



ELET SYMPOSIUM

Early Leaving from Education
and Training: The Way Forward

NOVEMBER 2020

Conference Proceedings



MINISTRY FOR EDUCATION
DIRECTORATE FOR RESEARCH, LIFELONG LEARNING
AND EMPLOYABILITY

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Biographies Of Conference Presenters

Key Note Speaker: Dr Paul Downes



Dr Paul Downes is an Associate Professor of Education (Psychology), Director of the Educational Disadvantage Centre, Institute of Education, Dublin City University. He has invited presentations in 29 countries. He is a member of the Coordinating Committee of the European Commission's Network of Experts on the

Social Aspects of Education and Training (NESET 2014-19). His contribution to international policy and practice includes invitations from 15 different countries' official ministries to present his research on social inclusion in education, lifelong learning, social & emotional education and wellbeing. His latest book is *Reconstructing agency in developmental and educational psychology: Inclusive Systems as Concentric Space*. New York/ London/New Delhi: Routledge (2019).

Key Note Speaker: Dr Eemer Eivers



Dr Eemer Eivers is a Research Fellow at Ireland's Educational Research Centre, currently on sabbatical. Her specialisms include digital assessment and comparative international studies. As well as being a test developer, she has led Ireland's participation in numerous large-scale assessments, including PIRLS (Progress

in International Reading Literacy Study), TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment).

Eemer has a particular interest in educational disadvantage. She previously worked on policies and programmes to reduce student dropout in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and recently led an IEA study to support early identification and targeting of students in Malta at risk of Early School Leaving. She is currently working with the National Foundation for Educational Research (on the International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study) and with the Irish Primary Principals' Network (analysing use of ICT resources in primary schools).

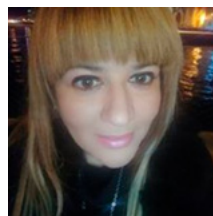
Alexander Farrugia



Alexander Farrugia is Director of Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability within the Ministry for Education.

Previously he was advisor to the Permanent Secretary within the same ministry, focusing on skills acquisition of students from vulnerable groups. A graduate in Philosophy, History, Theatre Studies and Journalism, Farrugia studied in Malta and in London. He is currently pursuing further studies in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy in Montpellier. He started his career as a journalist, and at the age of 29 became the youngest newspaper editor in Malta's second largest newspaper. After 15 years in journalism, he moved as head of the communications department within Malta Enterprise, Malta's investment promotion agency. He also taught Philosophy at Lifelong Learning for five years and for the last seven years he has taught political thought in the Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta. Farrugia is author of a number of academic articles in history, philosophy and theatre published in Malta, the UK, Italy and the Czech Republic. He is also a well-known literary author and has several books published in his name.

Pamela Spiteri



Pamela Spiteri, Education Officer responsible for the Early School Leaving Unit (ESLU), for the Prevention of Early School Leaving, at the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability. Pamela is currently responsible for policy monitoring, development and implementation related to

'The Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta'. Pamela is currently reading for a PhD in Education and Social Justice at Lancaster University and is an associate member of the Centre for Social Justice and Wellbeing in Education. She has previously obtained a Masters in Education: Teaching, Learning and Research from the University of Sheffield, and a Bachelor in Education from the University of Malta. Initially graduating as a teacher, she worked in a number of schools in Malta and abroad, including teaching for several years at an international school in Tripoli, Libya. Pamela is also a visiting lecturer at the Institute for Education in the areas of pedagogy, assessment and equity, and social justice.

Prof Roberta Ricucci



Prof Roberta Ricucci, Associate Professor at the University of Turin, dept. of Culture, Politics and Society, where she teaches Sociology of Inter-ethnic Relations and Sociology of Islam. She has wide and varied research experience, both at national and international levels, also as visiting research fellow at the

University of Princeton (NJ, US), Monash in Melbourne and Western Australia in Perth (Australia) and guest visiting associate professor at the Center for the Study of religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame (IN, US). Her recent research has generally been focussed on education, immigrant children and their both integration paths and identity-building process. Among her publications: *The New Southern European Diaspora: Youth, Unemployment, and Migration*; *Legislation, Projects and Strategies for the Implementation of Educational Inclusion in Italy: Results, Questions and Future Prospects*, in "The Open Education Journal", December, vol. 4, 2011 and Ricucci, R., *Educating immigrant children in a new comer immigration country. A case study*, in "Intercultural Education", vol. 19, issue 5, 2008.

Dr Viviana Premazzi



Dr Viviana Premazzi Founder of Global Mindset Development - GMD Malta. Specialist in education and training in diversity management, intercultural relations and communication, intercultural and interreligious conflict management. Appointed in 2018 as an Expert to deliver Professional Development Sessions on

international mobility, intercultural communication, intercultural relations, cultural diversity, intercultural education, interreligious relations, conflict management, capacity building, transnationalism, financial literacy for the Institute for Education, Malta's Centre for Continuing Professional Learning for Educators of the Ministry of Education.

Dr Sean Zammit



Dr Sean Zammit is a Principal Education Support Practitioner within the National Schools Support Services Department. He holds a Bachelor of Education Honours in Primary Education (B.Ed. Hons. Primary) and a Masters Degree in Education in Responding to Student Diversity (M.Ed. Responding to Student Diversity). Apart from the latter degrees, Sean also holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Educational Leadership (PGDEL). All

degrees were obtained from the University of Malta. Currently, Sean is reading a Doctoral Degree (MPhil./PhD) within the School of Education at the University of Lincoln (UK), from which he will be graduating next October 2019. Sean's main areas of interest are Multiculturalism, Inclusive Education, Equity, Social Justice and Responsiveness in teaching.

Bryan Magro



Bryan Magro is a qualified social worker and educator. He studied social work at the University of Malta, Philosophy and Arts at the Pontifical University of Maynooth and Pastoral Leadership at All Hallows College in Dublin. He worked at St. Patrick's Salesian School and the Church Schools' Secretariat for

Education. He also worked as Children's Service Manager at Appogg and as Head of Secretariat in the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity and the Ministry of Education and Employment. He is one of the initiators of the Youth.inc Programme and for six years held the post of Senior Manager at Youth.inc programme.

Miriam Teuma



Miriam Teuma has been a lecturer in Youth and Community Studies at the University of Malta for the past thirteen years. She is a founding member and was president of the Maltese Association of Youth Workers for eight years. She also has extensive experience at European Union, Council of Europe,

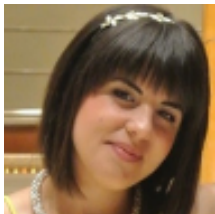
Commonwealth and international level on youth related issues and is a member of the Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ) and a board member and former vice-president of ERYICA (European Youth Information and Counselling Agency). She has also worked with the European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy, SALTO and the EuroMed Youth Platform and has contributed papers on youth work policy and practice to a number of international studies. In March 2018, she was elected chairperson of the Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Youth. Since December 2010, Ms. Teuma has been Chief Executive of Aġenzija Żgħażaġh, Malta's national youth agency. She represents Malta at the EU Youth working party and has led the Maltese EU Presidency in all youth affairs. As Chief Executive she is responsible for implementing and coordinating Malta's national youth policy Towards 2020 - A Shared Vision for the Future of Young People

Giulia Mifsud



Giulia Mifsud. (2009-2012) 2.1 BA Psychology & Theatre Studies University of Malta (Opening the Doors: Early School Leavers and their Perceived Lived Experience in the Maltese Educational System dissertation) (2012-2013) Higher Diploma in Psychology whereby I did my undergraduate dissertation in Early School Leaving. (2014-2015) and successfully received a scholarship from the MASTER it! scheme to read for my MSc Psychology of Education at the Institute of Education UCL (Second Chances: Exploring the Experiences of Young People In Further Education dissertation) (2015-2016) Learning Support Assistant in a secondary school in Hackney (2016-2018) Education Worker at Into University (national UK charity working with students from disadvantaged backgrounds to support them in achieving within Higher Education) (2018-present) Centre Leader at Into University (managing the Brent team and centre)

Gianella Mifsud



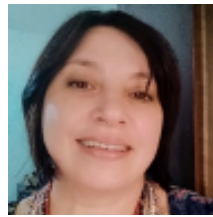
Gianella Mifsud. After graduating in Bachelor of Education in Computing from the University of Malta in 2011, Gianella Mifsud started teaching in a school that provides a supportive learning environment to the students to prosper both academically and socially. She has been teaching in this school for the past eight years. As enshrined in the school mission statement, the school environment creates a family-like setting where students and staff work side-by-side towards the single goal of empowering the individual student with a meaningful life-long educational journey. Throughout her teaching experience in this school, a lot of effort has been made to plan lessons aimed at empowering the school students who are full of energy and keen to become more digital literate notwithstanding the different abilities and needs. Teaching in this family-like school setting, she realised the benefit of developing an applied curriculum programme tailored to the needs of the students for which she is currently reading for Masters of Education in Computing at the University of Malta.

Grazio Grixti



Grazio Grixti is the Director for Digital Literacy and Transversal Skills (DDLTS) within the Ministry for Education. The main focus is to empower learners in acquiring the digital competences to succeed as global digital citizens. Previously, Grazio was the Assistant Director for Research and Innovation within the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability. He graduated from the University of Malta with Executive Master of Business Administration in Public Management. His first degree was B.Ed (Hons). Grazio has developed his expertise in digital literacy throughout the years with continuous professional development and in his role as teacher, and later on, as Education Officer in DDLTS where he had a leading role in the One Tablet Per Child Project (OTPC).

Ruth Farrell



Teacher of Mathematics for more than 20 years. Currently Head of Department Mathematics at San Gorg Preca College Hamrun. Holds a Masters Degree in Access to Education for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties (University of Malta). A member of the Executive Council of the Malta Dyslexia Association.

Dr. Minge Chen



Dr. Minge Chen currently works as a research Analyst at IEA Hamburg. She got her Ph.D. in Early Childhood Education and Master of Applied Statistics from Indiana University Bloomington, USA. Her research interests are scaling (both under CFA and IRT framework), statistical matching and at-risk children's well-being.

Ann-Kristin Koop



Ann-Kristin Koop currently works as a Research Analyst at IEA, Hamburg. She got her Master of Science in Statistical Science at the University of Bielefeld. Her research interests are statistical matching and hierarchical data analysis.

Jacqueline Gatt



Jacqueline Gatt B.Ed (Hons) (Melit) Biology & EMY, M.Sc. Sustainable Development (Melit), has completed her masters studies in Sustainable development from the University of Malta. Her research interests are in the sciences, in education and in sustainability issues related to education, income, employment and socioeconomic inequalities. She has a special interest in early school leavers and spatial trends and patterns that deal with issues that affect them. A distinction was awarded for the Masters research titled: Mapping Social Inequality: The Spatial Distribution of Early School leavers In Malta.

Dr Jacqueline Vanhear



Dr Jacqueline Vanhear - Jacqueline is Director – Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) in the Ministry for Education. She is leading a dynamic team who aim to evaluate and promote the quality of learners' holistic education provision in Maltese pre-compulsory and compulsory educational institutions. The DQSE also accredit learning and assessment programmes up to MQF Level 3 being academic, applied, vocational and non-formal, thereby creating diverse opportunities for all learners and contributing to inclusive and equitable quality education. Furthermore, they issue licences for educational institutions up till compulsory school age, while monitor adherence to legislation. Jacqueline has taught in the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors and coached educators, with a special focus on learning how to learn. She focused all her researches on how children learn and explored teaching and learning models which facilitate meaningful learning for learners of all ages while addressing learner variability. Over the years Jacqueline has given papers and presentations as well as published locally and internationally on the learning process focusing on Let Me Learn, Concept Mapping and Vee Heuristics collaborating with other passionate colleagues in the field. She has in recent years expanded and integrated her previous knowledge and research with in depth understanding of Universal Design for Learning.

Alexis Reid



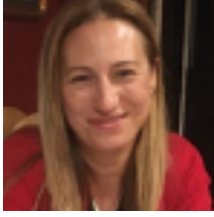
Alexis Reid - Trained at Loyola University in Baltimore, MD and Boston College, Alexis has worked in many different educational settings throughout her career. Most recently she taught in the Boston area and is currently the Director of Learning Based Therapies at the Boston Child Study Center (BCSC) and an Educational Consultant. Alexis is currently focused on helping to improve the training of executive function skills while closing academic gaps. At the BCSC she coordinates educational programs and services for learners, their parents, and teachers. As a CAST Professional Learning UDL Cadre member, Alexis strives to promote the integration of Universal Design for Learning into the educational landscape and has presented to and coached educators and administrators near and far. She is particularly passionate about fostering engagement in learning across contexts and works to nurture expert learning through the creation of optimal learning environments for all learners to thrive. Alexis is a consummate learner who seeks to integrate research and literature related to learner variability, mindfulness, mind-set, executive functions, and positive youth development by sharing and working with other passionate individuals in the field.

Professor Carmel Cefai



Professor Carmel Cefai, is the Director of the Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health at the University of Malta. He is Joint Honorary Chair of the European Network for Social and Emotional Competence and joint founding editor of the International Journal of Emotional Education. His research interests are focused on how to create healthy spaces which promote the resilience, wellbeing and psychological wellbeing of children and young people. He has led various research projects in mental health in schools, risk and resilience in children and young people, children's wellbeing, and the development of a resilience curriculum for early years and primary schools in Europe. Recent publications include RESCUR Surfing the Waves, A Resilience Curriculum for Early Years and Primary Schools (2015) published in 7 languages.

Annabelle Borg Gaffarena



Annabelle Borg Gaffarena has a Masters degree in Counselling and a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology. She has been working within the Directorate of Education since 1995 starting as a PSCD teacher and later as a guidance teacher. She has served in the schools' senior managerial roles for the past 9 years. Since 2016 she has been

occupying the role of Head of School at San Gorg Preca Middle School, Blata l-Bajda. As a counsellor Ms Borg Gaffarena also works with adults on a number of different issues involving general mental health and wellbeing, trauma and addictions.

Natalie Galea



Natalie Galea M.A. (Melit.) is a Research Officer at the Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health at the University of Malta. She is currently engaged in a national study on the wellbeing of foreign children living in Malta. She is also involved in a number of local and international research projects in the area of

resilience and social and emotional health amongst children and young people. Ms. Galea read for Sociology at the University of Malta, obtaining a BA (Hons) degree and a Master's degree. Her research interests are in sociology, social capital, resilience, social and emotional health and wellbeing. Publications:

Mollie O'Riordan



Mollie O'Riordan M.Sc. is a Research Officer at the Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health at the University of Malta. She attained a BSc in Psychology from the University of Southampton and an MSc in Cognitive Neuroscience from the University of Sussex. She is currently studying for an MA in Social Work at the

University of Malta and is involved in a number of projects, both internationally and locally, concerning resilience and socio-emotional health in children and young people. These presently focus in areas such as mental health curricula and second chance education.

Ljiljana Cumura



Ljiljana Cumura (1978) is sociologist, youth worker, project manager and researcher. Her research focus is on sociology, methodology of teaching, inclusion, disability politics, youth & community studies, peace education, integration and migration. During the studies (in Serbia, Germany, Sweden and

The Netherlands) and as a member of numerous scientific organizations, participated in 20 major studies and researches. She is author/co-author of over 100 projects; some of them are recognized as an example of good practice and are present in numerous scientific journals. Ljiljana Cumura holds more than ten awards for great impact in journalism, education, intercultural learning, music, documentary film, youth work, victimology and social work/social welfare. She is active as a researcher in Malta Sociology Association (MSA).

Evelina Barbanti



Evelina Barbanti (1991) graduated at the University in Padua (Italy) on master-course in Psychology of Community. Her final dissertation revolving around the implementation and theories of self-care in the healthcare setting. Evelina also completed pre-degree training at the Imperial College London, at the Public

health and primary care department in the SCARU unit. As a post-graduate intern she has firstly continued to work at the Imperial College London, while later she choose to explore European funded projects over social themes, serving current internship in Malta at the FOPSIM foundation

Dr Jonathan Vincent



Dr Jonathan Vincent is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at York St John University, UK. His research focuses on the barriers and pathways for autistic students as they transition into, through and from higher education. Most recently, he has been studying the employment ecosystem of autistic graduates to

uncover their experiences of accessing work as well as the attitudes and levels of knowledge among industry professionals. Where possible, his research is participatory and he is director of PRO Autism, which delivers training, co-facilitated by autistic experts-by-experience, to employers on how best to recruit and develop autistic talent.

Gallery





Introductory Chapter: ELET, The Way Forward

Pamela Spiteri, Education Officer, Early School Leaving, Ministry for Education, Malta

PhD Student Researcher, Education and Social Justice, Lancaster University – pamela.marie.spiteri@ilearn.edu.mt

ELET is a phenomenon emerging from various factors (educational, personal, economic and social). Consequently, this collection of papers following a three-day symposium held in Malta in November 2019 (hence, prior to the global pandemic) is widespread over a number of topics that contributed to the evaluation process of Malta's current strategic plan for the prevention of early school leaving and the development of a new policy that aims to achieve equity within a whole-school approach to learning.

This introductory chapter explores one aspect of a whole-school approach, that is parental involvement and its link with ELET, not only through an educational theoretical perspective but also through a social justice one. Consequently, the design and discussion of this chapter were informed by both the capability approach (Hartas, 2014; Biggeri et al., 2011) and a whole-school approach. A whole-school approach recognises that all stakeholders within the school community can have a major impact on students' learning and wellbeing. Learning within a whole-school approach necessitates a holistic model to learning that also acknowledges the various socio-economic backgrounds of students. Despite analysing one aspect of a whole-school approach, namely parental involvement, this study still acknowledged the relevance of all stakeholders. Therefore, apart from parents, it also included children, educators and management as participants.

Through a qualitative case study and the perceptions of various stakeholders, this research aimed to evaluate an after-school literacy programme emerging from the current ELET policy, targeted at students at risk and their parents. I was interested in gaining insight from the receiving end of this programme in order to evaluate how the national ELET policy might be further developed to reach more parents and students at risk, particularly since a new policy was being developed at the time of the study. Additionally, this study emerged from the policy itself which states that research is advised on "...the impact of the positive parent involvement that is inbuilt in some of these programmes in order to strengthen it and disseminate it as an example of good practice for parent involvement" (Ministry for Education and Employment, Malta, 2015, p. 39).

This introductory chapter is divided into eight sections. The first two sections provide the background and context of the ELET policy, its development as well as relevant literature pertaining to the study both within a global perspective as well as within a Malta's context. In the third section, I discuss the research issue and relevance of the study. An overview of the study is explored in Section 4, followed by the final sections wherein I discuss this study's methodology and findings and conclude by offering recommendations for policy development.

I ELET WITHIN A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

The EU defines early school leaving (ESL) as "young people leaving education and training with no more than lower secondary education" (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2013, p. 17). ESL has more recently been referred to as ELET (Early Leaving from Education and Training), which is considered a more inclusive term since it includes vocational education and training (Cedefop, 2016), and will thus be the term used throughout this paper. As part of the Lisbon strategy, the EU had set a priority to reduce ELET to below 10% by 2020. Therefore, educational strategies and policies have seen the need to target equity issues emerging from the needs of diverse learners (Cedefop, 2016), but despite the new policies and albeit the constant decrease in ELET numbers, not all EU countries reached this target.

Global national educational systems and international policies are undergoing ongoing changes in order to find ways of including all learners to ensure educational equity (UNESCO, 2017). However, ensuring that each student has an equal opportunity for learning remains a worldwide challenge also because of multiple globalisation implications (Ainscow, 2016; UNESCO, 2015). The year 2020 has even proved more challenging because of the global pandemic and school forced closure which highlighted multiple equity issues worldwide, including that of family disadvantage and socio-economic gaps (Nicola et al., 2020).

Embedding equity measures within educational policy to ensure that all students have the opportunity for a socially just education in practice is currently a global need and objective (Kyriakides et al., 2018; Nicola et al., 2020; Triplett, 2017). Research suggests that equity can be viewed as a political issue influenced by diverse views (Kyriakides et al., 2018; Triplett, 2017). Similarly, ELET might have strong political connotations since it is strongly linked to unemployment or dead-end jobs, social exclusion and poverty (Aarkog et al., 2018; Cedefop, 2016; Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014).

Despite the efforts of several international organisations to improve quality education for all, a recent Global Monitoring Report suggests that there are still 100 million children who do not complete primary education. Statistics further show that six out of ten children and adolescents who finish primary education are not achieving basic proficiency in literacy and mathematics (UNESCO, 2017b). Since 1990, the *World Declaration on Education for All* brought a number of international parties working together to achieve global quality education. More recently, a framework for action was designed to meet each learner's needs by drawing up seventeen sustainable development goals (SDG) and achieving Education 2030 targets (UNESCO, 2017). Major international organisations such as UNESCO, UNDP, UNICEF and World Bank were involved. Subsequently, SDG 4 focused specifically on education, accentuating that all governments

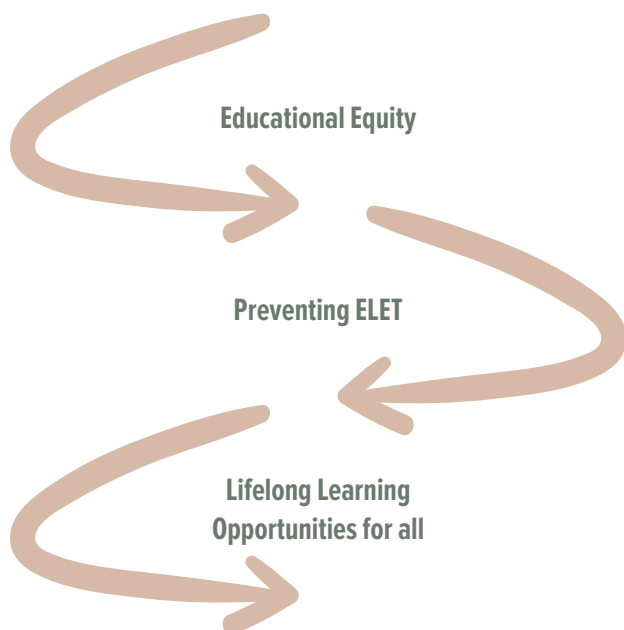
worldwide should “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (Chung et al., 2018, p. 326).

Furthermore, OECD (2012) states that:

Equity in education means that personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential (fairness) and that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion). (p. 9)

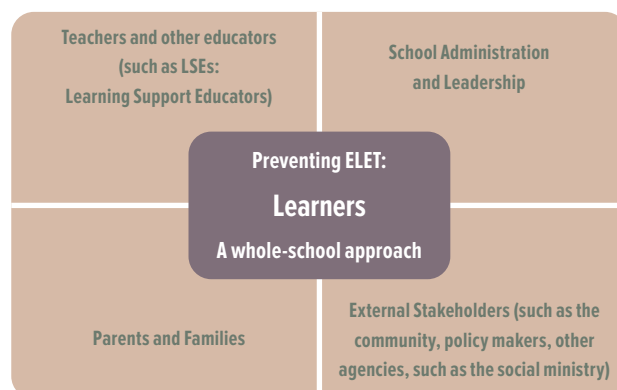
Global research and policies, therefore, indicate that early leaving from education and training is brought about by various factors often also including personal or social circumstances (Schraad-Tischler and Schiller, 2017). The relationship between educational equity and ELET is consequently intrinsic in nature (Figure 1). The fact that SDG 4 includes equality and inclusion implies that preventing ELET is also a priority in order to achieve lifelong learning opportunities for all. Moreover, the EFA global monitoring report (2015) suggests that failing to achieve a good standard of education can have strong economic and social consequences since democratic societies can be achieved through a more educated workforce which, in turn, produces more sustainable economies which can face multiple global demands and respond to common crises (Alexander, 2015).

Figure 1: Relationship between educational equity and ELET



While all reports and policies observe that improving quality and equity within educational systems worldwide involves a complex number of factors, quality teaching is essential but not sufficient (Aarkog et al., 2018). Students’ socio-economic background and hence parents are also considered among the main stakeholders in order to cater for this phenomenon, particularly within a whole-school approach that targets students at risk (Figure 2).

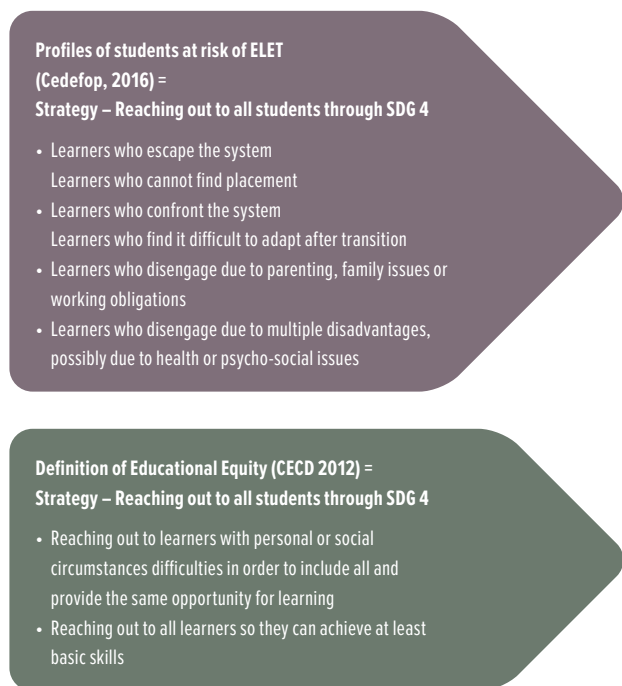
Figure 2: Parents as a main stakeholder within a whole-school approach to ELET (Adapted from School Education Gateway, 2017)



Therefore, if educational equity implies reaching out to all students (OECD, 2012), including those considered at risk of leaving education for a number of factors, then it can be observed that SDG 4 is also targeting ELET by supporting salient adults within the students’ life, including their parents by creating opportunities that reduce any socio-economic gap emerging from family disadvantage. Figure 3 gives a brief overview of the profiles of students at risk of ELET (Cedefop, 2016) and the similarities in defining educational equity.

This introductory chapter, therefore, seeks to develop implications for ELET future policies within Malta and beyond through a case study. Findings will discuss implications of how an after school parental involvement programme, though reaching out to a number of disadvantaged families might not be sufficient in order to provide equality for all students at risk of ELET. In light of the worldwide pandemic which brought about school closure for periods of three months and which consequently highlighted socio-economic gaps within the education system and implications for the implementation of SDG4, this paper seeks to discuss a main recommendation, that is of developing a whole-school approach within schools. It is hoped that this would enhance a social justice agenda of parental involvement within schools that further develops equity and inclusion within the education system.

Figure 3: Profiles of students at risk of ELET in relation to educational equity



II MALTA'S CONTEXT: DEVELOPING THE ELET POLICY THROUGH A WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH

In line with Malta's Educational Framework 2014-2024 (2015), that also aims to reduce ELET, the ESLU (early school leaving unit) was set up in 2014, following a new policy, 'A Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving' which was launched in the same year. This recommends various initiatives and programmes to reduce further the rate of ELET (Ministry for Education and Employment, Malta, 2014). It is built on the three pillars of prevention, intervention and compensation measures within compulsory and post-compulsory education (Figure 4). The policy was designed subsequent to various European and local working group consultations which advocated a whole-school approach (School Education Gateway, 2017; Cedefop.europa.eu., 2015).

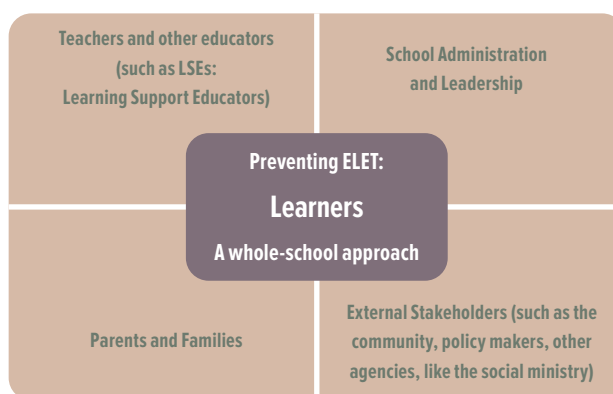
Figure 4: Framework of the Design of Strategies to address Early School Leavers (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014, p. 8)

Identification & Analysis		
Monitoring		
Coordination of policies		
Prevention	Intervention	Compensation
Early childhood education and care	Measures at System Level	Second Chance Opportunities
Measures at System Level	Student Focused Measures	Re-entering Mainstream E&T
		Comprehensive Support

This case-study focused on one of the intervention measures found in the policy to reduce ELET, namely, "supporting students and parents through after-school support programmes" (p. 39). In a whole-school approach, parents are considered as one of the main stakeholders within education (Figure 5). In the Maltese educational and cultural context, Borg, Mayo and Raykov (2016) discuss the strong link between parents' level of education and students' educational attainment. In addition, in 'Social Justice in the EU – Index Report 2017', Malta scores very low in offering an equitable education for students (Schraad-Tischler and Schiller, 2017). Cooper et al. (2007) explain that closing this gap is not only a matter of education but also a social justice and social equity one.

Enabling parents of low socio-economic status to support their children to aim high in education can make a significant difference to students at risk (Ministry for Education and Employment, Malta, 2014). Indeed, research shows that parental support can also have an impact on students' wellbeing by raising "their self-esteem and self-respect" (European Commission, 2013, p. 22). Recent studies in Malta on ELET conclude that students' wellbeing may impact their educational experience, attainment and aspirations (Borg et al., 2015; Camilleri, 2016; Cardona, 2015).

Figure 5: A whole-school approach to ELET (Adapted from School Education Gateway, 2017)



The role of parents in schools is consequently seen as a changing one within a policy, where “parents are not anymore the silent partner” (p. 30), but an active stakeholder in their children’s education. Epstein (2009) outlines a number of ways in which parents can be involved in education, namely, “parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating within the community” (p. 1-6). Downes (2014) develops them further and includes the need for a “differentiated approach to parental involvement” (p. 16). Similarly, in their case study, Bower et al. (2011) found that although Epstein’s model can be adopted as a framework, it needs to be modified according to the school’s culture, especially when wanting to include parents and students of low socio-economic status or minority groups.

III LEARNING FROM AN AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMME TO DEVELOP PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT WITHIN A WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH ELET POLICY

A growing body of research emphasises that parents’ literacy skills and their education might have an impact on parental involvement (Hartas, 2014). Borg et al. (2016) state that student achievement in Malta is still strongly linked to the family’s educational background. In line with this, Malta’s Educational Framework 2014-2024 (2015) not only aims at “reducing the relatively high incidence of early school leavers...[but also to]...raise the bar in literacy” (p. 2). However, despite the various measures which have been taken, the proportion of 15-year-olds underachieving in basic reading skills is at a high of 35.6% (Education and Training, 2017).

Underachievement in basic skills might influence negatively students at risk of early leaving from education and training (Borg et al., 2015; Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014b). Francis and Mills (2012) and Smith and Barrett (2010) argue that students have the right to basic education with the main focus on literacy skills. Within the capability approach as proposed by Sen (1999) and later developed by Nussbaum (2000), literacy is not only a valued ‘functioning’ for a socially just education but also a needed ‘capability’ for individual progress and ‘freedom’ within the development of society.

Spratt (2017) affirms that the development of literacy is also imperative for students’ wellbeing, and is sometimes overlooked in policy. Malta’s policy for the prevention of ELET, however, clearly states that students’ wellbeing is central to learning, and suggests that there should be “...better mutual relationships between schools and families which will also contribute towards the mutual consolidation of formal and informal support networks that nurture student wellbeing, especially for students at risk” (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014, pp. 36-37).

The policy recommends various strategies to decrease socio-economic gaps between students, including after-school programmes that offer extensive support in literacy to students and their families. Since low educational achievement is one of the signals of students at risk of ELET (Borg et al., 2015), it is important to act during the

early years of schooling. A literacy agency was specifically set up in Malta, to support students and parents, particularly in the early years, through various programmes by mainly offering parental involvement literacy sessions, literacy programmes for children and literacy professional development and support for teachers.

However, building a relationship between school and home in the early years of schooling can be a solid preventive measure (Downes, 2013b). Although parents are recognised as a vital stakeholder in the policy and a whole-school approach to offer a fair and just education to all students, there are still no guidelines for schools on how to achieve this. Therefore, different schools are left to tackle parental involvement on their own (Spiteri, 2017). According to Borg et al. (2015), this can lead to an unfair educational system and might be socially unjust, especially for students at risk hailing from difficult family backgrounds. In other words, if a whole-school approach, particularly parental involvement, is being advocated in Malta as a means to reduce ELET, then all students should be given a fair chance in their education, irrespective of the school they attend.

In this regard, this research is innovative since it attempts to delve into the impact of parental involvement that is inbuilt in after-school literacy programmes in Malta, thereby strengthening parental support in schools from the early years. This case study consequently included the main stakeholders, parents and young children aged 4-7 years. Although the number of participants can be described as a small sample, I believe that by involving different stakeholders I was in a more favourable position to evaluate this programme. This research follows in the footsteps of the work and suggestions provided by Biggeri et al. (2011) and Hartas (2014) on how to use the capability approach for research within education, particularly with children and parents.

According to Denscombe (2010), “all case studies need to be chosen on the basis of their relevance to the practical problems or theoretical issues being researched” (p. 57). A qualitative case study can gain a deeper understanding of particular phenomena in order to contribute valuable knowledge that can be generalised to theory (Denscombe, 2010). The major limitation inherent in this case study is that “a small sample is difficult to defend” (Stake, 1995, p. 5). As a ‘qualitative researcher’, I have tried “to preserve the *multiple realities*, the different and even contradictory views” (Stake, 1995, p. 12) during all observations and interviews. While selecting participants, I tried to vary the sample by choosing individuals even from outside the programme, not merely its participants. Interviewing not only parents, but also children, managers and educators enabled me to look in depth and better analyse this study’s findings.

IV THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A growing body of literature asserts that the capability approach can be used in research on education (Unterhalter, 2003, 2005; Robeyns, 2006; Walker, 2006). It suggests two core concepts namely, ‘functioning’, that is, what a person achieves, and ‘capability’, that is, the ‘ability to achieve’ (Sen, 1995, p. 266). This provides a framework for interactions between parents and their children as well as

interactions between parents and other agencies such as educational ones. According to Hartas (2014), “[f]unctionings are related to the different conditions that surround people’s lives. Educated parents, for example, may be in a better position to offer learning support at home and create learning conditions that are conducive to child academic achievement” (p. 166).

Functionings thus acknowledge the parents’ problems and the social constraints they might face to support children in their educational process (Hartas, 2014). Sen (1987) describes capabilities as “notions of freedom, in a positive sense: what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead” (p. 36). Within this theoretical approach, parents’ capabilities refer to their ability to overcome the different constraints and be actively involved in their child’s education.

Through this case study, I perceived the after-school programme as an ‘opportunity’ for parents, and thus wanted to evaluate whether it was possible to develop this further as a ‘valued function’ in schools (Hartas, 2014). I further wanted to determine whether similar ‘opportunities’ were present in schools and if these could be developed into ‘valued functions’ in all schools by evaluating and developing further the ELET policy. Consequently, in this case study, I also included participants who are not taking part in this after-school programme. Similarly, Hartas (2014) asserts that

...an important principle of the capability approach is that individuals are able to exercise volition in deciding what constitutes a valued activity or state of being, while acknowledging human diversity and different living conditions in negotiating the principles of equality. (p. 166)

Additionally, the capability approach offers a rationale for the context of the selected programme whose aim is to improve literacy skills in children by involving parents directly. An increasing body of literature discusses literacy within the capability approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000; Alkire, 2002). More specifically, Maddox (2008) defines literacy within the capability approach as “...a key determinant of well-being, an important social entitlement, and a goal of human development” (p. 185).

The capability approach is seen as an alternative model to human-capital and rights-based models in educational policy evaluation and development (Maddox, 2008; Robeyns, 2006; Walker, 2006). Consequently, through the capabilities approach, I attempted to look at the policy implications of this parental involvement programme. Through the different perceptions of stakeholders, I endeavoured to explore the impact of the parents’ broader freedoms on their children’s educational experience. Keeping in mind the above theoretical perspective, I drew up the following research questions as portrayed in Figure 6.

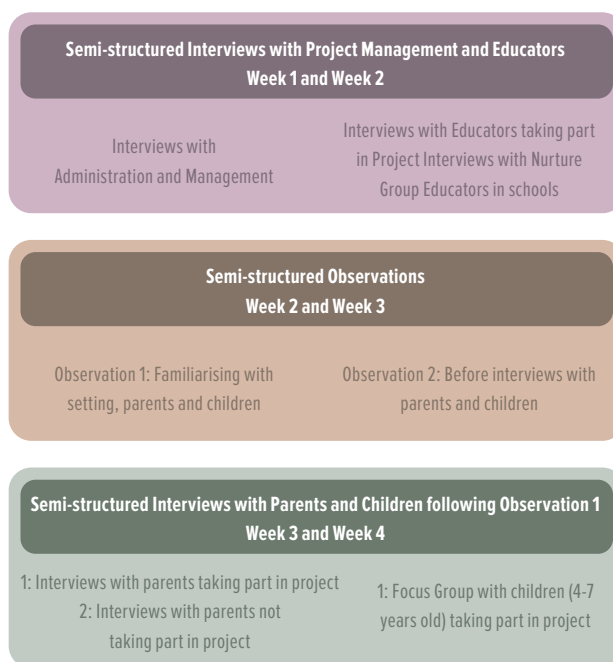
Figure 6: Research Questions



V RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the above research questions, I designed a case study. Denscombe (2010) explains that by focusing on a case rather than taking a wider research approach, the researcher might obtain particular insights that might generate “wider implications” (p. 53). The adopted research methods were two observations, semi-structured interviews with different stakeholders and a focus group with children (4 to 7 years old). Figure 7 demonstrates the data collection phase and the 21 different participants.

Figure 7: Data Collection Phase and Research Participants



According to Denscombe (2010), “all case studies need to be chosen on the basis of their relevance to the practical problems or theoretical issues being researched” (p. 57). A qualitative case study can gain a deeper understanding of particular phenomena in order to contribute valuable knowledge that can be generalised to theory (Denscombe, 2010). As a ‘qualitative researcher’, I have tried “to preserve the multiple realities, the different and even contradictory views” (Stake, 1995, p. 12) during all observations and interviews. While selecting participants, I tried to vary the sample by choosing individuals even from outside the programme, not merely its participants. Interviewing not only parents, but also children, managers and educators enabled me to look in depth and better analyse this study’s findings.

The selected programme was a free literacy session which takes place after school hours, ‘The Magic of Stories’ which is aimed for children aged 4 to 7 years and their families. The objective was to promote reading as a fun experience, while involving parents or other family members, like grandparents, by supporting them to build literacy skills they can apply at home with their children. I selected this programme due to its commitment to involving parents in their children’s educational experience, particularly literacy skills.

Therefore, this study was ideal to explore parental involvement through a whole school-approach where parents and teachers work together for the students’ benefit. As aforementioned, literacy is also a basic skill that students should acquire from schooling, and thus, the nature of this study allowed me to discuss its findings also through the capability approach and its implications within schools. In order to design observation guidelines and interview questions particularly with children, I followed the work of Biggeri et al. (2011) who also carried out focus groups with children using the capability approach. Ethical approval was sought from Lancaster University as well as the local Educational Research Department. Moreover, information sheets and consent forms were designed and later approved.

Following a whole-school approach model that asserts the importance of all stakeholders within a child’s learning experience, I selected a number of different stakeholders involved in this literacy programme, including management, educators, parents and children. Two educators and five parents who do not take part in the programme were also selected (Figure 7). The first part of the study was conducted by visiting the literacy agency and interviewing two major stakeholders within the agency’s administration and management. This provided a good overview of the various programmes that were offered and the work involved. It further allowed me to discuss various perceptions of those participants I was going to interview and modify some questions accordingly. Subsequently, I carried out an observation session during one of the literacy sessions and two pilot interviews. Interview questions with educators and parents participating in this programme were then finalised.

The focus group and interviews were conducted following the second observation. For the children’s focus group, I prepared a pictorial PowerPoint and used a puppet. Due to the young age of this group, I decided that it would be more appropriate for parents to be present and observe the session. Furthermore, the parents’ presence would retain a familiar setting for the children in terms of the venue of the

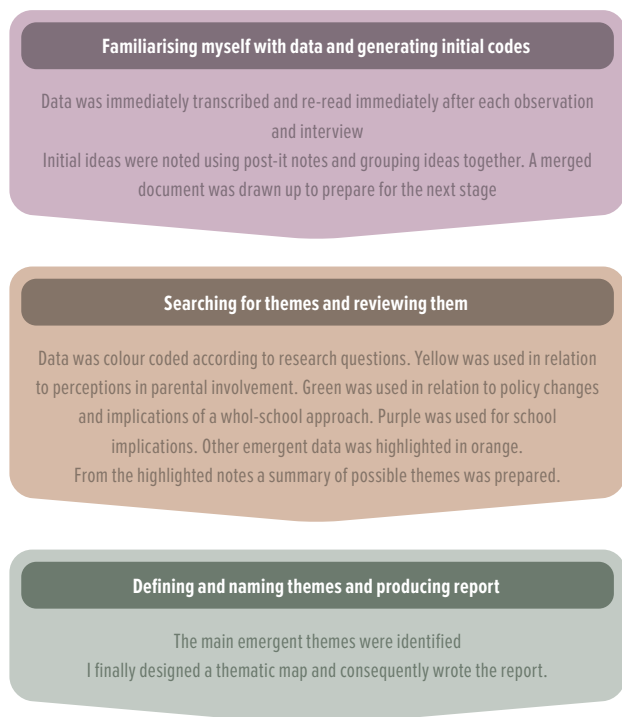
literacy session. Their presence was additionally more ethical on my part, ensuring that in the event that any child became upset, their parent could easily withdraw them from the group. Thankfully, this did not happen, and the children participated eagerly in the focus group. Phone interviews with parents and face-to-face interviews with educators were later scheduled and conducted during that week. Although all parents were given the possibility of selecting face-to-face interviews, they all chose phone interviews due to time constraints.

Following interviews with stakeholders participating in the programme, interviews with stakeholders who did not participate in this programme were conducted. These latter participants were sought through local social media forums. In my opinion, interviewing parents who do not take part in this programme enabled me to gain a better understanding of what could be evaluated and developed within the policy in order to prevent early school leaving and engage more parents in such programmes in schools and after school hours. Since another of the study’s objectives was to gain better insight into what could be done in schools about parental involvement and students at risk, I also interviewed two nurture group educators who work with students at risk in schools. Nurture group teachers work on emotional literacy and the wellbeing of children considered at risk of early leaving in primary schools. As discussed in the second section, children’s wellbeing plays a major role in their education, hence the importance of gaining these educators’ perceptions of parental involvement and thereby adding value to this study and its findings.

VI ANALYSIS

Following the data collection phase, findings were elicited by comparing and analysing data collected from observations and interviews. To analyse the obtained data, I used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Boyatzis, 1998). Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that this can be used as a flexible tool to analyse data across different methods or stakeholders. Since the main criticism of thematic analysis is that it relies only on the researcher’s judgement, I followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) “phases of thematic analysis” (p. 87) as shown in Figure 8. In order to minimise any personal bias, the data collection tools were also designed and adapted with a set of capabilities derived from the capability approach that is in line with the nature of this study, that is, education and social justice (Biggeri et al., 2011, pp. 95-98).

Figure 8: My phases of thematic analysis during this study (Adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2008, p. 87)



VII FINDINGS

Overview of Findings

The three main themes identified were perceptions on parental involvement programmes, a whole-school approach within schools, and implications for policy changes to support students at risk of early leaving. These were directly linked to the research questions. Multiple sub-themes were further identified as shown in the thematic map in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Thematic map of findings



PRESENTATION OF THEMES AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Perceptions of Parental Involvement Programmes

Developing Parental Skills, Lifelong Learning Skills and Wellbeing of Parents and Children

Findings showed that parents developed skills to support children in literacy at home through these programmes. The interviewed parents disclosed that being there with their children helped them to not only observe how their children are learning, but also to gain further skills. The importance of them being present during the session emerged as a major benefit of this programme. One parent compared this to school:

Sometimes I feel lost when it comes to supporting her at home. Sometimes teachers blame parents, but they don't realise that we might not have the skills to do so. Coming here is really helpful as we can see what the teacher is doing and try to do the same at home.

Similarly, while explaining his picture (Figure 10), one 6-year-old child said,

I'm happy when dad is here. We play and read stories at home like the teacher, and we play like here.

Figure 10: Picture of 6-year-old during the focus group



In their review on parental involvement, Hoover et al. (2001) link parental involvement to students' outcomes and the overall development of children for a successful school experience. Ingwu et al. (2010) nevertheless found that parental involvement is sometimes lacking as parents might lack the skills, recommending adult education targeting parents as an intervention method. Bandura (1997) suggests that children's personal capabilities are developed through the modelling theory. Therefore, since parents are the primary caregivers in children's lives, it is essential for them to perceive any observed learning as one they value in skills and abilities. Findings additionally demonstrated that one of the primary aims of this programme, as explained by a member of the management, is to

...support parents in building literacy skills at home with their child. This programme is not only targeted at children, but also to bridge the gap between school and home through modelling of storytelling, shared reading and literacy activities.

Most parents commented that they believed this programme was not only giving them skills to support their children at home, but also equipping their children with lifelong learning skills. Apart from obtaining a number of skills in literacy such as extended vocabulary, the most frequently cited skills were creativity and confidence in speaking skills. Indeed, an educator observed that

...children here are given the opportunity to speak freely and build their self-confidence through literacy activities. I personally encourage them to be creative and make sure every session they have time to voice their opinions.

In contrast, parents disclosed that they perceive school as being mostly academic, and often feel their children are not gaining enough 'job skills'. They strongly felt that most of the time, their

children are only exposed to writing activities and are often not familiarised with

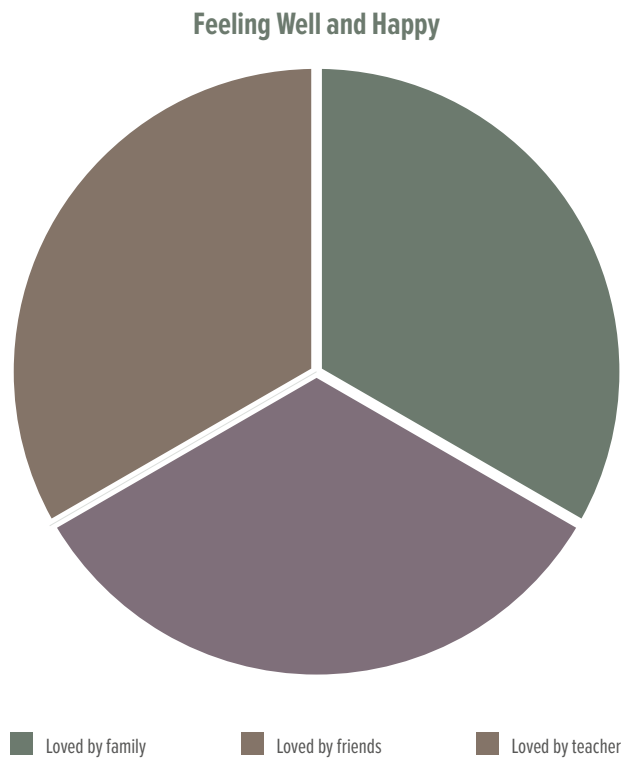
...skills they need at work. I thought school had changed from my time. That it is not just sitting down and listening. But from what I see of my daughter, it seems that sometimes it is still the same. Will she have the right presentation skills and the skills to communicate with others?

Day (1999) asserts that if schools and teachers do not focus on lifelong learning skills, children might not be provided with the best opportunities. However, teachers should not be expected to build these skills on their own. Lifelong learning skills can also develop through networks, other stakeholders and agencies, particularly to target "at risk children" (p. 184). This is reminiscent of the aforementioned 'whole-school approach' where all stakeholders work together to support each child in their educational path. Nonetheless, it transpired that parents and children participating in this programme obtained more skills than their non-participating counterparts.

Warin (2017) observes that policy sometimes struggles to find a balance "between academic achievement purposes and holistic educational aims" (p. 188). This study's findings support research that suggests the importance of wellbeing as part of a successful holistic learning experience (Borg et al., 2015). Children in this study talked about enjoying going to school and following this programme since it is 'fun'. This is further supported by the capability approach as discussed by Biggeri et al. (2011) who similarly mention being loved by teachers, parents and friends as essential capabilities for children. The importance of being loved not only by parents, but also by teachers and friends emerged from the focus group as well as the observations as documented in Figure 8 overleaf. All children spoke of both their friends and teachers when describing their school. To all of them, being happy at school implied being loved by their teacher and friends. For example, according to a five-year-old child,

...[s]chool is okay because I have friends. I want more, but Ms Miriam loves me a lot too. She helps me when I'm kind of not well.

Figure 11: Wellbeing at school



Developing parental skills, lifelong learning skills and encouraging the wellbeing of stakeholders are all priorities within a whole-school approach. Nevertheless, despite the priority given to achieving a whole-school approach within schools, it is still not well explained in the policy, and practical ways on how to achieve this are still not evidenced. Through this study, different perceptions of a whole-school approach and practical ways of encouraging this in schools emerged. These findings will be discussed in the next theme.

Developing a Whole-School Approach in Schools

Defining the Parents' Role, a Communication Gap and Training

It transpired that the parents' role in schools depends on school management and varies according to different teachers. Similarly, in her comparative study, Warin (2017) observes that leadership in schools can make a difference when it comes to achieving a 'whole-school approach'. Findings in this study demonstrated that children react differently when they perceive that their teachers care. According to one parent, "teachers make all the difference". Furthermore, one educator divulged that

...it is often difficult to find the balance. I do believe parents are important, but how can you achieve a balance? It is not easy to work with all parents, and some just don't want to be involved.

In contrast, one parent shared her concerns that

...I'd like to be involved more, but I don't know how. I feel that the teacher does not have the time to speak to me, and I don't want to

be seen as someone that wants to disrupt her work. So I try to not disturb much.

Wood and Warin (2014) conclude that a more "democratic approach between parents and schools is needed" particularly in settings where negative perceptions of parents pervade (p. 938). Communication is a key factor when it comes to parents and their roles in their children's education. This study's findings show that both educators and parents feel the lack of communication. Out of the ten parents interviewed, only one parent was satisfied with the communication received from the school and teacher. All other parents verbalised their concern that communication was lacking and they would like it to be continuous throughout the year, not limited merely to parents' evenings twice yearly. One programme manager admitted that throughout her teaching experience, she could observe that teachers do not always feel confident to include parents, and thus, often build barriers.

Not all teachers are courageous enough to open their classroom doors to parents. Where should one start or stop? I often feel that schools should provide training on how to involve parents in an ethical way.

Similarly, another parent made reference to her experience of being involved in parental training at school, suggesting that

...some teachers might not have the know-how on how to present [learning skills] to parents. In this training, the presentations were not very helpful. I wouldn't go again.

Training for educators and school management emerged as a priority measure to achieve a whole-school approach to learning. However, it transpired that parental roles and criteria in schools need to be first defined. Similarly to the research issue discussed in the initial sections, all stakeholders emphasised the difficulty to achieve effective parental involvement when it often depends on the different schools and their culture. Often, this gives rise to communication problems thereby creating a gap between school and home. This rift is also felt in the policy and might be firmly bridged by clearly defining the role of parents and how educators might support this. Similar studies on parental involvement policies conclude that parental-school relations can widen the gap between the various existing socio-economic inequalities (Lareau and Weininger, 2003; Reay, 2004). Policy implications will be discussed further in the following theme.

Implications for Policy Changes to Support Students at Risk of Early Leaving

Early Intervention, Awareness and Flexibility

A number of implications for policy changes to support students at risk through a whole-school approach emerged during the study. A major finding is an early intervention through a monitoring system where all stakeholders play a major role. This is especially important since although ELET addresses 18 to 24-year-olds, a growing body of research shows that students are mostly not doing well at school from an early age (Downes, 2013; Pyhalto et al., 2010). Educators in

this study reported that presently, there are still children who finish their primary schooling without basic literacy skills. Referring to two students currently in Year 6, one educator explained that

...it is very sad that these children will go to secondary school without knowing how to read and write. Some teachers have tried their best, but these children are often absent from school. There is no communication between their parents and teachers as probably it is a vicious circle and parents feel judged. It is a fact that we always say that parents of children that need most attention are not present not even on parents' days.

Literacy within the capability approach is a functioning that is fundamental to human development and contributes to democracy (Smith and Barrett, 2010; Sen 1999). Consequently, from a social justice perspective, literacy is valued not only because it is every individual's right, but also because it enables individuals to be active responsible citizens (Smith and Barrett, 2010). Studies on Malta's educational context report that children's academic achievement is still linked to their parents' socio-economic background and skills (Borg et al., 2016). Similarly, Nussbaum (2009) reminds us that adult literacy statistics worldwide are a sign of existent social inequalities and a lack of developing capabilities.

Heckman (2012) and Downes (2013b) highlight that early interventions can have a greater impact on students' future academic success by forging a relationship between school and home during the early years of schooling. Teachers alone cannot support such situations, and if effective monitoring is in place, all stakeholders can intervene at an early stage. This would not only enhance the parents' relationship with educators but also support children's rights to develop the basic capabilities in schooling.

It further transpired that those parents who participated in the programme got involved through social media and the school administration. Additionally, the significance of awareness and community outreach is another finding. Different parents can be reached through a myriad of ways. Although this programme is free, not all parents are aware of it. Indeed, the interviewed parents who do not participate in the programme were unaware of the free literacy sessions. It is thus important to reach out to all parents. Downes (2014) suggests that this can be achieved through "a differentiated, holistic and systemic approach" which would contribute to the prevention of early school leaving (pp. 12-14). School is one way of doing so, hence the importance of building a robust communication system.

Apart from being oblivious, parents explained that their work commitments often deprived them of the opportunity to attend such programmes or other activities that the school might organise. Most parents commented that activities were often organised in the morning, and they are subsequently blamed for not attending. These findings intimate that policymakers need to sit with various stakeholders within education and those outside education to discuss better ways of empowering parents with flexibility and accessibility in order to be more involved. Tikly and Barrett (2010) further affirm that although the role of education is essential in "promoting a range

of freedoms, a social justice approach can provide a fuller rationale for a policy focus on education quality" (p. 23).

VIII CONCLUDING REMARKS: RECOMMENDATIONS

Downes (2014) observes that parents have different needs and "there is not a one-size-fit-all approach to be taken" (p. 19). Furthermore, Epstein (2009) identifies a 'framework of parental involvement' and six ways of how parents can be better involved in schools. These are very similar to the findings of this research, particularly communication, learning at home and collaboration.

The overall findings, however, suggested that although a framework for parental involvement within the policy can be developed, it needs to be sufficiently flexible to include all parents from different socio-economic backgrounds. This is reminiscent of Bower et al. (2011) and Griffin and Steen (2010) who suggest the development of a framework that is congruent with the different school cultures thereby avoiding frustration. The findings discussed above suggest that the ELET policy in relation to parental involvement can be evaluated through a "context-led framework for education quality" (Tikly, 2010, p.14). Figure 12 provides a description of how the policy might be further evaluated and developed in relation to the above findings. According to Tikly (2010), "...a good quality education arises from the correct mix of enabling inputs and processes in three inter-related environments" (p. 14).

Figure 12: ELET policy evaluation (Adapted from Tikly, 2010, p. 14)

It is therefore recommended that the policy for the prevention of early school leaving develops a framework with practical examples of parental involvement within a whole-school approach. This could be done by employing specific people within schools and colleges who their main role is to liaise between parents, teachers and students and work from within the early school leaving unit in order to support parental involvement on a national level. The framework can be used as a practical albeit flexible guideline to achieve the overall policy aims, including effective parental involvement, monitoring and intervention strategies within a whole-school approach. Given that research shows how some parental policies can exacerbate social iniquity (Lareau and Weininger, 2003; Reay, 2004), and the recent global pandemic that might have widened educational disadvantage, further studies preceding the development of a framework are recommended to define which parents are currently benefitting from these programmes and what is needed to include all parents from different socio-economic backgrounds within schools and beyond, in order to minimise the school-home gap.

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From ELET (Early Leaving from Education and Training) Prevention to Promoting Inclusive Systems as Concentric Relational Space: Future Steps for a Holistic, Differentiated Systemic Vision Across Europe

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Abstract - Addressing the where, how and who questions to engage early school leavers requires an assertive outreach model, one that is relational, face-to-face and centred on the needs of the individual client. Such an assertive outreach approach also adopts an individual, proactive outreach approach to engage with those on the margins of society.

It fundamentally starts from where the person is, centred on the person's needs in a concentric relational space of assumed connection and not in a diametric oppositional space of hierarchy and assumed separation. A concentric relational space for outreach presupposes not only a relational competence but also a cultural competence.

Keywords—concentric relational space; needs; proactive outreach approach

I INTRODUCTION

A prevention of early leaving from education and training (ELET) focus needs to be combined with a positive vision on what to promote in education systems. This keynote presentation argues for the promotion of inclusive systems and in doing so, seeks a specific shift in systems from diametric spatial-relational systems of exclusion towards concentric spatial-relational systems of inclusion. In other words, ELET prevention needs to address issues of relational space, and concepts such as exclusion and marginalisation in education need to be recognised as spatial dimensions.

An inclusive systems focus seeks to go beyond one that promotes individual resilience to one that seeks to foster supportive systems to meet vulnerable people's holistic needs. This holistic focus on inclusive systems recognises the social, emotional and physical needs, and not simply the academic and cognitive ones, of both children/young people and their parents (Downes, Nairz-Wirth & Rusinaite 2017). Within an inclusive systems framework, it is not being sought to create children who are resilient superheroes in the face of adversity and trauma, as the resilience discourse often implies. Rather children need to be simply children, experiencing a range of supportive systems to enable their inclusion and participation in school and wider community and society systems (Downes 2017).

While other holistic needs issues such as sleep loss of pupils (Hargadon & Downes 2019) require recognition in an ELET prevention strategy, this paper will firstly, foreground a key principle of differentiated need building on the public health model of complexity of need, as an important strategic consideration for inclusive systems highlighted in our report for the EU Commission

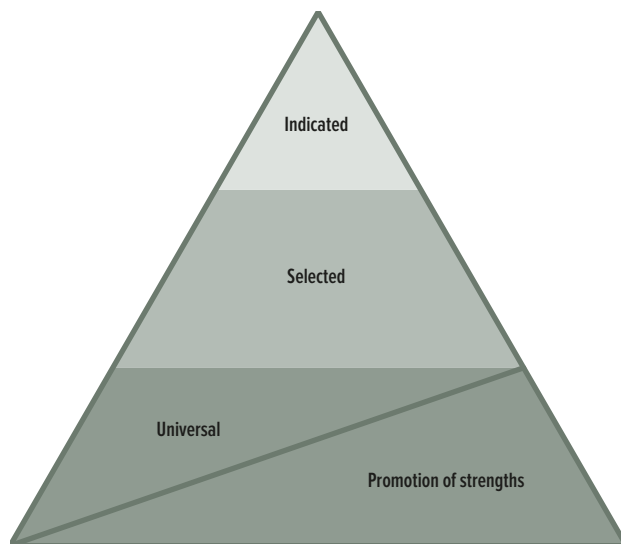
(Downes, Nairz-Wirth & Rusinaite 2017) on inclusive systems in and around schools in Europe. In doing so, it will foreground the need for addressing trauma as part of an ELET prevention strategy. The second and main focus of this paper will highlight the need for a system shift towards concentric relational spaces and away from diametric oppositional hierarchical spaces in education.¹ The final section of the paper will summarise a range of key themes for early school leaving prevention recommended to be addressed in our recent report for the EU Commission evaluating the impact in 35 countries of the 2011 EU Council Recommendation on Early School Leaving (Donlevy, Andriescu, Day & Downes 2019). These recommendations together with the issues raised in the first and second parts of this paper all invite a number of issues for consideration by the Maltese Education Ministry for its new Early school leaving/ELET national strategy.

II TRAUMA AND CHRONIC NEED STRATEGY: STRATEGIC FOCUS ON INDICATED PREVENTION LEVEL FOR ELET PREVENTION

The OECD's Ten Steps to Equity in Education (2007, 2010) is open to criticism for ignoring emotional trauma issues and relationships for equity in education (Downes 2011). A principle of differentiated need to recognise different layers of complexity, building on public health models of need as universal prevention (all), selected

¹ This section is based on extracts from Downes, P. (2020). *Reconstructing agency in developmental and educational psychology: Inclusive Systems as Concentric Space*. New York/London/New Delhi: Routledge

prevention (some, moderate risk, group based supports) and indicated prevention (few, individual, intensive supports) is gaining fuller recognition in domains such as mental health (Suldo et al., 2010), positive behaviour in school, (Reinke et al. 2009), school violence and bullying (Astor et al. 2012; Downes & Cefai 2016), early school leaving (Downes et al. 2017) and social work (Hood 2018).



Universal – All
Selected – Some, Groups, Moderate Risk
Indicated – Individual, Intensive, Chronic Need

There is ‘a growing emphasis on the use of multi-tiered approaches’ (p.19), specifically, this three tiered level of prevention (Rivara and Le Menestrel 2016). A similar model of need differentiation is the long established Hardiker model of need (Hardiker et al. 1991).

Against this backdrop, it is also important that system level responses to address needs of children experiencing trauma recognise these differences of levels. For example, West et al.’s (2014) US account of a trauma-informed teaching curriculum offers little on integrating the different levels of system responses beyond the universal to address this issue in schools. Esch et al.’s (2014) review of mental health dimensions to early school leaving offers notable findings relevant to the indicated prevention level. When adjusted for socio-demographic factors, mood disorders (e.g. depression) were significantly related to ESL. Among anxiety disorders, after controlling for potentially confounding factors, social phobia was a strong predictor of poor educational outcomes, as indicated by early school leavers themselves, such as feeling too nervous in class and being anxious to speak in public.

Quiroga et al.’s (2013) research involving 493 high-risk French-speaking adolescents living in Montreal observed that depression symptoms at the beginning of secondary school are related to higher ESL mainly by being associated with pessimistic views about the likelihood to reach desired school outcomes; student negative self-beliefs are in turn related to lower self-reported academic performance and predict a higher risk of ESL. Quiroga et al. (2013) conclude that interventions that target student mental health and

negative self-perceptions are likely to improve ESL prevention. The complexity of emotional need in students at the indicated prevention requires supports that an individual teacher is not in a position to provide. A teacher can offer support as mental health promotion and stress prevention, but is not a therapist (Downes 2003a). Hence, a multidisciplinary team level of supports is required in and around schools for the indicated prevention level of need, including emotional counselling supports in school.

The recent evaluation for the EU Commission of the 2011 Council Recommendation on Early School Leaving examined the issue of emotional counselling supports in and around schools (Donlevy, Andriescu, Day & Downes 2019). Donlevy et al. (2019) observe that:

- “Emotional counselling and support is provided in a range of countries in order to help those suffering from serious emotional distress, including the Czech Republic, Belgium and Germany.”, while “ In France, all pupils have access to the Psychologist of Education to for psychological support and career guidance. Emotional counselling is also available in Sweden, where all students have access to a school doctor, school nurse, psychologist and school welfare officer at no cost and in Slovenia (p 63).” Donlevy et al. (2019) continue
- “In some countries, emotional counselling is expressly backed by legislation. In Poland, legislation mandates for the existence of a system of support to students who are having significant difficulties at school, in the form of one-to-one academic tutoring and psychological support where required. “
- “In Denmark, legislation states that school leaders can choose to recommend a student for pedagogical-psychological assessment, the results of which may initiate a process where the student may receive psychological support. Croatia and Bulgaria also have legislation in place that provides for emotional counselling and psychological support (p 64).”

It is to be noted that the Incredible Years Programme approach of Malta ESL Strategy (2012) is at a universal level and not the indicated prevention chronic need level that needs individualised, specialised emotional counselling supports. Moreover, the mentoring emphasis in Malta ESL Strategy includes selected prevention for moderate risk but not this is not an indicated prevention level focus for trauma and chronic need. Donlevy et al. (2019) comment on Malta on this issue

- ‘Further, several countries have implemented policies offering individual support to students. For example: Malta has implemented policies regarding behaviour management, gender orientation and healthy lifestyles’ (p 55)

However, again this is not emotional counselling/therapeutic support for those requiring individual supports for trauma who are at risk of ESL.

III DIAMETRIC AND CONCENTRIC SPATIAL SYSTEMS OF RELATION: FROM EXCLUSION AND HIERARCHY TO INCLUSION AND ASSUMED CONNECTION, FROM RELATIVE CLOSURE TO OPENESS IN EDUCATION

Arguments have been made elsewhere both in structural anthropology (Lévi-Strauss 1962, 1963, 1973), education (Downes 2009, 2013) and developmental psychology (Downes 2003, 2020) for the significance of contrasts between mutually interacting spatial systems of diametric (Fig. 1) and concentric (Fig. 2) space, respectively. A diametric spatial structure is one where a circle is split in half by a line which is its diameter, or where a square or rectangle is similarly divided into two equal halves (see Fig. 1). In a concentric spatial structure, one circle is inscribed in another larger circle (or square); in pure form, the circles share a common central point (see Fig. 2).

Figure 1

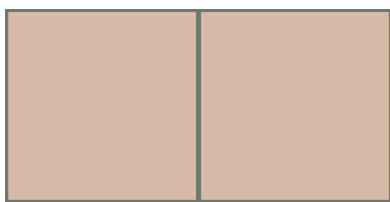
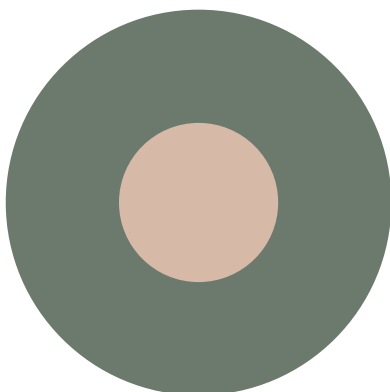


Figure 2



Lévi-Strauss highlighted the cross-cultural pervasiveness of both diametric and concentric space, observing the mirror image inverted symmetries of diametric structures, thereby relating structure to meaning, through examples such as sacred/profane, good/bad, and hierarchies of above/below. Diametric space is a governing spatial condition for the process of othering into us versus them.

A further feature of diametric systems recognised by Lévi-Strauss is that the diametric oppositions are a more closed and non-interactive system with background than the relatively more open and interactive concentric systems. Concentric space is more fluid. Another entailment of the relative differences between diametric

and concentric spaces, overlooked by Lévi-Strauss, is that the poles of diametric space are in an assumed separation of opposition, whereas concentric spaces are in a relation of assumed connection around a common centre – a co-centre (Downes 2003, 2020). It is evident that the inner and outer poles of concentric space are fundamentally attached to each other, unlike in diametric space; both concentric poles coexist in the same space, and thus, the outer circle overlaps the space of the inner one. The outer circle surrounds and contains the inner circle. The opposite that is within the outer circle or shape cannot detach itself from being within this outer shape. A concentric space assumes connection between its parts and any separation is on the basis of assumed connection, whereas diametric space assumes separation and any connection between the parts is on the basis of this assumed separation. As structures in relational difference, this contrast is a relativistic one of degree. A concentric spatial relation is a structure of inclusion compared to a diametric spatial structure of exclusion.

Table 1. Relative Differences between Concentric and Diametric Spatial Systems

Concentric Space	Diametric Space
Assumed Connection between Poles	Assumed Separation between Poles
Symmetry as Unity	Mirror Image Inverted Symmetry
Relative Openness as Interaction with Background	Relative Closure as Non-Interaction with Background

A Beyond Suspensions/Expulsion as Diametric Structure of Exclusion

Suspension and expulsion practices in school exemplify a diametric spatially structured approach to exclusion. A largescale Louisiana study of 596,537 children observed that expelled students had a 2.3 times greater chance of leaving school early than non-expelled students (Robison et al. 2017). It concludes that expulsion is one of the main factors leading to early school leaving and that ‘these findings may suggest that school and social policies in response to these negative behaviours are ineffective and even counterproductive’ (Robison et al. 2017, p.44). The American Academy of Pediatrics Policy Statement (2013) on this issue recognises that ‘the adverse effects of out-of-school suspension and expulsion can be profound’ (p.e1001); such students are as much as 10 times more likely to leave school early, are more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system and ‘there may be no one at home during the day to supervise the student’s activity’ (p.e1002) if the parents are working. The policy statement continues, ‘They can also be very superficial if, in using them, school districts avoid dealing with underlying issues affecting the child or the district, such as drug abuse, racial and ethnic tensions, and cultural anomalies associated with violence and bullying’ (American Academy of Pediatrics, p. e1002).

Evidence from Britain, Lithuania and Ireland, in particular, highlights the serious scale of the problem of suspension and expulsion from secondary schools. A British sample at baseline of 7977 parents of children aged over 11, with final sample at follow up of 5326 found that experience of exclusion was higher for those

experiencing socioeconomic deprivation, and exclusion was associated with higher psychopathology especially for those excluded at a younger age (Ford et al. 2018). They found that the exclusion-psychopathology relation was bidirectional. The most recent English government figures (Department of Education 2016) for permanent exclusions are 5800 (0.7% of school population) and for fixed term suspensions was 302,980 (3.88% of school population). An English study by Rennison et al., (2005) found that young people in the NEET [Not in Education, Employment or Training] group were over three times more likely previously to have been excluded from school than young people overall.

A Lithuanian national report provides the following example:

- According to management and the teacher interviewed, approximately 10 percent of students are expelled from school in each year. The reasons are usually behaviour problems, bullying, harassment, and aggressiveness i.e., non-academic reasons prevail. (Taljunaite et al., 2010)

The Irish post-primary figure of 5% for suspension, applied to the total population of 332,407 students, equates to over 16,000 students suspended from postprimary schools in 2005/6 (ERC/NEWB, 2010).

This need for a broader set of skills than those available to teachers to meet the needs of students through alternatives to suspension also emerges from research on the key role of multidisciplinary teams for early school leaving prevention (Downes, 2011a). Moving beyond diametric relational strategies of suspension and expulsion requires a vision of systemic change through a multiplicity of intervention approaches, for different issues for early school leaving prevention. Removal from class does not have to require removal from the school, with the availability of multidisciplinary team supports as part of an individual education and wellbeing plan for the student in a concentric relational space of assumed connection with the individual's needs and voice.

B Beyond Authoritarian Teaching and Discriminatory Bullying as Diametric Spatial Systems – Assumed Separation, Splitting and Mirror Image Hierarchies of US/THEM, GOOD/BAD, POWERFUL/POWERLESS

An acceleration of focus on emotions in education in the past decade can be characterised as an emotional-relational turn in education (Downes 2018). A holistic emotional-relational turn includes heightened awareness of the need to address authoritarian teaching and teacher conflict resolution skills, to prevent students from being alienated from school.

Concentric and diametric spatial structures invite application to relations between self and other, thereby entwining the spatial and relational. Developing a spatial-relational focus on education, an important determinant in the participation of the most vulnerable young people is the trust built up between teachers and the learner (Power 2006); trust presupposes a concentric relational space of assumed connection. In contrast, in an Australian educational context, a diametric assumed separation is evident in McIntyre-Mills' (2010) observation of a hesitation in some Aborigines where

they avoid 'putting themselves forward' and are 'careful about what they said' (p.31).

Meier (1992) cites personalised, caring relationships with teachers as a prerequisite for school reform - to avoid students becoming 'eased out' (Smyth & Hattam 2004) of school; again a concentric relational space of assumed connection is a key precondition framing care. Yet this diametric spatio-relational feature is even more pervasive in educational systems in terms of the climate as a whole in the school and not simply based on relations with an individual teacher. For example, Cornell et al. (2013) note that early school leaving prevention programs often focus too narrowly on changes in individual students, without considering broader peer and school influences.

Diametric spaces of system blockage have been highlighted as structures and processes of exclusion leading to early school leaving in the education system (Downes 2013). Such diametric relational spaces of assumed separation between teachers and students include teacher discriminatory bullying of students in a sample of 1352 immigrant and Roma students as part of a wider sample of 8817 students across 10 European countries (Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain) (Elamé 2013). Elamé's (2013) observed the fundamental importance of teacher influence on discriminatory bullying. Those immigrant and Roma students who think the teacher exhibits similar behaviour towards 'native' and immigrant and Roma children in the class are those bullied least in the last 3 months. In contrast, those who declare that their teacher favours native children over immigrant/Roma students are more vulnerable to suffer some form of bullying. Specifically, less than half (48 %) of the 123 [immigrant/Roma] children [across the 10 countries] who sense bias in the teachers' attitudes towards native classmates declare to have never been subjected to violence (Elamé, 2013). Those immigrant or Roma children who sense an imbalance in the teacher's attitudes to different ethnic groups in their class are also those who have been bullied with the highest frequency during the previous 3 months (Elamé, 2013). It is the propagation of diametric spatial relations of splitting and exclusion by the teacher that reveals a system level impact upon the classroom relational space for those experiencing the teacher discrimination. The fracturing of concentric relational spaces of trust in bullying leads to a system reaction of diametric oppositional relations. It is important that a school response does not perpetuate a diametric relational space (through, for example, a hostile and punitive reaction to students) and goes beyond focus simply on the individual to one on promotion and restoration of concentric relational spaces across the school as a system (Downes 2016).

Elamé's (2013) findings on the key influence of the teacher regarding parity of esteem among students, the absence of which can foster a negative climate of bullying, gains support from a Greek study (Kapari and Stavrou, 2010) of 114 secondary school students (58 female, 56 male) drawn from three Greek public middle schools: two urban schools in Athens and one rural school on the island of Zakynthos. In schools with high levels of bullying, students consider their treatment by adults to be unequal, the rules to be unfair, and student participation in decision-making to be very limited. According to Kapari and Stavrou (2010), particular attention must be given to the significant strong correlation between bullying and

authoritarian practices of enforcing discipline in the school. Kapari and Stavrou (2010) highlight the relationship between fairness perceived by students and bullying or school violence is consistent with the results of previous studies.

The World Health Organisation report (2012) on children and young people's wellbeing recommends 'modifications' in school systems. It states that modifications that appear to have merit include: establishing a caring atmosphere that promotes autonomy; providing positive feedback; identifying and promoting young people's special interests and skills to acknowledge that schools value the diversity they bring. These modifications are all framed by a concentric spatial-relational precondition of assumed connection between students and teachers. These background spatial issues accelerate focus on a positive school climate to be created at classroom and school levels.

The WHO (2012) largescale international survey of student wellbeing has foregrounded not only the need for caring responsive teachers for student wellbeing but also explicitly raised concerns regarding authoritarian teaching so as not to 'publicly humiliate' students. Qualitative research across a range of contexts points to this as a pervasive system problem. Authoritarian, fear-based relations instil a diametric relation of assumed separation between student and teacher and require alternative coping strategies.

Features of diametric spatial systems such as mirror image hierarchy involving binary oppositions between those with and without power, between those characterised as 'successful' and 'failures' in the system, portrayed as 'good' and 'bad', as well as diametric oppositional splitting, have been argued elsewhere to be key spatial-relational features of educational systems with regard to early school leaving (Downes 2013, 2016).

