learning is essential. Although digital education depends on an extensive technical infrastructure, it is of great importance that educators have the appropriate digital pedagogical skills and digital readiness. A transformation may involve aligning curricula and educational structures to digital skills, technology enhanced learning in classrooms across all subjects and professional development for educators in terms of active learning and digital education. An institutional culture of transformation would provide a vision with rigid foundations for the future, keeping pace with eventual change. The results from this study support the need for a transformation whereby the institution fosters a culture for resilience, embraces change, accepts innovations and assertively moves forward providing a holistic educational experience to students and equity access to education.

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