

Studies in Education: Perspectives from Malta



Edited by



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with Peter Clough and Cathy Nutbrown

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Foreword

In 2009, by invitation of *St Catherine's High School Higher Education Tuition Centre* the *School of Education* at *The University of Sheffield* launched an MA in Early Childhood Education. The first eBook *Researching Early Childhood Education: Voices from Malta* was published in 2012 and featured essays by the first 14 graduates of our programme. Since that time, the programme has expanded to include opportunities to study aspects of Languages in Education and Educational Studies. This eBook *Studies in Education: Perspectives from Malta* features the work of MA graduates who have focused on a range of educational topics with a particular interest policy and practice in Malta.

The Sheffield Academic team has been delighted to teach and support over 100 students to successful completion of the MA programme, and the work featured represents just some examples of what they have achieved. Their approach to study and their commitment to making a positive difference to education in Malta, has made it a privilege to teach each one of them. This book will be an important resource for those involved in education across disciplines and age phases in Malta, as well as for our current students.

On behalf of the *School of Education*, and the academic team involved in the Malta programme I want to thank Sue Midolo of the *St Catherine's High School Higher Education Tuition Centre*, for hosting our Post Graduate Programme in Malta. Particular thanks go to the authors who share their work in these pages.



Professor Cathy Nutbrown
Director Malta Post Graduate Programme

April 2017

Special Educational Needs and Inclusive Education in Early Years: Teachers' Views on Practices for Effective Inclusion

Pauline Mallia-Milanes

Introduction

This research briefly outlines the picture of my study, where I probed the issue of inclusive practices in the field of Early Years (EY) education with the research question being 'Do teachers in Early Years mainstream classes implement learning practices to enhance effective inclusion?'.

The terms inclusive education and Special Educational Needs (SEN) have been holistically defined by Warnock (1979) within the field of special needs:

Wherever there is a special need, there should be special educational provisions, and the difference between ordinary and special education is not where it takes place, but what is provided. (p.667)

Arguably, such term is the foundation and the way forward to inclusive education and as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2009) commends, 'the barriers to inclusion can be reduced through active collaboration between policy-makers, education personnel and other stakeholders' (p.1). Policies in these fields have changed considerably from the 1600s to date, and teachers in the EY sector are constantly adapting to work with these policies. However, there is still room for further development, because according to Clough (1998), very often children with SEN are placed 'in a vacuum' (p.7) thus inhibiting them from developing their skills (Rogoff, 2003).

These issues encouraged me to pursue the study of special needs and inclusive education in more depth, with this research study being the result. Moreover, my decision to investigate the issues influenced the reflection upon and the development of my professional practice. Working as a learning support assistant (LSA) in the EY sector for these last twelve years gave me the opportunity to work with a wide spectrum of children having different learning needs. I recognise and believe that children, irrespective of their learning abilities, must be given equal opportunities to achieve their potential learning outcomes. Diversity reveals the child's identity and it is the educators' responsibility to cater and provide the child with the appropriate teaching strategies. Upon reflection, I embarked on this study aiming to explore teachers' views on practices for effective inclusion, teachers' beliefs about inclusive practices and the challenges teachers face, in order to implement inclusive practices.

Literature Review

Since the 1600s, Jan Amos Komensky (known as Comenius) focused on the importance of EY education, proposing that every child should have the opportunity to learn (Nutbrown *et al.*, 2008). Since then, developments in the field of SEN and inclusive education were always an ongoing progress.

Inclusion in Malta

The idea of shifting slowly from the medical model of disability towards the social model was a key issue in the area of inclusion. Ever since 1946, when compulsory education was introduced, education in Malta shifted its role and worked towards promoting rights for children with SEN, thus giving equal opportunity to all. The Inclusive Education Policy issued by The Ministerial Committee on Inclusive Education (2000) was significant for further developments within inclusive education. A holistic methodology in the field of special education redefined more child-centred approach learning.

Ongoing development in policies was evident with the Inclusive and Special Education Review Working Group (2005) report. Recommendations to adaptations of the education curriculum, more resources for effective learning, a more collaborative teamwork approach and early intervention programmes were made. The latest policy development, namely A National Curriculum Framework for All, by the Ministry of Education and Employment (2012) provides lifelong education learning, thus giving everyone the opportunity to develop their learning skills in order to achieve a more active role in society.

Teachers' Views on Practices for Effective Inclusion

Various researchers are still debating what really works within the inclusive education sector. Research by Horne and Timmons (2009) pointed out that the mainstream class is the best learning environment for every child.

The EY education is moulded to enhance the link towards learning and the development of the child. During these years, it is important that teachers expose children to different learning environments, thus providing different learning experiences. A stimulating environment, appealing to the child, will facilitate learning and development. Moreover, according to Howard *et al.* (2012), when structured learning is implemented, 'children often associate play with particular times of the day, particular locations or particular social context' (p.187). Furthermore, the United Nations (2007) Convention on the Rights of the Child document recognises play as a child's right, not just an activity but also the path to educational learning. Learning through play is quite a new concept, and one which is often interrogated.

An adult complements curriculum delivery, especially when implementing innovative practices. Bruner's theory of development is based on the importance of the adult role in supporting children's learning, a role described as 'scaffolding' (Meggitt, 2006, p.159). A study undertaken by Walsh *et al.* (2010) in Northern Ireland primary schools concluded that the adult role during play is vital in promoting effective learning. Moreover, the implementation of a child-centred curriculum is the key to providing all students, including those with SEN, with different learning opportunities. When the student's needs are identified and learning strategies are implemented inclusively, the student achieves a meaningful learning outcome and progress results (Koegel *et al.*, 2012). Research by Barron *et al.* (2006) has indicated that 'multimedia applications provide students with a multimodal approach to learning, allowing them to develop and enhance specific intelligences' (p.8). The best form of implementing multimodality is by using technology in EY settings. The again, some researchers challenge the use of technology within the EY classroom setting. For instance, even though Rudolph

Steiner was a pioneer of education, the Steiner Waldorf kindergarten philosophy of learning believes that the use of a computer inhibits children's imagination (Nicol, 2010).

Collaboration is another effective practice to integrate students with SEN in the mainstream classes. When a more collaborative approach is implemented in the classroom (Naraian, 2010), all students will benefit from individualised learning. Scruggs *et al.* (2007) outlined 'the most common co-teaching variations' (p.393), namely 'one teaches, one assists; station teaching; parallel teaching; alternative teaching; and team teaching' (p.2). This co-teaching approach is a new concept in the Maltese education system and requires preparation. When the traditional teaching method is implemented in the classroom, it is noted that the LSA is more akin to a caregiver, supporting only the child/children under her attention. However, despite policy changes, the co-teaching model still needs to be evaluated because bridging the gap from policy to practice is a rather complex one (Zollers *et al.*, 1999).

Teachers' Beliefs About Inclusive Practices

Jordan *et al.* (2010) identified two different approaches in teachers' beliefs about inclusion, namely:

The pathognomonic (Path) beliefs, that disability is an internal, fixed and pathological condition of the individual that is not amenable to instruction [...] and the interventionist (Int) beliefs [which] view disability as created in part by society. (p.262)

Interventionists believe that it is their responsibility to create an inductive learning environment for all spectrums of learning abilities. Even though such epistemological approaches seem to be linked together, these may influence the teachers' views about inclusive educational practices. Observations should be conducted in order to primarily identify the needs of children (Path belief), and through the implementation of inclusive practices mentioned beforehand (Int belief); the student will enhance his or her academic skills.

Supplementing different ways of learning (as outlined by Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory), peer intervention is another strategy which teachers believe in. Through peer intervention, children learn to observe and to take turns, imitate developed peers, enhance children's self-esteem and learn how to share (Gyanani and Pahuja, 1995). Conversely, studies by Harper and McCluskey (2003) showed that in a structured teaching environment the likelihoods of peer interaction were inhibited. Likewise, Duran and Monereo (2005) have factually observed that 'traditional schools [have] attempted to minimize, if not eliminate, peer interactions considering that they disturbed learning' (p.180).

Teachers' Facing Everyday Challenges

Even though Malta's route to inclusion goes back to 1946 with the introduction of compulsory education and with recently developing policies, the issue of inclusive education remains an ongoing debate. Despite policies and the implementation of new practices, teachers' views of inclusion within the educational discourse, is still identified by some as an obstacle. On the other hand, teachers also complained about curriculum demands and frequently mentioned that it is difficult to blend inclusive learning practices together with the class curriculum. Research shows that facing such reality is inhibiting teachers from implementing inclusive practices (Hove, 2014). This is of concern, since teachers are key instruments for providing

support and promoting effective learning. Besides, a study report by Macartney and Norton (2013) indicates that an effective teacher cultivates a class learning community where everyone is included.

Another issue pointed out by researchers is the limitation of time to implement effective pedagogy using technology (Morgan and Kennewell, 2006). Very often teachers complain that curriculum demands are inhibiting them from using technologies effectively. Other educators, bound to their traditional teaching methods, resist using these technologies due to lack of confidence. Lynch and Redpath (2012) comment that:

It is potentially at odds with teacher held intentions to transform learning through technology use, particularly with respect to tensions between print based traditions and new digital literature and those between standard classroom curricula and more emancipatory agendas. (p.149)

Another issue raised has been the need of more professional training in the implementation of inclusive practices (Chen and Cheng, 2011). Avramidis *et al.* (1999) pointed out that it is the school's responsibility to organise such training in order to improve the school's approach and efficacy towards inclusion, which efficacy 'meet the needs of a diverse school population' (p.155). It was also mentioned that professional training help teachers overcome 'negative attitudes' (p.291).

Bridging the gap from policy to practice is always presented as a challenging issue in the field of special education. The teacher's effort and adopting the right attitude is needed to promote inclusion and to favour their participation in implementing effective practices. The final discussion is that even though teachers are the main players in implementing inclusive practices; their beliefs are undermined by challenging issues encountered in the education system. Congruently, as stated by Dyson (1990), 'the concept of change is by no means a new one in education' (p.57).

Methodology

In carrying out this study, teachers' views were explored through a qualitative approach to data gathering. Qualitative approaches 'are more concerned [with] understand[ing] individuals' perceptions of the world' (Bell, 2010, p.5), and in this respect, structured interviews and semi-structured observations were utilised.

The Research Question and The Use of Multi-Methods

This study examined three teachers' views on practices for effective inclusion in mainstream EY classes. This issue is very challenging within the Maltese education context, however, schools are promoting education for all by developing inclusive policies in order to meet individual learning needs.

I therefore concentrated on exploring the views and practices of a small number of participants aiming at an element of depth and specification (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007), with the focus being on:

- Finding out about the practices teachers are implementing to enhance inclusion for children with SEN;

- The teachers' beliefs about inclusive practices; and
- The challenges the teachers face when implementing such practices.

Opting to work on focused interviews and semi-structured observations helped me to explore specifically and in depth the nature of this study. Backing up my studies with personal experience and practice in the field of inclusion helped me to identify and to clarify my perceptions, also to sustain reasons for further research and indicate the way forward. Underpinning this research were also my values and beliefs about inclusion and the children's right to education. The challenges the teachers face in implementing policy also contributed to this study and in finally positing the research question.

The path to formulating the research question was based on Clough and Nutbrown's (2007) 'Russian doll principle' and 'Goldilocks test' (p.37) and after various attempts, I identified two research questions, which eventually, upon professional advice I was geared and chose to work upon:

- Do teachers in Early Years mainstream classes implement learning practices to enhance effective inclusion?

which in itself incorporates an investigation of learning practices, what these consist of and, more crucially, whether they are being used (and to what effect).

The Chosen Participants

Due to the sensitivity of the chosen topic, children were not participants in the study. The chosen participants were teachers working in EY mainstream classes as defined in Figure 1, having mixed ability students with a spectrum wavering from learning difficulties, autism spectrum disorder and behavioural difficulties. The number of students in each class varied from 18–23 pupils. The Kindergarten 2nd year and the Grade 1 teachers are employed as regular teachers within the Maltese Education Sector, while the student teacher was finalising her final year of teaching studies in Early Years Children's Play Learning and Development and was undergoing her last practice placement in a Grade 1 class.

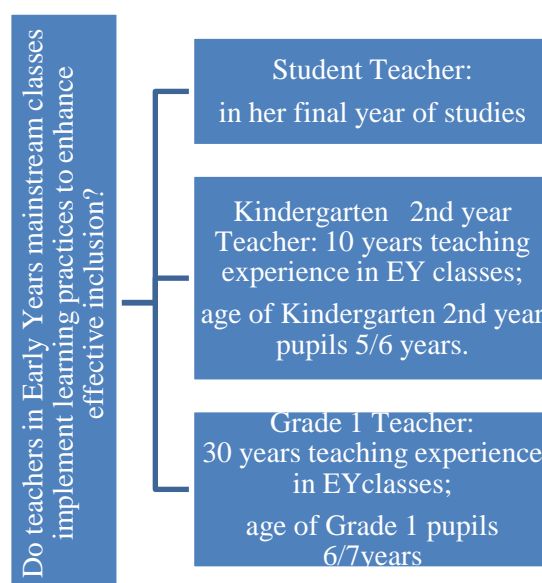


Figure 1: The Chosen Participants

For confidentiality purposes, no participants' names are mentioned in this research project but the participants will be referred to as the student teacher, the Kindergarten 2nd year teacher and the Grade 1 teacher. Also, no school names are divulged in order to retain confidentiality (Cohen *et al.*, 2011).

Ethical Considerations

The British Educational Research Association (2011) mandates that 'educational researchers should operate within an ethic of respect for any persons involved in the research they are undertaking' (p.3). Particular consideration was given to ethical considerations when conducting this study, and so I had to be aware of such issues, namely the nature and sensitivity of the study, the participants' opinions and the data collection process (Oliver, 2003).

Prior to carrying out this study, the required ethical approvals were obtained. The participants were then presented with the Participants Information Sheet and their Consent Form. Their participation was voluntary and they could have opted to withdraw from the research at any point in time. Moreover, I placed particular attention on the schools where this study was conducted, given that Malta is a relatively small country. Abiding with the guidelines listed by Cohen *et al.* (2011), privacy was respected with regard to 'the sensitivity of the information being given, the setting being observed and dissemination of information' (p.63).

Data Analysis

Although this qualitative study focused on just three participants, I believe the data gathered was valuable and ensured high quality information. According to Cohen *et al.* (2011), 'qualitative data often focus [es] on smaller numbers of people than quantitative data, yet the data tends to be detailed and rich' (p.539).

Interviews

Using an interview schedule helped me to code the data more easily. The circled and ticked questions were summarised and coded to provide uniformity measurement (Cohen *et al.*, 2011; Kerlinger, 1970) of the nature of the data collected (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, the open-ended questions helped in giving a better understanding of the nature of my research question. The participants were provided with these questions in order to view their beliefs about the implementation of learning practices. On the other hand, presenting the participants with a rating scale question was useful in order to view participants' perceptions (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). This rating scale question was useful because it helped me check over 'against data elicited by the open-ended questions' (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p.416).

Transcribing the interviews was critical and time consuming. Interviews were not transcribed verbatim, in consideration of this, I annotated the transcripts. The audio recordings were vital because they bridged the gap and gained lost written comments (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007). After data collection, I presented said data analysis to each participant for validation. After this consolidation course, the process of coding followed. I opted to personally carry out data coding instead of using computer software packages.

Observations

The observation schedule steered the track for data collection and 'fitness for purpose' (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p.469). It served as a link for writing out notes and key words which were later logged in the reflective journal. Together with the observation schedule, the reflective journal bridged the way to data filtering (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007). Furthermore, the reflective journal was instrumental for the data collection. Data was analysed in the same way as the interviews, that is, data analysis was personally carried out without the use of any computer software.

Data Findings

Looking at the data collected, I coded the different topics which were later on categorised under three different themes. These themes were derived after the coding of different topics:

- Theme 1: Teachers' practices for effective inclusion
- Theme 2: Teachers' beliefs about inclusive practices
- Theme 3: Teachers' challenges faced with implementing effective practices

Further analyses were also derived from the interview where the participants were asked to voice their opinions by means of the following open-ended question: "How do you feel about inclusive EY mainstream classes?" Following said question, they were asked to rate their opinion which is then discussed under the heading 'Overall view about inclusive EY mainstream classes'.

The data collected was directed at generating a hypothesis and thus giving an overall picture of the implementation of learning practices for effective inclusion. My findings are only partial because there is still room for further research and improvement in the field of SEN and inclusion

Underpinning this research were my professional concerns about inclusion and inclusive practices. Upon reflection, the chosen methods were significant as they made my research study relevant. The observations and the interviews were, as stated by Cohen *et al.* (2011), 'powerful tools for gaining insight into situations' (p.474) thus giving a deeper understanding of the study.

Findings and Discussion

The findings derived from the data findings and the literature review discussed paved the way for discussion and conclusion of the findings.

Teachers' Practices and Beliefs

The Student Teacher and the Kindergarten 2nd Year Teacher

Both the student teacher and the Kindergarten 2nd year teacher implement learning practices to enhance effective inclusion in their everyday teaching settings namely:

- A child-centred approach learning
- Differentiation in the class curriculum

- Implementation of technology and play-based pedagogy
- Collaboration
- Scaffolded learning
- Formative assessments

Moreover, these findings indicate that when such learning practices were implemented, learning occurs (Naraian, 2010; United Nations, 2007). Implementing these learning practices embraced diversity thus reaching the children's different developmental levels. This issue also presented a positive outcome in helping to improve the children's self-esteem. Such outcomes from the study also show that both teachers are abiding with new policies, as indicated in the Ministry of Education and Employment's (2012) report. Their professional attitudes facilitated the implementation of new policies (Avramidis *et al.*, 1999) thus their influences resulted in the positive implementation of inclusive practices.

Collaboration was also mentioned by both participants and it can be concluded that positive perceptions towards implementing a teamwork approach enhances the smooth running of the classroom. Moreover, it can be concluded that when an effective teamwork approach is implemented, both the teacher and the LSA work towards a common inclusive approach (Naraian, 2010).

There is a clear indication that both participants believed that peer tutoring also contributed to active learning (Gyanani and Pahuja, 1995), corroborating evidence that mixed ability classes help to facilitate inclusion. The participants' shared beliefs enhanced the importance of implementing such learning practices, as present in literature review together with policy developments which both participants were abiding with.

The Grade 1 Teacher

An outcome that was clearly derived from the study was the different views and beliefs that the Grade 1 teacher expressed and perceived from the other participants. It can be concluded that her structured type of learning was inhibiting her from implementing inclusive practices which were also hindering her from following new policies (Croll *et al.*, 1994). She was more bound to her traditional teaching method, which method was inhibiting the child's learning and development. Moreover, this teacher's perception towards inclusive education is considered more in line with 1950s and 1960s views about the medical and social model of disability (Clough and Corbett, 2012). Congruently, viewing disability as a 'pathological condition of the individual' (Jordan *et al.*, 2010, p.262)

Common Challenges

All participants showed concern about the need:

- for further professional development in the field of inclusive education;
- that inclusive education be outlined as a school policy.

In terms of common challenges, participants were faced with the issue of curriculum demands. Viewing the participants' different point of views about said issue, conclusions are drawn hereunder:

- Both the student teacher and the Kindergarten 2nd year teacher believe in active teaching (Macartney and Norton, 2013). The teacher's role is vital to create and provide activities which are attractive to children. The curriculum was presenting great challenges but both participants were to ensure they abide with said policy so that the individual needs of the child are met (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012).
- On the other hand, for the Grade 1 teacher, the curriculum was presenting demands which, due to her traditional style of teaching, were not being met (Lynch and Redpath, 2012).