A review of a number of small scale, Maltese studies with secondary students identified a range of themes emerging from students' voices (Cefai & Cooper 2010). Authoritarian teaching was a central issue:

- One of the most common and frequently mentioned grievances by the students across the eight [Maltese] studies was the perceived lack of understanding and support by the classroom teachers. The students felt humiliated and inadequate when teachers shouted at them in front of their peers, ignored them or refused to listen to their views. (Cefai & Cooper, 2010, pp. 116–118)

Cefai & Cooper (2010) highlight a pervasive theme of:

- the autocratic and rigid behaviour management approach adopted by many teachers in their response to misbehaviour. Their blaming and punitive approach was seen in many cases as leading to an exacerbation of the problem... It looks... that perceived victimisation by teachers was more prevalent and had more impact than victimisation and bullying by peers. (p. 188)

A qualitative study of girls aged 12–16 in the Inner Harbour of Valetta and Northern regions of Malta illustrates this theme of alienation through authoritarian teaching:

- I remember very clearly phrases from my teacher such as; "you should really be in the B class", or "this is above your level". I felt

incompetent compared to the other students and was very much aware of how happier I was in my previous class. (p. 2) Disastrous, because they expect everything the way they want it. I cannot take it when they start shouting. They start shouting as soon as you utter a word'. (p. 54) 'It's not the subject that I don't like, it's the teacher... she starts shouting in your face, she gets you crazy...'. (Magri 2009, p.75)

Such experience is an attitudinal precursor as a risk factor for leaving school early. Student-centred research in schools in an area of high poverty in Dublin, explored a number of issues through 12 focus groups and 173 questionnaire responses from secondary students (Downes 2004). A minority of students strongly emphasised the issue of the need to change authoritarian teaching, 'Have anger management courses for teachers' (female, focus group), with illustrative questionnaire responses including: 'The teachers shouting at you. That makes me really, really down' (Age 13, F), 'if the teachers didn't roar at you' (Age 13, F), 'Have an equal teaching system and sack ignorant snobby teachers... very harsh teachers usually make me stay out of school' (Age 16, M).

Teacher professional development and initial teacher education can offer capacity for teachers as a protective factor to move beyond a diametric space of splits in communication towards connective, concentric communicative pathways. However, the danger exists that it is precisely those teachers who may be most resistant to professional development for conflict resolution skills who need them most; this applies a fortiori if there is no specific requirement or incentive to do so. It is important to emphasise that it is not a matter of shifting blame from student to teacher; it is about going beyond an individual blame approach to a systemic focus.

Another system level blockage in communication is the practice observed in a Dublin, Ireland, post-primary school, 'I would change that you should not need a written note off your parents to go to the loo in school' during class time (Age 17, Female) (Downes 2004). This theme of school or class policies regarding use of the toilet also emerged in a Maltese context:

They don't let you use the toilet, not even during the break. Then when it [the break] finishes we go to class to put the bag there and go to the toilet, but the teachers won't let you, they tell us you should have used the toilet during the break. (Magri 2009, p. 52)

This preventable systemic flaw in communication needs greater cognisance of children and young people's rights to have their views considered in a relational dialogue of concentric-assumed connection for early school leaving prevention.

C Students' and Parents' Voices to Challenge Diametric Spatial Hierarchical Mirror Image Splits as System Blockages in Communication

Challenging diametric space through avenues for students' voices: Beyond diametric mirror image inversions in the relational space of the powerful (teacher) versus powerless (student), active (teacher) versus passive (student)

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) is ratified across all countries internationally, with the striking exception of the US. Despite this, much remains to be done to make this key legal corpus one that is centrally embedded in the mainstream policies and practice of schools internationally.

Further understanding of schools as relational systems is required to give substantive expression to Article 12 (1) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which declares: 'States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'. Day et al.'s (2015) review reveals the need for much system change on this issue in a European context:

- In practice, however, there is an immense variation in the quality and extent of [children's] participatory practices within educational settings'; 'In many schools across Europe, however, children's participation is focused principally on formal school structures and committees, and levels of participation in wider decisions relating to teaching and learning, school policies (including for behaviour, bullying and exclusion) remain low across the EU. (p. 219)

Assumptions of connection treat concentric relational connection as normalcy — connection between pupils themselves and between teacher and pupils (Downes 2009). Children have often been regarded as 'other' and adults as 'norm'. Concentric states of relation of assumed connection challenge traditional hierarchical relations between pupil and teacher, as hierarchy and 'otherness' rest on a diametric mode of assumed separation; diametric assumed separation emerges as a displaced structure from concentric connection. It is important to note that a concentric relation is not a monistic relation of identity so that the teacher would be the 'same' as the pupils; rather, as with the two poles of a concentric relation, allowance is made for a separation, though this separation is on the basis of an assumed connection. Conceptions of voice, including students' voices in school, as well as voices from marginalised communities, presupposes a background space of assumed connection — a concentric spatial-relational setting for the voice to be expressed.

Resonant with Freud's pervasive concerns with mirror image reversals between being active/passive, good/bad, powerful/powerless, life/death, love/hate (Downes 2012), diametric spatial mirror image polarities of being powerful/powerless, active/passive may apply in a range of ways in a school setting. Focus for current purposes is on overcoming and dismantling these traditional diametric oppositions through giving active voice and power to students, such as, though not exclusively, through student councils. Spaces for students' voices invite a shift towards school systems of dialogue based on concentric relations as a protective factor for early school leaving prevention.

Cefai & Cooper's (2010) Maltese overview observes a theme of 'no voice, no choice' (p. 189) where 'some students saw an imposition of the alien school culture on their own. They sought to resist the attempts of enculturation by refusing the values projected by the school, such as behaving and dressing ways that conflicted with the culture in the communities and peer group' (p. 190). Cefai &

Cooper (2010) conclude that 'there needs to be more child-friendly and emancipatory approaches to eliciting students' views so as to ensure authentic representations and constructions' (p.195). This is tantamount to building a concentric relational space of assumed connection between student and teacher and moving beyond diametric oppositional and mirror image inverted relations. A disappearance from view, relevance and voice of the student is of systemic concern.

D Concentric Relational Space as Assertive Outreach and Challenging Diametric Space as Closure: Opening School as After School Community Lifelong Learning Centre

A distinct feature of promoting inclusive systems is that of community outreach which also encompasses a universal and selected prevention focus on moderate risk groups. This community outreach aspect of prevention and health promotion is generally underdeveloped in much international research in developmental and educational psychology. Nevertheless, the then UN Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, Paul Hunt (2006) observes international good practice as 'properly trained community health workers [who]...know their communities' health priorities... Inclusive, informed and active community participation is a vital element of the right to health'.

In his characterisation of the 'socially just school', in an Australian context, Smyth (2012) states that 'these are schools that bring people's lives into the school — students, parents and members of the community — rather than creating walls and moats around the institution of the school' (p.12). In other words, this is a call for schools that offer a concentric relational system of more fluid dynamic interaction with background rather than of walled diametric closure to parents and the community. It is an exhortation for schools of concentric assumed connection with the lives and experiences of its working class students.

Smyth (2012) asks why such ideas of connection, care, relationships, voice and lived experience are 'so difficult to lodge, implement and sustain in disadvantaged schools?' (p.15). Such a focus on making educational spaces accessible as open and relational spaces for traditionally marginalised parents also raises the issue of the school as a focal point of community education after school hours and in the summer. Opening the school after school hours can make the school a lifelong learning community. This may be a key resource in areas of high socio-economic exclusion and play an important role in promoting concentric inclusive systems.

The following responses from municipalities in a European report (Downes 2014a) highlight both a mode of diametric spatial closure to the community and contrasting concentric modes of openness and assumed connection to the local community and parents. In Nantes Municipality, France there is:

- Institutional and psychological deadlock with teachers. Even if buildings are owned by "Départements" for secondary schools and "Communes" for elementary with a complete theoretical autonomy to do what they want with the kind of use they would

like after school time (of course in a certain way compatible with the general use), most of the teachers have the feeling that schools are their home. (Downes 2014a, p.46)

In contrast, The Hague municipality in The Netherlands, states, ‘Almost all our schools already open their doors after opening hours for various learning classes, like language courses for parents’ and Antwerp municipality in Belgium recognises this need for openness’ ‘The city promotes the shared use of buildings (like school and other locations)’ (Downes 2014a, p.46).

The nine-city European PREVENT project investigated the availability of the school site after school hours for lifelong learning courses for parents, whether based on nonformal or formal education (Downes, 2014a). The following table illustrates the high level of variation in practice on this issue across a range of European cities.

Table 2. Municipality Responses across Nine European Cities: Availability of School Site After School Hours for Lifelong Learning Classes for Parents (Downes, 2014a)

Country	On a scale of 1-3 where 3 means at least 80% of schools in your municipality open their doors after school hours for lifelong learning classes and 2 means at least 30% of schools do so and 1 means less than 30% of schools do so which number best describes the situation in your municipality?
The Hague	3
Gijon	3
Tallinn	2
Stockholm	2
Antwerp	1
Usti	1
Munich	1
Nantes	1
Sofia	1

A defensive diametric relation of closure that treats novelty as a threat, in a reliance on the familiar, has also been observed with regard to community based facilities in areas of high socio-economic exclusion. Physical location of a community service needs to be in a neutral community space in order for certain groups to feel comfortable enough to access this space (Downes & Maunsell 2007); local histories of divisions due to drug dealers territories may need to be understood as part of local groups’ propensities to seek closed, familiar spaces only. The diametric projected structure of closure frames an understanding of territoriality, where space belongs to “people like them” versus “people like us”.

There is a need to promote concentric systemic relations and change not simply at the individual level. A bridging role to the local community of community based lifelong learning centres needs to offer a physical space in the community where interactive outreach to marginalised groups can be achieved (Downes 2011b). The community based location of such lifelong learning centres, typically focuses on

a welcoming and non-threatening environment of non-formal education courses (Downes 2014; LLLP 2019). It seeks to open educational opportunities to those who have experienced the formal education system previously as a space of closure, as a closed system which tended to exclude them.

Outreach requires a spatial shift and movement. A further feature to complement community outreach is an individual or individual family outreach approach, including home visits, to challenge the diametric space of an assumed separation of the individual from the system. At times promotion of educational interventions seem to be based on the idea that leaflets, websites, posters and other forms of information will suffice to engage ‘hard-to-reach’ groups. Implicit in this very terminology is that when such marginalised groups are not reached by these information-reliant approaches, they are disinterested, and that they are therefore ‘hard to reach’. However, the spatial-relational communicative approach itself needs to be questioned, rather than blame the individuals who do not become enchanted by such ‘information’. This information processing type approach neglects the meaningfulness of the ‘information’ for concrete individuals. It rests on an assumption of an abstract other; this abstract other is constructed through a basic diametric spatial assumption of assumed separation from the other.

An assertive outreach as assumed connection beyond the abstract other is a feature of developing concentric relational spaces of trust and assumed connection with those excluded from the system. Emphasis on the how question as part of outreach approaches, gives attention to a dialogue process between the early school leaver and the staff members from the ‘system’. Whereas information-reliant approaches assume a one-way, one directional flow of information from the system to the passive individual, a dialogue process is two-way. The approach needs to be interpersonal, relational, contextual and pragmatic, including with parents of children at risk of non-engagement.

This relational outreach approach requires dialogue with individuals, parents and group cohorts. It must engage with the stories and world of meaning of the individuals being reached out to. Discussion requires understanding how re-engaging with the education system can meet the individual’s needs, life circumstances and also help overcome barriers to re-engagement that the individual and his or her peers may experience. Often a message about the benefits of re-engaging with education gains credibility through word of mouth at a local level between friends and peers from marginalised communities. This is increasingly being recognised also for access to higher education issues, at least in some contexts (McNally & Downes 2016).

A key overlooked feature of many approaches to engaging with marginalised early leavers from the system is the who question – who is the person communicating with the early school leaver? Does this person share a cultural affinity with the early school leaver? Are they living in the same locality, do they share a common ethnicity, social class and/or religion? On what basis will this person be trusted by people who may have been let down time and again by the education system? There are isolated examples of sensitivity to the ‘who’ of outreach. For example, the Swedish project, Unga in,

now carried forward through the UNGKOMP project, employed outreach mediators who were from the same ethnic background as those they tried to reach to engage them in employment and education initiatives (Downes 2014a). Similarly, Roma mediators in Sofia Municipality (Bulgaria) are often from the Roma community themselves (Downes 2015).

Addressing the where, how and who questions requires an assertive outreach model to engage early school leavers, one that is relational, face-to-face and centred on the needs of the individual client. Such an assertive outreach approach not only addresses the where, how and who issues identified above, but adopts an individual, proactive outreach approach to engage with those on the margins of society. It fundamentally starts from where the person is, centred on the person's needs in a concentric relational space of assumed connection and not in a diametric oppositional space of hierarchy and assumed separation. A concentric relational space for outreach presupposes not only a relational competence but also a cultural competence.

IV KEY EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING PREVENTION RECOMMENDATIONS AT EU COMMISSION LEVEL TO INFORM THE NEW MALTESE ELET STRATEGY

Our recent evaluation for the EU Commission of the implementation of the 2011 Council Recommendation on Early School Leaving Prevention (Donlevy, Andriescu, Day & Downes 2019) gave rise to a range of recommendations that are directly pertinent to the themes raised in this paper regarding holistic, differentiated strategic approaches to system change to promote a shift from diametric space to concentric relational space in and around schools. These include the following recommendations for ESL policy and practice at EU and national level (Donlevy et al. 2019):

3. "In order to tackle the multi-faceted dimension of ESL, facilitate and promote more strategic and cross-sectoral dialogue between policymakers across different fields (e.g. education, health, employment, justice, migration) both at national level (across ministries) and at EU level (across DGs of the European Commission, but also involving other relevant players such as the EU social partners or EU level NGOs) (p. 124)".

4. "To be effective, policy-making must include the voices of other key stakeholders such as marginalised parents, learners, migrant communities, and NGOs (p.124)".

5. "A whole community, area-based approach merits further consideration at policy, practitioner and research level. Promising examples of community lifelong learning centres combined with multidisciplinary teams as one-stop-shops in a common location could also be linked with a future dimension of the Youth Guarantee to integrate it with a common focus on ESL as part of a combined community outreach strategic approach (pp. 124-125)".

Relational issues are foregrounded in the following recommendation for initial teacher education:

10. "There is a clear agenda for the reform of ITE to place ESL – and social inclusion more widely – at the heart of the preparation of teachers and other school leaders for the classroom, including through increased recognition of the importance of practical placements of student teachers in areas of high poverty, as well as student teachers' relational and cultural competence skills (e.g. conflict resolution skills, integrating diverse, culturally meaningful material into lessons)..... To date, this issue – in line with the lack of focus on ESL in educational research at universities – has been relatively neglected in teacher education (p. 125)".

Recommendation 6. "Policies aimed at tackling ESL should be further integrated with those targeting anti-bullying as well as mental health and wellbeing, including trauma. (p. 125)" builds on a more detailed argument for a combined early school leaving and bullying prevention national strategy in our earlier report for the EU Commission (Downes & Cefai 2016). All of these recommendations above are relevant for consideration in the Maltese national context for its forthcoming ELET prevention strategy.

Further issues addressed in our Recommendations to EU Commission (Donlevy et al 2019) include the following:

2. "The headline target provides a valuable and visible cross-country comparative point, and should be retained post-ET 2020. As well as reviewing the level at which to set the future target (since several countries have now decreased their rate below 10%), it should include sub-dimensions with disaggregation for example by gender, migrant background, Roma and regional differences, in order to provide the basis for more nuanced policy-making (p 123)".

2. "Based on evidence from targeted research, policies should be developed to address the specific needs of particular groups, such as newly-arrived migrants (of all ages), learners of different age groups, young men, those living in rural or deprived areas and those with mental health issues, including trauma. There also needs to be a stronger focus on those with complex needs (e.g. children with mental health issues, children in care, children with a parent in prison, victims of domestic violence). Without adapting policy to those facing the greatest disadvantages, approaches to ESL cannot succeed (p 124)".

8. "There is considerable scope to better strategically exploit the potential of the arts and culture, as well as other extra-curricular activities, to tackle ESL (p 125)".

9. "The potential of ESL measures to contribute to increased peace, stability, and social cohesiveness, including the successful and sustainable integration of migrants and refugees, is not recognised clearly enough in policy processes or documents (p 125)".

Against this background, areas for development beyond the current ESL Prevention Strategy in Malta (2012) include the following issues:

- Trauma - Emotional counselling/therapy services in and around schools for indicated prevention level of need (chronic, individualised)
- Explicit suspensions/expulsion prevention approach with multidisciplinary teams
- Initial Teacher Education - Explicit conflict resolution skills of teachers focus to build on the 2012 Maltese Strategy commitment to “use of pedagogies that are inclusive in nature” (p.64).
- Integrating parental involvement and family support through multidisciplinary teams
- Outreach – community and family

From Multidisciplinary Case Management teams to community one-stop-shops in and around schools. These could expand models such as the Cottonera Resource Centre as a gateway to a 1 Stop Shop Co-location of Multidisciplinary Team Services in a Community Location linked with Schools. Any Family Outreach Support Worker role linked with schools, including home visits to families, needs to be part of a multidisciplinary team based approach

- an integrated ESL and Bullying Prevention Strategy for promoting inclusive systems
- Sleep awareness intervention programmes in schools
- Social, emotional education priority on curriculum (Cefai et al. 2018) building also in the New Personal, Social Learning to Learn EU Key Competence
- Greater priority to the Arts centrally embedded from primary school onwards to help motivation, personal and social development and overcome fear of failure.

A final question worth considering in a Maltese context is reform to the structure of upper secondary education. As noted by Cefai & Downes (2014) in the Times of Malta:

“At age 16, students are being asked to move from a school that is conveniently located in their local area to one that may be a significant distance away. Transport availability may not always be easy to access. They may be uprooted from their friends to enter a transitional environment where there are new and, at times, face unknown challenges.”

Continuity of school environments from middle to upper secondary school needs to be addressed as part of an inclusive systems focus to challenge diametric spatial splits of system fragmentation.

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The way forward: Early monitoring and prevention of students at risk of Early School Leaving in Malta

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Abstract—This paper describes the outcomes of a recent EU-funded project to facilitate monitoring and early identification of young people at risk of Early School Leaving (ESL) in Malta. Analyses of current provision identified several strategies that would be suitable for adoption/expansion in Malta, including increased time allocated to reading instruction, adopting whole school approaches, improving parental engagement, and allowing students to select language in their terminal school examination. The paper additionally describes how longitudinal administrative data was mined to identify ESL risk indicators for a recent cohort of students in Malta and outlines how such indicators could be incorporated into a monitoring system.

Keywords—Early School Leaving, ELET, educational disadvantage, targeted measures, early intervention

I INTRODUCTION

Reducing Early School Leaving (ESL) rates in member states to below 10% by 2020 is one of the main education targets in the European Commission's "Europe 2020" strategy. With one of the highest rates of ESL in the European Union, this was a particularly ambitious target for Malta. Since the target was set, the Maltese Ministry of Education and Employment (MEDE) has launched a national strategy to reduce ESL, encompassing a wide variety of interventions and compensatory measures. The strategy and related interventions have contributed to a large drop in the ESL rate (from 23.8% in 2010 to 17.4% in 2018) [1].

However, Malta continues to have one of the highest ESL rates in the EU. MEDE's own analyses identified two areas of relative weaknesses: poor early identification of children at risk of ESL, and, insufficient emphasis on "whole school system approaches". To address these, MEDE sought help from the European Commission's Structural Reform Support Service (SRSS) on the creation of a centralised monitoring system for the early identification of at-risk students.

The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) was awarded the resultant tender, and was tasked with reviewing Maltese policies and practices that might help or hinder early identification, and proposing options for a national monitoring system. The work, which was conducted between October 2018 and September 2019, had four main outputs, or "deliverables":

- A detailed description of current practice.
- Business objectives for a new system.
- Identification of gaps in existing provision and interventions.
- Proposals for a new monitoring system.

Combined, the overall project outcome was a holistic view of current provision in Malta, and a holistic view of how that provision might be improved. Some aspects of the work were confidential and/or commercially sensitive, and therefore presented only to MEDE and SRSS. However, the final two project "deliverables" – possible changes in provision, and proposals for a monitoring system – are publicly available [2, 3]. They provide a more detailed theoretical underpinning for this summary paper, which also draws on information collected as part of the first two deliverables.

The potential negative consequences of ESL for the individual, and costs to wider society and the national economy are significant. For example, individual costs include a higher risk of unemployment, jobs with less employment security, and lower lifetime earnings [4], greater reliance on social welfare programmes, and higher than average risk of poverty and social exclusion [5]. In terms of cost to governments, Eurofound estimated that the annual loss to EU member states from young people who were not in education, employment or training was €153 billion, based on 2011 costs [6].

However, rather than consequences of ESL, this paper focuses on potential solutions in Malta. It is divided into four main sections:

- Rationale for the main proposals put forward.
- Proposed strategies for ESL-reduction.
- Characteristics of students at risk of ESL, drawing on recent Maltese data
- Proposals for monitoring system.

II RATIONALE

The international research literature, and research available in Malta, suggest that the alphabet soup of ESL prediction is Achievement, Behaviour, Chronic absence, Disability, Engagement, Family (e.g.,

European Commission, 2011). The research also indicates what can be effective in reducing risk and dropout: early intervention, including at pre-primary level; targeted interventions that focus extra resources on those from low socioeconomic status (SES) or at-risk families; and, measures to support the development of basic literacy skills. At a broader level, whole-school approaches (to include improving parental engagement), assessment for as well as of learning, and interesting, differentiated lessons that include all students are recognised as playing important roles in maintaining student engagement and reducing dropout.

Countless research studies have shown how structural characteristics of education systems can contribute to ESL. In particular, “othering” students by taking them away from their class and peers, and making them somehow different or atypical will increase risk of ESL. Grade repetition is counterproductive, as is high-stakes assessment of learning, especially in the absence of assessment for learning. Somewhat more controversially, the research literature shows that while Teaching Assistants or Learning Support Educators (LSEs) can in theory be effective in maintaining student engagement with the education system, in practice they rarely are [7].

Finally, looking only at the individual factors that may contribute to risk while ignoring the wider school and social context is not effective. Indeed, this was acknowledged by Minister Bartolo’s address to this conference when he noted that in Malta it is still common to ignore the role of structural characteristics: “It is easier for us to blame the individual than the system”. Knowing what the research literature indicates to be effective in reducing ESL, it is illustrative to compare against current policy and practice in Malta.

A Achievement

Looking first at A (achievement), it is unsurprising that students who have lower achievement are at elevated risk of ESL. In particular, reading achievement is important. If students have trouble reading, they have trouble engaging with the curriculum and with lessons, making them far more likely to disengage from school. To quote President Vella’s speech when opening this conference, “To learn to read is to light a fire”. Reading is what fires the imagination and what fires learning.

Some of the international large-scale assessments (ILSAs) provide external reference points for achievement outcomes in Malta. These include:

- Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which examines reading at primary level.
- Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) which examines mathematics and science at primary and second level).
- Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) which examines reading, mathematics and science, but at second level only.

Full details of Maltese (and other countries’) performance on these cyclical studies can be found in numerous reports [e.g., 8, 9, 10, 11]. Focussing on reading, data from ILSAs show that it is a relative

weakness among Maltese students. For example, Malta’s students perform well below the PIRLS Centrepoint for reading, yet very close to the TIMSS Centrepoint for mathematics.

One possible explanation is the relatively limited time allocated to reading instruction in Maltese schools. Having adequate instruction time is a necessary, but not sufficient, prerequisite for developing skills. As data from ILSAs show, there is certainly not a linear association between time allocated to a subject and student performance on that subject. That said, to ensure that all students can develop core reading skills, a certain minimum time for reading and language instruction is necessary, and an increased minimum time is recommended for schools where a sizeable number of students are likely to experience difficulties.

Both PIRLS and TIMSS look at the amount of instruction time in Grade 4. They show that total annual instruction hours in Malta is above average internationally, and that instruction time for mathematics is average. Where language instruction time is concerned, Malta is below the international average, but that is something of an artefact finding as teachers were asked about instruction in Maltese only. Had English been included, time would have increased.

However, PIRLS 2016 data revealed that Maltese teachers spent less time on cross-curricular reading instruction (in any language) than teachers in almost every other country that took part. Of the 50 countries took part, only one devoted less time to reading instruction than Malta. Whereas the international average was 156 annual reading instruction hours, in Malta it was 83 hours.

B Behaviour and chronic absence

Moving on to the B and C of ESL: behaviour and chronic absence. We know that whole-school and classroom factors affect the prevalence of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, but intervention in Malta is typically at student-level [12]. Whole-school approaches tend not to feature. There are some exceptions to this, but they are just that – exceptions.

Chronic absence is a very well-known flag for risk of ESL. Some recent initiatives – such as parental texts – have brought about improvements in attendance rates in Malta. However, an understanding of the importance of partnerships with parents to reduce absence is not a feature of the Maltese education system. In particular, the early recourse to a Tribunal is out of step with MEDE’s ESL strategy, and with practice in most EU countries [13].

C Disability

Again, drawing on what research suggests is best practice, disability should be dealt with using early, integrated interventions, interesting lessons, and using whole-class and whole-school approaches. Importantly, support should be teacher-led. Studies such as PIRLS allow us to compare practice in Malta with that in other countries. What PIRLS 2016 revealed was that Maltese practice does not align with best practice. Compared to teachers in most other countries,

when teachers in Malta faced a student who was having reading difficulties, they were:

- more likely to wait to see if performance improves, and less likely to personally intervene.
- less likely to spend extra time with the student.
- much more likely to have access to teacher aide.

In other words, differentiation & dealing with disability was likely to be outsourced, not integrated into general classroom teaching and learning.

D Engagement

It is well known that parental engagement in their child's education can have positive effects on student achievement and behaviour, each of which is strongly linked to risk of ESL [14]. Parental engagement is an interesting topic in the Maltese context. Over the course of 2019 I conducted a large number of stakeholder interviews and encountered much negativity regarding parental engagement. There were frequent references to the 1984 educators' strike, poor relationships between home and school, and the fact that Malta was no longer a traditional society where the mother stayed at home (the implication being that parents were no longer available for contact with the school).

However, it is worth noting that when the educators' strike took place, many parents of current students had not been born. Also, while there have been large increases in employment, particularly among women, data from the Labour Force Survey show that between the ages of 25-54 (the age of most parents of school-aged children), Malta has one of the highest rates of female labour force inactivity in the EU.

Thus, I highlight two points regarding parental engagement. First, those most likely to benefit from efforts to encourage parental engagement are often those least likely to be employed. They are often available and can interact with the school. Second, parental attitudes are much more positive than most stakeholders seem to believe. Again drawing on data from PIRLS 2016, parents in all participating countries were asked how satisfied they were with their child's school. Satisfaction levels in Malta were not only well above the international average, but the highest in any country in the study.

E Family

Family characteristics are universally recognised predictors of student achievement and of risk of ESL. Parental SES, education, and "social capital" are all closely related to risk of ESL, but this is especially so in Malta. I will demonstrate this by focussing on SES, but the same broad relationship also applies to parental education and other familial variables.

Again, we can examine what Maltese participation in ILSAs reveals about family SES and student achievement. These studies show that in Malta, there are larger than average achievement gaps between low- and high-SES students. PISA data show that Malta has fewer than average "resilient" students – students who are high achievers

despite coming from disadvantaged backgrounds [15]. PIRLS and TIMSS data show Malta has larger than average "school context effects" on achievement, particularly reading achievement, meaning there are larger than expected gaps between the reading skills of those in low- and high-SES schools [16]. Thus, the Maltese education system may amplify disadvantages arising from student family context.

Because the link between family SES and student achievement and retention is well known, almost all EU countries target additional resources at children from low SES families. Targeting is typically early (e.g., pre-school), and may be directed at the level of the individual student as well as at the overall socioeconomic composition of schools.

In contrast, Eurydice analyses of structural indicators in EU countries show that Malta is one of a very small number of member states that does not allocate additional support to schools with disadvantaged students. Regarding early targeting at the individual level, the Free Childcare Scheme actively excludes children who are most socioeconomically disadvantaged, (i.e., without a parent in employment or education). Yet, these are the children likely to benefit most from the scheme.

In sum, targeted interventions have not been a strong feature of provision in Malta, despite the strong relationship between background characteristics and student outcomes.

III PROPOSALS

The previous section outlined the rationale underlying the proposals that will be outlined in this section. However, there is already a plethora of measures – particularly compensatory and/or standalone – designed to address the issue of ESL in Malta. Thus, while there are many measures that could be recommended, only a few are proposed, and priority has been given to measures that integrate with existing work or with other proposed measures. Put simply, efforts to reduce ESL in Malta need more coordination, not more things to coordinate.

A Main changes proposed

Based on the outcomes of the IEA's analyses of existing practices and provision, four key proposals were made:

- The Free Childcare Scheme should be extended to all children in the target age group.
- Students should have the option to complete SEC papers in Maltese
- A new whole-school approach to ESL prevention should be adopted, incorporating four specific elements.
- Target parental engagement, linked to proposed new whole-school approaches.

1 Expansion of Free Childcare Scheme

As Van Belle's review of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for the European Commission noted, while the effect on

educational attainment is considerably smaller than the effects of SES, “from a policy perspective, preschool is one of the largest modifiable environmental predictors of educational outcomes” (p. 19) [17]. That word modifiable is important. SES and other family characteristics are important predictors of ESL risk, but they are largely beyond MEDE’s control, whereas providing access to ECEC is not.

Longitudinal research shows that, while ECEC is generally associated with better retention rates, quality ECEC is most effective for those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged and who are at subsequent highest risk of ESL [18]. However, in Malta, children whose parents are not in employment or education cannot currently benefit from the Free Childcare Scheme. This is because it was originally framed as a labour market intervention targeted at parents. Thus, it misses what Gatt called the golden opportunity to target children most at risk of educational disadvantage and of subsequent ESL [19].

For this reason, our work recommended that the Free Childcare Scheme be extended to all children in the target age group. That said, it is important to ensure that ECEC provided is of high quality, as poor-quality care may have negative effects on the educational outcomes of children (especially boys) from a disadvantaged background [20]. Bearing this in mind, the role of the Quality Assurance Department in monitoring quality of provision is vital.

2 Choice of language for SEC

At present, students taking the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) will encounter most papers set in English and are expected to answer in English. This requirement is often explained by noting that students who wish to pursue post-secondary education need to be competent in English. However, the SEC is not just an access route to further education. It is a certificate of completion of compulsory schooling, and an assessment of student competencies. Given its importance, it is essential that it is as accurate and fair as possible.

Unfortunately, requiring students to be assessed through English when they may have been largely taught through Maltese makes for inaccurate assessment, because student competence in English hampers the accuracy of the assessment of the skill in question. It also privileges students whose instruction has been largely or exclusively through English.

The recent review of post-secondary education noted that many teachers surveyed were concerned about students’ low levels of English competence [21]. Yet, these were students who had completed the SEC. It is likely that those who opted not to take the SEC might have even more limited English proficiency, and that the English requirement may be the final straw in a long process of disengagement for some students. Thus, we proposed that for each SEC paper, students should have the option to choose the language in which they take the examination.

3 Whole school approaches

Whole school approaches create schools that are flexible, cater to a variety of student needs and offer integrated and tiered support to students who need additional support. It is the antithesis of models whereby additional supports are targeted at individual students, and where students must manifest problems before assistance is

provided. Whole school approaches to ESL do not just focus on retention. They also target achievement (especially reading), behaviour and well-being, meaning that whole school approaches to ESL are relevant for primary schools too. There are four main elements of the whole school approach proposed for introduction in Malta:

- Implementation of a minimum time for reading, language & literacy.
- Targeted funding for at-risk students, with additional funds to high-need schools.
- For a small number of high-need schools, re-structuring support to focus on whole class & whole school.
- Proactive approaches to improving attendance.

And related to these, a parental engagement programme should be introduced.

a) Minimum reading time

Acquiring basic reading skills is key to engagement and to retention. Therefore, at least 90 minutes a day should be spent on language and reading instruction in primary schools, with greater time allocations in low-SES schools. This broadly aligns with what is already recommended in National Literacy Strategy and with what is outlined in the 2007 circular Time Management in the Primary Classroom. However, data from both the 2011 and 2016 cycle of PIRLS show that it does not seem to be happening in practice. Thus, schools need support in adhering to existing guidelines.

b) Target high-need schools

“School context effects” are well-established. Even after the student’s own background characteristics are controlled for, the characteristics of the school can have additional effects on student outcomes. Therefore, targeting additional resources at very disadvantaged schools can help to reduce social inequality, and is a feature of national policy in almost all EU countries. Data from PIRLS and TIMSS show that school context effects are stronger in Malta than in many other countries [22], meaning that targeting additional resources at low-SES schools is all the more necessary in Malta.

c) Re-structure support in high-need schools

A comprehensive review of Teaching Assistants (similar to LSEs) in 11 countries concluded that “Ineffective and separate instruction delivered by untrained and unsupervised TAs [Teaching Assistants], as well as their constant physical presence inadvertently undermine the inclusion, learning, socialization and independence of students with disabilities, and the pedagogical roles of their teacher. (p. 125)” [23].

Research shows that a role such as LSE can be effective, usually is not, and sometimes can have negative affects on achievement and retention. For example, UK longitudinal research on a cohort of 8,000 students found that those who received most support from TAs made least progress in core subject areas, even after considering prior attainment and level of SEN [24]. This can be attributed to the tendency for student-TA interaction to replace student-teacher interaction.

To make the best use of LSE-type roles, they should mainly be a school-wide resource, not tied to a student [25]. Their role is best defined as adding value to a teacher's work and to promoting student independent learning skills, not replacing student-teacher interactions or inadvertently creating dependent behaviour. A similar model is already in use in the Alternative Learning Programme, where LSEs are assigned to class groups, not to students.

Frontloading a majority of inclusive education teaching supports directly to schools increases school autonomy in allocating teaching resources, reduces the requirement to apply for supports, and allows schools to foster continuity and experience among support teams. However, assigning resources in this manner requires a school profile containing information such as the number of pupils with complex needs, the social context of the school, and ideally, comparable indicators of achievement. MEDE does not currently have adequate information at school-level to support frontloaded allocation, or indeed, targeted interventions of any kind. Better data on school enrolment characteristics are required.

d) Targeting attendance

Monitoring attendance is one of the main methods by which MEDE and schools in Malta try to reduce risk of ESL. Certainly, the longitudinal monitoring of overall absenteeism rates by MEDE's Early School Leaving Unit shows that there have been major improvements since the Strategic Plan was introduced in 2014 [26]. However, responses to poor attendance are mainly reactive, considered the bailiwick of senior management only, and absence is still seen as a problem of the individual student.

The IEA's work for MEDE provided examples from other countries of positive approaches to improving attendance, such as breakfast clubs, class league tables, certificates, and so on, all paired with use of data to track student- and school-level attendance patterns and proportionate responses to absence. These types of proactive, whole school approaches can be contrasted with Maltese practice. In particular, the early recourse to a Tribunal is out of step with MEDE's ESL strategy, and with practice in most EU countries. They are also ineffective. For example, The Times of Malta reported that in a three-year period, 90% of parents called to a Tribunal did not attend, and only 5% of fines issued were actually paid. As they waste social worker time, alienate parents, and are not treated seriously by most people, a Tribunal should be the last resort, not the first response.

e) Parental engagement

One avenue for improving attendance is to encourage greater engagement by parents in their children's education. While there are many potential models of parental engagement programmes, what was proposed is an integrated programme targeted only at schools with a low SES intake. It is modelled on Ireland's Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme.

Adopting an approach similar to the HSCL scheme would mean that targeted schools are assigned a coordinator – a teacher in the school (or College) who is assigned full-time responsibility for promoting parental engagement. The coordinator serves as a focal point for linkages with local welfare services and community supports, such as school social workers, local LEAP Centres, Klabb 3-16, Skolasajf,

and so on, as well as primary-secondary links. The HSCL approach includes both general and targeted measures, such as short courses open to all parents, and targeted contact with parents of at-risk children. However, the efficacy of the HSCL approach is dependent on a broader whole school approach to tackling ESL.

f) Supplementary proposals

As well as the four main proposals outlined, a number of supplementary proposals were advanced. These included:

- Making better use of existing “administrative” data, to simplify the process of registering for the SEC, help identify clusters of disadvantage, and to support school self-evaluation.
- Adopting the Incredible Years Teacher Programme in parallel with the roll out the Incredible Years Parent Programme by LEAP Centres.
- In the absence of a more integrated parental engagement programme, continued support for the Schools as Community Learning Spaces Programme.
- Supporting improved home access to books for at-risk children, by increasing either the number of families helped by National Literacy Agency's Home Libraries Scheme or the number of books given to families under a Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived scheme.
- Ensuring MEDE's anti-bullying policies have been implemented in all schools, and consideration of the introduction of an anti-bullying programme.
- Creating a second Alternative Learning Programme to meet increased demand and to provide better geographical coverage.
- Creating access and inclusion programmes within the University of Malta.
- Providing a model of blended or distance learning for students who are unable to physically engage with school.

IV PROPOSALS FOR A MONITORING SYSTEM

As noted, this paper focusses on two project outcomes, the second of which was proposals for a system to monitor risk of ESL. The development of an effective monitoring system must identify who is at risk and propose how that risk can be monitored. However, a model to identify who is at risk of ESL in Malta cannot simply be imported from another country. While most risk indicators are reasonably universal, their relative importance varies by local and national contexts, and some risk factors may be very locally specific. Therefore, to identify risk factors for students in Malta, local data were needed.

While the EU definition of ESL refers to those aged 18-24, the research aim was to identify features of an early warning system. Thus, those who did not achieve Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) Level 3 at the end of Form 5 were identified as a suitable earlier proxy for ESL status. The most recent cohort of students who should have completed the SEC and for whom full outcome data could be accessed were those in Form 5 in 2016/17. From within this group, those who did not achieve Level 3 were considered as ESL proxy.

The National Statistics Office collated administrative data about these students from a number of sources, pseudonymised the dataset, and provided access for a limited time period, after which the dataset was destroyed. The procedure used to collate the data was complex, and the data have many gaps, particularly for Independent schools, but also for students in some Church schools. However, good quality data were available for important student characteristics such as SEC results, home region, and gender. Given the limitations of the data, what is presented are preliminary outcomes from a partial dataset, intended to inform an improved long-term data-gathering process.

A Characteristics of Early School Leavers

Students in the Harbour regions (especially the Southern) were overrepresented in students identified as “ESL Proxy” – 26% of Southern Harbour students failed to successfully complete the SEC compared to only 7% of students from Gozo (Table I). This is different to the geographic distribution of ESL reported in the Labour Force survey, which is based on relatively small samples, but more in line with that reported in the census. Males were also at higher risk than females (23% versus 14%, respectively).

Performance on the Benchmark examination taken at the end of primary schooling was a very good predictor of non-completion of the SEC. Adding together all examination marks (Maltese, Mathematics and English) gives a possible maximum total score of 300. Considering only students whose total Benchmark score was below 183, half were classified as ESL proxy. Absences, generally, were also associated with ESL proxy status. Table I shows that 61% of students with at least 20 days absence in Form 1 were subsequently classified as ESL proxy, but the data also showed that poor attendance at any grade was predictive of ESL proxy status and that students with poor attendance in any given year tended to have poor attendance in other years.

While the number of Maltese students in the database was sufficiently large to provide reliable data, it is probable that EU and Third Country Nationals were under-identified. Thus, while it is possible to state that the rates of ESL proxy among Maltese students was 18%, there is less certainty over the accuracy of the rates for non-Maltese students (although it is likely to be elevated). Finally, student-level information on school change was only available where at least one of the schools was a state school (i.e., transfer between state schools and into or out of the state sector was captured, but transfer within non-state sectors was not). Of students who changed secondary school, 34% fell into the ESL proxy category.

Table 1: Percentage of students who were classified as “ESL Proxy”, by various characteristics*

		% Proxy
Region	Southern Harbour	26
	Gozo and Comino	7
Sex	Male	23
	Female	14
Exam data	Benchmark total below 183	49
Absence	20+ days in Form 1 (now out of date)	61
Nationality	Maltese	18
Changed school	Only between or in/out of state schools	34

*Subject to cautions about quality and comprehensiveness of the dataset

The dataset also contained information on Special Educational Needs, grade repetition, behavioural ratings, and family SES. Unfortunately, the data were not available for all students, and/or were not always collected in a comparable manner. Thus, percentage values are not reported, but it is likely that there are elevated rates of ESL proxy status among students with additional needs, who repeat a year, exhibit behavioural issues, or who are from a low SES family.

As information was gathered about the schools attended by students, it was possible to aggregate student-level data to the level of school, albeit with the same cautions that applied to student data. Doing so revealed large differences by sector in student intake characteristics and academic outcomes.

For example, the percentage of students from “high SES”¹ families ranged from 20% in state schools to 39% in Church schools and 73% in Independent schools (Table II). The mean Benchmark score for students who enrolled in State schools was 193 marks, compared to a mean of 220 in Church schools, while the number of Independent school students who completed the Benchmark was too small to provide reliable data. The rate of absence in primary school for students who subsequently transferred to a state school was almost double that of students who later transferred to a Church school.

Given the differences in intake, it is unsurprising that there were large differences by sector in rate of ESL proxy. In state schools, 24% of students were classified as ESL proxy, compared to 6% in Church and 7% in Independent schools.

Two examples illustrate how individual and school characteristics interact. First, if only those schools with an at least average number of students from high SES backgrounds were considered (i.e., excluding schools with a very low SES intake), sectoral differences

1 “High SES” students were those whose parents’ occupation fell under International Standard Classification of Occupations code 1 or 2 (managerial or professional categories). However, due to how the data were provided, it was not possible to distinguish between missing data and labour force inactivity. Thus, student-level analyses of SES could not be conducted, and aggregated school-level analyses should be treated with caution.

are reduced. The rate of ESL proxy in state schools falls to 10%, to 5% in Church schools and 4% in Independent schools.

Table 2: Summary characteristics of secondary schools, by sector, excluding ALP

	State	Church	Independent
High SES students*	20%	39%	73%
Mean Benchmark total	193 marks	220 marks	Insufficient data
Mean Year 6 absences	13.7 days	7.5 days	Insufficient data
% ESL Proxy	24.2%	5.9%	7.4%
% ESL proxy if v. low SES schools excluded	10	5	4

* Caution needed due to missing data. May over-state percent of high SES in non-Church schools.

Second, as noted, Harbour area students were at highest risk of becoming ESL (24% were classified as ESL proxy). But if the outcomes of students from the Southern and Northern Harbour areas are analysed based on whether they enrolled in a low, medium, or high SES secondary school, a more nuanced picture emerges. Among those who enrolled in high SES schools, the ESL proxy rate was only 7%, compared to 19% among those in medium SES schools, and 38% in low SES schools.

B Proposed indicators

Given the many issues with the data on which the preceding analyses were based, what were proposed as indicators drew on a mixture of what the analyses revealed and what prior research indicated as important. The relative weights to be assigned to the various indicators and the identification of a subset of key indicators should be developed iteratively, based on more reliable data, with universal coverage and consistent definition.

Those caveats aside, student-level indicators for elevated risk are:

- Region (both Harbour regions).
- Attendance (those in the lowest quintile, nationally, at that grade).
- Achievement (those in the bottom third nationally, at that grade).
- Gender (males).

Based on evidence from broader research, student behaviour, lateness, SES, SEN status and nationality are all also likely to be indicators of ESL risk.

Other student-level data required to support a monitoring system are student and parental National IDs, linked to the Corporate Data Repository to minimise data entry errors. The inclusion of parental National ID can also facilitate measurement of SES.

In addition, some school-level characteristics should be considered as indicators. These include:

- Low average school-level SES (e.g., assessed using Scheme 9 data).
- Low average Benchmark performance (bottom third of distribution).
- High ESL rates (secondary schools only).
- High absence rates.

C Proposed model

Having addressed who is at risk, attention turns to how that risk is monitored. What was proposed is that risk is monitored via a common Education Management Information System (EMIS) in all schools, with central MEDE access. The EMIS would be provided by MEDE and be similar to systems currently used, such as MySchool or Klikks. Schools would use the EMIS as normal, but the system would have additional dashboard functions to support data review and export.

Access to the dashboard functions would be permissions-based, meaning that only a small number of approved roles would be able to access specified information. That said, access would be direct and not mediated through a third party such as staff in MEDE's School Information Systems. The database would draw on real-time student- and school-level data to monitor student risk, while also having access to students' historic data.

The model should also link to what goes before and after compulsory schooling. Ideally, attendance data from the Free Childcare Scheme's database would be imported centrally, but subsequently accessible locally within schools. Likewise, it should be possible to centrally export some student data and examination choices to MATSEC. So doing could facilitate a basic examinations database, streamline procedures, and potentially allow for later sign up for the SEC or for changes in examination choices.

The EMIS would have a small number of fields that are pre-defined and required, based on likely risk factors. Thus, for example, there would be required fields for student national ID, address, sex, nationality, SEN status, and a common behaviour rating scale.

The proposed model meets almost all of the business objectives for a new system (identified through a mixture of stakeholder consultations and World Bank and UNICEF guidelines for education data management systems). It permits collection of student-level data, essential for a student-level risk assessment. It provides universal coverage of students, also essential for a national monitoring system, and it facilitates two-way information flows (vertical flows to and from schools, and horizontal flows between state agencies). On a more practical level, it reduces replication & workload, improves the security of data and data-sharing practices, and allows for accessible reports for schools and for agencies such as ESLU.

However, as a final cautionary note, what is proposed requires considerably more sharing of data than is currently the practice in Malta. Yet, MEDE require access to such data in order to fulfil some of

its main functions as the Ministry responsible for the educational outcomes of young people in Malta. Thus, it may be necessary to put in place a stronger legal framework to support the collection and dissemination of such data. It also requires closer collaboration between stakeholders than currently exists, and some changes in practice. However, the changes required are small, relative to the potential benefits for young people.

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Best and Promising Practices to Prevent Early School Leaving and Promote School Inclusion of Migrant and Refugee Children in Italy, Europe, Canada and the US: Strengths and Weaknesses from the Field

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Abstract: The paper will present the results of the project FASI (Fare Scuola Insieme), a project supported by the Italian Ministry of Education and carried out by the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society of the University of Turin. An analysis of best and promising practices against early school leaving and to support school inclusion of migrant and refugee children and/or children of migrant origin will be presented. The practices (projects and programmes) were collected to make available to students and teachers strategies that have proved to be useful, already tested with success at national and international level. The project was developed through a bottom-up approach, building a network of stakeholders: from teachers and schools, to the third sector, and the public administration.

The initiative starts from the assumption, therefore, of learning by sharing not only strengths but also weaknesses to learn from past errors and improve future actions.

Keywords— education, early school leaving, migrants, second generations, best practices

I INTRODUCTION

The school is identified as the privileged observatory to grasp, even if not in a complete and exhaustive manner, the characteristics of foreign minors and young people, their inclusion in the welcoming context and their future projects. The centrality of the school in a debate on the integration of the young generations is justified not only by its daily confrontation with foreign students, but also by its functions. In fact, the school, an important socialization agency, plays the role of transmitting cultural heritage, shaping and developing the human capital of the young generations. However, the expectations towards the scholastic institution and its capacity both as a trainer and promoter of equal opportunities are often disregarded. Three are generally the focus points in the debate on educational inequalities:

1. the family, whose studies continue to detect the influence on school career opportunities (and subsequently work), analysing the resources that parents can make available to their children: economic, cultural and social;
2. the scholastic context, from its technical -- structural characteristics to the qualification of the teaching staff and of the technical -- administrative staff in multicultural contexts;
3. the students, of which not only the biographical characteristics are noted, but also the conditions and the problems that they live,

the consumptions, the lifestyles that are intertwined in the ways in which to face the scholastic experience.

Analyses and discussions on the difficulties students may encounter in their schooling have long called for a multi-factorial analysis of the causes that contribute to defining failures up to situations of real abandonment.

In the case of reunited or second-generation immigrant students, the legal status of a foreigner (or foreign origin), the migration background and opportunities for school support have to be added. The influence of the context, as well as of the integration policies is confirmed by the results of numerous studies, which reaffirm how, in addition to the social capital, they affect the school results of the second generations.

In this context, the FASI - Fare Scuola Insieme project was introduced, aimed at offering a reasoned survey of the interventions put in place by Italian schools in collaboration with local authorities, the third sector, associations and other subjects active in the area. The project sought to investigate and discuss the experiences of the Italian school to make it available for policy development, with a view of sharing and promoting the daily work that for over twenty years has contributed to making schools not only a privileged observatory for reading the changes linked to migration, but also for the didactic and methodological innovation practices that are experienced there. FASI has tried to collect, illustrate and contextualise strategies to

combat marginalization and early school leaving, which have proven to be useful, because they have already been tested and evaluated for success. The initiative started from the assumption - shared with the representatives of the Ministry of Education - that we can learn from the concrete experiences of others. A school serving students, especially those of immigrant origin, must be built together.

II STATE OF THE ART IN CURRENT EDUCATION RESEARCH

Studies and research focussed on the “second generation” deal with the importance of school outcomes, language proficiency and the need to gain qualifications to enter the labour market are numerous¹. Both analysis of survey data and anthropological research methods were the research instruments used to discover why immigrant children lagged behind native host-countries children². Results of these studies show that socio-economic status, usually operationalised as the educational level of the parents, is an important determinant of educational arrears. Other studies³ stress the importance of other factors:

1. inadequate language proficiency and lack of information on schooling opportunities,
2. cultural aspects, such as belief systems in relation to education and the labour market, pre-school informal teaching within the family, rules regarding the relationship between parenting and formal education, and
3. school characteristics, such as the quality of the teaching program, the ‘hidden’ curriculum, and the adaptation of intercultural teaching methods.

These findings are also confirmed by some cross-national studies undertaken considering EU countries. According to these studies several factors influencing educational attainment can be identified and explain the high degree of differences comparing various national/ethnic groups: cultural aspects, socio-economic aspects, available strategies in the migration situation and the functioning of the different education systems. Additional aspects like ethnic segmentation should also be taken into account.

The most important difference between immigrant and native children is the migratory biography. The age at the moment of immigration determines ethnical differences in educational attainment in migrant pupils. The explanation is based on the logic of a generation-integration-cycle implying that the generation status is determining the education career. Following this hypothesis, children starting primary school and having attended kindergarten in the host society (namely the second generation) have higher opportunities to end up with higher educational degrees. Those arriving after the age of twelve are more likely to leave school without having obtained a high school level diploma. The reasons that led them to abandon their studies are diverse. Nevertheless, as the

statistical data show, the effect of belonging to an ethnic minority or a different nationality seems to be an important variable to consider.

Another aspect determining the education of children, are the parent’s resources in terms of rendering assistance to the educational efforts of their children. These can be both socio-economic (occupational status, living conditions) and cultural (language proficiency, education) resources. This impact is also confirmed by the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) survey (examining reading competence and proficiency in maths and natural sciences): differences between immigrant and native children are explained by the socio-economic status and the common language spoken at home. Language and specific ethnic beliefs represent other important factor influencing educational outcomes. Language proficiency is of key importance for immigrant children particularly if they want to proceed in their educational career. The language skills of their parents, especially of the mothers, influence the language knowledge of their children. Linked to the language proficiency is the family social capital. The embeddedness in ethnic communities and family values can have positive effects on education attainment of immigrant children; it can also be found that a closer parent-child relationship impacts positively on the school outcomes among immigrant children, even outperforming native children. On the other hand, ethnic communities can be a hindrance, for example, when families or ethnic communities expect children to help in family business instead of completing higher education, or to earn money in the ethnic economy as an unskilled worker. The role of the family social capital could be ambiguous, favouring in the latter case a process of “downward assimilation”⁴.

The last factor to consider is the institutional setting. It is almost clear that educational attainment also depends on the place of residence, the education system and the local school type. The main differences among the European school systems are the age at which education begins; the number of face to face contact hours with teachers during the years of compulsory schooling; the school selection mechanisms and the existence of special programmes for migrant pupils.

One controversial question is the separation of children without sufficient knowledge of the language of instruction into special classes for foreigners. Scholars criticising this model add the argument that without contact with native pupils the probability of the language acquisition of the native host country is reduced. Furthermore, schools where immigrant children are taught in the same class with the native population, offer better opportunities for inter-ethnic contacts among students. According to the institutional setting, it could be useful to remember the negative impact of ethnic concentration/segregation on achievement. In classes with over 20% of immigrant pupils, the mean proficiency level of all students can progressively be lowered.

In many countries, schools encounter difficulties in communicating with immigrant parents. Language forms a barrier, though certainly not the only one. Until recently, language teachers fulfilled the role of translators and were often asked to bridge the gap between parents and teachers. In some countries, this is still a common practice.

1 Faist, 1993; Feld and Manco, 2000.

2 Shavit and Bossfeld, 1993; Simon, 2003; Worbs, 2003; OECD, 2006

3 Muller and Shavit, 1998; Irtis-Dabbah, 2003; Chevalier et al., 2005

4 Portes, 2007

Language teachers, however, are neither trained nor paid for this role. The role of an intermediary is gradually being taken over by school contact persons and school assistants who themselves have a migrant background. They are not trained as teachers but specifically as intermediaries (cultural mediators).

III FOREIGN PUPILS AT SCHOOL

Statistics on non-Italian school population collected by MIUR (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca) indicate its steady increase with respect to the total school population, even though the current economic and work crisis begins to see a number of immigrant families return to their home country. According to Fondazione Agnelli's elaboration of the Italian Ministry of Education statistical data⁵, the percentage of non-Italian pupils and students was 8.1% already in the school year 2008-2009. However, the following features continue to characterise those youth's educational experience:

1. the structural dimension of foreign pupils' increase in the Italian school system,
2. its uneven distribution across the country,
3. its growth concerning mostly vocational and technical schools at the upper secondary level,
4. the number of schools and urban neighbourhoods whose classrooms are predominantly composed of foreign pupils.

Speaking about immigrant pupils at Italian schools, it is necessary to face the problem of their generational definition. In fact, until now, the majority of them arrived in Italy for a family reunion. This means that their age at the time they left their country acquires significance. In fact, unlike the second, Italian-born generation, foreign adolescents born elsewhere share with their parents their country of origin, language and culture, although they differ in other aspects. Therefore, how can we define these adolescent minors who have certain characteristics that would compare with first generation migrants and yet are projected – and partly socialised – within a context different from where they were born and partially grew up? Some Italian authors use the definition of the '1.5' generation⁶.

As mentioned above, the number of foreign minors has increased in the Italian education system, stressing the deep structural and socio-cultural changes in Italian society. In the last twelve years, the number of foreign students has become almost ten times greater, with a 50,000-unit yearly increase during the last three years. This is a distinctively Italian situation: this rate is not comparable with other countries where the "transformation" took a longer time.

The school is the best observatory to study the development and numerically growth of foreign young generations. Through this channel, it emerges clearly how the most important difference between immigrant and native children is the migratory biography. The age at the moment of immigration determines ethnic differences in educational attainment among migrant pupils. The explanation is

based on the logic of a generation-integration-cycle implying that the generation status is determining the education career. Following this hypothesis, children starting primary school and having attended kindergarten in the host society (namely the second generation) have higher opportunities of ending up with higher educational qualifications. Those arriving after the age of twelve are more likely to leave school without having obtained a high school level diploma. This is clearly shown in the experience of a recent immigration country – like Italy – where migrant pupils are over-represented among "1.5" generation (i.e. children re-joining their family between 10 and 14 years old). Consequently, studies based on recent Italian experience have found that there is a lack of inclusion of immigrant children in the school environment and that national students need to be supported to adapt to the arrival and inclusion of immigrant students.

The generational factor is not the only one to take into account when the Italian school context is considered. In fact, another difference with other immigration countries is the so-called polycentrism (i.e. the presence of a number of different nationalities within the classrooms). This is a peculiar element which intervenes in the daily life of schools, where managers and teachers have to develop strategies for managing a plethora of different socio-linguistic backgrounds in each classroom. This situation is not spread even by through all Italian schools: the phenomenon of foreign pupils' concentration in a few schools is well-known, especially in specific areas of the major Italia cities (Milan, Rome, Turin, Florence). Nevertheless, the growing up of a second generation adds a new element to this scenario: schools have – in the meantime – developed projects addressed both to foreign pupils newly arrived in Italy and those who are born in Italy, to 1.5 generation and 2.0 generations.

Some efforts have been made to better understand the characteristics and profiles of foreign students. Three examples clarify this attention. Firstly, in the last two years, statistics on students enrolled in Italian schools split foreign students according to their place of birth, stressing the growth of the second generation.

This distinction is necessary to guarantee proper educational opportunities to those newly arrived from outside and to those who follow a wholly-Italian school path, which does not, however mean that they do not need particular attention. In the latter situation, we find above all infant-school and primary-school children, while in later stages of education the proportion of foreign-born pupils is even greater.

Secondly, since 2008⁷, the definition of "New arrivals in Italy" has been introduced to identify foreign students enrolling in Italian schools from abroad (e.g. due to family reunification). If these two novelties suggest a positive attention in order to better define school programmes for a more complex school population, bearing in mind the different school paths, the variety of educational backgrounds and the lack of competences among teachers in facing multicultural classes, in the meantime one controversial question arriving on the school agenda this year also stresses education debates: it is the separation of children without sufficient knowledge of the language of instruction into special classes for foreigners. Scholars criticising this model add the argument that without contact with native pupils

5 MIUR, 2010

6 Rumbaut, 1997

7 Miur, 2008

the probability of acquiring the language of the host country is reduced. Furthermore, schools where immigrant children are taught in the same class as the native population offer better opportunities for inter-ethnic contacts among students. Third, the new law provision, Circular of Ministry of Education n. 2, 8.1.2010, provides for a maximum of 30% of foreign students in the classrooms.

IV FOREIGN STUDENTS AT THE CORE OF THE RESEARCH AGENDA

The birth-rate of the second generations (the children born in Italy from first-generation immigrants) is increasing, but at the moment it is mainly represented by children under 10 years old. Since the early 2000s, however, as already mentioned above. Issues have broadened and measures have deepened to improve the attention and increase the importance of the field. Local and regional studies (see references) have helped to identify key topics of interest to researchers and to educators, but unfortunately, this research has not helped to redirect and improve policy and practice: changes in policies and improvements in practices appear to be fragmented. More attention has been dedicated to the school area. Several works⁸ investigated the social characteristics of immigrant children and their difficulties with the Italian school and language. Classrooms and schools are governed by linguistic, socio-cultural and social interaction codes that may well diverge from those governing the home, peer and community lives of foreign pupils. Language and literary acquisition, in particular, may be impeded when the social organization of teaching and learning ignores these differences, and fails to provide opportunities and activities that permit students to integrate in the classroom and proceed in their schooling. This is the reason why schools are beginning, on the one hand, to define projects addressed to foreign pupils' parents, recognising the strategic importance of family involvement for student success. On the other hand, networks with NGOs and intercultural associations have developed to support foreign students' educational paths⁹.

Two surveys have compared results and educational preferences of foreign pupils with those of their Italian peers. The first¹⁰ was carried out in 1998, in nine Italian cities, and the second one¹¹ was carried out more recently, in 2007, and concerned ten Italian regions. The data collected in the two research studies show a high degree of similarity between the sample groups in their perception of one's school achievements, educational and work preferences, family relations and future expectations. Nevertheless, other studies¹² continue to show how there is a lack of inclusion of immigrant children in the school environment as well as that national students need to be supported to adapt to the arrival and inclusion of immigrant students. These studies noted that immigrant children encounter hostility and difficulties at school. But, what are the key issues with regard to minority pupils at school? Looking at the relationship between school and immigrant pupils, the most important lesson emerging

from the Italian case is the importance of supporting youth integration programmes concentrating on the following core areas: language acquisition, education, and integration into the labour market, social counselling and social integration.

Attention to migrant pupils, or those belonging to an ethnic minority, especially at the lower secondary school level, has been acknowledged as crucial for the definition of integration paths. In fact, it is exactly at this level that the bases for subsequent schooling are built: without language support, an educational basis, etc. foreign minors arriving from abroad when 11 to 14 years old risk pursuing exclusively vocational education.

With particular reference to language, it is seen among the first criteria considered when allocating immigrant children to mainstream classes: the question Italian teachers deem crucial for that purpose is "are those children capable of following lessons in the language of instruction used at their schools?"

With regard to the school success of non-Italian pupils and students, the family socio-economic condition continues to be an important factor of school success or failure. According to this, in Italy there are still today significant differences between both the North and the South of the country and between residential areas and the peripheries in the main cities. In these specific contexts, firstly, low educational and low economic capital of the parents have a negative effect on the school careers even of Italian children. Within the Italian context too, adolescents with a poor family background mainly attend vocational institutes because these are considered as less educationally and culturally demanding and more useful to job placement¹³. In this situation, the network of external survival support for the elaboration of one's migratory experience, combined with the adolescents' crisis stage, is poor. Often, the second generation has neither people to whom express uneasiness, worries and difficulties nor places where they can do it. The socio-educational world in general seems still unprepared to tackle – and even notice at times – the specific relevance of diversity and of cultural, religious and family feelings of belonging during these adolescents' growth process. In these conditions, adolescents' growth processes can increase inter-generational gaps and negatively affect assimilation and integration paths.

To sum up some data dealing with the most recent Italian sociological studies: first, for immigrant pupils at risk of school failure for whatever reason, it is feasible to hypothesise that these young people grow up in a context characterised by the lack of strong identification models. The family is weak because, in most cases, it holds a marginal position in society (low capital and socio-economic status) as well as not possessing the cultural tools useful for promoting school paths and the success of their children.

Second, there is a scarcity of external aid, essential for survival, combined with adolescent crises and the process of elaborating one's own school and social experience. Often, the pupils at risk do not have models or places where they can express discomfort, worries and problems.

8 Giovannini, 1996, 1998; Fravega and Palmas, 2003; Mantovani, 2008; Ravecca, 2009

9 Omodeo, 2002; Gobbo, 2008

10 Giovannini, Queirolo Palmas, 2002

11 Casacchia, Natale, Paterno, Terzera, 2008

12 Luciano, Demartini, Ricucci, 2009; Eve, Ricucci, 2009

13 Besozzi, Colombo, 2007

Finally, there often is, in the socio-educational world, inadequate support, which seems still ill-equipped for the management of the continuous challenges facing adolescents, especially those living in the suburban and socio-economically deprived areas. In these conditions, their growing process can increase the generational gap and negatively influence school and socio-integration paths.

V POLICY MEASURES

A common feature of educational policy in European immigration countries in the 1980s was their slow adaptation to the changing realities of education for immigrant pupils. Piecemeal engineering was the rule, and coherent sets of policy responses materialised only slowly. The life chances and future careers of immigrant youth are shaped both by resources from within their own families and communities and by the opportunities the educational institutions in which they are enrolled offer. Educational institutions in particular determine to a large extent these opportunities. In day to day practice, the sharply contrasting national integration policies were confronted everywhere with the same basic needs of migrant children. In essence, this meant that all countries (at national policy making level) launched language programs, compensatory programs and preparatory programs for both primary and secondary school.

The differences between countries lay more in the specific methods the authorities applied to deal with these issues and in the relative priority assigned to various aspects (facets). In some countries, for example, compensatory programs were integrated into school curricula, while other countries opted for separate programs and classes for migrant children.

To fight against this risk of school failure relevant policies and significant actions have always been observed at sub national levels. Local authorities involving schools, associations, NGO's and immigrants' communities to improve education and training of migrant youth, have developed projects, initiatives and policies¹⁴. This sector of policies deals with the more general context of local integration policies. Some cities and districts may have been instituting action programmes for local integration policies in recent years, including the organisation of special integration offices within the municipal administration or the establishment of working groups and councils.

Despite the progress that has been made in the field of integration, policies in this area still contain contradictions, mostly with regards to a discrepancy between theory and practice.

Anyway, a great number of projects and activities were designed to favour the integration of foreign children and adolescent, especially at school.

Precisely, in order to make effective the right to education and make the integration of migrant pupils easier, National, Regional and Local Authorities should establish programme aimed at promoting and facilitating the reception and integration in the different

social contexts as well as to protect the pupils' original culture and language.

These projects can be sorted into three categories:

1. Orientation measures;
2. School-based support measures
3. School-based recognition of immigrant culture.

In the first category can be cited orientation measures, generally focussing on improving the quality of information transferred between home and school, particularly by facilitating the use of migrant languages. The principal types of information and orientation measures for immigrants in schools, pre-primary and full-time compulsory education are: written information about the school system, provision of interpreters, special resource persons/councils and additional meetings specifically for immigrant families. Several schools publish information in foreign languages with a view to explaining the school system at the level of Ministry of Education. Recently in several cases, there are developing the use of information technologies improving the family-school relationship.

In the second category, measures are developed aiming at the fight against early school leaving, high rate of failures and drop-outs. According to the wide range of existing measures, it could be interesting to focus on those measures dealing with: 1) support to improve their language proficiency and 2) support to fill gaps in certain areas of their curriculum.

Even if we are facing either an integrated or separate model of school integration, these measures are often present. Obviously, supports to learn and improve language skills are by far the most extensive in European countries. Generally speaking, linguistic tuition is based on a teaching approach to the language as a 'second or additional language' (i.e. not the mother tongue of the pupils concerned). Rarely does the introduction to the native language of instruction occur at pre-primary level.

The integration of children in pre-primary education is not often the subject of priority measures on the part of the authorities concerned. In fact, only recently, much attention is being paid to pre-school education. It is known that children from immigrant families are under-represented in institutionalised forms of care outside of the family. For children with migration backgrounds, these complementary care facilities are seen as an opportunity for early language and cultural integration¹⁵.

Among measures to help them with certain areas of the curriculum, the initiatives are various and provide individual or group teaching during part of the school timetable. It is interesting to note that, according to the law, it is possible to modify the content of this school programme as migrant pupils reduce their deficit. Other initiatives supporting the high school success of migrant students involve native students: e.g. they become tutors/mentors of their migrant peers, they offer tuition and help in learning the school system and the school way of life. These types of projects allow both to reinforce

14 Allemann-Ghionda, 1997

15 Lanfranchi, 2002

migrant students' opportunities to better proceed in their school careers and to develop intercultural attitudes among native students. Support measures at the high school level can be useless if they are not followed by equal opportunities at the university level.

Turning to the last categories of measures, there are numerous findings confirming that the integration of the mother tongue as equivalent and not as an alternative to the native language of instruction in the curricula guarantees the necessary intellectual development, which would provide a basis for school success and integration into the receiving societies' school system. Programs to maintain home languages come into existence under differing forms of sponsorship: homeland governments seeking to maintain loyalty, ethnic organisation (often religious) seeking to reinforce community cohesion, and the education authorities of the host country, convinced by the appeals of one or more of the argument discussed. The teaching of the mother tongue is in most cases an extracurricular activity occupying a few hours a week. Generally speaking, measures to support teaching of the mother tongue encompass not merely language tuition in its own right but instruction related to aspects of the culture or history of the country of origin.

VI EDUCATIONAL PROVISIONS FOR A NEW SCHOOL POPULATION: STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTING DROP-OUT

The institutional response has been to give way to, and sustain, a number of "good practices" aimed to:

- support migrant pupils' school integration (through language courses, cultural mediators' support, leaflets explaining the characteristics of the Italian school system, translation of educational materials);
- improve the relationship between schools and migrant families. Furthermore, it has been enhanced the organization of training courses for teachers to develop new methodologies and define new tools and ways to teach in a multicultural classroom.

Given the legislation earlier mentioned, quite a number of research projects or activities are enacted at the regional and local level, both by regional and local government bodies and by non-governmental organizations. The recent revision of Article V of the Italian Constitution (voted in 2001) has favoured such partnerships, by introducing a form of school decentralization and autonomy that allows schools to independently devise part of their educational offer, and become more responsible for their educational choices as well as more responsive to local needs.

More than 90% of the initiatives in the North-Centre of Italy are developed through a partnership among local authorities, school, NGOs and associations (both intercultural and ethnic). This kind of partnership highlights one of the main characteristics of the Italian educational/migration scenario: as compared with a limited number of institutional (i.e. ministerial) initiatives, there is a great self-promotion of associations and the third sector. They satisfy the

needs of schools and pupils with "just in time" interventions, that are however somewhat fragile: they are carried out under annual funding, without either any continuity or any final evaluation of the efficacy of the actions. Recently, some projects funded by local authorities require a final evaluative report that however consists of a self-declaration written by the grantee organization, without any evaluation carried out by experts.

Organization of courses for school principals, administrative staff, future teachers and in-service teachers are considered as urgently desirable and indispensable (and some have in fact already taken place) so as (1) to recognise and answer the different needs of a diverse school population, (2) to become responsible for new educational initiatives in line with the official perspective of "school autonomy" and a "bottom up" educational approach, and (3) to mobilise itself around such initiatives.

However, the educational inclusion of non- Italian pupils and students - as Fondazione Agnelli¹⁶ points out - continues to be matter of concern, mainly owing to the fact that (1) the official rule of enrolling them in the grade corresponding to their age is not always honoured; (2) their school delay grows significantly with age and school grade and level and it may indicate schools' partial inability to meet pupils' educational needs; (3) there is a risk of strengthening and disseminating stereotypical views of other cultures (often at the origin of incidents of social uneasiness and/or bullying¹⁷), and of ignoring the interesting changes within those groups, as it has been stressed by ethnographic research.

A Areas and actions, from contrast to dispersion to the promotion of inclusion

In the Fasi project, a well-explained methodological premise underlying the survey and reaffirmed at the beginning of the interviews was to maintain a very broad approach to the issues of school inclusion, also considering initiatives not specifically focused on combating dispersion but which, in practice, had had that effect. Thus, very different areas of intervention and actions emerged: from education activities to citizenship and legality, to contrast discrimination, to reception and insertion activities, to educational guidance activities, to activities to strengthen the competence of the Italian language and in some cases, strengthening skills. In many cases, it has been emphasised that the rigid division between areas, as proposed by the survey form, does not account for the complexity of the projects and the interdependence between the different areas.

This is also the case for those small-scale interventions that are only apparently simple in their premises. As an example, the project on childhood and oral memory realised by the Bellini school of Novara, Piedmont, Italy touched multiple areas. First of all, it envisaged an activity of valorisation of cultural and linguistic differences, because each student had to draw on the family oral heritage; in the same way, the project included activities to strengthen the Italian language skills because all students were asked to reflect on their mother tongue and then to translate.

16 Fondazione Agnelli, 2010

17 Gobbo (Ed.), 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Comitato oltre il razzismo, 2006; Galloni, 2009b

For newly arrived students, also included in the project, there was the enhancement of non-linguistic skills, since they were asked to organise themselves in heterogeneous work groups and the musical and singing skills were highlighted. There was also an important activity of intercultural mediation, in particular aimed at the families of the students who found themselves working together for the first time and this dimension also led to an important activity against discrimination.

VII THE EMERGING ISSUES

In this last paragraph, we focus on the most problematic aspects that emerged from the interviews but also on the proactive aspects solicited by the last question in the questionnaire “If you had 100,000 euros for a school support initiative, how would you spend them?” Many issues highlighted have to do not so much with the specific project described but with structural aspects of the functioning of educational institutions.

It has been pointed out that the problems of foreign-born children entering secondary school, not only for newcomers but also for those who have attended primary school in Italy, are becoming more acute; secondary school teachers inherit problems that were not solved in the first years at school and before which they find themselves without adequate intervention tools. For example, as far as Roma pupils are concerned, there are several cases in which the basic skills of reading and writing are lacking.

School education staff, with rare exceptions, declare themselves facing big difficulties, even in territories that for years have been confronted with a massive presence of immigrants. The teachers recognise that the Ministry has tried to intervene to remedy this situation, investing for example in the staff. But, according to many, this intervention was not very effective because there was no wisdom in the allocation of human resources, often allocating personnel without any experience and sometimes without even interest. Some of the interviewees pointed out that the growing difficulties with students are to be attributed to the disappearance of the teacher in co-presence, a tool that was fundamental in the past to manage complex situations competently. Another aspect that was suggested is that there is little sharing among the teachers about choices and intervention strategies to be adopted; in many situations, a small group of teachers who are particularly attentive to these issues come up against the lack of interest and sometimes obstructionism of the rest of their colleagues.

Another problem that is very felt by teachers concerns the training and life-long learning opportunities. This aspect emerges in particular among the teachers of schools that are located in decentralised territories, which do not have frequent training opportunities and are confronted with a much poorer offer than that found in the big cities. These teachers have emphasised how strongly they feel the need to share the challenges they encountered and their own educational experiences with other teachers, precisely because they feel a sense of strong isolation.

In some schools, the material aspects are also of concern. Physical spaces, from classrooms for laboratories, gyms and sports facilities, to common areas such as gardens are inadequate, old and maintenance-free. Without adequate structures, it is difficult to work towards the creation of inclusive and welcoming educational environments.

The decrease in resources also has had an impact on other services once provided by schools that facilitated student involvement. An important example is the disappearance of the canteen service in secondary schools. The possibility of staying at school for lunch was an important continuity factor between morning and afternoon activities.

Problems have also been highlighted with regard to the relationship between educational institutions and associations, in particular on the preparation of voluntary personnel. The quality of the staff is rarely verified and sometimes the contribution provided rather than facilitating the work of the teachers makes everything more complicated. However, there are also many situations in which the collaboration between educational institutions and extracurricular institutions has existed for many years and has resulted in excellent complementarity, both in the design and implementation phases.

As for the analysis of educational practices, many teachers have highlighted the limits of the logic of “project-based actions”, which unfortunately are prevailing at the expense of ordinary and structural intervention measures. The design takes up a lot of time and is often taken in charge by teachers that are unprepared for technical and administrative aspects. These teachers make themselves available, often voluntarily, but then find themselves operating alone and without qualified assistance. In this way, less prepared schools can lose funding opportunities because they do not know where to look for funds or how to technically proceed with requests. The logic of the project on an annual basis translates into times of interventions very compressed, which sometimes are reduced even to a single quarter, while educational planning would require much more relaxed times, years, and great flexibility to adapt to the needs of different subjects. Several teachers emphasised the limit of the extemporaneous nature of the interventions and sometimes a “financial subjection” towards the donors, in terms of spending and cost constraints. It is important to underline that there are several projects initially born as time-limited initiatives, which were then consolidated and translated into repeated lines of intervention.

A final series of problematic issues concerns the relationship between school and families, a central aspect in educational planning to combat school dropout. The majority of the teachers interviewed stated that the problems of communication with parents continue to be very strong, in particular with those parents of foreign origin. This lack of communication depends primarily on social factors (working conditions, level of education, economic poverty) and secondarily on cultural factors. Many families do not show interest in projects aimed at their children because they have often lost faith in the possibility of social promotion that the school should guarantee. In other cases, parental participation is hindered by objective conditions that make the commitments required by schools incompatible with the timing of work. However, the difficult involvement of parents

has seen some positive exceptions, which could constitute a good element of direction for future interventions. In the project for the inclusion of Roma students at the Leonardo da Vinci school in Turin, one of the most important results was the participation of Roma parents in the majority of meetings with educators and teachers, contravening the low expectations that the teachers themselves had at the beginning of the project. This high involvement was certainly dictated by the presence of a social worker who constituted the bridge and the facilitator of the dialogue between school structure and parents, a figure absent in many school inclusion projects intended for Roma pupils in past years.

The interviewed teachers, starting from the newly highlighted nodes, formulated a series of proposals that they believe would improve the inclusive dimension of schools. We should invest more on the continuity between schools of different order and level to allow students not to get lost in the transition phases. The direct involvement of alumni in mentoring activities can also be very effective. As regards the involvement of associations, selectivity is required, imposing strict criteria for accreditation, which certifies the skills to work in an intercultural environment. Furthermore, after initial accreditation, an update and periodic verification would be required. From the point of view of the offer to students, as already mentioned, the logic of the project should be overcome, in which temporal and administrative logics often prevail over educational objectives and return to investing in ordinary tools, for example by extending the structured educational staff. Schools should also invest in the modernization of school spaces, rethinking their functions in a creative way and more suited to the needs of the students. A proposal is to extend the opening times of schools even in extra-curricular times, favouring an open use to the surrounding neighbourhoods and to different social actors who work with students. In the most fragile neighbourhoods, with fewer resources in terms of cultural offer, sports centres and other services for young people, the school could become the most important educational and socialization centre. Finally, from the point of view of the relationship between school and families, work should be done on the creation of mutual recognition and trust, starting from educational paths designed and shared with parents. To avoid the growing phenomenon of the creation of ghetto schools it is important to promote the social mix also from the point of view of the students' families, introducing in the educational offer distinctive elements that make the school attractive and competitive with respect to the rest of the offer. The introduction of the musical sections, for example, was an innovation that has had this attractive effect especially on families of social and cultural medium - high level, bringing diversity in a positive sense within the classes.

The exchange of experiences between teachers serves to improve existing practices through an incremental process of innovation. It is important to facilitate the transfer of practices not only between teachers, but between schools as a whole, and the mediation process should be oriented not only to teaching practices and relationships between individual teachers, but also to the identification of common resources and shared leadership, in order to contribute to building a sense of community. At the base of our project of collecting good practices, there is the awareness of a sharing unfortunately still lacking.

Colombo⁴⁸ underlines how good planning must be the basis of good educational practice, characterised by some fundamental elements. The planning must start from an analysis of needs, following which a strategy is defined that presents consistency between objectives, approach, methods / stimuli, resources, problems, and expected results. Design must have clear educational objectives and must be built around an active subject for whom the content of the intervention is meaningful. The recipient must also be involved in a learning process in which he interacts with the environment. The practice is effective if it produces changes in the recipients, in the operators, in the context and these changes must be measured (and measurable). The practice must include ongoing and final verifications and based on these assessments it must be able to foresee an adjustment of the initial objectives and methodologies.

The success of an educational practice can be evaluated from both an internal and external point of view and the evaluation of the practices can be carried out either based on subjective indicators (significance, satisfaction, perceived quality), or on objective indicators (the number of beneficiaries, learning levels, costs).

18 Colombo, 2007

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Eliminating ‘Deficit-Thinking’ In Favour Of Inclusive And Culturally Responsive Education In Malta

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Abstract— The paper emanates from a major research study, entitled ‘Education for all learners: Eliminating ‘deficit-thinking’ in favour of inclusive and culturally responsive schooling in Malta’, as part fulfilment for the award of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). The study presents an in-depth investigation of the effects of ‘deficit-thinking’ on the Maltese educational system, by exploring the perceptions of different educational stakeholders, who ranged from policymakers to educational leaders to diverse educators and LSEs. Collected evidence helped to identify ‘minority learners’ at risk of ELET and to reveal challenges in the implementation of inclusive education in Malta, which varied from lack of conceptual clarity on inclusion to lack of strategic leadership to one-size-fits-all pedagogical practices. The study presents also the ‘re-positioning-of-the-self’ technique to challenge deficit-rooted beliefs to further reduce risks of ELET.

Keywords— deficit-thinking, inclusion, democracy, social justice, and leadership.

I INTRODUCTION

Malta spends approximately 6.8% of its GDP¹ on education to ameliorate the availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability of compulsory education² through several system-wide reforms³, which transformed the local education scenario, i.e. from no education provision to segregated support to systems of integration towards the full inclusion of minority learners. However, the perpetuation of high ELET rates⁴ and below average performance in literacy, numeracy and science and technology⁵ indicates that system-deficits may not necessarily derive from national reforms but from educators’ beliefs and practices in implementing change. Jesse, Davis and Pokorny (2004) posited that “schools feel unprepared to respond to the diverse needs, abilities and interests of heterogeneous student populations” (9) against “the historical heritage of excluding students who are deemed not able to adapt to the system” (Tomasevski, 2004, 3). Thus, the need to focus more on HOW to

put “learners at the centre of the system” and place “curricula at the service of students” (NMC⁶, 2000, 26).

A Problem and Purpose Statements

EASNIE (2014) indicated that one of Malta’s biggest problems is the persistent presence of ‘deficit-thinking’, which “attributes learning and behavioural problems to deficits residing in learners” (Trent et. al., 1988, 478), who are perceived as “a laundry-list of problems” (Katsarou et. al., 2010, 139). The present inquiry investigates ‘how’ Maltese educators work to eliminate the ‘deficit paradigm’, by adopting: (1) Valencia’s (1997) examination of ‘deficit-thinking’; and (2) Shields’ (2004) notion of the ‘re-positioning-of-the-self’ technique. My original contribution was to unveil how educators challenged ‘the status quo’ to keep ‘true democracy’ at the centre to overcome the dichotomy between academic excellence expectations and conceptions of equity and social justice, by “increasing the capacity of mainstream schools to support the learning of an increasing diverse range of learners (Griffiths, 2013, xxi).

1 Gross Domestic Product: Malta’s GDP expenditure on education is above the EU average.
2 The National Curriculum Framework (2012) and the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 (2014) outline a consolidated strategy for “...lifelong learning opportunities from early childhood education to adult learning to ensure that all children, young people and adults have the opportunity to obtain the necessary skills and attitudes to be active citizens and to succeed at work and in society” (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014, 3).
3 Relevant Reforms: For All Children to Succeed (2005); Transition from Primary to Secondary Schools in Malta (2008); My Journey: Achieving through different Paths (2017).
4 Despite, a decrease of 12% in ELET rate, in 2018, Malta registered the second highest ELET percentage (17.5%) in the EU. The World Bank Group (2018) observed that in Malta, “... despite good schools, many students leave education early and with poor cognitive skills” (World Bank Group, 2018, 96).
5 PIRLS and TIMSS International Standardised Tests Results.

6 National Minimum Curriculum.

B Need for Research

Despite the presence of ‘deficit-thinking’ in the local educational system (EASNIE, 2014), this concept is still under-researched. Hence, this paper revolves on four research questions:

1. What are the views of educators on ‘deficit-thinking’ and ‘inclusive education’?
2. Who are the students at risk of ELET in the Maltese educational system?
3. Why does ‘deficit-thinking’ constitute a major challenge to reduce ELET?
4. Why is ‘re-positioning-of-the-self’ fundamental to reduce ELET?

The illustrated research questions helped the researcher to: (1) analyze perceptions on ‘deficit-thinking’ and ‘inclusive education’; (2) identify cohorts of minority learners at risk of ELET; (3) understand challenges faced by minority learners in the local education system; (4) examine practices employed by educators to navigate ‘deficit-thinking’ logics; and (5) present the ‘re-positioning-of-the-self’ as an essential technique to reduce ELET. In so doing, the researcher tries to uncover the ‘of’ aspect of inclusion, whereby all educational stakeholders have ongoing opportunities to create, shape and determine how the college/school (as a ‘professional learning organization’) operates.

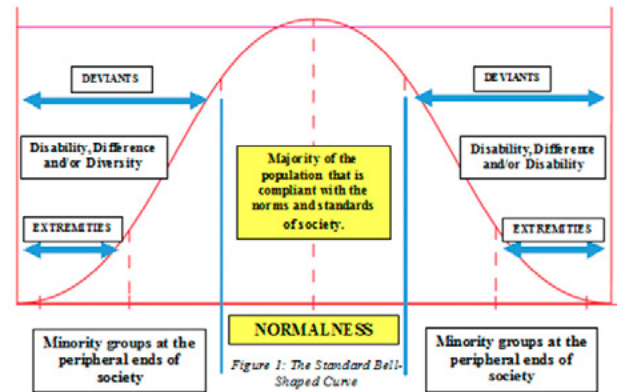
II LITERATURE REVIEW

The rise of neoliberalism led to “...a conceptual shift in policy-thinking around the world towards a new political rationality based on ‘truths’ associated with the economy, the market, human capital and an entrepreneurial vision of the individual” as ‘homo-economicus’ (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010, 215). Essentially, neoliberalism favours “personal freedom” or “possessive individualism” over “collectivism” and encourages individuals to ‘self-invest’ and to compete with others to maximise their human potential (Robertson, 2008, 13). These ‘modes of reason’ narrowed the concept of ‘freedom’ and distorted ‘social thinking’ on ‘diversity’ because of excessive competition, antagonism and stereotyping (Compton and Weiner, 2008). Hence, the social rights agenda is envisaged in a framework of how valuable minority groups are to the economy rather than as a function of traditional citizenship based on equity and social justice (Ong, 2006).

Neoliberal logics revolve around the ‘concept of the norm’ (Savage, 2011), which posits that individuals conforming with society’s general norms fall under the arch of the standard bell-shaped curve, whereas those who deviate stand at the ‘extreme end’ and are called ‘deviants’⁷ (Figure 1). DESA⁸ (2009) argued that, “power imbalances between groups with different social identities lead to the use of labels to categorise individuals, by using stereotypes

based on characteristics, such as age, appearance, physical status, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religious, language, political and cultural affiliations” (21).

Figure 1: The Standard Bell-Shaped Curve



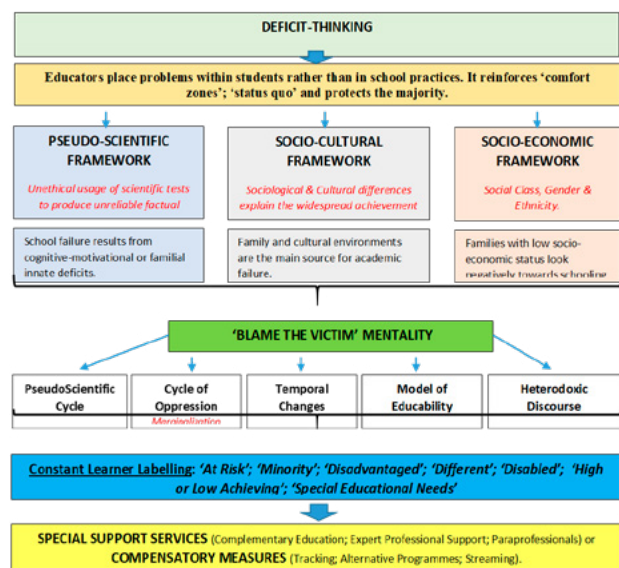
Callanan and Waxman (2013) posited that, “if we look closely at the context that defines people as deviants or different, that difference will no longer seem empirically discoverable” (22), but rather ideas on difference, disability and/or diversity become clues to problems associated with people’s responsibilities, interactions and relationships. Hence, the rise of ‘deficit-thinking’, which Gorski (2008) defined as an institutionalised ideology woven in the fabrics of society, based on assumed ‘truths’ on ‘difference’, ‘normality’ and ‘socio-political relations’ that shape individual assumptions by “blending in with normal or common-sense thinking” to encourage compliance with an oppressive social order (Portelli, 2010, 32). Sleeter (2004) remarked that deficit-thinking influenced educational discourse, whereby “educational needs are thought of as emanating from the student, who is viewed as different, faulty and in need of assistance” (Reiser, 2003, 119). Valencia (2010) also defined ‘deficit-thinking’ (Figure 2) as the practice of holding low expectations for minority learners⁹, who end up experiencing marginalization and exclusion. Sharma and Portelli (2014) considered ‘deficit-thinking’ a serious problem since it equates to chronic absenteeism, early school leaving and poor academic attainment.

7 ‘Deviants’ refers to citizens who are at the peripheral ends of society. These include individuals with physical and/or psychological conditions; people in or at risk of poverty; migrants; citizens with diverse ethnic, religious, linguistic and/or cultural backgrounds; people with different sexual orientations; and individuals with diverse intelligence quotients, abilities and talents.

8 Department for Economic and Social Affairs (United Nations).

9 Minority Learners are students who do not fit the traditional context of the school system.

Figure 2: The ‘Deficit-Thinking’ Ideology in Educational Settings



The illustrated ‘deficit paradigm’ weakened educators’ abilities to identify diverse forms of giftedness in minority learners, who end up receiving a weak and narrow set of educational skills to ‘fix’ assumed deficits (Ford and Grantham, 2003). Concretely, ‘deficit-thinking’ results in practices that deterred minority learners from receiving equitable education by continuously privileging students in dominant groups. Hence, disadvantaged learners suffer from disparity of treatment and gross educational mismatch (Ladson-Billings, 2007), because of:

- a) Unresponsive curricula – culture and identity of minority learners not accounted for;
- b) Unresponsive pedagogy – needs and abilities of disadvantaged learners not catered for;
- c) Lack of parental engagement – school practices not congruent with family upbringing; and
- d) Lack of student engagement – minority learners not involved in decision-making processes.

These systemic flaws led to the development of different compensatory support services and SEN withdrawal learning programmes that encourage the use of ‘teaching the basics’ pedagogy (Ravitch, 2009) to safeguard the dominant school cultural mould (Portelli and Sharma, 2014). However, research (Sharma, 2014) questions the effectiveness of compensatory practices since they further alienate minority groups from schooling; diminish the quality of public education; and reduce the possibility of having truly democratic schools (Weiner, 2006). Finally, Valencia (1997) posited that ‘deficit-thinking’ has harmful effects on teachers’ professionalism. In fact, through the ‘teacher-deficit’ paradigm (Weiner, 2003), “educators became the new scapegoats of the educational system” (Darder, 2005, 214).

Ainscow (2007) remarked that ‘inclusive education’ is the antithesis of ‘deficit-thinking’ as it implies recognising, celebrating and

responding effectively to diversity, by focusing on: How to achieve responsive education to reduce ELET; How educators can best cope with diversity; and How to make teaching and assessment more equitable. In this regard, Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) emphasised that, “if a country aspires for higher levels of educational attainment...it must address the underlying inequality which creates a steeper social gradient in educational achievement...” (30). Hence, inclusive education, apart from genuine commitment and constant nurturing, requires strategic leadership, good governance and effective management (Griffiths, 2013).

III RESEARCH METHODS

This research study pursued the concepts of both ‘deficit-thinking’ and ‘inclusive education’ through a rigorous process that aimed to explore (rather than explaining) how educators strive to eliminate ‘deficit-thinking’. In so doing, the researcher adopted a constructionist approach, given that knowledge formation on both ‘deficit-thinking’ and ‘inclusive education’ is socially-constructed through the participants’ use of discourse and engagement in educational matters. Hence, ‘critical inquiry’ imbued all aspects of the study to help the system “move from good to great, from doing well to always winning and from constantly correcting to forever innovating” (Barrett, et. al., 2005, 20). Finally, the ‘mixed-method’ approach’ supported the collection and analysis of data from diverse research tools as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Main Sources of Data Evidence

Research Questions	System Level/s	Research Method/s Applied
What are the perceptions on ‘deficit-thinking’ and ‘inclusive education’?	Directorate Colleges Schools	Questionnaires Semi-Structured Interviews
Who are the students at risk of ELET (minority learners)?	Colleges Schools	Questionnaires Semi-Structured Interviews In-Class Observations
Why does ‘deficit-thinking’ constitute a major challenge to reduce ELET?	Directorate Colleges Schools	Questionnaires Semi-Structured Interviews In-Class Observations
Why is ‘re-positioning of the self’ technique fundamental to reduce ELET?	Directorate Colleges Schools	Questionnaires Semi-Structured Interviews In-Class Observations Job Shadowing Sessions

A Research Sites and Participants

A total of four State colleges and eight State schools (4 Primary, 2 Middle and 2 Secondary) participated in the study upon acceptance. Table 2 illustrates the different research methods utilised in relation to research participants.

Table 2: Research Methods, Range and Number of Participants in Relation to Data Collection

Participants	Collected Questionnaires	Conducted Interviews	Job Shadowing	Participant Observations
MEDE Minister		1		
DGs ¹⁰		2		
Directors ¹¹		3		
Heads College Network		4		
HoS ¹²	16	3	8	
EOs ¹³	15			
Asst. HoS ¹⁴	26			
HoDs ¹⁵	20			
INCOs ¹⁶	5			
Specialist Teachers/Practitioners	50			
Primary Teachers	150			4
Middle & Secondary Teachers	120			4
LSEs ¹⁷	150			
Totals	552	15	8	8

10 Director Generals.
 11 Three Directors: Director National School Support Services; Director Learning and Assessment Programmes and Director Quality Assurance.
 12 Heads of School.
 13 Education Officers.
 14 Assistant Heads of School.
 15 Heads of Department.
 16 Inclusive Education Coordinators.
 17 Learning Support Educators.

B Research Methods

Qualitative research methods enabled the researcher to “develop a level of detail by being highly involved in the actual experiences” (Creswell, 2003, 67). The utilised methods included:

1. Semi-Structured Interviews helped to analyse perceptions and to examine how educational policymakers try to eliminate ‘deficit-thinking’ in favour of ‘inclusive education’.
2. Job-Shadowing Sessions with Heads of Schools to analyse the duties of SLTs¹⁸ in schools; and examine leadership styles that enhance strategic decision-making.
3. Class Participant Observations helped to unveil the attitudinal practices of both educators and students towards minority learners as well as to scrutinise pedagogy¹⁹.
4. Document Analysis of national policies and college/school documents²⁰, which helped to shed
5. light on change processes in favour of inclusive education at all system levels.

Finally, anonymous questionnaires with SLT members; diverse teacher grades²¹ and para-professionals²² represented the quantitative aspect of this study. Table 3 below illustrates the questionnaires’ response rate.

Table 3: Response Rates of the three Questionnaires

Questionnaires	Participants	Response Rate
SLT members in schools	Heads of School; Assistant Heads of Schools.	49 responses out of 68 72%
Educators	Education Officers; Heads of Department; Inclusive Coordinators	367 responses out of 780 47%
	Primary-Middle & Secondary Teachers; Specialist Support Teachers/Practitioners.	
Paraprofessionals	Learning Support Educators	158 responses out of 295 54%
Total Response Rate		574 responses out of 1143 51%

Questionnaires served as the primary data source, while the four-qualitative methods acted as secondary data sources during the analysis process. To ease data-comparison, the researcher converted questionnaire results into percentages (%) and utilised the NVIVO-8 software (QSR 2008) to enable transparency in the analysis of semi-structured interviews.

18 Senior Leadership Teams in schools, i.e.: Heads of School and Assistant Heads of School.
 19 Teachers’class and time management skills; delivery and pace of lesson; use of resources and type of differentiation used; student involvement and questioning techniques; and assessment procedures.
 20 Documents included: College Development Plans; School Development Plans; Individual Educational Plans; and College-and-School-Based Policies.
 21 Class or Subject Teachers; Heads of Department and Inclusive Coordinators; and Education Officers.
 22 Learning Support Educators.

IV METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis utilised the grounded theory methodology, which involved open, axial and selective coding to analyse perceptions on ‘deficit-thinking’ and ‘inclusive education’; explore attitudes towards minority learners; and discover leadership styles supporting inclusive practices. Hence, the researcher adopted an inductive approach, which involved coding data into “units of meaning” (Cohen, et al. 2000, 34) and comparing incidences and categories together by using the ‘constant comparative method’. The process involved: (1) attaching initial isolated meanings to interview transcripts, observation and job-shadowing notes, and questionnaire data to identify emergent themes; and (2) comparing emergent issues together in search for similarities and discrepancies. In so doing, localised meanings evolved into general themes following a logical chain of evidence (Scriven, 1974). All this generated hypothesis and lines of questioning, which informed the study’s main recommendations, whilst ensuring robust triangulation in pursuit of research reliability and validity.

V FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Perceptions on the ‘Deficit-Thinking’ Phenomenon

Although participants associated ‘deficit-thinking’ with stereotypic assumptions on learners’ personal and social characteristics (Table 4), among the diverse respondents at all system levels existed limited knowledge on the ‘deficit paradigm’.

Table 4: Determinants of Educational Failure

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS	SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS
Categorised responses focusing on minority learners’ abilities and aptitudes	Categorised responses focusing on minority learners’ familial and cultural backgrounds
“lack of motivation and attention”	“a culture of poverty”
“lack of confidence and self-esteem”	“inadequate housing conditions”
“poor school attendance”	“lack of parental support”
“lack of interest in schooling”	“lack of parental affection”
“lack of participation in class activities”	“lack of parental follow-through”
“lack of academic skills”	“limited access to academic material”
“severe emotional and behavioural problems”	“difficult socio-economic conditions”
“severe physical disabilities or conditions”	“low parental educational attainment”
“severe communication difficulties”	“difficult cultural backgrounds”
“severe reading and numeracy difficulties”	“lack of financial capital”

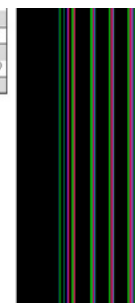
These responses strengthened “a blame culture” and reinforced the ‘fix-fit’²³ attitude through the provision of “compensatory support

23 The process of providing compensatory interventions to normalise diagnosed deficits to facilitate the re-integration of minority learners in mainstream schools or classrooms.

measures”²⁴, which resulted in an exponential increase in “referral procedures to secure additional support services to minority learners”²⁵. The latter correlated positively with questionnaire data, which indicated lack of collective responsibility for all students’ learning (Table 5).

Table 5: Collective Responsibility for ALL Students’ Learning

	273 – 49%			163 – 30%			79 – 14%			37 – 7%		
Streaming is beneficial.	18	170	70	18	170	70	6	20	10	0	0	0
	258 – 47%			258 – 47%			36 – 6%			0		
Mixed-ability teaching.	8	20	20	5	10	10	7	50	40	22	280	80
	48 – 9%			25 – 4%			97 – 18%			382 – 69%		



Collected evidence also shows that SLT members and teachers (84%) had ‘Not so Pleasant’ (49%) and ‘Frustrating’ experiences with minority learners. The registered malcontent shows that schools “feel unable and unprepared to respond to the diverse needs, abilities and interests of heterogeneous student populations” as “many educators still champion traditional norms and working styles over inclusive and responsive teaching”. Moreover, the latter practices posed “challenges on educators to address achievement gaps and dropout rates”, which reinforced the credo that homogenous grouping “was essential for high and low achievers” (Table 6).

Table 6: Preferred Teaching Settings

	Always			Very Often			Sometimes			Never		
	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE
Tracking & Banding.	9	60	20	8	50	20	10	120	40	15	130	70
	89 – 16%			78 – 14%			170 – 31%			215 – 39%		
Streaming	13	190	70	13	100	50	9	50	20	7	20	10
	273 – 49%			163 – 30%			79 – 14%			37 – 7%		
Streaming is beneficial.	18	170	70	18	170	70	6	20	10	0	0	0
	258 – 47%			258 – 47%			36 – 6%			0		
Mixed-ability teaching.	8	20	20	5	10	10	7	50	40	22	280	80
	48 – 9%			25 – 4%			97 – 18%			382 – 69%		

24 Participants emphasised the need for: “more additional support services”; “more learning support educators”; and “special settings that cater exclusively for the identified needs of minority learners”.

25 Extract from the interview with Director National School Support Services (NSSS). The most common additional support reported resulted in the provision of a Learning Support Educator.

Collected evidence also highlighted other system-wide factors that helped to sustain ‘deficit-thinking’ in the Maltese educational system. These factors included:

- a) Market-driven educational targets and objectives²⁶;
- b) Centralised (top-down) decision-making processes²⁷;
- c) Lack of school autonomy²⁸;
- d) Rigid curricula and assessment practices²⁹;
- e) Content-oriented syllabi³⁰;
- f) Confusion around the LOF framework³¹;
- g) Lack of focused CPD³²;
- h) Limited parental and learner engagement³³;
- i) Lack of college networking and collaborative approaches among educators³⁴;
- j) Lack of enabling systems of support in mainstream colleges/schools³⁵.

- 26 Among others ‘market-driven’ educational ideology includes: rigid accountability requirements based on high-stakes testing; excessive competition; and target setting highly influenced by global economic trends and business exigencies. According to Dudley-Marling and Baker (2012) this ideology, was failing to meet the needs of minority learners, rather than ensuring educational progress.
- 27 Extract from the teachers’ questionnaire: “to date teachers are still the least consulted and considered people in the education system...our voice is rarely heard and taken into serious consideration before decisions of any type are taken” (Primary Teacher); “The only notable difference from the introduction of the college system was that before the Education Division issued orders directly, while now these are communicated to us by CPs or HoS” (Secondary Teacher).
- 28 SLT members in their questionnaire were asked to indicate if they ‘Have enough power and autonomy to execute change in their school’. The following were the responses: 48% and 28% indicated ‘NEVER’ and ‘SOMETIMES’ while 17% and 7% chose ‘VERY OFTEN’ and ‘ALWAYS’ respectively.
- 29 Heads of College Network and SLT members pointed out that rigid curricula and syllabi together with high-stake examinations influenced the way teachers teach. A primary school teacher also argued that, “my teaching methods are highly influenced by the end of year examinations”.
- 30 78% of participants remarked that emphasis is more on content coverage (what students learn) rather than on how well students are learning (quality of teaching). Teachers remarked that education officers and parents emphasis on whole-of-syllabus coverage.
- 31 Extracts from the teachers’ questionnaire: “we lack training on the LOFs...the received training was too short and generic to pretend the successful implementation of these syllabi” (Primary Teacher); “if there exists confusion among EO on the LOF, how can authorities pretend teachers to implement this framework successfully” (Middle School Teacher); “the introduction of LOs was a complete failure, which is why many educators are now insecure on how to utilise it” (Secondary School Teacher).
- 32 43% of SLT members indicated that Continuous Professional Development complemented educators’ needs. On the contrary, 54% of participant teachers and 67% of participant LSEs believe that CPD did not complement their everyday needs and exigencies.
- 33 Extract from the interview with the Minister for Education and Employment: “both parents and learners are important stakeholders. In general, we need to strive to involve and engage more parents and learners within the system by overcoming the ‘us vs. them’ mentality, which is very strong among all educators”.
- 34 Questionnaire data indicated that 45% of the participant teachers preferred to work on their own rather than in collaboration with other educators. Moreover, 40% of the participant teachers indicated that they never plan and work in conjunction with the LSEs present in class.
- 35 The majority of SLT members (56%), teachers (64%) and LSEs (72%) indicated that expert support practitioners/professionals rarely supported them in their work. These experts concentrate their attention on referred minority learners.

Table 7: Educators’ General Beliefs and Attitudes towards Inclusive Education

Statements	Always			Very Often			Sometimes			Never		
	SMT	Teacher	LSEs	SMT	Teacher	LSEs	SMT	Teacher	LSEs	SMT	Teacher	LSEs
Some learners are not fit for mainstream schools.	14	120	50	6	100	30	10	110	40	12	30	30
	184 – 33%			136 – 25%			160 – 29%			72 – 13%		
Not all learners are capable of learning.	25	140	70	7	130	50	5	40	20	5	50	10
	235 – 43%			187 – 33%			65 – 12%			65 – 12%		
Inclusion hinders high-achievers.	7	120	30	7	100	30	23	70	40	5	70	50
	157 – 28%			137 – 25%			133 – 24%			125 – 23%		
Failure results from factors beyond the schools’ control.	25	120	50	8	130	60	4	50	20	5	60	20
	195 – 35%			198 – 36%			74 – 14%			85 – 15%		
More special support services are needed.	20	150	60	15	150	60	5	60	30	2	0	0
	230 – 42%			225 – 41%			95 – 17%			2 – N/A		
Teaching methods are to blame.	8	40	40	8	60	20	16	120	30	10	140	60
	88 – 16%			88 – 16%			166 – 30%			210 – 38%		

Perceptions on ‘Inclusive Education’

Definitions on ‘inclusive education’ denounced a general “...uncertainty on how to teach inclusively and on how to create inclusive learning settings” (Allan, 2000, 10) among school-based participants, who viewed ‘diversity’ as a ‘defect’ in need of ‘fixing’. Emanating from the latter belief were (A) Placement Issues: “learners with severe physical or psychological disabilities are not fit to be placed in regular mainstream classrooms”; (B) Access Issues: “minority learners are unable to access regular curricula as they lack basic skills to complete a given task”; and (C) Labelling Issues: educators categorised SEN learners to their impairment or capacity limitation. Furthermore, collected data also evidenced lack of clarity on ‘inclusion’ and ‘integration’, which posed dilemmas on how to be caring, fair, honest and equitable to all learners; and that impacted negatively on educators’ beliefs on ‘inclusive education’ (Table 7), which they defined as “perfect in theory, but not in practice”.

Figure 4: Graphical Representation of the 3 Main Minority Learners’ Groups

Table 8: The ‘Most Common’, ‘Emerging’ and the ‘Least Common’ Minority Learners’ Groups

Categories	Most Common (168 + 138)	Emerging	Least Common (55 + 48)
Diverse cognitive and learning skills or abilities.	306	143	103
Diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.	(127 + 102) 229	129	(112 + 81) 193
Diverse religious and faith backgrounds.	(78 + 98) 176	120	(140 + 116) 256
Diverse socio-economic backgrounds.	(164 + 118) 282	161	(68 + 48) 116
Gender differences.	(52 + 32) 84	45	(18 + 243) 261
Diverse physical disabilities or psychological conditions.	(169 + 144) 313	120	(78 + 41) 119
Diverse communication difficulties.	(124 + 97) 221	148	(107 + 76) 183
Diverse aptitudes towards schooling.	(163 + 125) 288	161	(78 + 25) 103

Conversely, participants forming part of MEDE’s top management team managed to move ‘inclusive education’ away from the field of ‘disability’ into the realm of ‘diversity’. As such, these participants concentrated on issues of “equity”, “respect for human rights”, “social justice”; “democratization” and “balancing of unity”. All this shows that the biggest dilemma in the local educational system is “whether ‘inclusive education’ represents simply a

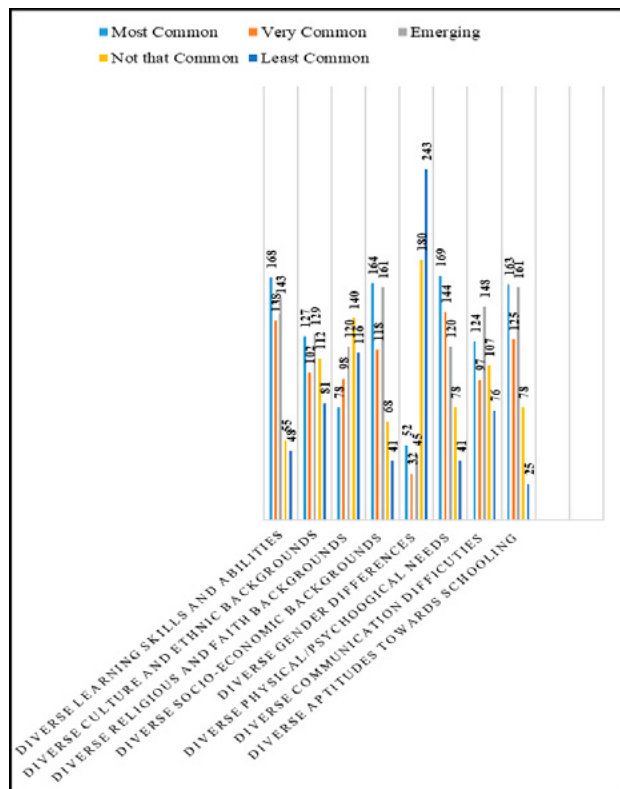
linguistic shift or else a new focalised educational agenda”. Whereas the vision of the Ministry for Education is to “free inclusion from ‘special education’ towards a broader agenda focused on responding to all forms of diversity in colleges and schools”; educators viewed ‘difference’ as “a problem” rather than “as an opportunity to develop more socially just teaching practices”.

Identification of minority cohorts of learners at risk of ELET

The researcher presented participants with 8 categories of minority learners to rate using a Likert Scale from 1 to 5 (Figure 3). To better identify and rank cohorts of minority learners, the researcher merged the ‘Most Common’ and the ‘Very Common’ and the ‘Not Common’ and the ‘Least Common’ preferences together. The latter process facilitated cross-tabulation of results and allowed the researcher to group the eight categories under three main preferential groups:

- a) ‘Most Common’ cohorts at risk of ELET or social exclusion;
- b) ‘Emerging’ learners’ cohort; and
- c) w‘Least Common’ learners (Table 8 and Figure 4 below).

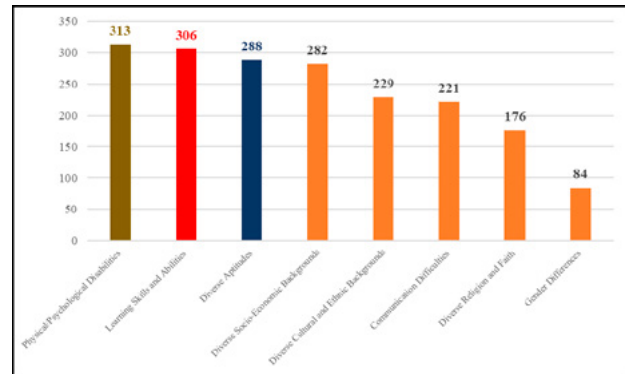
Figure 3: Graphical Representation: Minority Groups: All Responses



Collected evidence shows the unique and diverse reality of participant colleges and schools. In fact, the choice of ‘learners from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds’ was predominant in Northern and Centrally located schools, whereas the preference of ‘learners from diverse socio-economic backgrounds’ was very common in Southern parts of Malta. On the other hand, ‘learners with diverse aptitudes

towards schooling’, ‘learners with diverse cognitive and learning abilities’ and ‘learners with physical disabilities and/or psychological conditions’ were systematically chosen in all schools. Figure 5 below shows the ‘Most Common’ minority group of learners in all participant schools.

Figure 5: The Most Common Minority Groups



The first 3 minority groups relate to the pseudoscientific deficit framework. Moreover, data shows that socio-economic and socio-cultural issues in schools are on the increase. This data correlated positively with remarks made by Heads of College Network, who unanimously agreed that “over the past 10 years, schools experienced an exponential increase in social cases” due to poverty and multiculturalism . Finally, the ‘Most Common’ category correlated positively with both the ‘Emerging’ (Figure 6) and ‘Least Common’ groups of learners (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Emerging Minority Learners’ Groups

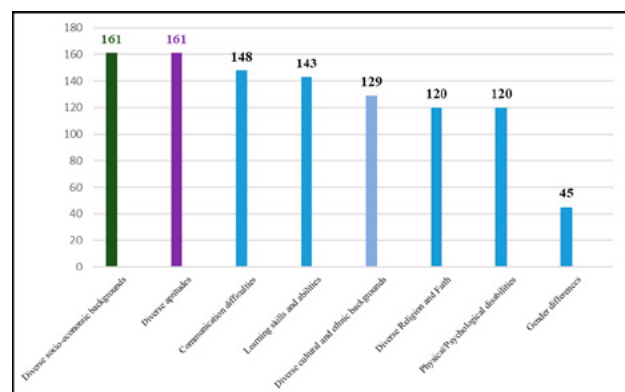
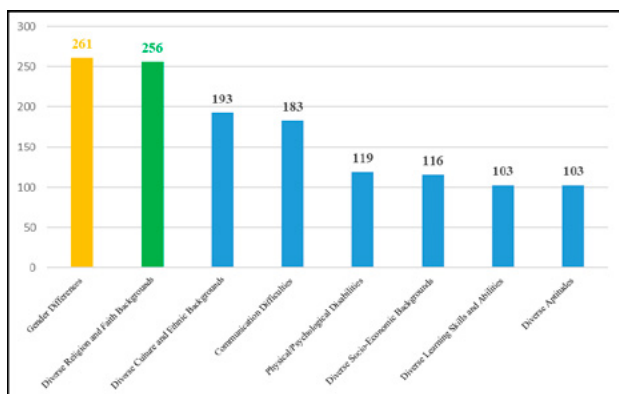


Figure 7: The 'Least Common' Minority Group



Finally, all the above results matched collected evidence from class participant observations, job-shadowing sessions and interviews.

Attitudes, Behaviour and Academic Performance of Minority Learners

Most of the participants (67%) indicated that minority learners' behaviour at school and in class was either 'Not so Well' (41%) or 'Bad' (26%). Only 33% of the respondents indicated the opposite. Likewise, respondents remarked that minority learners tend to underperform when compared to their 'other' peers (Figure 8). Hence, strengthening the assumption that minority learners are more vulnerable for becoming ELET.

Figure 8: Minority learners' Academic Performance

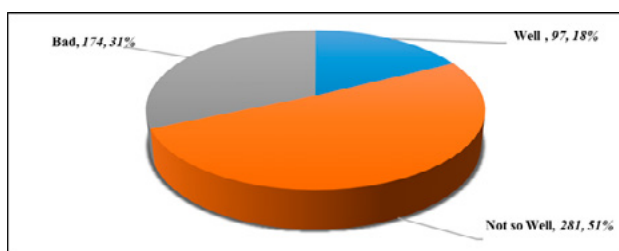
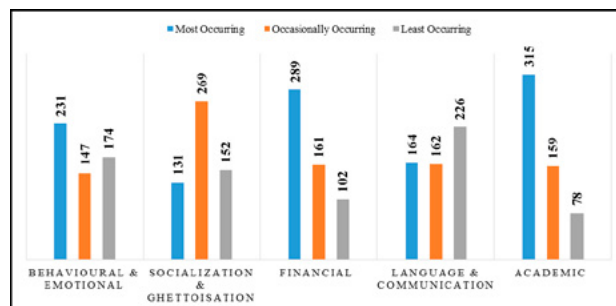


Figure 9 illustrates the major challenges that minority learners face at school, which hinder their overall personal and academic development (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Minority Learners' Challenges



'Academic challenges' also correlated positively with 'Financial' (289) and 'Behavioural and Emotional' (231) barriers since participants constantly referred to minority learners' "inability to pay attention for a sustained time-period"; "lack of maturity and impulsiveness" and "low IQ". Notably, these justifications strengthen the 'blame-the-victim' mentality since participants focused mainly on minority learners' perceived weaknesses rather than on limitations in syllabi and pedagogy as potential deterrents for academic success. 'Language and Communication' (164) together with 'Socialization and Ghettoisation' (131) were predominantly chosen by participants in schools in the Northern and Central regions of Malta due to an influx of migrant students, who exhibited "limited competences in Maltese and English"; "lack of academic skills"; "acting-out behaviour" and "poor self-esteem". Respondents also highlighted other barriers, which act as major determinants for school marginalization, i.e.: 'Health and Mental Health challenges', which pose barriers to learners' quality of life; and 'Social and Parental challenges', such as issues of neglect and excessive peer pressure.

In mainstream schools, minority learners fall under the direct responsibility of class teachers, who oversee the planning and teaching of all learners. Table 9 shows that although educators empathise with learners' diverse personal, social and academic needs, they struggle to address the latter demands due to limited knowledge on how to address the tensions between increasing academic outputs and meeting individual learning needs.

Table 9: Educators' Perceived Responsibilities

	Always			Very Often			Sometimes			Never	
	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher
Empathize with learners' social needs.	22	100	60	15	180	60	5	80	30	0	0
	182 – 33%			255 – 46%			115 – 21%			0 – 0%	
Not my responsibility to address social needs.	8	80	30	12	60	40	13	120	50	9	100
	118 – 21%			112 – 20%			183 – 34%			139 – 25%	
I use an 'ethic of care' approach.	28	100	50	14	120	50	0	80	30	0	60
	178 – 32%			184 – 33%			110 – 21%			80 – 14%	
Hold high expectations for all learners.	8	60	20	8	40	30	10	100	30	16	160
	88 – 16%			78 – 14%			140 – 25%			246 – 45%	

Moreover, Table 10 illustrates educators' general teaching beliefs vis-à-vis minority learners. Data shows that educators preferred to 'refer'

minority learners for the provision of additional support, following an in-class needs identification process.

Table 10: General Teaching for Support Practices

	Always			Very Often			Sometimes			Never		
	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE
Lack of Policies.	10	180	60	10	150	60	9	30	30	13	0	0
	250 – 45%			220 – 40%			69 – 13%			13 – 2%		
Time & finance.	38	180	60	4	150	60	0	30	30	0	0	0
	278 – 50%			214 – 39%			60 – 11%			0 – 0%		
Rigid syllabus.	38	200	90	4	130	40	0	30	20	0	0	0
	328 – 59%			174 – 32%			50 – 9%			0 – 0%		
Training issues.	28	230	90	4	90	40	7	40	20	3	0	0
	348 – 63%			134 – 24%			67 – 12%			3 – 1%		
Parents attitudes	30	200	60	5	100	20	7	60	40	0	0	30
	290 – 53%			125 – 23%			107 – 19%			30 – 5%		
Lack of interest	30	200	90	7	100	50	5	60	5	0	0	5
	320 – 60%			157 – 27%			70 – 12%			5 – 1%		

Evidence shows that the most common pedagogical tool used by teachers to support minority learners was ‘differentiation of content’, which consisted in: (a) preparing adapted material; (b) regulating or exempting learners from class/homework; (c) presenting whole-to-part or part-to-whole information; and (d) providing individual attention. However, most participants (54%) denounced difficulties to implement these strategies due to “lack of time”; “limited know-how” and “rigid syllabi and exams”. The latter raises questions on the effectiveness of ITT and CPD, which participants described as “not rooted in reality”. Finally, mentioned support services promoted ‘class-withdrawal practices’, which hindered school staff empowerment.

Barriers and Challenges for the Elimination of ELET

Table 11 illustrates some barriers that negatively affect the fight against early school leaving.

Table 11: Barriers for the Elimination of ELET

Statements	Always			Very Often			Sometimes			Never		
	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE
Lack of Policies.	10	180	60	10	150	60	9	30	30	13	0	0
	250 – 45%			220 – 40%			69 – 13%			13 – 2%		
Time & finance.	38	180	60	4	150	60	0	30	30	0	0	0
	278 – 50%			214 – 39%			60 – 11%			0 – 0%		
Rigid syllabus.	38	200	90	4	130	40	0	30	20	0	0	0
	328 – 59%			174 – 32%			50 – 9%			0 – 0%		
Training issues.	28	230	90	4	90	40	7	40	20	3	0	0
	348 – 63%			134 – 24%			67 – 12%			3 – 1%		
Parents attitudes	30	200	60	5	100	20	7	60	40	0	0	30
	290 – 53%			125 – 23%			107 – 19%			30 – 5%		
Lack of interest	30	200	90	7	100	50	5	60	5	0	0	5
	320 – 60%			157 – 27%			70 – 12%			5 – 1%		

Further to the above challenges, research data revealed also three main other barriers, namely:

- k) Systemic Deficits that shaped negatively teachers’ beliefs and attitudes. The latter include:
 - Lack of conceptual clarity and shared vision on how to reduce ELET. There exists fear of high leverage change, deriving from a well-ingrained desire to protect the ‘status quo’;
 - Neoliberal market-based orientations based on excessive demands for higher academic standards that promote ‘one-size-fits-all’

teaching approaches to accommodate the needs of the most affluent learners;

- Leadership lacunas that reinforced ‘crisis management’ because of limited planning on how to address societal and learners’ emerging needs;
 - Knowledge shortfalls on ‘deficit-thinking’, multiculturalism; and differentiation; and
 - Lack of enabling support services that move away from the ‘fix-fit’ deficit model based on statementing procedures and ‘class-withdrawal’ practices.
- 1) Teacher-Related Challenges that emanated from class participant observations, namely:
- Lack of time to cater for all learners’ diverse expectations and needs; and to compensate for the absence of academic support from parents. The time barrier affected also the way teachers plan, differentiate syllabi and modify lessons.
 - Lack of collaboration resulted in educators ‘shifting responsibility’ for meeting diversity needs on specialist teachers, support practitioners and paraprofessionals (Table 12).

Table 12: Collaboration

	Always			Very Often			Sometimes			Never		
	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE
Educators work together.	10	100	30	5	50	30	10	50	20	17	160	
	140 – 26%			85 – 15%			80 – 14%			247 – 45%		
Teachers and LSEs plan and work together.	10	80	30	8	50	30	12	100	20	12	130	
	120 – 22%			88 – 16%			132 – 24%			212 – 38%		
IEPs are a joint effort.	7	90	15	11	90	25	10	60	43	14	120	
	112 – 20%			126 – 23%			113 – 20%			201 – 37%		
SLT, HoDs & INCOs provide support.	8	40	50	9	30	40	13	130	40	12	160	
	98 – 18%			79 – 14%			183 – 33%			192 – 35%		
HoDs and INCOs’ presence is felt at school.	8	40	30	8	20	30	13	130	40	13	170	
	78 – 14%			58 – 11%			183 – 33%			233 – 42%		

- Differentiation Challenges emerged as a major difficulty during participant observations. Teachers manifested lack of confidence in the following aspects, i.e.: differentiation of curricular content; differentiation of instruction; differentiation of teaching material; and differentiation of output to encourage active participation.
- Curricular Access Challenges that pose difficulties for teachers to accommodate gaps in learning, especially minority learners’ lack of readiness for grade level³⁶. Moreover, poor attendance (common in Middle and Secondary schools) helped to widen learning gaps.
- Lack of training and expertise to deal with the inclusion of minority learners in class. This finding correlated positively with data from questionnaires (Table 13).

36 Lack of readiness for grade level referred to students who lacked skills in comprehension, language of instruction, reading, writing and mathematics: “inability to participate in class discussions”; “inability to read material at a level close to class level” and “inability to recognise numeral signs or to understand mathematical language”. Although minority learners might cope academically with the early years of schooling, they experienced difficulties as the gap widened in primary and secondary grades, where subject content becomes more complicated and language of instruction is more technical and specific.

Table 13: Effectiveness of Training on Inclusive Education

Statements	Always			Very Often			Sometimes			Never		
	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE
Leaders':												
Distribute work to empower staff.	20	80	60	18	70	40	3	120	50	1	90	0
	160 – 29%			128 – 23%			173 – 31%			91 – 17%		
Listen, discuss and evaluate feedback.	15	80	50	12	150	60	10	130	40	5	0	0
	145 – 26%			222 – 40%			180 – 33%			5 – 1%		
Use constructive dialogue.	12	20	20	12	150	30	10	70	40	8	120	60
	52 – 9%			192 – 35%			120 – 22%			188 – 34%		
Encourage educators to take leadership roles.	9	80	20	10	70	20	15	100	40	8	110	70
	109 – 20%			100 – 18%			155 – 28%			188 – 34%		

College-School Challenges related to the operationalization and the provision of additional specialised support services because of:

- An over-reliance on needs identification and statementing procedures;
- Weak IEP, Transition and Home-School liaison processes;
- Lack of multidisciplinary work;
- Limited support from INCOs; and
- Lack of coordination among the diverse support services' personnel.

Collected data from class participant observations shows that additional support services do not sustain mainstream school capacity building. Finally, other observed challenges include:

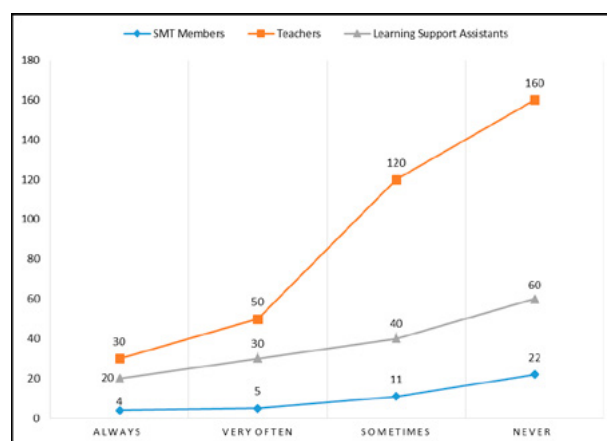
- Disciplinary problems due to increased behavioural difficulties;
- Lack of contact-time with learners;
- Poor school attendance;
- Increase in bullying behaviour; and
- Lack of motivation and poor self-esteem among minority learners.

Leadership Challenges that hindered improvement efforts, change processes and reinforced 'technical-rational authority' over 'professional authority'³⁷. Data in Table 14 indicates that 'crisis managerial' approaches ousted transformational, distributed and strategic leadership.

37 Research participants viewed leadership as a 'behaviour' (the ability to manage people) rather than as an 'action' (the capacity to enhance proactive ideas). The latter praxis resulted in short-termed administrative-managerial issues over long-termed vision setting and implementation. Frattura and Capper (2007) stressed the importance of effective leadership to develop 'schools as professional learning communities' to "sustain networks of conversation on teaching issues" (63).

Table 14: Leadership Approaches

Statements	Always			Very Often			Sometimes			Never		
	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE	SMT	Teacher	LSE
Leaders':												
Distribute work to empower staff.	20	80	60	18	70	40	3	120	50	1	90	0
	160 – 29%			128 – 23%			173 – 31%			91 – 17%		
Listen, discuss and evaluate feedback.	15	80	50	12	150	60	10	130	40	5	0	0
	145 – 26%			222 – 40%			180 – 33%			5 – 1%		
Use constructive dialogue.	12	20	20	12	150	30	10	70	40	8	120	60
	52 – 9%			192 – 35%			120 – 22%			188 – 34%		
Encourage educators to take leadership roles.	9	80	20	10	70	20	15	100	40	8	110	70
	109 – 20%			100 – 18%			155 – 28%			188 – 34%		



Other evidenced leadership shortfalls, include:

- Centralised leadership³⁸;
- Lack of shared vision on how to reduce ELET³⁹;
- Unstructured policy development and implementation;
- Silo-working mentality and lack of collective accountability⁴⁰;
- Role overlapping and work duplication⁴¹;

Lack of autonomy, trust and assistance from National Authorities to Heads of College Network and Heads of School to respond effectively to the hierarchical and bureaucratic needs of the system.

Finally, collected data evidenced also weaknesses in CDP⁴², SDP⁴³ and IEP⁴⁴ development and implementation due to limited internal and external monitoring and reviewing practices.

Re-Structuring and Re-Culturing the Educational System

- 38 Educators felt as 'implementers' of decisions made at higher system levels. The latter created a general unwillingness and de-motivation to implement decisions taken by top-level authorities.
- 39 ELET and school absenteeism reductions viewed as a 'mechanical practice' and the remit of special service provisions rather than as a long-term developmental process.
- 40 Educators highlighted the lack of synergy and trust among the various system sectors.
- 41 Duplication of work results in lack of time to supervise implementation process.
- 42 College Development Plans.
- 43 School Development Plans.
- 44 Individual Educational Plans.

To be able to effectively tackle the phenomena of school absenteeism and ELET, research participants indicated that the current educational system needed to reinvent itself from the present ‘one-size-fits-all-exam-oriented’ structure (Figure 10) towards a more equitable system that provided responsive and meaningful learning opportunities to all learners (Figure 11). All respondents also remarked that the ‘My Journey’ reform in the secondary sector was “a step in the right direction, which has to be emulated in other educational sectors”.

Figure 10: Re-Inventing the Current Educational System

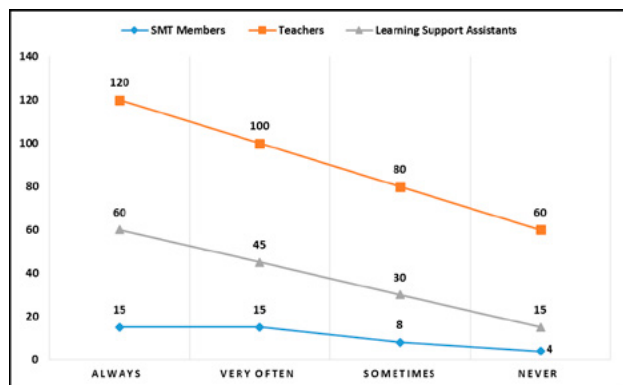
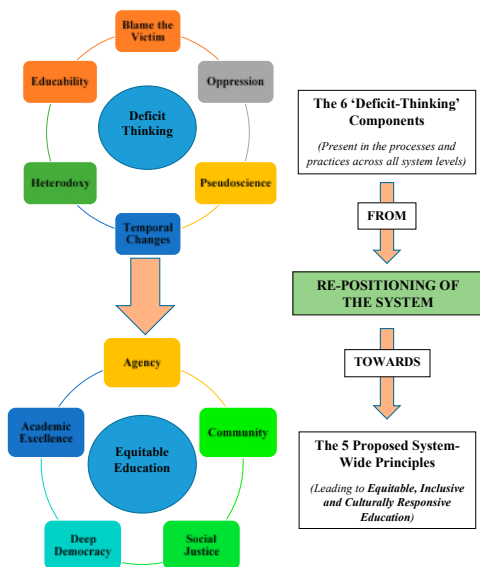


Figure 11: Provision of Equitable Opportunities for All Learners

Figure 5.2: The Proposed Conceptual Re-Positioning of the Self



VI SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings indicate that the local educational system required a holistic ‘re-positioning-of-the-self’ process (Shields et. al., 2004),

which allows “all stakeholders⁴⁵ to engage in an ongoing decision-making dialogue” to tackle ‘deficit-thinking’ and address ELET issues (Moller, 2006, 94). In this regard, Bode (2001) proposed a “democratic approach as a way of life” (45) to create a culture that “validates and understands the lived experiences of all minority learners” (Ladson-Billings, 2007, 103) (Figure 12).

Figure 12: The Proposed Re-Positioning-of-the-Self Process

Table 15 illustrates the above-proposed five system-wide principles required to ‘re-structure, re-culture and re-position’ the local educational system.

Table 15: Defining the Proposed 5 System-Wide Principles

Re-Positioning Principles	Meaning
Agency <i>as a Tool for Balancing Power</i>	To overcome power imbalances, the educational system needs to recognize and embrace the lived experiences of ALL stakeholders. As the latter grow in their own agency, they increase commitment and ability to validate the cultural, intellectual and emotional identity of under-represented groups.
Community <i>as a Tool for Creating Inclusion</i>	The development of strong relationships through deliberate dialogue and trust to challenge marginalization norms. Hence, the need for ‘a sense of community’ atmosphere by allowing all stakeholders access in a system that recognizes and challenges inequities.
Social Justice <i>as a Tool for Validation</i>	The fostering of practices that enable educators to empathize and experience the world through the eyes of the marginalized learner/s by bringing forth equitable practices (Shields et al., 2004). This requires deliberate dialogue to enhance shared understanding on how best to respond to socio-cultural, linguistic and socio-economic differences.
Deep Democracy <i>as a Goal</i>	Deep democracy provides a platform for all social groups to engage in deep conversations on educational matters. The deliberation and validation of ‘voice’ creates opportunities for fundamental change to move beyond ‘tinkering’ to redress current practices and inequities.
Academic Excellence <i>as a Goal</i>	Teachers’ beliefs and attitudes and learners’ expectations and academic achievement correlated positively together. In this context, teachers play the most significant role to change ‘pedagogy’ rather than ‘learners’. Hence, the need for specific CPD opportunities that help to transform colleges-schools into PLCs.

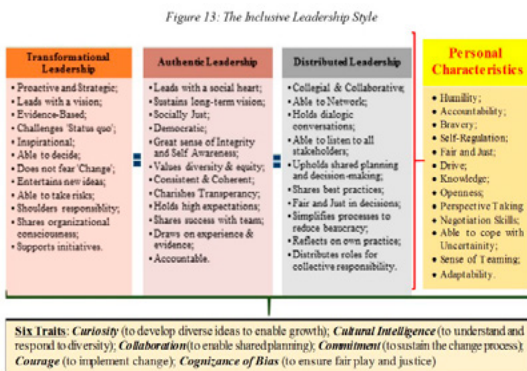
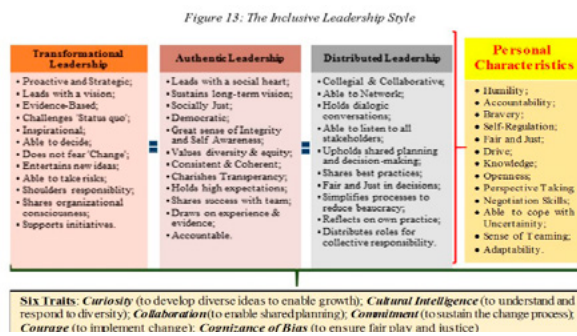
The ‘re-positioning-of-the-self’ process requires inclusive leadership to move ‘leadership’ thinking in a new direction away from fixed entities and tightly drawn boundaries towards “looseness and open-endedness to accommodate a sense of reality as fluid and continually emerging” (Gronn, 2008, 142). Hence, ‘inclusive leadership’ merges the traits of authentic, distributed, and transformational leadership under one form of leadership style (Figure 13).

Figure 13: The Inclusive Leadership Style

In this regard, ‘inclusive leadership’ presents three ‘core practices’ (Table 16), which enable educators to sustain their fight against ‘deficit-thinking’, school absenteeism, and ELET.

45 Stakeholders include: students, parents, educators, administrators, and community members.

Table 16: 'Inclusive Leadership' Core Practices



More specifically, 'inclusive leadership' demands the following five interdependent factors:

Strong commitment to plan, set and coordinate priorities, roles, expectations and modes of working to minimise inequalities and marginalization practices leading to ELET;

Development of a cohesive culture through coherent and shared policies, goals and values on 'inclusive education' and 'equity';

Collective ownership of the education system's core vision through a 'dispersed' rather than a 'top-down' implementation model;

Focused capacity-building through longitudinal CPD training to empower all educational stakeholders to look beyond traditional solutions; and

Development of strong relational trust and collective internal accountability by promoting tolerance, respect for others, and acceptance of difference.

Emanating from the above factors are five key levers, i.e.: shared understanding; participatory culture; enabling institutional structures; open social environments; and the practice of sharing and evaluating. Altogether, the latter help to develop a sense of 'professional community' to step up the fight against ELET by:

Strengthening educational governance processes through accountability; capacity; whole-of-system perspective; strategic thinking; stakeholder engagement; knowledge governance.

Enhancing intra-ministerial collaboration among diverse Directorates, namely: National School Support Services; Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability; and Learning and Assessment Programmes Directorates⁴⁶.

Strengthening the College system by enabling networking initiatives among the ten State colleges and by reviewing the operational structure of the CoH⁴⁷ to enhance a 'bottom-up' approach; enable constructive dialogue; and increase collective accountability.

Planning strategically to develop responsive CPDs and SDPs with long-term preventive measures to address ELET issues.

Enhancing accountable Quality Assurance mechanisms to enable meaningful whole-of-college or school evaluation through the integration of internal and external monitoring and reviewing practices.

Developing enabling Support Services based on a multi-tiered system of support (Figure 14) to move services away from a 'diagnosis-referral-system' to 'support allocation' based on the profiled needs of colleges or schools following multidisciplinary teaming.

Figure 14: The 'Multi-Tiered' System of Support



Promote CRP⁴⁸ to help educators become 'adaptive' rather than 'routine' experts by focusing on the 4 pillars of 'Differentiation'. CRP facilitates formative assessment (Figures 15 and 16).

46 The proposed synergy reduces work duplication to re-directs energy and attention on preventive ELET measures rather compensatory ones.

47 Council of Heads forum, which is chaired by Heads of College Network. The latter need to give Heads of schools more space and voice to forge synergistic alliances and to plan collaboratively together. The latter practices pave the way for the transformation of colleges-schools in PLCs.

48 Culturally-Responsive Pedagogy based on Universal Design for Learning strategies.

Figure 15: Teaching Imperative of Culturally-Responsive Pedagogy

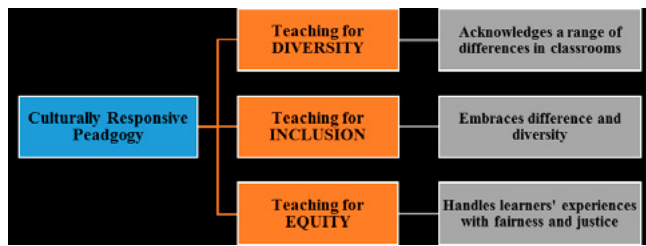


Figure 16: Teaching Credentials of Culturally-Responsive Pedagogy



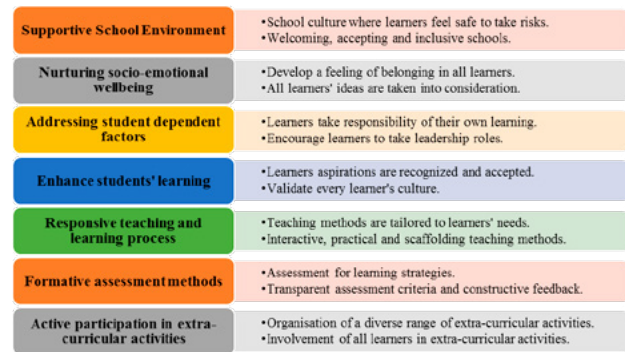
Promote In-Class Networking to enable productive collaboration and meaningful dialogue among diverse educators, parents and learners.

Fill Knowledge Gaps on Learning Outcomes Framework among all educators to address 'HOW' and 'WHY' questions constructively.

Tackle Whole-of-System Knowledge Gaps through PD⁴⁹ training that is: underpinned by robust evidence; rooted in educators' daily realities; and sustained over time⁵⁰.

Enabling student engagement by moving from an 'attitude of caring about' to a 'practice of caring for' by involving and giving learners a 'voice' in decision-making (Figure 17).

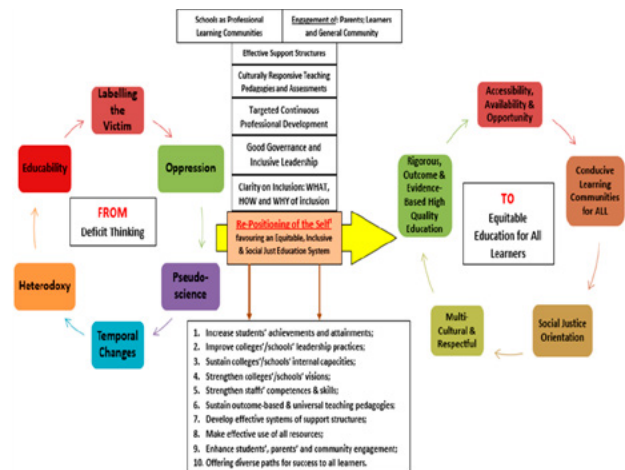
Figure 17: Conditions effecting student engagement



VII CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study was to provide a cohesive strategy on 'HOW' to develop inclusive and culturally-responsive schools to further reduce ELET in Malta (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Cohesive Strategy to Eliminate ELET



The proposed strategy illustrates the need for whole-of-system re-positioning, by placing onus on ALL educators to become agents of pro-positive change to maximise the 'talents' of all stakeholders and to augment job-satisfaction. In this sense, 'inclusive leadership' is fundamental since,

"schooling has a highly significant role in either reproducing ideologies of subordination or to provide resources and habits to question and to move beyond them. School structures and culture, as well as patterns of classroom language and learning, can either reinforce social inequality or challenge it" (Freire, 1972, cited in Wrigley et. al., 2012, 13).

Finally, the research study helped to develop a strategic framework to combat effectively ELET (Figure 18).

49 Professional Development that is prioritised by Heads of College Network and Heads of School.

50 CPD with a clear focus on improving all learners' outcomes and that includes collaboration and expert challenge as well as allows educators to implement ideas.



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Education: A matter of the heart – A Salesian Perspective

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Abstract - “Education is a matter of the heart”. How can we put our hearts in education to reach out to those young people who are most in need? How can we put the hearts of young people in their education? Educators are to reach out to all young people to help them achieve their full potential. We need to provide opportunities that will impact the life of every young person entrusted in our care. This paper aims at addressing matters on how to reach out to the neediest young people who drop out of our education system. Experiential learning and peer learning in a non-formal setting can reach out to young people that our educational system has failed repeatedly. Inclusivity in education is possible if we can create the right environment for them. An environment that shows that learning is exciting and fun. Based on the author’s experience, the paper will expand on quality indicators that can be adopted in a non-formal education programme for young people who have failed in the formal education system. It will explore the characteristics that are required to provide a meaningful non-formal educational programme. The author will draw maxims that are to be considered in formulating specialised educational programmes based on educational theories and wealth of good practice. In the end, any educational programme to be successful is a matter of the heart.

Keywords: Education, Non-formal, Happiness, Presence, Accompaniment.

I INTRODUCTION

Personal Note: Sitting down to write this paper, I experienced ambivalent feelings of wonder and vagueness. The imagery that comes to mind is the lifting of the mist on an early spring morning. Within this scenario, there is the uncertainty of knowing that there is so much more to expose but there are also inspiring moments when you feel in awe once you start discovering the scenery beyond the mist. I hope that this brief contribution helps you to navigate through your path of the misty landscapes in searching to understand the secrets behind successful education as a matter of the heart.

Educators are to reach out to all young people to help them achieve their full potential. We need to provide opportunities that will impact the life of every young person entrusted in our care. This paper aims at addressing ways on how to connect with the neediest young people who drop out of our education system.

II HAPPINESS

Unhappy children do not learn. It is even worse when young people start developing a sense of unhappiness to learning. When unhappiness is associated with learning, this will become a stumbling block

throughout one’s life. It is truly sad when a child enters this path of feeling unhappy in the heart when it comes to his or her education.

Many times, young people fail in the education system because the system makes them sad, unhappy and sometimes miserable. Our job as educators is to turn around this experience and present education as a way to achieve happiness. Experiencing happiness is the key to a successful education.

The 19th-century educator of the young, John Bosco, believed that “Education is a Matter of the Heart”. The question is what do we mean when we say we need to educate from our heart? Education is all about happiness. But what has happiness got to do with education? Well, everything! John Bosco had a specific objective underpinning education and when explaining it to young people he described it in simple terms – “true happiness in this life and the next” (Bosco, 1920).

Happiness proffers freedom, hope, belief, love, trust, confidence self-determination, confidence and credibility. It is not only an end within itself but also the means to succeed in education. Michal Vojtás states that “Happiness is more than a pragmatic approach as it is the channel for a ‘true’ education, for Don Bosco it was a way of life, which he derived from the innate psychological needs of young people and the family spirit” (Vojtás, 2017, p. 183).

In my 35 years of active involvement in formal and non-formal education, providing a happy and joyful environment to learning was always decisive in ensuring a successful learning experience. Happiness, cheerfulness, joyfulness, fun and optimism in the educative experience is a key ingredient to help young people learn and grow. To keep young people engaged in a process of learning and growth, they need to experience not only a good feel factor but a sense of achievement, a sense of meaningfulness, a state of personal satisfaction, a conviction of self-belief and experience self-fulfilment. They need to achieve a unique state of happiness about themselves, about others and about the environment that they live in. The goal of education should always aim to reach an experience of holistic endowment which forms the unique identity of every person.

III EDUCATION MUST BE TRANSFORMATIVE

The purpose of education is to bring about change in the young person through learning and growth. Transforming young people through opportunities should be the goal behind every educational programme.

No one else has exposed the power of transformation in education better than Paolo Freire. For too long, education has been a 'trans-mission' whereby the educator exports their knowledge to the learner who does not know enough. Freire opts for a different model of education – rather than placing the emphasis of education on reason and logic – and he proposes a more transformative approach by taking into consideration the learning process that takes place within the person with a special emphasis on the emotional and affective engagement (Bartlett, 2005).

Paolo Freire in his book *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* portrays a 'banking' model of education, which he argues 'mirrors an oppressive society'. The banking model of education is based on "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those who they consider to know nothing" (Freire, 1972, p. 46). In such a process, learners are seen as mere empty containers or receptacles to be 'filled' with knowledge, and the more a teacher fills the receptacles, the better he or she is; and by extension, the more learners agree to this way of learning, they appear to be good learners (Shih, 2018). But what happens to those students who do not fit into this formula? This is where young people who do not continue their education come to exist. If young people do not fit into the form of knowledge education that we present them, they end up staying on the edge of our learning community or even worse are excluded from the educational system. This banking model of education tends to be exclusive rather than inclusive, more elitist rather than egalitarian and it is selective and not anti-discriminatory.

Unless an educational programme aims at working with the young person to achieve the changes from within, it will stifle rather than enable. It is through empowering growth that young people can transform themselves in search of happiness.

IV THE ONLY FOCUS FOR THE EDUCATOR SHOULD BE THE YOUNG

The motivation behind every educational philosophy must be young people. The John Bosco's way to education always focuses on putting the young at the centre of his educational approach. The young were always his primary concern in the educative journey. By insisting that young people should be the leading factor in his educational thinking, John Bosco did not mean that we should pamper young people and coddle their needs. On the contrary, John Bosco was renowned for his kind way of disciplining young people and challenging them to grow and learn.

The emphasis of a young person-centred education emerges directly from the primary aim of John Bosco's pedagogical approach. The young learner is not seen as the passive object of the learning process, but the young learner is invited to participate actively in the educational programme by becoming an active participant and an enthusiastic learner. Hence, a successful educational programme must provide learning opportunities which lead the young person to experience self-actualisation and active participation in society. Through the educational programme the young person matures into a dynamic person of social, political and cultural action.

A young person-centred education generates expressive young people who cultivate happiness wherever they go and whatever they do. The focus of the entire educational programme – the curriculum, the facilities, the architecture, the playground, the staff – have to be set with a view to providing a holistic endowment for the young person for whom and in whose name the educative programme is created. The only purpose of an education programme is the young learner. John Bosco's educational contribution was determined by placing the young person's welfare above anything else. "They were treated with kindness and respect; it was the educator's responsibility to place them in a happy, vigorous, enquiring educational environment, a context where all were treated as equals, where all were encouraged to speak up, and speak out ..." (Gonsalves, 2011, p. 24)

Adaptability and flexibility are fundamental elements in developing an educational programme. Learning must be adapted to the different needs and levels of young learners especially those who fail to complete their education. Creativity and innovation are essential in reaching out to inclusivity in education which can only be achieved if the programme can be adapted and flexible to respond to the wide range of learning needs of young people. Young people who drop out of school need alternative learning mechanisms that apply for them and that does not necessarily work for the main cohort of children.

V OPPORTUNITIES AND RELATIONSHIP AS A BASIS FOR EDUCATION

Learning opportunities are based on relationships and experiences. John Bosco's educational system was built on a 'significant relationship' between the educator and the learner and providing

wide-ranging opportunities of experiences for young people to learn in a non-formal environment (the Oratory).

In the next sections, I will explore more deeply the building of a relationship between the educator and the learner and then present four criteria which create a unique opportunity for a stimulating learning environment.

VI THE ‘SPARK OF CONNECTING’ WITH THE YOUNG

The ‘spark of connecting’ with young people is crucial in the relationship between the educator and the young person. I describe it as a spark as it is a significant moment which serves as a catalyst for the young person that makes him or her feel that the educator is on their same wavelength. It is the sacred spur of a moment when the young person feels a sense of fulfilment that the educator is there to understand and accept them as they are. This moment does not consist of only one instance but needs to be continuously sustained in the relationship between the educator and the young person.

I recall a distinct moment with a 16-year-old girl who had been expelled in her last year of secondary school due to challenging behaviour and substance misuse. She came with her mother for an introductory meeting to our alternative non-formal learning programme. I can still see the anxiety in her eyes not knowing what is happening. At the end of the meeting, the mother approached me with her daughter standing behind her. The mother asked me whether I can allow her daughter to attend the programme with dyed hair – incidentally, I think it is good to mention that her hair was dyed bright blue. I turned to the young person still hiding behind the mother and told her that she can keep whatever colour of her hair that she likes if she is happy within herself. I could see a sparkle in her eyes – a moment of change from anxiety to the ‘spark of connecting’.

These encounters should not be superficial meetings but significant moments in the educative journey with the young. Michal Vojtás highlights that an educator “Without accepting the challenge of profound openness, dialogue remains welcoming only in a formal way and the non-authenticity is grasped intuitively by the young person” (Vojtás, 2018, p. 1). From the very beginning, authenticity needs to be experienced during the educational journey. Genuineness in the relationship is key to the success of every educative process. Every educative moment is to be meaningful from the very first encounter. The way we present ourselves as educators, the way we relate with the young, and the way we share our proposal to partake in an educative process are all very important. The initial steps are decisive whether we can offer a path for the young to walk with them. Young people see through their educators and educators need to be aware that first impressions last long. Succeeding in jumping the first hurdle with the young is essential.

The starting point of any educational proposal can be very simple – honest, truthful, showing genuine interest, getting to know the young person are among the focus of the first steps of the ‘process of an educative encounter’. The central focus should be on how the

educator will understand the needs of the young person and not how the educational programme will meet the needs of the young person. The centre of focus should always be the young person and not the educational programme on offer. Giving your full attention to the young person is critical in the initial ‘process of the educative encounter’.

We need to start where the young are. We need to start where the young can engage. We need to start at the point where we cross paths with the young. Every educational programme must be flexible and inclusive in a way that touches the heart of the young.

A good start to a solid relationship between the educator and the young person will lead to consolidate the ‘spark of connecting’. “An unconditional welcome to young people when they arrive for the first time makes a huge impact” (Salesian Youth Ministry Department, 2014, p. 137). The young person needs to feel safe, comfortable, accepted, appreciated, satisfied and above all loved – all these point toward education as a matter of the heart.

VII MAINTAINING THE ‘SPARK OF CONNECTING’ AND TURNING IT INTO A ‘VALUABLE EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY’

“It is enough that you are young for me to love you,” John Bosco said. The only condition to show love was the fact that they are young. This is the education from the heart – to show love without any conditions. The things we learn from people we love have a greater impact on us and are more difficult to forget than what we learn from others. It is this love that turns the ‘spark of connecting’ into a ‘valuable educational journey’ to learn and grow.

There is no learning without a relationship between the educator and the young (Gonsalves, 2011). John Bosco continues to state that “It is not enough to love, they must know that they are loved.” It is a genuine form of selfless love that the educator offers to the young person that maintains the ‘spark of connecting’ and transforms it to a committed engagement to source the meaning of happiness in one’s life. John Bosco was a very disciplined educator and was very aware of the boundaries between the educator and the young. As the saying goes, ‘Familiarity breeds contempt’ but, in contrast, he is quoted as saying that ‘Familiarity breeds affection. Affection breeds confidence’ (Moncayo, 2018, pp. 68 – 73)

The relationship between the educator and the young must reach the state of “loving what the young love, which they may love what you love.” John Bosco here emphasises the importance of a two-way movement to love. The kind of love that is free from oppression, inequality and injustice.

Education is not only about teaching. Earlier when referring to Freire, I referred to the one way imparting of knowledge from teacher to a pupil or the “depositing of knowledge”. Education must go beyond this. True education is the ability of the educator to draw out the best from the learner. This ‘drawing out’ cannot happen

unless there is a relationship of love first. Too often teachers rush in to ‘indoctrinate’ the values they cherish without first establishing a kind and friendly relationship with their learners. Following John Bosco’s way to education promises that the young people are ready to receive ‘what their educator’s love’. This only happens once the educators themselves have made efforts to appreciate what the young people love and feel most comfortable with.

The more loving and trusting the relationship is, the greater is the confidence of the young person to learn and to grow. John Bosco spoke about amorevolezza or loving-kindness which meant an authentic concern embedded in the educator to be committed to the learning and growth processes of the young. Loving-kindness is a way of expressing a sense of humanity and a compassionate approach to educating. Carlo Nanni states that Don Bosco’s aim was to create “an educative, humane, affectionate and meaningful relationships with all his youngsters” (Nanni, 2018, p. 27). Loving-kindness in education is comparable to the act of parenting – no greater care and affection can be expected from a father and mother if they were to take up teaching their children themselves.