Overall View About Inclusive Early Years Mainstream Classes

This outcome encompasses my study objectives and we can conclude that:

- A clear identification of the terminology inclusive education is required.
- There is still room for further developments in order to ensure that learning practices are being implemented especially in the area of emergent literacy.
- Provision in order to engage all students in the learning process are required and a more 'interventionist' (Jordan *et al.*, 2010, p.262) approach needs to be implemented.

Conclusion

Even though this is considered a relatively small research study, the outcome of this study gave insight into how inclusive education is viewed in the Maltese educational context. The following recommendations are drawn in order to enhance further the implementation of learning practices and with these, effective inclusion:

- Create a clear concept of the term inclusive education – this will ensure a more effective inclusive approach for all students irrespective of their learning needs and abilities.
- Ensure that schools develop an inclusive policy – this will counterpart the Ministry of Education and Employment's (2012) policy, thus ensuring the effectiveness of inclusive education in schools. This will help to enhance the implementation of learning practices and thus lessen barriers to learning.
- Provide further professional development – this will ensure that the learners' needs are being met.
- Create a more collaborative approach – a co-teaching approach caters for the diverse learners in the classroom. Moreover, the role of the LSAs needs further clarification as many a time the LSAs' role lies within supporting the statemented learners assigned to them.

This chapter concludes by referring to Clough's (1998) assertion that inclusive education is simultaneously an issue of inclusion and exclusion. Unfortunately, this issue is still visible in the Maltese educational system. Embedding and implementing inclusive practices in the EY classrooms is seen as a much more manageable issue rather than the junior years. This is because educators in the junior years are facing challenging issues with the current educational system where by the end of the junior years, students are presented with benchmark testing. Even though this testing is an indicator of the child's progress, it presents demands on the curriculum taught in the classrooms. This issue was argued in the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2014) external report, which states that

'the high stakes testing associated with benchmark tests and final examinations is not an appropriate indicator for all learners' (p.76). Such statement shows the current reality in schools.

The accomplishment of this study shows that teachers in EY mainstream classes are committed to building inclusive classrooms, which commitment is overriding the traditional teaching method. Teachers are engaged in providing a holistic approach to learning and development for every child under their care. On the other hand, as stated by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2014) 'inclusive classroom practices cannot be developed in isolation' (p.92). It requires assurance from all participants to adopt inclusive values and positive approaches for such fruitful change (Zollers *et al.*, 1999).

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How do Maltese Mothers of Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder Perceive Music as an Educational Intervention in Early Childhood?

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Introduction

Increased attention has been paid to early identification and early interventions for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) as they increase the likelihood of improved long-term outcomes (Koegel et al., 2014). Although many educational approaches to teach students with ASD are being used in the classroom setting, searching out suitable interventions options can become a never-ending struggle for parents and educators (Kasari, 2002). Therefore, it is particularly important to realise that an intervention which works well with one child may not be appropriate or effective with another. Trevarthen's (1999) theory is that 'musicality is a part of the natural drive in human socio-cultural learning, which begins in infancy.' (p.194) The unique contributions of music experience can be integrated into various aspects of early education with children with ASD and augment other supportive services in both special education and mainstream classrooms when included in the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) (Pellitteri, 2000). Children with ASD have a special receptiveness to music (Thaut, 1988), and this can be the key to improving the quality of life for them and their families at home and in educational settings.

The aim of the research was to reveal music implications for learning, and for the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream early childhood school settings, therefore takes an educational standpoint. The principle motivator was my inquisitiveness into how humans form and maintain relationships.

Listening to the voices of mothers with children with ASD and gaining a better understanding on how these children relate to music, will stand educators in good stead in teaching and planning early educational interventions in the classroom (Thompson, 2012). Cuckle and Bamford (2000) assert that all parents need reassurance that their opinions and experiences are valued by education professionals, and therefore it is important that such professionals listen to this group of mothers.

Studying the effects of music as an early educational intervention with children with ASD from the maternal perspective is a logical beginning, as mothers traditionally have served as the primary caregivers for children (Lutz et al., 2012). The prevalence of ASD is increasing worldwide, the mother's role has transformed to become 'co-therapist' (Matson and Konst, 2014) as they can be trained to assist their children during interventions.

The reason to elicit the mothers' perspectives as opposed to the fathers, educators or other professionals supporting children with ASD is reinforced by studies that show that the mothers are the persons mostly impacted and stigmatized with their child's condition, and parenting burden falls more heavily on mothers than on fathers (Moes et al., 1992). Mothers are believed to be instrumental for early diagnosis of ASD in their children as they are first

people who notice atypical childhood development (Russell and Norwich, 2012). The mother's psychological and physical health is affected as a result of the stressful life-long challenges associated with parenting and raising a child with ASD (Myers et al., 2009), and consequently may interfere with the mother's ability to engage in interventions with her child (Meirsschaut et al., 2010).

Although the cause of ASD has been shifted from the 1950s unproven concept of 'refrigerator mother' there still exist a climate of suspicion and distrust directed to the mother of children with ASD (Pisula, 2011, p.92). Lay perceptions that ASD 'violated societal norms' (Huws and Jones, 2010, p.336) and hostile social disapproval often translates the child's behaviour into a symptom of poor upbringing, subsequently stigmatizing the mother as 'a bad mother' (Farrugia, 2009, p.1018).

Literature Review

Huws and Jones (2010) illuminate lay conceptualisations and discourse on ASD, and found them to be misinformed and contradictory, indicating a need for better means of informing the public on this condition. Most concerning is that only one aspect of the condition; the socially 'inappropriate behaviour', is viewed by lay people as the indicator of ASD (Huws and Jones, 2010, p.342).

ASD was originally defined by Kanner in 1943 as a clinical disorder of 'a biological disturbance of affective contact' with the child's inability to establish social relatedness or 'aloneness' and a failure to use language for the purpose of communication, an obsessive desire for the maintenance of sameness, and a fascination for certain kinds of stimulating objects (Kanner, 1943 p.245). The abnormalities in the anatomy and functions of the brain, outlined by Trevarthen (2000) places ASD within, what Russell and Norwich (2012), call 'biomedical model' that views this condition as 'a neurodevelopmental disorder with discoverable neurological and genetic origins' (p.230). This line of argument is relevant to my study, since different theories and arguments surround the nature of ASD, influenced by various professional perspectives, namely sociology, psychology, psychiatry and medicine, which have implications on the choice of 'effective treatment for ASD' (Trevarthen, 2000, p.41).

Every individual on the ASD spectrum will have difficulties to some degree in; social communication and interaction across multiple contexts, in relating to others and the world around them and in thinking and behaving flexibly (Trevarthen et al., 1998).

How society views people with disabilities and the language describing a disability have changed drastically over the years. I chose to put the person before the disability, and rather than referring to an *autistic child* I preferred to use the 'person-first' language, therefore *a child with ASD*.

Koegel et al. (2014) attest to the poor outcomes and the undesirable living conditions most children with ASD, 'as early as toddlerhood', endured behind the locked doors of mental institutions before the advent of numerous comprehensive interventions (p.51). Individuals with ASD were defined as mentally retarded with labels which carry a stigma, are demeaning, segregate our society and also indicate that individuals with ASD are incapable of developing their educational potential. Most notable discourse is influenced by the social model of

disability (Oliver, 1997), advocating that ASD is socially constructed and the disability is caused by attitudes and setups of society (Russell and Norwich, 2012).

It is the Maltese government's policy to include most of the children with ASD within the mainstream schools and given the services of a Learning Support Assistant in class (Inclusive and Special Education Report, 2005). However, Resource Centres previously known as segregated 'special schools', (Special Schools Reform, 2004) cater for primary school learners with Individual Educational Needs, among them children with ASD. These Centres house a multisensory room and an 'optimusic' room that offer a controlled environment where communication and social skills are targeted through vocalisation and turn taking with music and musical instruments. Music, as part of Creative Arts, forms part of the curriculum at the Resource Centres (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2015). Students have the opportunity to be part of a music making group and explore songs, chants, sounds and rhymes while they experience different types of music. The only fully qualified Music Therapist on the island revealed that music therapy is still in its infancy in Malta and recounted how she experiences the special ways in which music can transform people. Although culturally Maltese people engage with music and seek musical events and experiences, few people are aware of its therapeutic effect. Consequently, young people do not consider a career in music therapy, compounded by the fact that training needs to be carried out abroad.

Music is not just a passive, auditory stimulus but is an engaging, multisensory, social activity that appeals to humans across all ages and cultures, not limited to a particular educational, social, cultural, or even biological function (Overy and Molnar-Szakacs, 2009). Music can be a universal language that reaches people through rhythm, melody and structure.

Listening to music can help humans to relax, to think, to celebrate, and to grieve. A group of listeners can experience different emotions when exposed to the same music, meaning that a music experience can be a unique personal sensation which may not be experienced similarly by anyone else (Trevarthen, 1999)

Trevarthen and Malloch (2002, p.11) state that 'from the time of birth infants are able to engage musically with the caregiver'. There is a strong correspondence between early mother-infant interactions and future emotional and social relationships (Stern, 1985). Morely (2002) proposes that the 'high non-verbal emotive utterances involved in parent-infant vocal interactions, 'motherese' (p.212), are the earliest bases of language, since neuroscience revealed that musical vocalisation precedes speech and the ability to communicate meaningfully in human evolution and development. Stern (1985) refers to the emotionally regulated engagement between mother and child as 'affect attunement', while Trevarthen and Malloch (2002) believe that, 'an infant may learn language patterns by first recognising musical pattern in a parent's speech' (p.11), through the steady beats and rhythms that parents use to soothe their infants or rock them to sleep and the lullabies they sing to their children contain complex repeated patterns. Trevarthen (1999) proposes that babies are born with rhythmic recognition and are immediately ready to engage with adults, coining the term 'communicative musicality' (p.179).

Professionals, including educators and neuroscientists, are researching music's effects on the brain processes and learning, to enhance students' academic achievement in educational settings, and argue that music has the potential to impact current practice in education

positively by promoting development of innovative music-based teaching practices in the classroom (Bunt, 2003; Geist and Geist, 2012).

Trevarthen's (2011) study on communication with young children emphasises the need for early educational practice and provision to be directed to what has been learned on 'children's motives for sharing intentions, experiences and feelings,' 'in peer communities' (p.173). Infant musicality is an emotional companionship because music can modify the emotional state of mind more than spoken words. It signifies the need to focus on the infants and young children's intuitive motives to utilise musical activities to express themselves, communicate and also as a source of enjoyment, inspirational and emotional fulfilment. Foran (2009) argues that listening to music appears to help students reach parts of their brains that function poorly or not at all, identifying music and rhythm as tools for learning language and building memory.

Bunt (2003) claims that Trevarthen's notion of an 'intrinsic motive pulse' (1999, p.158) within the brain that enables early engagement with music to emerge, has been fundamental in researching connections between educational, social and psychological roots of early infant musicality and learning. By virtue of music's ability to communicate social and affective information, and to create the feeling of 'being together', Overy and Molnar-Szakacs (2009) claim that music has the 'powerful components for successful educational intervention' (p.499). Music possesses inherent mathematical principles such as spatial properties, sequencing, counting and patterning (Edelson and Johnson, 2004). The perception of the repetitive structure and organised patterns in music is a powerful key to the parallel concepts of emergent mathematics and literacy in very young children (Geist et al., 2002).

It has long been recognised that children with ASD have unusual sensitivity and attentiveness to music, enhanced music perception skills and frequently demonstrate a high level of musical ability (Nordoff and Robbins, 1977; Thaut, 1988; Trevarthen et al., 1998).

Stephenson (2006) cautions that music interventions need to be personalized to individual responses, as not all students are likely to respond in the same way. In America, music intervention is emerging as a related service offered by the multidisciplinary team in the mainstream school setting to children with ASD as it can prove effective in attaining IEP goals (Pellitteri, 2000). Accordino et al., (2007) state many parents report positive outcomes of music intervention with their children with ASD when it is included as part of the curriculum in Special schools.

Music has a long history of use as an intervention for children with ASD, particularly those with poor social engagement (Reschke-Hernandez, 2011). Developing sociability is challenging for a child with ASD as this absent ability is not easily trained or taught (Reschke-Hernandez, 2011). The elements of music make it difficult for children with ASD to be socially isolated (Darrow and Armstrong, 1999), by providing playful spaces to tune to other children through a musical dialogue (Wimpory and Nash, 1999). Interactive music making using instruments can provide a useful framework for learning and developing of social skills in children with ASD (Thaut, 1998).

Trevarthen et al. (1998) noted that listening to music can evoke a great intensity of emotions in children with ASD who typically have difficulty processing emotions, by inherently connecting to the surface and deep structures of the music. Active involvement in family-

centered music-making experiences potentially improves the quality of the parent–child relationship by providing unique opportunities for the skill development and improvement of social interaction such as: focusing and joint attention on the face of their parent; turn taking and responding as part of dyadic play (Thompson, 2012).

Improvisational music intervention targets deficits in communication and social responsiveness, because music provides an alternative framework that involves a complex range of expressive qualities, dynamic form and dialogue (Wigram and Gold, 2006).

Organised musical elements with the similarity and repetition of musical patterns enhances speech production and supports learning new vocabulary words (Lim 2010). Music is a unique, multimodal stimulus that involves the processing of simultaneous visual, auditory, somatosensory and has the potential to enhance social interaction, facilitate communication and expressive language in nonverbal children with ASD, through the ‘overlap between the language and music physiological functions within the brain’ (Wan et al., 2010, p164).

Learning to play a musical instrument fosters positive experiences that increase emotional well-being, self-confidence, social agency in children with ASD (Bakan et al., 2008). Playing a musical instrument can improve self-esteem, as the child is given a typical means for engaging in social interaction in school and in the community, centered on their strength (Shore, 2002). Trevarthen (2000) validates that music helps regulate behaviour, emotions and learning in children with ASD, through a facilitative, child-directed, and success-oriented approach that ‘meets the child where they are,’ by ‘picking up on his or her interests, abilities and sensitivities’ (p.42).

Methodology

My research is not about figures or statistics, and ‘contrary to the positivist traditions of quantitative methodologies,’ it radically values the individual as a ‘knowledge source’ (Cohen et al., 2010, p19). It was difficult to make absolute distinctions between different qualitative methods, but this led me to explore both traditional approaches defined as ‘biographical’ (Goodley, 1996, p.333) and ‘personal experience’ (Denzin, 1989, p.11) and the relatively new approach of IPA (Smith, 2004). Therefore, employing a qualitative methodology based on meaning making of experiences and perceptions through oral narratives would significantly add to the field of educational research by exposing in-depth, contextualized and experiential accounts of the phenomenon under investigation.

Cole and Knowles (2001) point out that, while it is important to delineate different qualitative research approaches, the researcher must not ‘be caught up in terminology... or pretend that the lines among the various approaches are clearly drawn’ (p.15). Given the implications of my research paradigm and research question, I had to find a personally meaningful and academically suitable method that satisfies my strong belief in the interconnectedness between people, the development of relationship, and the value of individual narratives.

IPA is interested in how lived experiences take on a particular significance for people, as it aims to capture and explore the meanings that participants give to their experiences (Smith et al., 2009), suitable where the topic under investigation is; ‘dynamic, contextual and subjective, relatively under- studied and where issues of sense-making are important’ (Smith, 2004, p.42).

Ultimately my final question needed to move me as the researcher 'towards discovering what is happening in a particular situation with a particular person or group' (Agee, 2009 p.434). Ethical approval from the University of Sheffield Ethical Review committee was sought and obtained prior to the start of the study. This qualitative study required what Clough and Nutbrown (2012), call 'radical listening', entailing me to make 'faithful' interpretation of the data collected and report with 'honesty and integrity'. Ethical Considerations were carefully attended to in issues of recruitment, written consent, confidentiality, anonymity, potential vulnerability, and sensitivity. It was my responsibility to conduct the interviews and collect data in morally acceptable ways. The participants were chosen through homogenous and purposive sampling that requires in-depth knowledge by virtue of their lived experiences. The volunteering mothers and their children with ASD who were nominated by the music therapist were given pseudonyms; Marija whose daughter was Lily, and Anni whose son was Tom

Data Analysis

The two interviews with the mothers were audio recorded in the participants' homes after the consent forms were signed. I adopting the position of an 'active listener' (Eatough and Smith, 2006, p.119) I allowed each interview to progress down the paths the mother opened up rather than those dictated by a rigid or constrictive interview schedule with preconceived and imposing 'themes and categories' (Snelgrove et al., 2013, p.124). Brief field notes summarising my personal feelings and ideas that emerged during the conversation were made after each interview. The audio recorded conversations were transcribed verbatim with names changed and identifiable information removed. The verbatim transcripts served as the raw data that was analysed manually for recurrent themes using IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

Larkin et al. 2006 emphasise that IPA is not 'simply descriptive', and the analytic process involves two parts. My 'insider's perspective' or 'phenomenological' stance required me 'to hear the participants' stories and prioritise their contextualised account' (Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez, 2011, p.22). I will attempt to make sense of the participants' experiences and concerns, and illuminate them in the form of an interpretative commentary, using verbatim extracts from the data for support as advised by Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011).

Biggerstaff and Thompson (2008) term the analytic engagement with the data in IPA as a 'cyclical process' because it involves the reading and returning to the text several times for the identification and grouping of themes. Further analysis called 'abstraction' required 'moving back and forth' (Eatough and Smith, 2006, p.120), by reviewing and coding different sections of the transcript, to established possible connections and links between the emerging preliminary themes, thereby reducing the data.

The coded preliminary themes or sub themes were structured appropriately into four 'clusters' representing a clear topic with a descriptive 'higher order theme title' (Eatough and Smith, 2006, p.120) Therefore the sub-themes; the mother's role of having a child with ASD; convincing the professionals; and addressing the child's needs were nested in the first cluster or superordinate theme; 'the journey so far'. The whole analytic process was repeated with the second interview, and four overarching themes that encapsulated the mothers' perspectives on the role of music in the lives of their child with ASD and on the music implications for learning were established.

Findings and Discussion

The mothers' journey so far has been long and demanding, and one must 'walk a mile in their shoes' (Gill and Liamputtong, 2011, p.41) to really comprehend what it is like being a mother to a child with ASD. The two journeys reveal significant adaptations which required resilience from the mothers to cope with challenges of their child's impairments (Bashir, et al., 2014). Concurring with Koegel et al.'s (2014) views, early detection and early interventions have positive outcomes and impact on the children and their families.

Noticing the first signs of atypical development in their children, and the experiences of convincing the professionals proved stressful for the mothers (Russell and Norwich, 2012). Their role in the diagnosis and sustaining the daily routines for a child with ASD positioned them as their child's advocate, educator and caregiver, as they took the major share of the care workload and demands associated with the uneven developmental progress of their child (McConnell et al., 2014), and became the experts along the journey (Woodgate et al., 2008). Similar to Meirsschaut et al. (2010)'s study, the participants' family life changed to the planned routine of their child with ASD, resulting in restrictive social activities.

The mothers relentlessly struggled with many doubts and questions on deciding which early interventions to choose for their child which left them feeling weary and disheartened (Hume, et al., 2005). They felt uncertain on the efficacy and impact of a variety of recommended services and practices on the child's progress, at times having to make uninformed decisions on discontinuing or changing interventions. The mothers call for better support in childrearing and developmental progress of individuals with such a pervasive and complex lifelong condition as ASD, as 'assessing the efficacy of any intervention can be a daunting task' (Kasari, 2002 p.448).

Both mothers were frustrated about the lack of services and access to music interventions for their child. Since the mothers perceived the impact of music intervention and its contribution to the child's development favourably, they strived to provide music interventions at school and home as they believed that these locations, as identified by Matson and Konst (2014) are 'natural environments' for learning.