VIII FOUR CRITERIA TOWARD ACHIEVING EDUCATION

After exposing the nature of the rapport between the educator and the learner as a solid basis for education to take place, I will now explore more on the values and the environment that need to be created to offer an inclusive and comprehensive education system. This model can be applied to a non-formal alternative educational programme for young people who end up excluded from our educational system.

John Bosco believed that to offer good quality education to learners you need to create a blend of a home, a school, a playground and a church in every learning programme. These are the most significant aspects of the Salesian Educative System and “these are not images that do not indicate determined environments, spaces and places, but rather a series of experiences that are offered to the young” (Salesian Youth Ministry Department, 2014, p. 137). In the Salesian educative and pastoral way, these four key spheres are central in reaching out to learners in a transformative educative approach and a safe learning environment. In non-formal education, when working with young people who are marginalised, the foundation of youth work can also be based on these criteria. Although each of these benchmarks must be there, however, they can be easily adapted and can be translated to the distinctive needs of different situations.

In this model young people are responsible for their educational journey and their development. This development is stimulated by creating an environment which promotes the values of freedom, responsibility, solidarity and meaning. This goal is reached by communicating with the people around them (other young people and educators) and by critically reflecting on the world that we live in. This process of growth empowers the educative community to focus on these four values which are set as the educational goals. These four values, which I will explain in some more detail, are

also symbolically linked to the four places of the Oratory that was founded by John Bosco in Turin.

Figure 1: Values, Criteria and Places

Value	Criteria	Place
Freedom	A Place of their Own	Home
Responsibility	A Place to Learn	School
Solidarity	A Place to Play	Playground
Meaning	A Place of Creating Sense	Church

Source: Adapted from ‘Few Words and A lot of Action’ by Don Bosco Youth-Net ivzw

A Freedom ... A Place of Their Own

To provide an education means that every young person feels that they have their own space that they can call ‘home’. This is the place where they feel at home and where they get the freedom to be themselves and to express their feelings. This space is essential for their growth. Having a ‘home’ environment will only enhance the shaping of their personality.

Young people in education are in the process of developing and forming themselves into integral and unique individuals. This process is a journey toward achieving personal freedom. As they journey, the role of the educator is to accompany the young person in the struggle of achieving personal freedom. “True education is a matter of the integrated formation of the character of the young person in a spirit of freedom” (Miranda, 2006, p.106). In accompanying the young person, the educator must provide the space and means to achieve this goal. Indeed, this entails a double challenge as, on one hand, the educator must provide an accompanying presence and support the young person and, on the other hand, create the space for the young to be critical of the world which we live in.

This way to education means that we employ a learner-centred approach where young people take charge of their own learning process and adapt it to their individual learning needs. This means that the skill of the educator is to be able to adapt and adjust learning processes to the needs and reality of the learner and reach the learning outcomes set in an educational programme.

But what do we mean by a place of their own? This means a safe, secure, sheltered learning environment which makes you feel calm, comfortable and cosy. Without this nurturing and safeguarding environment, you cannot learn. The environment must be welcoming, pleasant and friendly. To reach this aim, it does not mean that you need to introduce too many rules that restrict the young people but rather to promote a sense of respect and dignity toward each other. It is through creating an atmosphere of respect that young people will enter in a dialogue of learning where values can be shared and enjoyed.

B Responsibility ... A Place to Learn

Young people need an ambience which is conducive to learning that is the space and opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge. This learning ambience has also to be adaptable to the presenting needs of the learner and not the other way around. Learners should not have to fit into standardised containers of learning, but it is the role of the educator to create boundless opportunities of learning that meet the learner's needs. The 'place to learn' supports the young person to assume responsibility and become active citizens in building their community.

Responsibility helps the learner to set their own boundaries. Freedom without boundaries is failed freedom and it is by nurturing a sense of responsibility that you help the learner to achieve the right balance and a positive outcome. When the learner is given the opportunity to exercise responsibility, they are challenged to shape their social construct and opens the door to the understanding of truth, justice, and human rights.

C Solidarity ... A Place to Play

In the learning process, it is important to create spaces and opportunities 'to play'. Play helps young people to understand each other and make sense of the world that they live in. Play helps the social and intellectual development of learners – they mature emotionally and gain self-confidence through play. "Young people need a place 'to play', where they can meet their peers, can talk and discuss openly, build and maintain relations with others, where they can accept solidarity and can organise and experience things together" (Don Bosco Youth-Net, 2015, p. 18).

Coming together to play presents the opportunity for young people not to be alone and present an opportunity to integrate and be accepted. In play, young people are given the opportunity to experience solidarity which will help them to practice this value. Solidarity, love and care are central to humanity and contribute to personal development. Learners should have the opportunity to experience care, love and solidarity so that they can share the same with others. Solidarity should not be limited to their peer group but should be open towards the broader community.

Play is a source of growth to work in a team where the focus is not only the individual skills but also on the dynamics of the group. Play promotes cooperative learning where young people can work together to seek better outcomes which are beneficial both for themselves and for others. "Cooperative learning promotes higher achievement, greater productivity, more caring, supportive, committed relationships and greater social competence, friendship, trust and self-esteem" (Don Bosco Youth-Net, 2015, p. 18). This means that cooperation leads to solidarity.

D Meaning ... A Place of Sense

It is innate in the nature of humanity to search for the meaning of our being. Young people also feel the need to search for a place 'of sense' in their lives. This is part of their educational experience in their thirst to understand the essence of being. Young people are on

a journey in search of their *raison d'être*, in finding meaning in their lives. It is intrinsically wrong for the educator to ignore this stage of learning in the young person's development.

The educator has a role in supporting young people in their search for making sense in their lives. The educator's accompaniment and presence are essential to help them understand who they can be and what they can contribute to the broader world that they are living in. Education is also the search to know what is valuable in one's life, what they stand for and how they can live their life in a meaningful, significant and fulfilling way. It is important to accompany young people in establishing their identity based on the reality that they live. The discernment of their vocation is part of the formation of their identity and making sense of their future. This leads a young person to achieve fulfilment and happiness.

IX PRESENCE AND ACCOMPANIMENT IN THE CREATING OF A 'VALUABLE JOURNEY'

Sociological discourse categorises young people into different generations. These generation categories help the educator to learn more about the characteristics and traits of young people. Each generation is determined by historical happenings and cultural phenomena which create a unique and specific generation. The young people of today are often referred to as Generation Z or the iGeneration. Education needs to continually change and adapt to the reality of our young generations. What worked yesterday does not and will not work today. Creativity and innovation in education are key in responding to the learning needs of our younger generation.

Even though we need to change our ways and methods of education to reach out to the younger generation of today, there are two essential approaches that remain central to the educator; the accompaniment of the young and the presence of the educator remain fundamental in educating every generation (Grech, 2018). The ways and means of accompanying young people and the type of presence needs to be transformed to respond to the reality of the young today. Understanding the common traits of young people of this generation can only help the educator to enrich the experience of accompaniment and increase a meaningful sense of presence.

Louis Grech states that the four essential attitudes to accompany young people: Meet, Listen, Believe and Compassion. These four steps are needed for every educator to accompany the young. The educator must have "a real desire to meet the young people where they are and become part of their lives ... without this authentic desire, there can be no real and fruitful youth accompaniment" (Grech, 2019, p. 141). Listening to young people helps the educator to become in tune with the reality of young people of this generation. Listening is a process which means that the educator is fully engaged with the young and can facilitate the journey of self-discovery. Young people need educators who believe in them and help them build their self-confidence and self-esteem to achieve their goals and aims. Compassion in the world that we live today is crucial in the educator's encounter with the young. "Without real compassion

towards young people in such a challenging culture we can never really offer them true love and understanding.” (Grech, 2019, p.142)

John Bosco’s style of education is more based on ‘being someone’ rather than by ‘doing something’ for the young person. It is ‘not what we do’ for them but ‘what we are’ to them (Bosco, 1920). The type of presence of the educator is based on ‘being’ rather than ‘doing’. John Bosco “promotes a reassuring dialogue, aimed at being present and getting to know the person. He is interested in the child’s story, his condition, his character and aspirations”. (Formosa, 2019, p. 10). Being totally present for the young is crucial in every valuable educational journey.

Gonsalves Peter proposes six characteristics for a meaningful presence by an educator:

- It is a presence that welcomes.
- It is a presence that motivates.
- It is a presence that is personal and caring.
- It is a presence based on sound moral values.
- It is a presence which is creative and open to discovery.
- It is a presence which networks with others.

(Gonsalves, 2011 p. 57)

These traits all contribute to creating a meaningful presence of the educator which in turn will help the young people to experience a valuable educational journey by understanding the meaning of life and find happiness.

Presence is an important skill which will facilitate the role and responsibilities of the educator. When educators learn how to master presence this will lead them to serenity and wholeness. The educator’s “... presence is the path to peace and happiness” (Lucas Lisa, 2018, p.14). Education is about happiness and the educator can only radiate happiness if there is within a strong sense of joy, cheerfulness and peacefulness.

X CONCLUSION

For education to be a matter of the heart, it needs to be tailor-made. Society has developed ways and means to fit people into groups and categories. It is much easier when people fit perfectly into pigeon-holes, but this is not real. As a result, we have young people who are excluded and marginalised in every educational system. Education with a ‘one size fits all’ mentality does not work and can never be inclusive, holistic or comprehensive.

Education ... to be a matter of the heart ... must provide the space for educators to spread their wings and let them hover. An educator needs the breadth, height and width to work an educational plan for each youngster within his or her reach. In education, there are no short cuts - all short cuts mean that we are short-changing our young people.

Experiential learning and peer learning in a non-formal setting can reach out to young people whom our educational system has failed repeatedly. Inclusivity in education is possible if we can create

the right environment for them. An environment which shows that learning is exciting and fun. It is about learning the practice of happiness.

In this paper, which is based on my experience in education, I expanded on some of the quality indicators that can be adopted in an educational programme for young people who have failed in the formal education system. I believe that these characteristics are mandatory to have an alternative learning programme. They are essential to provide an alternative meaningful educational programme for young people who fall outside the education system.

Finally, education to be successful is a matter of the heart.

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The Role of Youth Work and Non-Formal Learning in Tackling Early Leaving from Education and Training

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Abstract: This paper considers a transition process or flexible education pathway, which combines both formal and non-formal learning approaches to Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET). In particular, it highlights how youth workers and effective youth work practice can bring innovative, flexible and coordinated approaches to tackling ELET.

Youth.inc is an inclusive and flexible education programme, based on applied learning, for young people between the ages of 16 and 21. Operated by Agenzija Żgħażaġh, it adopts a youth-centred approach that seeks to strengthen the complementary roles of formal education and non-formal learning through effective youth work practices and values.

The paper considers how Youth.inc adopts a hands-on, flexible and youth work approach and how it provides young people with as many options and experiences of real working life as possible and the confidence to lead independent lives and participate actively and responsibly in their communities and society. In particular, the paper focuses on individualised learning; course content and delivery; and the role of youth workers.

The paper concludes with some general observations on how youth work and non-formal learning can be useful and effective tools in addressing ELET.

Keywords – Youth work, non-formal education, early leaving from education and training

I INTRODUCTION

While there are many positive aspects to the well-being and quality of life of young people in Malta, there are other aspects that are a cause of concern. An often quoted statistic is Malta's rate of early school leavers, which is among the highest in the European Union.

This paper will consider a transition processes or flexible education pathway, which combines both formal and non-formal learning approaches to Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET). In particular, it will highlight how youth workers and effective youth work practice can bring innovative, flexible and coordinated approaches to tackling ELET.

Youth.inc is an inclusive and flexible education programme, based on applied learning, for young people between the ages of 16 and 21. Operated by Agenzija Żgħażaġh, it adopts a youth-centred approach that seeks to strengthen the complementary roles of formal education and non-formal learning through effective youth work practices and values.

The paper will consider how Youth.inc adopts a hands-on, flexible and project-based approach and how it provides young people with as many options and experiences of real working life as possible and the confidence to lead independent lives and participate actively and

responsibly in their communities and society. In particular, the paper will focus on individualised learning; course content and delivery; and the role of youth workers.

I will first outline the issue of ELET in Malta and the policy approaches being adopted. Before describing the Youth.inc programme, I will consider three contextual issues that both underpin and impact on the programme: youth policy; the validation and recognition of non-formal learning; and professionalisation. Youth.inc has also been the focus of an Erasmus+ project on Youth work for Learning and Working life, in which Agenzija Żgħażaġh is the lead organisation, and I will consider the project's progress and potential for both strengthening Youth.inc and the role of youth work in addressing issues such as ELET.

Finally, I will conclude with some general observations on how youth work and non-formal learning can be useful and effective tools in addressing ELET.

II CONTEXT

Young people in Malta have a positive attitude to the benefits of a good education and its role in providing them with the competences they need for their personal, civic and working lives. A recent survey of young people in Malta, *Mirrors and Windows 2: Maltese young*

people's perceptions, experiences and expectations of education, employment and lifestyles, commissioned and published by Aġenzija Żgħażaġh (National Youth Agency) (2019), confirmed this positive attitude towards education. Two-thirds of those in education, agreed that the education they are receiving prepares them well for the transition from school to work, while less than 10% disagreed. Almost 60% of all those in employment agreed that the education they received prepared them well for the transition from school to work, while less than 20% indicated that they had not been well prepared for the transition. Over 80% of males and over 70% of females were satisfied with the learning opportunities available to them. Of those in employment, 75% were satisfied with their employment, while only 7% were dissatisfied.

In terms of education and employment, while the survey indicated general overall satisfaction with provision and opportunities, females appear less satisfied and more excluded. This is not the only less positive aspect of education in Malta. An often quoted statistic is Malta's rate of early school leavers, which for long has been among the highest in the European Union¹. In 2006, a third of Maltese students left school early and while this figure dropped to 17.5% in 2018, Malta has the second highest level of early school leavers in the European Union.

Concerns with early school leaving are reflected in the framework for the Education Strategy for Malta, 2014-2024, which has four broad goals one of which is "to support the educational achievement of children at-risk-of-poverty and from low socio-economic status, and reduce the relatively high incidence of early school leavers"².

Under the national youth policy, Towards 2020 - A shared vision for the future of young people, which is being implemented and coordinated by Aġenzija Żgħażaġh over the period 2015-2020, cross-sectoral action plans in education and training, health and well-being, employment and entrepreneurship, arts and culture, social inclusion, voluntary and community activities, and sport and recreational activities have been developed and implemented that utilise "both formal education and non-formal learning as mutually reinforcing agents" and aimed at "enhancing young people's educational attainment levels and progression"³.

The action plan for education and training provides for a dedicated action whereby "early school leavers and young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) will be supported to develop their skills and enhance their future education and employment prospects". Aġenzija Żgħażaġh's Youth.inc programme is such a dedicated action.

A Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving⁴ was also initiated in 2014 that focuses on a range of preventative, intervention and compensation measures. These measures include strengthening

the transition process and flexible education pathways, supporting networks for students at risk, and harnessing the support of youth work.

Youth.inc is effectively one of these transition processes or flexible education pathways, which combines both formal and non-formal learning approaches. Before however considering the Youth.inc programme as a means of addressing ELET, there are three other contextual issues that need to be considered: youth policy in Malta and Europe; the validation and recognition of non-formal learning; and professionalisation.

III YOUTH POLICY IN MALTA AND EUROPE

Youth policy, as it has evolved at Maltese and European level, has two inter-related dimensions.

The first of these is what are often described as "core" services and activities such as non-formal learning, participation, mobility and youth information. Youth work, in particular, is widely regarded as one of the main drivers of effective youth policy. Youth work is the process employed through which non-formal learning can come about.

Second, youth policy has a cross-sectoral aspect. This means that youth policy must encompass and contribute to those policy areas that impact on the lives, development and well-being of young people: education and training, employment, health, social welfare, arts and culture, volunteering, as well as addressing such issues as ELET and social exclusion.

The national youth policy Towards 2020, which focuses on all 13 to 30-year-olds, and is being implemented over the period 2015-2020, has two related aims:

- to effectively support and encourage young individuals in fulfilling their potential and aspirations while addressing their needs and concerns, and
- to effectively support young people as active and responsible citizens who fully participate in and contribute to the social, economic and cultural life of the nation and Europe.

The policy is being implemented through two specific but interdependent strategies that complement the two policy aims. Each of the two strategies has a number of designated Action Plans under which specific actions are being undertaken and implemented over the six year timeframe 2015-2020.

Strategy 1 – Youth work and services for young people.

- Action Plan - New spaces at local community level for young people and youth organisations.
- Action Plan - Awareness raising, listening to and supporting the voice of young people.
- Action Plan - Initiatives for the active engagement, empowerment and participation of young people and youth organisations.

1 Eurostat (2019).

2 Department of Education and Employment (2014), Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024.

3 Department of Education and Employment (2015), National Youth Policy Towards 2020.

4 Department of Education and Employment (2014), A Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta.

Strategy 2 – Cross-sectoral supports for young people.

- Action Plan - Education and Training.
- Action Plan - Health and Well-being.
- Action Plan - Employment and Entrepreneurship.
- Action Plan - Arts and Culture.
- Action Plan - Social Inclusion.
- Action Plan - Voluntary and Community Activities.
- Action Plan - Sport and Recreational Activities.

Towards 2020, describes youth work as “a planned learning programme, project or activity aimed at the personal, social and political development of young people based on their voluntary participation and on mutually respectful and supportive relationships between young people and adults and built on a strong working relationship between the individual young person and youth workers”. It envisages Malta, where all young people are “respected, valued and listened to, supported and encouraged in building fulfilling personal and social relationships and in developing their innate abilities and talents for the benefit of themselves, their communities and society”. Its values are those of respect, recognition, sustained support and solidarity based on principles of responsiveness, access, participation, inclusion, integration, diversity empowerment and equality. Youth work focuses on young people at the particular stage in their lives when they are developing their awareness, seeking answers and beginning to explore their beliefs, values and choices.

The role of the youth worker is to nurture this development process by helping young people to build self-esteem and self-confidence; develop the ability to manage personal and social relationships; promote learning and develop new skills; and build the capacity of young people to consider risk, make reasoned decisions and take control of their own lives as well as to develop a “world view” which widens horizons and invites social commitment.

IV THE VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL LEARNING

A cross-sectoral approach to youth related issues as well as the validation of non-formal and informal learning are also significant features of the European youth policy landscape.

The overall objectives of the renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018)⁵ were to:

- create more and equal opportunities for all young people in education and in the labour market; and to
- promote the active citizenship, social inclusion and solidarity of all young people.

In achieving these objectives, a dual approach was adopted involving the development and promotion of both:

- specific initiatives in the youth field - i.e. policies and actions specifically targeted at young people in areas such as non-formal learning, youth work, mobility and information; and
- mainstreaming initiatives - i.e. initiatives to enable a cross-sectoral approach where due account is taken of youth issues when formulating, implementing and evaluating policies and actions in other policy fields which have a significant impact on the lives of young people.

The main fields of action in which initiatives were to be taken were: education and training, employment and entrepreneurship, health and well-being, participation, voluntary activities, social inclusion, youth and the world, and creativity and culture.

The Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012)⁶ states that

“the validation of learning outcomes, namely knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning can play an important role in enhancing employability and mobility, as well as increasing motivation for lifelong learning, particularly in the case of the socio-economically disadvantaged or the low-qualified”.

The Recommendation called on Member States to establish systems, by 2018, that allow individuals to identify, document, assess and certify/validate all forms of learning in order to use this learning for advancing their career and for further education and training.

What is absent in these approaches to policy and its implementation is the role of youth work and youth workers. Under the renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field, “supporting and developing youth work is regarded as a cross-sectoral issue”. But it is a restricted one, “youth work belongs to the area of “out-of-school” education, as well as specific leisure time activities managed by professional or voluntary youth workers and youth leaders and is based on non-formal learning processes and on voluntary participation”.

Youth workers are only referred to, inter alia, on three occasions in the Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Recent experience in Malta points to a much broader and more crucial role for youth workers as professionals. If cross-sectoral approaches to youth related policy issues are to be effective, particularly with regard to young people at risk of ELET and social exclusion, and if young people are to be effectively supported in gaining accreditation for non-formal and informal learning, then the values and methods of youth work are a crucial ingredient. In its work as an accrediting agency with the power to make awards,

5 Council of the European Union: Council Resolution of 27 November 2009 on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018).

6 Council of the European Union: Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Aġenzija Żgħażaġh is ensuring that the outcomes of effective youth work are evaluated and formally recognised.

V PROFESSIONALISATION

Recognition and parity of esteem among their fellow professionals/practitioners is essential for youth workers if cross-sectoral approaches to issues such as ELET are to be successful.

The Youth Work Profession Act 2014 gives⁷ formal professional recognition and status to youth workers in Malta, as well as regulating the profession and determining the qualifications and conditions under which youth workers can acquire such recognition. The Act provides for a Youth Work Profession Board to regulate the practice and the eligibility to practice the profession of youth work in Malta. The Board has established a Code of Ethics for the professional behaviour of youth workers, following a consultation with relevant stakeholders.

The Act is one of a range of measures in Malta to promote youth work and non-formal learning and to strengthen the professional capacity of the youth work sector.

Professionalisation has long been a feature of education. The teaching profession is well established and respected worldwide. In more recent times, professionalisation has also spread to other services such as social work. However, one area in which professionalisation has been slow in developing is youth work. While youth work emerged as a social and educational activity for young people in the late 19th century, its accreditation and recognition as a profession has lagged behind its overall development and impact. This can be accounted for, in part, by the very definition of what youth work is and what it is meant to do.

A recent report by the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth, Mapping the education and career paths of Youth Workers⁸, found that only a minority of countries in Europe appear to meet the requirements for professional recognition. The European Union's Directive⁹ on regulated professions, which also includes European Economic Area countries and Switzerland, does not include a single entry on youth work. Conversely, teaching has 161 entries, covering all levels from kindergarten to university, while social work has 17 entries. Malta appears to be the only European country to statutorily recognise youth work as a profession

VI THE YOUTH.INC PROGRAMME

Youth.inc is an inclusive education programme, based on applied learning, for young people between the ages of 16 and 21. These young people have completed full time compulsory education,

often without qualifications, and were not in education, training or employment before entering the programme. The aim of the programme is to help young people to improve their standard of education and gain more knowledge, values and skills to enable them to enter the labour market or gain qualifications to continue in further education and/or training.

The programme employed what were described as “support youth workers” to ensure that the young people were actively engaged in the learning process and they also were responsible for supervising the validation of learning.

While the programme has operated in Malta since 2011, it came under the remit and management of Aġenzija Żgħażaġh in summer 2014. The purpose of bringing it under Aġenzija Żgħażaġh was to facilitate a more youth-centred approach that seeks to strengthen the complementary roles of formal and non-formal learning through effective youth work practices and values.

In assuming responsibility for the programme, Aġenzija Żgħażaġh was also delegated authority by the Council for Higher and Further Education to accredit the programme at Levels 1, 2 and 3 of the Maltese Qualifications Framework. Thus, Aġenzija Żgħażaġh became an accrediting agency with delegated power to make awards not only as regards Youth.inc but also in the case of other youth work related programmes. Effectively, Aġenzija Żgħażaġh, as the National Youth Agency, was empowered to evaluate outcomes and make awards.

Youth.inc is based on the idea that success can be achieved by young people if they are engaged and motivated to participate actively in an applied learning environment which is practical in its approach. This applied learning approach is based on experiential learning and is tailored for young people who prefer a more practical style of learning. One of the key attractions of this type of learning is that young people are given the opportunity to apply their learning in the context of real life situations and challenges. It provides opportunities in the problem solving process, the use of resources and related techniques, and in personal skills, occupational awareness and safety, and work experience. The applied learning also provides learners with tasks and situations, and includes applications of knowledge, elements of career awareness, career exploration, and the integration of industrial knowledge and practices into their work, and provides multiple ways for young people to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

Youth.inc is described as an alternative learning programme, but it is a formal one, with a standardised curriculum; it comprises a full-time validated programme of three years duration leading to Levels 1, 2 and 3 qualifications in the Maltese Qualifications Framework; it is compulsory in the sense that maintenance grants are dependent on attendance; its aims might be described as utilitarian. It is a learning environment seemingly far removed from that of youth work.

Under Aġenzija Żgħażaġh, the number of course options available to young people on the programme has been considerably widened. While core curriculum subjects such as English, Maltese and Applied Maths and Basic IT Skills remain in place along with the

7 Youth Work Profession Act, No. XX of 2014

8 Council of Europe (2018) Mapping the education and career paths of Youth Workers, Strasbourg.

9 Directive 2005/36/EC

development of core competences, the range of optional courses for young people has been expanded to include animal care, beauty care, filming, design and make, entrepreneurship, hairdressing, social care, home cooking, cake decoration, nutrition and health, DIY, DJing, photography, web design, upholstery, hospitality, customer care and sales techniques.

All these options adopt a hands-on and project based approach. They aim to provide young people on the programme with as many options and experiences of real working life as possible.

The widening of the range of course options available to young people on the programme has had a number of consequences, three of which in particular are worthy of note.

First, one of the consequences of this expanded programme is that the more formal and standardised timetable that characterised the programme heretofore has given way to a more individualised personal learning programme for each young person.

Second, delivery of course content is being facilitated by outside professionals/practitioners from the world of work. These outside professionals/practitioners are not teachers or educators as such. They bring with them the daily realities and routines of the world of work, its demands, pressures, disciplines, responsibilities and rewards.

Third, the role and work of the youth support workers, now re-designated simply as youth workers, has undergone a fundamental change. Previously, the role of the youth support worker was that of the evaluator as much as it was that of a mentor. They were effectively responsible for overseeing vocational work placements and organizing voluntary activities.

With the advent of a wider range of course options being delivered with the support of outside professionals/practitioners and a more personalised and individualised learning programme, the youth worker has increasingly become a go-between, a facilitator, a mediator and a negotiator between young people seeking knowledge and professionals/practitioners who have such knowledge. The focus of their work has shifted to building supportive relationships with young people, engaging with them to help them discover their strengths and weaknesses and encouraging them to map and pursue future career and learning paths.

What this process has revealed is the demanding, difficult and often uncharted landscape between young people, often socially and economically excluded, at risk of ELET, with poor levels of educational attainment, and the realities, demands, disciplines and responsibilities of the world of education, training and work.

This process has also revealed how the values and practices of youth work can play a vital and constructive role in helping to bridge this gap.

VII YOUTH WORK FOR LEARNING AND WORKING LIFE

Youth.inc is also the focus of an Erasmus+ project ‘Youth work for Learning and Working life’, on learning environments that offer services to young people with complex learning needs. The project is concerned with the impact of youth work on young people’s learning and development, specifically in respect of the soft skills essential to many fields of employment and the relative capacities of young people with regard to life skills, such as communication, team work, and self-confidence.

Using Youth.inc as a conduit and example, Aġenzija Żgħażaġh and its partners in the project, George Williams YMCA College London and Manor Education and Training Solutions Ltd. (METS), set themselves the tasks to test, measure, question and reflect on how youth work can enhance the skills necessary for young people to find, gain and maintain employment and build their capacity to play a responsible role in their communities and society.

“Essentially the partners wanted to confirm and corroborate their experience of and evidence the positive role non-formal and relational approaches in bettering the life experience and chances of young people.

The project, in particular, focuses on young people’s learning and competence acquisition, specifically the capacity to participate in civil society, employability, and intrapersonal and interpersonal empowerment. It aimed to develop a model of youth work delivery, with associated tools and approaches, which facilitated young people’s development in the latter respects”¹⁰.

The project is being conducted by the three partners with young people from the Youth.inc programme. Over the two year duration of the project the partners are employing a number of overlapping and continuing stages that include:

- Consultation
- Establishing baseline research, training and practice strategies
- Supervision of practice
- Learning assignments and tasks
- Impact assessment
- A manual of tools and practical exercises.

The project’s focus on practice delivery, the examination of methods and approaches, and observation and recording skills, will further strengthen the capacity of Youth.inc in supporting young people at risk of ELET. It also further emphasizes the potential of youth work to impact positively on the learning and development of young people and, in particular, educationally and socially disadvantaged young people.

10 Belton, B, Draft report on the ‘Youth work for Learning and Working life’ project, (2019)

VIII CONCLUSION

ELET is often seen as, or a result of, a “systems failure” - a failure of the education system to adequately meet the needs of particular children and young people. As such, ELET is also a feature of educational disadvantage. As far back as 1967, a definition of educational disadvantage was tabled at a UNESCO Institute of Education conference that still resonates. The definition proposed that a child may be regarded as being at a disadvantage at school “if because of factors in the child’s environment, conceptualised as economic, cultural and social capital, the competencies and dispositions which he/she brings to school differ from the competencies and dispositions which are valued in schools and which are required to facilitate adaption to school and school learning”¹¹.

Responding to educational disadvantage, including ELET, can take on many forms. Such responses can be through the formal education system, can be either preventative or compensatory, or can alternatively adopt non-formal learning approaches or flexible learning pathways.

However, the potential of alternative non-formal learning approaches, including youth work, can be inhibited by a number of factors.

First, youth policy needs to be cross-sectoral and the relevant ministries and state agencies, with the cooperation of the voluntary and corporate sectors and civil society, need to be proactive and mutually supportive if the economic, cultural and social capital of children and young people is to be enhanced.

Second, the validation and recognition of non-formal learning is essential if the young people, who acquire such learning, are to have the necessary qualifications and to engage in working life or in further education and training.

Third, those who provide non-formal education, including youth workers, need professional recognition and parity of esteem with their fellow professionals who work with young people. This also requires parity in terms of pay and conditions, job security and career prospects that in turn point to a broader issue. For long, the non-formal education and youth work sector has been seen as the “poor relation”. Even in countries, such as Finland and Ireland, where youth work and youth services are well established and comparably well-funded, annual funding amounts to less than 1% of the education budget.

If the potential of non-formal learning and youth work, as evidenced by the Youth.inc programme, in addressing educational disadvantage and ELET is to be realised, then it must be treated as an equal partner in terms of policy, status, recognition and funding.

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Second Chances: Young People in Further Education

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Abstract. Several quantitative studies have investigated post-secondary choices of students and their attributes. However, there is still a lack of information as to why students choose Further Education (FE). Therefore, this study has adopted a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of youths in FE, in order to uncover their motives for choosing this pathway as a second chance at education. Thus, this study aimed to understand the push and pull factors which affect the young person's decision-making process. The data was obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted with six youths who attend an FE college in London. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data as it allowed the researcher to describe, without modifying, the participants' views and experiences. Three clusters of themes, which had an impact on the students, emerged from the analysis: (1) the learning culture, specifically the relevance of vocational education, the approach of the teacher and transmission of information, (2) the family influence and support, and (3) the personal choice of the individual. The impact of the learning culture was deemed to have had the most impact on the student's choice, whereby the interlocking factors helped push and/or pull them into attending an FE College. The 'voices' of these youths could help British and international policymakers address some of the challenges found within the educational system and society.

Keywords: further education, youths, experience, British educational system

I INTRODUCTION

In the United Kingdom, a student must remain in education until the age of 18: whether it is in full-time education (i.e. attending school or college); an apprenticeship or traineeship; part-time education or vocational training whilst also being employed (gov.uk, 2019). The Education and Skills Act 2008 (Legislation.gov.uk, 2008) created measures to ensure that youths below the age of 18 remain in education by guaranteeing various pathways which may suit the learners' needs. This is to help reduce the rate of early school leavers (ESLs) and NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training). This research will delve into the experiences and decision-making processes of a small group of youths who attended a Further Education College.

While many choose to continue education such as those who attend Sixth Form (which may lead them to enrol into a

degree at a university), others may choose to enter employment or choose to read for a course at an FE college. Whereas school offers a primarily academic curriculum and environment, FE offers a mixed blend of academic and vocational courses (Castlemant et al., 2015; Thompson, 2009; Wallace, 2013). This pathway of vocational courses

has been widely researched, and it has been called the choice that "other people's children" make (Thompson, 2009, p.29). Previously "other people's children" often referred to children from low social standing families or working-class backgrounds with low levels of attainment. Therefore, youths may turn to FE for a 'second chance' since their learning within school did not fulfil their potential.

The term 'second chances' (Baird et al., 2012; Wallace, 2013) has been used to describe the FE sector and its students. Moreover, FE has also been compared to several characters in English literature. It has been compared to 'Cinderella' (Baker, as cited in Wallace, 2013); 'The Frog in Princess and the Frog' (Wallace, 2013) to the 'neglected middle child' (Foster, 2005). FE has helped to reduce the risk of students 'dropping-out', becoming ESLs or NEETs (Canduela et al., 2010). Additionally, FE has been given a great deal of importance in the Europe 2020 strategy which aims to reduce the number of young people with low basic skills (European Commission, 2013). While students' choices have been largely studied, usually quantitatively, to investigate how young adults move from school to FE and/or Higher Education (HE) (Haynes et al., 2012), the underlying experiences of these youths have often been neglected, especially as to what caused them to lose out in specific educational contexts.

A Understanding FE

FE was enacted in the 1950s in the UK as a method to help reduce the failure rate of secondary school students and provide more skill-based qualifications. FE has been defined as offering “a parallel, alternative route in higher education, through vocational qualifications, general qualifications or access courses” (Wallace, 2013, p.27). It includes all post-compulsory education and training, for youths between the ages of 16-19 and adults. As a result of the variety of courses found within this setting, different levels of qualifications are awarded to the students. This is dependent on when a learner enters the college. Level 1 is the lowest (basic) level and Level 3 being the highest. FE ensures that basic Maths, English and IT skills are taught alongside the chosen course. Therefore, in the UK educational system, FE is viewed as having a fundamental role in helping youths obtain high quality skills, as well as contributing to the economy and promoting social cohesion (Thompson, 2009).

A great deal can be insinuated from these comparisons and FE. This may imply that FE is for youths who are disregarded by either family or teachers but may still have a chance to succeed. Furthermore, FE has been called other various terms such as: under the umbrella label of ‘Vocational Education and Training’ (VET) (Cedefop, 2017; Wallace, 2013), and of ‘Alternative Education Provision’ (AEP) (Gutherson et al., 2011). Both titles refer to institutions which host a different teaching system for students who need to be taught through ‘alternative’ ways. There are various contradictory ideas as to whom these colleges are attracting, and the qualities FE students tend to have.

B Qualities of an FE Student

The Association of Colleges: Key facts 2018/19 (Association of Colleges, 2019) have shown that 685,000 16-18-year olds chose to study in colleges, an additional 76,000 16-18-year olds undertake an apprenticeship through colleges and 149,000 youths’ study higher education in a college. This indicates an increase in the percentage of students who are in FE and/or training. The background of the student has deemed to be an important quality in research, as it has shown that FE students are those who tend to have low levels of school attendance, have a low level of socioeconomic status, poor attainment in maths and literacy, behavioural problems (at risk of offending), from minority ethnic backgrounds and other similar characteristics (Callender, 2003; Gutherson et al., 2011; Harper & Quaye, 2009). Also, Frederick (2013) stated that ethnicity is an important factor with white students from a working-class background progressing less well in school when compared to others.

Other macro and micro-systems which may influence students’ choices are their culture and values. Bronfenbrenner’s model of the ecological system (1994) portrayed how the development of a person is affected by the daily different systems and their interactions. If there is a change in the micro-system of the individual (family, school, peer group), then there will be a change in the macro-system. Therefore, this indicates an element of reciprocity and interaction, whether it be through direct or indirect approaches. For instance, some learners may decide to choose an institution close to home in order to stay near to their family, while others may want to gain their

independence and move away (Callender, 2003). These experiences and qualities which an individual may have, can result in a ‘pull and/or push’ for them to move in a certain direction.

According to Gutherson et al. (2011): “whether in relation to education, employment and training...the range and complexity of issues are consistently emphasised as dimensions of interrelated problems or issues that cannot be effectively addressed in isolation” (p.44). Before examining these factors, it must be emphasised that this is not a single event which takes place but, rather the climax of an ongoing process (Callender, 2003).

C The family influence

Various studies show that microsystems, such as family, shape the child’s future (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Payne, 2003). Parents exert an influence through their parenting style, their type of employment, and the family income. Research has found robust associations between the financial costs of education and students’ attendance. While the concern of financial costs associated with university tuition are marginalised for those students coming from a higher social class, students of low socioeconomic status tend to worry about these issues to a higher extent (Callender, 2003; Castlemant et al., 2015; Parry et al., 2012). Thus, a student’s perception of the impact of costs may be determined by a class-based system which decides whether educational attainment is reached. While financial aid may be attainable to some, it is not attainable to all (Callender, 2003; Harper & Quaye, 2009).

Parental support has been found to be another factor which could serve as either a risk or as a protective factor towards education and the choices a student makes. Callender (2003) found that parents were the most common source of discouragement amongst students who decided not to continue in school. Gutherson et al., (2011) reiterated this notion and found that parental support, along with supervision, involvement and conflict were key factors in this respect. Children also look up to their parents as role models (Buikstra et al., 2007) and therefore, some children will want to work in the family business. Moreover, parents and other family members who obtained a low level of education can transfer a limited amount of knowledge to their children (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Haynes et al., 2012; Parry et al., 2012). This may be problematic, since this may result in the children being less aware of their options, and thus creating a barrier towards their goals.

D Response to Social Class

As far as some research and media are concerned, there is an unspoken rule about FE colleges in a “class-conscious England”. This reiterates that students attending FE are often uninterested, find difficulty in understanding tasks, and that FE is thus best suited for those children from working class backgrounds (Richardson, 2007, p. 411). The ‘class’ background attributed to a young person, was not chosen, yet given. Whilst Baird et al. (2012) stated that students in FE tend to have lower aspirations than students who have remained in formal schooling, it has been found that students are aware of this situation, and may believe that certain opportunities are not within their reach due to their family’s level of

socioeconomic status (Ball et al., 2000). Thus, FE students view their learning as “a response to their positioning in an education and training hierarchy” (Bathmaker, 2005 p.98). According to Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2006), while the UK Government has had a predisposition to downplay the role of class, there still is a great deal of debate regarding this issue within the further education sector (as cited in Thompson, 2009).

E The FE learning environment

Quinn et al., (2006) described FE institutions as “creating caring, non-authoritarian learning environments and, populating them with adults who are sympathetic to the special needs of these students and their families” (p.16). Gutherson et al., (2011) also stated that effective AEP should have high standards, small class sizes, student-centred or personalised teaching to focus on the students’ needs and create a good level of autonomy within the classroom. FE thus differs from what all other secondary schools or Higher Education (HE) institutions provide, at both the macro-system and micro-system levels in these scenarios (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). While, secondary schools and HE institutions should be able to teach groups of students who have different needs, and ensure positive outcomes through good support systems such as: through Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG), holistic teaching and the use of teamwork within the classroom setting, FE goes a step further. A key difference is the implementation of vocational learning within FE. This method of learning helps orient students towards the world of work, motivate students and enhance enjoyment through non-traditional methods (or mixed methods).

Various studies have shown that the school which students attend, is key in shaping their decision in choosing their learning and/or training, post sixteen years of age. There are several micro-elements which have been found to affect the child’s development: the learning culture and guidance found at school are two factors which have been widely discussed.

This “learning culture” is a micro-system factor which has been found to influence students entering FE (Parry et al., 2012, p.14). Rutter et al., (as cited in Keys & Fernandes, 1993) stated that there were certain features in the teacher’s approach and classroom setting, which largely affect the student’s level of attainment and behaviour. These include the teamwork within the classroom, styles of teaching, use of resources, patterns of discipline and expectations of the teacher. Moreover, researchers have found the use of complex lesson plans, lack of new and engaging methods, and insufficient close monitoring of these students creates an environment which is ineffective and boring to them (Ofsted, 2014). In addition, it was also found that teachers tend to by-pass issues of students understanding their work, due to the pressure of having to complete the prescribed curriculum. To support this notion, FE is mainly taught in a vocational setting vis a vis a purely academic one. The vocational learning style is believed to be more person-centred, supportive and help them learn practical skills (Gutherson et al., 2011; Parry et al., 2012; Ofsted, 2014). However, according to Wallace (2002), it should not be assumed that teachers are the major and direct causal influence, which causes students to move away from traditional schooling.

As previously mentioned, children may lack support and knowledge at home, therefore students may look to their teachers and peers for support. Teachers and/or guidance counsellors may serve as substitute parents; however, it has been found that this may not be enough help to build adequate self-efficacy within the child (Harper & Quaye, 2009). According to social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1977), there is a strong correlation between low-income families and the level of information they can obtain (as cited in Hampden-Thompson, 2013). Furthermore, it has been found that students from a lower socio-economic status attend schools which may lack the resources to provide this guidance (Callender, 2003; Hampden-Thompson, 2013; Harper & Quaye, 2009).

Policymakers have focused on the key role of IAG sector in school (Smyth and Banks, 2012). In studies by Blatchford (1992), McCrone & Filmer-Sankey (2012), Skill, Social Community Planning Research & Further Education Funding Council (1996), it was found that this information and guidance was central to students’ choice of future studies. Previously, students had little accessibility to career guidance and the little that there was, was not focused on their wants and aspirations (Key & Fernandes, 1993). This lack of information also highlighted how, with less opportunities for guidance, talks on financial aid, extra-curricular support and lack of personalised advice, these students were left in the dark as regards to possibilities for scholarships, tutors and mentors. This lack of information has a direct effect on their decision-making process (Hutchings, 2003). They may also turn to another source for advice, their friends.

F Peers

According to Blatchford et al., (2016) the peer group plays a crucial part in the development of the learner. The peer relationship can exert an important effect on the behaviours and attitudes of the students (Keys & Fernandes, 1993). This occurs, not only on a personal level but also academically (Castlemant et al., 2015; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Schmuck & Schmuck (2001) found that when their son had difficulty informing peer relationships, this created an effect on his school attainment, resulting in poor assessment. However, as soon as relationships were formed, his educational attainment increased. Moreover, it is well-known that when students have difficulty within a school culture, they often turn to friends for advice and knowledge (Ofsted, 2014). Adolescents are undergoing puberty, and hormonal and physical changes may also bring about behavioural fluctuations. These behavioural problems could lead to rebelling against teachers, negative attitudes towards learning and even lead to suspension or worse, expulsion (Castlemant et al., 2015; Gutherson et al., 2011; Wallace, 2002; Wallace, 2013).

Conversely, some researchers found that even though some students were aware of their friends’ choices, this did not affect their educational decisions (Wikeley & Stables, as cited in Haynes et al., 2012). They also found that this was dependent on whether the individual felt pressurised to follow their friends’ footsteps.

G Aims of study

This research will provide an overview of how young people are affected by the different macro-systems and micro-systems found

within the community, such as: school culture, socio-economic status, and family and peer relationships. This will be done by allowing these individuals to share their experiences and opinions on the matter.

II METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was chosen in order to delve into the experiences of why these students chose to enter a vocational course at an FE college. As the students' may have been 'pushed' or 'pulled' into the world of FE, one-to-one interviews ensure that the lived experiences of the participants are analysed in depth (Ritchie et al., 2013). As often stated, this type of research on youths have often been neglected since studies tend to focus on statistics, rather than the underlying personal experiences of these individuals, and what causes them to lose out in specific educational contexts (Hall, 2016).

Moreover, the social constructivist theory will be considered regarding the interaction with others, as it is vital in the understanding and formation of meanings and in developing an understanding of the participant's world (Burr, 2003). Therefore, the reasons behind the students' choices may be viewed within a social and cultural context in a specific situation (Creswell, 2007). This epistemology is needed within the context of the study, to ensure that the analysis of the data is viewed within the social meanings of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

A semi-structured interview schedule was constructed in order to be a guide to the respondents' answers yet allowing the interviewee to decide how to respond. The open-ended questions allowed for flexibility, since the intention was to create a flowing conversation and touch upon salient points with all the participants. This type of questioning "impose[d] topic areas on people's thinking, where it may be preferable to gain a more naturalistic road into people's meaning systems" (Joffe, 2011, p. 212).

The choice of participants was selective, and all from the same college and course. This was in order to understand the differences and/or similarities between participants and their decision processes. Contacts were made with a teacher of a Bricklaying course at an FE College in London. Therefore, snowball sampling was used. Six students (all male) who were willing to take part in this study volunteered. The interviews varied in duration as some participants hesitated in between questions and answers while others were very direct. Thus, the interviews varied between 15 to 40 minutes each.

Thematic analysis was chosen to analyse the findings. According to Boyatzis (1998), "thematic analysis is a way of seeing" (p.79). Joffe (2011), reaffirmed this notion, having described the thematic analysis as being the most "systematic and transparent" way of qualitative work. This type of analysis allows the researcher to interpret the data, while not modifying the participants' views and motives. It is a "method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). Although body language could not be analysed, non-verbal cues, such as pauses and silences, were noted in the data analysis. The themes which were developed

from the data analysis were then organised into hierarchies of meaning, to obtain clusters of themes.

The ethics code and conduct issued by the British Psychology Society (BPS) (The British Psychological Society, 2018) was followed, ensuring mindfulness and respect, along with other principles. All the participants were informed and reassured that their identities would remain anonymous and that pseudonyms would be used. They were also informed that they could end the interview at any point and disregard any questions they did not feel comfortable answering. They were also aware of the aim and rationale of this research study before the interview took place.

By ensuring the researcher's own bias was not a factor in this study, it may be viewed as reliable and valid. Thus, the researcher was prepared to be the audience, in order to understand the students' reasons and thus add to British and international research in this area.

III RESULTS

The findings illustrated that three overall themes were composed of the data: the learning culture, the influence of the family, and the choice of the individual.

Participants' Profile

John, a 17-year-old, lived close to the FE College. He obtained three GCSEs (all practical subjects e.g. PE). He went into FE after secondary school.

Mike, 18 years old, moved to Ireland to complete secondary school as his parents wanted him to move away from the crime in London at the time. He completed four years at secondary school and then went into FE whereby he completed a year course in which he did his GCSEs whereby he obtained his English GCSE.

Robert, 18 years old and went into FE after secondary but started a different course. He then switched to Bricklaying. He did not elaborate when asked about GCSEs.

Trevor, 18 years old and was the only student who had tried to enter a different form of HE. He attended business school, however, did not enjoy the course and so entered FE and chose Bricklaying. He obtained all his GCSEs at a C grade (but did not specify how many).

David, the youngest at 16 years old, attended FE right after completing secondary school and obtained four GCSEs: Business, IT, Art and Science but did not obtain Maths and English.

Lastly, Sean was 19 years old. He attended a different college where he was not happy due to problems with staff within the college and so changed to this current FE College. He did not elaborate when asked about GCSEs.

None of the participants had any knowledge of one another before entering the FE College. They all lived in different areas and had attended different schools.

A Learning Culture

All the participants discussed their experience of secondary school and the impact it left on their decision to go into FE.

Vocational education.

All participants mentioned how working in a practical setting was preferred versus writing and academia. John, the only participant who had a learning difficulty, stated that since he was dyslexic, he could do “better things with [his] hands. So that’s why [he] chose bricklaying”. He felt that people with dyslexia “can’t do things like other people – always in a classroom for a long time e.g. book work. It would be better for them to do like stuff outside”.

All the participants agreed with this notion of how they preferred subjects like Science and PE as they were more physical. Robert and David, similarly, preferred subjects like Science “cause of all the experiments” (Robert). When asked if there was anything he would like to change within the secondary school, he stated “may be more practical work cause I remember in school, only work work work – like course work... Course work was alright but I needed more practical work”.

The balance between the two areas of vocational and academia was also highlighted by Mike: “we come in and just learn and have a bit of fun here too. In school we’d always have to drop down notes from a screen but here we’d stop and do demonstrations and have a laugh while we’re learning, and I think that’s why everyone likes it so much”.

Thus, all the interviewees found that this balance between the two areas of learning led to an increase in enjoyment.

Method of Teaching

All the participants discussed the differences found between the methods of some teachers at secondary school and those found at FE. Mike said, “it’s down to the teacher and how they teach”. Sean emphasised that “they should handle stuff differently and not everyone is the same. So more individual attention”. Only Mike’s school seemed to implement some sort of personalised teaching to those students who were struggling “they would put them in a room and try teach them differently”.

While Trevor stated how: “There were maths teachers and [he] didn’t understand their method of teaching so [he] had to move classes but that’s about it, but it’s not necessarily bad teachers but because everyone has their way of teaching”.

Other respondents believed that it was the subject they did not enjoy, no matter the method of teaching, especially regarding Maths. Maths was found to be the most disliked subject (Trevor, David, Mike, Sean and Robert): “maths I didn’t like – the worst... I find

maths really difficult” (Trevor); “I didn’t like Maths” (Sean); “wasn’t keen in Maths” (David).

Student-Teacher Relationship

In contrast, the interviews also showed how some students did not like certain subjects due to the relationships with the teachers within secondary school: “I didn’t like English, cause like the teacher didn’t like me” (John). Therefore, the relationship between the student and teacher seems to have affected the level of attainment of the student. Moreover, the amount of support provided by the teachers effected the level of learning done by the participants. John was highly affected by the lack of this support: “cause they said I wouldn’t get anything like they always used to put me down” and “my teachers would tell me you won’t get this grade so why are you coming to school”.

The element of pushing the student out, was found when participants compared their past relationships with teachers who were not supportive as their current teacher. Mike, Sean and Robert emphasised how their relationship with Mark* (current teacher) was different and believed he was a really good teacher and “pushing people to do well” (Mike); “this one they push you more, the other one they didn’t really care or bother” (Sean).

Transmission of Information.

The discussion on awareness and knowledge of courses, led into a query as to where they acquired their information. When asked if the students had any form of career counselling or career guidance (IAG) most of the participants mentioned how they discovered FE courses through leaflets or books: “saw it in a brochure, I was looking for courses and I saw bricklaying and I really liked it” (Robert); “just from school...and the teacher used to hand out leaflets and things” (David); “I found it on leaflets they issue them on buses” (Sean). Sean had no help from the school as the only advice given was regarding sixth form. Neither did Trevor: “I found it on the internet, when I was applying for courses”.

On the other hand, two of the participants, John and Mike, received a form of IAG at school. John was handed a book and the school organised “a week all different colleges, all different people coming like telling us about them”. While Mike stated that the school in Ireland organised for work experience to be completed in the UK and so it helped him to discover new opportunities for work.

This seemed to be the highest quality of IAG mentioned from all the interviews.

B The Influence of the Family

The family seemed to be an influential factor when deciding which pathway, they should take. Whether it was due to the student wanting to work in the same sector as their parents, or as an indirect result of their family belonging to a lower socioeconomic background. Mike seemed to hold his father as a role model: “my father is big into building and I find myself, I think I’m good at it, I enjoy it”. In the case of Robert, his family attended the FE College where he attends

therefore, they were a direct impact on his decision. Most of the participants' relatives work in low-income roles such as: construction, rubbish clearance, building and window cleaners: "my dad does rubbish clearance and my mum's a cleaner like a building/business cleaner – cleans it up at night" (David). David, Mike and John all mentioned how they have worked for their fathers' in order to assist them and for work experience. Sean was the only participant who had a relative who obtained a high level of education: "my sister just graduated from University... and my brother is an accountant".

Family Support

The familial support was deemed important to the student in order to understand their experience. Whether it was in the form of pushing the student to further their education, or to ensure that their educational needs were met at school. For John: "I just wanted to do something to get like out of school cause like I didn't like college at first but I only came for my parents like so but then I started to like it". John's parents seemed to have supported him throughout his education and pushed him to continue studying. His mother was the one to notice and ask for her son to be assessed at his school for any learning difficulties. Moreover, John mentioned how since his mother worked in primary school, she did not have the same level of attainment required to help him with his homework. David did not have enough help and support at home either. Yet, Trevor, Sean, Mike and Robert were supported by their parents as they helped them to look for courses and expected them to continue with their education.

C The Choice of the Individual

Choosing the Right Course

When asked why they thought people chose to come to an FE college, David replied: "I'm in construction so you've got to come here to do construction". John also felt this way: "It depends on what you want to pursue in life... I chose to do bricklaying, so this was good for me". Lastly, Mike felt that even though the college had "a bad name for itself... like it was a college known for not good students", he thought it was the best option as they were known to be the "best college for Bricklaying in a few miles".

Personal Growth

Several different factors were mentioned whereby the students compared themselves within the secondary school environment and the FE environment. These factors seemed to suggest the changes that occurred within the self once they changed their 'location of learning': being in a mixed age, mixed abilities classroom and becoming independent. Independence was mentioned by most of the participants: "you can wear your own clothes and it's at all different times and you can like go out to like get something to eat, in a school you can't do that" (Robert). While Mike said:

"like its more up to you to come to college, like all the teachers will persuade you to come but it's up to you. In school there's a feeling like you have to go in because then you get...expelled or suspended..."

With college it's more up to you if you want to go, and I find that a lot of people do enjoy college so".

The theme of enjoyment was also stressed as Mike felt as though he "never come out of college stressed or angry". Therefore, it became more a relaxed setting whereby learning could fluctuate. Moreover, most of the learners highlighted that the classroom consisted of students of all ages: "We have all stayed together as a group, like if anyone is struggling you can see other people will help them out cause in our group the youngest person is 17 and then the oldest is 70. It's a nice bond to have, that's what's nice about college I think" (Mike).

While some students felt this choice was better for them due to independence and mixed ability, some students were not ready to move away from home (John, Mike and Sean). For instance: John found that this college was the closest to home and so he felt the safest: "this one was like the closest... all the other ones were too far and my mum doesn't like me too far because when I was coming home from school, I had a football game, and someone... tried to mug me and put a gun to my head". Therefore, this traumatic experience led to him choosing an FE college close to home.

However, some participants showed maturity by emphasising the importance of studies instead of working at a young age. Two of the participants underlined the importance between choosing studies before joining employment: "I've got a long time to work so that's why I chose college, cause if I didn't choose college I would have done it at a later date, when I get older" (John); "go into college and don't go straight into a job, learn a bit more, cause you do learn more in college" (Mike).

Past Behaviour and Its Effects

Five of the participants (Sean, Trevor, Mike, John and David) stated that they were rebellious during secondary school and tended to talk back to teachers. John seemed to be the participant who was affected greatly by his peers. He used to like "getting into fights for no reason" and this would result in poor reports. However, then he met another group of boys who helped him stay out of trouble: "If I didn't have them, I wouldn't be here now... I'd probably be out on the street".

IV DISCUSSION

According to the literature, those who choose to enter FE are usually young people who have certain similar characteristics. In this present study, all the participants were male (Frederick, 2013). This was not done intentionally to agree with the literature yet happened by chance due to the participants who were willing to take part. Also, the students were of mixed ethnicity, with the majority being white (Frederick, 2013). Other similar attributes included low socio-economic status and low attainment especially in maths and literacy (Callender, 2003; Gutherson et al., 2011; Harper & Quayle, 2009; Thompson, 2009). Most of the participants (Trevor, David, Mike, John and Robert) had low attainment in school whilst Trevor, David, Mike, Sean and Robert had extreme difficulty with learning Maths. Regarding their course, the participants are all reading for a Level

1 course, which supports learners who may have poor secondary school results where they re-learn Maths, English and ICT along with their chosen course.

Most of the families of the participants were from working-class backgrounds: building cleaners, construction and rubbish clearance. This concurs with previously published studies which found that low socioeconomic status is prevalent with the features of an FE student (Callender, 2003; Gutherson et al., 2013; Thompson, 2009). This contradicts the research gathered by Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2006) which stated that there was no difference between social class and those who attended FE and mainstream higher education.

A Learning Culture

The foremost influence found within this present study is the school and the learning culture. This agrees with Parry et al. (2012) who found that the learning culture within the school is one of the strongest influences of students choosing FE. The type of teaching, the method of how the teachers taught subjects, the interest (or lack of) with certain subjects, the relationships between teachers and students and the quality of IAG within the school were all discussed.

Vocational Education

Within the school setting, all the participants mentioned how they preferred working through a more physical and hands-on approach (Gutherson et al., 2011; Parry et al., 2012). Thus, while subjects such as Science and PE were favoured because of their more interactive approach, the students felt there still was not enough of these subjects in the school schedule to keep them interested. David, John and Mike stated that it was the course which had the greatest influence on their decision process.

This type of micro-system setting is also found to be preferred by students with learning difficulties such as John, who did not enjoy spending a long time inside the classroom. This could be due to the monotonous regime within the classroom where students experience the same environment and teaching. The data collected by Ofsted (2014), also found that a lack of different methods within the classroom may create a lack of interest within the students, causing teaching to be ineffective. The participants found that mixing academia and vocational training would be the best learning culture to increase interest and enjoyment. This also puts into question whether all the subjects at secondary school are teaching skills which are needed for future work, and are of interest to all the students, or just specific to some.

The teacher's Approach

Rutter et al. (as cited in Keys & Fernandes, 1993) stressed the importance of the teacher's approach and expectations of the teacher and how this translated into the relationships between the students and teachers. The relationship was in fact a focal point within the interviews. John, Mike, Sean and Robert distinguished the differences between the approach their past teachers had and their current teacher - Mark. They believed Mark created a better environment

as he ensured enjoyment as well as learning. The balance between these two factors is crucial in order to increase motivation within the student. This finding does not agree with Wallace (2002) who put forward the notion that teachers were not to blame for students' capability to learn. In this present study, teachers were found to be a very important push factor, as they can either "push people to do well" (Mike) or push students out of the classroom by not "bothering" (Sean).

Moreover, they all found the method of teaching to be less interactive, less supportive and with less individual attention. Therefore, the vocational learning style was preferred as it has been found to be more person-centred, suiting the needs of the student and supportive. This is in agreement to the literature by Gutherson et al. (2011), Parry et al. (2012) and Ofsted (2014).

Transmission of Information

During the interviews, it was found that there seemed to be a lack of high quality IAG given to these participants during their time at school. Only one of the participants was given the opportunity for work experience while at secondary school. The lack of information accessible seems to have affected their choice. While in the past the IAG sector and its effects were not given much importance, currently this issue seems to be of greater importance (Haynes et al., 2012). As stated previously, the studies by Blatchford et al. (1992), McCrone & Filmer-Sankey (2012) and Skill, Social Community Planning Research & Further Education Funding Council (1996), found that the information and guidance given at school was of the greatest importance to the student and their decision-making process. Without this knowledge, students do not fully know their options, especially if their families do not know themselves.

B The Family Influence

Family is one of the first sources of knowledge that a child seeks (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Payne, 2003). However, families who have obtained a low level of education, may find difficulties in sharing their knowledge of post-16 education (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Haynes et al., 2012; Parry et al., 2012). This was evident within the interviews as most of the participants' parents seemed to have had low levels of education and worked in low-income jobs. The family members are also regarded as role models (Buikstra et al., 2007; Haynes et al., 2012). This is in regard to the type of jobs their parents have, and wanting to continue in the same work, such as Mike whose father worked in construction. On the other hand, Robert, looked to his family for advice as some family members had attended the same college, and so he did not hesitate or question the decision to choose the same FE College. John was the participant who was the most influenced by his parents to continue education. He described how he was not interested in continuing education after secondary school, yet his parents wanted him to strive and so pushed him into attending a course at the FE College.

According to existing literature, there seems to be a relationship between the financial costs of the type of education (FE, HE etc.) and students' attendance (Callender, 2003; Castlemand et al., 2015; Parry et al., 2012). Hence, students may be limited as to which type

of education to choose. However, Mike and Robert, were the only two participants to mention the effect of financial costs.

C Peers

Whilst, the influence of peers has been widely discussed within literature (Blatchford et al., 2016; Castlemand et al., 2015; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002), this was not found to be an important factor within this study. The participants did not express or show any indication that their friends influenced them to enter FE. The only mention of peers was by John, in relation to his low attainment at class and how he became rebellious due to the friends he had. However, after meeting another group of boys at his school, the latter helped him to behave better. Therefore, peers seemed to have affected attainment at school in relation to behaviour, however, not regarding choices of post-16 education (Wikely & Stables, as cited in Haynes, et al., 2012).

D The Choice of the Individual

The will of the students was regarded as the most important factor compared to the micro or macro-factors found in the literature (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). However, within this study, the school seemed to have the greatest influence on the student's decision. The participants only showed their 'will' when stating they wanted to be independent and to be in a more relaxed environment. Yet, there were some differences. Even though they wanted to be independent, some of the students (John, Mike and Sean) were still not ready to move away from home.

However, some participants believed that, presently, studies were more important than work. They believed that learning and achieving a qualification would help them to secure a career they will be satisfied with. Therefore, this distinguishes them from the similarities found between FE students and ESLs (Keys and Fernandes, 1993).

V CONCLUSION

As Callender (2003) pointed out, it is the way a young person interprets the factors of the macro and micro-system which enables them to form a decision. This seemed to be the case in this study. The factors which seemed to be the most dominant to push or pull the student into FE were: (1) the learning culture: the vocational education, the teacher's approach and transmission of information, (2) the family influence and support (3) and the choice of the individual. It is not a single event yet the highpoint of a long and complex process of push and pull factors. Whilst this research was conducted on a small scale in 2015, these experiences could assist policymakers both in the UK and in Europe to address the obstacles young people face in accessing compulsory education. This would also lead to a wider social acceptance of these students, who struggle to achieve in previous education, yet work very hard to ensure that their second chance at education is successful.

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An Applied Digital Competences Curriculum To Help Reduce Early School Leavers And/Or Students Without Skills

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Abstract—This paper explores the development, part-implementation and evaluation of an Applied curriculum programme in Digital Competences at secondary level. It will strive to show how such programmes serve students better by addressing their needs, helps them overcome difficulties, and acts as a catalyst in developing their skills. Such a programme does not discriminate between students but empowers those who, coming from underprivileged backgrounds, would struggle within the traditional schooling system.

This study offers directions that would help in reducing the early school leaving rate in Malta whilst raising the bar in digital competences as targeted in Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024. By collecting data through semi-structured interviews with two key stakeholders, systematic classroom observations and a focus group interview with ten students, the researcher gained insight of measures that are in place and others that can be implemented to embed applied subjects. It also explored how the present system, which caters for 64% of the students, can encompass a wider number, who ultimately are at risk of being early school leavers. An examination of challenges faced by the educational system are also ascertained in this study. This is followed by implications for the future, which underpins the targets manifested in the Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta where all stakeholders must commit to provide a better future for 21st century learners regardless of the blends of options they will choose to study.

Keywords: applied curriculum programme, early school leaving, digital skills

I INTRODUCTION

Various local and international studies have shown that the relatively high early school-leaving rate is one of the challenges faced by the Maltese education system.

As highlighted in A Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta 2014 (Ministry for Education and Employment Malta, 2014), the target is to reduce the Early School Leaving (ESL) rate to less than 10% by 2020. Thus, this Strategic Plan accentuates the need to contribute to an educational framework, namely the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 (Ministry for Education and Employment Malta, 2014) which focuses on offering high quality educational programmes tailored to individual capacities. This framework outlined four targets, one of which is “support educational achievement of children at-risk-of-poverty and from low socio-economic status, and reduce the relatively high incidence of early school-leavers” (p.3).

To this end, two years after such framework has been published, the Ministry for Education has proposed a ‘new secondary schooling system’ through My Journey (Ministry for Education and Employment Malta, 2017) which shall move from a one-size-fits-all schooling system towards an equitable quality learning provision system. This new system shall provide general academic and vocational education and training as well as applied/practical learning programmes in various subjects; including Information Technology (IT), all leading to an MQF¹ Level² qualification (National Commission for Further and Higher Education Malta, 2018).

The aim of this study was to develop a Digital Competences curriculum at secondary level for the Applied Strand, implement and evaluate a subset of this curriculum with a class.

¹ MQF refers to Malta Qualifications Framework

² Different levels on the MQF require a minimum number of credits

A The European Commission's Policy Messages to tackle Early School Leaving

The European Commission presents key findings of the European Union's ET2020 Working Group on School Policy on ESL. The paper 'A whole school approach to tackling early school leaving' (European Commission, 2015) shows that ESL is multi-faceted and needs an equally multi-dimensional approach to effectively tackle its varied causes.

The Underlying Factors of Early School Leaving

This paper shows that ESL is habitually the result of personal, social, economic, educational and family-related factors. Most often, ESL is also the result of accumulative disengagement from education, associated with underachievement, which may have started in early years. It also illustrates that parents' socio-economic status and their educational attainment are among the strongest triggers of ESL.

Educational systems with: grade retention, early tracking, not enough support for learners, lack of VET³ and inadequate provision of early childhood education and care, are faced with tougher social inequalities in educational achievement and attainment.

Our education and training system may also be exacerbating the situation and creating barriers for learners who are struggling within the traditional educational and training system. At school level the following factors can contribute to ESL. These include: school and classroom practices, educators' attitudes, teaching pedagogies that may affect learners' motivation and commitment towards education, unpleasant school atmosphere, lack of learner-centred approach, insufficient awareness of educational disadvantage, bullying and violence, poor relationship between educators and learners and teaching methods and curricula that are not perceived as relevant to the learners.

Key Conditions for Collaborative Approaches against Early School Leaving

'A whole school approach to tackling early school leaving' (European Commission, 2015) presents key conditions around five thematic areas in relation to the aim of this study.

1 School governance

Schools should be given more autonomy with regards to curriculum implementation. This will enable schools to recognise and offer the most suitable solutions for the specific needs of the school community.

2 Learner support

Curricula should be engaging and stimulating while allowing various forms of teaching, learning and assessment styles to take place. A strong focus should be placed on formative assessment, facilitating the attainment of knowledge and the development of skills and competencies to the best ability of the learner. Learners should be able to make a link with real-life and diversity in society.

Moreover, it is important to ensure that they may further their studies in subsequent levels of education and training or alternative training paths. Learner-centered teaching approach and further collaborative teaching and learning are highly encouraged. The validation of non-formal and informal learning should also be provided.

Learners should feel a sense of belonging and motivation through active participation in their school life. Time should also be allotted for dialogues in classrooms, student councils or during consultations to give an opportunity to learners to voice their views about their learning experiences. Opportunities to talk about issues that learners feel have an impact on their learning, should be provided through for instance interactive teaching and dialogic learning. To help promote learners' participation, schools are encouraged to involve students in school decision-making through school boards/councils and encourage learners to participate in school projects like Erasmus+ and eTwinning.

Career education and guidance is another preventive measure for ESL. Research shows (as cited in European Commission, 2015) that learners who have a career plan are more likely to engage positively in education as well as remain in schools. Another advantage of career education and guidance is that it helps smoothen the transition between compulsory schooling and subsequent levels of education and training or work. It is suggested in this paper that good study skills and career education should be incorporated in the curriculum while helping students recognise their strengths and talents. Career education can be incorporated in the curriculum as cross-curricula in various ways, for example: curricular and extra-curricular activities, work experience programmes, job shadowing, career games, or maybe taster courses in other pathways of education. Teaching staff, counsellors, parents/carers and employers all play an important part in this to empower learners in acquiring skills to pursue their interests, competences and career aspirations.

3 Teachers

As reviewed by the European Commission (2015), research shows that a supportive relationship between the teacher and the student is the strongest predictor of school engagement and achievement. Teachers should recognise that they can make a huge impact on the students' educational path while also understand the fact that helping the students fulfilling their potential is not a sole-responsibility but should be a whole-school approach. It is recognised in this paper that the teacher's role is becoming more demanding and broader in this sense. That is why it is of utmost importance for a teacher to acquire new skills and competences through CPDs⁴ and teachers' education training. The latter should help teachers understand school dropout mechanism as well as an educational disadvantage which includes risk and protective factors. Since teachers are in an advantaged position of recognising school disengagement or that a student may have learning difficulties at an early stage, immediate action can be taken to tackle the situation. The teachers also need to recognise and be enticed to reap the benefits of parents' and families' involvement in the child's learning process.

3 VET refers to Vocational Education and Training

4 CPD refers to Curriculum Professional Development

In-house training to encourage peer observation and peer-to-peer learning among teachers and among pupils is also envisaged in this paper. Peer supervision within the school or maybe with other schools may also be adopted so that one can work and learn from each other. eTwinning is mentioned as an example of a collaborative platform to support the above.

Another key finding is presented in this paper, mainly that when combining an engaging and relevant curriculum with an inspiring and dedicated staff, ESL and social exclusion are prevented in the most effective way.

4 Parents and Families

Since parental involvement is an important factor for a child's educational success, it is highly important that parents/carers are provided with ideas of how to help their children at home with school-related work.

a) Stakeholders involvement

A wide range of stakeholders and professionals including youth services and organisations, social workers, care workers, psychologists, nurses and therapists, child protection services, police, unions, business, intercultural mediators, migrants associations, guidance specialists, NGOs⁵, community based organisations from sport, cultural environment and others, can bring a variety of perspectives in comprehending the problems related to ESL and provide solutions tailored to the students' needs. Therefore, schools must be politically supported in order to promote cooperation and networking between schools and these stakeholders. Cooperation and networking with social partners and local businesses is crucial so that learners perceive the curriculum attractive and relevant to the world of work.

The key conditions provide guidelines to the above mentioned educational and non- educational stakeholders of how to work collaboratively to tackle the issue of ESL.

Another project co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union, namely 'Study: Telling digital stories to fight against early school-leaving' (Donert et al., 2016) also reports key policy messages that can inform policies to prevent ESL. One such vital key messages is the importance of supporting schools to develop beneficial and supportive learning environments that concentrate on the learners' needs while also promoting curricula that are engaging and relevant to the students. These messages are vital in informing policy stakeholders to develop policy frameworks to tackle ESL (a multi-level political issue concerning Malta and Europe).

b) Malta's National Lifelong Strategy 2020

The Europe 2020 strategy (as cited in Ministry for Education and Employment, Malta, 2014) partly highlights the need of protecting and promoting longer term investment in education and training as well as pursuing the modernisation of the education and training systems particularly Lifelong Learning, vocational training and work-based learning schemes. Moreover, Malta's National Lifelong strategy 2020 (as cited in Ministry for Education and Employment,

Malta, 2014) highlights that Malta's immediate challenges with Lifelong Learning are evident in various trends, in particular early school leavers and low-skills achievers. Though Malta's early school leaving rate is slowly declining, it is still high when compared to EU 2020 average target rate of 10% (The President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, 2015).

In 2015, the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society published a study entitled 'Early School Leaving and Wellbeing in Malta and Beyond'. In the introduction to the study Her Excellency notes that early school leaving is directly associated with the wellbeing of any society. She points out that early school leaving is linked to negative consequences including social exclusion, poverty and unemployment. Her Excellency claims that if such an immediate challenge is not appropriately addressed, the negative impact on the future of our children will be long lasting. Whilst noting that the rate of early school leavers in Malta is declining, She encouraged policymakers and educators, to maintain the rate of decline.

c) My Journey – Achieving through Different Paths

One of the reforms in the Maltese educational policy frameworks is My Journey – Achieving through Different Paths (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2017). My Journey will replace the present compulsory secondary school model with inclusive and comprehensive secondary school system that provides equitable quality learning to all students by offering personalised, relevant and quality programmes. These programmes are inspired by the values of inclusion, social justice, equity and diversity and the four major targets of Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta: 2014-2024 (as cited in Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014).

d) Applied Teaching and Learning Curriculum Programme

Global and national policy documents define applied teaching and learning around similar key aspects which can direct professional planning, development and implementation of educational programmes for all students to succeed notwithstanding the different abilities, difficulties and needs.

In the reform My Journey, the Ministry for Education and Employment (2017) outlines the aims of the three 'equitable learning programmes' namely: general academic learning, the vocational and the applied programmes. The aim of the latter mentioned programme is that it provides practical hands-on learning in a dynamic and progressive learning environment. It falls under the qualification stream which gives students employability skills necessary for the world of work whilst allowing them the option to progress to post-compulsory educational institutions providing programmes at MQF levels 1-3 as may be required or to higher programmes at MQF 4 (and possibly eventually even higher). (p.8)

The development of the programme proposed in this study is an applied programme based on the key conditions proposed by the European Commission (2015) and the above mentioned policy documents and programmes.

e) Digital Competences Skills

The European Union's Science Hub published the European Digital Competence Framework to improve the citizen's digital competence.

5 NGO refers to Non-Governmental Organizations

Digital Competence, also referred as the task for the 21st century citizen, refers to being confident in using basic ICT skills for work, leisure and communication (European Commission, 2019). This means that someone who is digitally competent will have competences in: Information and Data Literacy; Communication and Collaboration; Digital Content Creation; Safety; and Digital Problem Solving.

In this study, an Applied curriculum programme in Digital Competences was developed and was partly implemented with a Year 9 class at secondary level. The Digital Competence Framework 2.0 (Carretero, Vuorikari & Punie, 2017), and other curricula like Northern Ireland Curriculum Guide for Post Primary Schools, the Australian Curriculum and the Information and Communication Technology 2019 v.1.0 Applied Senior Syllabus of Queensland were referred to as models for the development of this curriculum which mainly focused on the above mentioned competencies.

II METHODOLOGY

A Action Research with a Case

This paper explores an action research with a case within a policy framework (bounded and focused). According to Hine (2013) “action research enables researchers to develop a systematic, inquiring approach toward their own practices oriented towards effecting positive change in this practice, or within a broader community” (p. 2).

In this study, the case is the design of a Digital Competences curriculum for the IT Applied Strand as mentioned in My Journey (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2017) in a small school setting (bounded) in the participants’ (boys’ secondary school students) natural setting. Then, a subset of this curriculum was partly implemented and evaluated through various methods and assessment with a Year 9 class by the same researcher as will be discussed further down.

The researcher chose one small-school. The school was selected based on the researcher’s teaching experience in the same school. The number of participants was ten students from the Year 9 class.

B Methods for Data Collection

Denscombe (2010) emphasises in-depth data collection through multiple methods and multiple sources of data. Due to ethical considerations, information sheets and consent forms were given prior to the below methods of data collection. Pseudonyms will be used in the transcript. Data collection was done having ethical clearance.

This research included five components:

1. Analysis of policy documents: analysing the main goals depicted in policy documents about the ‘new schooling system’ and on the prospect of reducing the ESL rate.
2. Interviews with educational stakeholders: with the Director General for Curriculum, Lifelong Learning and Employability and the EO⁶ of Vocational and Applied Education.
3. Development of curriculum: this curriculum was developed while a thorough review of literature is ongoing and after depicting the needs and current challenges of the Maltese educational system. It was partly put to trial and assessed.
4. Observations with students from the Year 9 class: since part of this curriculum was put to trial with the Year 9 class, systematic observations were important for this study. These sessions were video-recorded.
5. Focus group interview with the Year 9 class: to encourage participants to talk about their views towards the subset of the curriculum that has been put to trial, focus group interview was considered as crucial. Participation in the focus group interview was voluntary. The interview took around thirty minutes and was then transcribed.

III RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

A School Autonomy over Curriculum

During the semi-structured interview with Mr Cachia, the Director General (DG) for Curriculum, Lifelong Learning and Employability, he claimed that he hopes that in the future, schools will be given more autonomy with regards to curriculum development which makes sense for them in their reality. Ms Zerafa, EO of VET and Applied IT, explained that teachers are now being empowered since they can choose modes of assessment that are more learner focused. Throughout the researcher’s teaching experience and during this study, it was realised how beneficial it would be for schools to tailor curricula according to the needs and abilities of the students. Students felt more motivated to learn and showed more commitment to the subject. Participating students made the point that this is more relevant to them and is useful for their prospects including work, studies and life.