The discovery of their child's musical potential and abilities confirmed by music professionals evoked positive emotions, such as pride and delight for the mothers. This unusual sensitivity and attraction to music agrees with the fact that according to Thaut (1988) some children with ASD demonstrate a high level of musical skills.

This study not only supports the literature that outlines the infants' musicality from birth and its role in early communication (Trevarthen and Malloch, 2002), but the unique contributions of music in the lives of children with ASD as perceived by the mothers. The children's challenges in social interaction, communication and emotional attunement were addressed by the music-making activities shared by mother and child, a notion depicted in Reschke-Hernandez (2011) and Wimpory et al. (1995). Music intervention attained improvement in relationships and emotional responsiveness in the family context, central in the study by Thompson (2012).

Both mothers referred to ASD as a separate 'world of their own' similarly labelled by Huws and Jones (2010), but differed when alluding to music's relevance to these 'worlds'. Whereas

music is a world in which Lily 'can be herself', and an emotional life companion, that fits to Trevarthen and Malloch's (2002) description, music is a bridge that connects Tom's world to the outside.

Ascertaining that music influences their children's holistic well-being, reinforced the mothers' determination to exploit the child's strengths and abilities in the crucial foundation years of early childhood, for developmental attainment in educational and functional life skills (Young, 2005). The mothers' perspectives showed how music became a means of social interaction, emotional expression, reward and motivational tool. Music became a language to communicate with in the absence of words and speech relating Trevarthen and Malloch's (2002) theory of 'communicative musicality'.

Music has not only enhanced learning and school experience, but achieved to create relationships with their peers and the educators. Music-centered relationships seemed to help the two children overcome the absent socio-emotional and communicative deficits of ASD (Reschke-Hernandez, 2011) that lead to both physical and emotional isolation (Kasari, 2002) in the family and in a 'peer community' (Trevarthen, 2011, p. 173).

Despite the children's poor social engagement and communication, music seemed to serve as a tool for including them in the mainstream classroom. As indicated by his mother, one of Tom's teachers shares Foran's (2009) and Lim's (2000) views that music is a valuable tool for learning language and building memory and adopted this teaching approach with the rest of the class. Music was successfully used with a whole class to introduce tasks and increase independent functioning in the classroom.

The mothers reported the timing of their children's positive change in behaviour coincided with the start of music experiences. The sensory and expressive components of music calmed down and brought order to disorganised outside sensory overload consequently regulated challenging behaviour and decreased tantrums (Wan et al., 2010). Longer attention span and better concentration on tasks such as homework and listening were noticed.

Outcomes of skill development and improvement of social interaction, such as; turn taking initiating, responding joint attention and focusing, resulted from active music making and were generalized elsewhere (Thompson, 2012). The playful musical spaces during which the child tunes to other children and adults through a musical dialogue, led to improvement in areas of social engagement evidenced by increased eye contact and imitations of active involvement (Wimpory and Nash, 1999).

The children's musical abilities and skills were recognised and appreciated by their peers and teachers, the mothers' were convinced that school was seen, as 'an inviting place' (Darrow and Armstrong, 1999, p.18), where 'a sense of belonging', (Niland, 2015, p.4) is the key element of early childhood education, is nurtured. Lily's self-esteem was boosted through her peers' appreciation of her talents. Tom's classmates sought him to provide an appropriate tune to start the lesson or activity. Child directed and success-orientated pedagogical approach in any community setting fosters positive experiences that increase self confidence and self-esteem in children with ASD (Bakan et al., 2008).

Lily's mother realised the connection between the arrangement and structure of music (Lim, 2009), and the key role of patterns in words and mathematics (Geist et al., 2002), and

promoted music as a developmentally way to engage her daughter to learn sums problems, sequencing, counting and patterning (Edelson and Johnson, 2004).

The communicative benefits from music intervention did not manifest themselves as improvement in physiological overlapping functions in the brain, with increase in speech and verbal skills (Wan et al., 2010), but rather as a medium for expressive communication in the absence or limited speech argued by (Shore, 2002).

Conclusion

The IPA approach has assisted me to achieve my aim for this study; to present a richly detailed and nuanced analysis of personal meaning-making from the perspective of mothers. The principle interest was not to ascertain the efficiency of music interventions, but to give the participants the space to make sense of their lived experiences of the effects of music on their children with ASD. According to Huws, Jones and Ingledew (2001), meaning-making of life experiences is a central topic among parents of children with ASD.

The mothers embraced the opportunity to voice their expertise knowledge gathered from lived experiences of concerns, challenges and doubts combined with resilience, pride, joy and hope. Music highlighted the children's abilities rather than their disabilities, and with successful experiences they gained confidence, self-esteem, learned a skill, and acquired outside acknowledgement and praise. The power of music was recognised and actively incorporated in their children's lives, helping them to live a more fulfilling and promising life

The findings cannot be generalised, as two participants can by no means fully represent this diverse population. ASD is characterized with variants in intellectual level, development of communicative speech and the severity of symptoms.

The mothers' perspectives on the impact of music on the lives of children with ASD provide data from which educators can begin to develop a better understanding of how music can be used as a complementary educational approach and enhance the teachers' capacity to employ inclusive practices and diverse teaching methods. The mothers' perceptions can contribute to the development of future research on generalisation of skills achieved during music intervention in mainstream early childhood educational settings with students with Individual Educational Plan for ASD and those without in Malta.

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Evaluating Young Children's Science-Related Discourse whilst Engaging in Water Play Activities

Giselle Theuma

Introduction

Listening to children's discourse and observing children at play is a vital tool to recognise children's understanding of the world. The pedagogy of listening related to the Reggio Emilia approach reveals that the child is 'rich in potential, strong, powerful competent' and constructs knowledge alone, with peers and adults (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 10). This qualitative action research study focuses on the science-related conversations of a group of four boys aged between five and six years of age during unstructured and structured floating and sinking activities.

Quality science teaching and learning is of concern in the Maltese Islands. International surveys, namely the "Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study" held in the years 2007 and 2011, reveal that Maltese children have been ranked to achieve below the lowest average benchmark (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2008/2012) in science education. Consequently, the main aim of this dissertation is to develop a theoretical framework to the teaching and learning of Early Years Science after investigating children's related science discourse in their play. These main aims led me to construct the research question: How do young children co-construct their understanding of science concepts through water play activities?

Literature Review

Teaching and learning has been a debatable subject since the Socratic era. Socrates, a 5th century BC Greek philosopher, has had a significant impact on what education is today. His belief that 'wisdom begins with wonder' is the foundation to early childhood education. His thoughts, which were scribed by his students centred on the idea that teaching could commence from the learner's questions (Nutbrown and Clough 2014). Similarly scientific inquiry is a process that supports the learner to attempt to answer his own questions by manipulating materials and construct meaning from previous knowledge and new experiences (Dawson and Venville, 2007).

Constructivist Approach to Learning

One characteristic of constructivist learning is that individuals respond to their curiosity by constructing their own understanding of the world. Gatt and Vella (2003, p. 3) define constructivism as the learner's need to pass through a mental process in order to 'make sense of' the concepts that pertain to that phenomenon.

A Swiss psychologist pioneer, Jean Piaget's (1896-1980), main point of view with regards the acquisition of knowledge is that learning takes place when a scheme leads to perturbation and in turn when this balance between assimilation and accommodation is lost, equilibration

motivates the learner to maintain or create equilibrium (Piaget, 1955). Several studies present Piaget as a theorist who considered social factors as unimportant in the cognitive development of the child (Bruner, 1985; Rogoff, 1990). Both von Glasersfeld (1995) and DeVries (1997) comment on the fact that during experiments related to logically reasoning, Piaget did not always mention social interaction giving researchers the impression that social interaction makes no significant difference in acquiring knowledge. However Lourenço, (2012), attests that on several occasions Piaget states that individuals will never be able to organise their thought processes unless they interact with others (Piaget, 1947).

Vygotsky, (1962) a Russian psychologist, was able to develop a theory that stresses the fundamental role of social interaction in cognitive development. According to Vygotsky (1962) teaching and learning and the social context cannot be separated. Lourenço (2012) points out that whilst Piaget believed that the adult's presence in a child's learning may hinder the child from having an active role in learning, Vygotsky believed that an adult or a more able peer may facilitate learning (Lourenço, 2012). In agreement with this view, Vygotsky's main theory 'The Zone of Proximal Development' (Vygotsky, 1962) explains that children could be supported by more competent peers and adults to move from their level of ability to a higher level of understanding.

Constructivist models have shown that constructivism is not merely a 'theory of teaching' but a way of exploring the ways children acquire knowledge (Gatt and Vella, 2003). Prior to engaging children into a hands-on investigation, it is vital that a teacher is aware of children's initial ideas about the concept under investigation. Through their observations and manipulation of objects in water children build a repertoire of ideas about this science phenomenon and their reasons for floating and sinking may be somewhat different from the scientific reality. So how is it possible to help young children understand the scientific concept behind buoyancy, and if necessary lead to a conceptual change in thinking?

Havu-Nuutinen (2005) acknowledges that the process of conceptual change takes place when there is knowledge addition through social interaction. In a study wherein the researcher was to identify any changes in children's ideas about floating and sinking after social discourse, the researcher sustained that after active social interaction which was basically oriented at scientific concepts, new concepts of floating and sinking were overheard in their conversations (Havu-Nuutinen, 2005). The researcher summarizes that the teacher's support was crucial in not only acquiring conceptual knowledge regarding the floating and sinking phenomena but also in using the concept. Similar to Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) thinking, the children's knowledge in this study was constructed as a continuous winding process, in which the children, in collaboration with the teacher and other children, integrated their experiences and past knowledge to come to a new understanding (Havu-Nuutinen, 2005). Indeed Siry and Lang (2010) point out that if adults do not create opportunities of discursive conversations then children's misconceptions about science phenomenon will be instilled for life.

Unstructured play versus structured play in the early years

Research has shown that an effective pedagogy relies not only on adult-led practice but there should be a balance between adult-led structured play and child-led play (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002, Walsh et al. 2006). Although a play-based approach is the recommended pedagogy for the early years classroom researchers question the role of play in young children's learning (Wood, 2014; Walsh et al. 2010a).

In the Enriched Curriculum Project, an innovative play-based curriculum was specifically developed to alleviate the pressure of the formal curriculum for the early years in Northern Ireland where young children are obliged to follow a formal curriculum which focused mainly on literacy, numeracy and science (Walsh et al. 2011). A new pedagogic image, *Playful structure* was coined after a research team observed in a pilot study of the Enriched Curriculum that teachers were confused in identifying the connection between play and learning. *Playful structure* is based mainly on the interaction between the teacher and the child and does not necessarily mean that the activity needs to be child-initiated or that it is set within play-time (Walsh et al., 2011). The authors further explain that playfulness is infused into interactions between the teachers and the children while facilitating learning by engaging children and promoting good relationships between the two participants. The goal of this innovative pedagogy is to give an insight to early years teachers that play could permeate throughout all class activities whether the activities are child-initiated or adult-initiated.

However this does not rule out that free play is not beneficial. In agreement with Wood's (2014) argument I feel that by offering the children free play they would be establishing their own rules for agency amongst their peers. When the children are offered structured play as in 'playful structure' the children experience power relations between an adult/child relationship where autonomy is honoured and respected. This dissertation will give way to a combination of free play and structured play wherein children will play freely with water without any adult intervention and within a playful structure children will be involved in water play wherein the adult and children engage in constructive dialogue within a negotiated agency.

The teaching and learning of Science concepts in early childhood education

An inquiry-based approach involves students asking questions about natural phenomena and then attempting to investigate and answer their own questions. Put simply inquiry-based learning is about 'finding out' (Dawson and Venville, 2007, p. 128). Inquiry-based learning is known to foster active learning where learning takes place within a social environment with the children and teacher collaboratively working together to investigate science phenomena. A suitable framework in designing an effective science lesson to motivate children into co-constructing their understanding is the 5E Model of instruction. I adapted this model to the first year of primary school. The 5E model of instruction is useful to provide children with opportunities to explore specific concepts and questions (Yoon and Onchwari, 2006).

Methodology and Methods

Given that the nature of this study is confined to specific observations of children's play, it was feasible to conduct a qualitative study. A qualitative study is a focused study highlighting the qualities of the participants and an evaluation and analysis of the methods used to answer the research question (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013). This dissertation is an in-depth search that listens to young children's voices while at play. What are the young voices trying to convey? What will my findings reveal by listening and observing these young participants?

By 'radically looking' at children and 'radically listening' (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012, p. 47) to their conversations while at play, I have concluded that action research is the ideal process of inquiry to change educational practice. In line with Denscombe's (2010) statement, that a study that involves a 'hands-on small-scale research project' is associated with action research, this dissertation used this strategy to evaluate children's learning in unstructured and structured water play.

Action Research

There are several schools of thought regarding action research however all have the objective of 'change' in mind (Kemmis, 1997). Reflecting on the way I have been teaching science, I became aware that science is not merely filling up a science workbook but young children need to be involved in their learning through experiencing hands-on activities.

Schön (1983) states that when a practitioner reflects on a confusing situation he 'carries out an experiment' which will generate new understandings and a 'change in the situation' (Schön, 1983, p. 68). With the specific aim of improvement, action research always involves a process technique encompassing critical reflection on the practitioner's identified problem. The five cyclical processes I have decided to follow is an adapted one recommended by Denscombe (2010) (Figure 1). In the first stage the focus area was the teaching and learning of early years science education. Secondly, the outstanding problem identified was that the young children in my class were not having the opportunity of being offered a play-based approach to investigate science concepts. The third stage, engaged the researcher in a thorough research related to the theoretical aspect of the focus. In the fourth stage a strategic plan was outlined and implemented. In the final stage, the data was analysed and reviewed.

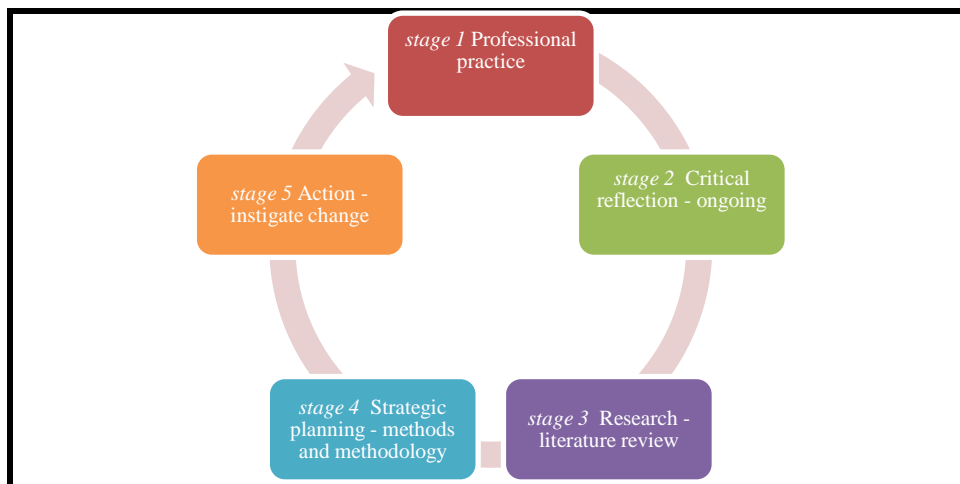


Figure 1 : The Action Research process

Planning and Design

The choice of unstructured and structured play

Although a play-based, child-centred approach has been claimed to foster a child's development, several teachers and educators are deeply concerned that such an approach will not foster all developmental needs (Walsh et al., 2010b; Van Oers and Duijkers, 2013). Therefore, in parallel to structured water play activities I also offered, unstructured play activities wherein children played freely at the water table without any intrusion from adults. In free play children exercise 'agency, self-regulation, ownership and control' while directing their own learning (Wood, 2014, p. 1). Surely, during the unstructured play the young participants acted as their agents managing their own learning and conflicts with peers, revealed their knowledge about floating and sinking, disclosing their ideas about the scientific concept of buoyancy.

A model of instruction to guide structured play

The 5E model of instruction, proposed by a science educator, Roger Bybee (2006), is adapted to the 3E model which is based on Engagement, Exploration and Evaluation. The four structured play activities were pre-planned activities and planned in sequential order with the first activity as inquiry into children's ideas about floating and sinking. Following this inquiry, I introduced an activity to find out children's explanations of what makes an object float or sink. The third activity involved manipulating objects since children were asked to shape a piece of aluminium foil to make it float. The final activity focused on the investigation of finding out the ideal shape of boat to carry a number of marbles (Table 1).

	Topic	Key Ideas
Activity 1	What is floating and sinking?	Things float if they are ‘supported by the water’ (or air) due to an up thrust displacement force.
Activity 2	Heavy or light materials float?	Objects float or sink depending on the material they are made of— whether they are heavy or light. Air that is found inside objects reduces their effective density.
Activity 3	What is the best shape for aluminium foil to float?	Dense materials can float if made into a boat shape.
Activity 4	Which shape will carry the most marbles without sinking?	The displacement of water is determined by the immersed volume of objects rather than their surface area.

Table 1: The structured activities

The Participants

All twenty-four boys participated in the water play activities however being a qualitative study I focused on four children, namely Ben, David, Mike and Sam. All names are pseudonyms in line with ethical considerations. The boys speak both Maltese and English and come from a middle-class social background.

I selected the sample by non-probability sampling. Denscombe (2010) explains that non-probability sampling is an approach used when the sample requires specific abilities. I wanted to target a varied group of children who have different communicative abilities since the nature of this study involved observations of multimodal communication skills.

Observations

As an observer during the unstructured play activities my decision to use a video recorder was to capture both the verbal and non-verbal communication skills and overcome my fear of collecting a partial view of the play activities (Cohen et al., 2011). Flewitt (2005) illustrates that adults and peers co-construct meaning not only through words but also through gaze, facial expression and body movement and therefore video recording unravels all unrecognised multimodal expressions.

My role in the structured play was basically as a participant in discourse. Cohen et al., (2011) define discourse as a way of thinking which is influenced by cultural factors and reveals power of individuals. Very often as Christensen (2004) comments in a research paper about issues of power, teachers take an active, interfering role when playing with children and this type of behaviour will intimidate and overpower children. To establish equilibrium in power, I encouraged an environment of ‘children-as-researchers’ in balance to the ‘teacher-as-researcher’ and made the young participants feel they are part and parcel of the research by encouraging them to ask questions prior to the exploration.

The Interviews

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) refer to interviews as professional conversations where an interchange of views takes place between persons about a theme of mutual interest. I decided to interview the focus group through a group interview. The members of the group could interact and build meaning together, challenge one another rather than simply answer my questions (Cohen et al., 2011). I audio-recorded their voices during the interviews and transcribed all the interviews. The participants were guaranteed assured confidentiality and pseudonyms were used throughout the study to secure the participants' anonymity.

Analysis and Findings

Cohen et al., (2011) define content analysis as a process of summarizing and recording the main contents of written data. Content analysis was an appropriate method of analysis to examine science-related discourse in relation to the children's scientific learning and also to any conceptual changes after intervention.

The theme categories emerged after I had collected all the data and transcribed the conversations (Table 2). Merging the children's responses to the structured activities supported me in drafting a suitable coding framework with themes similar to a research paper by Hsin and Wu (2011). These researchers used emergent themes from children's responses in a sinking and floating activity that was similar to the responses of the young participants in my study.

During the free play children's discourse portrayed evidence of science-related discourse however in a discreet manner. The children were offered the same objects as in the structured play activity, namely an apple, a stone, a half-filled bottle and a plastic cup. Throughout the unstructured play, children's discourse revealed power relationships in play. It was evident that David was leading the conversations and also the play. David portrayed himself as a powerful agent within the group acting as a social negotiator who made an impact on the experiences of his peers (Lee and Recchia, 2008). Without adult intervention barely any verbal reference was made to the science phenomenon in relation to buoyancy. Only David and Sam seemed to be trialling out objects that were present in the water tub and predicting whether they would float and sink.