With reference to the key conditions proposed by the European Commission (2015), this can also have an impact on ESL. This was highlighted during the focus group interview where students showed that they were keen to further their studies after compulsory education in various areas including IT as they realised that alternative paths other than the academic one can serve better their abilities and needs.

B The Educational System was Failing a Cohort of Students

Mr Cachia remarked that after vocational subjects were reintroduced in schools, it was still realised that the needs for a particular

6 EO refers to Educational Officer

cohort of students were still not being met by the system. He claimed that the present system is currently catering for 64% of the students. Introducing vocational subjects in schools was still a success and the biggest change that brought most of the success was the change in assessment that is: assessment was divided between 60% continuous school-based assessment and 40% exam-based to form a global mark. However, a number of students' needs were still not being met by this system. Both Mr Cachia and Ms Zerafa claimed that this could be due to the strong theoretical aspect of the VET subjects. Though the theoretical aspect is still important, it was felt that syllabi with strong focus on learning by doing was needed. Students participating in this study claimed that learning was much more fun when focus was placed on learning by doing. The focus of the Digital Competences curriculum that was designed as part of this study was put on hands-on digital skills, soft skills which then guides the theoretical aspects of these skills. Some of the students observed how the mode of teaching is different from other IT related subjects and is much more tailored to what they need. These remarks are in line with the routes proposed in My Journey (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2017) as well as with the EU propositions of students being actively engaged in learning.

C The Nature of Applied Curricula

Participants in the semi-structured interview remarked that applied syllabi are targeted for students who find it difficult to sit down, listen, take notes and then apply what they have learnt in the workshops. Applied syllabi are more practical in nature – the students will first engage in hands-on activities, then the theory underpinning the practical follows. Ms Zerafa noted that applied subjects are more targeted toward 'kids, the majority of whom don't like to learn from books and papers, hate reading and writing nonetheless some of them are very good students'. Though reading and writing may be 'boring' for some students, Ms Zerafa claimed that when students say 'I'm enjoying what I'm doing, I am motivated to read and write about it', reading and writing can still be implemented in a 'fun' way. During the focus group interview, Harry⁷, a student that has literacy difficulties, said that now he is more eager to search the web to help him learn more on something (he said 'kemm tikteb l-affarijiet li trid u ssibha ghax tkun vera helpful').

Mr Cachia added that in order to offer the whole package 'to this type of students', an applied version of the Core subjects was also important to develop. He claimed that if a student furthers his/her studies or becomes employable, the student needs the whole package. This shows that when students who often struggle to cope within the traditional classroom setting due to learning difficulties, find learning more fun and useful when they are actively engaged and find the subject relevant. Participating students made the point that when the English lesson was embedded with the IT lesson, they realised that they did not only found the lesson much more fun but also found realised the importance of good communication skills when communicating with shop attendants when buying something, working with colleagues at the place of work and maybe when talking with clients when they become employable.

Though other subjects may not be in the applied route, these can still be tackled from the applied perspective. Certain tasks may seem more theoretical, however the teacher can still adapt a pedagogy and an alternative way (rather to the pen and paper) so that lessons will be more hands-on. Ms Zerafa convincingly said that when tasks are more hands-on 'most probably, students put more, learn more and remember more. And I believe that all or most of academic subjects can be applied'. During one of the lessons that was put to trial in this study, dominoes were used to teach students a particular topic (units of storage). During the focus group, more than one student mentioned this activity when asked if they remember a particular activity done in class. There were more activities that were mentioned and all of them were practice-based. Alistair⁸ said 'Hadt gost f'tad-dominoes u fhimt' and Jack⁹ added that he would find this relevant when buying a technological device in the future. They expressed more interest as they found that what they were learning was relevant to them as remarked in the key conditions proposed by the European Commission (2015).

As from 2020/2021, all academic subjects will also include a school-based assessment, however the exam still carries the biggest weight Mr Cachia claimed. He said that it is a 'cultural thing' which is not that easy to change. Our problem is that we prepare students just for the exams were unfortunately students do not really show what they really know in exams. Mr Cachia believes that school-based assessment can help all students and not just the so-called 'weak students'. Through 'real-good school-based assessments', Mr Cachia said that even the so-called 'high flyers' can benefit more since students will learn in depth and most probably they learn much more effectively. Mr Cachia feels that it is very unfair that summative exams penalise most the weak students because for him, summative exams are the worst way for 'weak students' to show what they really know while most probably they have strengths which can be shown through other means of assessment. The strong focus on exams is a 'cultural thing' among all stakeholders (he mentions parents and teachers in particular) and it is time to change it. Since nine new vocational and applied subjects are going to be introduced for the scholastic year 2019/2020, we are starting to move away from this strong focus on summative exams and hopefully in the future we can look at other subjects to be implemented in the applied version as well.

D Engaging Learners through Active Learning

During the part implementation of this applied curriculum, students were introduced to the concept of active learning. Students who often struggle in the traditional classroom setting, were eagerly asking how active learning could be implemented in class. Active learning was introduced to them as a process where the teacher presents the conditions to learn and guide them to find a solution to the problem rather than providing knowledge. As soon as they realised that they were going to spend a lot of time doing something hands-on and that they were going to own the problem, they could not wait to start doing the activities and asked many relevant questions. Since constructivism is a theory of active learning (Pardjono, 2016) the researcher presented quotes of Dewey, Papert and Einstein

7 Pseudonym

8 Pseudonym

9 Pseudonym

who all exercised the principles of constructivism to help them appreciate the benefits of active learning. Though many of them have never heard of any or all of the three constructivists, they curiously asked about them. At the end of the introduction lesson, Juvi¹⁰ (a student who lacks self-confidence when asked to work on non-usual activities) said they he really was looking forward and said 'hekk toghgobni hafna l-lesson'. During one of the activities, students were asked to justify why they have made certain decisions. They got so involved in the activity that they searched, discussed and learnt other concepts on their own. This also showed that when students feel that their participation is valued and that they enjoy what they are doing, they are much more eager to learn and experiment without having to constantly help them to focus. Thus, this paper recommends that when the lesson is more student-centred and students are actively engaged in activities, their motivation increases, and they excel in their assigned tasks much more than one can ever expect.

E Pushing the Vocational and Applied Learning Experience into Secondary Schools

During the semi-structured interviews, it was expressed that the applied and vocational subjects should not be seen in a vacuum but part of the whole system. Mr Cachia said that while the system is currently catering for 64% of the students who get at least five SEC O'Levels¹¹, the majority of the remaining 36% further their studies in post-secondary institutions like MCAST and 55% of these students who read a Level 1, 2 or 3 course achieve a Level 3. He was concerned about the irony of the situation since in actual fact, these students who achieve a Level 3 at MCAST, would be repeating what they should have done in secondary schools and managed to achieve it. Thus, he believes that we must push this vocational and applied learning experience into secondary schools through these syllabi. Students overwhelmingly expressed their eagerness to further their studies in post-compulsory institutions that offer hands-on learning since the project-based assessment and the real-life scenarios were among the most things that motivated them to work. One particular highlighted this when he said 'qabel ma dhalt hawnhekk ma kontx inhobbu l-kompjuter. Hekk iktar joghgobni bil-progetti u hekk'. Thus, pushing the vocational and applied learning into schools through active learning activities and project-based assessments may also have an impact on students' achievement in schools as they are more motivated to work and hopefully will encourage them to further their studies in an area that interests them most.

F Guidance to Students about Applied Subject as an Option and its Eligibility

During the guidance sessions that were concluded in March 2019, it was made clear both to parents and students who were doing their option choice that the structure of the applied curricula is different from that of the other routes. It was also made clear to them that while SEC (Secondary Education Certification issued by MATSEC) is for academic and vocational subjects, SEAC (Secondary Education Applied Certification – a new certification issued by MATSEC) is for the applied subjects. Mr Cachia claimed that they informed

parents and students that while SEC certificate is recognised at Junior College, MCAST, ITS, Higher Secondary, Gozo sixth form, and private sixth forms, SEAC is recognised only at MCAST and ITS. Mr Cachia claimed that they received very good feedback from parents especially the ones who were not doing well at school. Ms Zerafa claimed that since guidance teachers know the students very well, they guided students to choose a route that is a good match for their needs. In fact, Mr Cachia remarked that guidance was done very well since the students who can benefit the most from the applied route, have in fact chosen this route. This goes in line with research (as cited in European Commission, 2015) that career education and guidance is a preventive measure for ESL. This also helps smoothen the transition between compulsory schooling and subsequent levels of education and training or work as also aimed in My Journey (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2017).

G Closing the Gap between the World of Education and the World of Work

Mr Cachia and Ms Zerafa conveyed that students being able to connect what they are doing in class and what is happening in the world of work is the most ideal way for learners to perceive the curriculum attractive and relevant to the world of work. Mr Cachia said that certain subjects like Hospitality lend themselves for students to learn directly within the hospitality industry. However, both Mr Cachia and Ms Zerafa said that it is not that easy to make this kind of arrangements with the industry for certain subjects (Ms Zerafa mentioned IT as an example). The reason being is that some industries are much more fragmented and smaller in size as companies. Ms Zerafa said that for certain subjects, due to these logical barriers and challenges, it currently boils down to the school's and teacher's initiative to make arrangements with the industry so that students can at least make observations or have talks at the practice placement. The ideal way is that they get hands-on practice at the practice placement, and efforts are being made to develop these types of experiences for the students to help them relate the world of education and the world of work. Tyler¹² said that when he was given a real-life scenario where he had to propose a computerised system to someone while keeping with the budget, Excel (a software used for calculations) is going to help him in the future in the world of work 'L-Excel huwa bzonnjuż ukoll fil-hajja għax jekk ikollok hanut bilfors ikollok bzonn l-Excel. Eżempju jiena użajtu tfajt xi haġa, tfajt kemm hu u jghidlek kemm fadallek. Jghinnek fil-flus għall-budgeting'. This showed that he could relate what he learned in class with the world of work. Jack added that now he knows how to search for better deals and he feels more in control of how much money he spends, he added 'Għax xi darba ahna ha jkollna l-flus tagħna, se jkollna budget u rridu nkunu nafu x'irridu naghmlu'. Apart from helping students to relate to the world of work, students are also gaining other skills as proposed in the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 (Ministry for Education and Employment Malta, 2014).

10 Pseudonym

11 SEC O'Level exams are set by the University of Malta

12 Pseudonym

H Basic General ICT Skills for All Students

Ms Zerafa refers to the digital skills as skills which everybody should have, and she believes that these should be taught to all students in schools. Mr Cachia added that these skills should be as applied as possible and offered to all students. The focus should still be on learning by doing while students are actively engaged in relevant activities from which they can learn. He believes that IT has a big advantage due to the 'wow factor' of technology and works as a motivator for all students. As cited in *My Journey* (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2017), Malta is investing in modernising the curricula, improving the quality of teaching as well as promoting the digital skills. This is also envisioned by the European Union in the European Digital Competence Framework. During the focus group interview, students mentioned numerous digital skills that they feel are important to have, some of which have been partly tackled during the part-implementation of the Digital Competences curriculum.

The following were among the most mentioned digital skills: knowing better how to do online search for jobs, courses and leisure activities, awareness of how to stay safe online, safe and secured websites, knowing how to book online when planning a vacation, using apps to locate places when travelling, e-commerce, applying for online courses, and using e-government services. Though some students claimed that they do not have the above-mentioned digital skills, they said that they need these skills for now and the future.

I A Strong Focus on Formative Assessment

Mr Cachia was constantly emphasising the importance of formative assessments in schools. While he explained that the assessment model for the vocational subjects was a big step forward in our educational system, in applied subjects it seemed important as well to give more weight on formative assessment. In effect, it was proposed that 70% will be allotted to formative assessment. Next scholastic year will also be the first time that Core subjects will have 60% formative assessment.

Ms Zerafa further explained that formative assessment allows teachers to be creative in their modes of assessing students. She gave examples like video-recording, interviews, reporting and project-based. Mr Cachia was asked about the possibility of removing summative exams completely for the applied subjects. While he claims that this can be explored in the future, he feels that the system has already made big steps in the way we assess students. As the European Commission (2015) highlights in its paper to combat ESL, a strong focus should be placed on formative assessment.

To meet the challenges of preparing students identifying problems, plan, apply, produce and evaluate solutions, project-based assessment was implemented as formative assessment during this study. Through observations, it was noted that students could practice critical thinking as well as problem solving skills. It was realised that through the various previously mentioned activities that were done as part of project-based assessment, students could implement more what have learnt in class under the guidance of their teacher, than they would have in the traditional form of assessment. During

the focus group interview, Albert¹³ claimed that learning by doing is the most effective means of learning. He said 'Meta tiktibhom ma jfissirx li ser titghallimhom'. Harry also mentioned that 'Jiena rajt li hafna ahjar taghmilhom l-affarijiet milli tiktibhom ghax li tiktibhom fuq karta mhux se tkun qed tiehu pjaċir u t-tieni ma jfissirx li vera fhimthom billi tiktibhom'. Some participating students also claimed that sometimes language can be a barrier when being assessed. These students said that both English and Maltese should be used in class and assessments. Thus, this paper strongly recommends that strong focus should be placed on formative assessment within the "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.95) of the students as it can enrich the learning experience of students with various needs, increases students' engagement in class, improves students' motivation to work, while instilling in them interest to further their knowledge in that area in the future.

J Empowering School Students for Lifelong Learning

The idea behind the new secondary schooling system is not solely to prepare the students to go in the world of work but to motivate students and let them feel that they are successful in what they do. Mr Cachia emphasised that rather than emphasise on students' weaknesses or what they were not capable to achieve as the system has done for many of them, it is important to recognise students' strengths and build on that. He was confident in saying that this will be a motivator for students to further their studies after compulsory schooling. Even though Mr Cachia is aware that not all students can achieve a Level 3 certificate, nowadays there is the possibility of quantifying what the students have learnt even if this is at Level 2 or 1. Thus, truly giving justice to the students and presenting them with a certification of their skills.

Ms Zerafa also said that the idea is to give them the opportunity to get real-life situations that they can have at home or at the place of work in the future. She said that students will be given a taste in certain subject areas, and hopefully they will be motivated enough to further specialise in an area that they like. This reinforces the students' views that have been earlier highlighted. Though not all of them may further their studies in post-compulsory educations, the general view of the students was that they want to keep updated and to further their knowledge in areas that interest them. Ben¹⁴ have also showed interest in reading online courses 'Jiena nixtieq nistudja fuq l-internet, nistudja online eżempju biex ingib xi liċenzja'.

K Soft skills for Employability

Persuasively, Mr Cachia and Ms Zerafa said that soft-skills are highly sought by employers and is something which all students must have irrespective of the route they choose to study. They said that skills like: teamwork, creativity, problem-solving, language and communication skills are skills which students have an issue with. Mr Cachia said that if students are motivated through relevant subjects, ultimately this will have a spill-over effect and students will become more motivated towards school and willing to achieve good skills through the above mentioned soft skills. Ms Zerafa continued to

13 Pseudonym

14 Pseudonym

emphasise that these soft skills and 21st century skills can be achieved through the applied subjects. She remarked that through hands-on tasks, students can achieve more skills than they would achieve from the theoretical aspect.

She hopes that these skills work as a motivator for students to further their studies in post-compulsory educational institutions. During this study, an IT lesson was embedded with the English lesson. Jovi said 'din teamwork' and Jack said that now he realises the importance of communication skills when greeting someone (he refers to this as 'mhux just nghidlu din l-ahjar li ghandi imma nispegalu u nkun naf inkellmu ghaliex u hekk. Titghallem iktar kif taghmel konverżazzjoni'). This is in line with the implication for the future in the Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta. When students were asked to express their views about the soft skills, they have mentioned several soft skills and their importance including being responsible at the place of work, adhering to timeframes, teamwork at the place of work, within the family, and when going to a vacation with a tour group.

An Early School Leaving Strategy for Malta (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012) recommends a collaborative holistic approach in developing life and problem-solving skills. Problem-solving was an active learning technique implemented during the part- implementation of this curriculum. Students were presented with different real-life scenarios from which each group had to choose one scenario and ultimately choose the appropriate computer, parts of a computer, peripheral devices and software for the chosen scenario.

Through various hands-on activities including: webquest, unplugged computing activities¹⁵, online search on the specifications of currently available technologies, dismantling and upgrading computer machines, dialogue speech prepared during the English lesson and 3D design and printing during the Design and Technology lesson; students worked in teams to provide solutions. The general view of the students was that through the above-mentioned activities, they have developed life and problem-solving skills among others which they are going to find useful when they further their studies, at work and also in their everyday life. One particular student mentioned that such skills are going to help him make better decisions in the future as he said 'inkun naf x'inhu li qed infittex u nistaqsi'. During the observations, it was noted that students got involved in the scenarios as if it was their own situation. The majority of the students made strong arguments during the lessons which helped in developing life and problem-solving skills. Other students had to be encouraged a bit more to express their views, and this shows that curricula need to put more emphasis on such skills.

L Applied Subjects may Help in Reducing the Early School Leaving Rate

Mr Cachia hopes that through these subjects, in the long run a number of students will achieve a Level 3 qualification (which they may not have achieved through other syllabi). If not, at least they are

motivated to keep on studying at post-secondary level in institutions such as MCAST and ITS and this in turn would reduce the ESL rate.

Ms Zerafa is hopeful that applied subjects will help in reducing the ESL rate since she believes that early school leavers, leave school because they get bored at school. They are going to be motivated to go to school because they know that they are going to do something that they enjoy. The fact that they can be creative, that are going to be assessed through different modes of assessment and the fact that the mark at the end of the year is going to reflect the work that have been done at throughout the year, will ultimately help out to diminish ESL. This is in line with what is being proposed in My Journey (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2017) to provide equitable quality learning programmes to all students that will help to reduce the ESL rate as targeted in the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 (Ministry for Education and Employment Malta, 2014).

M Challenges

Mr Cachia claimed that they had to guide the students in a manner to choose wisely the appropriate route due to the fact that they could not have a surge in the number of students who choose applied due to workshops space limitations. Thus, everyone was guided in a manner that best fit the student.

Another challenge that we are still facing is the perceived quality of all routes. With regards to applied subjects, Mr Cachia strongly believes that 'No, that it should not be of lesser quality. It is different but it should not be of a lesser quality.' He claimed that we should fight this challenge in the coming years through pedagogy and the attitude towards students. Though Ms Zerafa feels that the society is changing, she claimed that there are parents who still tell their children 'no don't go for the vocational because it is 'tas-snajja' (something which is considered of a lesser quality) but strictly speaking it is not'.

Mr Cachia acknowledges that some people look at the applied route as a route for those students who would fail in the academic route. However, he strongly believes that these are students who have other strengths which we must value more. Since applied subjects were approved by the Senate of the University of Malta and certified by MATSEC, Mr Cachia claims that this gives out the message that there is a parity of esteem between all routes. Ms Zerafa said that people are still a bit biased regarding certification 'if it is behind an MCAST stamp or University of Malta' but she believes that this mentality is changing. We must keep pushing forward and challenge this mentality.

Mr Cachia recognises that practical sessions for certain subjects are more difficult to do due to practicality (he gave the example of having the teacher monitoring a student while doing a bandage). The fact that teachers have to monitor while assessing and given the available time to do so, may create logistic issues. Still, he believes that it is an interesting challenge and he is still in favour of formative assessment and the fact that we have moved away from just the summative exam which let down quite a number of students in the

15 Pseudonym

past years. Unfortunately, he claims that there is still some resistance even from teacher about moving away from exams.

Ms Zerafa expressed her concerns that teachers nowadays have more work to do with regards to assessing student (she refers to as a 'hassle on the teacher' and 'quite more hectic to assess').

This is becoming more time-consuming than before, but still this is more beneficial for the students.

During the class observations, it was also noted that sometimes students found it difficult to comprehend online content. When they worked in a group, students could help each other overcome such language barrier but when they had to work individually, they had to be given a lot of guidance. For assessment purposes and during the lessons, students were encouraged to use the English language so that they will not only enhance their English language skills but for other foreign students to feel that they are included. However, when they found it struggling to communicate in English, they were given the opportunity to express their views and their findings in a language that they feel confident to use, even for assessment purposes. This was also pointed out during the focus group interview, and though they feel that both English and Maltese (their mother language) should be used, the general view was that sometimes they should be given an opportunity to use a language that they feel confident to use. Thus, this paper highly recommends alternative language use (particularly the Maltese language in this case) for applied subjects as this can affect learners' motivation and commitment towards education.

IV CONCLUSION

This study has shown that it is crucial to provide students a supportive learning environment to prosper both academically and socially. All stakeholders should work in collaboration towards a single goal of empowering the student towards a life-long education. As highlighted by the European Commission (2015), the ESL is multi-faceted and needs an equally multi-dimensional approach to tackle ESL. To combat ESL, as highlighted in a key condition by the European Commission, it is crucial to develop engaging and stimulating curricula with strong focus on formative assessment which facilitates the attainment of knowledge and the development of skills and competencies to the best ability of the learner. Schools should be given more autonomy with regards to curricula to best adapt according to their realities. These curricula should allow the students to link with real-life and diversity in society while ensuring that they may further their studies in subsequent levels of education and training. In order to improve the citizen's digital competence, as also highlighted by the European Union's Science Hub, it is important that the citizen be confident in using basic ICT skills for leisure, active citizenship, employment and communication. The proposed Applied Digital Competences curriculum shall empower the school students who are full of energy and keen to become more digital literate, notwithstanding the different abilities and needs. The Applied Digital Competences curriculum is inspired by Malta's educational framework which envisions to provide equitable quality learning programmes, digital skills and soft skills. This programme

shall engage students in hands-on activities, while let them achieve skills in real-life situations and also help them in mastering the so important soft skills. Conceding that the curriculum is tailored to be more hands on, students who usually are labelled as low achievers in the one-size fits all education system will engage more and a better experience will ensue. Moreover, it is more likely that they progress to post-compulsory educational institution which is one of the targets of the applied strand in My Journey reform.

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Employing Maltese Students' Digital Inclinations As a Gateway to Formal Learning

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Abstract— Technology is changing the ways we do things. Nowadays children are using the internet and digital technologies such as iPads, tablets, smartphones and computers from a young age. A number of studies have been conducted in different countries to analyse which digital technologies children have at home, how they use them and how did they learn to use them. As part of the One Tablet Per Child Initiative (OTPC), in 2016, every child in Year 4 was provided with a tablet to enhance their digital competences, writing, numeracy and reading. By now all students in Year 4, 5 and 6 are benefitting from this initiative and there are plans to introduce the use of personal devices in middle and secondary schools in the following years.

However, research on digital competences in the Maltese children is still scant. Therefore, the aim underlying this study is to discover how students' private digital inclinations, can shed light on the employment of digital technology in formal educational contexts within the learning outcome frameworks and curriculum. The results of this study show that the objectives of the OTPC have been reached as the majority of the participants use the school tablet for educational purposes. Beyond school activities; such as entertainment; the participants prefer to use other technological devices like television, smartphone, laptop and home tablet. Also, the participants do not make use of the school website and Ilearn frequently at home. Results show that the most adopted digitally mediated activities include: watching videos on YouTube, playing games and browsing for fun. Laptops, smartphones and home tablets are three of the most preferred devices participants would like to bring to school.

It is envisaged that these findings will shed light on the best available options for a new pilot project that will start in the scholastic year 2019-2020 where personalised digital technologies will be introduced in Middle Secondary School

I INTRODUCTION

Technology is revolutionising our world at a remarkable speed (Badri, Nuaimi, Yang, Rashedi, 2017). These changes are also evident at schools (Lim, Zhao, Tondeur, Chai, Tsai,

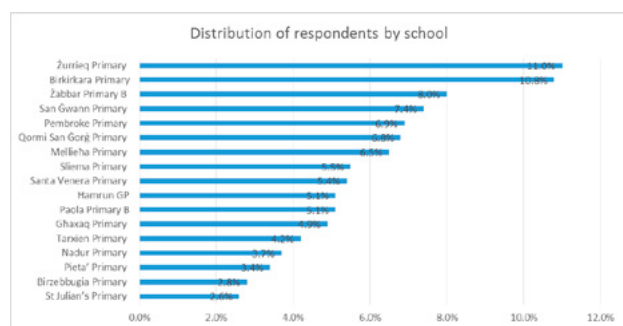
2013). As highlighted by Lim et. al (2013), in the last two decades technology investments in schools have increased worldwide. Through technology, not only do students search and analyse information, solve problems and communicate better, but, will be equipped with the competencies necessary for today's workforce (ibid, 2013).

The inclusion for ICT in Malta's schools has been going on for several years (Camilleri, 2017; Curmi, 2015). Digital learning has been introduced through the introduction of various classroom technologies, laptops for all teachers and learning support educator and the set-up of several Virtual Learning Environments and Learning Management Systems in schools including even non state schools (ibid). In 2014, the Digital Malta 2014-2020 (MITA and MCA, 2014) and the National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 (MEDE, 2014) were launched. The latter strategy focuses more on adult education while Digital Malta 2014-2020 focusing on issues related to ICT and the economy (Camilleri, 2017). These two strategies are accompanied by Digital Literacy, a green paper put forward by the Department of eLearning (2015) within the Ministry for Education. This green paper offered an academic perspective and its main objective was to offer

insights into digital literacy within the Maltese educational system and local policies. Also, in 2014 a pilot study was conducted about the One Tablet Per Child Initiative. The aim behind this initiative is to improve students' reading, numeracy, writing and digital competences (Debattista, 2015). Furthermore, the Learning Outcomes Framework (Ministry for Education and Employability, N.A) which was introduced in 2018 within the Maltese educational system will move away from centrally imposed learning models to more adaptive learning that addresses better the needs of each student.

Within this context of digital transformation, this paper highlights and discusses the main findings of the study 'Employing Maltese Students' Digital Inclinations as a Gateway to Formal Learning'. This was conducted with Year 4 and Year 5 students from sixteen state schools in Malta and Gozo in November 2018. 1,360 responses out of 1,483 were collected through an online questionnaire. This means that 91.7% of the eligible population participated in this study, of which 52.1% were boys and 47.4% were girls. Figure 1 shows the distribution of respondents by school.

Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by School



This means that 25.9% of all students attending State Schools taking part in the national project One-Tablet-Per-Child Initiative (OTPC) participated.

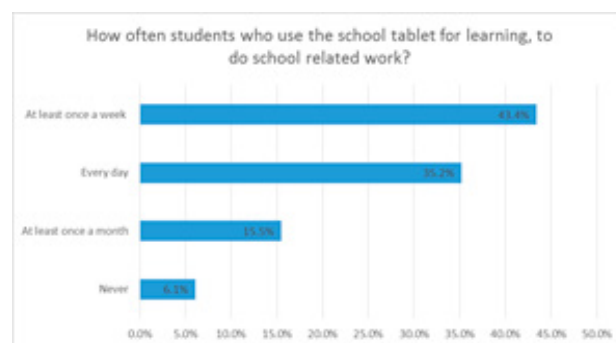
This quantitative research study was conducted by the Research and Innovation Unit (DRLLE) within the Ministry for Education (MEDE) in collaboration with the Directorate for Digital Literacy and Transversal Skills (DDLTS) and Dr Patrick Camilleri, Faculty of Education at the University of Malta. The main research question is: How students' digital inclinations can be adopted in formal education to enrich students' learning experience? Hence, this paper analyses students' private digital inclinations whose outcomes can provoke the design of tailor-made policies that educators can take advantage of to support and enrich teaching and learning in formal educational contexts.

II MAIN FINDINGS

Since 2016, these tablets have been used for educational purposes and nowadays all children in Year 4, 5 and 6 have a school tablet. In order to analyse in depth the relationship between the use of the school tablet for learning, students' competences and participants' perceptions on technology, the responses of respondents who claimed they

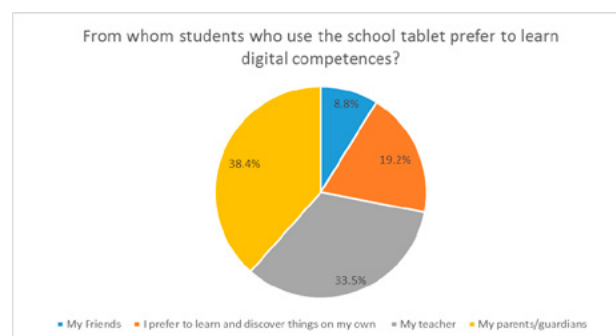
used the school tablet for learning were taken into consideration. From this analysis, it became evident that for the following tasks, participants prefer to use specific technological devices. It was found that for entertainment purposes, these students mostly resort to using the television and the other tablets while for communication these students mostly avail themselves of a smartphone and a tablet PC other than that provided by the school. Less than half of the respondents, used the school tablet at least once a week at home to do school related work while 35.2% used the school tablet every day for the same task. Furthermore, 15.5% claimed that they used the school tablet at least once a month, while 6.1% never used the school tablet at home to do school related work as illustrated in table 20 and Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: How often students who use the school tablet for learning, to do school related work?



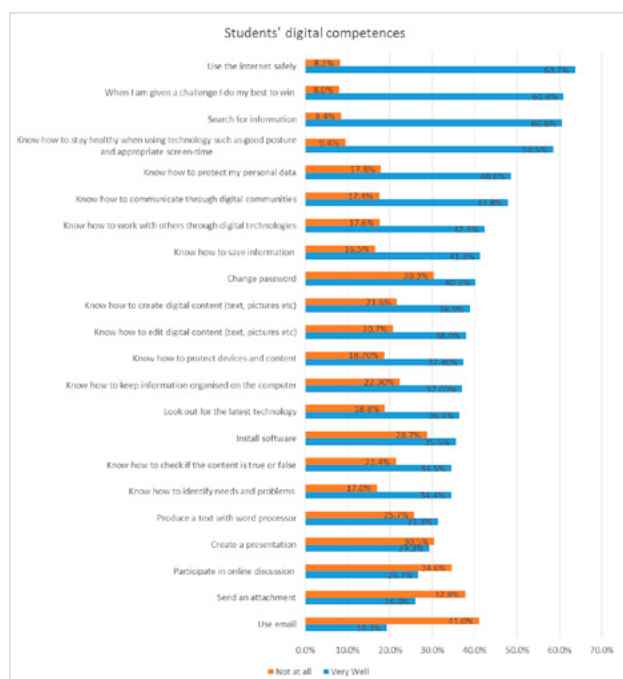
Respondents prefer to acquire digital competences from their teachers followed by their parents/guardians. Only 8.8% of the participants prefer to learn digital competences from their friends and 19.2% like to experiment on their own to learn new things.

Figure 3: From whom students who use the school tablet prefer to learn digital competences?



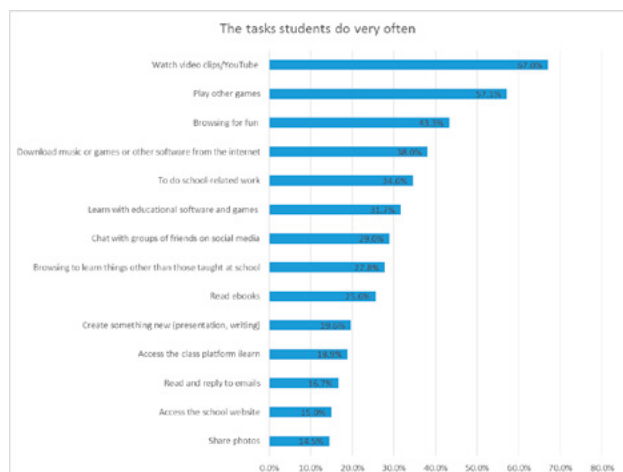
After analysing the use of the of the tablet for learning and how much do they know about internet safety, it became evident that more than half of the students who use the tablet for learning know how to use the internet safely, do their best when they are given a challenge and search for information. The tasks that these students are not confident to do are using the email, sending attachments and participating in online discussions as illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Students' digital competences



Moreover, the task which respondents do very often is watching video clips/ Youtube. This task is followed by playing other games and browsing for fun. On the other hand, the task which these participants do not do very often is sharing photos.

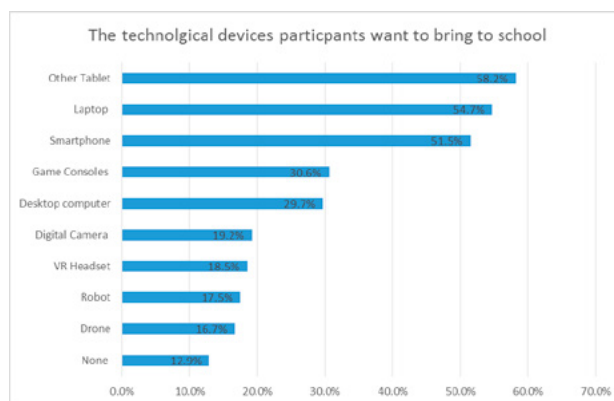
Figure 5: The tasks students do very often



The other tablet (home tablet), the laptop and the smartphone are the most devices the participants preferred to use and which students would like to bring with them at school to learn with. On the contrary, only a small number of participants would like to bring either a drone, a robot or a VR headset to school to learn more and this reflects the findings of this study that digital cameras and drones are not used by the participants for learning. This same trend is also reflected in the use of VR headsets. Only 18.5% claimed that they would like to bring a VR headset to school to learn more. Unlike

the findings of this study about the use of VR headset and learning Microsoft has launched the 21st century classroom project to demonstrate how the virtual reality can be used for educational aims. As from this scholastic year, 1,500 students in ten State, Church and Independent schools will experience the use of virtual reality in the class. The 21st century classroom will be set up at the Microsoft Innovation Centre. As a result of this, schools and students can experience the use of this technology.

Figure 6: The preferred devices students would like to bring to school



III CONCLUSION

The objectives of this study were to directed to:

- Firstly, investigating students' digital skills and inclinations of technology use.
- Secondly, identifying nascent qualities that can potentially be used by educators to push forward digitally inclined pupils while helping others that lag behind,
- Thirdly and finally, interpreting the outcomes within the context of the Maltese school realities to identify potentially adequate digital technology that can be used by students in their learning and at school

Subsequently, the main findings of this study are:

- The most preferred activities these participants like to do using digital technology are watching videos on YouTube, playing games and browsing for fun.
-
- Least preferred activities were sharing photos, reading and replying to emails and chatting with friends on social media. Incidentally these were also related to the tasks which the students claimed that they do not know how to do. This shows that some skills are not straightforward and that a one-size-fits-all teaching approach does not address different needs.
- As regards, other digital competences, the respondents claimed that they were knowledgeable on internet safety. They were capable of searching for information and overcome technological challenges. The school tablet was preferred by the participants to learn school related things while laptops, home tablets and

smartphones were preferred to learn about subjects not done at school as well as for entertainment purposes.

- Drones are increasing in their use, however, robots and VR headsets still have a long way to go to reach the popularity of other technological devices.
- Laptops, smartphones and home tablets were three of the most preferred devices participants would like to bring to school.
- For educational purposes, the tablet is mostly used at least once a week while robots and VR headsets are never used for these purposes.
- The school tablet is not preferred by a lot of the participants in their free time. The school tablet is mostly preferred for educational purposes. For this reason, the main objectives of the OTPC were reached since the school tablet is mostly preferred for educational purposes.

From this study it is clear that YouTube and other video clips may be interesting sources for student engagement while the use of laptops, smartphones and home tablets may lead to better educational outcomes.

Even though all students in Year 4, 5 and 6 are provided with a school tablet as part of the OTPC initiative, this does not mean adequate acquisition of digital competences by all the students. Literature establishes that educators can influence students to a great extent. This is exemplified when the respondents were asked from whom do they prefer to learn digital skills. Therefore educators have to be adequately trained and feel confident when using digital technologies in order to equip students with the skills required in the 21st century. In this study students claimed that they wish that they use technology more often at school because technology makes learning more enjoyable and engaging.

Unlike Marti and Mon (2017) findings only 32.3% of the participants in this study claimed that they know how to produce a text with word processor very well. Additionally, only 20.9% of the participants know how to use the email very well. Similar to what was discerned by Marti and Mon (2017), 60.8% knew how to search on the internet very well. Like the participants in Dashti and Yateem's study (2018), 56.7% of the participants used technological devices very often to play games. Similarly, reading e-books was not very popular with the participants in this study as only 26.4% stated that they regularly use technological devices for reading. Similar to the outcomes of the Zero to Eight Children's Media Use in America (2013) study, educational activities on mobile devices were not very popular. In this study, only 33.3% of the participants claimed that they learned with educational software and games. More or less the results found in the qualitative study conducted by the Joint Research Centre and the national country report that accompanied this study were similar to the results found in this study in terms of the use of digital competencies, the devices they have at home and children's competences.

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The MathPro Battery: A Tool for the Early Identification of Difficulties in Learning Mathematics

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Abstract—30% of Maltese 15-year-olds fail to demonstrate adequate mathematical proficiency (Pisa, 2018). Early diagnosis of mathematical learning difficulties (MLD) can greatly reduce the risk of consequential disadvantages for the future development of students. This study forms part of ongoing research in various European countries to standardize and ameliorate MathPro Test, an online computer-based assessment battery of numerical tasks. In line with the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, it presents a multidimensional model of MLD. MathPro Test incorporates 18 tasks modelled on four cognitive mathematical domains: Core Number, Memory, Visual Spatial and Numerical Reasoning. Mathematical profiles, highlighting areas of strengths and weaknesses for each domain are extracted and can be used to design intervention programmes based on the student’s specific needs. Participants (n=479) were primary school Maltese children from state, independent and church schools. Results revealed that the MathPro Test can identify, at an early age, Maltese students at risk of MLD. Individual profiles of students evaluated by teachers as ‘poor’/‘very poor’ in Maths, showed weaknesses resulting from distinct cognitive mathematical domains, indicating different subtypes of MLD. Participants in the comorbid group (‘poor’/‘very poor’ in both Maths and literacy) demonstrated the most severe impairments across domains. Results suggest promising methods of conducting and monitoring assessment of children’s numerical development.

Keywords: Mathematics learning disability (MLD), assessment, early identification, individual mathematical profiles, reading disability (RD), comorbidity (MLD + RD)

I INTRODUCTION

Results of the latest international studies, mainly PISA (2018), PISA (2015) and TIMSS (2015), indicate that a significant number of Maltese students, aged 13 to 15 years, fail to demonstrate adequate proficiency in Mathematics (MEDE, 2016; OECD, 2017, 2019). The Framework for Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 had already expressed concern and taken measures to address the situation following similar negative results in PISA 2009 and TIMSS 2007 (MEDE, 2014). However, in 2019, around 30% of Maltese fifteen-year-olds were still found to be performing below the benchmark in Mathematics (OECD, 2019).

Young people with special educational needs seem to be particularly at risk of early school leaving (ESL) (EASNIE, 2016). Poor

performance in examinations, lower teacher expectations, difficult courses of study and lack of educational support have been identified as factors that can lead to ESL (EASNIE, 2016; Winding & Anderson, 2015). An education system that aims at decreasing the number of early school leavers and the number of students leaving school without the necessary numeracy skills, needs to give serious consideration to early identification and intervention of Maths Learning Disability (MLD).

MLD, like RD (Reading Disability), occurs in childhood. If undiagnosed and untreated, impairments on core mathematical tasks manifested during primary years will not disappear but will persist and become a lifelong handicap (Kaufmann & Von Aster, 2012; Wilson et al., 2015). MLD and RD have a prevalence of 10% or more with a comorbidity incidence rate of roughly 40% (e.g. Jordan, 2010; Wilson, et al., 2015; Wong et al., 2017).

Research on the causal effects of MLD has been gaining momentum during the last 20 years (Traff, et al., 2017). The multitude of cognitive deficits underlying the complex domain of Mathematics, coupled with the fact that, unlike reading difficulties, maths difficulties may not be stable over time, present complications and impediments in bridging the gap between research and practice and with providing comprehensive assessment measures for early identification and treatment (Kaufmann & von Aster, 2012). Different theories of MLD have been proposed. They mainly fall under three categories: hypotheses supporting the idea that MLD stems from domain-specific deficits, those that posit that MLD results from domain-general deficits and theories claiming that MLD is heterogeneous and different subtypes prescribed, although the various table text styles are provided. The formatter will need to create these components, incorporating the applicable criteria that follow.

A Theories Supporting Domain-Specific Deficits

Hypotheses that fall under this category postulate that core Numerosity-Coding Hypothesis. Butterworth (2010) claims that MLD is caused by an impairment in the innate ability to represent and process exact numerosities on the basis of sets (ENS) (Iuculano et al., 2008). A deficit in this internal number coding system results in an inability to judge quantities (e.g. recognising that there are four and not three objects) and reason with their symbolic representations (i.e. know that '4' is bigger than '3') (Traff et al., 2017). The performance of children with MLD in number-comparison skills and basic number naming is poor relative to typically achieving peers (Landerl et al., 2004; Mussolin et al., 2010). Compared to typically developing children, those with MLD show large numerical distance effect (Ashkenazi & Henik, 2010; Ashkenazi et al., 2009).

The Access Deficit Hypothesis posits that MLD is a disconnection syndrome. As humans grow older, they learn to represent numbers symbolically and precisely (Wilson & Dehaene, 2007). MLD is caused by a failure to link non-symbolic to symbolic number representations (Rousselle & Noël, 2007). Children with MLD perform normally when comparing non-symbolic quantities and sizes, such as length of sticks, but manifest problems on tasks involving symbolic number comparisons (De Smedt & Gilmore, 2011; Rousselle & Noël, 2007). Findings with both adults and children further support the idea that a defective mapping system between the numerical symbols and the underlying magnitude representations might be an underlying cause of MLD (Castro et al., 2012; Mejias et al., 2012). Maintaining the Integrity of the Specifications.

B The Domain-General Cognitive Hypothesis

This hypothesis suggests that MLD can also result from weaknesses in underlying supporting cognitive systems. Geary (2004) identified three such systems: the central executive which controls "the attentional and inhibitory processes needed to use procedures" (p. 9), the language system which incorporates phonological skills, verbal WM and long-term memory and a visuospatial system which is responsible for the representation and manipulation of mathematical information presented in spatial form (e.g. number lines). Research with both adults and children evidence the involvement of these underlying cognitive functions in mathematical performance

(Andersson, 2007; Swanson et al., 2008). Many children with MLD keep on using immature counting strategies and problem solving techniques, contrary to their typical achieving counterparts who would have generalised and automatised certain knowledge and developed faster and better techniques (Geary, 2004). This is due to a deficient semantic long-term memory that fails to store previously learned mathematical knowledge and so prohibits retrieval of information (D'Amico & Passolunghi, 2009). Some studies using a broader spectrum of WM tasks, including both verbal and visual-spatial skills, support the hypothesis that children with MLD show weaknesses in both these skills (Kyttälä et al., 2010; Passolunghi & Cornoldi, 2008). Others report deficiencies in visual-spatial memory skills only (Andersson, 2010).

C The Multiple-Deficit Hypothesis

Research carried out during the last decade challenge the idea that MLD is caused by a single core deficit or by a specific neurocognitive factor. The Multiple Deficit Theory posits that a number of underlying causal factors can give rise to MLD. It can be explained by an access deficit and/or deficits in number sense and/or domain-general impairments. Only those phenotypes with a single deficit in numerosity are described as being 'pure' dyscalculics (Von Aster & Shalev, 2007).

Various studies provide evidence that MLD is heterogeneous. Traff et al. (2017) investigated the cognitive profiles of four children, aged eight to nine with similar mathematical deficits. An analysis of their results reveals a wide variety in their profiles indicating that MLD cannot be attributed to a single deficit. Andersson and Ostergren (2012) revealed that the MLD group in their research displayed weaknesses in subitising, estimating the position of a number on a number line and number comparison. Furthermore, they performed poorly in tasks involving visual-spatial working memory and memory retrieval. These findings provide support for a defective ANS and/or OTS, a domain-general cognitive deficit and to some extent the Numerosity-Coding Hypothesis but are not consistent with the Access Deficit Hypothesis.

Bartelet et al. (2014) classified participants in their study into six distinct clusters. The first group demonstrates a weakness in the mental number line only and the second a weak ANS (number line and approximate numerical knowledge). A third group encountered the same difficulties as cluster 2 coupled with a weak spatial WM. Children in cluster 4 had the weakest arithmetic performance due to an access deficit. The last two clusters were a group with no numerical cognitive deficit that may have resulted from factors such as poor teaching or lack of student motivation and a garden-variety group. None of the clusters provide enough evidence that the Domain-General Hypothesis alone can best describe a phenotype of children with MLD. Similarly, a study carried out by Karagiannakis et al. (2017), grouped low achievers in Mathematics (LA) and participants with MLD into five out of six distinguishable clusters.

D Comorbidity RD and MLD

Notwithstanding, the high comorbidity rate of RD and MLD, research on the causal effects and implications of this comorbidity

is still in its infancy (Wilcutt et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2015). There seems to be agreement that they are two independent disabilities with domain specific deficits, have separable cognitive profiles and that the problems of the comorbid group (MD+RD) are additive (Landerl et al., 2009; Wilson et al., 2015; Wilcutt, et al., 2013). Individuals in the MD+RD group experience a ‘double-deficit, where deficits in core numerical skills and reading continue into adulthood (Wilson et al., 2015). Deficits in maths skills in the MD+RD group are the most severe and most likely to persist (Vukovic, 2012).

E Changes in the Classification of Learning Difficulties to Account for Heterogeneity

The vast amount of knowledge and findings accumulated during the last decades has not made it any easier to reach a consensus on defining MLD and RD. To account for the heterogeneity of both RD and MLD and improve the clinical utility of the diagnosing process, changes to the classification system were introduced in the 2013 fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5) (APA, 2013; Kaufmann & von Aster, 2012). DSM 5 groups together disabilities in reading, writing and Mathematics under one overarching category: Specific Learning Disabilities (Tannock, 2014). RD is differentiated into word reading accuracy, reading rate and fluency, and reading comprehension. The subcomponents for MLD are number sense, memorization of arithmetic facts, accurate or fluent calculation and accurate mathematical reasoning (Tulchinsky & Varavikova, 2014).

II THE PRESENT RESEARCH

MathPro battery is still under construction. It supports the Multi-Deficit Hypothesis of MLD. In line with DSM 5, its four domains cover a wide range of cognitive abilities. Its designers claim that it can be used to diagnose MLD and indicate a specific subtype and the severity of specific cognitive deficits associated with it (Karagiannakis et al., 2017). One major advantage is that it can be adapted to any syllabus. This study forms part of ongoing research in a number of European countries. It aimed to explore whether an adaptation of MathPro battery can identify young Maltese students at risk of MLD. It further examined whether individual mathematical profiles derived from its scores can provide insight into the underlying cognitive deficits of the different existing subtypes.

Research Question 1. Does MathPro account for the differences in strengths and weaknesses of Maltese students described by their teachers as being ‘very poor’ or ‘poor’ in Maths only (MD) and those evaluated as ‘very good’ and ‘good’ in the subject (control)?

Research Question 2. Does MathPro account for the heterogeneity of MLD? Are the profiles of students in the MD group heterogeneous? Is the mathematical profile of the comorbid group (MD+RD), in terms of strengths and weaknesses, lower from the group with difficulties in Maths only?

A Description of MathPro Battery

Skills are tested by a number of subtests (tasks) carried out online (Table 1).

Table 1. Classification of subsets in MathPro Battery

	DOMAIN	SUBSET
CORE NUMBER	Spatial	Dots comparison Subitizing
	Numerical	Single-digit numbers comparison Multi-digit numbers comparison
MEMORY	Counting	Enumeration Numbers dictation Next number Previous number
	Retrieval	Addition facts retrieval Multiplication facts retrieval
	Numerical	Mental calculations Word problems Calculation principles Numerical patterns
REASONING		Number lines 0 to 100 Number lines 0 to 1000
	Spatial	Squares Blocks

Source: MathPro 2019 retrieved from <http://public.mathpro.education/TestEn>

Subsets pertaining to the Core Number Domain assess domain-specific cognitive abilities. *Dots Comparison* measures ANS acuity, *Subitizing* tests the OTS, *Numbers Comparison* tasks assess the ability to represent numbers symbolically (Karagiannakis et al; 2014).

Subsets in the Memory Domain assess the ability to retrieve numerical facts stored in long term memory. Reaction time is considered important and tests are timed. *Numbers Dictation* assesses the speed by which a number is transcoded from one representation to another. *Enumeration*, *Next Number* and *Previous Number* test the speed at which the right order of numbers can be retrieved. The ability to quickly retrieve addition and multiplication number facts from memory is measured by *Addition Facts Retrieval* and *Multiplication Facts Retrieval* (Karagiannakis et al., 2014).

Tasks in the Reasoning Domains examine reasoning abilities. They also assess the ability to use multiple steps in complex procedures. *Mental Calculations* involves the interpretation of number in decimal position notation. *Word Problems* examines decision making skills associated with the selection of the appropriate mathematical operation. *Calculation Principles* examines the ability to understand and process conditional (if) statements in mathematical reasoning. *Numerical Patterns* tests the ability to grasp numerical concepts and to relate numbers. Number representation precision is assessed by *Number Lines from 0 to 100* (Karagiannakis et al., 2014). *Number Lines from 0 to 1000* involves both the representation and manipulation of mathematical information presented in spatial form and the ability to use proportionality and estimation skills to locate the position of number (LeFevre et al., 2013; Simms et al., 2016). *Squares* and *Blocks*, two subsets specifically designed for MathPro, assess reasoning in the visual-spatial domain (Karagiannakis et al., 2014).

III METHOD

Tasks were levelled against the Mathematics Syllabus for Malta (Primary Mathematics Support Team, 2014) and presented in Maltese and English. In the Maltese version instructions and feedback are in Maltese but mathematical content is still presented in English to mirror classroom situations.

Randomly selected 479 Maltese, co-educational, students from Year 2 (age 6) to Year 6 (age 11) from six state, two church and two independent schools participated. Multistage cluster sampling technique was applied. The sample size guarantees a maximum margin of error of 4.4%, assuming a 95% confidence level.

Table 2. Female and male participants from Year 2 (age 6) to Year 6 (age 11) for each type of school per year.

SCHOOL TYPE	YEAR 2		YEAR 3		YEAR 4		YEAR 5		YEAR 6		TOTAL	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
STATE	16	21	17	13	21	17	17	16	15	21	86	88
CHURCH	14	18	18	22	14	24	19	17	13	15	78	96
INDEPENDENT	12	16	9	13	11	16	15	14	17	8	64	67
TOTAL	42	55	44	48	46	58	51	47	43	43	228	231

340 participants opted for the Maltese and 139 for the English version of the test. Duration lasted from 50 to 80 minutes depending on age. All data were collected in schools within a three-week time frame for each year. Responses were directly fed to an online central database. To identify participants in the MLD or RD groups we had to rely on class teachers' judgement. This is one limitation to this study. A meta-analysis on 75 studies concludes a moderate to high correspondence between teachers' judgements, the performance of their pupils on standardised achievement tests and their academic achievements (Südkamp et al., 2012). Class teachers provided information requested on students on the day of data collection. Quantitative data (students' scores on battery tests) processed with SPSS version 24 (2016) was triangulated with information provided by class teachers (evaluation of students' performance in Maths and literacy).

A Processing Quantitative Data

Cleaned data were transferred to SPSS Version 24 (2016). Variables were created for accuracy scores (AC) for each subset. For Number Comparison tasks and tasks pertaining to the Memory Domain a second variable was created for reaction time scores (RT). For Number Line tasks a second variable was created for absolute error (AE), the difference between participant's estimation of the target number and its correct position.

Normality tests were carried out on all scores for all subsets. A reliability analysis, using Cronbach's Alpha as a measure of internal reliability (George & Mallery, 2003), followed on the scales that satisfied the assumption of normality (Table 3).

Table 3. Final list of variables that passed both normality and reliability checks each year.

DOMAIN	VARIABLE	YEAR GROUPS
CORE NUMBER	Spatial subitizing_AC	all years
	Numerical single_digit_numbers_comparison_RT	all years
MEMORY	Numerical multi-digit_numbers_comparison_RT	years 4, 5 and 6
	enumeration_RT	all years
	Counting numbers_dictation_up_to_3_digits_RT	years 2 and 3
	Counting numbers_dictation_RT	years 4, 5 and 6
	Counting next_number_RT	all years
	Counting previous_number_RT	all years
RETRIEVAL	Retrieval addition_facts_retrieval_RT	all years
	Retrieval multiplication_facts_retrieval_RT	years 4, 5 and 6
REASONING	Numerical mental_calculations_AC	years 4, 5 and 6
	Numerical word_problems_AC	years 3, 4, 5 and 6
	Numerical calculation_principles_AC	years 4, 5 and 6
	Numerical numerical_patterns_AC	all years
REASONING	Spatial number_lines_0_to_100_AE	years 3, 4, 5 and 6
	Spatial number_lines_0_to_1000_AE	years 3, 4, 5 and 6
	Spatial squares_AC	all years
	Spatial blocks_AC	all years

B Processing Information from Class Teachers

Two independent variables Math Criterion and Literacy Criterion were created. Participants were classified according to how their class teacher evaluated them in Maths and literacy respectively. A control group was created from Math Criterion with participants evaluated as 'very good' and 'good' in Maths. The MD group, selected from Math Criterion, included participants evaluated as 'poor' or 'very poor' in Maths. Data of participants whose mathematical abilities were evaluated as being 'moderate' were not considered to reduce the elements of subjectivity. RD group was formed with participants described by their class teachers as being 'poor' or 'very poor' in literacy. Participants falling into both the MD group and the RD group formed the comorbid group (MD + RD).

C First Research Question

A one-way univariate analysis of variance was run for variables which passed both normality and reliability tests (Table 3) to determine statistical difference in performance between the MD and the control group. The independent variable in all cases was the Math Criterion. Table 4 shows number of participants in the MD and control groups for each year.

Table 4. Number of participants in the MD and Control Groups for all years.

YEAR	MD GROUP	CONTROL GROUP	TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
YEAR 2	13	60	73
YEAR 3	13	59	72
YEAR 4	10	74	84
YEAR 5	12	64	76
YEAR 6	8	62	70

1 Results

The control group performed better than the MD group for most subtests across the four domains. Difference was statistically significant ($p < .05$) across the years (Table 5).

Table 5. MathPro subsets in which performance of MD group was significantly poorer than that of the control group.

2 Discussion

The first research question explored whether an adaptation of MathPro could be used as a diagnostic tool. Since the number of participants in the MD group could not be determined beforehand, an imbalance in the number of participants between the MD and the control groups occurred (Table 5). This is another limitation to this study. Vastly unequal groups violate homogeneity of variance and may underestimate the significance level. Differences between groups are more difficult to detect and the hypothesis may be falsely rejected (Statistics Solutions, 2018). This could be a possible explanation of why no statistically significant difference was found for Blocks (AC) in both Year 4 and Year 5 and Missing Numbers (AC) in Year 5. An MD group with more participants could have resulted in a significant difference between the performance of the participants in the MD and control group for even more subtests.

Notwithstanding, control groups performed significantly better than the MD group in a considerable number of subtests across the four domains of the battery for all years. One can thus infer that MathPro does account for differences in strengths and weaknesses and can be used as a tool, from an early age to identify at risk of MLD children (Karagiannakis et al., 2014; Karagiannakis et al., 2017). Furthermore, for each year, all four domains contain enough subsets where the control group performed significantly better than the MD group to enable the compilation of individual mathematical profiles that may indicate areas of strengths and weaknesses.

D Second Research Question

A thorough process selected eight individual mathematical profiles of participants in the MD group: four from Year 4 and four from Year 6. These years are considered to be pivotal years in the Maltese education system. Year 4 marks the start of formal assessment at primary level and Year 6 concludes by the national end-of-primary-school benchmark examination. The performance of each of these participants was evaluated in relation to the norm of the whole sample. For each battery subset z-scores were calculated using SPSS Version 24 (2016) and converted into stanine scores. Tables 6 and 7 show all participants in the MD group in Year 4 and Year 6 respectively. The profiles extracted were expected to be heterogeneous, identifying different strengths and weaknesses for different participants.

Table 6. All participants in Year 4 in the MD group who concluded all MathPro Battery subsets.

Table 7. All participants in Year 6 in the MD group who concluded all MathPro Battery subsets.

Participant 7055(4A) was selected since she was the only student from an independent school. Church school participant 7104 (4B)

was chosen because her diagnosis showed a comorbidity of Dyslexia and ADHD. State school participant 7138 (4C) was noted as very poor in Maths but very good in literacy. All participants selected thus far were female. Finally, state school male participant 7144(4D) was included because of the marked difference in performance in Maths (very poor) and literacy (moderate).

From the Year 6 MD group, participants 5495 and 5419 were eliminated for analysis since not much information on the severity of their diagnosis, which could affect their intellectual ability, was available. Participant 5560 (6A) was the only student from an independent school. Church school participant 5418 (6B) was included because she was the only student evaluated as poor in Maths and moderate in literacy. Participant 5598(6C) was the only remaining student evaluated as being very poor for both Maths and literacy. Participant 5666 (6D) was included in the list following a random selection of the three remaining state school students.

1 Results

The mathematical profiles of the eight participants are outlined in figures 1 to 8. Conversion from z-scores to stanine bands to percentile ranking is displayed in Table 8.

Table 8. Conversion from z-scores to stanine bands, percentile ranking and performance description.

Figure 1: Mathematical Profile of Participant 7055 (4A) evaluated as poor in both Maths and Literacy

Figure 2: Mathematical Profile of Participant 7104 (4B) evaluated as very poor in both Maths and literacy and diagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD evaluated as poor in both Maths and literacy.

Figure 3: Mathematical Profile of Participant 7138 (4C) evaluated as very poor in Maths and very good in literacy.

Figure 4: Mathematical Profile of Participant 7144 (4D) evaluated as very poor in Maths and moderate in literacy.

Figure 5: Mathematical Profile of Participant 5560 (6A) evaluated as poor in Maths and moderate in literacy.

Figure 6: Mathematical Profile of Participant 5418 (6B) evaluated as poor in Maths and moderate in literacy.

Figure 7: Mathematical Profile of Participant 5598 (6C) evaluated as very poor in both Maths and literacy.

2 Discussion

Four of the eight participants were evaluated by their teachers as poor or very poor in both Maths and literacy: 7055 (4A), 5598 (6C), 5666 (6D), 7104 (4B).

Profile 7055 (4A) reveals difficulties across all battery domains (Figure 1). Low scores for subitising and enumeration may indicate an impairment in processing exact numerosities resulting from a weak OTS (Butterworth 2010, Iuculano et al., 2008). Very poor performance in the Memory and Domain uncovers a difficulty in

retrieving information. The low scores in the Numerical Reasoning Domain coupled with a 'poor' evaluation for literacy, may suggest problems in the phonological loop, a subsystem of the working memory (Baddeley, 2000). The deficits in Spatial Reasoning Domain are marked as particularly severe. Two factors could be attributing to this: (1) an inability to process exact numerosities and (2) problems in WM, arising from a defective visual spatial sketchpad, another subsystem of the WM (Baddeley 2000).

Participant 7104 (4B) is diagnosed with ADHD and Dyslexia (Figure 2). Her profile revealed strengths in the Memory Domain and average performance in the Core Number Domain. On the other hand, she encounters problems in processing visual and verbal mathematical information as evident from her below average performance in subsets pertaining to the Reasoning Domains. The profile indicates a deficit in the WM visual spatial and language subcomponents. WM deficits have been found to underpin ADHD, Maths and reading difficulties (Hart et al., 2011; Wilcutt et al., 2013). Despite the very poor evaluation for Maths, it seems that problems in Mathematics are not resulting from deficits in core number or retrieval skills. It appears that they are a secondary effect of weaknesses in verbal comprehension and WM resulting from her RD and ADHD.

Profile 5598 (6C) presented severe deficits in core number skills implying a domain specific deficit (Figure 7). Weaknesses are then portrayed across the four domains. The below average/extremely low performance in all the subsets seems to be resulting from the additive deficits of both MLD and RD (Landerl et al., 2009; Wilson et al., 2015; Wilcutt, et al., 2013). Such a profile is indicative of comorbidity of MLD and RD.

High/average stanine scores in the `single_digits_number_comparison_RT`, `enumeration_RT` and `addition_facts_retrieval_RT` support a particular strength of participant 5666(6D) to learn by automaticity simple numerical/arithmetic facts that are way below his chronological age and do not require logical reasoning or visual spatial skills (Figure 8). The very low accuracy in the Multi-Digit Numbers Comparison RT unmasks deficits in symbolic magnitude or in place value consolidation. It appears here that the magnitude of one digit numbers is automatically being accessed (Mussolin & Noël, 2007) but automaticity is limited only to single digits. The deficits in both reasoning domains indicate a problem in the WM, visual spatial sketchpad and central executive. This mathematical profile indicates a MLD. Domain general difficulties associated with the central executive seem to be underlying cognitive problems that are also responsible for the difficulties in reading.

The other four participants were evaluated by their teachers as having difficulties in Maths only: 7138 (4C), 7144 (4D), 5560 (6A) and 5418 (6B).

Participant 7138 (4C) has not been diagnosed for MLD, but her school felt the need to provide this student with special arrangements for Maths (Figure 3). Her profile concurs with the teacher's description. The child scored extremely low in all tasks pertaining to the Memory Domain (<3rd percentile). Severe impairments are evident in core number skills and the Spatial Reasoning Domain. Yet stanine scores unexpectedly shoot up to high average bands for

the Numerical Reasoning Domain. It is important to note that a low score in memory tasks does not imply the child's answers were incorrect. It simply shows that, though her accuracy score was high she took *much longer* to produce correct answers. Memory Domain tasks, where reaction time is considered, evidence inability to retrieve information from her long term memory easily, where she then probably relies on her strong reasoning abilities. On the other hand, the score for `mental_calculations_AC` is not dependent on reaction time but on accuracy. This explains the unexpectedly high score in `mental_calculations_AC` despite extremely low scores in retrieving simple arithmetic facts. If her problem with retrieval arose because of a domain general deficit, it would have impacted her literacy skills. It appears therefore that the problem here lies with an access deficit that is specific to numbers. This is further reinforced by the extremely low score in `single_digit_numbers_comparison_RT`.

The cause of difficulties for participant 7144 (4D) (Figure 4) appears to be a severe impairment in the OTS (subitising). This impairment in subitising results in a very low score for `addition_facts_retrieval_RT` and possibly for `squares_AC` where participants had to count the number of whole squares that could be formed. The profile of this participant indicates a domain specific problem in the core number system that can be associated with a deficit in processing exact numerosities.

The mathematical profile of participant 5418 (6B) reveals impairments in the Reasoning Domains (Figure 6). Extremely low stanine scores obtained in both number line tasks suggest a weakness in the ability to „skillfully assemble an array of relevant knowledge to perform a complex and (often) novel numerically-relevant task” (LeFevre et al., 2013, p. 9). This is reinforced by the very low performance in `mental_calculations_AC` and `calculation_principles_AC`, which put a lot of demand on the WM. Both tasks involve concurrent executive tasks where incoming information needs to be processed, a procedural strategy has to be applied, number facts from long term memory have to be retrieved whilst interim results have to be maintained. The problem here lies with an inability to come up with successful strategies to solve complex mathematical tasks associated with lack of coordination between the various subcomponents of the WM.

There appears to be no serious concerns in any particular domain for participant 5560 (6A) (Figure 5). The student shows weaknesses in retrieving information on multiplication number facts and selecting the appropriate arithmetic operations for problem solving. At this level, these two skills might be considered as very important to the teacher. Such a profile does not indicate any domain general or domain specific deficits. Poor achievement can, in similar cases, be attributed to factors, such as lack of motivation on the student's part or poor teaching methods (Abbas & Khurshid, 2013; Al-Zoubi & Bani Younes, 2015).

The stanine scores obtained by the eight participants from the MD group did reveal different cognitive profiles. The low stanine scores in only a few tasks of participants 6A cannot be attributed to any deficits or learning difficulties. The profile of 4C indicates an access deficit that is specific to numbers. Problems encountered by 4D stem from a domain specific deficit in processing exact numerosities

(OTS). The profile of 6B indicates an inability to apply previously acquired basic arithmetical skills when planning and solving more complex mathematical tasks. Participants 4B, 4A, 6C and 6D were evaluated as 'poor' or 'very poor' in both Maths and literacy. The poor performance in Maths of 4B seems to be resulting from the poor verbal comprehension caused by her RD and WM deficits associated with both RD and ADHD. The profiles of 4A, 4C and 6D revealed weaknesses across all domains and the deficits in these cases, as expected, proved to be the most severe. One can infer that MathPro battery does account for the heterogeneity of MLD and that the mathematical profiles derived from it of the participants with difficulties in both Maths and literacy demonstrated the most severe impairments.

IV CONCLUSION

This study sought to investigate whether MathPro Battery can be adapted to serve as a diagnostic tool by which Maltese students, at risk of MLD, can be identified at an early age. Classification of participants in the MD or RD group was based on the class teachers' evaluation. Individual profiles derived from the scores in battery tasks corresponded with information provided by class teachers. This convergence of the two sets of data prove the validity and reliability of the method applied.

A one-way univariate analysis of variance was conducted for all battery tasks to compare the performance of those participants in the MD group to that of the control group. For all years, the performance of the control group was statistically significantly better than the MD group in a considerable number of subtests across the four domains of the battery. The results indicate that MathPro battery tasks can be used to identify Maltese students who may be at risk of MLD.

The conclusion drawn from the analysis of profiles is that MathPro battery does account for the heterogeneity of MLD. For each case, the profile derived using MathPro revealed particular strengths and weaknesses in the different domains. It was also demonstrated that the mathematical profile of students who fall in the comorbid group are characterised by the most severe deficits across all domains of the battery. Information from these profiles can be analysed by clinicians and other professionals and the appropriate individual interventions can be devised.

V RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

Longitudinal studies indicate that problems with numerical processing in preschool years predict difficulties in arithmetic skills later on at primary level (Mazzocco et al., 2011; Moeller et al., 2011). It would be interesting to examine whether the performance of Year 2 participants would be predictive of their performance when they reach Year 4 and Year 6. Such a longitudinal study would provide further insight for early identification and intervention with Maltese students.

To investigate further whether interventions based on the results of MathPro battery Mathematical profiles are effective, case studies could be carried out. Intervention programmes should be specifically designed to target areas of weaknesses as outlined by the profile. The profiles of participants before and after intervention could be compared to see whether targeting particular area/s of weakness would yield better results.

Comorbidity with other profiles, mainly RD and ADHD, affect mathematical performance. There was an indication that Maltese students are more probable to be diagnosed with ADHD if they attend an independent school and less likely if they go to a state school. Studies to confirm this side observation and to examine the possible explanation for such an occurrence, if it exists, would be beneficial.

Failure in diagnosing any learning disability or combination of learning disabilities at an early stage and providing the necessary interventions to overcome weaknesses, would result in low academic achievement. This not only increases the risk of early school leaving but also impacts negatively the future life prospects of our students (e.g. OECD, 2013; Price & Ansari, 2013; Winding & Andersen, 2015).

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Insights on Early School Leaving Risk Factors in Malta

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Abstract—This paper draws on analyses of a student-level dataset for a full cohort of students in Malta. As previous research on the characteristics of individual early school leavers in Malta tended to be qualitative, small-scale or “tracer” studies, the current analyses represent a rare opportunity to identify individual risk factors. As the EU’s definition of early school leavers relates to 18-24-year olds, a proxy indicator (failure to complete Malta’s Secondary Education Certificate) was used.

As a first step, previously determined individual risk factors were analysed on student-level. These included: results from an end-of-primary school “benchmark” examination (abbr. total benchmark results), gender, district of residence, school absences secondary school (abbr. absences), and parental socio economic status. On the student-level, every risk factor was significant ($p < 0.05$).

In the second step, the individual risk factors were analysed together in a logistic regression model to classify early school leaving students. Due to data constraints, separate models were built for state and church schools, while it was not possible to build a model for students from independent schools.

For state schools, the risk factors gender, total benchmark results, and absences were significant ($p < 0.05$). For church schools, insufficient data meant that total benchmark results and absences could not be included. For church schools, risk factors identified were gender, parental socio economic status, and district of residence were significant ($p < 0.05$). The analyses, while illuminating, are based on a dataset with several limitations, and therefore need to be interpreted with great care.

Keywords— early school leavers, risk factors, logistic regression

I INTRODUCTION

Early school leavers are defined by European Union (EU) “as people aged 18-24 who have only lower secondary education or less and are no longer in education or training” (European Commission, 2011a). In a Maltese context, this is taken as those who do not have the equivalent of at least five Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) passes at grades 1 to 7 and are not currently in any training or educational programmes (Malta Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014). Consensus has been reached that early exit from the education system can have negative impacts both at individual and national level (European Commission, 2011b). For example, reviews by Psacharopoulos (2007) and Nevala et al. (2011) found early school leaving was associated with lower annual earnings, higher rates of unemployment, physical and mental illness, and with increased risk of criminality and incarceration. Costs to society included increased welfare and health payments, and poorer social

cohesion. A multitude of research studies focus on early school leaving students to explore the potential driving forces or risk factors leading to early exit from the education system and the consequences felt by early school leaving students (Marks & Fleming, 1999; Byrne & Smyth, 2010).

A Potential Risk Factors of Early School Leavers

1 Academic Performance

Students’ academic performance has been found to be one of the most salient factors leading to early exit from the education system (Marks & Fleming, 1999). Batten and Russell (1995) claimed that early school leavers scored lower both on literacy and numeracy compared with non-early school leavers. Although associations between poor performance and early exit from the education system are evident from prior studies, there have been many attempts to explain this relationship. One notable additional association is poor performing students’ decreased motivation toward schooling, which

is associated with student dropouts before completing the compulsory education (Marks & Fleming, 1999).

2 Behavioural Problems and Bullying

There is a large body of research that indicates behavioural problems are related to risk of early school leaving, with those who receive warnings, suspensions and/or expulsions at much higher risk (e.g., Jasińska-Maciąg & Tomaszewska-Pękała, 2017; Morrow & Villodas, 2018). Even persistent lateness, while often not classified as a behaviour problem, is in fact a behaviour that is highly predictive of early school leaving (e.g., Chung & Lee, 2018). In addition, the behaviour of a student's peer group might increase the probability of early school leaving. Research results from Ireland by Byrne and Smith (2010) indicate higher dropout rates for students that were bullied at least three times of the first year in Junior Cycle, compared to students who were not bullied. In a South African study by Townsend et al. (2008) the association between bullying and the risk to drop out of school, could only be proven for boys, but not for girls.

3 Gender

Gender is another significant factor associated with early exit from the education system. Some researchers even claim that the impact of gender on early exit from the education system is stronger than other factors (Marks & Fleming, 1999). In Australia, boys are found to be more likely to leave school early compared to girls. Similar phenomenon has also been found in Ireland (Byrne & Smith, 2010).

However, a recent European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop (2014) study found that while boys were over-represented amongst early school leavers in almost all European countries, amongst higher socio-economic status students, the gender gap in the rate of early school leavers was smaller. The same report also found that the gender gap in rate of ESL in Malta was broadly similar to the average for EU-28.

The association between gender and early exit from the education system is not fully explained by students' attitudes toward school or their academic motivation (Marks & Fleming, 1999). Moreover, researchers have found that gender differences may become more salient over time, possibly due to conditions where there are more opportunities for teenage boys in the job market (Marks & Fleming, 1999).

4 Socioeconomic Background and Family Background

Prior research has found that students from lower socio-economic background are more likely to drop out school before the 12th year of schooling (DEET, 1993) or in general before the end of compulsory schooling (e.g., European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014). As important indicators of socio-economic background (Erola et al., 2016), parents' education and occupation level exhibit an association with early exit from the education system of the student (Williams et al., 1993; Marks, 1998; Marks & Flemings, 1999). Maternal education in particular is a predictor of dropout (Nevala et al., 2011), as is having an older sibling who dropped out (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999).

However, Rumberger and Lim's (2008) comprehensive review of 25 years of research on school dropout concluded that while parental

education, income and socio-economic status are all important risk factors of early school leaving, social capital and how parents engage with their children were also important. In particular, they report that high parental expectations, a supportive home environment (e.g., many books), and good home-school links are all related to lower levels of dropout from compulsory education.

Robinson (1999) claimed that students whose parents had finished post-secondary education have greater propensity to finish school (Year 12) than those whose parents dropped out of school during the early years of secondary education. Marks and Fleming (1999) have found similar results but emphasised that the impact of parents' education level on early exit from the education system is only obvious when comparing households with very well educated parents to households with poorly educated parents. Similarly, parents' occupation can also impact students' early exit from the education system. It is reported that students whose parents work as professionals or managers/administrators are more likely to finish school than students whose parents work in other fields (Marks & Fleming, 1999).

5 Region

Research from countries such as Australia and Ireland suggest that students living in rural areas are less likely to finish secondary education compared with their counterparts living in urban areas (Marks & Fleming, 1999; Byrne & Smyth, 2010), whereas in the Netherlands e.g. Traag and van der Velden (2008) base their study on the hypothesis, that students in urban areas are more at risk, mainly due to a higher percentage of students with migration background. Rumberger and Lim's (2008) review of (mainly the US) research suggests mixed results for studies examining the relationship between rurality and school completion. Part of the reason for mixed results may derive from how rurality is defined. For example, World Bank datasets show that Australia has one of the lowest population densities in the world (three people per square km), while Malta's population density (1,511 people per square km) is one of the highest. Given the small geographic size of Malta and Gozo coupled with such a high population density, few students would be considered to live in what would (internationally) be considered remote areas. This means international research findings regarding rurality may not manifest in Malta. Further, Gatt's (2012) mapping of social inequality in Malta suggests that although the (relatively) rural island of Gozo exhibited the highest levels of socio-economic inequalities, the densely populated urban Southern Harbour district had the highest percentages of early school leavers.

6 School Sector

The type of school students attend can also impact early exit from the education system. For example, in Australia, findings indicate that non-Catholic independent schools have the highest retention rate while government/state schools have the lowest retention rate (Marks & Fleming, 1999; Lamb & Rumberger, 1998). Rumberger and Lim's review of (mainly US) research (2008) concluded that there was a so-called "Catholic School Effect", but that this might at least in part be due to differences in intake characteristics, and that dropout from Catholic and other private schools was somewhat masked by the tendency for students in such schools to first transfer

to the public school sector rather than dropping out directly from a private school.

7 Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism is frequently linked with early school leaving (Kearney, 2008). And this association has also been identified in a more recent study conducted in the Netherlands, in which students with a higher rate of unauthorised school absences are found to be more likely to leave school early than those attending classes regularly (Cabus & Mitte, 2014).

8 Migration

Migration is another potential factor, which could lead to early school leaving. Despite all possible disadvantages of the migration families, the association between migration and dropout still needs to be explored. Students from such background can still be highly motivated and work hard for their future especially when they have supportive parents (Cedefop, 2016).

In the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2016,¹ 8th grade students were asked about their sense of belonging at school. According to secondary analyses of European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2019), foreign-born students in Malta and Bulgaria reported a significantly lower sense of belonging compared to native-born students. And similarly, students who do not speak the language of instruction at home reported a lower sense of belonging compared to students whose home language is the language of instruction – the difference between both groups was significant for students in Malta, Italy and Netherlands. European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2019) claim that a sense of belonging is especially important for students with a migration background, “if they are to achieve their academic potential” (p. 40).