<p>Activity 1</p> <p>Floating and Sinking – What is floating?</p>	<p><i>Explanation before/after intervention.</i></p> <p><i>Conceptual/ No conceptual change.</i></p>
<p>Activity 2</p> <p>Floating and Sinking – Heavy or Light materials float?</p>	<p><i>Material.</i> The child refers to material as a factor to contribute towards the concept of floatation.</p> <p><i>Weight.</i> The weight of the objects is the reason why many things sink.</p>
<p>Activity 3</p> <p>Dense materials can float if made into a boat shape.</p>	<p><i>Volume.</i> The child justifies that volume plays an important role in determining whether something floats or sinks.</p> <p><i>Hardness of the object.</i> The child refers to hardness of an object as something that is solid.</p>
<p>Activity 4</p> <p>The displacement of water is determined by the immersed volume of objects rather than their surface area.</p>	<p><i>Shape.</i> The shape of an object is a factor that also determines the concept of buoyancy.</p> <p><i>Water.</i> The weight of the object and the weight of the water are relevant properties to the concept of floatation.</p>

Table 2: Children’s discourse and explanations for sinking and floating.

David picks the half-filled bottle and pushes it down into the water saying:

David: *I think it will go down.*

Sam: *I think it won’t go down*

Sam imitates David’s actions with the apple and repeats the same sentence.

(17th March, 2014. Time: 10:20a.m.)

In the structured play activities, before intervention all the children explained that the apple floated and the stone sank. However when they observed the half-filled bottle and the cup they were unsure how to classify these half-submerged objects. Similar to another study by Biddulph and Osborne, (1984) the four boys in my study also referred to the object as ‘a bit sinking and a bit floating’ or ‘almost sinking’. I tried to challenge the children and reminded them to reflect back on what David had responded when I had asked him why he thought the apple was floating.

David: *It’s floating.*

Teacher: *Why do you think it’s floating?*

David: *because it’s not going down to the bottom.*

(17th March, 2014. Time: 11:06 a.m.)

The importance of adult intervention was apparent in this activity. Although all the boys had mentioned that sinking meant 'touching' the bottom of the tub, I had to employ scaffolding techniques to support them to transfer their definition to the practical observation.

In another structured activity the four boys were to trial out a number of objects of a variety of sizes and weight, made of different materials and suggested reasons for floatation. None of their replies cited the material of the items under investigation to be the cause for floatation but in the interview following intervention two boys' explanation for floatation was the material of the object.

Ben: *I I I thought it was going to float* (talking about the metal paperclip)

Teacher: *... Why did you think it was going to float?*

Ben: *Because it was small and not heavy.*

Teacher: *And what happened to it?*

Ben: *It sank.*

Teacher: *So why do you think it sank?*

Ben: *Because it is made out of metal.*

David: *... it depends on the type of the material the floating and sinking.*

(25th March, 2014. Time: 10:43a.m.)

The final activity involved a problem-solving situation wherein the young participants had to make a boat out of aluminium foil that would carry a number of marbles. They found difficulty in designing their shape and many of the constructed shapes were either flat or crumbled with holes and gaps and had difficulty keeping water out of the boat. I scaffolded their learning through questioning and the boys were becoming aware that the shape of an object in floatation made a significant impact on floatation.

Teacher: *Why do you think it sank Sam?*

Sam: *It's the shape and I changed it...*

Ben: *Mine sank...then I made it different.*

Teacher: *How?*

Ben: *... I made it square.*

Teacher: *And yours Mike?*

Mike: *I change it because all the sides I pushed them a bit up and then it rounded a bit.*

(26th March, 2014. Time: 12:33p.m.)

The children's responses and frequent references to the shape of their boats after intervention indicated that there was a clear understanding that this property contributed to floatation, notwithstanding the fact that the children never mentioned the shape of a boat as an important factor to floatation before intervention.

Analysing the verbal discourse during unstructured play the findings show that although the children observed science phenomenon through their play they were not necessarily constructing the correct concept. Vygotsky (1966) views play as a recollection of something

that has already happened and therefore when the children were playing with water they were replicating a real situation they had observed.

In contrast to the unstructured play, the structured play gave the group of boys the opportunity to have a focus and was engaged to investigate a science phenomenon. Studies indicate that free play without adult intervention does not lead to acquiring any scientific understanding (Fleer, 2009; Hsin and Wu, 2011). Based on a constructivist theoretical thinking the process of concept formation is a 'complex and genuine act of thought that cannot be taught by drilling' but will be achieved when the child would have reached that mental capability (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 82). In this study the results show that partial conceptual changes were acquired however the children did not make reference to more than two properties to the attribute of buoyancy.

As Vygotsky (1962) explains once a child learns a word the process of internalization is a long one. Vygotsky (1962) attests that the mental age for children varies and although a more capable adult may scaffold children of the same age to reach a higher level of the zone of his proximal development it is not always the case that they attain the same level. Surely this was evident in the results. David and Ben made more reference to properties of buoyancy in their discourse than Sam and Mike.

Implications for practice, policy and research

There are implications from this research study that young children learn science whilst engaged in hands-on activities (Siry et al. 2012). Evidence also indicates that for children to discover science concepts adult intervention is a requirement (Fleer, 2009; Havu-Nuutinen, 2005; Hsin and Wu, 2011). The results have implications for teachers and educators involved in policy making and curriculum to recognise that observation of young children at unstructured play should be part and parcel of pedagogical thinking because the hidden curriculum lies within children's discursive conversations.

For this reason, training and mentoring of pre-service teachers and in-service teachers alike should be a continuous process to support educators to improve their own knowledge of science and to enhance their techniques of how to best support children in understanding science phenomenon.

This study revealed that children's interest and complexity in their explanations increased after the four activities. Presently, the science syllabus comprises several topics wherein teachers find difficulty in involving children in long term investigations (Department of Curriculum Management, 2014). It would be beneficial to consider a science syllabus which, rather than spreading thinly to cover several topics, would consider less topics with greater depth so as to undertake quality learning experiences.

Conclusion

The current study evaluated how young children construct scientific concepts within a group setting. As seen from the results of this study effective discussion and playing within a group

resulted in cognitive conflict and initial understanding of the phenomenon of buoyancy. Science in the early years should foster 'a sense of curiosity' and also positive attitudes that would guide children in becoming able problem solvers and possible future scientist (Harlen, 2008, p. 37). The main purpose of this dissertation is to show that children can be given a voice in constructing their own knowledge in cooperative and communicative activities together with adults and other peers (Dahlberg et al., 1999). Children have a 'Hundred ways of thinking /Of playing, of speaking' and being open to children's thinking and learning will enlighten practice (Edwards et al., 1998, p. 3).

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Implementing the Maltese National Literacy Strategy in the Early and Primary Years: Teachers' and the Literacy Team's Perspectives

Joanne Falzon Zammit Munro

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the significant role that literacy strategies and practices occupy as part of a balanced literacy programme in relation to the perspectives of teachers and the literacy team. Their implementation will be also analysed and discussed in the light of the recent *Maltese National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo*, the aim of which is primarily to improve the levels of literacy whilst “ensuring that all the children, youths and adults are offered the opportunity to obtain the necessary competencies required for them to lead fulfilling lives” (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014, p. 6).

The research question pertaining to this study is as follows:

What are the teachers' and the literacy team's perspectives that underpin the implementation of the Maltese National Literacy Strategy, as well as the prevalent implications on the respective stakeholders, in relation to policy and practice?

The *National Curriculum Framework* placed literacy as the “first cross-curricular theme” whilst emphasizing that learning takes place “primarily through language in its various forms” (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2012, p.37). Therefore, educators must regard themselves as “guarantors of the language mastery” and thus, literacy competence is the teachers' responsibility, as well as that of the parents and the local community (ibid.). Additionally, the *National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo (2014)* embraces a “lifelong perspective” and emphasizes the importance of literacy underpinnings, especially in the first and early years as these “will influence highly later development” (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014, p. 6).

Following the launch of the *Maltese National Literacy Strategy (2014)*, literacy teams were introduced within each college in the State school system to meet and plan, as well as to review policies, strategies and programmes (Bartolo, 2016). The motivation behind the launch of this strategy was primarily linked to the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, (2011)* (PIRLS) results, which indicated a discrepancy between the mean reading score at international average (500) in comparison with the lower one of Maltese ten year old students' (477) and which “ranked 35th out of 45 participating countries” (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2013, p. vii). Nevertheless, the strategy places heavy emphasis on the parents' and caregivers' crucial role in the literacy development of their children, accentuating the fact that literacy development is no longer considered as the sole responsibility of the educator. Thus, the strategy proposes to provide an amalgamation of educational programmes in order to guarantee the acquisition of the essential literacy skills for “children, parents and other adults” (ibid., p. 22).

Notwithstanding the National literacy Strategy being at the centre of my study, through this research I attempted to answer the research question stated above. This painted a picture of those elements that are yielding results and which therefore need to be further reinforced, as well as others that may need to be modified and addressed accordingly in order to improve literacy levels among students. For the purpose of the study thirteen participants consisting of teachers and other professionals within the literacy team were chosen. The primary research method used for data collection consisted of in-depth interviews which was further supplemented by classroom observations, the use of which was intended to further link and consolidate the data gathered from the interviews.

Literature on Literacy Development

Literacy acquisition is not only one of the most significant targets of schooling and top academic responsibilities, but is fundamental towards further learning and engagement in society and employment (Ministry for the Education and Employment, 2014). Nevertheless, learning to “read and write in decontextualized situations” does not make “effective literacy users, as children need to transfer the acquired skills and knowledge in other range of contexts, both in and out of school” (Wray *et al.*, 2002, p.23). Therefore, the best methods of instruction emphasize the importance of “building on what children already know and can do, as this provides knowledge, skills and dispositions for lifelong learning” (NAEYC, 1998, p.3).

Implementing a Balanced Literacy Approach to enhance Literacy Development in the Classroom

Balanced Literacy is a “curricular methodology” that incorporates various strategies of literacy education (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014). Teachers use different strategies based on a “well-planned comprehensive literacy programme that reflects a gradual release of control (or scaffolded instruction), where-by responsibility is gradually shifted from the teacher to the students” (*ibid.*, p.8). Educators must primarily acknowledge that in order to promote a balanced literacy approach, every child must be regarded as unique (Gambrell *et al.*, 1999). Moreover, students learn better when they are stimulated and engaged through experiential activities, as apart from enhancing their intrinsic motivation, it empowers them to “learn how to learn, thus increasing their learning power” (Kolb & Kolb, 2009, p. 297).

Effective teachers are careful to avoid falling into the trap of treating the art of reading and language processes “as solely a series of subskills or components to be taught in a prescribed, linear fashion” (Gambrell *et al.*, 1999, p.19); conversely, they acknowledge the importance that each plays in literacy development (*ibid.*). A balanced literacy programme must include various modes of reading, namely: “Independent Reading, Cooperative Reading, Guided Reading, Shared Reading, Read Aloud and a Combination of Reading Modes” (Cooper *et al.*, 2003, p.31). Throughout the balanced literacy programme, the teacher should plan and evaluate the teaching strategies, as well as the adaptations for best practice, in order to meet the needs of all the students.

Literacy Coaching...shaping Roles and Relationships

The ability to read is a predominant component which enhances students' opportunities to participate effectively in society. Therefore, both the literacy coach and class teacher need to embrace the same beliefs concerning the best strategies that need to be implemented for all the children to learn and succeed. Jay & Strong (2008) state that a literacy coach is a person who has specialized in reading and is regarded as an expert teacher targeting the improvement of literacy instruction. The International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children proposed the following guiding principles for adoption by both the coach and class teacher (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998), providing "challenging, yet achievable goals for literacy learning, using results of ongoing assessment of individual children's progress in reading and writing and considering the social and cultural context" (Kent, 2005, p. 239). Nevertheless, it is essential that the teacher knows exactly why the literacy coach is in their classroom, and that they understand the latter's roles and responsibilities, as this could be generating anxiety and discomfort at the teacher's end. Therefore, the relationship needs to be based on trust and must never be "pejorative and condescending" (Jay, 2009, p.57); the coaches who start off their visits by teaching instead of observing "alleviate teachers' discomfort while providing the foundation for a collaborative relationship" (ibid., p.57). Besides, the literacy coach should also specify what the demonstration entails and what will be observed throughout the visit (ibid.).

Nonetheless, teachers could be unwilling to cooperate due to fear of change, as they would rather remain in their comfort zone, rather than apply the strategies proposed. In order to reduce anxiety, reassurance on confidentiality must also be specified by the literacy coach (Jay & Strong, 2008) and for the relationship to work, teachers need to feel safe and not placed under scrutiny (Burkins, 2007).

Effective Teaching in Literacy and Supporting Children with Dyslexia and Literacy Difficulties

Each student is entitled to a teacher who understands and addresses their differences by adapting instruction accordingly. In order to minimise the experience of repeated failure, and further detrimental effects on the student's self-esteem, (which could even develop into a self-fulfilling prophecy), the teacher must help the students by providing learning moments, as well as challenging activities, which can yield successful experiences as "success in literacy is not measured by what children know about texts, print... but what they can do with these" (Wray *et al.*, 2002, p. 6). Thus, students need to be able to transfer the learning and the skills acquired to real tangible situations. However, it is also critical to address children who encounter literacy difficulties, who risk falling behind their peers, and who are left to experience helplessness and disengagement, should proper intervention not be provided. Rose (2009) accentuates that "teachers of beginner readers should have at least a working knowledge to identify that a child may be at risk of dyslexia and know where to seek advice" (p. 17) in order to help them. The working knowledge should be an integral component of initial teacher training, which is updated through in-service training as part of ongoing professional development (ibid). Thus, teachers are responsible for supporting and encouraging students encountering literacy difficulties by providing the right adjustments to the classroom environment, whilst implementing teaching strategies that promote an inclusive classroom.

Family-based and Effective School Literacy Programmes

Family literacy initiatives are essential because apart from strengthening the children's literacy and language development they build a continuum between the school and home. However, a cultural divide between home and school is experienced by some children which necessitates "a permanent space for family literacy in school" (Zygouris, 2007, p. 58). The primary aim behind these programmes is to target the "child's literacy and socio-emotional development", whilst equipping parents with the necessary skills to support their children to be successful readers (Ministry for Education & Employment, 2014, p. 23). The Maltese National Literacy Strategy postulates that family literacy projects need to "complement what occurs in the classroom" (Ministry for Education & Employment, 2014, p. 23). As part of the Strategy, several initiatives in relation to school literacy programmes have been introduced. (1) the family literacy programme 'Aqra Miegħi' (Read with Me) targeting children from 0-3 years; (2) 'Aqra Kemm Tiflaħ' (Read as much as you can) programme, the aim of which is to distribute 100 'high-appeal readers' in each classroom. The Reading Ambassadors' programme, involving prominent people such as actors, singers and journalists, carrying out reading sessions to students around various schools (4) The Reading Champions awards which acknowledged the efforts of 205 secondary students who instigated reading among their peers (ibid.). (5) The 'NWAR' programme, which is an after-school family literacy programme, offered in ten colleges to about 300 children (ibid.). (6) 'Seħer l-istejjer' (Magic of Stories) programme for four to nine year olds, involving over 5,000 children and their parents and teachers (ibid.).

Bilingualism and the Draft Language Policy Document for the Early Years in Malta and Gozo

The recent consultation document *A Language Policy for the Early Years in Malta and Gozo*, which was launched in October 2015, emanates from the *National Curriculum Framework (2012)*, the *National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo (2014)* and the *Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta (2014-2024)* (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2015, p.2). This document originates from the publication of the Language Education Policy Profile for Malta, by the Council of Europe, 2015 whose aims are to impart national guidelines for bilingual education. It emphasizes that the promotion of *bilingualism* in the early years is a crucial responsibility that must be shared amongst the "parents and significant others, early years educators and managers of early years education settings" (ibid., p. 2), so that learners are given possibilities to foster "positive attitudes towards Maltese, English and other languages" (ibid., p.5).

The issue of *bilingualism* is pervasive in Malta, and a balanced bilingual education posits several challenges. The objective of the Maltese educational system is not only bound to the "acquisition of linguistic knowledge and skills but, through them, the construction of knowledge and proficiencies in the other disciplines, at all educational levels" (Council of Europe, 2015, p. 75). Nevertheless, the opinions regarding the children's exposure to different languages are erratic, as there seems to be the notion that this might impinge on their language development. Conversely, research has indicated that children have the ability to shift the beliefs and knowledge primarily learnt from their first language/mother tongue

onto the second/foreign language, to eventually consolidate further stimulation to other cognitive competencies (Edelenbos *et al.*, 2006).

Methodology: Research Design and Methods

Research Orientation

My inclination for choosing the qualitative over the quantitative methodology stemmed from the fact that I am particularly intrigued by the participants' direct experience and perspectives, where the researcher becomes a "human instrument" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.187) by combining one's expertise on the subject to methods that are associated with human enquiry (*ibid.*). Halliday (2002) highlights the prevalence of the philosophical and political stance and background, *vis-a-vis* the relationship between values and educational research. This underlines both the values of the researcher and the researched, whilst implying that bias and prejudice are prevailing.

Sampling

For the purpose of the study a sample of thirteen participants, consisting of teachers and other professionals within the literacy team were chosen. I conducted twelve interviews with teachers and other professionals and four observations with four teachers from Year 3, Year 4, Year 5 and Year 6, all of which teach in different schools. The rationale for choosing this sample was based on my desire to get an insight of the professionals' perspectives and implications regarding the implementation of the Maltese National Literacy Strategy. Their expertise in the field was pertinent to the study and in fact, apart from conducting in-depth interviews, I was also intrigued to observe good practice taking place in the classrooms.

The Research Methods

The primary research method used for data collection consisted of in-depth interviews. This was further supplemented by classroom observations, the use of which was intended to further link and consolidate the data gathered from the interviews. Twelve interviews of approximately thirty minutes were conducted with the teachers and other professionals working within the literacy team. The interviews were semi-structured, granting the interviewees considerable space to express their views. Kvale (2007) emphasises that a skilled interviewer must be endowed with "conversational skills and takes instant decisions about what to ask and how aspects of subject's answer to follow up, and which not; which answers to comment and interpret, and which not" (p. 81). This highlights the meticulous preparation that is essential to construct an interview, as it requires work both before and during the data collection, as well as when it comes to transcribing. With regards to the observation method, my role was that of a complete observer where I opted to choose the semi-structured observation. I was particularly intrigued to explore the different methodological and pedagogical styles that were being implemented in order to gather relevant data that would further substantiate my research in relation to good literacy practices in the classroom.

Ethical Considerations

All the participants were informed about the research in advance and were asked to give informed consent prior to each interview and observation, where they were assured of full confidentiality throughout. Real names of participants and the schools were not mentioned, in order to safeguard confidentiality.

Data Analysis

I assembled the participants' responses and analysed the collected data via the thematic approach. Qualitative data collected from methodological tools such as interviews and observations present a range of challenges when it comes to the analysis stage, since the data is rather rich and not necessarily structured. Thus, the method of coding which entails "attaching one or more keywords to text segment in order to permit later identification of a statement" (Kvale, 2007, p. 105) was utilised in order to retrieve and gather the data more systematically. Codes need to be exerted constantly, and the same code is to be present throughout, so that no pertinent data will be excluded, whilst allowing "retrieval, categorisation and collation" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 561) to take place.

Findings and Discussion: Interviews and Classroom Observation

The interviews sought to determine the attitudes and perceptions of teachers and professionals within the literacy team, whilst the observations provided a picture of good practice, by highlighting the predominant characteristics that produce effective literacy learning moments whilst promoting a balanced literacy approach. Findings are structured according to five themes, namely:

- Characteristics and Methodologies that produce Effective Literacy and a Balanced Literacy Approach to enhance Literacy Development in the classroom
- Supporting children with Dyslexia and Literacy Difficulties
- Literacy Interventions vis-a`-vis the relationship between the Respective Professionals
- The Maltese National Literacy Strategy and the impact of Literacy Programmes on the Stakeholders: the Way Forward
- The Notion of Bilingualism and Pluralism within an Ever-Changing Multicultural Society: how are these Issues being addressed?

Characteristics and Methodologies that produce Effective Literacy and a Balanced Literacy Approach to enhance Literacy Development in the classroom

A social constructivist approach, based primarily on student-centred learning, was highlighted by the majority of the respondents in the interviews, as well as during the observations. The students were inspired by various strategies of literacy instruction, which encouraged them to get involved and be responsible for their own learning since experiential learning *“gives them the opportunity to experiment and think outside the box”* (Literacy Support Teacher, LST) and learning by doing is the key to *“produce effective literacy”* (Complementary Education Teacher, CET). An interactive and collaborative environment that is conducive to learning, further empowered them to construct their knowledge. Also the relationship between the teacher and the students and the classroom’s physical environment (such as a print rich environment) were also considered important. Another prominent element was that of linking the four overriding literacy skills by incorporating the themes within the syllabus. Wilkinson & Silliman (2000) claim that *“all the elements of literacy – speaking, listening, reading, writing, and thinking – continuously develop together”* (as cited in Cooper *et al.*, 2003, p. 5), therefore it is essential that educators understand this process in order to develop effective literacy strategies (*ibid.*). The other factors which were not addressed by the majority, but are also relevant, highlight the significance of the physical and affective environment, language development and a cross-curricular approach *“to reading and writing, so that children can link what they know in other contexts”* (Year 2 Teacher).

Supporting Children with Dyslexia and Literacy Difficulties

Respondents raised the importance of classroom adjustments, and adaptations such as using coloured paper or changing the interactive whiteboard’s background colour, which were regarded as the crucial aspects to support children with dyslexia and literacy difficulties. They also commented on using different fonts and coloured pens, peer tutoring and group work, and adopting a multisensory approach. The elements of enhancing self-confidence and self-esteem also emerged where the teacher’s role is crucial to *“create emotional security”* (CET 2) and *“focus on the student’s strength”* (Co-ordinator of a Family Literacy Programme) as well as provide opportunities for students to set up goals that are likely to yield success. As regards whether teachers in general are trained enough to identify and address dyslexia difficulties, even the ones who have undergone training emphasized that it was not enough, and maintained that teachers in general are not sufficiently trained. Hence, this implies that there is definitely more room for training through ongoing professional development.

Literacy Interventions to impact Instruction vis-a`-vis the Relationship between the Respective Professionals

The majority of the respondents highlighted the significant elements that are vital for building and sustaining relationships that are based on mutual trust and that professionals share the same goals for the students’ welfare (Jay, 2009). Ongoing dialogue and effective communication was considered as the underpinning element of a genuine relationship for providing appropriate support by acknowledging that every teacher is unique and therefore the LST or CET needs to be sensitive and adapt accordingly in order to decrease the element of resistance (by teachers) which could be attributed to several factors. Burkins (2007) reiterates that for the relationship to succeed, teachers need to feel safe and not feel constantly under investigation; *“building relationships and establishing rapport”*

(Lowenhaupt *et al.*, 2014, p.750) were the leading concerns for literacy coaches, where the use of “symbolic gestures, the selection of locations for interactions and shaping the content of discourse with teachers were found to be the best practices” (*ibid.*) that yielded trusting relationships and reduced the element of resistance. Furthermore teachers’ intransigence could be related to various beliefs when they regard the support as waste of time, as not being so innovative and novel and they perceive their role as that of an “independent contractor” in the class (Jay & Strong, 2008).

The Maltese National Literacy Strategy and the Impact of Literacy Programmes on the Stakeholders: The Way Forward

Nearly all of the respondents seemed to be informed about the projects, interventions and schemes that were proposed in the Maltese National Literacy Strategy. They gave a lot of positive feedback on the Read with Me Project and the Magic of Stories, both of which are prevalent initiatives for instigating family literacy and providing more opportunities for parents to be part of the school, as well as on the Read as much as you can and the Reading Ambassadors. Morrow *et al.* (1993) point out that the family plays a significant part in the child’s literacy development and if parents are not part of what is going on at school, whatever techniques are applied at school won’t lead to success in literacy acquisition. The following are two responses by the LST and CET respectively regarding this issue:

We need more parents at school because the cycle isn’t complete unless there is the teacher, the SMT behind the teacher, the child and the family; that is when the cycle of education is complete...to get to the parents we need to break the indifference, that distinction between schooling, us and them!

Initiatives such as the Read as much as you can are good initiatives for everybody, but mostly for those children who don’t have such book rich environment...unfortunately it is the middle class people who tend to use them...however little by little the word will start spreading around, parents talk to each other and hopefully the people who need to read more will follow the example.

As a matter of fact the strategy addresses this matter and states that socio-economic constituents are regarded as “major determinants of levels of literacy acquisition. Children coming from families with a lower socio-economic status are likely to lag behind in cognitive and educational performance” (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014, p. 20). Thus, the proposed programmes seek to give greater attention in order to safeguard the needs of “low-income families and ethnically diverse target groups” (*ibid.* p. 23).

The Notion of Bilingualism and Pluralism within an Ever-Changing Multicultural Society: How are these Issues being addressed?

The most prominent factors that emerged were linked to the importance of implementing strategies that promote balanced bilingualism, as well as the challenges that underpin issues related both to bilingualism and pluralism. All the respondents were adamant that a balanced bilingual approach ensures that children master a good command of both Maltese and

English. The Literacy Strategy also emphasizes that a balanced bilingual approach is crucial since “one of the essential elements of a bilingual country is the ability of its people to switch easily between languages” (Ministry for Education & Employment, 2014, p. 28). Nevertheless, as regards the use of code-switching, this correlation was not present, as the majority maintained that its use inhibited students from being good bilinguals. The majority of the respondents did not agree with code-switching as it hindered students from being good bilinguals reiterating the importance of being good role models for the children by using one language throughout the whole lesson and employing a variety of techniques, rather than merely resorting to code-switching:

...as teachers we need to start assessing our language in seeing that we are good role models for our children and think about strategies that facilitate language learning for all children...assess why and when to code-switch! (Bilingual Teacher)

The Dyslexia Specialist postulated that:

teachers need to make children aware that they are using two languages and not sort of code-switch all the time in a flow of discourse”; it is essential to treat the two languages separately and not speak half English and half Maltese (Year 4 Teacher).

The *National Curriculum Framework* agrees on its use solely in the case of problematic situations which pose “pedagogical problems”, while the National Literacy Strategy seems to regard it as a “crucial and positive element” (Council of Europe, 2015, p. 40). Consequently, this discrepancy creates further concern and confusion among educators, which could eventually hinder the students’ capacity from acquiring the necessary competencies to become proficient in both languages.

Discussing the Main Findings of the Classroom Observations

This section discusses the principal aspects that transpired from the classroom observations, all of which are intertwined and highlighted in the interviews and literature review. The overriding components which were prominent in relation to all four teachers are discussed below. A *social constructivist* approach (Vygotsky, 1978) the foundation of which rests on the concept of learning by doing, and “direct, hands on experiences” (Ministry for Education & Employment, 2012, p. 40) created a stimulating and interactive environment conducive to learning. Besides, *scaffolding* or the ‘gradual release of control’ (Gambrell *et al.*, 1999; Ministry for Education & Employment, 2014) was effected meticulously, as the teachers adopted the role of a facilitator, providing support, as well as the use of *effective questioning techniques*, which prevailed as the teacher instigated the students to critically analyse and reflect. Moreover, the *affective environment* was also featured during the observations and the good rapport between the teacher and the students enhanced the foundation for effective learning to take place, as it reduced the likelihood of discipline issues and challenging behaviour to occur (Gambrell *et al.*, 1999).

The issue of *Bilingualism* further supported the teachers’ views as regards code-switching. They were good role models for their students as they were consistent throughout the lesson, using visuals and gestures without having to resort to haphazard code-switching. The use of

peer to peer assessment was observed in Year 5 and Year 6, where students were expected to give each other verbal and written feedback. This enhances the students' self-reflective and evaluation skills in order to provide feedback and constructive criticism. Last but not least, was the element of acknowledging 'Literacy' as a *cross-curricular theme*, which was observed in Year 6 and was also highlighted as an essential aspect in the *National Curriculum Framework* as:

this gives areas coherence, relevance and stability providing a holistic learning experience by highlighting common objectives, content and pedagogies (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2012, p. 37).

Conclusion

This study has provided a deep insight into the professionals' perspectives on the Maltese National Literacy Strategy and its relevance in providing a framework where the respective stakeholders are vital and responsible for the proposed targets to be reached. The National Literacy Strategy was a breath of fresh air as it has formulated the necessary guidelines to ensure that students are offered the best opportunities to enhance their literacy skills.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

My research has identified several implications for policy concerning the teachers' and the literacy team's perspectives on the implementation of the Maltese National Literacy Strategy. The use of a balanced literacy approach which the strategy regards as an essential element for students was also highly supported in the research, as it enables students to transfer the learning to concrete and meaningful situations. Besides, Assessment for Learning techniques were meticulously employed by all the teachers that I have observed. The students' success in attaining the necessary literacy competencies was the strategy's overriding principle, and this research shows that the teachers are in line with the policy by implementing an array of strategies and methodologies that are likely to produce effective results in literacy acquisition. The balanced literacy approach, is therefore recommended to be further reinforced on a national level. This also applies in the case of family literacy and school literacy programmes, which were regarded as novel and essential initiatives that were providing a bridge between the family, the school and the community whilst promoting a reading culture amongst adults and children. In this light, it is recommended that the policy still revises and analyses these and other programmes on a national level, as proposed in the strategy, in order to address and modify accordingly. As regards the issue on bilingualism, the strategy also proposes a bilingual policy. However, the results show a discrepancy on the issue of code-switching and therefore I feel that clear guidelines for teachers are recommended on a national level.

From the results it was clear that teachers definitely need more training to support children who are encountering dyslexia and literacy difficulties. It is therefore recommended that on school/college level, more training is provided as part of ongoing professional development, together with support systems for educators to overcome challenging situations. The prevalent importance of a trusting relationship based on effective communication between the teachers and the respective literacy professionals was also evident; therefore specific

allocated sessions where teachers can meet and discuss are highly recommended on a school/college level. Finally, sharing of good practice is recommended so that teachers are given the opportunity to observe and learn from each other, in order to consolidate or modify the strategies according to the specific dynamics of their particular classroom.

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research

As regards the study design, the number of professionals recruited for this study was thirteen, and therefore the sample size was not large enough to generalise the findings across the population of professionals within the field. Thus, further research is recommended by using both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies so that the findings can produce a representative across the population, and further consolidate this study. Besides, the use of semi-structured interviews could have caused the researcher to be unintentionally biased during the interviews. A final limitation of the study could also be related to the fact that the informants might have for various reasons given socially desirable answers.

With reference to the bilingual policy, a discrepancy that emerged from the results obtained from the interviews regarding the issue of code switching, urges for further action research to produce clear guidelines that are essential to address this issue appropriately on a national level; teachers cannot be left to their own devices to determine the best practices in code-switching, as well as which strategies are most likely to produce effective results for children to become balanced bilinguals. Additionally, it would be worthwhile and interesting to analyse the initiatives and programmes proposed in the strategy after a period of five years from its implementation. It is essential that feedback is gathered from all the stakeholders including educators, schools, colleges, parents and caregivers in order to evaluate the Strategy's success on the improvement of literacy levels across different sectors in society. The areas that were found to be yielding results should be reinforced, while the others which were not so fruitful should be given particular attention and addressed accordingly for the benefit of the students, so that the aim of the strategy would be fulfilled.

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Digital Literacy Practices at Home and School: Perceptions of 5 Year Old Children, their Parents and their Teachers

Alessandra Balzan

Introduction

Throughout the 21st century, the use of technology has been expanding to an extent that today the majority of young children are considered to be 'digital natives' (Zevenbergen, 2007; Prensky, 2001), for they are born and raised being actively engaged in a media-rich world (Aubrey & Dahl, 2014; Mifsud, 2013; Davidson, 2009). Digital tools have acquired a status in the daily life in many societies, shifting the emphasis of the teaching and learning process to creating content and sharing information on virtual spaces (Voogt et al., 2013). Technological advances have brought about a change in social practices and consequently influenced various aspects of early childhood education, particularly literacy.

The meaning of literacy has thus been broadened to encompass digital forms of reading and writing, namely by tapping on keyboards and touching screens when writing, as well as reading interactive texts on electronic devices (Nutbrown, 2011). Such a new phenomenon has brought about a change in dealing with new skills to support children's development and learning. New curricula and policy documents are currently addressing and supporting proficiency in digital literacy practices amongst all learners to perform in society. This implies that the notion of literacy has been extended '... to include digital text and communication' (Churchill & Yong Khoo, 2012, p.381), hence new definitions of literacy have emerged.

As Belshaw (2012) delineates, meanings and representations of literacy across the globe tend to vary, to an extent that it is imperative to be specific when explaining any connotations to digital literacy, prior to using the term within this study.

What is Digital Literacy?

The embracing of the term 'digital literacy' within this research, acknowledges the ability at accessing various digital devices such as computers, laptops, tablets and mobile phones, being skilled at interacting with and creating different texts as well as communicating with others. This, of course, is not the sole definition of 'digital literacy', for the word 'literacy' itself tends to direct the attention to the ability of reading and writing with meaning. As Koltay (2011) defines it, 'The concept of literacy includes visual, electronic, and digital forms of expression and communication' (p.214).

Being digitally literate therefore encompasses being literate at using various technological tools and skilled at listening, speaking, reading and writing to be able to function in today's society (Belshaw, 2011). Along the years, following the cultural changes and advances in technology, the concept altered its eminence from simply being competent at having basic ICT skills to acquiring more advanced skills that enable the production, presentation, interpretation and consumption of digital texts (Voogt et al., 2013; Burnett, 2010; Levy, 2009).

Within the Maltese context, digital literacy has recently received thorough attention and has become an action plan in the policy document 'A National Literacy Strategy For All in Malta & Gozo 2014-2019' (NLS). Malta's vision of digital literacy emphasises the acquisition of skills that enable individuals '... to communicate, learn and work through different technologies...' (MEDE, 2014a, p.52).

In contrast, the Norwegian national curriculum, considered as a leading example in underpinning digital literacy practices within the teaching and learning framework, believes digital literacy to be '... the 'fifth basic competence' along with reading, writing, arithmetic and oral skills, being mandatory in every subject at every level of compulsory schooling' (Belshaw, 2011, p.28).

This implies that although different approaches to digital literacy are evident, most policies and curriculum frameworks are aware of the elementary competencies required in society today and thus suggest that they are integrated across the curriculum (Voogt et al., 2013).

Within the context of this study, the term 'digital literacy' delineates any practices that involve the use of digital devices and multimodal texts to support children in their acquisition and development of literacy skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing as well as their technical skills in accessing digital technologies.

Digital Literacy Practices

Children's social practices within homes and the community at large contribute to having receptive learning environments that pave the way to digital literacy attainment (Wolfe & Flewitt, 2010).

In the 21st century world, children have become avid users of new technologies which are being influential in terms of the activities children participate in and thus significant in changing literacy practices (Evans, 2004). Whilst keeping in mind that not all children get to experience technology in the same way, depending on culture, environment and family economic status, many children are nowadays experiencing digital practices that are affecting their learning and development (Nutbrown, 2011).

This change in children's education has created '... considerable interest in contextualizing learning and looking at different styles and forms of learning' (Willett, 2009, p.14). The use of digital devices provides an entertaining site that allows children to learn through common shared practices whilst enabling communication and meaning-making. Hence, children develop digital skills and competencies that assist them to function in today's society.

Children's engagement with digital literacy practices and the learning and development taking place, provide evidence that home and school settings play a vital role in acting as a source of continuity from one context to another (Bulfin & Koutsogiannis, 2012).

I have tried to carry out a study to address the needs of digital literacy practices within today's local society, whilst trying to answer the following questions:

- How do children, parents and teachers feel about using digital technology at home and in class?

- Do children, parents and teachers perceive the use of digital devices at home and at school as being helpful to literacy learning? Why?
- What are children's, parents' and teachers' literacy learning preferences? Is it print-based or digital-based? Why?

The increase in number of children being engaged in digital practices from a very young age raises questions about the competences being developed before compulsory schooling and the role of homes and schools in providing opportunities to develop such skills (Willett, 2009).

Parents' Approach to Digital Literacy at Home

Even though many children in today's world have access to a range of digital devices, research indicates that permission to using them at home is '... often carefully controlled and constrained by the location of equipment ...' (Wolfe & Flewitt, 2010, p.392). This strategy reflects anxieties on the overall immediate as well as distant consequences of screen-based activities.

On the other hand, parents are always on the alert not to deny their young children from what engages their interests, and therefore tend to provide them with the latest technological devices they afford. Although this is accomplished through their best intentions, one should enquire whether parents are aware of the positive opportunities digital tools provide to children, or whether the provision of digital devices is by mere choice so as not to be different from other families (Genc, 2014; Plowman et al., 2008).

Teachers' Approach to Digital Literacy in Class

Technology enthusiasts and technology sceptics (Collins & Halverson, 2009) influence teachers in arguing in favour or against approaches to digital literacy practices in class.

Opposing views exist as to whether schools should cater for digital literacy practices, given that 'Children's lives are increasingly filled with screen time rather than real time with nature, caring adults, the arts, and hands-on work and play' (Alliance for Childhood, 2004, p.1). This argument implies that children who already spend much of their time using digital devices at home, irrespective to the issue whether they are learning or not, should not be exposed to more digital practices in class. Alternatively it can also be argued that providing children with familiar digital practices within the school setting '... can bring about high levels of learner motivation and participation' (MEDE, 2014a, p.53).

Teachers can also resist change (Collins & Halverson, 2009) given that their training and personal experiences vis-à-vis digital literacy skills have been minimal or non-existent. Lacking the appropriate skills to personally engage in digital practices, teachers can find it complex to use technology in their teaching. Hence, besides having a personal good will to embark on new teaching methodologies that promote the use of digital pedagogy in class, teachers also require professional support to establish developments in digital literacy (Schrum & Levin, 2009).

A Gap between Home and School

One may question if, how and why digital literacy practices differ between home and school settings, given that there is now an increased awareness of the importance of such practices in children's daily lives. Research reveals that 'In-school and out-of-school practices are clearly not mutually exclusive' (Davies, 2009, p.30) and 'Overall, there seems to be a gap between children's access to and use of new technologies at home and in the EY setting ...' (Aubrey & Dahl, 2014, p.105). It is crucial that the existent disparity in digital literacy practices within formal and informal settings is reduced and limited.

Children need to be competent at engaging in digital literacy practices in the same way within diverse settings whilst transferring knowledge from one context to another without any limitations. This is because digital literacy practices in class need not be associated and restricted to practices that differ widely from home digital practices (Arrow & Finch, 2013). The difference in practices between home and school can also be identified through the way in which they are presented to children. Bulfin & Koutsogiannis (2012) outline the fact that:

Out-of-school practices are largely seen as creative, innovative and non-traditional ... [whereas] In-school practices are dreary, dusty, traditional school activities which ignore the pervasiveness and informal educational potential of children's everyday digital literacies. (p. 343)

This distinct divide is to be bridged by assisting children to develop an awareness and knowledge of literacy resources and skills in a range of media within all settings (Wolfe & Flewitt, 2010).