B Early school leavers in Malta

Fighting with an early exit from the education system to increase the overall education level and individual well-being has long been a priority of the EU (European Commission, 2011b). Recently, the EU has set a goal to reduce its members’ early exit from the education system rate to 10 per cent by 2020. This target seems ambitious especially for countries like Malta whose early school leaver’s rate (20.9 per cent) was the second lowest in 2013 (Malta Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014). In 2017, the rate of early school leavers in Malta was 18.6 per cent, decreasing compared with 2013, yet this was still far above the EU average (10.6 per cent) (Malta Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014). Despite the substantial obstacles, Malta has committed itself to achieve the EU’s 2020 goal by launching a series of centralised early exit from the education system monitoring mechanisms to help the Ministry of Education and Employment (MEDE) identify potential early school leavers and initiate programmes to prevent early exit from the education system.

At this moment, no such centralised monitoring systems have been established in Malta, yet a strategic plan has been developed (Malta Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014).

The purpose of the study is thus to provide preliminary information needed to build up such monitoring and intervention mechanisms. Specifically, this study tries to answer the question: which risk factors are important to predict early exit from the education system?

II DATA, METHODS, AND RESULTS

A Data

This paper draws on analyses of an anonymised, student-level dataset for a full cohort of students in Malta – all those who should have finished compulsory education and completed Malta’s Secondary Education Certificate at the end of the 2016/17 academic year. The dataset comprised several smaller databases that were combined and anonymised by Malta’s National Statistics Office, before being shared with a small number of researchers in the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). The collation of the database allowed for the a) the examination of the quality and coverage of existing data systems and b) identification of characteristics that distinguished between those who did and did not successfully complete compulsory schooling. Access to this data was restricted to a small number of researchers and was available for a limited amount of time.

As noted earlier, the European Commission’s definition of early school leavers considered those from ages 18 to 24, but the dataset was based on 16- and 17-year olds. Thus, another proxy indicator was needed. The proxy for early school leavers (early school leaving proxy) used for the purpose of the research project and for this paper was defined by an expert round of representatives of the following institutions: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), Malta Ministry of Education and Employment (MEDE), European Commission’s Structural Reform Support Service (SRSS). The failure of a student to attain a Malta

Qualifications Framework (MQF) Level 3² (typically, based on Secondary Examination Certificate (SEC) 2016/17 outcomes) was considered as an early proxy for early school leaving.

The combined database drew on existing administrative and available data sources, and consequently has several significant limitations. As such, all results presented in this working paper have to be interpreted with caution and as preliminary insights into the characteristics of early school leavers in Malta. The primary data shortcomings are:

1. Limited data available for independent and church schools, so that (i) not all potential risk factors could be considered for analysing students at risk in independent or church schools, and (ii) results based on the overall student cohort have limited generalisability
2. Some well-known risk factors were either not available in the data or less reliable: e. g., there was limited access to reliable data about

1 For more information see: <https://www.iea.nl/studies/iea/iccs/2016>

2 The Malta Qualifications Framework is aligned with the European Qualifications Framework. MQF Level 3 is equivalent to EQF Level 3.

socio-economic status of students/their parents (for more information see Appendix A)

3. Students that repeated a year had to be excluded from the analyses (for more information see Appendix A)
4. General data shortcomings: not all IDs (almost 10 per cent) could be matched with the data (possibly due to data entry errors). Therefore, cases that could not be matched were discarded from the analysis. However, there is still a risk that valid data was deleted by this procedure.

An overview of all data, including meanings and shortcomings listed for each variable can be found in Appendix A. For this paper, a selection of main individual risk factors was taken and measured by the following variables:

1. Academic performance

Measured by total benchmark results: sum of all results from an end-of-primary school “benchmark” examination in the domains Mathematics, Maltese, English.

2. Gender

Measured by boys and girls.

3. Socioeconomic background and family background

Measured by parental socio economic status, abbr. SES proxy: binary variable. Category one “high SES”: if one of the student’s parents has ISCO-o8 code 1 (Managers) or ISCO-o8 code 2 (Professionals), else “low to middle or not known SES”.

4. Region

Measured by district of residence: binary variable. Category one “Southern or Northern Harbour”, else other districts. According to the data set used, Southern and Northern Harbour had the highest percentage of early school leavers according to the variable early school leaving proxy. The choice is data driven. More research is needed to fully explain regional differences for Malta.

5. Absenteeism

Measured by total absences in year three of secondary school (abbr. absences). For more information on the choice of the variable see 2.2.1 Bivariate Analysis.

6. Migration

Measured by migration background: Maltese, non-Maltese.

B Methods and Results

1. Bivariate Analysis

To get an overview about the potential individual risk factors and their behaviour in the Maltese context, the predictive power of each risk factor on the early school leaving proxy (see Appendix A) was analysed separately on student-level. To test if a specific risk factor distinguished between early school leaving and non-early school leaving students, the following criteria were used:

- a) t-tests where the ordinal risk factor total benchmark results was treated as continuous variable
- b) χ^2 -tests for the following categorical variables: parental socio economic status (abbr. SES proxy), gender, migration background, district of residence (Southern or Northern Harbour coded as “1”, other districts coded as “0”)

The data provided six different variables on absence those could be used as predictors for early exit from the education system, specifically the sum of absences within year six of primary school,

and within year one, year two, year three, year four, and year five of secondary school. To see which of the variables provides the best prediction, for each variable a separate logistic regression model was used with the early school leaving proxy as the dependent variable. On the student-level, every predictor was significant ($p < 0.05$). To have an early predictor of early school leaving it was decided to choose the predictor total absences in year three of secondary school (abbr. absences) as a predictor for early school leaving in further analyses. Detailed results can be found in Appendix B.

2. Logistic Regression

To gain first insights on the predictive power of risk factors in a complex setting, a logistic regression approach was used (for more information on logistic regression see Peng et al. (2002)³), with the *early school leaving proxy* as dependent and the risk factors as independent variables. Different logistic models for students who attended a state school and for students who attended a church school were used due to the following considerations:

- a) missing data for many students attending church schools on the relevant risk factors total benchmark results and absences would limit a single model, and
 - b) using separate models allows for a more contextual picture, capturing different situations across different school types
- Students from independent schools were removed from these analyses, as the sample size was rated as insufficient.

To find the best performing logistic regression model, a backward elimination approach with list wise deletion was used. In the first step, a full model was built for each school sector. The following independent variables were used in the full models:⁴

Full model for students from state schools:

$\log(\text{ESL proxy odds}) \sim \text{SES proxy} + \text{gender} + \text{total benchmark results} + \text{absences} + \text{migration background} + \text{district of residence}$

Full model for students from church schools:

$\log(\text{ESL proxy odds}) \sim \text{SES proxy} + \text{gender} + \text{migration background} + \text{district of residence}$

In the next step a second model was built, in which a non-significant risk factor ($p > 0.05$) and/or risk factors with the lowest predictive power were eliminated. The new and the previous models were compared based on the Aikake Information Criterion (AIC, with a higher value indicating a better model). The process was repeated, as long as the new model performed better than the previous model based on the AIC. Following this approach, the following two models performed best:

3 As the data had to be analysed in a limited amount of time (see also section 2.1 data) not all guidelines provided by Peng et al. (2002) could be observed for this paper.

4 Based on the results of the study from Byrne and Smyth (2010), the interaction between gender and socio economic status (SES proxy in this paper) was tested. But as the interaction was not significant ($p > 0.05$), it was decided to discard this interaction from the logistic regression models.

For students from state schools:

Model 1: $\log(\text{ESL proxy odds}) \sim +\text{gender} + \text{total benchmark results} + \text{absences}$

TABLE I. LOGISTIC REGRESSION RESULTS FOR MODEL 1

Coefficient	Dataset for a full Cohort of Students in Malta			
	Estimate(β)	Error	Z value	P
(Intercept)	4.98	0.40	12.33	<0.001
Gender(Male)	0.45	0.16	2.76	<0.01
Absences	0.06	0.007	9.72	<0.001
Total benchmark results	-0.04	0.002	-18.16	<0.001

The logistic regression *Model 1* allows the following interpretation: All risk factors of *Model 1* have a significant effect ($p < 0.05$). Male students have a higher risk of being an early school leaving student than female students ($\beta = 0.44$). A higher number of *absences* ($\beta = 0.06$) is associated with a higher risk of being an early school leaving student. The higher the *total benchmark results* ($\beta = -0.04$), the lower the risk of being an early school leaving student.

To identify the influence of different factors on the probability of a student becoming an early school leaver, the following approach was used: First, the probability that a student is predicted to be an early school leaver was set to some fixed probability. Secondly, observation of how the risk factors behave dependent on a fixed probability was considered. In setting the probability there are more restrictive and less restrictive approaches. Setting a high probability will predict as early school leavers only those students with very high probabilities based on risk factors. This method has a higher risk for false negatives; that is, the possibility that students who will become early school leavers are not identified as at risk of an early exit from the education system. For this study, a less restricted approach was used setting the probability to > 0.20 . This less restrictive approach has a higher probability of predicting students as at risk of early school leaving though they are not, compared to a higher probability of, for example, > 0.90 .

If π is the probability of a student becoming an early school leaver, and β_0, \dots, β_n are the n coefficients of the logistic model with β_0 as the intercept, and then the formula is calculated as follows:

$$P(\text{student is ESL}) \quad (4)$$

$$= 1 / (1 + e^{-(\beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \dots + \beta_n x_n)}) > 0.20$$

Transferring the equation to our early school leaving *Model 1* for state schools, there are three unknowns: *gender*, *total benchmark results*, and *absences*. The resulting equation necessitates a number of conditional statements. Two of the three risk factors must be fixed to identify the minimum value of the third factor. The decision here depends on the research question. In this example, the variable *gender* was set to “male” (1) and the variable *total benchmark results*

to the estimated (as some values are missing) mean from students in state schools, which is 189. The resulting equation is as follows:

$$P(\text{student is ESL}) \quad (5)$$

$$= 1 / (1 + e^{-(4.98 + 0.45 - 0.04 \times 189 + 0.06 \times x_3)}) > 0.20$$

The equation can be solved, by setting x_3 to 22 (or more) *absences*. This predicts that the probability of a male student with a benchmark result of 189 will become an early school leaver (according to the *early school leaving proxy*), if he has been absent for 22 days (or more) in year three of secondary school, is greater than 20 per cent.

For students from church schools:

Model 2: $\log(\text{ESL proxy odds}) \sim \text{gender} + \text{SES proxy} + \text{district of residence}$ (6)

Table II. Logistic Regression Results for Model

Coefficient	Students-Level Dataset for a full Cohort of Students in Malta			
	Estimate(β)	Error	Z value	P
(Intercept)	-3.31	0.258	-12.87	<0.001
District of Residence	0.77	0.240	3.20	<0.01
SES proxy	-0.77	0.289	-2.70	<0.01
Gender	0.67	0.249	2.70	<0.01

The logistic model allows the following interpretation: All risk factors of *Model 2* have a significant effect ($p < 0.05$). Male students have a higher risk of becoming an early school leaver compared to female students ($\beta = 0.67$), while students from Southern or Northern Harbour districts have a higher risk of becoming an early school leaver compared to students from other districts ($\beta = 0.77$). Students with parents who have higher parental SES status, have a lower risk of becoming an early school leaver ($\beta = -0.78$).

To understand the impacts of the individual risk factors from students of church schools, the probability of being classified as an early school leaver was examined for one risk factor.

As an example, the risk factors are set to the following values: *gender* was set to “male” (1) and the *district of residence* to “Southern or Northern Harbour” (1). The equation then predicts the probability of a male student from Southern or Northern Harbour will become an early school leaver (according to the *early school leaving proxy*), dependent on her or his family’s socio-economic status (measured by *SES proxy*).

$$P(\text{student is ESL}) \quad (7)$$

$$= 1 / (1 + e^{-(3.31 + 0.77 + 0.67 - 0.77 \times x_3)}) > 0.20$$

By setting the *SES proxy* (x_3) from 0 to 1, comparing students whose parents have a lower or unknown ISCO code ($x_3 = 0$) to students whose parents have either ISCO code 1 or 2 ($x_3 = 1$), the predicted

probability that a student will become an early school leaver (according to *early school leaving proxy*) decreases from 13 per cent (low or unknown ISCO code) to 7 per cent (ISCO code 1 or 2).

III CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Despite quite many shortcomings of the data set (see section 2.1 data), this study indicates that the examined risk factors *total benchmark results, absences in year three of secondary school, parental socio economic status, gender, migration background, district of residence* play a role in the Malta context. Furthermore, the study used logistic regression to gain further insights on the probability of students to become an early school leaver.

One limitation with the chosen approach is that risk factors were analysed at the student-level, ignoring the multilevel nature of formalised schooling where students are nested in schools. Students from the same school are not independent of each other as they share similar experiences of formal schooling. An outcome can be that there is a risk of finding significant effects, which are actually none (Hox, 1998; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

It has been shown, that within a multilevel structure, results found on the student-level may differ from results found on the school-level. This fallacy is called “individualistic fallacy” by Alker (Alker, 1969). Aggregated effects on school-level, such as the proportion of at risk students in the school, school sector, or average benchmark result on school-level may have important influences that cannot be measured by a model on the student-level. In further analyses on early school leavers in Malta, we therefore strongly recommend researchers to expand the models used in this paper by considering the hierarchical structure of the data, as it was e.g. done for a Netherlands study on early school leaving. For example, preliminary results on state schools suggest that school effects could be important predictors on early exit from the education system in Malta. By analyzing the risk factors *total benchmark results* (mean by school), *Absences in year 6 of primary school* (mean by school), *SES proxy* (proportion by school) on the school-level using a simple linear regression with early exit from the education system (as a proportion) as independent variable, show significant effects of all aggregated risk factors ($p < 0.05$) (see Figures 1 to 3).

Fig. 1. Percentage of high SES in a school (%) and early school leaving (%), school-level

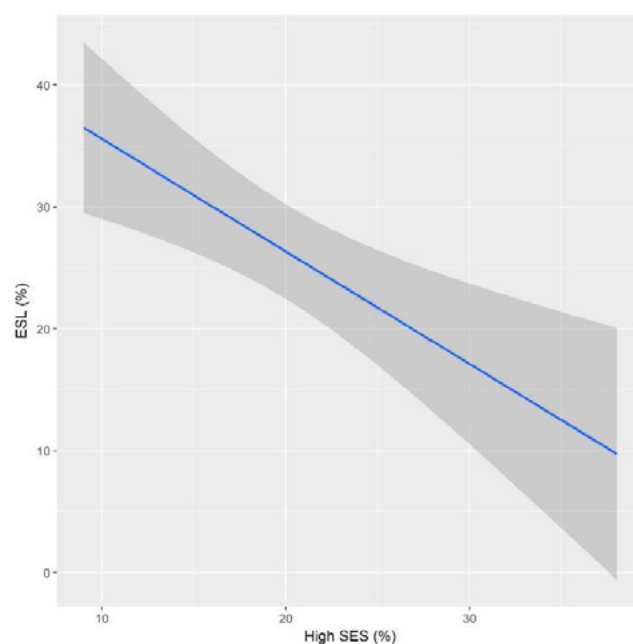


Fig. 2. Total absences in year 6 of primary school (mean) and early school leaving (%), school-level

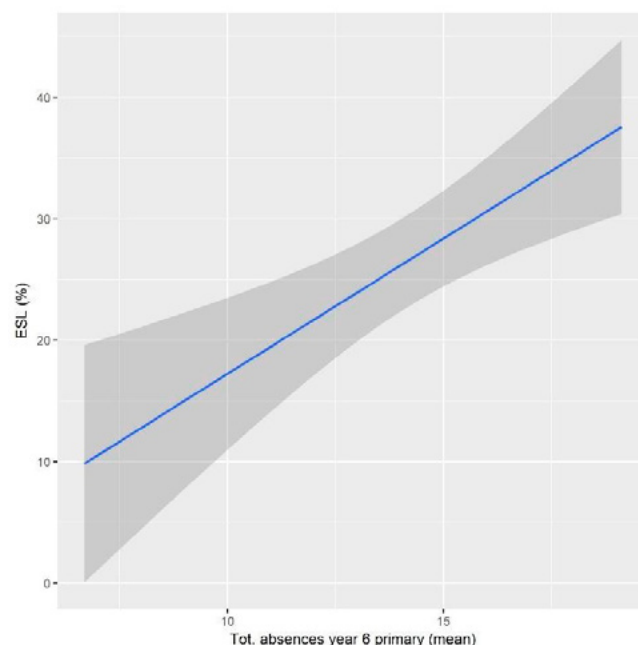
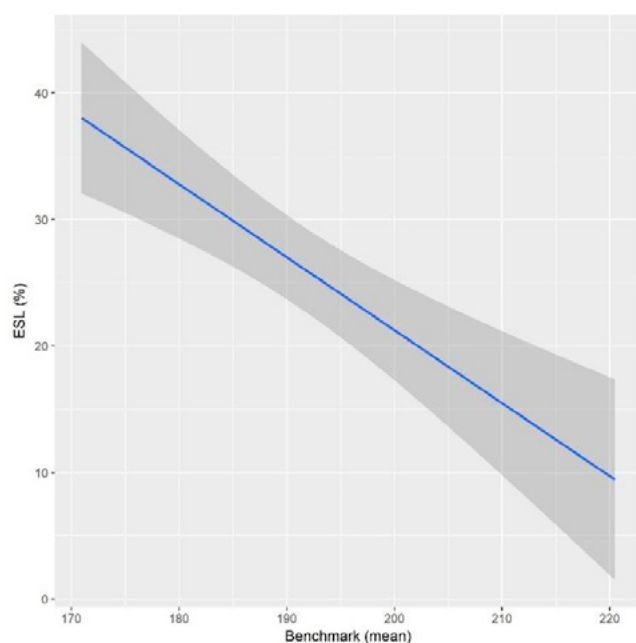


Fig. 3. Benchmark result (mean) and early school leaving (%), school-level



Preliminary results based on the data allow at least two observations: a) state schools in Malta differ from each other with regard to their proportion of early school leavers (standard deviation of *early school leaving proxy* is 10.26 per cent) and their proportions of students that are effected by risk factors (e. g. standard deviations of *benchmark results (mean)* is 13.86 per cent) b) there is an association between aggregated individual risk factors and the proportion of early school leaving students on school-level. To analyse how much of the effect can be explained on the individual level and how much of the effect can be explained by aggregated effects (“school effects”), one has to analyse both levels within one model, e.g. mixed models.

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APPENDIX A

Table 3: Data shortcomings

Analysis variables	Description	Missing rate (in percent, based on all students)	Shortcomings
early school leaving proxy	Binary variable: SEC outcomes (passed/failed) are used as proxy variable for early school leaving status	2 %	The early school leaving proxy has to be interpreted as “of high risk to become early school leaver”. The effect of grade repetition could not be analysed, as the data only contains students from a single cohort. Students repeating a school year were excluded from the analyses.
Total benchmark results	Numeric variable: Sum of all results from an end-of-primary school “benchmark” examination in the domains: Mathematics, Maltese, English (recoded with list wise deletion)	25 %	Non-missing at random: - limited data from students that go to church or independent schools - without any further missing analysis results on student-level have to be interpreted with great care as their generalisability is limited
Absences in year 6 of primary school (abbr. <i>Absences primary school</i>)	Numeric variable: Number of total absences in year 6 of primary school	44 %	Non-missing at random: - limited data from students that attended church or independent schools - without any further missing analysis results on student-level have to be interpreted with great care as their generalisability is limited
Absences in year three of secondary school (abbr. <i>absences</i>)	Numeric variable: Number of total absences in year 3 of secondary school	35 %	Non-missing at random: - limited data from students that go to church or independent schools - without any further missing analysis results on student-level have to be interpreted with great care as their generalisability is limited
Parental socio economic status (abbr. <i>SES proxy</i>)	Binary recoded variable: category one “high SES”: If one of the student’s parents has ISCO-08 code 1 (Managers) or ISCO-08 code 2 (Professionals), else “low to middle or not known SES”	15 %	The variable used as proxy for the parental economic status has to be interpreted with great care, because of an unclear coding procedure in the original variable. Students for which a parental socio economic status was not available and students whose parents were inactive in the labor force were both assigned a missing code (concerns about 15 per cent of all students). As outcome, the results are blurred, as the second category “low to middle or not known SES” of the SES proxy variable might include students whose parents have actually an ISCO-08 code 1 or ISCO-08 code 2. Data from “Scheme 9” was not available for the cohort examined. Students benefiting from Scheme 9 can access up to seven types of financial assistance, such as free lunch and funds for stationery and uniforms. The number of benefits that can be accessed is linked to family socio-economic status.
Gender	Binary variable: Categories male, female	4 %	/
Migration background	Binary variable: Categories Maltese, non-Maltese	2 %	The percentage of non-Maltese students is according to the data used 3.1 per cent. It could not be proven, that this number reflects the real situation in Malta. In the European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2019) report, the percentage of non-Maltese people, with reference to all people under 15 years, is indicated by 7.5 per cent. Results that refer to this variable should therefore be interpreted with care.
District of residence	Binary variable: Current district of residence of the student. Categories Southern/Northern Harbour, other districts	2 %	/

APPENDIX B

Table 4: Bivariate analyses

Analysis variables	Method	Test	Performance indicator
Total benchmark results	Mean comparison	T-Test	p-value = <0.001
Absences in year three of secondary school (abbr. <i>absences</i>)	Logistic regression: The data provided six different absence variables that could be used as predictors for early school leaving: a total count of absences for year six of primary school and for year one, year two, year three and year five of secondary school. To see which of the variables provides the best prediction, for each variable a separate logistic model was run with <i>early school leaving proxy</i> as dependent variable.	Logistic Regression	In all 6 models the p-value of the predictor variable was lower than <0.001. In general, the effects of the absence variables became larger with rising year, e.g. the coefficient for <i>total absence in year 6 of primary school</i> was estimated to 0.08, and the coefficient for <i>absence of year 5 of secondary school</i> was estimated to 0.09. To have an early predictor of early school leaving it was decided to choose the predictor <i>total absences in year three of secondary school</i> (abbr. <i>absences</i>) as predictor for early school leaving in all further analyses.
Parental socio economic status (abbr. <i>SES proxy</i>)	Comparison of the groups ISCO 1 and ISCO 2, ISCO level 3 or higher and not matched or inactive	Chi-squared test	p-value <0.001
Gender	Comparison of boys and girls	Chi-squared test	p-value <0.001
Migration background	Comparison on students with and without migration background	Chi-squared test	p-value <0.001
District of residence	Comparison of Southern or Northern Harbour to other districts	Chi-squared test	p-value <0.001

The Spatial Distribution of Early School Leavers in Malta

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Abstract: Early school leavers are defined as those individuals aged between 18 to 24 years, with a minimum of lower secondary education and not in further education or training (Eurostat, 2019). The share of these 18-24-year-olds in Malta continued to decrease to 17.5% by 2019 (Eurostat, 2019), however, it is still one of the highest in Europe. This paper gives an overview of significant spatial trends and patterns of early school leavers in Malta and Gozo. The software ArcGIS was used as a tool to capture, structure, manage, analyse and visualise the data so that these trends can be displayed visually. A quantitative methodology using secondary data was utilised to create maps that display information.

A clustered geospatial pattern in Malta emerged around the harbour areas whereby nearby districts were shown exhibiting not only a high rate of early school leaving but also several inequalities. The Southern Harbour district shows the highest percentage of early school leavers, lowest rates of students in tertiary education, higher rates of unemployment, lowest average gross salary and highest rate of persons at-risk-of-poverty amongst others. Another important finding was that most early school leavers in Malta are males. A good percentage of these males are in employment and are undertaking jobs in sectors with a larger constant demand for manpower, such as tourism, construction or employed within family businesses.

Keywords: Early School Leavers, Spatial distribution, Education, Employment, Social inequalities.

I INTRODUCTION

A Early School Leavers: Who are They?

EUROSTAT defines early school leavers as the percentage of the population between 18-24 years:

1. who have lower secondary education and who are not in further education or training,
2. who at most have achieved ISCED Level 2 - which is equivalent to qualifications obtained below the upper secondary school level in Malta,
3. and who were not in education or training in the last four weeks before answering the Labour Force Survey (LFS) (Eurostat, 2019).

Early school leaving was declared by the European Commission (2018) to hamper economic and social development. Therefore, the European 2020 vision states that;

‘the share of early school leavers (18-24) should be under 10% and at least 40% of 30-34 years old should have completed a tertiary or equivalent education’.
(European Commission, 2018)

A decrease in early school leaving between 2010 (36.9 %, Eurostat, 2011) and 2019 (17.5 %, Eurostat, 2019), was registered, but decreasing the share of early school leavers to 10% to reach the European target by 2020 remains a challenge in Malta. At present, there is a great concern over this issue since Malta still has one of the highest rates of early school leaving in Europe together with Spain (17.9%, Eurostat, 2019).

The EUROSTAT definition is legally binding as it is an official statutory definition and incorporates the most important indicators, which are: age, qualification, education levels and employment. Although the EUROSTAT indicator has weaknesses, it allows the investigation of this phenomenon through variables which are acknowledged throughout all Europe. Therefore, the rate of early school leavers is investigated by National Statistics Offices, through the same Labour Force Surveys held in several countries. Having common metadata within countries renders data more reliable and more comparable. Moreover, countries can learn from each other, not only through the findings but also through good practices that can promote and guide development.

B Research Question

1. What is the spatial distribution of early school leavers in Malta? To investigate the early school leaving phenomenon in Malta the following research question has been formulated. The motivation

behind this question is that of looking at localities and districts in Malta to find out which areas yield the highest and lowest amount of early school leavers. In so doing, any measures proposed can be targeted to a district/locality. The gender of early school leavers and their occupation patterns are also investigated according to localities so that significant patterns and trends can be discussed in the light of findings from other countries.

Since 'early school leaving was found to create and perpetuate the socio-economic inequalities they live in' (Council of the European Union 2011, p. 4), the investigation of socio-economic inequalities is very important. Socio-economic inequalities include both social characteristics, such as level of education, and economic inequalities. These are both related to differences in income and occupations, and are therefore, related directly to one's job opportunities.

Maps were designed using ARCGIS to visualise the data obtained. In this case, the objective is to reveal spatial patterns which may exist in Malta and Gozo, but which are not easily identified unless data is presented spatially. Such patterns and trends can further provide information about particular phenomena which might persist in particular districts. Although this research is not intended to reach general conclusions about policy, the arguments and findings might have many practical implications. This paper can help policy makers make more informed decisions, based on clear visual representations of complex data.

C Body of Paper

1 Introduction

The aim of this research is to investigate the spatial distribution of early school leavers in Malta and Gozo. This research follows a typical starting point; the research question set to be investigated, then a procedure (the gathering of data) and then analysis of data and its discussion. The data and information required for this research called for a quantitative approach. Secondary data obtained from the National Statistics Office about the geographical distribution of early school leavers' location, gender and employment is utilised in the design of maps, which prove to be vital to uncover important spatial patterns. Spatial analysis is then carried out to correlate the information and to investigate relationships between variables that might highlight specific processes.

This research, therefore, investigates correlation with caution, and does not underestimate the fact that individuals have free will, and that behaviour is not always predetermined by variables such as residential location, even though patterns may suggest this. Within a residential district, there are indications of particular lifestyles and patterns. That is why this research aims to highlight particular trends within districts since it acknowledges that human agencies influence the future prospects of individuals. This research however has no intention of generalising or being deterministic since creating stereotypes is not the scope of this research. Ryan (2009, p. 15) asserts that 'everyone lives in the context of a worldview, which influences how we think and behave and how we organise our lives, including how we approach research'. In other words, social reality is consciously and actively created by individuals who interpret the world according to their experiences. Accepting that meaning can be subjective, lends

to the interpretive approach which incorporates commonly accepted meanings that people attribute to social phenomena. As Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991, p.5) explains 'interpretive studies assume that people create and associate their own subjective and inter subjective meanings as they interact with the world around them. Interpretive researchers thus attempt to understand phenomena by accessing the meanings participants assign to them.'

Although this research explores the variables (mainly district, gender and employment) other socioeconomic factors within the districts have been observed and these may have a correlation with early school leaving. Correlation does not imply cause. Correlation refers to the existence of a relationship between two sets of occurrences or variables whilst a causal relationship is possible when one situation produces another (Giddens, 2001). Human nature and reality is very complex, and influenced by many variables. These connections of cause and effect cannot be understood so mechanically since 'the attitudes people have and their subjective reasons for acting as they do are causal factors in relationships between variables in social life' (Giddens, 2001, p.644).

2 Methodology

Quantitative research has been primarily chosen since large amounts of data are required to construct the maps that demonstrate the spatial distribution on early school leavers. One of the strengths of a quantitative approach is that it enables the measurement of the determinants that can be measured (and in many cases, these provide very useful and very practical information for real-world decision making) whilst recognising, that for various reasons, these measurements might be subject to some uncertainty. Secondly, using quantitative research renders observations and measurements more precise and the data is collected faster, especially when large datasets are required. Thirdly, quantitative research has a fixed set of variables, which are all quantifiable and which facilitate the computation and analysis of the data.

This research uses a 'survey/correlation design' (Bryman and Duncan, 1990, p.5) since all the data collected has a quantifiable measure and must be done simultaneously for the same period or year. The data collected was obtained from the National Statistics Office through the Census of 2005, 2011, regional statistics issued 2019, Labour Force Survey (LFS), Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC), Eurostat, and other sources. Therefore, the spatial patterns discussed have a temporal perspective, since this research has been analysing data collected from the 2005 census till the Labour Force survey 2018. Using this data, maps can be designed and statistically analysed to reveal patterns or regularities (Giddens, 2001). To analyse the correlations between the variables, bivariate and multivariate analysis is carried out using SPSS software and further connections between patterns are investigated. According to Giddens (2001), if the research tools are designed properly, correlations found through a survey can be generalised to a larger sample of the population.

As mentioned previously, it is the most common tendency that can be extrapolated over the whole population, and this can only be done through quantifiable measures so that potential relationships between independent variables (such as a socio-economic

characteristic) and early school leavers can be discovered. Such tendencies can have more value to policy makers since they can be analysed statistically using proper techniques and the results can be applied to whole populations so that policy measures can tackle the issue at hand appropriately. Therefore, even though, quantitative analysis tends to be deductive, in that research is based on variables extrapolated from theory, it does not limit the research by refuting any knowledge derived from data obtained, which can further enrich the theory already at hand.

Adopting spatial data or spatial analysis to study phenomena in education or sociology is quite new in Malta. However, spatial data analysis has received considerable attention internationally and has been used extensively in a myriad of applications. Spatial data analysis is considered as the formal quantitative study of phenomena that manifest themselves in space and is an essential element in the development of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) (Anselin, 1989).

D Data structure and calculations

The data structure provides the information that the computer requires to reconstruct the spatial data model in digital form. Geographic Information Systems have two components referred to as feature and attributes. The feature is the map used to represent the real world. The Maltese Islands are either represented as six districts or as local council localities. The attribute component is the non-spatial data, which in this case is the information about early school leavers (Figure 1).

There are two ways in which data is structured; in vector or raster data layers. A vector data structure was used in this research, to represent real-world features such as districts, localities or local council boundaries as polygons. There are many advantages in using vector GIS data, but the most important is that it has the ability to store multiple attribute data (as shown in Figure 1) for each feature and as a result, it can be data rich and can help in the computation of calculations and spatial analysis.

Figure 1: showing the part of the attribute table with the data collected

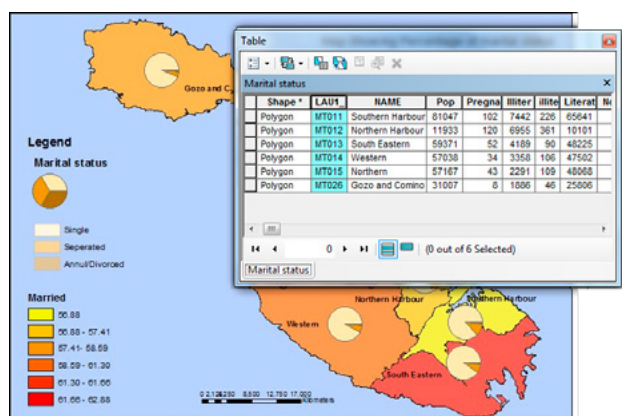
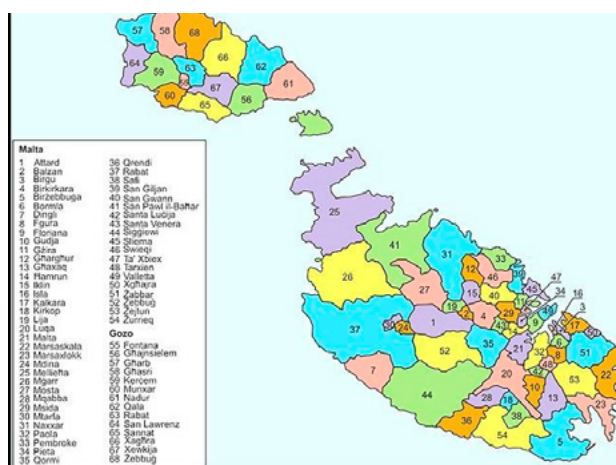


Figure 2: Map showing the different localities in Gozo and Malta



Source: Maps of Net, 2012.

The first step in this research was to obtain the reference data set for the Local Council Boundaries using ArcGIS, whereby information about the localities present in Malta and Gozo could be visualised in Figure 2. The NUTS IV district map represented all the localities grouped under the 6 districts as stipulated by the National Statistics Office. The six districts contain the following localities.

1. Northern District: Gharghur, Mellieha, Mgarr, Mosta, Naxxar, San Pawl il-Bahar,
2. Western District: Attard, Balzan, Dingli, Iklin, Lija, Mdina, Mtarfa, Rabat, Siggiewi, Zebbug
3. Gozo and Comino: Fontana, Ghajnselem and Comino, Gharb, Ghasri, Kercem, Munxar, Nadur, Qala, Rabat, San Lawrenz, Sannat, Xaghra, Xewkija
4. South Eastern Harbour: Birzebbugia, Ghaxxa, Gudja, Kirkop, Marsaskala, Marsaxlokk, Mqabba, Qrendi, Saf, Zejtun, Zurrieq
5. Southern Harbour District: Birgu, Bormla, Fgura, Floriana, Isla, Kalkara, Luqa, Marsa, Paola, Santa Lucija, Tarxien, Valletta, Xghajra, Zabbar
6. Northern Harbour District: Birkirkara, Gzira, Hamrun, Msida, Pembroke, Pietà, Qormi, San Giljan, San Gwann, Santa Venera, Sliema, Swieqi, Ta' Xbiex

The Data collected contained population headcounts for the variables mentioned. Other calculations were carried out so as to obtain further data and/or new data which could be integrated within GIS.

Figure 3: Map showing population number according to the districts



Most calculations, graphs and maps presented were prepared using GIS Software. Other complex calculations were carried out using SPSS, a special statistical package which can carry out further analysis of the data obtained, in this case the Friedman test. The following calculations were carried out:

1 Calculating density of population and early school leavers

The densities of the population per district were calculated by finding the area of the district mentioned and the population number of that same district and then divide the population by area. This made the comparisons between census and other survey data possible.

2 Percentages

The percentages of most variables were calculated since the population measured in the total Census included a larger dataset and the inputting of such large numbers could give rise to errors. So the percentage of each variable was calculated by denoting the total population under investigation as the 100 per cent and then denoting the particular variables studied as being a part of that 100 per cent. Another reason for calculating percentages is that when using results obtained from SILC and LFS and applying them to the whole population using percentages, such results are easier to explain. Moreover, for the purpose of comparability and presentation of data, percentages are better since the sample size in SILC, LFS and Census are different. Percentages are also better in the designing of charts and graphs required for further analysis and discussion.

3 Spatial maps

Overall three types of maps were used in this research: 'Symbol maps, Choropleth maps and Dot maps' (Heywood et al. 2004, p.161-162). The most frequently used is the choropleth map, in which the colour of the district/locality corresponds to the percentage of the variable being mapped (Figure 4). Proportional symbol maps use symbols (where the size of the symbol is represented by a shape that can be a square or a pentagon) in proportion to a quantity. They are most appropriate for visualising counts of data, especially where the size of the data being mapped does not correspond to the spatial unit of analysis (Figure 5). The third map type used is a Dot map. Dot maps create an impression of density (Figure 6) and are most appropriate for showing distribution of a discrete population over

space. One disadvantage of such a map is that the dot does not signify the true location of the individual, so some dots can be found in areas where there are no recorded residents, such as in Comino.

Figure 4: Choropleth Map A

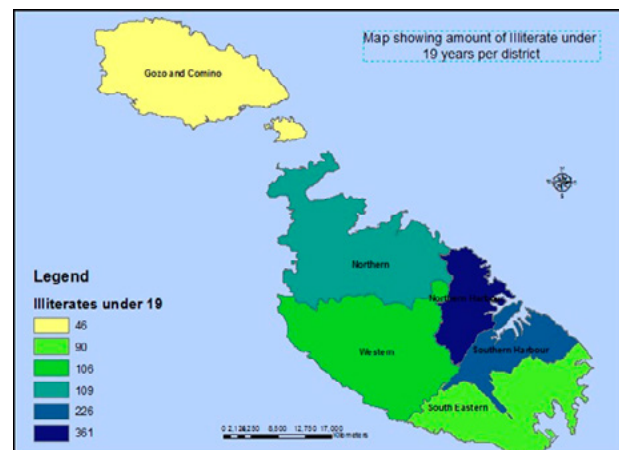


Figure 5: Choropleth Map B

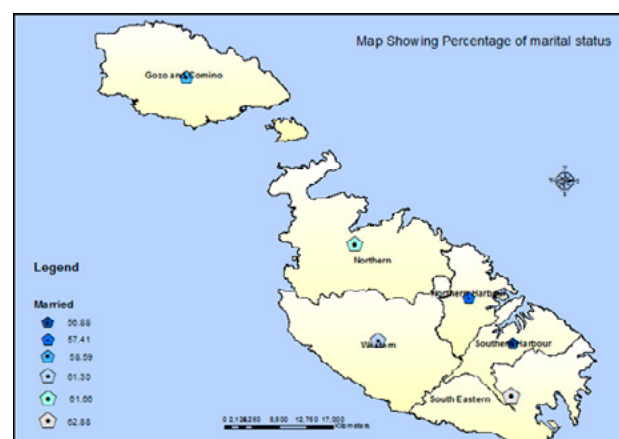


Figure 6: Symbol Map

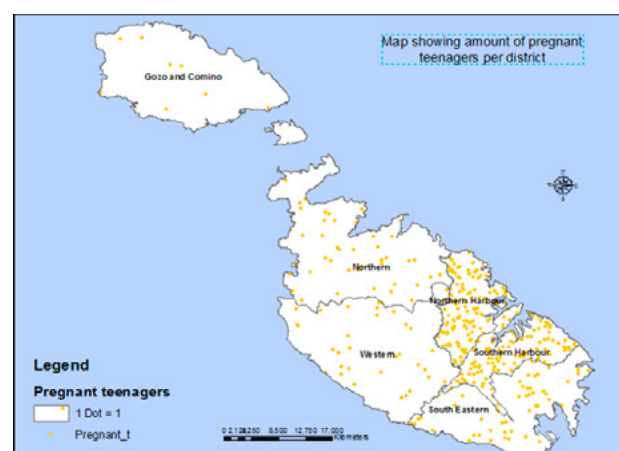
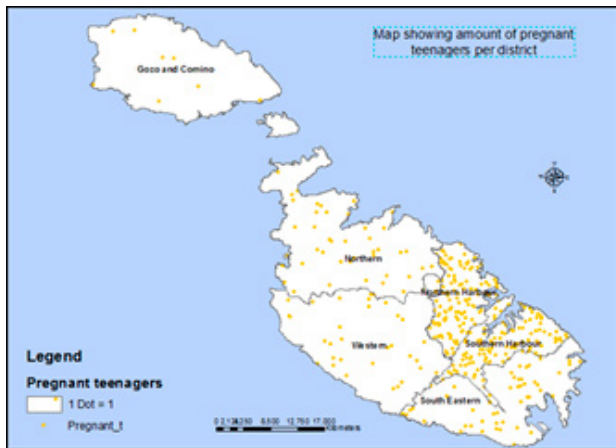


Figure 7: Dot Map



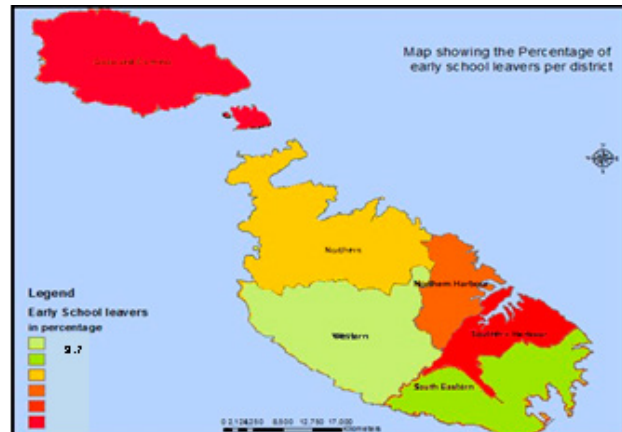
II SPACIAL DISTRIBUTION OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS IN MALTA AND GOZO

Interesting spatial patterns have emerged in this study and presented in this paper. Lee and Wong (2001, p.32) have suggested that the investigation of spatial processes can shed light on any geographical phenomena that may determine underlying environmental or cultural factors that are affecting such patterns’.

The highest number of early school leavers in Malta follows a clustered pattern around the harbour region. This is the latest data obtained from the NSO through the LFS of 2018. This shows that some adjacent districts display a similar spatial concentration of results. The maps presented in the following section represents the different patterns that have emerged from this research and are classified using ‘Jenk’s system with natural breaks’ (Heywood, 2002, p.162). As explained in the methodology section, this system uses a statistical formula to determine the natural clusters of

attribute values and the graduated colours drawing method applies this classification technique when uneven distributions of attributes are present. Clustering has been investigated by using the hierarchical approach whereby a system of colour coded data is used to identify ‘hotspots’ marked in red hues and ‘coldspots’ marked in green hues (Fotheringham, 2000).

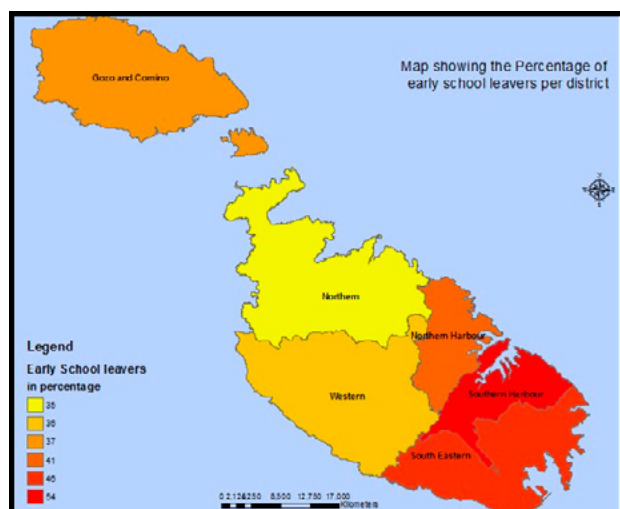
Figure 8: Map showing the percentage spatial distribution of early school leavers



A ‘hotspot’ area displaying a high concentration of early school leavers around the harbour region has been noted, whilst ‘coldspots’ have been observed in the North-West part (Northern, South Eastern and Western districts) of Malta. Both ‘hotspots’ and ‘coldspots’ are of great interest in this research, and the spatial processes underlying such a result, shed further light on the geographical and social divide that exist in education in a country, even if it is a small island like Malta. In the Southern Harbour district, 25 per cent of the youths (aged 18-24) are early school leavers; that is one quarter of the young people that reside in the area. There is a significant difference of 16 per cent between the highest and lowest rate of early school leaving, so the data reveals a possible link between early school leaving and residential area since such a high value and relationship cannot be due to chance. The Southern Harbour region has also an underrepresentation of students in Further Education (16.7%) when compared to the share of the total population living in that district (19.2%). At a locality level, Zabbar (31.4 %) and Birkirkara (24.7%) (NSO, 2019), displayed the highest amounts of early school leaving. Another interesting fact that emerges is the rate of early school leaving in the district of Gozo. Such a non-homogenous distribution in the spatial concentrations of early school leavers does not depend on the location per se but, as Cassar (2009, p.65) reports, the ‘particular elements pertaining to the area such as specific assets or the lack of them’.

Results obtained from the Census had revealed an aggregation in the distribution of early school leavers around the southern part of Malta. The patterns observed in Figure 9 below had highlighted a North-South divide between the South (the hotspots) and the North (coldspots), however this phenomenon seems to be slightly diluting with the early school leavers being more diffused around the island. The social prestige of the locality attracts or deters individuals from choosing a specific location of residence, and, even though residential mobility has been observed, and several localities are being rehabilitated, a distinction between localities and its residents still prevails.

Figure 9: Map showing the percentage spatial distribution of early school leavers from the Census



A Gender and Early School Leaving

The literature available and Eurostat statistics for the year 2018 shows that in EU there are more male (12.2 %) early school leavers than females (8.2%) (EUROSTAT, 2019). Malta is no different and early school leaving differs significantly on the basis of gender, with boys having a higher rate of early school leaving than girls (Byrne et al., 2010). This research supports the existing literature since on average over the six districts male early school leavers account for 19.5%, whilst females are at 15.9 per cent (LFS, 2018). A difference of 3.6 per cent between male and female school leavers is quite significant.

Figure 10: Gender differences in early school leavers (pie chart)

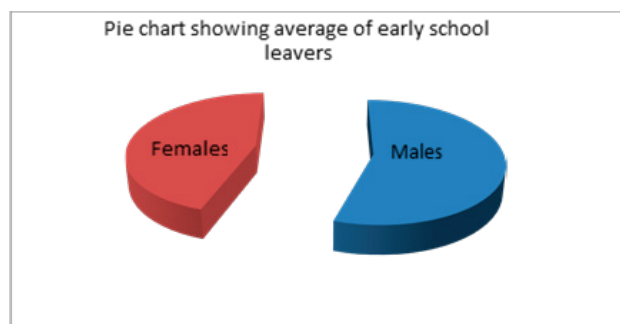
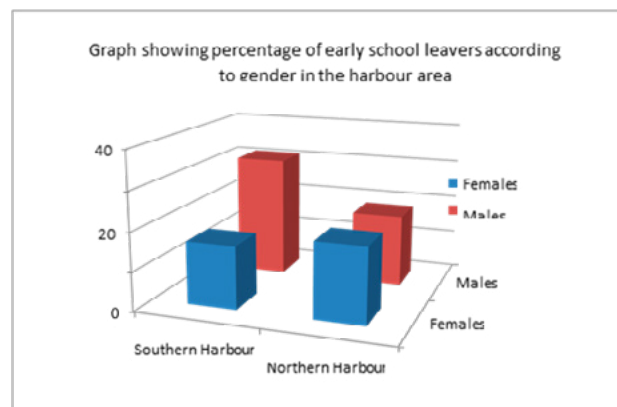


Figure 11: Gender differences in early school leavers per district (graph)



The data further shows that the highest percentage of early school leavers both male and female reside in the Northern and Southern Harbour of Malta (Figure 11). Gender-based residential patterns with higher rates of male and female early school leavers residing in the harbour parts of Malta, have been observed. As a matter of fact, the Southern Harbour district has the highest number of male (31.2 %) whilst the Northern Harbour area has the highest percentage of female (19.4%) early school leavers. This further supports the clustering geospatial pattern that exists in early school leaving rates. Data provided also shows (Figure 12) that the Northern Harbour has the lowest difference (0.9%) between male and female early school leavers, whilst the Southern harbour has the highest percentage. A difference of 15 per cent exists, implying that there is a significant difference in the educational choices carried out by males and females in the Southern Harbour.

This relationship between education and gender can be further supported by data from the University of Malta. Regional statistics published in 2019 show that females make up the majority in tertiary Education (54%). In 2017, there were 2513 female graduates and 2067 male graduates. The NSO data on graduates reports that females outnumber males in most age brackets at University, except in the 30-34 years age bracket. This result reveals that females are continuing their studies at a younger age than males, in courses related to the caring profession. Most female choices highly depend on gender stereotyped occupational and life aspirations (Mallia and Mallia, 1997). As a matter of fact, gender differences also persist in subject area choices in Further Education. Disparity was mostly observed in the Health and Welfare and Education programmes where females dominate, while males are overrepresented in programmes in Engineering, manufacturing, construction and business. This female retention rate can be related to the need to achieve personal fulfilment and success, but Rumberger (1998) states that teenage girls who have been excluded from any source of full-time employment or apprenticeships have further continued studying at a tertiary level in larger numbers than males who have found employment. Figures released by Eurostat, 2019 data reveal that whilst Malta has one of EU's best male employment rates, women have a lower rate hence registering the largest employment gap between men and women (EUROSTAT, 2019).

Table 1: Table showing percentage of employed and unemployed early school leavers in Europe and Malta

	Males			Females		
	Total	Employed	Unemployed	Total	Employed	Unemployed
EU – 10.6	12.2	6.4	5.8	8.9	3.4	5.5
Malta – 17.5	19.4	15.1	4.4	15.5	11.4	4.1

Source: EUROSTAT, 2019

The distribution of early school leavers according to gender and labour status (Eurostat, 2019) has also shown that Malta has a high rate of employed early school leavers for both males and females. It also shows that whilst on average in the EU there are higher rates of unemployed female early school leavers, this is not the case for Malta with only 4.1 per cent of unemployed female early school leavers. The percentages presented are very significant since they reveal that females invest in higher education at a younger age, probably before marriage or parenthood, whilst males take up further education when they are older, probably to improve employment opportunities. As Rotin (1997, p.295) further points out, girls' social class, future aspirations and jobs offered, 'reinforce and interact with the socialisation received at school to entrench these students in particular educational and occupational destinies'.

On the other hand, Byrne et al. (2010) report that the lure of the labour market (as the reason for leaving school) has increased among males, to the point where it has surpassed school pull-factors. This means that males are attracted towards employment in higher rates than females, and that more males start employment or apprenticeship at an earlier age (sometimes very young), contributing to Malta's twilight economy (Sultana, 1994).

B Employment and early school leavers

European statistics of 2018, has shown that out of 10.6 % of early leavers from education and training, 4.9 % of these were early school leavers in employment, while 3.5 % were early school leavers not employed but wanting to work, and the remaining early leavers (2.2 % of the population aged 18-24) were not employed and did not want to work. However as shown in the table below (Figure 2) in Malta 13.3 per cent are employed (Eurostat, 2018 & LFS, 2018). This makes Malta the country with one of the highest amount employed early school leavers (77 per cent) and indicates a significant difference, since early school leaving is highly correlated with unemployment in several other countries (European Commission, 2018).

Table 2: Table showing the distribution of early school leaver in EU and Malta by labour status

	Total employed and unemployed	Emp-loyed	Not emp-loyed	Would like to work	Not wanting to work
EU	10.6	4.9	5.6	3.5	2.2
Malta	17.5	13.3	4.2	3.0	1.2

Source: EUROSTAT, 2019

Displaying the data per district shows that that out of 25.6 per cent of early leavers in Gozo and Comino, 21.6% of these were employed early school leavers. (Figure 12). This shows that Gozo has not only the highest rate of early school leaving but also the highest rate of employed early school leavers in Malta. Western has no results marked since out of 9.7 percent of early school, the sample of employed was very small (less than 20 sample observation) therefore NSO considers it not reliable.

Figure 12: Shows the distribution of early school leavers by labour status

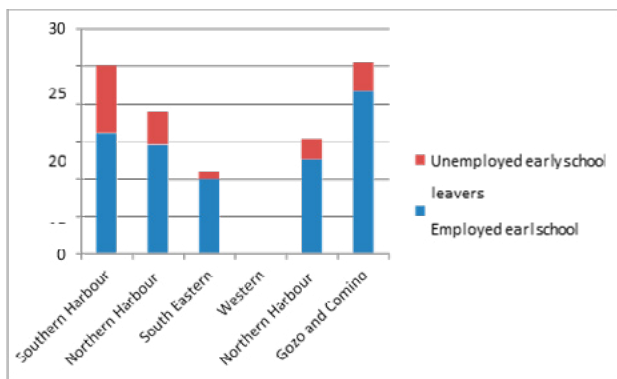
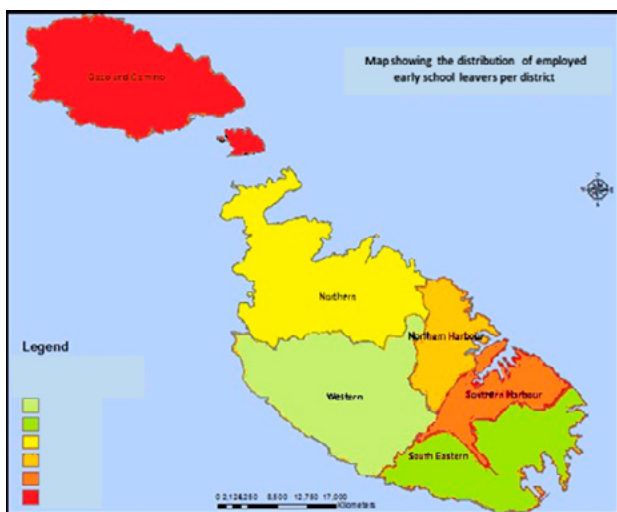


Figure 13: Map showing the distribution of early school leavers in employment



Calculating the percentage of employed early school leavers further shows that the South Eastern district has the highest percentage of

early school leavers in employment (91.6 %) whilst the Southern harbour registers the least amount of early school leavers in employment (64.4%) and more early school leavers unemployed (35.6%) (LFS, 2018).

Figure 14: Percentage of employed early school leavers (Out of 100%)

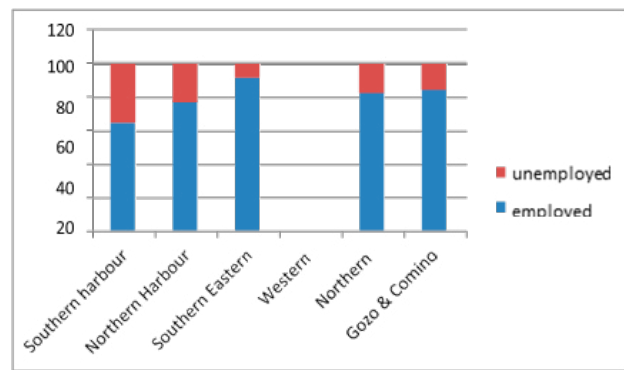
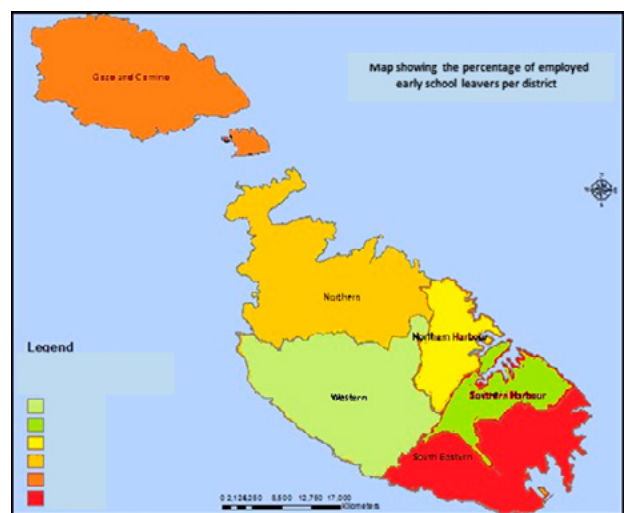


Figure 15: Map showing the percentage of employed early school leavers



The maps (Figure 15) shows a distinct random pattern both in the 'coldspots' and in the 'hotspots' with no strong correlation of aggregation in the concentrations of neighbouring Harbour areas. Clustering is displayed mildly in the Northern districts. Employment does not exhibit a distinctive geographical divide between the North and South divide. Gozo with its double insularity is displaying a high concentration of employed early school leavers. Some students are

highly focused on the world of work and manifest their desire to stop their education in several ways at an early age.

Absenteeism is just one example, and ‘involved staying away from school for reasons not justified by law (Chircop, 1997, p.355). Truancy and other overt ways of absenteeism also manifest themselves in those students with no intention to further education or not sitting for any exam. On average, students attending state schools located in the Northern Harbour district accumulated the highest average number of absences (18 days per student). On the other hand, the lowest average number of absences was recorded in the Western district and stood at 9.9 days per student. (NSO, 2017)

Some of the reasons given by students for leaving education and recorded in the Tracer Study (2017) are that they were not interested in studying, did not sit SEC exams, obtained no certification, joined the family business, having a gap year, or having financial problems either to support oneself or to support their family. Financial problems within the family because of unemployment of parents, single parent households or medical reasons add further pressure on young people to contribute to the family budget. Sultana (1994) explains that helping out in family businesses within the house or outside, with a formal remuneration or not, all help the household economy rather than an educational experience.

These findings are in line with research carried out by the Early School Leavers Unit (ESLU) that published ‘A Study Focusing on Students dropping out from Post-Secondary Education in Malta in the Scholastic year 2015-2016, researching why they terminated their studies. In this research, 65.5% were in employment at the time when the survey was conducted. 51.2% of these jobs were full-time and 48.8% part-time. 4.5% of dropouts were employed in a family business. The highest level of education for most parents of the respondents in this survey was secondary. Respondents also mentioned ‘family reasons; (2.5%) and ‘problems with transport’ (3.3%). Students who used public transport reported that they used to spend a lot of time travelling from their hometown to their post-secondary institution; this was considered a waste of time and consequently, they had decided to drop out.

III CONCLUSION

Early school leaving is a consequence of a number of diverse inter-related socio-economic inequalities concentrated in particular districts. These inequalities do not, in themselves necessarily determine whether young individuals stay in or leave school early; rather, they interrelate with each other to make early school leaving more likely.

Early school leaving is geographically linked to a location. A strong North-South divide is evident in Malta, with the Northern part experiencing less inequalities and better conditions (less people are unemployed, at risk of poverty and have lower incomes), as opposed to the Southern localities. The aggregation of inequalities in certain districts (such as the Southern Harbour) creates zones (hotspots) of high interest. This research has, therefore, investigated the impact of the neighbourhood on the decision for early school

leaving, otherwise referred to by Miller (1977) as the ‘Przeworski environmental effect’. Results have indicated a neighbourhood effect around the Harbour area with regards to early school leaving but not and high North-South divide. Results further indicate that districts with higher rates of professionals and more educated individuals have lower rates of early school leavers, whilst districts with less qualified individuals have higher rates of early school leavers, even though schooling is offered equally to all students. In this way, economically advantaged individuals or families owning a higher cultural capital translate this capital into higher grades for their children (Bourdieu, 1977). As Sultana (1997, p.24) reports ‘the social origin of an individual determines social destinations despite the mediating factor of school’.

Another important outcome reported in this research is the strong correlation which exists between employment and early school leaving. The Maltese Islands reports one of the highest percentages of employed early school leavers in Europe. Therefore, the labour opportunities available support the high percentage of early school leavers registered. This does not imply that employment is the direct cause for such a high rate but it can be an incentive. A strong correlation is present in districts registering high rates of early school leavers and low-skilled jobs, or areas with higher concentrations of family owned businesses. This leads to a two-fold employment theory that states that more employment availability can be an incentive for early school leaving, whilst, on the other hand, further education is not a definite necessity for employment (Mickelwright, 1990). The availability of work offered to early school leavers within family enterprises grants employment in high status jobs, not on the basis of meritocracy but on the inheritance of such positions. Therefore, such possibilities result in early school leavers attaining higher economic capital without investing in education (human capital) as a means to achieve this. Bourdieu (1977) explains how people gain access to powerful positions through connection with others, as they have a higher social capital.

According to this research, employment and unemployment have the highest impact on the increase or decrease of early school leavers. The results discovered have important implications for policy making, in that addressing inequalities within the districts’ is vital if a decrease in early school leavers is desired in Malta as well. The National Commission for Sustainable Development (2006, p.53) states that ‘Early school leaving should be avoided at all costs’.

Furthermore, the types of occupations available also explain the higher rate of male early school leavers. A high gender bias (in favour of males) exists in the labour market since more elementary occupations which require male employees are available. Higher percentages of younger males are in employment, and this may be due to the aspirations and expectations that the Maltese society has for its male and female population. Although there is a high rate of employed early school leavers, still there is high gender disparity in employment opportunities, and salaries. This lack of labour opportunity explains why more females have progressed into further

1 The ‘Przeworski environmental effect’ model, which suggests that the middle class operate according to the reactive model in working-class areas, whereas the working class operate according to the consensual model in middle-class areas.

education. This shows that females are still limited when it comes to education and employment, especially when they have family responsibilities (Darmanin, 2006).

The National Strategic Reference Framework 2007-2013, states that Malta's socio-economic development rests on sustaining economic growth and competitiveness through the generation of a knowledge-based and service-based competitive economy. To achieve such a target, European countries and the Maltese government aims to reduce early school leaving rate to 10 percent, since lower education levels are often associated with a lower quality of life. This research demonstrates that there is a need to explore the phenomenon of early school leaving in Malta attentively and further geospatial data of different variables must be studied in correlation with early school leaving. Statements claiming that early school leavers contribute to higher rates of unemployment and poverty are incorrect when referring to the Maltese labour market. Therefore, even though higher rates of young people in further education might help achieve the knowledge-based economy recommended by the Government, a 10 percent rate of early school leaving might not be ideal. In fact, higher rates of graduated youths might encounter unemployment problems and not obtain the income return expected after years of study.

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Addressing Learner Variability Through Executive Function as a Preventive Measure for Early School Leaving

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Abstract - The Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta, (2014) identifies high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as one of the preventive measures to improve learning outcomes. The Free Childcare Scheme launched in (2014) led to an increase in the participation of children (0-3 years) in childcare. Furthermore, the responsibility of Childcare Centres (0-3 years) has shifted to the Ministry of Education and Employment to establish an integrated model approach towards ECEC (0-7 years) which includes the acknowledgment of educational attainment for all learners through a learning outcomes framework complemented by an authentic assessment approach revolving around a learner-centred environment. To address individual learner variability, educators also need support to proactively plan and address such needs across learning environments. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that is guided by the neuroscience and psychology behind how learning occurs and guides educators to best support ALL learner needs. Rather than waiting for learners to struggle or fail, UDL establishes flexible learning environments that provide accessibility from the outset. By providing multiple means of engagement, recognition, as well as action and expression, educators can promote expert learning to help each individual actualise their potential and understand what serves them best across contexts. One point of focus is to support expert learning by scaffolding and explicitly teaching skills and strategies related to executive function. This awareness and understanding will assist educators to equip young learners with a robust platform for successful future learning impinging on their learning engagement and motivation.

Keywords: early childhood, executive function, universal design for learning, learning process, meaningful learning environments.

I INTRODUCTION

Reducing early school leaving is a top priority for Malta. Notwithstanding that in recent years there has been a declining trend, with a drop of 2.7 percentage point between 2015 and 2018, the proportion of early leavers (17.5%) is still markedly above the EU average (10.6%). According to Eurostat, early school leavers are those aged between 18 and 24 who at most, have only obtained a lower secondary level of education and who are not in further education or training.

A Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta was launched in June 2014 (MEDE, 2014a). This strategic

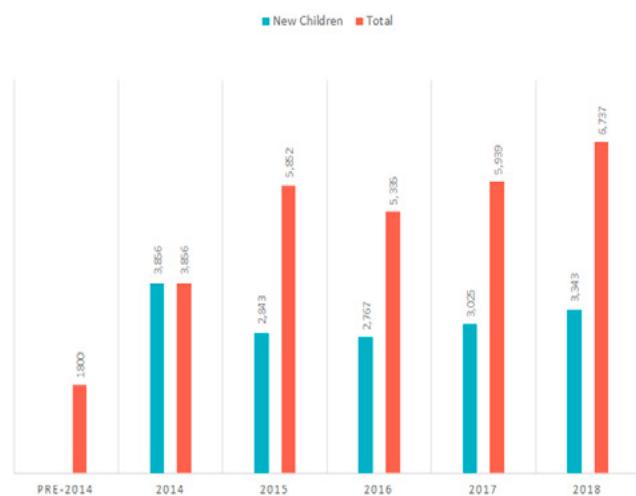
plan identifies prevention measures, in particular, to ensure that schooling responds to learner diversity and addresses learner needs from a very young age.

It is becoming increasingly accepted that early years' provision is the foundation of learning throughout life and "early childhood settings around the world serve as societal platforms" (Johansson & Einarsdottir, 2018: 4). There is a consensus that high-quality learning programmes in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) are pivotal for future education and work and for social and relational competences (Ringsmose & Kragh-Müller, 2017; Johansson & Einarsdottir, 2018). Research is showing that children who experience high-quality childcare and early education meaningful learning programmes, perform better in their later years at school,

develop better social skills and display fewer behavioural problems. Inclusive and equitable quality educational programmes in ECEC will nurture a meaningful personal journey of holistic development and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, in congruence with the National vision of My Journey: Achieving through different paths (MEDE, 2016).

Enhancing the quality of education within ECEC is pivotal to respond adequately to the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 (MEDE, 2014b) and to keep up with Malta's commitment to reach the target of reducing Early School Leavers to 10% by 2020 (MEDE, 2014a). Consequently, in 2014, the Free Childcare Scheme was launched to increase female participation in the labour market and this led to a significant increase in participation of children from three months up to three years of age in childcare centres. This impacted a steady increase in the proportion of children below three years in formal childcare (see Figure 1) and it has contributed to Malta reaching the Barcelona target of 33% of children under 3 years old attending formal childcare and which nowadays is above the EU average (see Figure 2). Furthermore, participation in ECEC for children between three and five years is also above the EU average (see Figure 3).

Figure 1: Participation in Free Childcare Scheme



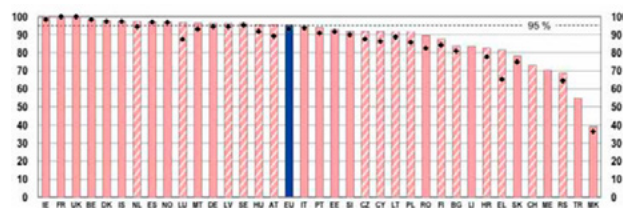
Source: Jobsplus data, 2019

Figure 2: Participation rates in centre-based ECEC of children under the age of 3 in EU, (provisional) 2017



Source: Eurydice (2019) calculations based on Eurostat EU-SILC Survey.

Figure 3: Participation rates in ECEC of children aged between 4 years old and the starting age of compulsory primary education, 2017



Source: Eurydice (2019) calculations based on Eurostat UOE statistics.

Additionally, to reinforce the vision of lifelong learning, from the cradle to the grave, as from 1st July 2016, the responsibility of Childcare Centres (0-3 years) shifted from the Department of Social Welfare Standards (DSWS) in the Ministry for Family and Social Solidarity (MFSS) to the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) in the Ministry for Education (MEDE). This has formally established an integrated model approach towards ECEC including acknowledging the educational attainment of all learners through a learning outcomes framework complemented with an authentic assessment approach revolving around a learner-centred environment.

It is valid to state that Malta is on the right track in its efforts to effectively put an edge on ECEC as a prevention measure. This paper will shed more light on the concept of a learner-centred environment which views that it is more than just providing information or teaching skills but rather an approach of developing responsible and autonomous learners through positive learner/teacher relationships (McCombs & Miller, 2007). As educators, one must focus on the learner but not at the price of minimising the role of the teacher in the whole process. Both learners and teachers are equally important, and they should be seen as partners in achieving the desired learning outcome. There is a need to complement a learner-centred approach with teacher/learner meaningful interaction through intentional teaching with an understanding of how children learn.

II HOW DO CHILDREN LEARN?

Defining learning is not an easy task. 'Learning' is one of those terms that is frequently used, and seemingly understood ubiquitously, but would be hard pressed to define. We have all experienced it, we usually know it when we see it, and we tend to accept its crucial function in life.

Learning is a complex process and each individual's learning experience may present "as unique as our fingerprints" (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014:49). Models of learning should focus on thinking, feeling and acting (Novak & Gowin, 1984; Johnston, 1996; Jarvis, 2006) and any education that does not address these three human forms of learning will produce unbalanced and, often, disengaged and disenchanting learning. This intricate process involves different mental processes and will develop and change over time. It is part of our being and if one wants to be a contributing citizen in society one

must understand how one learns (Slavkin, 2004; Pritchard, 2018). Coffield et al. (2004:1) ask a very simple question which triggers off critical reflection “How can we teach students if we do not know how they learn?”

Research in neuroscience and elsewhere shows that cognition (thinking), affectation (feeling) and conation (acting) cannot be studied as disparate elements, but one must analyse systems and networks of connections if one wants to understand how learning occurs and empower meaningful and expert learning experiences (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014). Such theories of learning emerge as paradigm shifts to consider learning as a complex dynamic system of networks and mental processes that impact the process of thinking, acting and feeling. Consequently, teachers should be interested and focus on an understanding of the process of learning rather than content acquisition alone so as to increase the quality of their teaching. This will minimise the risk of superficial learning by giving due importance to engage in teaching and learning.

In this premise, to create a learner-centred environment, especially in the early years, one should provide different opportunities and choices for participation that are centred on the learners’ interests. However, to be able to do so, one should listen to the voice of the learners by understanding why, what and how learners feel, think and act. This kind of understanding will empower educators to build meaningful relationships with their learners (Bateman, 2016). Educators are encouraged to work collaboratively with their learners to foster curiosity in finding answers to questions in inquiry-based learning environments.

The ‘learner’s voice’ in this context refers to the move to consulting individuals to provide opportunities for learners to voice their opinions about things that matter to them and that affect their learning. The learner’s voice helps both the learner and the teacher to better understand how to make learning more meaningful for the learner. Spendlove (2009:76) claims that “learners can provide rich and penetrating evidence and insight into what works well in lessons and what does not.” He also suggests that listening to the learner’s voice may make the teachers feel vulnerable since it goes against the grain in which most adults were brought up and it gives the learners a kind of elevated status, therefore, creating a students-vs-teachers scenario within the classroom. However, Spendlove (2009:76) explains that this is a misconception and “that just because a pupil says something does not make it correct; what it does is provide a rich insight into pupils’ perceptions which can provide incredibly valuable information about their beliefs and misconceptions” and as a result teachers can then plan their learning programme accordingly and more effectively.

Individual differences or learner variability (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014) in the context of this paper may present itself in the form of various factors such as differing thoughts, feelings and ways of performing (Matthews et al. 2000). For instance, Brain (2000) suggests that while some incoming information is selected for attention, other information may be neglected. Brain’s work on how information is received shows that information enters the senses through a ‘sensory buffer’ where the information is selectively filtered. This selectivity view is also presented in Sousa’s (2017) model. The way

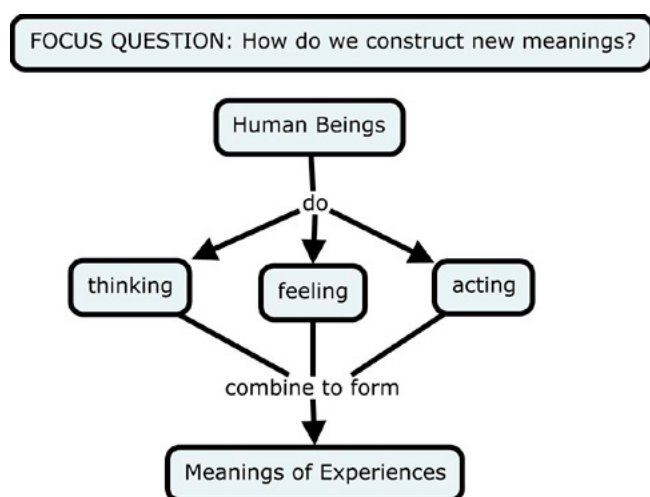
in which an individual perceives a situation can differ based on a number of variables that can shift or change the point of initiation for that experience. Similarly, affective responses to experiences can physiologically change a learner’s performance (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007) and these perceptions are considered as initial points of engagement or disengagement for learning (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014) that can skew a learning experience even before it occurs.

Many theories of learning further distil the emotional and cognitive influences on learning. For instance, Forsten et al., (2006), Dweck and Masters (2008) and Brophy (2010) reveal how learners can interpret and respond differently to learning experiences in the face of challenge. The appraisal of a situation will determine how learners feel about a situation that may impact their performance. Marshall Shelton and Stern (2004) and Smith (2018) also suggest that having teachers who are attuned to understanding feelings, referred to as ‘emotional information’, would increase the effectiveness of teaching and student learning. Other authors such as Matthews et al., (2000:16) state that there are differences in “stylistic variables such as willingness to respond and preference for speed over accuracy.” “Emotions play a major role in behaviour and in human learning since they are at the heart of our personhood” (Jarvis, 2006:177). Novak (2010:30) proposes that “feelings or what psychologists call affect, are always a concomitant of any learning experience and can enhance or impair learning.”

It is evident that learning is quite a complex process involving cognition (thinking), conation (acting) and affectation (feeling). Many times, learning theories’ literature present cognition, conation and affectation as disparate mental processes. Each of the different learning theories offers insights into the learning process. Nonetheless, some authors refer to an integration of these three mental processes (Novak & Gowin, 1984; Johnston, 1996, Novak, 2010) For example, Seel (2012:17) claims that “it is widely acknowledged that academic achievement is the result of a complex interplay between cognition, affect and conation.” Jarvis (2006:23) suggests that as thinking, feeling and acting beings we transform our experiences “through all three dimensions, often simultaneously.” According to Novak (2010:132) “meaningful learning must underlie the constructive integration of thinking, feeling and acting if learners are to be successful and achieve a sense of empowerment.” Corno (2008:197) claims that “when the full range of conative processes is studied in conjunction with cognition, and when affect is seen as central and not peripheral to performance, human behaviour and performance can be better explained.”

This scenario leads us to a realisation that learning can no longer be viewed as a process which involves solely cognition. While learners are going through a process of thinking during learning, they are also doing and feeling. Novak and Gowin (1984:xi) in the preface to their book claim: “Human experience involves not only thinking and acting but also feeling, and it is only when all three are considered together that individuals can be empowered to enrich the meaning of their experience”.

Figure 4: Meaning of Experiences (Novak & Gowin, 1984).



Understanding how a child learns by taking into consideration the integration of thinking, feeling and doing, opens a door for the educator to plan meaningful interaction and learning experiences in early childhood education and care that truly capture a personalised learning journey that will serve to generate a robust platform for future successful learning to take place.

III LEARNING OUTCOMES

Malta has recently embarked on a learning outcomes approach as the keystone for learning and assessment. The Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education indicates that “The aim of the Learning Outcomes Framework is to free schools and learners from centrally-imposed knowledge-centric syllabi, and to give them the freedom to develop programmes that fulfil the framework of knowledge, attitudes and skills-based outcomes that are considered national education entitlement of all learners in Malta.”

A common good working definition of a learning outcome would be that “a learning outcome is a statement of what a student should know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of a learning process” (Kennedy, 2009:126; Bernholt et al, 2012:111). One interesting definition is the one put forward by Watson (2002:208) where he defines a learning outcome as “being something that students can do now that they could not do previously....a change in people as a result of a learning experience.”