Davies (2009) points out that in this day and age, despite policies that favour digital literacy practices in educational settings, schools still tend to be oriented towards promoting paper based practices that support reading and writing skills.

Unfortunately, there also exist financial restrictions which limit the variety of technology available within classroom settings, as well as lack of teacher knowledge and confidence in using digital devices for teaching and learning purposes. These factors widen the gap between digital literacy practices at home and at school.

Digital Literacy and the Curriculum

More than a decade ago, research revealed that unless curriculum frameworks consider digital literacy practices, educational provision will continue to lag behind the brisk advances in the wider world (Marsh, 2004). Yet today, curriculum guidance vis-à-vis the use of new technologies to facilitate and assist children's digital literacy development and learning is still limited (Wolfe & Flewitt, 2010).

All too often, '... integrating technology into education [by] ... simply adding it to the existing curriculum and pedagogy, thereby limiting its usefulness for teaching and learning' (Biancarosa & Griffiths, 2012, p.149) does not make up for anything.

The existing curriculum in Malta places strong emphasis on skills related to print literacy thus it portrays the use of digital devices in classrooms as additional practices to the teaching process rather than as an aiding tool for literacy development (Davidson, 2009). Also, although digital literacy has been recognised as one of the core competencies to be acquired by children as an initial step towards lifelong learning, the issue related to the curriculum also circles around having merely a skeleton plan to follow (Balzan, 2014). The policy document *A National Curriculum Framework for All* (NCF) simply outlines the fact that during compulsory education children are meant to acquire ‘... an indispensable prerequisite mastery in ... Digital Literacy’ (MEDE, 2012, p. iii).

The NCF therefore ensures the use of digital technologies within the classroom environment through implying the acquisition of the following skills, namely, ‘... data sources and manipulation; information communication and presentation; programmed control; and social, ethical and personal aspects’ (MEDE, 2012, p. 9). Yet, since no specific guidance exists as to how one can pursue these outcomes in class, it is very likely that classroom digital practices are limited.

The recent launching of the NLS policy document (2014a) provides 24 recommendations for using technology for education purposes, giving all stakeholders the opportunity to evaluate their practices and promote digital literacy competencies. Yet, although the proposals available are specific in nature, they still refrain from providing explicit guidelines for the teaching and learning process.

Mifsud (2013) delineates that for children to become proficient at digital literacy practices in the most effective manner, ‘It is essential for early childhood educators to be provided with the curriculum guidance and training they need ...’ (p.123). Also as Bazalgette & Buckingham (2013) claim, it is essential ‘... to ensure that the curriculum remains relevant to children’s changing experiences outside school’ (p.95).

Barriers to Digital Literacy

Issues related to time, overloaded syllabi and prescriptive curricula are major in terms of restricting digital literacy practices within the daily teaching and learning experiences. Considering the constant race against time to cover all the expected material whilst ensuring that children get the best results in national tests (Burnett, 2009) limits teachers’ enthusiasm and efforts to engage in digital literacy practices.

A related barrier to embedding digital literacy is poor attitude vis-à-vis the use of technology in class (Aubrey & Dahl, 2013). Several approaches such as fear, lack of confidence, limited digital experience, availability of training as well as the need for teacher support, can all impede teachers from catering for digital literacy in class. Also, as Honan (2008) points out, the fact that teachers might put emphasis on the production and presentation of a writing task rather than the process and ability to complete that same task, does not make it as effective as can be. Teachers’ misjudgement of children’s digital practices and experiences within the home environment can also act as barriers (Davidson, 2009; Honan, 2008).

Additionally, as Gee & Hayes (2011) explain, ‘Many people also fear that reading and writing are “dying” in the face of new digital media’ (p.21) and teachers might therefore resist digital

literacy practices in class to sustain print literacy. This can also be linked to the notion that children who are nowadays born in a digital world and who engage in digital practices early on in life do not require the use of digital technology in class too.

Henderson (2011) sustains that ‘... teachers need opportunities to reflect on current practices and to examine and re-examine the possibilities for pedagogical change’ (p.160). It is through understanding the benefits of digital literacy that many barriers can be defeated.

Methodology

My research design was based on a child-centred methodology. The notion was that of voicing children’s ideas by regarding them as active subjects within the research process. Children’s opinions are as valuable and important as adults’, hence through child-friendly methods they could eloquently participate in the study.

Conducting a multiple-case study

The multiple-case design is considered to be a very persuasive method of research, hence able to provide the entire study with a strong theoretical framework (Yin, 2009). So, by focusing on a small-case study replication design it is possible to investigate similarities and differences that exist within the research findings (Yin, 2009).

Within this study, the choice has been to focus on four 5 year olds, their parents and teachers, to understand better their perceptions related to digital literacy development and learning. Its value lies within having ‘... the potential to deal with the subtleties and intricacies of complex social situations (Denscombe, 2010, p.60). However, four small-scale studies do not allow for generalisations to be made (Denscombe, 2010; Yin, 2009; Stake, 1995) because the data do not represent all the perspectives of five year old Maltese children, their parents and teachers in terms of digital literacy development and learning. My focus shall therefore be to understand each case and use all the knowledge acquired to enlighten my future practice in literacy teaching and learning.

The multiple-case study approach encourages the use of various methods to depict the reality under enquiry and hence to foster several sources of data (Denscombe, 2010). This however may be susceptible to criticism since the credibility of findings can be subjected to participants’ trustworthiness in the data collection procedures (Denscombe, 2010). Within my study, the use of triangulation is meant to augment the element of reliability because of the counter checking of data (Cohen et al., 2011).

Research tools

To obtain useful data from all the participants within the study, I decided to employ three different methods that would enable me to effectively address the research question.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the parents within their preferred settings, thus making it easier for them to participate and to feel valued (Cohen et al., 2011; Denscombe, 2010; King & Horrocks, 2010).

Opting for semi-structured interviews enabled me to use an interview guide which delineates the major themes originating from the literature and which address the research question to be explored.

Centring on the interview concept, research conversations were carried out with the children to give them the opportunity to express their opinions on learning through the use of technological mediums. To ensure that children are engaged in meaningful conversations which impart trustworthy and legitimate data, it was required to design interview-based tools to assist the process (Levy, 2011). The use of picture cards gave children the opportunity to engage in a play-oriented setting, thus making it more familiar and fun for them to participate.

Teachers were also involved in the data collection process through disseminated questionnaires. The information needed from teachers within the study was very concise and simple, in terms of their knowledge about the concept of digital literacy, their familiarity with using technological skills in their teaching and their opinion about the children's competences in literacy and the use of digital tools.

Participants' selection and consent

The selection of participants was based on stratified sampling (Blaxter et al., 2010) whereby contributors to the study had to specifically be children in Year 1 classes, their parents and their teachers. Moreover, the sampling was also based on voluntary and convenience (Blaxter et al., 2010; Denscombe, 2010). The participants who were approached and informed about the study consisted of family members, friends and colleagues. This rendered the selection process to be more practical and suitable for me.

The table below presents an overview of the participants within this study by using pseudonyms to conceal their identities. This was done to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Name of child	Adult/s interviewed	Teacher Interviewed
Jack	Mother and Father	Ms. Borg
Julia	Mother and Father	Mr. Pace
Mark	Mother	Ms. Ellul
Karl	Mother	Ms.Vella

Pilot study

Through the pilot stage it was possible to recognise practical matters such as clarity and timing, the validity of questions, the need of adjusting the wording used, and to identify and categorise responses (Cohen et al., 2011). Moreover, the piloting exercise allowed for a systematic analysis of the types of questions asked and more appropriate questions were then altered or further developed to ensure better findings (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012). Carrying out the parental interviews and the children’s research conversations enabled me to try out the equipment to be used for audio recording and to familiarise myself with the leading process in an active manner.

Ethical procedures and concerns

Prior to embarking on this research, approval was requested and granted by the University of Sheffield Ethics Committee which had to ensure that the investigation design included appropriate measures that would protect the interests of everyone involved (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012; Denscombe, 2010). Permission was also approved by the local Research and Development Department to conduct the research in state schools.

All stakeholders were informed that no rewards were associated with participation and that withdrawal was possible at anytime without any repercussions whatsoever. The participants were ensured of anonymity and confidentiality by guaranteeing the use of pseudonyms to conceal their identities (Blaxter et al., 2010; Cohen et al., 2011). Also, all potential contributors were notified that the language medium to be used during the data collection procedures was at their discretion and that interviews and conversations were meant to be audio recorded for meticulous analysis. The participants were equally informed that the data collected will be stored for analysis purposes and that nobody outside the project will have access to the raw data (Cohen et al., 2011).

Children were also given due value to decide on their own participation within the study (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012; Denscombe, 2010). Their information and consent form sheets were tailor-made to include visuals that would make it easier for them to understand the purpose of the study as well as to make it simpler for them be able to provide permission on their behalf (Blaxter et al., 2010). Parental consent for children’s participation was also requested.

Data collection and analysis

All the data was collected during the second semester of the scholastic year 2014-2015, during the months of April and May. Immediately after every parental interview held, the research conversation with each child followed. This was necessary to avoid having any influence on parents' views upon having followed the children's conversations on the subject under study. Moreover setting a new appointment to carry out the children's conversations would have been an added burden to parents.

Subsequently, the data collected during both sessions was transcribed and stored in separate computer documents for examination purposes. Personal comments were also kept within a journal entry to record the nature of every interview and research conversation.

Once the necessary data had been gathered, the next major step was to organise it for investigation (Roberts-Holmes, 2005). First and foremost it was necessary to scrutinise the data to highlight commonalities and differences, thus code and categorise the most significant information (Merriam, 2009). Similar and contrasting views amongst the participants were therefore identified, selected and classified to be able to make sense of the data. Then attention was shifted on the concepts that elucidate the facts and generate theory (Denscombe, 2010). Through the evidence collected, I then had to attend to a meticulous analysis to be able to deliberate and portray alternative interpretations that answer the research question (Yin, 2009).

Summary of Findings and Discussion

Drawing on the different views, the study revealed a discrepancy between home and school practices (Marsh, 2003) whilst indicating that parents and teachers alike, are in favour of print-based rather than digital-based practices. They also disagree with promoting digital competences and including assessment of children's digital skills in their first year of primary schooling. On the other hand, it was very clear that children prefer digital practices and are aware of the existing boundaries between home and school practices.

The findings on children's preferences, parental attitudes and teacher beliefs about home and school digital practices, all seemed to be consistent with previous studies (Arrow & Finch, 2013; Henderson, 2011; Levy, 2011; Jewitt, 2009; Plowman et al., 2008). Indeed, research suggests that these days, young children's digital experiences before schooling enable them to acquire a wide range of competencies, knowledge and understanding of the digital world (Plowman et al., 2008). Their home digital practices also allow for the development of reading and writing experiences of multimodal texts that ultimately induce literacy learning. 'The Oakfield Study' (Levy, 2011) supports this notion and sustains that as children enter the schooling system, it is very likely that they would have gathered much experience in managing and making meaning from a wide range of different texts, including digital texts.

This study also revealed that although schools in Malta have lately witnessed a drastic increase in the amount of digital devices available in classes, the accessibility for children

remains limited. The reasons are mainly because teachers themselves admit that they either lack digital competences or else need further training to support them in digital literacy teaching. Moreover, teaching methodologies rely heavily on print-based reading and writing experiences, leaving little or no time for digital literacy practices to be implemented. In fact children are allowed much more freedom in using the wider variety of technological devices accessible in the home setting rather than in class (O'Mara & Laidlaw, 2011). Reality shows that there exists a gap between home and school digital practices (Arrow & Finch, 2013; Yamada-Rice, 2010) and this discrepancy is of concern (Henderson, 2011).

This study also differentiated between the use of digital devices and the time allowed to do so, both at home and in class. Whereas children associated on-screen reading, digital matching games, and digital writing tasks with home practices rather than school tasks, it was remarkably noticeable that children's use of digital devices in the home setting is often controlled and limited. Karl's mother for example made it explicitly clear that there exist rules for the child to be able to use any digital devices. After school he must primarily complete his homework, spend some time reading and practising the piano, then *"He is allowed an hour to play with these devices, and he has to choose between the computer and the tablet"* (Translation). The mother also emphasised that the one hour rule counts throughout the week, weekend included.

A key argument was that whereas teachers agreed that both print-based and digital-based reading and writing tasks are effective for literacy learning and development, the former are more commonly used in classroom practice. Also, parents were convinced that traditional print-based reading and writing activities are more valuable and appreciated by their children. To the contrary, all children expressed their preferences to digital-based practices, implying that nowadays children can demonstrate confidence in handling digital texts and in outlining characteristics of individual literary identity (Levy, 2011).

Considering assessment practices of digital literacy was another issue which all teachers and most parents did not agree with. According to them, at such age children should be exposed to digital practices to acquire the skills yet not assessed on their mastery. Interestingly enough, Jack's mother did not commit herself to give an explicit opinion on digital assessment but was more concerned about the type of assessment to be conducted. In fact she clearly declared that for such a question she only had several other questions instead. *"What is the purpose of this assessment? Why are we to assess? What will it include? How and what will the outcomes be used for? Is it a matter of knowing how to save a document, send emails? You know?"* (Jack's mother – Translation). Her questions seem to propose a certain degree of concern about digital assessment in general because assessment in the local education system is given a testing connotation which might add stress to all stakeholders alike. It is therefore evident that assessment is still a debatable practice although the NLS policy document (2014) recommends the design and implementation of assessment tools for digital literacy.

On the basis of the findings from this research, one can outline a number of suggestions for parents of young children and teachers in educational settings. Teachers must support and

build upon children's acquired multimodal skills from their home settings and develop them further within their classrooms.

It is also suggested that children are given opportunities to engage with print in meaningful contexts by interacting with digital texts within the classroom environment (Levy, 2011). They need to be exposed to digital-based reading and writing tasks that embed holistic representations of real-life experiences. Actually schools need to develop programmes that emphasise knowledge, attitudes and skill-based outcomes which shape the environment and change the conditions for learning (MEDE, 2015). The implications result in digital literacy practices that reshape the pedagogy in the classroom and bring along a multimodal perspective to literacy learning and development (Jewitt, 2009).

Teacher education and professional development is yet another issue which needs addressing (MEDE, 2015; Jewitt, 2009). All participant teachers expressed their interest in receiving training on digital literacy, highlighting the fact that more attention is required by qualified teachers and those pursuing their teacher training studies, in becoming proficient users of digital technology and more knowledgeable at providing a learning environment rich in digital literacy practices (Plowman et al., 2008).

If we want our children to strive and become competent employable citizens, we must provide them with the best possible education and digital literacy knowledge, and offer support to their parents and families. Parental education must be within the agenda to offer support in assisting children's digital literacy practices for educational purposes (MEDE, 2014).

Far more extensive research into young children's engagement with digital texts both within the home and the school setting is necessary to understand what children already know before commencing compulsory schooling and to eventually try and bridge the existing gap (Arrow & Finch, 2013).

This study implies that there is much to learn about children's engagement with digital literacy practices, both at school and at home as well as about parents' and teachers' roles in the literacy development and learning process. The way forward, as Levy (2011) rightly argues, is that '... it does appear that a general goal for early years education would be to find ways in which to allow aspects of children's home discourse to penetrate school boundaries' (p.101).

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The Impact of Digital Technologies on Emergent Readers

Rita Saliba

Introduction

In the 21st Century, technology is becoming a trend in every education setting. Children are living a digital world childhood and this influences their behaviour, communication and learning. Digital technologies are incorporated in everyday teaching to stimulate learning. If used properly by educators and students, technologies in classrooms can lead to positive outcomes in a child's learning and development. In this study the question of possible effects that these digital technologies, namely the iPad, may have on emergent readers and if their motivation to learn to read differs when technology is involved is discussed, observed and analysed.

Purpose of the study

During my course of teaching, I meet several children from different age groups who are struggling with their literacy development stages. Padak and Potenza-Radis (2010) stated that children may struggle in mastering the reading skills, as besides lacking reading knowledge and skills, motivation and independence are also missing. By introducing digital technology in early years, children are exposed to more stimulating interactive lessons which can also be motivating. In the light of using various technologies in classrooms mainly to teach literacy, I asked myself: do these technologies really make a difference to the literacy learning outcomes of our students? Can students be motivated enough to learn reading or can technology hinder learning?

With these questions in mind, forming the basis of my study, and incorporating technology with instruction to observe the effects of literacy mobile applications found on iPads on students' motivation to learn and reading skills children were observed during literacy activities to answer my research question:

What are the effects of digital technologies on emergent readers and their motivation to learn?

As an educator who feels that it is of utmost importance to keep up to date with newer pedagogies, the introduction of tablets in primary schools led me to study more and reflect on my teaching for future practice incorporating this new technological device as a means to motivate emergent readers to learn to read and enjoy reading while presenting literacy learning in a revitalizing way to stimulate a passion for reading in children from a very young age.

Literature Review

Teachers have a responsibility to transform learning into an enjoyable experience for their children in class by adapting new interesting pedagogies in their methodologies to motivate them in their learning voyage. An effective teacher has to keep up to date with modern pedagogies in order to give her best to her students. One important skill that children, everywhere in the world, need to master is the skill to be literate.

Learning Theories and digital technologies

With the appearance of new technological devices to be used as tools in classrooms, pedagogical theories have to be adapted to incorporate these technologies. With the impact of these technological devices, learning has to be shifted from a teacher-centered to child-centered giving more autonomy to the student in his own learning. Young children's early literacy development and Information and communication Technology (ICT) have been studied and observed through a range of theoretical perspectives namely the behaviouristic theory and the socio-cultural perspective.

From a behaviouristic perspective, learning takes place when instruction and feedback control the practice. Shield (2000) suggested that this type of learning is observed through game play where children are rewarded through encouragement by moving onto the next level of the game when each level is mastered. When Oladunjoye (2013) observed the use of iPad applications from a behaviouristic perspective, he stated that while using applications on iPads, learners are given quick positive or negative immediate feedback to answers given for an action done or shows if the action is to be terminated. On the other hand Vygotsky-inspired constructivists view learning as a social process where one constructs knowledge from experiences. Bodrova and Leong (2006) assert that according to Vygotskian theory, three to four year old children are in the process of developing abilities to memorize, pay attention, reason things out, think and imagine. Social context is critical for the development of these functions as it is through interactions with adults and peers that these functions are refined. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (1978) shows what a student can actually do without an adult's or peer assistance and what a student can do under the guidance of a teacher or peer. Learning begins with support for students to practice new strategies, and gradually let students become independent and take ownership of their own learning. This can be done by scaffolding children's use of technology as teachers ensure that active engagement, participation, interactivity, feedback and connecting to the real world context are taking place during learning. (Lapp et al. 2012) These scaffolded interactions with digital print during touch screen tablets interactions may foster children's emergent literacy development. Neumann and Neumann (2014) developed a theoretical framework based on Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory, scaffolding and Ehri's (2005) theory of early reading development to propose how touch screen tablets can contribute to emergent literacy.

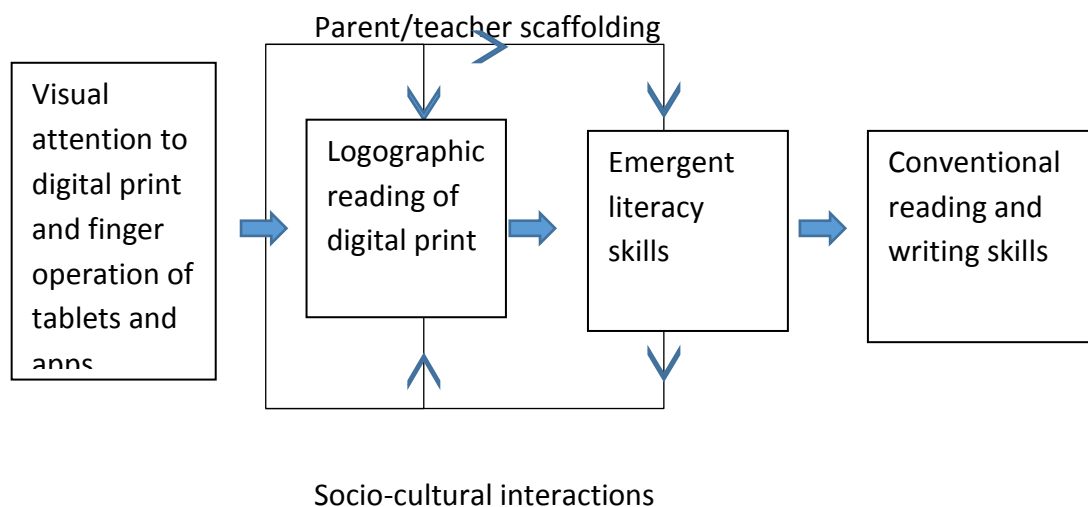


Figure 1: a proposed framework of emergent literacy development through the use of touch screen tablets. (Neumann and Neumann, 2014, pg. 234)

This diagram clearly shows us that from a very young age children are attentive to digital print around them, developing their motor skills to interact with touch screen tablets. Tablets can be a source of opening a window to a world of attractive print such as icons, symbols, letters, words and numbers. Through socio-cultural interactions with surrounding print environment and scaffolding knowledge by an adult, children master the ability to decode print leading to conventional reading.

Tablets and Young Children

Children are becoming digital natives as they interact with their own environment. They are developing their literacy skills through their own experiences within their families, their communities and in schools, and also most of them even before their entrance to schools. Marsh et al. (2005) advised that as early childhood educators, we have to accept and incorporate media, popular culture and newer technologies into our curricula as most children are already acquainted with using technology at home. Children in our schools require an environment setting which present challenging experiences. One of these digital literacy tools which is providing a learning experience is the iPad. As it is relatively new technology, iPads and other touch screen tablets are becoming popular among young children as iPads are light, mobile hand held devices which are intuitive and easy to use. Looking like a book and in the form of a writing pad, iPads facilitate learning as it responds to just a stimulation by a finger, hand or a multi-touch gesture such as tap and scroll. (Neumann & Neumann, 2014)

iPads and touch screen tablets can facilitate emergent reading and as Tahnk (2011) stated that as touch screen tablets make use of interactive multimedia displays which stimulate the

visual, auditory and kinaesthetic system of a child, they are easy to explore helping children to learn new things and gain early literacy knowledge by receiving instant feedback for a child's activity. Michael Cohen Group and USDOE (2011) observed that children as young as two year olds can learn how to count and match by figuring out things, exploring and winning levels gaining more interest and enthusiasm. This study showed that children progress from a concrete sensory experience to an independent operation of tablets through the use of apps which can be downloaded freely or cheaply. Yates (2012) also describes the potentiality of tablets as a learning tool to gain literacy knowledge, one can access literacy applications such as alphabet/word/matching games, and listen or read an e-book. Using drawing tools help children produce representations of their thinking while enhancing children's eye-hand co-ordination, motor and cognitive development and emergent literacy skills. (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) This can pave the way for future academic learning.

Effects of Tablets and Apps on Emergent Literacy

While using iPads, children can use communication processes of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Using iPads apps for communication purposes may facilitate emergent literacy. Michael Cohen Group and USDOE (2011) identified three types of apps which can be downloaded on touch screen tablets. These are gaming apps, creating apps and e-books which are interactive and easy to learn and they give immediate feedback to the children. Apps can enhance diversity of teaching as they can present differentiation according to the different levels of activities in games. The learning possibilities presented by these touch screen tablets can be afforded at any time in any place. In fact it is due to its affordability and functionality that tablets gained their popularity in education.

Through apps children are provided with oral, visual and written communication separately or as multimodal literacies making them more applicable to the younger literacy learner who has yet to experience formal literacy learning. Hisrich and Blanchard (2009) reported a few high quality apps which exist that are designed to promote emergent literacy skills such as letter sound and name recognition, print concept and emergent reading and writing. From an emergent literacy perspective, teachers and also parents have to be careful how to select quality literacy apps for their children both at pre-school and home setting (McManis & Gunnewig, 2012). Neumann and Neumann (2014) recommended certain features which literacy apps must have. These have to:

- be age appropriate
- link to literacy curriculum
- have a high level of interactivity, stimulating all senses.
- present clear understanding tasks
- provide opportunities for peer collaboration
- encourage creativity and logical thinking
- connect children with print screen symbols
- give constant immediate feedback
- guide child's performance (p. 234)

The introduction of e-books opened a new door to enhance children's literacy development. Research shows that e-books can enhance emergent literacy (Korat, Shamir & Arbriv, 2011) as children focus their attention on words being read to while being highlighted, changed in shape or size. In fact e-books allow children the option to choose if they want to read or listen to the story independently or else read to them by an adult. Adult assistance during e-book reading sessions was found to enhance phonological awareness and emergent writing (Korat et al. 2009). Moody (2010) also concurs with this when he found out that interactive e-books support children's emergent literacy development through the use of scaffolded learning. Some e-books also give the opportunity to explain the meaning of a difficult word, and present interactive games embedded in pages. As Larson (2010) claims children can read faster due to the larger font size and can use the text-to-speech tool to navigate through difficult passages.

While children are interacting through e-books, they are also collaborating with peers and retaining more information. (Chau 2008) Thus e-books also support learning and comprehensive levels. Research evidence suggest that e-books read via non-touch screen tablets (with mouse and keyboard) has positive effects on emergent literacy too. (Korat et al. 2009)

Although there are negative opinions on the use of computer technology used in early childhood education settings (Cordes & Miller, 2000) the effects of technology on children's development have been strongly positive. Vernandakis et al. (2005) pointed out that children who use technology show gains in intelligence, structural knowledge, problem solving and language skills compared with those children who are not technologically exposed. On the other hand, from a survey of one-to-one tablet done in Quebec, Karsenti and Fievez (2013) noted that tablets can be seen as a form of distraction too. Teachers argued that tablets can be very tempting to offer an opportunity to chat with friends or play games not related to learning. This can affect students' academic performance. A very important aspect in using apps on tablets is the quality of apps chosen. Unfortunately as Murray and Olcese (2011) pointed out several apps although focusing on creativity, present features at traditional practices, like the use of flashcards but with the added feature of audio and phonetic representations of words to be learned, lack feedback, give unclear objectives and are filled with too many distractions. (Michael Cohen Group and USDOE, 2011). If literacy apps lack feedback and rewards while presenting too many distractions, they can hinder learning. Good quality literacy apps must be linked to learning theories considering the social, emotional, physical and cognitive development of the learners. (Orrin & Olcese, 2011). Literacy activities have to engage and motivate children in their learning offering a level of support in gaining more independence while learning. Flewitt et al. (2014) described the iPad as a possible means to offer children the opportunity to learn how to work independently as through immediate feedback they can be engaged and motivated to advance their literacy skills.

Method and Methodology

Believing that children learn through active play by seeing, and taking part, my research question reflected my epistemological belief that as educators we have to present child-

centered learning in an attractive enjoyable way. So with the introduction of tablets in our schools from next scholastic year, I was intrigued if this technological device will help children to learn to read through interactive games presented on iPads. While Basit (2013) proposed that ‘researchers are inevitably influenced by their ontological and epistemological position (p. 510) when selecting their research methods, I argue that my beliefs were influential far earlier from my experiences as a mother through using these digital technologies as learning tools at home with my own children.

Generating the Research Question

The use of iPads as a learning tool in classrooms is in its initial phase in Maltese primary state schools. Following the Goldilocks Test (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012, p.37) by and taking account of its ‘suitability’ to me within a particular time frame and place (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012, p.41); the table shown below describes how my research question was developed.

	Draft Research Question	Goldilocks Test	Reason
1.	Do ebooks motivate and engage emergent readers?	Too small	It indicates eBooks’ effects only on children’s motivation to read.
2.	Do digital technologies effect children’s literacy development?	Too big	It requires smaller several questions before the study could be designed.
3.	What are the effects of digital technologies on children’s emergent reading and their motivation to learn?	Just right	This will help me to identify how digital technologies can motivate children to learn how to read during their emergent reading stage.

Table 1: Devising the research question (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012, p 40)

Context and Participants

This study took place in a small Maltese state school in a central part of Malta. This school incorporates mixed ability classes. Children attend this school from various spheres of the economic levels of society. The majority of the teachers are young but not all of them technologically minded. Technological devices such as laptops and interactive whiteboards are used daily in class but no one uses tablets as learning tool yet. Before selecting the participants for the study I had to think of several factors which could have influenced the study. Time availability, what I planned to explore, where I wanted to gather the data from and the size of the research study all determined to focus my case study on two children who are in Grade 1, interviewing their teacher and parents. As Miles and Huberman (1984) claim

my selection of participants was based on the purpose of the study and the participants' characteristics which were likely to fit my research question. All participants were given pseudonyms to cater for confidentiality and anonymity. The table below shows all the participants in this small scale study where pseudonyms were used.

	Grade 1	
Teachers	Ms. Laura	
Children	Daniel	Elisa
Parents	Martha	Natasha

Table 2: Number of participants in the study.

Both Daniel and Elisa, 5 year olds, are in the same Grade 1 class. They were referred to me by their class teacher, Ms. Laura, last January as they were still encountering difficulties with letter sound recognition and basic reading skills. They attend my lessons three times a week. Daniel is a more creative than technological boy preferring to learn through hands-on activities at home and 'did not show any interest in technology as his siblings' as stated by his mother. On the other hand, Elisa, an only child, is a very shy girl. Although she likes to use computers in class and participates through interactive white board activities in class too, she is more exposed to print books at home.

Before the study took place, an initial briefing meeting with parents of children involved in this study was held one morning before school commenced. This proved to be beneficial as purpose of the study and any questions parents had were clarified. Subsequently information letters and consent forms were distributed to each and every participant before Easter recess to which everyone has voluntarily agreed to take part in this study.

Observation in Class

One of the research method tools used in this study was overt semi-structured observation as I wanted to study the picture of what really happens when children are given a technological tool in their hands to learn with instead of pen and paper. As Cohen et al., (2011) state 'observational research method offers the researcher to gather 'live' data from naturally occurring social situations' (p.456). So my choice of observing children in class was due to the fact that characteristics of observation method including oral and visual data plus writing down field notes make it a powerful device. (Erickson, 1992)

Before conducting observations, particular attention was given to the selection of appropriate literacy apps for this research as I had become aware of certain poor literacy apps while reading other researchers' work (Michael Cohen Group and Ready to Learn, 2011). Ipads were available to children during four weeks of literacy tutoring for three times a week. These lessons lasted an hour each, where literacy skills were taught and explored through iPads. These iPads were a new and exciting device used during my lessons only, so children did not

take any particular attention of being observed although they were informed beforehand. Video recording was rejected as I thought that this could hinder learning and can be a means of distraction as it was a very small group of children. To focus on certain behavioural cues, field notes of children's behaviours, verbal expressions and photos of literacy apps were all taken during observation which were later transferred to a structured observation sheet. Preparing for this study I knew what research question I wanted to find answers to and so I might have been aware of focusing my attention on what I was looking for. So being aware of taking record of frequency of behavioural cues, importance was also given to 'critical incidents' or 'one off behaviours' as I knew that these incidents can offer me sustainable knowledge that would not be routinely available. (Cohen et al., 2011, p.404) To get a more holistic picture of the situation where children learn through technological devices, presenting more reliable study, informal discussions with these particular children also took place as discussed in the next section.

Informal Discussions in Class

The role of children in society is changing as childhood evolves over time. As Christensen and James (2007) claim children are seen as worthy of investigation in their own right and nowadays researchers seek to learn about children's knowledge perspectives and interests from the children themselves.

Whilst children's voices have become better heard in research and children's role in surveys is changing from being subjects to participants, children are still being compromised by political structure determined by adults (Wyness, 2006, p.209) So in the light of a new development of a digital literacy policy and the evolution of practices using tablets in Maltese classes which are finally designed to involve children, as a researcher I wanted to give children their right to raise their voices and have their view point taken into account. (Nutbrown, 1996). Bragg (2007) points out that the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (1989) (UNCRC)'s recommendation is that children should be informed, involved and consulted about all activities that affect their lives. I tend to agree with Bragg but in my position I did not want to put any pressure of interviews on the two chosen children as participants in my study at such a tender age. So I opted for informal discussions with them while they were using literacy apps during lessons. Field notes were taken, a combination of talk, body movement and facial expressions were observed but video recording was also opted out because I wanted to present a natural setting as possible doing lessons as usual.

Teaching both Daniel and Elisa, the two children chosen for my case study, I was not a stranger to them leading me to a better position to understand their opinions, feelings and views about learning with a new tool in their hands. So the objectivity of this research might not have been achieved as the relationship between adult and children was already positive and established.

Data Analysis

Using various research methods helped to gain insights from individual sources which complemented and enrich overall research findings (Cohen et al., 2011). Each research instrument used in this study had a specific aim in finding answers to the research question as the Table 3 which follows clearly shows.

Data collection Instrument	Purpose
Field notes	Data will be collected about research question while tutoring sessions are taking place.
Students artefacts	Data will be collected about students' engagement to learn literacy skills through iPads.
Students informal discussions	Data will be collected about children's voices regarding the use of iPad as a learning tool.
Parents' and teachers' interviews	Data will be collected about teachers' and parents' views on the role of digital technologies effects on emergent readers.

Table 3: Data collection

When the data was collected, recorded interviews were listened to and transcribed using a word processing programme (Microsoft Word). After analysing the data files, I worked on linking the data to the research question by analysing emerging themes from interviews done and also predicted from the literature review. This was done by highlighting interesting sections, repeated phrases and certain words, patterns of behaviour and occurrences that repeated themselves throughout the interviews.

All participants who took part in the interview were given a hard copy of their transcribed interview in order to validate the research findings and interpretations of the data (Creswell, 2010) verifying data through the process of member checking.

Any other field notes done during observation sessions and informal discussions with children were also read over and over again in order to increase my understanding to present what has been discovered from my data. I reviewed, analysed, read my reflections and coded observation data after each session with the children and this helped me track analysis overtime.

Findings and Discussion

The Researcher's Role

In a learning perspective iPad applications (apps) can be seen as a scaffold to language learning. The Vygotskian perspective shows us various ways of how learning can take place among which are scaffolding (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976), guided participation (Rogoff et al. 1993) and guided interaction (Plowman & Stephen, 2007). For this study it was relevant to combine these perspectives to ensure the researcher's role as a teacher and her scaffolding by emphasizing technology mediated learning.

1. Enjoying	Through animation presented by apps. Choosing and receiving rewards.
2. Explaining	What is the literacy app about and what is required to do.
3. instructing	Researcher read reading dialogue boxes on screen when necessary. Showed how to use camera and upload photos.
4. managing	Researcher intervened in showing turn taking during the first lessons using iPad.
5. modelling	Researcher showed and worked out a level to show what children had to do and explained some features.
6. monitoring	Researcher moved children to an appropriate level of difficulty.
7. prompting	Researcher helped children to choose and type difficult words during the retelling of the story Farmer's Lunch.
8. Provide feedback	Researcher gave encouraging words for children's efforts to continue levels.
9. supporting	Researcher stayed close to children to offer emotional support and see that children come to no harm while taking photos in garden and around class.

Table 4: Different type of support for guided interaction

Following Plowman and Stephen's (2007) guidance to present child-led activities in which children learnt through play and exploration, the researcher acted as a facilitator, monitoring learning rather than actual direct teaching. Guided interaction was used by giving different types of support as Table 4 clearly shows.

Children's Learning

As iPads are not yet being used as learning tools in classes, and both children chosen for this case study are not exposed to digital technologies at home, a painting application was chosen for the children to get used to work on an iPad. This helped them to explore features and create something of their own. To begin emergent literacy sessions, children were presented with Twinkl Phase One LTE (2013) literacy app to help them in letter formation. Elisa liked this as it helped her finally to write the letters d and g well by following a black arrow.

Both Daniel and Elisa were encountering difficulties in letter sound recognition, so other literacy activities within this literacy app (Twinkl) were chosen to help children be more familiar with letter sounds. Matching games, popping up balloons, finding the initial and final sound of a word all helped children to strengthen their phonological awareness. On choosing the initial sound of the animals in Animals Phonics Island Adventure (2014) literacy app, children could be heard repeating the initial sound (t t t tiger; s s s snake) to find the picture which matches the sound required. After learning all the sounds of the alphabet and recognising sounds within words another core competence had to be tackled: that of reading simple words (cvc words). Working on these apps it was noticed that children applied their listening skills in order to get a word correctly. They even touched the letters many times in order to hear the word again and succeeded to match it to its picture or write the word correctly.

Constructivist applications were also used in order to challenge children to be creative and produce narrative stories when they had to retell Farmer's Lunch story (Big Cat Series, 2012) in their own version. Although they stuck to the main themes of the story, still they succeeded to create various positions where farmer's lunch was hidden. Listening to their recorded voices and sharing their story with others in class, boosted them to want to read more online books, create their own stories and share them among others. After four weeks of intense literacy tuition using iPad as a learning tool and continuous teaching back in class resulted in both Daniel's and Elisa's improvement in their emergent literacy skills.

Key Findings

Children's Learning to Read

Social constructivism theory and consequently scaffolding formed the basis of my decision to analyse the use of iPads in literacy learning to promote child learning independence, expanding on children's already known knowledge.

Although the two children chosen for this case study were not technologically exposed at home, they have shown their capacity to improve their emergent reading skills through iPad

use and showed competences in using features and specific tools while managing to read using letters, simple words, images, sound and stories electronically. During the four weeks of intensive literacy tutoring, there was an evident progress in children's reading which supported central findings in the literature available. This study concurs also with Ciampa's research (2012) as it shows that beginning readers and those who were having difficulties in reading were more motivated and engaged in their work while their level of attention increased through a constructivist method of instruction. It was also evident and complied with what McManis and Gunnewig (2012) stated that children working with technology in teacher-led activities, as was the case in this research study, can lead to both language and social development.

Motivation and Engagement

Another important objective for this research study was to motivate children enough to learn to read. Believing in what Sullo (2009) stated that in order to engage and motivate children in lessons, teachers must allow them to connect with each other, let them make choices while enjoying themselves in a safe secure environment, I tried to present this kind of learning environment to my students during this case study. 'Playing' with the tablet or iPad meant that this technological device was seen as a technological toy which could help them learn. Although this can have further implications when iPads are finally introduced in early years classrooms, children were intrinsically motivated to learn, not afraid to make mistakes (Flewitt et al. 2014) developing also a higher self-esteem. As most literacy apps were close-ended, because of literacy competences which had to be mastered, this helped children to be determined to continue levels within apps (Kucirkova et al. 2014). These educational apps were a means for children to strive continuously to attain the next level in the 'game'. Colourful graphics, animations and audio books which children regarded them as a help when encountering difficulties in reading all were a means to motivate children to read.

Other Effects of iPads on Children

Focusing on literacy learning and children's motivation to read, which were my principle aims for this research, other social affordances took me by surprise although I had read about them in other studies. Handling an iPad for the first time, children did not have any problems in turn-taking. Complying with other studies how can children establish rules for digital control themselves (Alant et al. 2003) and possibly as it was a very small group, children found it easy to share its display and cooperated easily with each other. Using the iPad led children to support and help each other in paired work while communicating, contrasted well with Plowman et al.'s study (2010). This was mostly evident when children used open-ended creative apps. Children are curious by nature and like to explore and investigate new things and understand how they work. Clicking buttons, exploring app features, swiping pages on iPad and creating their own story led these children to change their role from passive learners to engaged ones.