One popular way of constructing learning outcomes is by using the structure as presented in Bloom’s taxonomy (Kennedy, 2009; Bernholt et al., 2012). This has provided a scaffold for teachers to follow when writing learning outcomes. However, Hussey and Smith (2002) have criticised approaches to writing learning outcomes that rely on a generic level descriptor such as those based on Bloom’s Taxonomy. Allan (1996) argues that learning outcomes limit the students’ learning experience or focus on minimal learning. Ecclestone (1999:29) points out that “if unchecked, there is a real danger that uncritical acceptance of increasingly prescriptive, standardised outcomes will create cynical, instrumental attitudes

to learning in teachers and students alike and remove critical dimensions of student centeredness.”

In the literature, there seems to be one common critique proposed by various authors (Eisner, 2000; Wisdom, 2001; Hussey & Smith, 2002, 2003) that although learning outcomes may be added value to educational processes since they bring more clarity to the learning process, however they will be counterproductive if they serve as fixed prescriptions or recipes or as Eisner (2000:344) puts it “uniformed army of young adolescents all marching to the same drummer.” Neuroscience is showing us that our brains are unique, therefore having fixed learning outcomes would not be responding effectively to the reality of today’s diverse classroom (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014). One should not regard the learning outcomes as a once and for all but as Wisdom (2001) points out, they should indicate an iterative process that involves both learners and teachers as active participants in their development. Therefore, the use of learning outcomes can add value to the educational process but only if they are used in a flexible way to guide rather than dictate student learning in the early years (Woods, 2013).

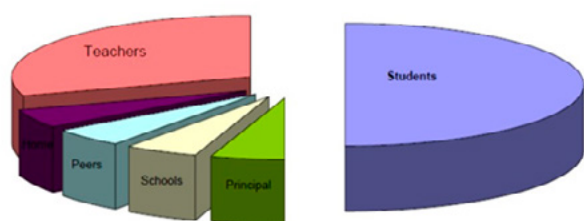
If learning outcomes are used too rigidly, they will limit the unplanned outcomes or what Hussey & Smith (2002) refers to as ‘emergent outcomes’ that tend to arise during learning moments. These ‘emergent outcomes’ are extremely important during the educational process, particularly in the early years and promote deep learning (Pianta, 2012; DQSE, 2015, OECD, 2017). This very much depends on the teacher and how adept he/she is in recognising and tolerating these unintended outcomes that emerge as the learners engage with the content and relate it to their own experience and pushes the students over threshold concepts to encourage creativity in thinking. This is in congruence with the recently established learning outcomes for the early years which clearly state “In the very early years, learning outcomes should be conceptualised as a compass not a map: they point in possible directions that children can learn and grow, but do not lay down templates that all children must follow” (DQSE, 2015:5).

Learning outcomes should move beyond the traditional view of focusing on knowledge and skills only to, for example, indicate also affective factors such as developing enthusiasm for learning or the ability to self-regulate (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014). This notion is also mirrored in Hussey & Smith (2003:367) “accepting that student motivation is an essential element in learning, we propose that those who teach should begin to reclaim learning outcomes and begin to frame them more broadly and flexibly, to allow for demonstrations and expressions of appreciation, enjoyment and even pleasure.”

Furthermore, Darling-Hammond’s (2000) findings from her evidence-based research about the effects of quality teaching on student outcomes reveal that the quality of teaching and teacher education seems to be more strongly related to student achievement and outcomes sought than other variables such as class size, teachers’ salaries or students’ background. Likewise, Hattie (2003) provides some of the most compelling evidence for the importance of quality teaching through a recent meta-analytic synthesis of the relevant evidence-based research which was drawn from an extensive review of the literature and a synthesis of over half a million studies. This

valuable work identifies the greatest source of variance that can make a difference in the classroom as the teacher, and excellence in teaching is the single most powerful influence on students' achievement (Hattie, 2003:3-4). Hattie's (2003) percentages of achievement variance are represented in Figure 5. This was also asserted by Rowe et al. (1993) where on the basis of their findings it was argued that effective schools were only effective to the extent that they had effective teachers. Moreover, Hattie distinguishes between expert and experienced teachers and identifies one of the five major dimensions in an excellent teacher as being that "expert teachers can attend to affective attributes" (Hattie, 2003:5) by having high respect for their students and by being passionate about teaching and learning.

Figure 5: Percentage of Achievement Variance (Hattie, 2003).



Teaching is very personal and idiosyncratic (Vanhear, 2015) and therefore, teachers need to gain more understanding about the learning process. As a result, they would then be able to select the pedagogical tools and strategies which would work for them in such a way that they would become more engaged and use these with the intention to deliver meaningful learning. The teaching process becomes most effective when teachers plan intentional approaches in response to how students are learning (OECD, 2019). Effective tools and strategies are important but they very much depend on the teachers' commitment and willingness to use them intentionally. It is not a particular strategy or tool that matters most, but the teachers' belief that they are willing to use them with the intention to improve their practice to reach different learners. This is where a paradigm shift needs to occur where a learner centred approach is coupled with teacher/student meaningful interaction emanating from an understanding of how children learn.

IV UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING

The aim of education is to meet the needs of all learners to increase their participation in society and to better themselves for the future. Currently, educators observe a mismatch of learner and environmental fit as systematic variability in learning often adds to the complexity of each individual's learning needs. This has led to an uptick in early school leaving and attrition for learners. To address individual learner variability, educators also need support to proactively plan and address such needs across learning environments. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that is founded upon and guided by neuroscience, educational sciences, and psychology relative to how learning occurs with the aim to support educators to proactively plan for ALL learner needs. Rather than waiting for learners to struggle or fail, UDL establishes flexible

learning environments that provide accessibility for content, assessments, and engagement from the outset or instruction and learning. By providing multiple means of engagement, recognition, as well as action and expression, educators can promote expert learning to help each individual actualise their potential and understand what serves them best across contexts. One point of focus is to support expert learning by scaffolding and explicitly teaching skills and strategies related to executive function.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework to provide scaffolds to design teaching and learning environments that best support a wide range of learners and is guided by the fundamentals of how the learning brain works (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). As more individual students began applying for and receiving services in the 1990s to improve learning skills and output, the founders of CAST shifted their focus from individual learning differences to barriers that exist in learning environments. Traditional classrooms and curricula are typically built around text-based materials that are not always accessible to all learners. With the increasing ubiquity of technology available, CAST began to design digital curricula and materials that are flexible from the beginning, rather than needing to retrofit to meet a specific student's needs after a point of struggle. Upon further evaluation of learning environments, not only are students with specifically diagnosed disabilities in need of more flexible options, but all learners can benefit from alternate pathways to meeting learning goal (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). Learning goals are pre-established outcomes that educators and learners may define to work toward in any given lesson, activity, or segment of time. Similar to "learning outcomes," learning goals through a UDL lens are also ways in which learners demonstrate their understanding of new concepts or skills.

During the 1990s technology was becoming more readily available and inexpensive which provided an opportunity to design digital environments for learning and ways to show what is learned. This allows for support to those who had not previously been able to participate in traditional learning experiences. Though digital technology is one way to design accessible learning opportunities, it is not the only way. Through years of research and the amalgamation of best practices and studies from the fields of education, psychology, and neuroscience, CAST has developed a set of guidelines that establish intentional and innovative pathways for educators to better meet the needs of all learners. Rather than providing options after a need arises, supports and scaffolds can be integrated directly into learning environments from the start. This is further solidified through the provision of **clear, rigorous goals, along with flexible means** which help to increase self-awareness and the development of skills for learners to increase mastery, confidence, and what is known as "expert learning". Understanding one's self as an expert learner in UDL terms is to be resourceful, knowledgeable, strategic, goal-directed, purposeful, and motivated. The UDL guidelines and framework set out to provide intentionally planned options to allow for the optimal navigation of different learning environments across context and time (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). Ultimately, this helps to transform teaching and learning experiences for all.

Over the years, educational institutions have recognised the increasing diversity that is inherent in all classrooms and learning

environments around the world. From a global perspective, when traditionally established institutions make changes in response to diversity, they may fall short due to lack of training, resources, or follow-through. The UDL framework was established as a way to provide more flexible options to accommodate such learner variability and also supports educators in their committed work to serving all learners. Learner variability is simply defined as the uniqueness in how each individual learns (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014) and accounts for the systematic variability that is inherent in all learners. A number of variables from culture, disability, socio-economic, developmental or social emotional needs can influence how a learner learns. It is undeniable that each learner brings with them a unique set of experiences, strengths and needs that vary depending on the situation and context (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). **Learning is variable.**

As a framework that started in the margins of the normal distribution or bell curve where learners may typically fall in one region or another, UDL shifts the focus from individual differences to predictable variability that exists among all learners. Rather than conceptualising learning through a normal distribution, it is imperative that we recognise how variability impacts learning and how learning experiences are context dependent. Learning is interactional and therefore a learner's traits will have an interaction with the environment. Learning environments may necessitate different demands where learners' internal as well as external states can influence learning and performance (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). Understanding how the environment, expectations, and interactions can shift and change how learners navigate through different learning experiences provide opportunities to increase expert learning (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). **Context matters.**

Learning environments can often dictate how and why students will perform or engage in different activities, lessons, or experiences. One of the key tenets of UDL is that the environment can provide structure, support, and flexibility that is proactively planned to allow for learners to access resources, interactions, and different components of the environment that will best meet their needs. Traditionally, education has taken more of a clinical approach where there is a recognised need or deficit that is identified and then some corresponding reaction or response to manage the identified need. At its core, the UDL framework provides a lens to support the establishment of learning environments that have **flexible pathways to reaching rigorous goals**. Such environments proactively integrate supports that are necessary for leveraging learner variability through the activation of the networks of the brain to allow for holistic learning experiences.

V THE UDL GUIDELINES

The UDL Guidelines (see Figure 6) highlight three neural networks that work together to activate learning. Each of these guidelines provides a roadmap to consider how learning occurs. For each guideline, there are three levels of principles that establish opportunities to access, build or practice skills, and ultimately internalise skills and checkpoints within each principle to provide options for learning. The top level of principles, at the access level, provide options that

educators can manipulate in learning environments. Further, they provide ways for learners to practice and build their skill sets and eventually to be able to internalise skills that lean toward embodying expert learning skills. Often, educators find that they are already incorporating many of the principles into their teaching. However, UDL challenges to integrate options to promote expert learning skills in more intentional ways. Ultimately, the UDL Guidelines are intended to serve as a tool to design goals, assessments, methods, and materials that provide access to rigorous and authentic learning experiences for all (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014).

At the internalise phase of the UDL Guidelines (CAST 2018), higher level skills to be developed revolve around providing options to increase self-regulation, comprehension and executive function. These three fit together as learners who increase mastery and comprehension while regulating their emotions can often access and effectively utilise executive function skills. Developmentally, this may look different across contexts and time. However, many of the ways in which executive function is established and strengthened is determined by how the learning environment is established. In early childhood, the learning environment and social interactions become opportunities to strengthen these important skills for learning and life.

Figure 6: UDL Guidelines (CAST 2018).

The Universal Design for Learning Guidelines		CAST Until learning has no limits		
	Provide Multiple Means of Engagement Affective Networks The 'WHY' of Learning	Provide Multiple Means of Representation Recognition Networks The 'WHAT' of Learning	Provide Multiple Means of Action & Expression Strategic Networks The 'HOW' of Learning	
Access	Provide options for Recruiting Interest Optimize individual choice and autonomy Optimize relevance, value, and authenticity Minimize threats and distractions	Provide options for Perception Offer ways of customizing the display of information Offer alternatives for auditory information Offer alternatives for visual information	Provide options for Physical Action Vary the methods for response and navigation Optimize access to tools and assistive technologies	
Build	Provide options for Sustaining Effort & Persistence Heighten salience of goals and objectives Vary demands and resources to optimize challenge Foster collaboration and community Increase mastery-oriented feedback	Provide options for Language & Symbols Clarify vocabulary and symbols Clarify syntax and structure Support decoding of text, mathematical notation, and symbols Promote understand across languages Illustrate through multiple media	Provide options for Expression & Communication Use multiple media for communication Use multiple tools for construction and composition Build fluencies with graduated levels of support for practice and performance	
Internalize	Provide options for Self-Regulation Promote expectations and beliefs that optimize motivation Facilitate personal coping skills and strategies Develop self-assessment and reflection	Provide options for Comprehension Activate or supply background knowledge Highlight patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships Guide information processing and visualization Maximize transfer and generalization	Provide options for Executive Functions Guide appropriate goal-setting Support planning and strategy development Facilitate managing and information resources Enhance capacity for monitoring progress	
Goal	Expert learners who are...			
	Purposeful & Motivated	Resourceful & Knowledgeable	Strategic & Goal-Directed	

Udlguidelines.cast.org/CAST, Inc. 2018/Suggested Citation: CAST (2018), Universal design for learning guidelines version 2.2 [graphic organizer], Wakefield, MA: Author.

CAST 2018

A Provide Multiple Means of Engagement

Initially, establishing a safe, comfortable learning environment that minimises threats and promotes self-regulation through the clarity of goals and expectations can help to provide a welcoming space. These clear expectations can optimise motivation while fostering collaboration and community. When spaces are organised, predictable, and clear of clutter, distractions are minimised, and learners can best navigate through their spaces without anticipating irregularity while increasing connection to learning and the community. Learning is incredibly emotion driven and supporting the affective network promotes engagement and motivation for learning. Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) have elucidated the connection between cognition and emotion through a neurobiological perspective to show the interconnections of cognition,

emotion, and social functioning. The more that environments and educators understand the important role of emotion in learning, the better generalizable skills will be outside and across classrooms. Integrating aspects of social emotional learning increases the likelihood of students using coping mechanisms to better regulate how they are feeling, their focus, attention, cognition, and biophysical responses to stimuli within themselves or in the environment (Reid et al, 2017). In consideration of variability among learners, providing mastery-oriented feedback in conjunction with varying demands and resources to optimise challenge allows for engagement that can be generalised across contexts. As learners interact with their environment, it is critical that they are provided with feedback that is authentic, timely, and accurate to their experiences (Hattie & Clarke, 2018).

Consistent feedback can guide the process of learning as the more mastery-oriented or growth mindset focused feedback will establish a narrative that functions as a protective factor against maladaptive learning or social behaviours. Elliott and Dweck's (1988) early research showed that regardless of the perceived skillset, mastery-oriented response to failure can help to increase motivation and the choice to take on greater challenges in the future while minimising the chances of learned helplessness. For young learners, perceiving their ability to attempt a novel task or lesson can be an access point or barrier to learning. For feedback to be effective, it must be in the context of learning and can have different intents from reframing understanding of something, to sharing information or providing an alternate approach or strategy (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feedback is information that guides the learning process and when it provides genuine as well as specific information, it can increase motivation and support future attempts at novel tasks (Elliott & Dweck, 1988). Ultimately, the goal is for learners to utilise feedback in a way that translates into self-assessment and reflection. In addition to providing explicit, master-oriented feedback modelling and explicitly teaching ways to recognise, identify, and regulate emotion is pivotal to establishing a safe and productive learning environment. As educators we have the power to shape environments to promote resilience by the way in which we present, face, and support the interaction with challenges. Teaching mindfulness by way of developing breathing skills to pause, take a breath, and assess what is happening to inhibit before responding to a challenge or stimuli can be helpful across situations. Noticing when a strong emotion or point of distraction occurs can allow a reset, recalibration, or shift in approach to optimise next steps. Susan Kaiser Greenland, Thich Nhat Hanh, and others have developed stories, tools, mindfulness cards, and games that can be practised with young children as soon as they enter the classroom. Developing and practising these skills along with young learners promotes a positive space and community that allows emotion to come up and not take over an experience or space. The development of emotional regulation skills establishes a basis for building executive function and expert learning skills.

B Provide Multiple Means of Recognition

Providing multiple means of recognition establishes access points that create opportunities where learners can utilise different materials to access the curriculum. In a text-based world, especially early childhood, learners need multiple means of representation for symbols, text, and other information are clarified. Integrating multiple means of representation not only shows learners that they are seen and noticed, but that they are respected and understood. At this crucial developmental time point, learners are still finding their voices and figuring out how to best access and learn information. In early childhood classrooms this may look like words and symbols paired with visuals, tactile manipulatives, role playing, modelling, playing, story-telling, problem solving, or information provided in other formats for young, often non-readers. Options for perception allow for learners with and without disabilities to interact with new content and information independently. These options to optimise perception activate the senses to offer ways to customise the display of information, alternatives for auditory information, and alternatives for visual information. Additionally, options for language and symbols promote the opportunity for a

shared understanding. These different access points become ways for learners to approach and interact with content and learning experiences in different ways. These options bolster and activate the recognition network of the brain to allow for the generation of new understandings through the consolidation and comprehension of new knowledge. To allow for practice and internalisation of these skills it is imperative to supply background knowledge, highlight patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships among new information. A visual display using images and words to make connections using a tool like a concept map can connect one concept to its component parts (Vanhear & Reid, 2014). If a lesson centres around understanding the importance and use of numbers, a concept map can highlight how and where we see and use numbers in our world. From counting buttons in a collection, to using currency to pay for different items of interest, establishing a background knowledge becomes a starting point for new learning. By connecting the concept to real world experiences, for example, seeing, using, or hearing about numbers, helps to maximise the transfer and generalisation of learning across contexts.

C Provide Multiple Means of Action and Expression

The three core executive function skills are not explicitly highlighted in the UDL guidelines, yet, and at the same time components of the engagement guideline and the guideline to support action and expression directly influence the support and development of executive function skills. How learners express what they have learned requires a complex set of skills that allow for the generation and organization of ideas, the establishment of a plan, and execution of that plan while monitoring progress and navigating toward a goal. The UDL guidelines encourage the provision of options that promote physical action or how learners act on what they are learning. Using accessible and flexible tools and materials helps learners to vary the methods for response and navigation through access to tools and assistive technologies when needed or beneficial. These access points provide options for how learners choose to show what they know or have been learning. Further, as learners practice how they express or show what they have been learning options for expression and communication can be provided with multiple media for communication, tools for construction and composition, or ways to build fluencies with graduated levels of support for practice and performance. This level of support relates to how learners can choose from developmentally appropriate options to demonstrate their learning. Early childhood learners can choose to tell a story, construct an image, record their voices, a video, or sequence a series of images to show what they know. For example, if learners explored how a worm becomes a butterfly, they can show what they learned about the steps of that process in many different ways. Images, digital apps, games or image manipulation, using cards with images on them, acting out how the organism changes form, or using another media (finger puppets, stick puppets, etc.) can share the experience they learned and enjoyed together. When appropriate, rigorous, and clear goals are established it allows for planning and strategy development.

In order to best support developing learners, it is imperative that we understand how their brains are growing. The development of the prefrontal cortex, or front part of the brain coincides with the refinement of executive function skills. These are a collection of cognitive

processes that are not automatic and typically require additional forethought through the activation of the core executive functions: inhibition, working memory, and cognitive flexibility (Nigg, 2017 & Diamond, 2013). These skills are not necessarily developed by means of teaching academic skills that may be associated with learning outcomes (e.g. literacy or numeracy). Most of these skills are developed through social, creative, active, and play-based experiences in and outside of the classroom. The goal is both to challenge and support these developing skills without overly taxing them which can lead to emotional fatigue or challenge that may shut down or minimise efforts of learners. From an early childhood perspective, it may seem as though articulating a learning goal is not important due to students' level of understanding, however, by establishing goals that are clearly stated, models how to establish and work toward such goals in the future. Maintaining clear goals and flexible means honours each learner's individual journey and supports their quest to learn more about themselves as learners. Goal setting and planning can be explicitly taught by establishing a schedule or plan for a lesson or the day, thinking about steps it takes to complete a goal, or even component parts of a bigger task. Verbalising the steps and rationale or even an adult thinking about multiple-options increases willingness to try new approaches, especially after the student struggles to complete a task previously. Articulating what is needed (materials, resources, assistance, partnership, time, etc.) along with verbalising which stage of the process you may be in while working through a project, task, or lesson, establishes connections for learners to incorporate with and without support moving forward.

For young children, inhibitory skills help them to wait their turn, monitor physical and bodily control, emotional control, and not acting impulsively. The act of waiting, increasing focus and attention, as well as to have greater skills to monitor how they are doing while helping to increase self-discipline. With inhibitory control comes persistence in the face of challenge, resiliency, problem-solving, and often greater learning outcomes. To support these skills educators can set up their learning environments with minimal decorations on the walls to limit potential points of distraction. Establishing clear expectations for how to be safe and respectful in class, as well as having predictable schedules, places to find materials, and expectations also help to minimise threat and distractions. Playing go-no go games like Simon says, red light, green light, and others all help to promote inhibitory control (Diamond, 2012). Working memory allows for learners to hold ideas in mind and manipulate or use such information in some way. This is important for the development of language skills, monitoring progress, and remembering what needs to be done next or to hold in mind details about the information they are interacting with or hearing through their environment or direct storytelling. Working memory can be developed by following simple, multi-stepped (though not too many) directions, and taking turns. Story reading and telling also tax and supports working memory as details are often delivered auditorily where new information needs to be taken in and held to make sense of the bigger picture (Diamond, 2011). Cognitive flexibility has to do with recognising and understanding that there may be alternate options, strategies, or approaches to accomplishing a task. Often young learners may get "stuck" and shut down if they are not sure how to solve a problem or determine another option to get around a barrier, challenge, or distraction. Even knowing that there needs to

be a change taxes executive function skill and allows for an opportunity to support the skill with scaffolds to get there. With exercise and practice, they can get stronger. However, if adults swoop in to support children who may be struggling or are challenged, they may not strengthen their executive function. Without the proper supports or scaffolds, learners may not be building or improving their **EXECUTIVE** function skills. It is imperative to be patient and show patience with learners who are navigating through learning opportunities, even if they are a bit clumsy upon the first try. Learning is emotional and when learners feel connected, encouraged, and capable (either perceived or accurately) they will take on greater challenges more consistently to improve their skills. When there are biophysical, emotional, or cognitive challenges it can be counterintuitive to learning and may impede executive function skills. If the learning environment is set up to support executive function skill development, it may also minimise stress, frustration, and emotional dysregulation (Diamond, 2013).

Often interventions that have been present in early childhood classrooms like storytelling, movement, art, music, play, using manipulatives, playing or creating music or art, as well as other forms of creativity, problem-solving, and social interactions can be more intentionally focused and supported to strengthen executive function skills (Diamond, 2011). Incorporating joy, mindfulness, collaboration, and helping one another establish emotional and cognitive connections that transform and strengthen executive function and expert learning skills. Ultimately, the goal is to increase confidence, self-regulation, resiliency, and autonomy. One of the common concerns in educational institutions is that learners are limited by their own expectations for themselves (either that great or no efforts are needed to achieve learning success) and that they do not trust in themselves. Nourishing and supporting expert learning skills allow for learners of all ages and stages to have agency around how they navigate through learning environments and utilise flexible means to meet rigorous goals.

Though each of the guidelines highlight options to support different networks in the brain, they are not working in isolation of one another. They are working together to establish cross-cranial connections that activate optimal pathways to learning (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). Though each individual may have their own unique path to achieving and finding expert learning, the provision of options and flexibility within a learning environment provides developmentally appropriate challenge and support to promote expert learning. The UDL guidelines and framework ultimately supports educators to support all learners.

VI CONCLUSION

Equitable educational opportunities promote long-lasting, inclusive economic growth and social cohesion (OECD, 2017). Global research and evidence acknowledge the power of ECEC as an entry point to address issues of inequities and social justice. Early childhood is a short span of time in one's life which is critical for individual growth. Early childhood years' experiences have an intense impact due to the unparalleled speed at which the brain develops, affecting learning, health, behaviour and consequently, social

capital and income (World Bank, 2016). In a climate of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) investing in early years pays off. It is one of the most cost-effective interventions any country can make to yield the highest economic return in human capital when compared with investments made at later stages in life (Heckman, 2013; Miller et al., 2018).

Malta is putting an edge on ECEC as a prevention measure to address early school leaving. This paper may serve as a stepping stone for educators so that early years' learning outcomes complemented with an authentic assessment approach revolving around a learner-centred environment may be enhanced through a better understanding of how children learn. UDL is a practical framework which may be used in classrooms to create flexible learning environments that respect learners' voices while equipping educators to empower learners' expert learning. By providing multiple means of engagement, recognition, as well as action and expression, educators can promote expert learning to help each individual actualise their potential and understand what serves them best across contexts. This awareness and understanding will assist educators to equip young learners with a robust platform for successful future learning while increasing their engagement and motivation in learning.

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A School Culture for the Prevention of Early School Leaving. A Case Study

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Abstract—Empathic and Supportive Teachers— Key to Quality and Efficiency in Education (EMPAQT) is an EU funded project which seeks to contribute to the creation of school environments where marginalised learners receive the support they need to succeed and feel respected and valued. A teachers' training programme was developed to build up educators' competence to support the learning and wellbeing of students at risk of early school leaving and of social exclusion. The training programme was piloted in various secondary schools in the five partner organisations, including a middle school in Malta. This chapter presents an overview of the project and how a middle school in Malta which participated in the project sought to create a learning environment to facilitate the students' active engagement. The school embarked on a three- pronged approach, namely the creation of a safer and more stimulating school environment; the provision of support strategies for a positive discipline approach, and the development of a more meaningful and engaging curriculum for the students.

Keywords— early school leaving, prevention, middle school, EMPAQT, teacher education

I INTRODUCTION

Early school leaving (ESL) is a complex phenomenon with multifaceted underlying causes requiring multilevel interventions. The strategic plan for the prevention of early school leaving (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014) maintains that one of the key preventive measures in ESL is to make schooling meaningful and effective, thus averting student disengagement and absenteeism. Research shows that school factors such as unaddressed learning difficulties, non-differentiated teaching, bullying and violence by peers and teachers, authoritarian teaching and punitive classroom management, and poor teacher-student relationships, are related to early school leaving (Borg et al, 2015; Cefai and Cooper, 2010; Cornell et al, 2013; Downes, 2013; Downes and Cefai, 2016). On the other hand, meaningful and relevant curricula, culturally and individually responsive pedagogy, a positive classroom climate characterised by authoritative relational teaching and teacher-student connectedness, and social and emotional learning and support, operate as protective factors against early school leaving (Bademci et al, 2020; Danielson et al, 2010; Downes 2011, 2013; Fortin et al., 2013; Quiroga et al. 2013). Research also underlines the need for adequate teacher preparation and education to facilitate the creation of classroom environments and learning experiences which keep students actively engaged in rewarding school experiences (Danielson et al, 2010; Downes, 2013,

Downes and Cefai, 2016). Teachers' professional development in the prevention of early school leaving needs to address such areas as diversity awareness and culturally responsive pedagogy, empathy and relationship building, democratic classroom management and conflict management, and understanding and supporting students' social and emotional needs (Downes, 2013; Downes and Cefai, 2016).

II PROJECT EMPAQT

The multi-country, cross-cultural project Empathic and Supportive-Key to Quality and Efficiency in Education (EMPAQT) sought to address the issue of early school leaving by supporting teachers' professional development. The two year Erasmus + project consisted of 8 European partners, including the Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health at the University of Malta. The consortium developed a training programme for middle school teachers to prevent early school leaving through their classroom practice. The programme provides an opportunity for practising teachers to reflect on their relationships with students and the effectiveness of their teaching so as to develop more empathic and supportive relationships and more engaging pedagogical skills. This consequently enables students to remain engaged in the learning activities and develop a sense of belonging to the school, and thus less likely to leave school prematurely.

The teacher training programme consists of three modules, namely an introduction on early school leaving to enable participants to identify the causes of ESL from a wide-angle, multi-faceted perspective, including school-related factors, and to examine the role of the school and classroom teachers in preventing ESL. Module 2 on Relationships, discusses how school teachers may develop and promote healthy and supportive relationships both in the classroom and at the whole school. Topics include empathy, conflict management, classroom management, emotional regulation, diversity, facilitating social and emotional learning, preventing and addressing bullying, and working the parents. The third module on Engagement provides training in facilitating student engagement and active participation through inclusive and culturally responsive teaching. Topics include understanding the learner, teaching in the digital era; making the curriculum meaningful for the students, culturally responsive teaching, and dealing with the practical challenges of teaching. Training sessions for practising teachers are organised as interactive, experiential and skills-based workshops, with opportunities for participants to participate actively in the training sessions, through self-reflective activities and problem-based learning activities including case studies, role play and group work.

Teacher training was held with a several teachers in each country in the partnership, following which teachers then applied the relational and pedagogical competences discussed during the training within their respective classroom practice. In Malta's case, teacher training was held with the school staff of a middle school located in the Northern Harbour Region. Many students at the school were coming from socially disadvantaged and marginalised communities, had learning difficulties and/or exhibited social, emotional, and behaviour difficulties and were thus considered as being potentially at risk of early school leaving. The staff at the school, first completed a questionnaire on the needs of the students and the staff about the prevention of early school leaving, with the findings informing the topics and issues addressed in the training workshop. The topics addressed in the 12 hours workshop included the role of the school in preventing ESL, facilitating social and emotional learning, empathy, bullying prevention, teaching diverse & intercultural groups, classroom management, and making the curriculum more meaningful for the students. Thirteen teachers and Learning Support Educators attended the training. The workshop participants completed an anonymous, online evaluation questionnaire at the end of the training. Most of the participants had very positive views of the training, reporting that it had met or even exceeded their expectations, that they had learnt a lot, and described the structure, resources, methods and approaches used as excellent.

In the next phase of the project, the trained participants then implemented what they had learnt during the workshop at their school and in their classes respectively. The following section describes some of the initiatives undertaken at the school during the one year implementation period of the project.

III A PSYCHO-SOCIAL DIMENSION TO SCHOOL CULTURE – A SCHOOL ON A STUDENT ENGAGEMENT JOURNEY.

San Gorg Preca College Middle School is a state school with a population of 350 students. It caters for 11 to 13-year-olds within a co-ed context. It has a new intake of approximately 170 students per scholastic year, with most students coming from a low socio-economic background. On estimate, 10% of the students arrive at school with functional illiteracy, unable to perform basic reading and/or writing, even though they would have been in our educational system for six years. In turn, this leads students to be frustrated, manifest challenging behaviour including anger issues and resistance to authority, have poor social and emotional competence skills, and become disengaged. Some simply decide not to turn up to school. Consequently, school attendance is a challenge at our school. Disengagement manifests itself not only at school but even in their personal lives and in their own communities. The school is trying to break the cycle of deprivation and marginalisation by giving students a new social reality, where education becomes meaningful for them and seen as a previous tool to achieve their objectives in life. The school has also evolved to meet the needs of a multicultural society and has a yearly intake of migrant students. This has created an atmosphere where cultures do co-exist, learn from each other, and at times clash too. Amidst a great deal of diversity, certain ingrained ideologies and hence behaviour prove to be demanding to shift. This is because, by the time students reach the school's doorstep, these ideologies would become so natural for them. The school has hence developed strategies whereby instead of aiming to fight a whole culture, it tries to target adolescent members of these sub-cultures through providing support and re-direction in seeking and creating better opportunities in life.

The school thus saw the EMPAQT project as a very good opportunity to strengthen its effort to prevent early school leaving amongst the students. A number of staff attended a number of workshop sessions provided by the project's team. Post-training, after a series of reflective sessions, the school's management team in consultation with teaching staff targeted three major pillars or areas for intervention to address the cyclic culture of deprivation and disengagement observed amongst students. The three selected pillars included:

- Creating a safer and more stimulating environment;
- Providing support strategies for a positive discipline approach;
- Providing a more meaningful and engaging curriculum

A A Safer and More Stimulating environment

Pedagogical and professional relationships at the school take place within a physical environment which was in urgent need of maintenance and refurbishment. The school dates back to the time when Malta was still a British colony. Even though technological advancements were added throughout the years, whilst regular cleaning and maintenance take place as part of the general upkeep of the school, it was felt that further investments were necessary to improve the

physical environment of the school. The team started by targeting aspects within the school's control by coming up with initiatives in creating a more welcoming and nourishing physical and social environment. A number of school embellishment projects were started, also with the aim of helping to foster a sense of belonging where students experience a homely atmosphere whereby they feel safe, understood, welcomed and valued irrespective of their social or cultural background. One initiative was to put up a welcoming main foyer, consisting of a whole ceiling of flags from all over the globe, but especially including the countries the students come from. Other measures included a yearly welcome message written in respective native languages, the celebration of Multicultural Days, participating in the Global Education Network Europe (GENE) project, organising and participating in sports activities.

The team also sought to provide a more stimulating learning environment for the students by decorating corridors and staircases with positive messages that also instill a growth mind-set, typically encouraging self-confidence, persistence and effort. This initiative was done together with the students themselves. Another initiative was the creation of physical space at school whereby students can use this as a calming room. This served as a de-escalation space for students during tantrums or episodes of meltdowns, whilst decreasing classroom disruption and preventing a bystander effect. Students benefit more when finding a calm and safe setting whereby they can release emotions and eventually gain control over their behaviour. As part of a process in creating a more welcoming climate, the school thought of decorating the spaces designed for recess. It refurbished old wooden benches in the open spaces, decorated the school canteen with bright colours and painted sport-related silhouettes at the main staircase leading to the school ground. The natural environment and open spaces at the school are valued as a resource which unfortunately most modern local schools lack. The school appreciates their contribution towards the holistic development of the students and embarked on such initiatives as *Eko-Skola* (Eco School Programme), planned watering and cleanups together in collaboration with NGOs and other local enterprises.

B A Positive Discipline Approach

As part of the positive discipline approach, the school has adopted a system of points whereby students are awarded positive and negative points for their behaviour. This creates a more tangible and measurable way of being fair and consistent with students. Apart from having clear disciplinary structures together with pre-communicated consequences in place, this approach also offers a multi-levelled support system whereby students can always find a reference point. Whilst adopting this pastoral care role, the school offers a support network whereby students find meaningful adults who are ready to give them the time and attention they need. Students are guided through a process of reflection to prevent re-occurrence of misbehaviour through analysing what is leading to that undesirable behaviour, developing self-control skills, building a relationship of trust, instilling the value of social responsibility and nurturing a sense of gratitude. This is done through the establishment of a trained team of members of staff who rather than simply teach their respective subjects and fulfilling other roles too, also uptake the roles of Behaviour Mentors, Organisational Mentors (for students who

are disorganised in their work), and Form Coordinators. Members of the School Management Team also contribute their fair share of the burden-sharing by adopting an open-door policy for students, parents/guardians and members of staff alike.

C A More Meaningful and Engaging Curriculum

In attempting to tackle the culture of deprivation observed amongst many of the students, the school also took the initiative of formulating a more meaningful and relevant curriculum for students within the limitations of a mainstream curriculum. This entailed seeking feedback from the students themselves together with an analysis of the teaching practices in the classrooms. An action plan was developed to strengthen and reinforce what is motivating and effective in the learning process. Staff sought to develop and implement more enjoyable, interesting lessons including class discussions, use of visuals, practical demonstrations, game-based learning, exhibiting students' work, self-discovery methodologies, hands-on activities, and pair and group work. Members of staff together with the school's Senior Management Team, also planned a number of school-based programmes, ranging from the Literacy Programme, Core Curriculum Programme (CCP) activity lessons, Emotional Literacy, an Alternative Learning Programme for the middle band, and adapted Personal Social and Career Development lessons for CCP students. These programmes sought to provide students with an opportunity for self-expression, development of communication abilities and the acquisition of independent living skills through such techniques as photography, video editing, drama, textile, fashion, applied design, pottery and art.

As part of a student-centred approach to teaching and learning, the school has prioritised the implementation of self and peer assessment across all curriculum units. The staff has been provided with training in providing more effective feedback and better use of questioning techniques during lessons. This professional development went beyond consolidating pedagogical practices of transmitting knowledge but it also included practical ways of how to lead students to engage in higher-order thinking tasks. Even though opportunities for educators to discuss and share effective practices are limited, the school does its best to encourage and foster a school culture of collegiality.

Initiatives to provide more meaningful and engaging learning experiences go beyond the formal curriculum. Throughout various school projects and extra-curricular activities, the students are provided with opportunities to uptake leadership roles, to believe in themselves, develop their capabilities whilst work in collaboration with others. Such activities enable them to contribute and actively partake within the school culture - gradually leading them to develop a sense of belonging. These initiatives also serve to consolidate and support what is learnt in class and provide opportunities whereby knowledge can be applied in more meaningful contexts. This school-based approach towards learning is also congruent to the national educational initiative of My Journey (Achieving through different Pathways in the Secondary), striving to break the culture of deprivation and disengagement and reducing the rate of early school leavers.

IV CONCLUSION

Through this innovative and creative educational journey, taking place against a background of the constantly shifting local and global spheres, the school might not be on the fore-front in obtaining high scores on ranking tables, but it is making a difference in the lives of its students. The staff feels proud to serve and belong to this school culture, whereby as educators they try to address the students' needs and provide a more meaningful and engaging curriculum that makes sense to students in their social realities. The school has developed a distinct school culture, where rather than judging success solely based on standardised academic results, the results are measured by the happy faces of students turn up every day at school, their active engagement in the classroom and outside, the level of care expressed by all members of the school community for each other, and the extent to which the minds and hearts of students have opened to embrace the vision to become active, responsible citizens and life-long learners!

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Trauma Informed Practices in Second Chance Education in Malta

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Abstract—This paper presents the results of a local study that formed part of the European THRIVE project. THRIVE (Training Hope, Wellbeing and Resilience in Vulnerable Early School Leavers) is an Erasmus+ project which seeks to enhance the professional capacity of staff in alternative learning programmes (ALPs) to support the resilience, wellbeing and social and emotional competence of early school leavers. This paper presents the findings of a study with students and educators on the ALPs available for early school leavers in Malta. The study made use of a mixed methodology design which included focus groups with students and educators, and an online survey with educators who work in ALPs.

Results indicate that the experiences of educators and students within this sector are unique and different from those in mainstream education, and that it is important not to have a rigid ‘mainstream mentality’. Flexibility, the use of more hands-on approaches in learning, building strong relationships, having a good sense of humour, being patient, and opportunities make more choices, were found to enhance the experience of students in ALPs. Educators expressed the need for further training on how to help manage students’ strong emotions, develop more positive relationships, mindfulness and resilience building.

Keywords—trauma-sensitive education, resilience, early school leavers, alternative learning programmes, THRIVE

I INTRODUCTION

Past research indicates that early school leaving is related to lower levels of wellbeing, and less satisfaction with one’s work, health and the general standard of living, as well as negative consequences on society and the national economy as a whole (Borg, Camilleri, Caruana, Naudi, Vella, & Raykov 2015). Therefore, it is necessary to provide support to vulnerable young people who are either at risk of early school leaving or have left school without the required qualifications to either continue to further education or follow a successful career.

Amongst those who are at high risk of educational dropout are children and young people who have experienced trauma due to personal or family problems, and those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (Borg et al., 2015). Gaining a deeper understanding on how these factors impact young people’s education, as well as how they can be supported within the educational

system is crucial in order to lower the rate of early school leaving in Malta. Malta has one of the highest rates of early school leaving in the EU. This stands at around 17.4% in Malta, compared with a rate of 10.6% in the EU (National Statistics Office, 2019).

This study aims to examine the experience of educators working within ALPs in Malta, and gain an understanding on their awareness of the impact of trauma on education, their sense of efficacy, and the challenges they face. It also aims to understand the perspectives of students enrolled in ALPs on their educational experience and what they would like to improve.

This study forms part of the Training Hope, Wellbeing and Resilience in Vulnerable Early School Leavers (THRIVE) project, a two year Erasmus+ project (2018 – 2020) consisting of six European partners, coordinated by the Institute of Child Education and Psychology Europe (Ireland) and the Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health at the University of Malta. The main objective of the project is to develop a training programme for second chance educators to

promote the resilience and wellbeing of early school leavers of education and training, and build the competences required to benefit from education, training and employment opportunities. Each participating country carried out a quantitative and qualitative research study to gain a deeper understanding on the perspectives and needs of students and educators who work with early school leavers. A total of 273 educators participated in the quantitative study overall, whilst a total of 45 educators and 25 students participated in the qualitative study in the participating countries combined. This paper presents the findings of the study carried out in Malta with both educators and students.

II METHODOLOGY

A Quantitative Study

An online questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data from educators on the following components: measures of trauma awareness and practice, secondary traumatic stress and educators' sense of efficacy. Measures of trauma awareness and practice, and secondary traumatic stress were measured on 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree/never) to 5 (strongly agree/very often) whilst the measure of educators' sense of efficacy was rated on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (a great deal).

Participants included 62 educators and youth workers from various primary, secondary and post-secondary education facilities and ALPs who work with vulnerable young people in Malta. The data was collected between March and April 2019, and was subsequently analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 25.0).

B Qualitative Study

Three focus groups were conducted with students and educators at ALPs. The main aim of the focus groups was to record and understand the subjective experiences of both educators and early school leavers through an open discussion on their needs, opinions and suggestions for improvement of the services. The focus groups allowed the research team to gain a more in-depth understanding of the perspectives of educators and students than is possible through quantitative methods alone.

Two focus groups were held with educators from two separate ALPs, whilst one focus group was held with a group of early school leavers attending an ALP. The focus groups with the educators were held with 6-7 participants each, whilst 7 students participated in the focus group with early school leavers. The focus groups lasted between 45 to 60 minutes each and following the participants' consent, these were audio recorded to allow for the subsequent transcription and analysis of the focus groups using thematic analysis. This allowed the research team to elicit the main themes and sub-themes from each focus group. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the entire research process. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper to ensure anonymity.

III RESULTS

A Quantitative Study

1 Participants' socio-demographic characteristics

Participants included 62 educators in specialized support classes in mainstream schools or second chance education settings (see Table 1), with the majority being female ($n = 48, 77\%$), aged between 35 and 44 years ($n = 26, 42\%$), having attained an undergraduate qualification ($n = 36, 59\%$). The vast majority of participants ($n = 46, 74\%$) had between 1 and 9 years of experience, whilst only four participants (7%) had more than 20 years of experience. With respect to the type of organization in which participants worked, the majority of participants work in state schools, mostly in Nurture Groups ($n = 33$) or Learning Support Zones ($n = 10$), with the remainder working in ALPs in Malta ($n = 18$). The students attending these centres were aged between 3 and 21 years old, whilst the mean number of students taught by each educator was 41.6 ($SD = 27.62$, $min. = 6$, $max. = 180$).

Table 1 Participants socio-demographic characteristics

Participants socio-demographic characteristics		
Variables	Total sample (n = 62)	%
Gender		
Female	48	77.4
Male	14	22.6
Age Group		
25-34	10	16.3
35-44	26	41.9
45-54	17	27.4
55+	4	6.5
Academic qualifications		
Professional/technical qualification	16	25.8
Teacher training	9	14.5
Degree	26	41.9
Further / higher degree	8	12.9
Other	1	1.6
Specialist training in second chance education		
Yes	22	35.5
No	37	59.5
Work experience in current workplace		
1-5 years	26	41.9
6-9 years	20	32.3
10-14 years	9	14.5
15-19 years	3	4.8
20+	4	6.5
Work experience in second chance education settings (if relevant)		
1-5 years	14	22.6
6-9 years	18	29.0
10-14 years	8	12.9
15-19 years	7	11.3
20+	5	8.1

Educators' perceptions of trauma prevalence amongst early school leavers and the understanding of trauma

Participants generally felt that trauma was prevalent amongst early school leavers with 92% reporting that at least 1 in 4 of their students had experienced trauma or adverse circumstances, whilst around half of the participants (53%) reported that between 61-100% of their students may have experienced trauma or adverse circumstances. Most participants felt that they had a good understanding of trauma and traumatic stress (92%), and a good understanding of how stress affects the brain and body, learning and development, mental health and the interpersonal relationships of their students (82%- 90%) (Table 2).

Figure 1. Participants understanding of trauma

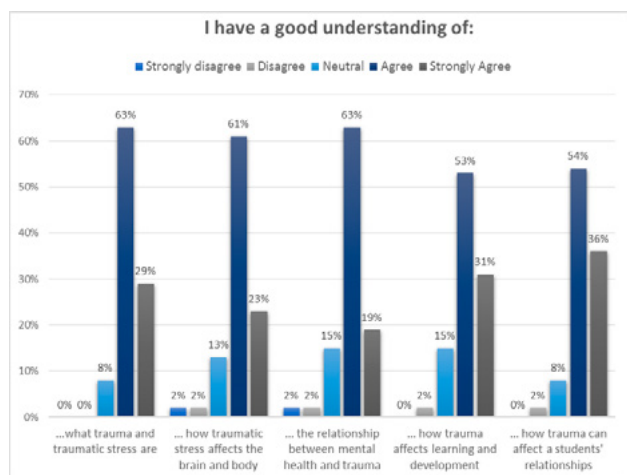
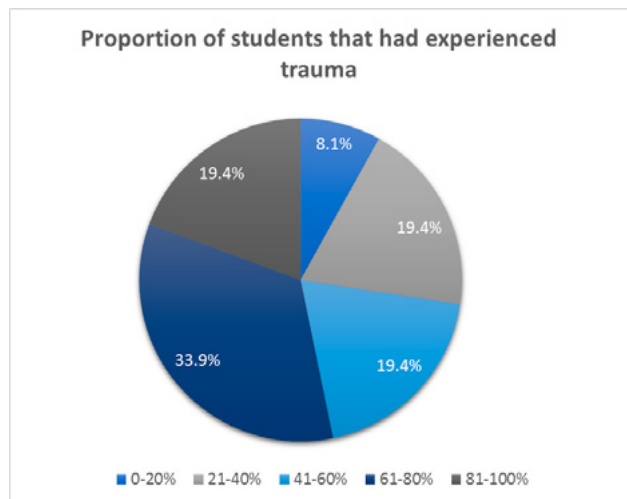


Figure 2. Experience of trauma by students



As indicated in Table 3, the perceived trauma understanding scale yielded a mean score of 20.44 ($SD = 3.02$). This is a positive score, considering that the maximum value that can be obtained is 25, thus suggesting that the participants have a very good understanding of trauma and its impact.

2 Trauma-informed practice

Two variables were created to assess participants' perceptions of trauma-informed practice, namely Trauma Support and Trauma-Sensitive Interactions. Trauma Support has an overall mean score of 26.85 ($SD = 5.57$), with participants with more than 20 years of experience demonstrating a greater value ($M = 29.75$, $SD = 9.07$). Analysis of individual items on this variable showed that even though most educators approach their supervisor if they require help when working with a student who has experienced trauma (69%), only just over half of the participants reported feeling comfortable talking with their supervisor about secondary trauma (57%). On the other hand, the majority of participants reported that they make referrals when students require extra resources (89%) and that they usually work with other organisations to support students (74%). However,

only a small number of respondents reported having been trained to recognise secondary stress trauma (16%) or even the impact of trauma on students (24%). With regards to trauma sensitive interactions, analysis of individual items indicated that more than half of the participants reported that students use derogatory or violent language (58%). However, they also stated that students seek to have positive interactions with staff (77%) and that educators seek to give them support in identifying and managing strong emotions (79%).

The analysis also showed that the secondary traumatic stress amongst the educators is relatively low, with a mean value of 21.02 ($SD = 5.81$).

Additionally, most participants feel that they can control disruptive behaviour, motivate and calm their students, and get them to believe that they can do well in school and value learning. This can be seen in the high mean values for both of the subscales of the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale (Table 3).

Table 2 Comparison of educators' outcomes by years of work experience using analysis of variance

Dependent Variables	Work experience		
	Total sample (n = 82)	Low (1-9 years) (n = 46)	Medium (10-19 years) (n = 12)
PTU	20.44 (3.02)	20.22 (3.08)	20.07 (3.00)
Trauma Practice			
Trauma Support	26.85 (5.57)	26.85 (5.53)	25.02 (4.54)
Trauma Interactions	28.29 (4.64)	28.52 (4.85)	27.08 (4.89)
Pro_QoL STS subscale	21.02 (5.81)	21.09 (5.43)	20.17 (2.17)
TSES			
Efficacy Student Engagement	6.95 (1.66)	6.99 (1.65)	7.02 (1.59)
Efficacy Classroom Management	8.39 (1.80)	8.30 (1.80)	8.65 (1.61)

Note: PTU = Perceived Trauma Experience; Pro_QoL STS subscale = Professional Quality of Life Secondary Traumatic Stress Subscale; TSES = Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale

IV QUALITATIVE STUDY

A Early School Leavers

Table 3 Areas and Themes from Focus Groups with Early School Leavers

Areas and Themes from Focus Groups with Early School Leavers	
Area	Theme
Reasons students are in second chance education	Excluded from mainstream school
	By choice
Difference between second chance settings and mainstream education	More hands-on projects, less writing
Life changes since starting second chance education	New friendships New personal skills
Favourite staff qualities	Caring Supportive teachers Sense of humour Patience
Best aspects of second chance education	More choices for students Larger breaks
Most important things learned	Hands-on skills for work in the future
Expected gains from second chance education	New job prospects
Improvements in second chance education	Better ways of correcting students

1 Area – Reasons students are in second chance education

a) Theme 1 – Excluded from mainstream school

When asked why the participants were currently attending an ALP, most of the students responded that they were sent there by their previous head of school in mainstream education. Students sent to the ALP had received the highest number of reports at their previous schools for incidents related to misbehaviour, such as violent behaviour or bullying.

“Because we were naughty, the head sent us here” Alex, 13 years old.

b) Theme 2 – By choice

Some participants said that it was their choice to leave mainstream education and attend an ALP.

“I could have gone to the other school” John, 13 years old.

2 Area – Difference between second chance settings and mainstream education

a) Theme 1 – More hands-on projects, less writing

The early school leavers stated that one of the main differences between mainstream education and second chance education is that there is a much stronger focus on hands-on projects at the latter, whilst the focus in mainstream schools is more on written tasks. All the students who participated in the focus group were more engaged in hands-on projects as opposed to written tasks.

“We had a lot of lessons where we would write all the time, and I did not like that school” Steve, 14 years old.

3 Area – Life changes since starting second chance education

a) Theme 1 – New friendships

The group of early school leavers agreed that their overall experience at the ALP is more positive than their experience in mainstream education. Attending an ALP allowed them to develop new, meaningful friendships with their peers.

Researcher: *“What do you see, when you look back at when you first started the programme until now?”*

Student: *“Friendship”* Steve, 14 years old.

b) Theme 2 – New personal skills

The students stated that they gained new personal skills, such as how to manage their emotions better, with the help of the educators at the ALP.

Researcher: *“And you also mentioned that you now manage your nerves better”*

Student: *“Yes”* Martin, 14 years old.

4 Area – Favourite staff qualities

a) Theme 1 - Caring and supportive teachers

Sub Theme 1 – Sense of humour

Students preferred those staff members who had a good sense of humour. Sense of humour was a strong theme that came out in all the focus groups, both with the students and educators. Students described previous teachers in mainstream education settings as unable to take a joke, which would ultimately lead the students being punished.

Researcher: *“What do you like most about this person?”*

Student: *“Because he jokes”* Frank, 14 years old.

Sub Theme 2 – Patience

The early school leavers appreciate teachers who are very patient with them and their behaviour.

Researcher: *“What do you like most about your favourite teacher?”*

Student: *“Mr _____, because he is patient with us”* John, 13 years old.

5 Area – Best aspects of second chance education

a) Theme 1 – More choices by students

Students describe being able to make more choices about what they learn as a very positive aspect of their experience in second chance education. Teachers regularly allow students to choose what they are interested to learn during lessons and the structure of the students' timetables is organised so that it alternates between a more practical subject which the student chose to learn, such as welding or woodwork, and a compulsory subject, such as mathematics or language subjects.

“The first lesson is something that we choose, for example, electrical”
John, 13 years old.

b) Theme 2 – Longer breaks

Students describe their breaks as being longer than the breaks at the mainstream schools, and they prefer this.

“It’s a small school, it’s not big and the break is longer” Frank, 14 years old.

6 Area – Most important things learned

a) Theme 1 – Hands-on skills for work in the future

The students mentioned the hands-on, practical skills as some of the most important things learned at the ALP since they can use these to find fulfilling jobs in the future.

“Welding, electrical, ICT, woodwork, home economics” Steve, 14 years old.

7 Area – Expected gains from second chance education

a) Theme 1 – New job prospects

Students expect to leave second chance education with enhanced job prospects due to the practical skills learned, and to use what they are learning in lessons, such as welding and woodwork, to find a job in the future.

Researcher: *“What do you wish to become when you are older, after this course?”*

Student: *“Me, a welder”* Martin, 14 years old.

8 Area – Improvements in second chance education

a) Theme 1 – Better ways of correcting students

Although students were generally very satisfied with their experience in second chance education and could not think of many improvements, one issue that was mentioned by a number of students was a particular teacher who has been described as not handling students in an appropriate manner.

Researcher: *“Is there anything you would like to change in this course?”*

Student: *“Mr _____, because I was playing football and I am quite rough” ... “He grabbed me and threw me on the floor”* Alex, 13 years old.

B Educators

Table 4 Areas and Themes from Focus Groups with Educators

Areas and Themes from Focus Groups with Educators		
Area	Theme	Sub-Theme
Understanding of impact of trauma on early school leavers	Hard to concentrate Hard to trust	
Prior knowledge, education or training in trauma awareness	Mental health training Mental health	
How successful are the activities provided	Workshop/ activity-based learning Youth-centred approach	Flexibility and adaptability Some of lessons and not taking things personally Patience
Differences between second chance and mainstream schools	Practical skills	Emphasis on links to future career prospects
Most challenging aspects of work	Emphasis on tools to cope outside of school and be resilient Addressing students' primary needs	
Impact of trauma on the workforce (secondary schools)	Students' family background and parents Fatigue and burnout National rate	
Further education in second chance settings - educator specific issues	Training on mental health, SGLD and behaviour modification	
	More understanding and support from those in charge	Uncertainty about schools future More efficient use of staff members' skills
	More funding and better premises	
Recommendations to better meet needs of ESEs	Need for continuity between services	
Recommendations to better meet needs of educators	Time for efficient working Supervision for staff	
Additional themes emerging from focus group	Success as a bulk of behaviour performance/competency Signora	

1 Area – Understanding of impact of trauma on early school leavers

a) Theme 1 – Hard to concentrate

According to the educators who work in second chance education settings, one of the main impacts they believe trauma has on students is on their attention spans. They describe students as generally being unable to concentrate on a specific task for a prolonged period of time so lessons are generally kept short, taking around 30 to 45 minutes each.

“You can’t have long lessons, they don’t have the attention span”
Ms Carmen

b) Theme 2 – Hard to trust

The educators described finding it challenging to earn the trust of those students who have experienced trauma. The importance of building a good relationship and establishing trust with their students was mentioned as an important part of working together with them and getting to know their strengths and weaknesses.

"It was difficult for them to trust you, then by the second year it was easier" Ms Jane

2 Area – Prior knowledge, education or training in trauma sensitivity

a) Theme 1 – Mental health training

Educators spoke about the importance of having good knowledge of psychology and mental health in order to work more effectively with their students.

"Now we've just done a mental health first aid course ... and I think a teacher needs to be very aware of an element of psychology, of mental health issues, of what ADHD is and isn't because it is one thing I feel we struggle with" Ms Pauline

b) Theme 2 – Mindfulness

Educators with previous training in mindfulness found it to be a very valuable tool to calm students down and focus their minds on the tasks during lessons. They also received positive feedback about the mindfulness sessions from the students.

"I used to do [mindfulness] with them, they used to lie down and I do meditation, breathing, body scanning and they used to enjoy it" Ms Josephine.

3 Area – How trauma informs service provided

a) Theme 1 – Not having a 'mainstream mentality'

Educators stressed that it is of vital importance to have a different mentality when working in ALPs than that of mainstream schools. It is important to acknowledge that the way in which formal education works will not necessarily work well with those who have experienced trauma, and therefore educating students in second chance education must work differently in order to achieve the intended results with students.

"Not having a mainstream mentality. If you're here you start afresh" Mr Victor

Sub Theme 1 – Flexibility and adaptability

One of the main aspects of trauma based education is for educators to be flexible and highly adaptive in the ways they work with students. Educators are flexible in terms of where they work (inside or outside the school in a garden), the time which they dedicate to a lesson or task, as well as taking the opportunity to make the most out of students' 'better' days when they are willing to work harder and for longer.

"In this programme, if you are not flexible it won't work" Ms Louise

Sub Theme 2 – Sense of humour and not taking things personally

As was mentioned by the students, educators also felt that having a good sense of humour is essential to build a good working relationship with the students.

"You have to have a very good sense of humour, and you can act, you must not take anything personally, you have to be able to let it go" Ms Francesca

Sub Theme 3 – Patience

Working with vulnerable students requires a lot of patience, especially due to the process of building trust with students, which can take a long time to establish, and also because students don't always have a long attention span and therefore patience is very important.

"Patience, loads of patience" Ms Rose

b) Theme 2 – Youth-centered approach

Educators held a strong belief in the effectiveness of taking a youth-centered approach whereby the ALP is specifically tailored according to each individual student, rather than according to a syllabus which must be followed by everyone.

"We start with the young person from their starting point ... We see where they all are and all their schedules are different" Ms Carmen

4 Area – Differences between second chance and mainstream schools

a) Theme 1 – Practical skills

One of the main differences between mainstream schools and second chance education according to educators is the emphasis on taking a very flexible approach to teach students any practical skills they may require to succeed in following an independent life.

"If he needs to learn how to wash his hair, we will wash his hair" Ms Josephine

Sub Theme 1 – Emphasis on tools for future career prospects

Second chance education works to enhance the future career prospects of students by directly teaching them the practical skills they can use in the future, for example, woodwork and welding. This is especially important since most of the students described themselves as being averse to written tasks, and are therefore less likely to follow academic oriented educational courses. Educators also focus on teaching students other skills related to finding a job, such as how to prepare themselves for a job interview.

"We have our work experience, it is not like that of the mainstream ... How to go to an interview, eye contact, you know, first we get them here, they are dressed smart..." Ms Jane

b) Theme 2 – Emphasis on tools to cope outside of school and be resilient

Educators emphasise teaching students the tools they need to cope outside of school and to be resilient, as well as basic skills on how to live independently.

"The tools that make them cope once they're out of here" Ms Rose

c) Theme 3 – Addressing students' primary needs

Educators noted that young people who are going through trauma do not always have their basic needs met, and therefore extra care is taken in order to ensure that these needs are met. They agreed that if the students' basic needs are not met, then they are less likely to do well at school.

"If we see they're hungry and they're acting up because they're hungry we have to see what to do" Ms Francesca

"If their needs are not met for example, they are not going to do well at school" Ms Pauline

5 Area – Most challenging aspects of work

a) Theme 1 – Students' family background and parents

The majority of educators felt that one of the main challenges that prevents them from succeeding in working effectively with their students is the students' family backgrounds. Apart from the lack of positive collaboration by the family, after school students go back home to their family, which may be the source of their trauma.

"One particular student, I mean we tried over and over again to make him understand but unfortunately we only managed up to a certain point because of his background, his family background" Mr Victor

"The feeling of helplessness that when he goes home he's going [back] to the same environment..." Ms Louise

6 Area – Impact of trauma on the practitioner (secondary trauma)

a) Theme 1 – Fatigue and Burnout

Educators experience fatigue, burnout and feel mentally drained as a result of their work. They felt that they possibly experience this more than teachers in mainstream education, due to the more challenging nature of their work and the students with whom they work.

"And we suffer from burnout like, I mean probably more than others" Ms Francesca

b) Theme 2 – Personal risk

Some educators believe that there is an element of personal risk in their work, particularly when working in second chance education with students who may have left mainstream education and joined the ALP due to violent behaviour.

"At 2.15 every day I say thanks God nothing happened to me. I come here and I love coming here, I love these kids, but there is an element of risk, I don't come here for them to hurt me" Ms Carmen

7 Area – Further attention in second chance settings – Educator specific issues

a) Theme 1 – Training on mental health, SpLD and behaviour modification

Educators felt that further training on mental health, specific learning difficulties and behaviour modification could enable them to work more successfully with their students.

"I think we all need to be more aware of difficulties, specific learning difficulties like dyslexia and the likes. I don't think we have any training in that and how to go about it" Ms Pauline

"One of the things we find challenging is also a good behaviour modification programme. We're trying to come up with our own but until now..." Ms Rose

b) Theme 2 – More understanding and support from those in charge

Sub Theme 1 – Uncertainty about the school's future

Educators felt that more understanding and support from those in charge would be beneficial to the second chance education settings. For example, some educators experience an uncertainty about the school's future every year.

"And every year, we are pending, is the school going to re-open next year?" Mr Victor

Sub Theme 2 – More efficient use of staff members' skills

Educators agreed that by acknowledging and making more efficient use of each individual staff members' skills, they would be able to give a better service to their students overall.

"Why not bring all those skills out and use them without feeling threatened" Ms Jane

c) Theme 3 – More funding and better premises

Second chance education settings tend to be smaller than mainstream schools, and when funding is done per capita, educators believed that with such a small number of students, the funding their school get is insufficient. Furthermore, the premises designated to second chance education is not comparable to mainstream schools, with limited and space for students to use their energy and vent their frustrations. Interestingly, the students who participated in the focus group did not mention the smaller size of the school as something which they would like to change.

"Somewhere they can vent their anger" Ms Josephine

8 Area – Recommendations to better meet the needs of ESLs

a) Theme 1 – Need for continuity between services

In order to better meet the needs of early school leavers, educators felt that there is a need for better continuity and collaboration between the different services available to them. Although these students have many services available, they are not well connected and it sometimes feels as though the services are in competition with one another rather than working together towards a common goal.

"We never see the holistic image and the young person has a lot of services but the services are never connected" Ms Carmen

"The idea that the services are in competition with each other" Ms Pauline

9 Area - Recommendations to better meet needs of educators

a) Theme 1 – Time for staff team building

Educators believe that allowing more time for staff team building would help to address their needs, in order to strengthen their relationships and help to overcome the fatigue and burnout experienced.

“An extra day off for team building, you’d be amazed how one day off recharges you for 2 months” Ms Louise

b) Theme 2 – Supervision for staff

Some educators believed that the stress and the lack of supervision they experienced when they first started working in second chance education could have been reduced if they had received the support they required.

“I personally feel resilient as a person but in the first year, after 2 months, I cried so much when we had a meeting, I did not even have a supervisor” Ms Rose

10 Area – Additional themes emerging from focus group

a) Theme 1 – Success as a lack of behaviour problems/delinquency

Educators agreed that success in second chance settings does not solely focus on academic achievements, but also on a lack of behaviour problems displayed by students.

“Knowing that they’re not in prison. For me, it’s already a success” Mr Victor

b) Theme 2 – Stigma

Educators stated that those who attend second chance education experience stigma. One of the reasons could be due to staff in mainstream schools who speak about second chance education in a rather negative way.

“And they used to feel like they have something less, because ... they used to tell them “if you are naughty we will send you down there... Teachers from the mainstream saying “how did you go down with them?” Ms Jane

V DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As demonstrated throughout this paper, the experiences of educators working with students at risk or experiencing early school leaving and of students following ALPs are unique and different from those within the mainstream education system.

The great majority of educators in the quantitative study believe they have a good understanding of trauma and traumatic stress and most of them have a good understanding of how stress may affect their students’ physical wellbeing, mental health, interpersonal relationships and learning. However, there is room for improvement when it comes to the support given to educators. Educators in the qualitative study stated that they would appreciate increased supervision, especially for those educators who are just starting their career in

this area. Training on how to identify and manage secondary trauma would also be beneficial.

More than half of the educators in the quantitative study stated that their students used derogatory and violent language towards them, and recognised that there is a degree of personal risk in their job related to this. Some of the students who participated in the focus groups mentioned that being violent towards others was one of the main reasons why were excluded from mainstream education. Therefore, training on how to better manage students who are violent as well as receiving more support in such instances, is crucial in order to reduce the perceived risk experienced by educators.

Most educators in the quantitative study believe that they are able to support their students in identifying and managing strong emotions, and this is reflected by the students as well, who felt that their teachers have helped them develop new personal skills in managing their emotions. Further training for educators on how to help students manage strong emotions could be useful, especially for those educators who do not have much experience in the area.

The educators who participated in the qualitative study stressed the importance of building strong, trusting relationships between educators and students and believe that it is vital in order to ensure success when working in second chance education. Training educators on relationship building with vulnerable young people is vital for working effectively with early school leavers. Furthermore, enhancing the relationships between the educators themselves, such as through more dedicated time for staff team building would allow educators to strengthen the professional relationships with each other.

The importance of not having a ‘mainstream mentality’ when working with early school leavers was one of the main themes elicited by the participants in the qualitative research. Being flexible, using more hands-on approaches, having a good sense of humour, being patient, taking things personally, going at the students’ pace and giving students more choices, are some of the suggested ways that could improve early school leavers’ experiences of education, as mentioned by both the educators and the students.

It is crucial for those working with vulnerable young people to recognise when students’ primary needs are not being adequately met, and take the necessary action. Furthermore, it is important to note that success in second chance education settings is not necessarily related to academic achievement, but more to the acquirement of new skills that will enable students to follow a successful path in life. Mindfulness training, training in mental health, resilience, specific learning difficulties, and behaviour modification can complement this and better equip educators working with early school leavers.

Finally, a reduction in the fragmentation of services available to vulnerable young people and increasing the collaboration between the services provided would have a positive effect on the education of early school leavers which would, in turn, enable them to enjoy higher levels of wellbeing, success in their future career and an increase in their life satisfaction.

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Opening the Doors: Early School Leavers and their Perceived Lived Experience in the Maltese Educational System

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Abstract. As stated in the Eurostat Regional Yearbook (Eurostat, 2019), early leavers are those individuals between 18 to 24 years of age who have finished no more than a lower secondary education and are not involved in future education or training. This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the perceived lived experiences of Maltese early school leavers (ESLs) and their disengagement from the Maltese educational system. The data was obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted with youths who fit this category, while Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to analyse the data. Five super-ordinate themes emerged from the analysis: (a) the ESL's self-concept and how this affects their motivation to further their education, (b) the influence of the family, (c) the peer group and its effect, (d) their experience in the Maltese schooling system and (e) the reasons why they believe some people become ESLs. These interlocking factors 'pushed' them or helped 'pull' them out of compulsory schooling, and hence curtailed their access to further education. These perceived experiences could help Maltese policymakers address some of the structural obstacles that these young people face when accessing compulsory education in Malta.

Keywords: lived experience, youths, education, career, Maltese educational system

I INTRODUCTION

A Defining ESL

"Is an education intended to integrate persons into the world as we know it, a world in which 'what is' and 'what works' determine what is possible? On the contrary, is it an education that is dynamic and which prepares people for a world not as it is but as it should and can be?" (Mayo, 2009, p. 6).

The Eurostat Regional Yearbook (Eurostat, 2019) states that "Early leavers from education and training may be analysed by looking at the share of individuals aged 18-24 years who have at most a lower secondary level of educational attainment (ISCED levels 0-2) and who were not engaged in any further education and training" (p. 65). Early research on Early School Leaving (ESL), as it may also be referred as, or 'dropping out' has found that this "...dilemma is more than a century old" (Haley, 2006, p.13). Yet there still seems to be a lack of knowledge as to how to identify those who are at risk of becoming ESLs and how to help them. While some studies indicate that there are no clear predisposing criteria as to who becomes an ESL (Haley, 2006), others denote that ESLs tend to have common features. Some studies have indicated that most ESLs tend to be male (16.0% male vs 12.1 % female) (Eurostat, 2012) and come from lower

socioeconomic status groups (van der Graaf et al., 2019). They are more likely to come from single-parent families; "vulnerable groups" (such as individuals with intellectual or physical impairments); from households without a member in gainful employment (Dale, 2010, p.5); and might have other members of the family who were ESLs and/or have parents with a low level of education (Panzaru & Tomita, 2013).

ESL is not an event, but a process which involves both the individuals and their own personal stories. These, in turn, affect their community, society and environment at school (Dale, 2010). Foster, Tilleczek, Hein & Lewko, (as cited in Ferguson et al., 2005), stated how ESL "is a long term, multi-dimensional process that is influenced by a wide variety of school and out-of-school experiences with broad social and cultural implications" (Ferguson et al., 2005, p. 3). Some studies have identified 'pull-out' factors, where students feel the need to leave school to work for individual or family reasons; other studies focus on 'push-out' factors, i.e. how the schooling system might have failed the student (Stearns & Glennie, 2006).

On a psychological level, Erikson addresses ESL through an understanding of adolescence as a transitional period during which, youths try to incorporate what they already know of themselves with three qualities: their own personal skills, physical attributes and what opportunities they can gain in their own social roles (Stearns &

Glennie, 2006). ESL may occur when the individual lacks self-motivation which subsequently discourages them from continuing in their studies (Van Deursen & Jansen, 2007). These youths tend to be interested in the 'here and now' and do not foresee how their present choices may affect their future lifestyle. Thus, while the blame for ESLs falls onto the individual (Haley, 2006), their surroundings is also a key factor. According to Bourdieu, individuals garner their behaviours' and values according to their previous experiences and future expectations (Lizardo, 2010).

II ESL AND INTERLOCKING FACTORS

This section focuses on different factors which might be implicated in preventing youth from furthering their education. These include the family, peer groups, socio-economic status, educational system and employment.

A The Family

Blondal & Adalbjarnardotti (2009) identified a correlation between parenting styles and ESL since the former could affect the quality of the parent-child relationship. The type and quality of the parent-child relationship can influence how youth think, adjust to new settings and lifestyle choices, thus affecting schooling and academic achievement (Jodl et al, 2001). Children raised in single parent households and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, similarly, tend to leave school at an earlier stage (Alexander et al., 2001). Family structure is also one of the strongest predictors of social, emotional and behaviour difficulties (SEBD) (Cefai & Camilleri, 2011), which in turn is one of the main risk factors of ESL (Ministry of Education & Employment, 2012).

B Peer Groups

Peer pressure is also a key factor in ESL since students may decide to leave school together, or peers may discourage students who want to succeed (Dale, 2010). Moreover, people who are more likely to leave school prematurely, tend to stay with those who have left school or are going to do so (Eivers et al., 2000). Bullying and social isolation may also push youth to leave school early. Some studies suggest that unless students are provided with the right environment where bullying and social isolation are concerned, these can lead youths to become disengaged from the school environment (Ministry of Education and Employment Malta, 2012; Cefai and Camilleri, 2011).

C Socioeconomic Status

Several studies indicate that a socially disadvantaged background will put the child 'at risk' of being an ESL. This could be due to pressure to find work to help families with the costs and stresses of daily life (Dale, 2010). In Malta, there seems to be a strong correlation between areas with high socio-economic inequalities and ESLs (Gatt, 2012). The highest levels of ESLs and low socioeconomic status are both found in the Southern Harbour district. On the other hand, the lowest rates of ESLs are found in areas with high socioeconomic status, namely in the North Harbour Area (Gatt, 2012). This correlates with Miller's 'Przeworski environmental effect' theory (1977).

This suggests that individuals with established careers and higher levels of education tend to live in the same districts, while persons with low levels of education live in the areas of proximity to one another (Miller 1977, as cited in Gatt, 2012).

D Educational Systems

Dale (2010) underlines that a vicious circle can result when the experiences of adolescents are affected by the experiences and expectations of the individual, family and of the community. Thus, those youths who come from families which eliminate themselves from the education system must resign themselves to a lower socio-economic status in society. The decision to leave school early may be linked to the school cultures which prevail in the schools frequented by these youths.

Beekhoven & Dekkers (2005) identified three types of these school cultures:

"...The aggressive school culture represents a hostile one in which students who are not exemplary are actively pushed out of school.

... The passive school culture is more or less indifferent, one in which students are neither supported nor encouraged to stay on.

...The active school culture, most appreciated by the youngsters, resembles a special and intensive type of education that completely focuses on enticing the students to remain in school." (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005, p. 200)

Therefore, the structure and management of the school in its relation to the community, can also be related to ESL (Eivers et al., 2000). There is also evidence that schools with students from a low socioeconomic background have a lower number of high achievers, while schools with a predominance of students from a high socioeconomic status are more likely to have students with higher achievement in their studies (Dale, 2010 and Bowles & Gintis, 2000). This relationship can result in a damaging pattern, unless there are in place the necessary interventions to help and encourage students to stay in school. These may include Learning Support Zones and Mentoring (Ministry of Education and Employment Malta, 2012), provisions which seek to prevent ESL amongst others.

E Employment

ESLs tend to find work in low-skilled jobs or family owned companies (Gatt, 2012; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Moreover, research has shown that those students who leave school prematurely find intermittent employment and earn less than those who remain in school (Ferguson et al., 2005; Van Deursen & Jansen, 2007). Their income is most likely to fall under the poverty line (van der Graaf et al., 2019). In addition, the rate of unemployment among ESLs is also likely to be high as they become dependent on social and other financial assistance, thus becoming NEET (young people not in employment, education or training) (Van Deursen & Jansen, 2007; Eurofund, 2012).

F Aims of the Study

ESL is a topical and a key problem in Malta. A report by the Ministry of Education and Employment (2012), states that “ESL is a symptom of a wider range of issues affecting the lives of children, their families and their communities and the structure and content of the school system” (p. xi). As described above, youths may become ESLs as a result of community based macro-factors such as socio-economic status, family, background. However, there are also factors at meso and micro levels: peer influence, school culture; individual and family circumstances. The aim of this present study was thus to identify perceived interlocking factors which either ‘push’ or ‘pull’ Maltese students into the ESL category. Identifying these interlocking factors would allow insights into individuals’ perceptions of their lived experiences and enhance future prevention and intervention programmes (Haley, 2006). The interrelationships which occur between these levels simultaneously can also help policy makers to find appropriate efficient solutions to the ever-growing issue of the rate of ESLs (Ferguson et al., 2005). This study thus explored the experiences of ESLs, focusing on six different macro, meso and micro factors which has been found to predispose ESL: individual’s self-concept, family, peers, socioeconomic status, the education system in which students were embedded and employment prospects (Dale, 2010).

III METHODOLOGY

There have been several national studies of a quantitative nature on ESLs (Haley, 2006), however, local research which “offers a rich, detailed, first-person account” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.56) is scarce. A qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was chosen in order to fully delve into the experiences of ESLs and understand how they perceive their own social and personal world (Smith and Osborn, 2008). ESLs were given the opportunity to share their experiences and opinions because it was felt that this would allow them to assess their own life choices and subsequently help others to question their own.

IPA allows the researcher to explore, describe, interpret and situate the means used by participants to make sense of their experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). It gives importance to the individual, establishing a close relationship between the researcher and the participant through one-to-one interviews. Additionally, an IPA study promotes quality over quantity, delving into the experiences of individuals which may be more important than that of outlining the experience of thousands (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Following ethical approval, the participants were selected using purposive snowball sampling. Four participants who fitted the inclusion criteria and were willing to take part in this study were identified (more details provided in the next section). A semi-structured interview schedule was constructed. The open-ended questions chosen allowed for flexibility, since the intention of the researcher was to establish a flowing conversation and touch upon salient points with all respondents. This also allowed the researcher to be more relaxed in the form of questions posed, while allowing for active listening that is unconstrained by rigid conditions. The advice given by Smith

& Osborn (2008) was taken into consideration when constructing the questions. As they suggested, the questions were broad, open-ended and non-directional.

Two interview schedules were created in Maltese and English for the interview to be carried out in whichever language the participant was most comfortable with. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Interviews took place in settings that ensured the safety of both the interviewer and the interviewee, and the location was chosen by the participants themselves. One interview was conducted in English, while the other three interviews were conducted in Maltese.

The interviews were subsequently transcribed, and debriefing notes were written immediately after each interview took place. In the field notes, personal thoughts, reflections and observations were noted. This methodology permitted the researcher to remain outside the subject matter of the individual being interviewed, whilst also being reflexive (Flanagan Jr., 1981). It also permitted the researcher to be aware of possible biases, while assessing their own personal construction of meanings. This was important in order to limit transference and ensure the reliability of the study.

In accordance with ethical considerations, pseudonyms were chosen for the participants to keep their anonymity. They were also informed of the aim of this research study before the interview took place. Hence, this ensured that the questions posed were not pushing any boundaries, were valid for this study, and enabled a credible and reliable piece of work (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Credibility was checked through peer review in order to ensure the identification of any possible prejudices in the data. The themes which emerged from the data analysis were then structured into hierarchies of meaning to obtain clusters of themes.

IV RESULTS

The four participants were all male ESLs. Will (all names have been changed), a 24-year-old, came from the south harbour area) and had been working at a printing factory for nearly three years at the time of the interview. He had attended a government school at both at primary and secondary level and had obtained his school leaving certificate after finishing Form 5 (Year 11). He had sat for six O-Levels but only passed three subjects.

Kyle, 24 years old, resided in the Central area), but was raised in the south harbour area. He worked as a surveyor on oil tankers. He had attended a state school at primary level and a church school at secondary level. He had not obtained his school leaving certificate since he left school in Form 4 (Year 10) after obtaining the relevant consent. He however sat for nine O-Levels and obtained six. Out of the four participants he had the most qualifications. He also mentioned that he had a mild case of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Simon, 23 years old, lived in the outer North harbour area and worked as a gaming tester. He went to a private school both at primary and secondary level and obtained his school leaving certificate; however, he did not mention how many O-Levels he obtained. He stated that

he “didn’t have enough to go to a decent school”. He had also been diagnosed with learning difficulties since he said he was found to be slightly dyslexic.

David was 18 years old and resided in the South Harbour area. He worked as a delivery man. He had attended government schools both at primary and secondary level. He had obtained his school leaving certificate but had not sat for any O-Levels. He also had some problems with his eyesight, which posed reading and writing problems.

The results obtained were organised as super-ordinate themes and subordinate themes. The five super-ordinate themes identified were: (1) the impact on the self during the ESL process, (2) the influence of the family, (3) peer pressure, (4) perceived limitations of the Maltese schooling system and (5) students’ views on ESL.

A The ESL Process: Impact on the Self

1 Perception of self before leaving school.

Being a good student. Two of the participants, Kyle and David, believed that they were keen students when they were still at school. David, who seemed to be the most interested in his studies said that during the lesson “we used to stay quiet to listen, because we were there to learn” and “never missed school”. They then discussed what happened to change their attitude to school and how this, in turn, affected their self-concept.

Having doubts. As already stated, David, Kyle and Simon had an intellectual or physical impairment. David spoke about this topic in great detail, especially in relation to how he felt during his time in class, as he was not able to keep up with the rest of the students: “I had a facilitator, but I still felt...like I was backwards”. Kyle also found himself in a position where he could not keep up with the rest of the class. His mind was always somewhere else, and he could never sit still for long periods of time due to his ADHD: “My mind wasn’t there, I’d get distracted and fed up”. He used to be distracted by his peers and this also affected his motivation to continue with his education. Will also began to decline in his studies “in primary school I wasn’t that bad...no definitely wasn’t that bad in school and then as soon as I entered secondary, I started being always one step backwards heh. Then from Form 3 (Year 9) onwards...”

2 Perception of Self when Taking the Decision to Leave School.

“I couldn’t continue”. Three out of the four participants expressed that they felt they could not cope with the amount of work given in school and they felt it was not for them. They believed schooling was not applicable to everyone, and in this case, not for them. Will emphasised “all that stress at school...I couldn’t stick it out”.

These findings indicate that these participants did not have a positive self-concept, which reinforced their decision to leave school at/before 16 years of age. Another factor was how others perceived the student. Kyle expressed how his teachers did not consider him to be potentially a good student: “the headmaster said, “he doesn’t give a damn about schooling”.

For David, his visual impairment was the main impediment. He believed he would not receive help in post-secondary education if he had decided to continue with his studies. David seemed to fear being rejected, and therefore he did not try to see whether this help was possible.

3 Observation of Self after Leaving School.

Finding work was a challenge. When the participants left school during/after secondary school, they all looked for work. David spent two years looking for work: “I felt like a disaster, heh, I couldn’t find work anywhere, no money, always asking my mother”. He also explained that potential employers never gave him a reason as to why they did not employ him. This situation seemed to have greatly affected his self-esteem, as he became subdued during this part of the interview.

On the other hand, Will, Simon and Kyle secured work immediately after they left school. Will said that after he left Form 5 (Year 11), he started working straight away. “I hadn’t even done my O-levels and I had started...as an electrician...but I only did two years with him... then I went to work at a factory, I did around 6 months... And then, I went to work in Hamrun, like in a shop of blinds...and then I went here [printing factory]”

Kyle took two years off - he was neither in education nor work. He used to spend time with friends and depended on his parents’ money. Yet he was the only participant who had a job waiting for him as his father owned an aluminium company: “that was one of the reasons that I did not continue with my schooling...it was as if I had everything laid out for me...emm I spent around 4 years working with my dad and then I got fed up”.

Feelings of regret. Even though Will described how he felt forced to continue school till Form 5 (Year 11), yet now he regrets not having persisted with his studies: “nowadays I regret it”. Kyle shared the same views as he stated how: “I regret not having put my mind to it”.

Simon mentioned that at 16 years one should not take such a decision: “young age, your mind is still developing, you don’t have a reasonable train of thought”. He also believed he did not have the “right mentality to leave and start work”. Kyle seemed to agree with this, stating how he wished he had had the attitude he currently has, so that he would have “continued with school”. (David, the youngest participant, also expressed his regrets and wanted others to learn from his mistakes: “I think it would be better if they learn more, not like myself and my friends, they learn more for work so that they wouldn’t find it difficult to find, like I did”.

4 The Influence of the Family

Family’s educational background. The participants came from mixed educational backgrounds.

Simon had family members with an academic background: “my sister is like basically the brain box of the family. She got, I don’t know how many A-levels and O-levels, always the smartest one, got into University with flying colours, chose Psychology, mastered that easily, finished University...moved to London, continued her studies there...”. On the other hand, Kyle’s parents had both obtained their

A-levels, but did not continue to tertiary education. His father managed an aluminium company while his mother was a stay-at-home mother. His brother also left school at 16 as he wanted to join the family business. David and Will both seemed to have family members with quite low levels of education. David's family seemed to consist of only his mother, and his two sisters as he neglected to mention his father throughout the interview. His mother left school early yet did an eight-month course to become a care worker. His older sister left school at the age of 20, and his younger sister left school at the age of 17. Will had a father who had left school early, while both his mother, brothers and sisters managed to obtain their O-levels.

Family circumstances. The family circumstances also affected the participants' decisions to leave school early. The participant who was most influenced by his family was Simon. During his last year at school (Form 5, Year 11), his family passed through several challenges: "my parents separated, just before my O-Levels, basically it was quite a rough time for the family because at the same time...my grandmother died, and at the same time, my sister decided to move to London to continue her studies there. And it was like, quite a rough period for me, cause not only am I basically losing a family member, my sister moving abroad and my parents splitting up, I also had to go to court and decide which parent I wanted to stay with... and you know, it kind of influences you in saying 'what's the point?'"

Kyle was also influenced by his family in that his brother left school early to join his father's business, so he knew that he also had a job waiting for him after he finished school.

5 Peer Pressure

"Those 'show-offs' who didn't let you learn". David stated how his peers were the biggest reason why he left school early: "talking nonsense at school, and those 'show-offs' who didn't let you learn, that's the thing that I hated most...they used to start fights and arguments". These students "would start to fool with the teacher and it wasn't just once, and so we couldn't learn a lot". David mentioned more than once that "I didn't use to do that badly [at school], but I think, that if they had to invent something, a school or something of the sort where they let all those 'show-offs' in there and then they could leave all the others work in peace and quiet, it would be better, we could have progressed much more." He really seemed to believe that his peers interfered with his learning.

Anti-school culture. While David felt his peers prevented him from learning, two of the participants, Will and Kyle, identified themselves as the disruptive element in class. When asked if he had a good group of friends at school, Will answered that: "it was good, we had a group sort of like that...we used to stay separate from all the rest...you'd stay with those who used to be kind of disruptive". When Will was asked if the situation would have been different if he had different friends (a quieter group), he explained that: "I would imagine so, unless I would end up changing them to become naughty (laughing), like I would be the bad [apple] in the group...they affect you and it works the other way round too".

Kyle explained that "you'd meet with those two, three guys who were unruly and grumbling and you carry on with them and...that's it,

when I went to school, I'd be sent out of class". He also used to fight at school, but he regarded this as being normal.

Feelings of exclusion. When the respondents were asked whether they felt they were stigmatised for being ESLs, Will answered how he felt different from his friends at times, as they would talk about school: "sometimes, I would be with my friends and they would start talking about things at school and such like, and I'd cut myself out...I'd say to myself it's like they are talking in a different language...in Japanese. I mean your friends do understand you, and they aren't going to [tease me] because I didn't finish school...I would let them but and then I would change subject".

6 Perceived Limitations of the Maltese Schooling System.

Inside the classroom. All the participants had negative comments to make on the Maltese education system, and how this may have affected their decision to leave school early. The four participants mentioned that they felt that classes should contain a smaller number of students so this would facilitate student-teacher interaction. Will added that "smaller classes, I think would work better, from the teachers to the students, because we used to be like 30 in a class... because there would be a better form of communication between the teachers and students, as it's hard to control a classroom especially a class of boys in secondary school". Simon also underlined how "everyone has different learning styles", and teachers would find it difficult to differentiate their pedagogy in big classes.

The interviewees commented on their teachers' and their teaching styles adopted. Simon, Kyle and David had a learning or physical difficulty. The way their teachers dealt with this situation was not always helpful. Simon, who was slightly dyslexic stated how: "[the teachers] don't test you for stuff, they don't basically if you're struggling they do like pull you aside and tell your parents like 'he needs to pull his socks up' rather than doing it in a manner where saying 'ok this guy might have something...let's try build something around him".

Examinations. Most of the participants discussed the issue of examinations and why they did not fare well. Kyle because of his ADHD: "I did not like exams, I felt that I wanted to finish as quickly as possible to leave, even if I did not finish, I still left".

Preparation for the future. The topic of career guidance provided by schools was also discussed with the participants. Simon underlined that "guidance counsellors...I never had that in my life...If there was career guidance in Malta where you actually had job experience, ok you are still 14 or 15 but take them to a place of work to see what it's like...like take them around Malta...see what jobs there are, it would help so much". Job shadowing was not available when these students were still in school. David, however, stated that MCAST career guidance staff used to go and speak to them, but it didn't help them. Kyle, stated that there were some discussions in his Personal and Social Development classes at school but he felt these were useless so he wished that there had been someone he could have referred to to find out the different courses and opportunities available to them. . In Will's case, he wished he had some sort of guidance given at school: "I think it would have made a difference...to help you.

It's better than having your parents...especially if you have parents like mine”.

7 Their Views on ESL

Money and its significance. All the participants mentioned how money was a key factor in their decision to leave school early. Will said, “I started thinking of money and saying now I’ll start working, I’ll start having a car and stuff, I think that was the thing that helped me to leave school”.

Perception of time. Three out of the four participants mentioned, at some point, that studying is too time consuming, which in turn affected their decision to leave school and start working. For Will, it was: “too stressful, to invest all those years, in just studies...I’m not capable”. Ironically when Kyle was asked if he would consider furthering his education, he stated: “I wouldn’t spend three years without a job”. David also would not consider dropping out of work to take a course.

V DISCUSSION

ESLs are more likely to be male, come from a lower socioeconomic status, and may have intellectual or physical impairments (Haley, 2006; Eurostat, 2019; Dale 2010). These features were found in the four participants, for e.g. three of the chosen participants had learning difficulties. However, there were factors which differed from the usual portrait of ESLs. For instance, not all participants derived from lower socioeconomic status (Simon and Kyle), which shows that ESLs are not a homogenous group, as suggested by Dale (2010).

1 An ESL’s Self-Concept

According to Stearns and Glennie (2006), the qualities which an individual possesses, such as personal skills, contribute to their decision process of whether they thought they could continue in their studies. This corresponds with the results obtained in this study. How the participants perceived themselves, also affected what they believed they were capable of. Will believed he was not able to complete his studies, as he believed school was not suited for him. Such low self-efficacy discourages the student from continuing with his education (Van Deursen & Jansen, 2007). This also occurred in David’s case. He had difficulty with reading and writing and did not manage to keep up with his learning at secondary school, even with the help of a Learning Support Assistant.

The transition from primary to secondary school was also shown to lead to changes in ESL’s attitudes towards the education system. This is further highlighted in other published studies which have shown that, where education is concerned, an individual’s decisions are affected by their earliest experiences of school (Elder, 1994; Pallas, 1993 as cited in Alexander et al., 2001). These experiences also affected the participants’ decision to withdraw from any further educational effort, while disregarding the consequences of their action (Haley, 2006). Kyle and Simon both underlined that, at that stage, they were still too young to be able to truly comprehend the long-term consequences of their actions.

2 The Family’s Contribution

Dale (2010) underlined that the expectations and experiences of the external factors, such as the family could also affect the decision-maker’s thinking process. In the case of Simon and Kyle, the family did not dissuade them from quitting school. Jodl et al. (2001) studied how the relationship between the parents and their children can be portrayed and how this impacted on school-related issues. For instance, if the parents see the educational system as being ineffective, this can also influence the child’s perspective on the matter. This was not found in the participants in this present study. The results, however, indicated that they were greatly influenced by their family’s situation at the time of making the decision to leave.

In addition, the family’s employment circumstances also contribute to the students’ judgement of their own type of employment (Gatt, 2012; Panzaru & Tomita, 2013; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). As seen in Kyle’s account, his father having his own business, allowed him to have a safety net to fall onto and so his “self-concept and career maturity” (as cited in Jodl et al., 2001, p.1247) were affected accordingly. Some of the participants were not comfortable with the job they could access at the time of leaving school. This pushed some of them to learn new skills, which allowed them to find better jobs.

3 Peers’ Influence

Another issue which the literature stresses upon is the effect of peers on students who may be ‘at risk’. Cefai found that children with learning difficulties were bullied by their peers and therefore, this created more obstacles within the school for the child to overcome (as cited in Cefai & Cooper, 2009). Bullying has been found to be one of the main factors in ESL (Downes, 2011). A situation which, to some extent, corresponds to Cefai’s observation is David’s narration of his experience. David, referred to the “show-offs” several times within his interview, and stated how he wished they were put in another school so that he could have had the possibility to learn. Dale (2010) also stated that peer pressure can ‘push’ the ESLs out of the education system. Two of the respondents spoke about how they formed part of this anti-school subcultures and that this gave them a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging which they needed since they were not that academic.

4 Their Perceived Limitations of the Maltese Schooling System

Eivers et al. (2000) mentioned several schooling related factors which may contribute to the individual deciding to leave school prematurely: the type of schooling, the relationship between the teacher and students and the method of teaching. These all seem to have been an issue for these four participants. As Beekhoven & Dekkers (2005) underlined, there are three types of school cultures: aggressive, passive and active. Kyle found himself in an aggressive school culture, as his teachers believed he was not capable of continuing in his education and so, presented Kyle and his family with an ultimatum. If he failed to pass his examinations again, he had to leave school. In David’s and Simon’s cases, both attended schools which seemed to be indifferent to the method adopted to teach students. These schools did not seem to provide sufficient guidance or support, therefore, creating a passive culture in the school. Thus, it seems that it is the environment in the school which has the greatest influence on the student, and not the type of school attended.

There was also a lack of career guidance counsellors, with the students not receiving the right information about different careers and courses available to them. If the child is only being told information from one source (their family), this would not allow them to have a holistic view of their opportunities, and therefore, they may be lost as to which career path to take.

All the participants referred to the teaching methods adopted by the teacher in class. Three of the participants had a learning difficulty, so one would expect more focused teaching for these groups. However, this was not the case and these three individuals were not given enough help and therefore, could not perform on the same level as the rest of the class.

The concept of Universal Design for Learning should be applied rigorously in schools, with the availability of more than one way of teaching, in order for students of mixed skills to equally understand, and not a 'one size fits all' method.

VI CONCLUSION

The small sample size in this research, may not be possible to generalise the results to the entire ESL population, but such research may serve to gain deeper insight into the lives of some ESLs. This IPA study confirms that the decision ESLs take is a "long-term, multi-dimensional process" (Ferguson et al., 2005, p.3). Various factors have an impact in this regard: the individual's self-concept, the family, the peer group and the school's efforts to integrate or not students with different learning needs. However, poses further questions, since it did not clarify which was the predominant effect i.e. push or pull: whether the respondents left school to find work or if they felt pushed out of the education system. Whilst this research study was conducted in 2013, ESL continues to be a challenge, "in 2016, Malta had one of the highest ESL rates (19.6%) in the EU and is still far from reaching its ambitious Europe 2020 national target of 10%. The rate is considerably higher for men than for women and is especially high for people with disabilities (39.5% compared to the EU average of 22% in 2015). (European Commission, 2018, p. 27).

Further, larger scale studies, are thus needed locally to help unravel more clearly the complex processes underlying ESL.

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Good Practices towards Tackling Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET). Comparative Approach – Malta, Italy, Serbia

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Abstract. Early leaving from education and training (ELET) is a multifaceted and multi-complex phenomenon which has consequences on individual, social and economical level. According to that, it is one of the current priorities of the European Union in the field of education and training. Since the causes for early school leaving are often complex and interrelated, the policies to reduce it must cover a number of issues (education, employment, labour market, health, youth work, work with parents, analysis of key stakeholders, housing, political participation, local strategies, strengthening the capacity of school staff, improving or changing the school culture etc.). Eurostat data and the progress report by the European Commission states that Italy and Malta have been specifically called upon to address the problem of early school leaving, while Serbia still have an issue with a dropout of children from minority and vulnerable groups, especially children from Roma settlements and youngsters with disabilities. This text aims to explore the situation in Malta, Italy and Serbia, to identify challenges and to provide recommendations on how to tackle ELET. The focus is on introducing successful education action and transferring best practices and innovative approaches regarding ELET.

Keywords: early school leaving, dropout, education, prevention, projects

I INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this text is to present the phenomenon of early leaving from education and training (ELET) and dropout of children from the school. The text aims to explore the situation in Malta, Italy and Serbia, to identify challenges and to provide recommendations on how to tackle ELET. The focus is on introducing successful education action (new teaching methods and cross-disciplinary approaches) and transferring best practices and innovative approaches. Our particular interest is recognising the self-care and health issues of ELS students, strengthening the capacity of school staff and improving the school culture. The methodology used in the paper is a combination of analysis of the legal frameworks, strategic documents, international projects and relevant reports with original examples and recommendations from personal practice in working with young people and teachers.

II AN OVERVIEW OF ELET IN MALTA, ITALY AND SERBIA

Early leaving from education and training is a multifaceted and multi-complex phenomenon which has consequences on individual,

social and economical level. Numerous studies have been conducted on this topic to discover the causes of early school leaving and prevent them. However, ELET and the trend of dropping out are still present. According to that it is one of the current priorities of the European Union in the field of education and training, especially if we know that early school leaving is inherently linked with poverty, social exclusion, unemployment and a number of other negative consequences.

Eurostat data's [1] and [2], national reports [3] [4] [5] [6] [7] [8] and the progress report by the European Commission 2014 [9] states that Italy and Malta have been specifically called upon to address the problem of early school leaving, while Serbia still have an issue with a dropout of children from minority and vulnerable groups, especially children from Roma settlements and youngsters with disabilities. On the other side, there are a lot of international projects, national programmes and initiatives as good examples of how to reduce dropping out of school and how to tackle ELET. This paper will provide an overview of some of them, with a focus on initiatives and good practices in Malta, Italy and Serbia.

A Malta

In Malta statistical data dating back to 2000 always indicated a very high percentage of early school leaving. In 2000 the official rate was 54.2%, in 2001 was 54%, and then for 2010 showed a significant drop of 36.9% and 33.4% in 2011 [10]. This shows that over the period 2000–2010 Malta has achieved significant progress.

According to the report from October 2018 by the National Statistics Office, the early school leaving rate for 2017 had dropped to 17.7%, a further drop from the 20.3% rate of 2014 and the 27.1% rate of 2009.

One particular emerging phenomenon in Malta, which affects the education system, is the increase of immigrants in Malta. Also, there is a high level of people with disabilities, as part of the inclusive educational system. The National Report from 2012 is noted that “the majority of disabled people have no qualifications. It is also concerning that disabled people, including those between 10 and 39 exhibit high rates of illiteracy when compared with the non-disabled population. The average illiteracy rate in these age groups is 23.5% - a high rate when compared to the rate of 6% in the non-disabled population” [11].

During 2008, 2009 and 2010 “participation rates of students within post-secondary (vocational) education have been higher than that of post-secondary (academic) education. This shows a change in the trend of choice in post-secondary education of young Maltese students. At age 19 [...] the total participation rate in further and higher education for the year 2010 was that of 56%; where 30% of which were enrolled within post-secondary education, whilst 27% were enrolled within tertiary institutions. This means that the participation rate of 19-year-olds is much higher in postsecondary institutions rather than in tertiary institutions. The result of this phenomenon could be due to repeaters or those who have left education at the age of 16-17 who would have decided to re-engage back into education at the age of 19” [12].

With regard to the tackling of the issue of ESL and to target 10% by 2025 in Malta, three important documents were launched. The first one is the framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 with four broad but measurable targets in line with European and world benchmarks followed by the education agenda in Malta. Two other national documents that address ESL/ELET are: Strategic Plan for The Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta and The Malta National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020.

In February 2015, a task force was set up to monitor the implementation of the strategy and 40 strategy programmes. The task force has also set up 3 working groups to focus on specific adult learning aspects: community learning and vulnerable groups; employment and accreditation; and connected learning [13].

B Italy

As noted in [14] “in many reports on education, both by the national Ministry and by the European Commission excerpted from the Report on Italy Social Cohesion, the serious consequences of school dropout in Italy are highlighted“. Italy is one of the European Union

countries where early school leaving and dropouts from the school are strong national emergency, especially suburbs in the southern region as well in the centre-northern part of the country. According to [15] and [16] ELET in Italy is associated with the socio-economic background of students and their families, low household income, parental unemployment, and low level of parental education.

“In most regions, particularly in the South of Italy and Islands, the rates of ESL are very high and far from the target of 10% proposed by the 2030 Agenda. In Sicily and Sardinia one young person out of four does not complete any study/training after the lower-secondary school, in Campania and Puglia the rates are respectively 18,8% and 16,7%. The phenomenon is also present in regions situated in the North of Italy (e.g. in Valle d’Aosta the percentage of ESL is 16,3%) but the progress in reducing rates has been greater here than in the South of Italy” [17]. According to [18] “the South and the Islands still involve 21.4% of early school leavers. Meanwhile, the North and the Centre involve 14.1% of early school leavers on average. The highest figures for ESL are in Sicilia (25.8%) and Sardegna (24.7%). (...) The greatest progress in reducing the phenomenon was achieved by the autonomous province of Bolzano, Puglia and Veneto (decrease of 10 percentage points for the latter)”.

Although it has early school leaving rate above 10% (which is also target according to the Europe 2020 Strategy for smart sustainable and inclusive growth), nevertheless Italy made significant progress in the last few years (from 23% in 2003, 19.2% in 2009, 15% in 2014 to 13.8% in 2016). The analysis of the National Report made by the Italian Ministry of Education [19], also shows that the phenomenon of early school leaving is decreasing. Between 2016/2017 and 2017/2018, the dropout rate in the secondary level of education was 1.17%, while between 2015/2016 and 2016/2017 it was 1.35%.

In [20] Colombo noted that with the support of EU funds, mainly the European Social Fund, Cohesion Action Plan, National Operative Programme and Regional Operative Programme, “many structural measures and local projects have been carried out throughout the country, building partnerships between schools and several non-schooling organizations: local councils, civil associations, enterprises, volunteers’ organizations, and professionals, such as counsellors, mental health doctors, pedagogies and social workers”. Check also Colombo’s researches in [21] [22] and [23].

The team of WeWorld in [24] noted that “in the last few years there was an effort, both from public and private sector, to promote projects on ESL aimed at building a cooperative network among different agencies located in the same territories, to strive for a unique goal, thus strengthening the so-called educational community and empowering every single actor involved towards a common good“. More information can be finding in [25] and [26].

C Serbia

The Strategy for Education Development in Serbia 2020 [27] recognises ELET and dropout prevention of students from the education system as one of the priority areas.

In Serbia, between 13% and 15% of children of one generation drop out from primary school overall, which is significantly higher in children from vulnerable groups, and according to 2013 data, there were 25.3% of young people (ages 18 to 24) who did not obtain a high school diploma [28]. In 2011/2012 the percentage of children included in primary education was 95.25% and in 2013/2014, it was 97.98% [29].

The rate of completion of primary school in Serbia is generally high, but, as in the case of dropout, this percentage hides a large disparity between the general population (93.4%) and children from socially disadvantaged groups, especially children living in Roma settlements where 64% finish primary school.

According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, available on the national web-site <http://webrzs.stat.gov.rs>, in the population, aged 15 and over: 87% of the Roma population and 51.7% of children with disabilities have completed primary education or less. In the population aged between 30 and 34, 25% are those with higher education; in the Roma population less than 1% are those with higher and tertiary education, and 6.5% of persons with disabilities.

The Strategy for the Social Inclusion of the Roma in the Republic of Serbia from 2016 to 2025 [30] provides clear evidence of the significant challenges that the Roma population face in many different areas and which are directly related to their disadvantaged socio-economic status in general.

The strategy emphasises that the majority of the Roma population is deeply affected by poverty and social exclusion. Therefore, they continue to be victims of discrimination, especially in the areas of employment, education and housing.

The problems and challenges faced by the Roma population in Serbia have also been addressed in the latest European Commission Progress Report on Serbia. The Progress Report [31] identifies early school leaving and dropping out of Roma children as a particularly serious problem.

Long-term trends and strategies at all levels of education are defined by the Strategy for Education Development in Serbia 2020, which was adopted in 2012. The Roma population is recognised as an extremely vulnerable group [32]. The main challenges of inclusion of Roma children in the education system are: low awareness of Roma parents about the importance of school education, living conditions, low or non-existent income, tend to frequently leave the place of residence due to temporary work in Serbia or abroad, early/child marriage of Roma girls, the lack of a stable and sustainable support/assistance from local government etc.

The key document dealing with the situation of children in Serbia is the National Action Plan for Children, adopted by the Government of the Republic of Serbia in 2004. The Plan contains priority measures, activities and programmes that need to be implemented to create the most favourable conditions for the development of children and their social integration [33].

In addition to improving the quality of knowledge, skills and competences, one of the main challenges of primary education in Serbia

is the reduction of dropout from primary schools. The Strategy for Education Development in Serbia 2020 sets out affirmative measures and the goal that early school leaving should be less than 5%, not only at the national level but also among vulnerable groups (the children from rural areas, children living in Roma settlements, children with disability or disorders in behaviour).

III NATIONAL PROGRAMMES AND INITIATIVES HOW TO TACKLE ELET

This part of the paper presents successful education action (new teaching methods and cross-disciplinary approaches) and transferring best practices and innovative approaches regarding ELET in Malta, Italy and Serbia. Considering that Lisbon 2000 Strategy [34] and Europe 2020 Strategy [35] set as one of its five key objectives a decrease in student dropout rate to under 10%, all mentioned countries made significant progress in the last few years in tackling the ELET.

The methodology used in the paper is a combination of analysis of the legal frameworks, strategic documents, international projects and relevant reports combined with original examples and recommendations from personal practice in working with young people and teachers.

A Malta

Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving in Malta [36] consists of ESL Prevention, Intervention and Compensation measures. Some of them have been implemented so far to prevent early school leaving, supporting young people to stay in school, and offering opportunities to early leavers for re-entering education.

The most important taken actions so far are: setting up of the Cultural Integration Unit and the Institute for Education, sustained investment in educational technology including the phasing in of tablet technology in primary schools, launching of free childcare scheme, Learning Support Assistant (LSA) service for helping children with disabilities to integrate better within the class, collaboration and involvement of parents, introduction of VET subjects as part of mainstream secondary education, VET-oriented part-time adult education programme and Foundation Certificate Programme offered by The Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), programmes by the National Literacy Agency, Alternative Learning Programme for vulnerable students, Prince's Trust International's XL Programme, a second chance programme offered by the Foundation for Social Welfare Services targeting vulnerable young people etc.

National Reform Programme [37] underlines the following preventive policy measures in tackling ELET: Tackling Absenteeism by Strengthening Student Services, Introduction of Vocational Subjects in Secondary Schools, Introduction of Embedded Learning for Foundation (Level 1) Students, Career Lessons, Learning Expo and Job Exposure Initiatives for 4th Formers – National and College Level and Introducing Life Long Learning through a Pilot Out Reach Programme.

Aġenzija Żgħażaġh (www.agenzijasghazagh.gov.mt) is realising several programmes, such as: Youth.inc programme, Youth Hubs and Youth Village. The Youth.inc is an inclusive education programme, based on applied learning, for young people between the age of 16 and 21. The aim of the programme is to help young people to improve their standard of education and gain more knowledge, values and skills to enter the labour market or gain qualifications to continue in further education and/or training. Youth Hubs' non-formal education service offers an informal and recreational environment where young people can develop projects and initiatives with the support of youth workers that build their personal and social skills and improve their educational and employment opportunities. The Youth Village provides space, facilities and supports for young people and youth organisations to stage events and initiatives. The Youth Village aims to create a physical and learning environment that will attract both young people and youth organisations.

The Malta Information Technology Agency – MITA (www.mita.gov.mt/gbl) in collaboration with the University of Malta and St Margaret's College in Malta, Donau University in Austria and Nystromska School in Sweden realised the project Game-based Learning to Alleviate Early School Leaving (GBL4ESL) which seeks to use games and incorporate them into classrooms effectively to reduce the rate of early school leavers (ESLs) [38] [39].

The Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health at the University of Malta (www.um.edu.mt/cres) was a partner on two international projects: EMPAQT and THRIVE, related to the prevention of early school leaving and empowerment of teachers, educators and parents, as well.

Enhancing Teacher Education to promote equality and social inclusion - EMPAQT is a two years project (2016-2018) aimed at contributing to the creation of learning environments that foster equity and inclusion, with a particular focus on children at risk for early school leaving (www.empaqt.eu). The project addresses the needs of teachers as professionals to obtain pedagogical support to enhance their skills for creating positive and supportive learning environments that increase students' resilience. It also addresses the needs of young people in disadvantaged situations who need support and coaching for constructing positive self-concept, setting realistic personal goals and building strategies to achieve well-being through education and professional realisation.

Training Hope, Wellbeing, and Resilience in Vulnerable Early School Leavers - THRIVE is a two-year project (2018-2020) aiming at combining the principles, methods and techniques of positive psychology, trauma sensitivity, and emotional literacy, and create an open-access innovative online training programme for educators working with early school leavers (ESLs). The course will help educators to increase their competences in addressing the priority emotional and social learning needs of ESLs, and help these vulnerable young people gain the skills they need to benefit from education, training and employment opportunities.

B Italy

In the last few years, several countries adopted a national strategy, or they are in the process to reduce early leaving from education or training. In Italy there is still no comprehensive strategy to tackle early leaving, but many projects and initiatives are visible. Also, there is a national framework provided by the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research. This framework is called Valorizza.

Valorizza is a project of the assessment of individual teachers in which the main goal is to identify and reward teachers who are distinguished by a general and proven professional appreciation within each school. The project was held during 2010-2011 in 33 schools of Campania, Lombardia and Piemonte [40].

Frequenza200 is a national programme promoted by WeWorld Italy, aimed at preventing and fighting ESL in primary and lower secondary school. It is based on a common model, then tailored to each local context, implying four levels of intervention, basically in line with the idea of giving value to each individual educational agency in the neighbourhood: students at risk of dropping out, school, family and community at large.

The School Inclusion Portal has been developed in the framework of two projects: The School Inclusion project and The Stay@School project. The main objective of the *School Inclusion project* is to promote the understanding of the strategies developed to combat early school leaving throughout Europe so as to develop a common proposal to prevent the phenomenon. The project focuses on the developing and testing of training materials aimed at transmitting the necessary skills to school teachers so that they know how to identify and prevent the risk factors which lead to students dropping out of school. The teachers' training Course on Prevention of School Early Leaving is organised in five modules and it is available on <http://schoolinclusion.pixel-online.org>. The *Stay@School project*, funded in the framework of the Lifelong Learning Programme "Leonardo Da Vinci" Transfer of Innovation sub-programme, aims to provide school teachers with the necessary skills to prevent early school leaving using the strategies and tools developed in the framework of the School Inclusion project.

The Module "Teaching methods" created by C.I.P.A.T. (Italy) presents examples of good practices in tackling ELET/ESL and dropping out of school, such as:

- *Benchmarking good practices*: Stella Polare (Pole Star), a network project for the prevention of early school leaving in the first two years of Upper Secondary Technical and Vocational Education in Genova, Italy. The schools share deprived suburban areas characterised by a steady increase in the number of immigrants and juvenile offenders. The project developed strategies and tools for initial and renewed guidance (questionnaires, activity formats, materials), which play a crucial role in combating early school leaving.
- *From motorbikes to ICT*: Scuola No Limits – Integrated pathways between State Vocational Institutes and Regional Vocational Agencies for disadvantaged students, by ISIP "Leonardo da Vinci-Ernesto Balducci" Arcidosso (www.isiparcidosso.it). The

project has coped with the educational special needs of disabled, foreign and socially disadvantaged students who are at risk of early school leaving and potentially unemployed. A 168-hour course for 10 students has offered technical, professional competences to restore old, no longer usable motorbikes (Vespa 50) together with cross-curricular competences in ICT and self-employment. Less time was devoted to theoretical learning, while practical activities enhanced the natural skills and interests of the students, who gradually modified their relation with school, and greatly reduce the failure and dropout rate.

- *Five ways* project involves five activities: Students' front office – peer education, Re-guidance – mini placements, Listening centre – information and advice, Students' progress monitoring and Recovery through e-learning. It was organised by Liceo Scientifico Statale "Alvise Cornaro", Padova (www.liceocornaro.com). The project created new, widespread, general perception and view of the problem among students and parents; positive and individualised interaction students/teachers and students/peers; it opened a channel of communication with students who experience discomfort and raised a deeper interest of students in learning.
- *External Support: "Opportunità"* project aimed at supporting students at risk of dropping out of school while they were attending compulsory education. It involved close cooperation between a network of Upper Education schools, the Provincial Vocational Centre, Vocational Agencies and the Provincial Job Centre. Seventeen students from ITT "Marco Polo", Florence (www.ittmarcopolo.fi.it) were involved, all of them at risk because of low motivation and previous failures.
- *Welcoming students from another school: DIDO* is a project of integrated modules and individualised supporting activities in Tuscan, realised by IPSSAR "Enriques" Vocational Institute, Castelfiorentino. The project covered all first year classes, provides a basic 100-hour framework for the activities chosen by each class teachers' board to fight early school leaving, reduce failures, enhance basic and cross-curricular competences, elaborate new individualised pathways for students at risk.
- *Integrated modules and individualised supporting activities* project uses intensive workshop activities for professional subjects and co-teaching, in order to divide students into groups. It's realised by I.P.S.S.A.R. "F.Martini" Montecatini Terme, Pistoia (www.ittmarcopolo.fi.it). Also, the usual students' teams for such special occasions as Conferences, open meetings with parents were used by the project to enhance self-esteem and give the opportunity for a perception of self-appraisal. The group or individualised support was meant to improve the students' study skills and help them in preventing or solving different personal problems.
- *A teacher counselling service: "School – Support, motivation, success – Information and Guidance Listening Centre to prevent early school leaving and favour students' integration and progress"* is project by Scuola Media St. S.Domenico, Istit. Magistr. "E.Lussu", Liceo Scientifico "G.Marconi", San Gavino Monreale, Sardinia (www.ittmarcopolo.fi.it). It is divided into different phases: making students welcome, thematic workshops, effective communication in offering information and guidance, both to students, parents and teachers with the help of counselors, cultural mediators and educationalists.

Besides above mentioned, there are also some other national programmes and international projects, such as:

- *Good practices against dispersion and promoting inclusion, Le buone prassi contro la dispersione e per l'inclusion* (www.iisacp.gov.it), project aims at preventing the phenomenon of ESL, consolidating the integration and inclusion, educating to the culture of solidarity, tolerance and sharing, enhancing learning through ICT methodologies, preventing risk behaviours. The project uses new disposals and tools to enhance and promote an innovative teaching methodology, based on ICTs. It's organised by Istituto Istruzione Superiore Artistica Classica Professionale.
- *Methodological research pertaining to fighting against scholastic dispersion, Ricerca Metodologica Didattica contro la dispersione scolastica - RI.ME.DI.* (www.scuolacaronda.gov.it), a project set up a research action aimed at limiting the cases of failure/dropping/ early school leaving, and, at the same time, preventing the emergence of such phenomena, developing an "early diagnosis" and "warning signs" of ESL. It's realised by Istituto Comprensivo Caronda di Catania.
- *FAre Scuola Insieme - FASI* (www.fieri.it) is the project, funded by the Ministry of Education and carried out in collaboration with the Regional Education Office for Piedmont (2016-2017). The project was focused on the analysis of school dropout in Italy, with particular attention to students of foreign origin. The research [41] was based on a detailed analysis of the international literature on the various factors which could cause the school drop-out and their interrelation, focusing on two moments of schooling that can fundamentally affect the choices and future paths: the nursery school and the transition from lower secondary school to secondary school.
- *Care for every child* project has an aim to support children living in areas with a high risk of social exclusion, and who were at risk of not completing their education. The research uncovered social issues contributing to compromised childhood education and drew attention to the need for preventative interventions as early as primary school to avoid ESL. It's organised by Ufficio Scolastico Regionale per la Campania (www.campania.istruzione.it).
- *European practices of mentoring with young adults at risk of social disadvantage and school dropout* developed different approaches, mutual learning and methodologies in educating and mentoring disadvantaged young adults across a range of partners involving schools, non-profit organisations and government institutions. It's organised by Aim Giosef – Agenzia Intercultura e Mobilità (www.associazioneaim.it).
- *The QPA Method* – New ways to support and motivate initial education and training (IVET) students at particular risk of early school leaving - ESL, (www.qpaproject.eu), including students with migrant or Roma backgrounds helps institutions develop education paths for their students, and starts by identifying the difficulties that students' face that are likely to prevent them from learning. It was implemented by Intensa San Paolo Formazione SCPA.
- *Peer-to-peer tutoring: Transferring successful methodology and learning strategies to reduce dropouts in initial education and training*

(IVET) is focused on Peer-to-Peer tutoring. It involves students teaching other students and is seen as an effective approach to use in classrooms to support learners who are at risk of leaving education. The project was implemented by Istituto di Istruzione Superiore Professionale Tecnico Commerciale A. Casagrande F. Cesi (www.casagrandecesi.gov.it).

- *Progetto In-Contro* project led some workshops aimed at preventing early school leaving and research among students. They were organised a refresher course and seminars with the teachers, who were able to reflect and acquire tools to counter the risk of early school leaving. The opening of a low-threshold day centre has promoted various activities. The organiser was Save the Children Italia (www.savethechildren.it).
- *Progetto dispersione* project supports the curricular activity within schools so that they become an active agent in the process of stimulating and empowering the pupils. The project aims at reintegrating the pupils at risk of ESL in the educative pathway thanks to specific activities that suit them. It's organised by Istituto Comprensivo 2 "S. D'Acquisto" (www.icsalvodacquisto.it).
- RE-NET – revitalising networks and new emphasis in transfer: Preventing and facing early school leaving (ESL) by sharing solutions and tools aimed to contribute to educational practices and systems that address ESL by developing a common strategy for this issue. It also aimed to enhance cooperation amongst actors from different cultural, social and economic contexts. Objectives included the transfer of best practices at the local level in coping with early school leaving, supported by tools and didactical-pedagogical solutions, and the improvement of existing networks. It's organised by Scuola secondaria statale di I grado Giuseppe Toniolo (www.icpieve.edu.it).
- *Fuoriclasse* project is organised by Fondazione Agnelli (www.icsalvodacquisto.it). The extra-curricular spaces dedicated, as the two new centres of Scalea and Crotona, and the involvement of teachers and parents, represent the added value of an innovative intervention that focuses on the connection between the school context and out of school, in which the activities are initiated in the school to continue its exterior using methodologies that refer both to formal education than to the non-formal, and can reach the target of the project in the various reference contexts with different approaches.
- *Theatre as empowerment methodology for initial education and training* transferred good practice that Centro Studi Opera Don Calabria had been implementing for many years to address early school leaving in its IVET courses to the other partners (www.ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus). The good practice is based on alternative approaches to learning, such as the use of theatrical workshops in the teaching process. The aim was to avoid using traditional approaches that were not suited to learners who were 'at risk' of dropping out of education.

C Serbia

The Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia has so far, in cooperation with governmental, international and non-governmental organisations, within the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion, "realised a number of activities, programmes and initiatives, primarily the following: Affirmative action for admission to secondary schools and colleges, The program Functional basic

education of adult Roma, the project Protection of Roma children against discrimination in education, training and appointment of advisors who are responsible for the improvement of Roma education, implementation of local action plans for improvement of Roma education, increased enrolment of Roma children in preschool, a model of the introduction of Roma assistants in schools is designed, and other systemic measures to improve the educational opportunities of the Roma population" [42].

The most important programmes and initiatives in tackling the ELET and dropping out are:

- *Second Chance – Development of functional adult education in Serbia* (www.drugasansa.rs), with an aim to provide system solutions for inclusion of adults into the process of basic education, giving them a chance to complete their primary education and to continue schooling in secondary education, either through a system of continuous training for the requirements of labour market or through a system of secondary education programmes according to programmes that are appropriate to the needs of adults.
- Two project initiatives *Education for All: Improving the availability and quality of education for children from marginalised groups* and *Providing Advanced Services at the Local Level - DILS* refer to the increasing the capacity of institutions in the sectors of health, education and social protection at the local level to provide more effective and accessible services to users of equal quality.
- *Inclusion of Roma in education and support for continuous education* by connecting institutions and NGOs at the local level created Developmental Education Centres in 10 municipalities in Southern Serbia, supported by UNICEF. The project included about 3,000 children in Roma settlements and it was focused on educational work with preschool children, remedial classes, working with parents, educational institutions and local governments.
- Project *Creation of conditions for the realization of equal enrolment policy* in the first grade of primary school was intended for the reduction of discrimination in education, by reducing the number of Roma children in special schools and creating conditions for the realization of equal enrolment policy in the first grade.
- *Increasing Accessibility of Preschool Education for Roma children* project has implemented by the Roma National Council and Ministry of Education. Through this project, Roma coordinators have been introduced as a measure of a liaison between parents, teachers and local authorities.
- Project *Roma Children Returnees – from language barriers to social capital*, was conducted by the Roma IDP Forum. The results of the project include defining procedures and proposed legislation, the development of standards and models for teaching Serbian as a second language to Roma children returnees.
- Project *Equal Chances in Secondary Education* is being implemented in cooperation between the Open Society Fund, Centre for Interactive Pedagogy, Citizens Association of Serbian-Roma friendship "Tree" and the Association of Roma students, with a goal to develop a model of secondary education which suits young people from Roma communities and contributes to the development of inclusive education policies. The aim is to achieve better conditions in education, by increasing the availability and quality of education, using modern methods of work, respecting

the values of social justice and establishing cooperation between the Roma and majority communities.

- *Chances and Choices for Roma Girls* project implemented by CARE Serbia and the Novi Sad Humanitarian Centre aims to contribute to the availability and quality of education of Roma girls, by improving the support of institutions involved in education and their accessibility, and by increasing awareness and knowledge about the importance of education of Roma girls in the Roma community. The project is multifaceted and includes various activities, such as: participatory research, making policy proposals, the Forum Theatre workshops etc.
- *School of Equal Opportunities* has an aim to empower youth to participate in various areas of school life, bring greater motivation and participation of students in all fields. Also, these programmes provide positive results towards reducing discrimination and increasing inclusion and participation in class.
- Mentoring and financial support (scholarship) were provided to Roma students through several projects: *1000 Scholarships for poor high school students*, *Creating conditions to increase the coverage and effectiveness of Roma students in high school*, *Inclusion of Roma pupils in secondary schools in Voivodina* etc.

IV CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

The consequences of ELET and drop-outs are multiple, both for the individual and the society, as well. Numerous studies show that for young people who leave or drop out of school is harder to find a job, more often they are victims of crime or socially excluded. The modern society, which is mainly based on knowledge and economics, is looking for more educated and skilled people. Persons with low-level education represent a burden and a large social issue to the state. Regarding this, many countries adopted, or are still in the process to adopt, various strategies, laws and regulations in tackling ELET and dropping out.

According to the European Commission reports [43] “early school leaving is linked to unemployment, social exclusion, poverty and poor health. There are many reasons why some young people give up education and training prematurely: personal or family problems, learning difficulties, or a fragile socio-economic situation.” Health is also a determinant of education consequently ELET and it is referenced as a factor to which ELET is linked. Moreover, in literature poor health is mainly investigated as a consequence of ELET. On another perspective, studies highlight that mental health is more compromised in people with a lower level of education [44]; poor education predicts poor health [45], and both low education and poor health on unemployment varies by work-life stage¹.

The Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health at the University of Malta realised various international projects and researches related to mental health, such as Wellbeing and Positive Peer Relations Schools, National study on the wellbeing of overseas children in Malta, Promoting Mental Health in Schools, Enhancing Resilience Through Teacher Education, HOPEs – Happiness, Optimism, Positivity and Ethos in schools etc. (<https://www.um.edu.mt/cres/ourresearchandprojects>).

In the report delivered by the National Observatory for Living with Dignity and The President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society [46] states that “early school leavers are more frequently active and vigorous than their counterparts with the higher educational attainment. Older participants with lower educational attainment less frequently report feeling active and vigorous, and there are no significant differences between them and the participants with higher educational attainment of the same age. This finding can support the assumption that the impact of early school leaving is not always immediate and direct but, over time, may lead to a more rapid deterioration of health and wellbeing”.

Besides self-care and health issues, teacher training, continuous capacity building of employees at school and the school culture are also recognised as an important factor in tackling ELET. In practice, this means that schools, respectively school employees – school management, teachers and associates, should improve their capacities to prevent students from dropping out. Improvement of the capacity of school staff is carried out through various training, professional counselling and conferences. Some examples of good practices are available in other papers [47] [48] [49] [50] and in other texts in this publication, as well.

UNICEF also noted that “prevention of ELET does not only cover activities that take place in the classroom or outside (e.g. extra-curricular activities, cooperation with local stakeholders and interest groups, collaboration and involvement of parents and the local community). Success can be achieved also through the quality of teaching” [51].

Analyses of good examples, mentioned in this paper, highlights also the quality of teaching using different approaches and methods: outdoor activities, guided visits in the area, cooperation with local stakeholders and interest groups, collaboration and involving of parents and local community, extra-curricular activities, e-learning, listening centres, mini placements, laboratory – practical activities, story-based learning, game-based learning, theatre in education, drama in education, participatory and action learning.

From practical experience in primary and secondary schools, youth work and vocational teaching [52] [53] [54], Čumura points the importance of participatory and action learning and different innovative approaches, such as: the Pedagogy of Oppressed by Paulo Freire, Forum theatre by Augusto Boal, drama in education by Dorothy Heathcote, status games by Ket Johnston, theatre games by Clive Barker, games for teachers by Dona Brendsy, creative games by Robin Dins etc. Use of drama in education (DiE) can be also productive in reducing and tackling ELET. DiE helps in expanding social awareness and deepening mutual relationships and communications, developing personal awareness, fostering a creative attitude towards individuals, society, work and life. It is also powerful, not only from the perspective of drama expression, but for forming attitudes, gaining and developing social awareness, especially (self) criticality, responsibility, developing humane moral beliefs and understanding of interpersonal relationships, and gaining security and confidence.

1 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles>

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Education is one of the most important cultural needs and we cannot imagine our own development without it. Education needs include large number of elements who are relevant for personal development and its condition for socialization, particularly because education provides framework for further learning. It is important factors which directly and permanent act on personal experience and complete individual development.

Unfortunately, numerous social, economical, political and other changes and factors affect educational institutions around Europe and due to that the children's access to education. Educators in schools face a lot of challenges, amongst which there is early school leaving, dropping out and lack of student engagement.

Eurostat data and the progress report by the European Commission states that Italy and Malta have been specifically called upon to address the problem of early school leaving, while Serbia still have an issue with a dropout of children from minority and vulnerable groups, especially children from Roma settlements and youngsters with disabilities. Through the analysis of the legal framework, strategic documents, international project, national initiatives and reports it's obvious that great efforts are being made in Malta, Italy and Serbia, but the process of tackling ELET needs to continue and constantly improve, to be sure that "No child is left behind".

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Autism: A Hidden Condition and Invisible Gap in Early Leaving from Education and Employment

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Abstract: This paper specifically addresses the often-invisible risk of those with an autism spectrum condition prematurely leaving education and experiencing unemployment. Autism is reported to be the fastest growing developmental disability globally (Baio et al., 2018) and with a prevalence rate of 1 in 100 in Malta (Farrugia, 2013). Many young people with autism have the academic ability to succeed in higher education and possess the skills to gain employment but, as an invisible condition, their needs frequently go undetected. This is particularly acute in emerging adulthood, as they transition into more demanding environments like university or the workplace (Vincent, 2019; Wei et al., 2018). The commitments, in Programmes 11 and 32 of the National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020, to ‘identify tangible measures to enable people with disability to engage in lifelong learning’ and ‘facilitate community-programmes to address issues of inclusivity’, are a hugely positive step. This paper draws on recent primary data derived from the UK context that might enable the Ministry for Education to realise these commitments through better understanding of the social, sensory and practical challenges - and solutions – for academically able young people with autism within the contexts of higher education and employment.

Keywords—autism, education, university, early leaving, transitions, employment

I INTRODUCTION

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition typically characterised by challenges in communication and social skills alongside a preference for predictable routines and, at times, repetitive behaviours (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It can also be linked to altered sensory sensitivity with many autistic people experiencing over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, colours, temperatures or pain (Buckley, 2017). Alongside these challenges, however, is a range of potential strengths including ‘strong memory, focus precision and an eye for detail, dedication, the ability of putting one’s mind to a subject, analytical skills, remarkable powers of observation’ (Van Hees et al. 2014:1684).

Until 2013 autism was described as a triad of impairments with variable intelligence quotient and language development leading to various subgroups including classic autism, atypical autism, pervasive developmental disorder, and Asperger’s syndrome; however, following changes to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5, 2013) and World Health Organization’s International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11, 2018) these were collapsed into one autism spectrum disorder

diagnosis. Approximately 50% of individuals with an autism diagnosis have average or above average intelligence (Charman et al. 2007), indicating this group’s potential for success in education and employment; however, given that autism is a ‘hidden’ condition, this often affects others’ expectations of the individual based on a perception that they do not ‘look’ like they need support (Glennon, 2001). For this reason, autistic individuals’ are frequently at a heightened risk of early leaving from education (Anderson, et al., 2018; Cage et al., 2020; Gurbuz et al. 2019) and experience significant gaps in their progression to employment (Nicholas et al., 2018).

This paper seeks to uncover, through qualitative data, the potential challenges that autistic young people encounter in their educational journeys, particularly into and through higher education and onto employment. It foregrounds the voices of autistic students and graduates in identifying the barriers, but also potential solutions, to early leaving education and enhanced employment outcomes. Whilst the data are derived from the United Kingdom context, it is envisaged that they might prove useful for the Ministry of Education and Employment in Malta for better understanding the needs of this group and how best to make provisions to enable their success across the life course.

II AUTISM IN MALTA

In Malta, the prevalence rate of autism is considered to be around 1 in 100 (Farrugia, 2013), with researchers reporting increases in diagnoses, particularly among children of school age (Sultana, 2018). Such increases may be due to the hugely positive and important 2016 Persons within the Autism Spectrum (Empowerment) Act and the establishment of the Autism Advisory Council, led by autistic advocate Dr Alistair de Gaetano. This body is legally charged to 'create awareness raising initiatives for the general public inter alia to achieve autism acceptance within society' and 'focus on the need to improve identification of undiagnosed adults within the autism spectrum through a person-centre[d] diagnostic approach, addressing also the topic of autism and ageing', and to 'give advice on [...] the promotion of self-determination of persons within the autism spectrum' as well as 'the enhancement of access to appropriate support services and equal opportunities for inclusion and participation in society'. Zammit (2018) notes how such legislation has catalysed early intervention provision and diagnostic services for autistic children and young people, particularly for those with significant communication and cognitive impairments; however, she identifies a gap in provision for more cognitively able autistic individuals. This is reflected in the Act itself through its omission of discussion regarding lifelong learning, university or employment provisions for autistic individuals.

The commitments, in Programmes 11 and 32 of the National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 do, however, identify tangible measures to enable people with disability to engage in lifelong learning and facilitate community-programmes to address issues of inclusivity. It is recognised in this document that 'young people with a disability who are in education, training or employment is very low and many persons with a disability go off the radar once they leave compulsory school'. The Strategic Action 3.9, thus aims to strengthen the transition process across educational pathways for students as they move from one cycle of education to the other, including further and higher education. Moreover, it suggests that students with particular learning difficulties, such as autism, 'need to be helped to find suitable openings in the education system that would enable them to develop their abilities and also to access employment opportunities on par with others within a perspective of social justice'.

III EARLY LEAVING, POORER EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES, AND WIDER IMPLICATIONS

Whilst there are positive trends, evidence suggests that those on the autism spectrum are still less likely than their peers to enter higher education (Newman et al., 2011). This number is also lower compared to young people with other types of disabilities such as those with speech/language, hearing, or visual impairments (Hillier et al., 2018). This, thus, leads to the conclusion that there are academically able autistic young people who are leaving education prematurely and so unable to realise their full academic potential.

Where they do reach university level study, students in the United States who have disclosed a disability are less likely than their typically developing peers to graduate from a post-secondary course (41% vs 52%), and autistic young adults are even less likely (39%) (Newman et al., 2011). This is also confirmed by Gurbuz et al (2019) who find that compared to their non-autistic peers, autistic students report a higher prevalence of thoughts about withdrawing from university and that negative academic experiences (Cage et al., 2020) and feelings of loneliness (Hillier et al., 2018) can also contribute to a growing sense of dissatisfaction and desire to drop-out.

It is relatively well-established that autistic adults face barriers entering the workforce and maintaining competitive employment (Nicholas et al., 2018; Shattuck et al., 2012); however, what is less well-documented are the challenges that autistic students experience on their departure from higher education (Vincent, 2019). Based on UK data, Allen and Coney (2018) report that those disclosing an autistic spectrum condition were the least likely of any disabled group in higher education to be in full-time employment; in fact employment outcomes were actually worse for this group where they had gained postgraduate qualifications.

Poorer mental health outcomes are also reported for this group, with quality of life measuring lower among autistic individuals compared to those without a diagnosis across children, adolescents, adults, and the elderly (Van Heijst and Geurts, 2015). In particular, depression and anxiety are reported as the most common mental health challenges for young adults with autism (VanBergeijk et al., 2008) and Gurbuz et al (2019) found that 54% of their sample reported having mental health issues which can interfere with academic success (Van Hees et al., 2015).

Both early leaving and poorer employment outcomes have wider social implications including reduced earning potential and increased dependence on parents and the state for welfare. Whilst economic arguments are somewhat distasteful, they are compelling at a policy level. Buescher et al. (2014) estimate the annual and lifetime costs associated with autism to include accommodation, medical services, non-medical services, special education, employment support, out-of-pocket payments by families, and reduced productivity as a result of lost or disrupted employment for autistic people and their families. The cost throughout a person's life was calculated as £1.5 million for those with a co-occurring intellectual disability and £0.92 million for those without intellectual disability. However, many of these costs might be mitigated where autistic young people are supported through education and into meaningful employment. Thus, there are both personal and social reasons for addressing gaps in early leaving from higher education and employment for autistic individuals.

IV METHODS

A qualitative research method was adopted to uncover the first-hand experiences of higher education and employment for autistic students and graduates. Data were derived from three separate but connected phases of data collection and reflects the input of n=86 participants in total. Ethical clearance was granted from the

researcher's institution for all three phases and all participants provided informed consent prior to taking part. Participants' names have been anonymised to minimise harm.

The first phase of data collection was a participatory action research study among seven autistic students, where participants used auto ethnographic writing (Denzin, 2018) to describe their own experiences of university (Vincent et al., 2017). Topics were identified by the participants themselves and included: what being diagnosed as autistic means to you; the period before coming to university; first week of university; practical issues at university; socialising; emotional needs; academic successes and challenges; living abroad as part of an exchange programme; life after university. The second phase was based on twenty-one in-depth interviews with autistic students and graduates across eight universities in England. The emphasis here was to understand the experiences of transition from higher education (Vincent, 2019). The sample included both autistic students in their final 12 months of study in higher education and recent graduates in order to reflect the experiences of those in the midst of this transition as well as some that had already made it. And the final phase of data collection was a further participatory study, which focused specifically on the transition to employment. In total 58 community stakeholders participated including autistic adults, parents, disability support workers, careers counsellors, researchers, and employees from the public sector (Vincent, 2020). Data were collected through focus groups of 12-15 participants, with each taking a different emphasis on rotation: finding and applying for jobs; disclosure to employers; sensory needs; and social needs.

V FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings for this paper have been organised into five themes: social demands; sensory demands; organisational demands; disclosure and attitudes; and support and provision. Where relevant, each is related to the university context and the employment setting for autistic young people as they make this transition. Whilst these two domains are recognised as being substantially different, there are also many barriers that both overlap and persist.

A Social Demands

Participants across the three phases of data collection reported challenges related to social demands associated with university and employment. In particular autistic students related their desire for friendships and social activity, however, often felt unable to participate.

I want to socialise and have friends like any normal people [sic], but every time the invitation comes, I almost always go into default mode and say "no". (Phase 1 – autistic student)

Often difficulties in navigating the social norms were the reasons stated for their withdrawal from social activities both at university and in the workplace.

I have no problems with general socialising most of the time. It's just the going out part that I freak out on. The social rules in society keep changing overnight! (Phase 1 – autistic student)

Social cues everybody's gone to the pub and you haven't and why is that? You don't want to go to the pub because the pub's a nightmare for you or it might be you would have liked to be included but you've not picked up on the social cue that everybody else has picked up on to know that this is what you do on Friday (Phase 3 – focus group)

Participants described what they called a 'social battery' intimating the emotional strain that social interactions place on them at university and in the workplace. This was often connected to difficulties in making sense of non-autistic social norms and/or the perceived need to 'camouflage' their autistic traits (Cage and Troxell-Whitman, 2019).

the reason why its draining is because ...you're too busy focusing on your body language, your behaviour, trying not to say anything inappropriate, trying to maintain that cover to pass as 'normal'. (Phase 3 – focus group)

I can't be 24/7 talking with people in a situation I am uncomfortable in... people need to have the opportunity to not be isolated but I think there's also a certain amount of if you're thrown into that situation all day everyday you're going to eventually crack. (Phase 3 – focus group)

Difficulties with interpreting others' actions and intentions is a well-documented trait of the autism spectrum (Cole et al., 2018) but students also reported difficulties in navigating social spaces on campus and in the workplace.

The university (or at least the Student Union) didn't appear to offer much in the way of Fresher's week activities that would be considered 'friendly' for students with Autism/Asperger's. (Phase 1 – autistic student)

Understatement: I am not good with crowds or social situations... In some crowds whenever someone looks my way I get nervous, I think why would they look at me and I go through everything I think I could have done or be doing wrong. I become overly paranoid and self-conscious. I say that these crowds have a negative aura. (Phase 1 – autistic student)

Such experiences can, unsurprisingly, lead to social isolation as well as increased levels of anxiety and depression (Lei et al., 2018; Gurbuz et al., 2019; Hillier et al., 2018). These findings are also verified by Van Hees et al.'s study, 2015, which reports that autistic students in their sample felt overwhelmed, anxious, and depressed often leading to poorer outcomes in other aspects of their life.

Participants in Phases 2 and 3 reported how social demands can also lead to poorer prospects in employment for autistic students and graduates. This was particularly pronounced in relation to recruitment processes like interviews.

If I have to do interviews and the socially awkward side of stuff might come out, being shy or saying or doing wrong stuff. (Phase 2 – autistic student)

I'm in a 'catch 22' situation - that's how I describe it... because I find it so difficult to do things that other people do like interviews and socialising, so it's easier for me just to live at home but I don't necessarily want to do that but in order to move out I need money but I can't get a job if I'm terrible at selling myself. (Phase 2 – autistic student)

Such social difficulties related to recruitment are also reported across the literature more broadly and create a persistent barrier for many autistic individuals (Shattuck et al., 2012). It is clear how such experiences can contribute to autistic students' chances of early leaving from education and heightened risk of post-graduate unemployment.

B Sensory Demands

Participants across each of the phases of data collection described how they process sensory information (sight, sound, touch, etc.),

'I hear everything at once and then I don't really hear one of my co-workers talking to me'. (Phase 2 – autistic student)

As some of the quotations above suggest, social difficulties were also related to participants' sensory experiences. Often there was a desire for sensory predictability in the environments in which they studied and worked; where this was not possible it led, for some, to a withdrawal from many of the more social aspects of university life.

They [non-autistic students] might not understand that by playing their music loudly they are effectively drilling a crater in your head (Phase 1 – autistic student)

I'm not against the idea of going out for a drink with some friends but the idea of going out to get drunk has just never really appealed to me. Neither has the noisy bedlam of the nightclub environment, as I like the quiet comfort of my own room too much... This was one area in which I and my housemates differed. (Phase 1 – autistic student)

These data accord with other research, which reports difficulties with processing information and sensory sensitivity (Anderson et al., 2018; Van Hees et al., 2015). Gurbuz et al (2019) reported that more than half of the autistic students in their sample experienced hyper-sensitivity to sensory input which affected both their academic performance and motivation to participate in social events.

For some information from just one sense was processed all at once which made it difficult to register and decode others' speech. For others, this was a much more emotive experience, precipitated by a build-up of stress, anxiety and pressure, leading to a 'meltdown'. One participant described it as 'explosive: it's nought to rage in like less than thirty seconds – kabumph! ... screaming, shouting, running around rampaging, bang my head off brick walls, hitting myself...just basically a complete overload of emotion' (Phase 2 – autistic student).

Whilst social isolation is one mechanism for managing such sensory experiences, some simple alterations to the sensory environment were also identified as increasing inclusivity and the possibility of success at university and in the workplace. sometimes a simple adjustment like turning a desk around to face the wall...it doesn't have to be big adjustments obviously lighting is a huge problem a big adjustment but again if you're sat by an open window it might be it might be helpful (Phase 3 – focus group).

C Organisational Demands

Participants reported the benefits they derived from having routines in order to manage their time and activities. Challenges arose, however, where changes occurred in these structures. As the statement below shows, this is a persistent difficulty across the life course and is exacerbated in new contexts such as the transition from school to university or into employment.

I've always been... it's just that kind of anxiety that I've always had moving onto something different. I had anxiety before I went to school, I had anxiety before I went to secondary school, I had anxiety before coming to university, I have this anxiety now that I need to go out and get a job. (Phase 2 – autistic student)

Change in routine has never been something that I have dealt with very well but going to university was an entirely new prospect; I would have to start again from scratch. (Phase 1 – autistic student)

Echoing the findings above, Gurbuz et al (2019), Anderson et al (2018) and Cage et al (2020) note how managing new routines alongside other practical concerns such as independent living can make autistic students particularly vulnerable to isolation and leaving in the early stages of their higher education.

The main difference between High School and University is with the timing of lectures. I could have tons of free time between lectures with nothing to do... I found myself walking back to my accommodation to eat or work, (sometimes to play video games,) because I felt uncomfortable in the crowds and there is no real reason to hang around the University. (Phase 1 – autistic student)

Hillier et al (2018) also cite sporadic class schedule, and greater independence, self-autonomy as being particularly problematic and Van Hees et al. (2015) students report difficulties with the lack of structure and predictability.

Whilst most autistic students demonstrate an aptitude for their studies (Hamilton et al., 2016) the organisational dimension of this can lead, for some, to increased psychological strain.

University work often brings with it the baggage of mental and emotional stress... which has an unhelpful effect upon my ability to organise myself when it comes to completing work on time. (Phase 1 – autistic student)

Many participants noted the benefits of mentoring support for enabling them to build new routines to enable their success at university and beyond. This will be more fully examined in Theme 5.

D Disclosure and Attitudes

Similar to other studies in this field (Anderson, et al., 2018; Nuske et al., 2018; Van Hees et al., 2015), students reported concerns about disclosing their autism diagnosis to peers, university staff and employers.

When I started university I had only recently been diagnosed and wasn't comfortable talking about my autism at all. If I were to go back and start again, I'd seek support to talk to academic staff about my needs and difficulties from the outset, rather than avoid talking about it. (Phase 1 – autistic student)

Often non-disclosure was related to anxiety about how this information might be received, as one participant put it,

When people don't understand... when people hear autism what do they think? If they haven't heard of this thing what are they thinking? [Expression of horror] So that's it, it depends on their feelings about someone with special needs. (Phase 1 – autistic student)

It's down to the individual employer and about their knowledge, their understanding, their level of training and awareness (Phase 3 – focus group)

As these data suggest, a lack of knowledge and understanding appears to be a consistent concern, particularly among faculty and staff, as well as peers (Glennon, 2016). Interestingly even where university students demonstrate relatively strong knowledge of autism, White et al., (2016a) report negative peer attitudes toward participating in university and classroom-based activities with autistic students. Gurbuz et al's (2019) study found that 46% of autistic students stated that this was a societal issue and that fuller understanding, without stigmatisation of autism, would be beneficial. Such views resonate with this participant's suggestion,

I think that traditionally autism is viewed from a deficit model and that is a real barrier... getting over that deficit approach and selling the positive aspects of autism, I think it's got to be there the way to move forward [Phase 3 – focus group]

Most importantly, however, is that evidence suggests that disabled students who access additional support are more likely to stay at university and achieve higher grades than those who do not access this. Autistic students' lack of confidence in disclosure limits their capacity to benefit from this support, thus, increasing their chances of leaving education early or graduating with grades unreflective of their academic ability.

E Support and Provision

Participants reported the importance of formal institutional support for navigating their university experience, particularly where they experienced times of psychological strain and loneliness.

The mentoring service that I received helped me incredibly in coping with my first year at university...I was able to discuss anything with my mentor that was causing me difficulty. (Phase 1 – autistic student)

This transitional time is a 'peak period of onset of major psychiatric illnesses' in typically developing individuals (Pinder-Amaker, 2014:126) but is also strongly associated with increases in stress and anxiety for autistic students (VanBergeijk et al., 2008). Various studies have identified the need for and benefits of additional support for mitigating for these emotional pressures (Van Hees et al., 2015; Hillier et al., 2018). As the participant above suggests, mentoring was valuable but institutions also offer other provisions including orientation programmes, support groups, academic supports, specialist tutoring, and counselling (Barnhill, 2016). Like Cai and Richdale's (2016) findings, the participants in this study recognised social groups as being particularly important.

The university has made great strides in this area thanks to its part in setting up a group...where people with Autism/Asperger's can meet with like-minded (and similarly 'socially challenged') people in a quiet room or place on an evening, away from the bustle of university and city life. It is certainly a group that I have enjoyed attending and that I believe has helped to solidify my comfort with myself and the fact that I have Asperger's (Phase 1 – autistic student)

As this participant suggests, the group was useful on a social level, in terms of meeting others, but also for developing and validating his autistic identity. Social groups and other provision play an important role in developing a sense of belonging for autistic students and may thus limit the risk of leaving early, although as Cox et al. (2017) suggest, there is still a gap in robust evidence in this area.

Alongside formal university support, participants related the importance of informal support, typically derived from their families and parents in particular. This was often required for practical and organisational issues related to making transitions, financial support, independent living, and exploring job options on completion.

my mum and dad were accustomed to helping me with upcoming changes, they planned in advance and helped me ... just sort of organising things so that it was less of a hassle and I didn't get stressed about it. (Phase 2 – autistic student)

My mum is very good at going 'have you done this? Have you done that?' sort of thing... so the things that I wouldn't even have thought about, she will or go 'you need to look at this'. (Phase 2 – autistic student)

Other research also verifies the significant role that family members play in facilitating the pursuit of higher education and enabling success whilst there (Cai & Richdale, 2016; Hatfield et al., 2017; Vincent et al., 2017; Zeedyk et al., 2016). As the data above suggests, parents take on "coaching" and "encouraging" roles (Peña & Kocur, 2013).

Findings from this study suggest, however, that at times there is a lack of formalised support which can limit the chances of success in higher education and increase poorer employment outcomes thereafter. Participants reported gaps in specialist careers guidance and advice for autistic students.

I found the Careers service themselves weren't really that helpful because they were like 'well you've got good grades, you've got work experience so

you're employable' which I thought 'yes I'm employable but I don't know how to get a job'. (Phase 2 – autistic student)

the way I see it the minute you leave, the minute an Aspie or someone on the spectrum at least leaves University, that's it you're on your own; no support, no disabled students allowances, no special helpers to write notes for you, no teaching assistants, it's just you and a harsh world that doesn't go easy on you just because your brain is different... I just don't know how Aspie adults get help because it's not there. (Phase 2 – autistic student)

What comes through from these extracts is the disconnect between the participants' academic abilities and their capacity to find graduate-level work. They both suggest that university personnel and those in the community assume that if an autistic student is capable of graduating with a degree (or even higher qualification) that they do not require any additional support when it comes to employment, intimating the 'hidden' nature of autism (Glennon, 2001). However, the wider data (Allen and Coney, 2018) has shown that this is consistently not the case and this group is still at the highest risk of any disabled student group of being unemployed after university.

VI CONCLUSION

This study has potential implications for the Ministry of Education and Employment in Malta. Currently, there is little peer-reviewed evidence regarding the experiences and outcomes of autistic young people seeking to embark on higher education and so there is a gap in knowledge about which autistic individuals are leaving education prematurely, what their reasons are for this and what could be done to prevent it happening. Moreover, there is limited data regarding the employment outcomes of autistic young people in Malta who do graduate with university qualifications and thus, with increased understanding there is the possibility of increasing their chances of success in the workplace and across the life course. These data might offer some insight into the kinds of barriers experienced by autistic young people, including high social and sensory demands, challenges with organisation and disclosure as well as the importance of support and provision for improved outcomes.

Alongside knowledge, however, is the need for increased understanding (Vincent and Ralston, 2019) in order to create support and provision that meets the specific needs of autistic students across their university careers. Given that autism is a 'hidden' condition, this can create the perception that they do not 'look' like they need support (Glennon, 2001), which puts them at particular risk here. There is a particular gap in employment and postgraduate transition provision recognised by participants in this study and more widely in the literature (Vincent, 2019; Zeedyk et al. 2016). The University of Malta has already demonstrated, through its Connect and Include initiative, the need to include autistic students in the life of the University but with greater understanding, particularly derived from autistic individuals themselves, this enterprise will be greatly enhanced.

Finally, there is a need to build on the progress that has been made so far in Malta in terms of developing the pathways for academically

able autistic young people to progress to university and beyond. The National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 and the 2016 Persons within the Autism Spectrum (Empowerment) Act are both hugely positive pieces of policy in this regard, specifically in terms of promoting lifelong learning and access to appropriate support services and equal opportunities for autistic people in Malta. As this study shows, where this support is well-resourced, introduced early and considers the whole of the student's higher education journey this can maximise the chances of success for autistic young people.

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Early School Leaving In A Changing World

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It is the remit of the Early School Leaving Unit (ESLU) within the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability (DRLE) to create and maintain a national discourse about early school leaving in Malta. Regardless of numbers (without diminishing the importance of lowering the statistical percentage of ESL), the discourse about early school leaving should never cease to remain essentially about social justice. The ESLU, therefore, has primarily a political role; politics in this context being understood as the role of pushing towards legislative, administrative and systemic change to ensure a just, fair and empowering climate towards personal achievement. To achieve this, the effort needs to be national. Reducing ESL is not just a matter of education. It is a matter that concerns the Health Authorities, Social Security, the Police and Justice – a whole array of institutions that need to work together towards the same objective. It is the role of the ESLU to raise awareness, and maintain the discourse, that ESL is a national matter, that it must be a national effort, that so many parties have to come together and own up to the cause.

The papers presented during the conference in November 2019 and published here give a very thorough overview of the ESL phenomenon mostly from an educational perspective, whether it's from the angle of pedagogical practice, sociological analysis or psychological observations. That said, the debate needs to be ongoing, particularly in the light of the social and economic changes in this country. There are challenges that need to be addressed: how can we better cater for immigrant children and adolescents to give them relevant education and support? What are the challenges posed by the digital revolution of our times? What further support is necessary for students whose families break up – how efficient is our intervention to ease their anxieties, provide them with stability and care, at a time of their life when insecurity becomes their daily reality? Are we doing enough

to tackle stress amongst our student cohorts? Are we paying enough attention to the mental wellbeing of young people in a society in which the rate of mental illness is on the rise?

So many challenges, so much to do. It is for this reason that the necessity of improving data gathering from schools becomes even more urgent and important. If we do not gather the data (and gather it well, with well-developed and refined tools) we will not have a clear and full picture of the reality in schools. A lot of the issues raised above might easily go on unnoticed until it is already late, not least because of the social taboo still tied to many of them. It is, therefore, crucial that we start gathering this information at an early stage and that the data gathering be uniform and widespread. It is only with such information that educational services can then be improved to reach those who need them.

It is also necessary for the school to go into people's homes. A number of services are already being provided at school, for the students and their parents. However, some parents will not come to school, they will not participate in adult learning programmes designed for their aid. There are multiple reasons for this. It is an urgent necessity, therefore, to develop and implement a programme where specialised educators will be willing to extend to the student's home that care given in the school to potential ESLs. It is not an easy task. The first difficulty might be to get the parents to open the door of their homes to these educators. That is why, in our opinion, for such a programme to work, this should be a programme owned by the community, with these educators ideally being trustworthy individuals well-known within that community.

In fact, community can be the keyword to tackle ESL: in practice, speaking of communities means speaking about multiple discourses

and further inclusion. We should perhaps look towards more autonomous schools, better adapted to the needs and demands of the communities they serve. The Learning Outcomes Framework (LOFs) should make this even more of a possibility. What this means in practice is that schools be more entrenched in the mentalities, cultures and habits of the communities they operate within. It is a question of relevance and discourse. In the end, what keeps many people outside of education is not the lack of interest in knowledge and learning but a discourse of learning and knowledge that is exclusive and elusive.

As a Directorate, our commitment is to keep pressing the issue and keep ESL on the radar of all relevant institutions. Our hope and ambition are to see less and fewer students feeling left behind and excluded. We will keep discussing ideas and promote good practices to drive the changes that are needed. It would be our greatest satisfaction and achievement if during the next conference we could present lower percentage rates of ESL, knowing that it is not just a correction of numbers but an accomplishment in social justice.

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