Conclusion

Beginning this personal experience on my research journey, I was sceptical about the outcomes of using iPads in an educational setting among very young children. I anticipated a kind of progress in children's literacy development since they get hooked on digital devices and can be more motivated to learn. While children liked and participated in activities on interactive white boards in class, the iPad gave them the opportunity to learn through a personal exploration and through working independently. This study clearly shows that if schools embark on implementing a one-to-one tablet policy in their classrooms, educators need to keep up to date in technology development to cater for the need of children bridging the gap between home and school. A synergy through teacher-child-parent can help children to improve their literacy development from very young age and succeed in their academic venture.

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Preparing for the Secondary Education Certificate Examination in Maltese through Private Tuition

Vanessa Saliba

Introduction

The educational system in Malta and the MATSEC examination system

The educational system in Malta offers fee-free education in government and church schools. While government schools are totally fee-free institutions that provide free books and school materials, church schools request donations and the purchase of books (Government of Malta, 2015). On the other hand, though independent schools charge fees and parents buy all necessary materials (Government of Malta, 2015), an amount of the fees paid can be deducted from the parents' taxes. Despite having free education, many students feel the need to receive private tuition—especially when they reach transitional phases in their education.

Education in Malta is compulsory between the ages of 5 and 16 (Vallejo and Dooly, 2008). This consists of six years of primary education, at the end of which students take national benchmark examinations that determine their posts in middle school. Following this, students attend two years in middle school and then three years in senior school. All government primary, middle and senior schools are co-educational.

After senior school, students may opt to further their education in a post-secondary school following Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) examinations. If the students wish to attend a sixth form school, they are requested to pass (at least grade 5) the Maltese, English and Mathematics SEC examinations together with one science subject and two other subjects of their choice (University of Malta, 2015). Around 54% of Maltese students continue their education in a post-secondary school (Vallejo and Dooly, 2008). Post-secondary institutions include the Junior College, sixth forms, the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) and the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS) (National Commission for Higher Education, 2009).

Effects of both systems on Maltese culture

Being a small country with a focus on human resources, many students and parents prioritise schooling. This is made more difficult by the limited opportunities for work and thus the need to be highly qualified to ease one's search for a career. There has been extensive effort from the government to invest in a better educational system, mainly by instituting reforms, providing technological resources and incorporating specialised professionals in schools and offering various scholarships for those who want to pursue their studies. This emphasis on schooling leads to a high percentage of students attending private tuition, but considering the government's large investment in education, it is interesting to investigate the reasons behind this growing phenomenon.

Literature Review

What is private tuition?

Private tuition consists of extra classes students attend in addition to the official educational system (Silova and Bray, 2006) with the aim of acquiring knowledge that has not been learnt in school (Dang, 2007) or to improve their understanding of a subject learnt at school (Ireson and Rushforth, 2011). It is given for remuneration (Foondun, 2002), and parents invest a lot of money in it. It is commonly referred to as a shadow educational system (Bray, 2006; Kwok, 2004a) because of its growing popularity (Paviot *et al.*, 2008) and because it works alongside the formal system.

Private tuition has changed its form over the years. It was understood as one-to-one instruction in the past (Ellson, 1976), but this has changed since private tutoring now has several forms, including large classes (Kwo and Bray, 2011; Tanner *et al.*, 2009), tutoring in small groups (Tanner *et al.*, 2009) and online courses (Ventura and Jang, 2010; Tanner *et al.*, 2009). Tutoring can be given all year round or just before important examinations, though it is more popular amongst secondary school students (Bray and Kwo, 2013).

Factors affecting the demand for private tuition

The demand for private tutoring is affected by various factors, including parents' educational levels: research shows that highly educated parents are more likely to send their children to private tuition (Nath, 2008; Paviot *et al.*, 2008; Kim, 2004; Bray and Kwok, 2003) since they value education more (Jelani and Tan, 2012; Davies, 2004). Moreover, they are probably more comfortable paying for private tuition because they are more likely to have high-paying jobs (Ireson and Rushforth, 2011). In fact, family income and socio-economic background both affect this phenomenon (Ireson and Rushforth, 2014, 2005; Paviot *et al.*, 2008). Family structure also affects this demand, as the more children a family has, the less likely it is to pay for private tuition (Kim and Park, 2010; Tansel and Bircan, 2006).

This demand is also influenced by the level and type of schooling in which the student is enrolled. Bray and Kwok (2003) argue that private tutoring is more common in secondary school due to the more difficult subject matter and the importance of doing well in exams, whereas Nath (2008) argues that children might need more tutoring at the primary level since, at that age, they require more attention and guidance. Davies (2004) further explains that children who attend private schools are more likely to be sent to private tuition, as are those who are sent to smaller schools (Kim, 2007), because their parents are more likely to be influenced by other parents.

Advantages of private tuition

Amongst the many advantages of private tutoring, there is the positive impact it has on learning and academic performance (Lavy and Schlosser, 2004; Jacob and Lefgren, 2002; MacBeath, Kirwan and Myers, 2001; Camp, 1990) because it can help students do better in school (Dang, 2007) and increases the probability of learners obtaining a matriculation certificate (Lavy and Schlosser, 2004). Tutoring helps students from disadvantaged backgrounds (MacBeath, Kirwan and Myers, 2001; Posner and Vandell, 1999) and weak students (Foondun, 2002). It helps students better understand content that was briefly covered in class or not fully comprehended (Wall, 2009) and helps students maximise their potential (Foondun, 2002).

Parents believe that private tuition is a good investment, as education levels are linked with future earning levels (Bray, 1995). Being tutored privately by the same teacher at school may also help students because the teacher already has a level of understanding regarding the students' needs and thus can more effectively help them (Bray and Kwo, 2013). Private tutoring also has a positive influence on students' attitudes and the way they view themselves (Camp, 1990). It has a relatively strong effect on pupil achievement as well (Kulpoo, 1998), and its pedagogical approaches are also innovative (Bray and Kwo, 2013).

Disadvantages of private tuition

Research suggests some drawbacks of private tuition, one of which is that it introduces social stratification and inequalities (Bray, 1999). Indeed, students from poorer families might not be sent to high-quality tuition (Dang and Rogers, 2008; Bray and Kwok, 2003; Foondun, 2002), which other families with higher average incomes might be able to afford (Bray and Kwo, 2013). Moreover, families may be forced to invest in tutoring because of the demands of the school system and society (Bray and Kwo, 2013). Bray (1999) discusses the phenomenon of private tutoring as a huge business enterprise where some teachers may reduce their efforts at school to reserve their energy for private tutoring (Bray and Kwo, 2013; Dawson, 2009). Teachers might also manipulate the mainstream system to their advantage to provide more tutoring opportunities for themselves (Foondun, 2002).

Children might experience negative consequences from private tutoring as well, including harm to their emotional, social and physical development (Paviot *et al.*, 2008; Foondun, 2002) due to the fact that tutoring takes a large amount of their time. This results in little time for hobbies, sports and relaxation (Bray and Kwo, 2013). Parents may also develop competitiveness and demand more hours for tutoring (Paviot *et al.*, 2008), resulting in more competitive children (Bray, 1999). Tutoring might lead to more disruptive classrooms as well, since students who are attending private tuition might consider school unimportant and value tutoring more (Kim, M., 2007; Foondun, 2002).

Reasons behind private tuition

Reasons for attending private tuition vary from wanting to do well in examinations (Paviot *et al.*, 2008; Ireson and Rushforth, 2005; Wanyama and Njeru, 2004) to pressure from peers who are already receiving tuition (Foondun, 2002). Tutoring is used to enhance student performance in a particular subject (Ireson and Rushforth, 2005; Wanyama and Njeru, 2004) because of the lack of time spent on the subject at school due to a vast syllabus (Mogari *et al.*, 2009) or insufficient instruction in the regular classroom (Foondun, 1992). In such cases, tutoring provides more support and individual attention (Dindyal and Bessondyal, 2007) and an increase in self-confidence (Ireson and Rushforth, 2005) because of the extra practice (Dindyal and Bessondyal, 2007).

Private tutoring may be the result of a failure in the school system to meet students' varying needs (Kim, 2006; Glewwe and Kremer, 2006; Davies, 2004; Kim and Lee, 2004), excessive school testing and an overemphasis on examinations (Bray, 1999; Foondun, 1992). Classes in school are often too large for individual attention (Foondun, 2002), and the number of classrooms and qualified teachers in school may be inadequate (Bray, 1995). Teaching materials in private tuition are also different from and better than those used in school, and students are given more tasks to complete (Bray, 1995).

Parents may even force their children to receive private tutoring because they want them to achieve the highest possible examination grades (Ireson and Rushforth, 2011; Kwok, 2004b). Many parents also believe that tutoring helps their children improve their understanding of a subject and therefore be more confident in it (Ireson and Rushforth, 2011). On the other hand, some students may lack parental guidance and therefore feel that they should seek help from other sources (Kim, 2006). It is also a way in which parents may feel involved in their children's education since they cannot help them in any other way due to differences in current teaching methods or insufficient time to mentor their children. Other parents even feel it is their obligation to send their children for private tutoring (Ireson and Rushforth, 2014).

It is also interesting to note why teachers are willing to provide private tuition. Many teachers are paid low salaries and therefore work as private tutors to make extra money (Wanyama and Njeru, 2004; Foondun, 2002). It is also possible that teachers follow their colleagues' practice (Foondun, 2002). Private tutoring can help maintain teachers' reputations as well (Wanyama and Njeru, 2004). There is an idea that the more students who pass, the better the tutor is; certainly, parents seek the help of the best teachers (Foondun, 1992). Private tuition may also be offered by university students or other unqualified persons who want to earn extra income (Burch, 2009).

Private tuition in Malta

An examination-dependent educational system leads to a high rate of private tuition, as is the case in Malta (Buhagiar and Chetcuti, 2013). In fact, Maltese students feel extra pressure to receive private tuition (Buhagiar and Chetcuti, 2013), which places a significant amount of stress on administrators, teachers, parents and students (Grima and Farrugia, 2006). This is an even greater reality given that, in the Maltese context, a

child's failure in examinations is associated with failure in the family (Calleja, 1988). The students' value in Malta is determined by their success in examinations, and thus, examination performance also affects their self-esteem (Chetcuti and Griffiths, 2002). It is for this reason that Maltese families are willing to make many sacrifices to pay for their children's private tutoring (Grima and Ventura, 2006). This has given rise to social stratification, since not all families can afford the expense (Buhagiar and Chetcuti, 2013). Moreover, families with a privileged socio-economic background generally have more connections and information, putting them in an advantaged position to find the best tutor. This further increases social stratification (Buhagiar and Chetcuti, 2013).

In Malta, the incidence of private tuition is greater in the academic transition years and is more popular for prerequisite subjects affecting academic achievement and career choices. Students from better schools also tend to attend private tuition more often (Buhagiar and Chetcuti, 2013). It is worth noting that private tuition classes typically cater to an average of 20 students. This is not remarkably different from the number of students in a typical school class (Gauci and Wetz, 2009).

Methodology

This research was guided by the interpretative paradigm, which relates to the qualitative methodology used in this study. In this view, truths and realities vary according to the perceptions of different people. The qualitative method of research allowed for deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions. The aim of this research was to determine the reasons why students in form 5 attend private tuition to prepare for the SEC Maltese examination even though they have free education at school. I conducted semi-structured interviews with three students, three parents and one private tutor, which were chosen randomly to ensure research validity and reliability (Cohen *et al.*, 2007). The aim behind this choice was to analyse the perceptions of the different stakeholders regarding this issue. The responses were later compared and contrasted to utilise triangulation. I pilot-tested my study to eliminate the possibility of any ambiguous questions and ensure that the queries yield the kind of data required (Nunan, 2009). All interviews were recorded and then transcribed and the data were analysed manually. The interview questions were divided into four general themes, which were chosen a posteriori since they emerged from participant responses. For each theme, I presented student, parent and private tutor responses (respectively) and then described the findings and provided interpretations.

Research Findings

Background information on participants

All three students participating in this research attended fee-free education. The parents were an assistant head of school, a public notary and a self-employed business owner. The private tutor was a teacher by profession with a master's in education and over 20 years of experience in different schools and institutions.

Demand for and supply of private tuition

Student, parent and private tutor responses were in line with the literature discussed in the literature review and with each other's arguments. Nath (2008), Paviot *et al.* (2008), Kim (2004) and Bray and Kwok (2003) all argue that the educational level of the parents affects the demand for private tuition as was indeed evident in the findings. Demand is also affected by the socio-economic background of the family, again confirming the findings of Ireson and Rushforth (2014) and Paviot *et al.* (2008.) The number of children in the family also plays a significant role, as suggested by Kim and Park (2010) and Tansel and Bircan (2006), together with the student's schooling level. It was also evident that busy work schedules and different teaching methods make it difficult for parents to personally help their children; therefore, they rely on private tuition. This confirms the findings of Ireson and Rushforth (2014). On the other hand, providing private tuition not only makes it possible for the private tutor to earn some extra money, but it also provides the teacher an opportunity to specialise further in a given subject and opens up new horizons.

Private tuition versus school

The participants expressed contradictory opinions about the difference the number of students in class makes. Whereas one student and two parents indicated that it makes a difference, the others said that it does not—and so did the tutor. All participants agreed that the teaching methods used in tuition are far better than those used at school, as are the resources applied in lessons, which supports Bray's (1995) findings. On this topic, however, the parents did not seem to be aware of the various resources made available. Therefore, they could not make a distinction. Although the students and the tutor indicated that more attention is given in private tuition, again supporting the findings of Dindyal and Bessondyal (2007), parents did not seem to find a difference between the attention their children receive at school and that in tuition. The students also indicated that tutors give them more specific homework; however, the parents and tutor indicated that the bigger difference lies in the amount of feedback given on homework. All participants indicated that the choice of tutor depended heavily on the parents and was determined mostly by the tutor's reputation amongst students and parents.

Benefits and drawbacks of private tuition

The students and parents did not see many drawbacks to private tuition; rather, they discussed its many benefits, including improvement in school due to good coaching and guidance from the tutor, as well as self-motivation. The tutor agreed with the other participants on the benefits of private tuition but also discussed some drawbacks, including limited free time, as argued by Bray and Kwo (2013), stress and the issue of fees.

Reasons for attending private tuition

Although many different reasons for attending private classes are discussed in the literature and confirmed by the tutor's responses, the most common reason in the case

of my participants was to serve as a review tool. This supports Paviot *et al.* (2008), Ireson and Rushforth (2005) and Wanyama and Njeru (2004). Both the students and their parents stated this, insisting that tuition is beneficial since it guides students towards SEC examinations by giving them the skills needed and the necessary coaching.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Concluding remarks

This study confirms that families are more likely to provide their children with private tuition when the parents are well-educated and have a good socioeconomic background as well as fewer children. Tutoring is more common in the last year of compulsory schooling, and it is a way for parents to help their children with their education. Class size in private tuition does not seem to be an important factor in students' learning, though some do prefer smaller classes. Teaching methods and resources in private tuition are better than those used in schools, and the homework and feedback are more effective. Despite leaving students with limited free time, private tuition leads to improvement in school performance and increased self-motivation. It serves as a revision tool in preparation for the SEC examination and helps students develop the necessary skills through targeted coaching.

Limitations of the study

The strength of this research lies in its ability to delve deeply into the responses of the participants, made possible through the qualitative method—especially with the semi-structured interviews. However, this method makes it impossible to generalise the findings because it eliminates other potential participants who might have answered differently.

Another possible limitation lies in the length and time available for this research. If the study had been longer and more time was available, I could have recruited more tutors to participate, which would have made it possible to gain different insights. Additionally, I would have been able to conduct observations in class myself, thus eliminating findings based only on perceptions.

Contribution to knowledge

This research presents a snapshot of the real situation in Malta regarding private tuition. In fact, the perspectives of the students, parents and tutor analysed in this study indicate that the local situation is no different from the international picture, thus confirming foreign research findings—mainly that the supplementary sphere of private tuition is an active world. The study shows that the main reason why students receive private tuition is to prepare themselves for the SEC examination in Maltese. The participants perceive tuition as beneficial because, according to them, it offers better teaching methods and resources and the tutor gives more individual attention, additional homework and more constructive feedback. They believe this combination contributes to the students'

improvement. In addition, these results confirm Malta's exam-oriented system of education.

Recommendations: Policy, practice and research

Considering that the main reason behind the prevalence of private tuition is the exam-oriented system of education, it would be beneficial to conduct an analysis of a possible alternative to the current system aimed to reduce examination pressure.

An anonymous feedback sheet for students, parents and teachers would be helpful to gain feedback about challenges, difficulties or suggestions for what can be done to improve the teaching experience.

It is also important to investigate what type of attention students expect from their teachers to feel adequately supported, including practical examples of attention they do receive. It is also important to know what type of feedback students consider helpful. Knowing what the students expect helps teachers provide better service.

It is also important for teachers to be trained more on how to adapt different teaching methods suitable for varying student needs. Moreover, teachers must be trained in how to strike a balance amongst the vast syllabus, the examination pressure and the authentic learning which should happen in classes. Possible changes in the syllabi might further improve the situation in Malta.

Another important step is to investigate the way teaching resources in schools are chosen, especially textbooks. All three students participating in this research indicated that the resources used in private tuition are better, while the tutor explained that one reason for this is that tutors are autonomous in choosing their own resources. Therefore, it would be beneficial to investigate how school textbooks are chosen and who is responsible for choosing them since the present system is surely not effective as that in private tuition.

Final note

This study confirms that the prevalence of private tuition in Malta arises from the deficits of its fee-free educational system. It also indicates that students and parents are totally in favour of private tuition since they perceive its many benefits. However, one must not eliminate other possible reasons behind private tuition, such as academic difficulties, as discussed in the literature review.

These findings reveal that private tuition is, in fact, beneficial for students—some of whom really need it. Therefore, the solution for the increasing incidence of private tuition is definitely not to eliminate it altogether but to improve the fee-free educational system. With this strategy, private tuition will remain a necessity for only those students who really need it due to personal academic difficulties, and those who can manage otherwise can avoid it through better school teaching.

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Mentoring Provision for Intending and Beginning Teachers in Malta

Tony Mizzi

Introduction

This chapter will analyse the type of support required at preservice and at induction by intended and new teachers in Malta. Subsequently, this chapter will consider the type of skills, competence and experience the individuals offering this support need to possess.

Background of the Study

The Education Act amendments of 2006 led to the formation of an Induction Phase for newly qualified teachers (Education Act, 2006). As an obligatory requirement for the Induction Phase, newly qualified teachers need to receive the support of a mentor.

In the meantime, The Newly Qualified Teachers Induction Phase Handbook (2016) document was formulated indicating the duties and responsibilities of the College Principals, the Heads of School, the Education Officers, the Mentor Coordinators, the Mentors and the newly qualified teachers. The Department also published the guidelines for assessing and profiling these newly qualified teachers (Quality Assurance Department, 2012).

Furthermore, during scholastic year 2016 – 2017 the Faculty of Education (University of Malta) which is the sole provider of initial teacher training in Malta, launched a new restructured teachers' training course. The students enrolled in this programme would first need to have completed a first course of study in the specialised area they aspire to teach. A key component of this reform is the introduction of the role of teacher-mentor to advise these new student-teachers.

Research Question

This paper is reporting the following research questions:

- I. How do the expectations, desires and aspirations of student-teachers and newly qualified teachers influence the way they react to the challenges of teaching?
- II. What type of support is needed by student-teachers and newly qualified teachers in their formation years?
- III. Who according to the literature review and this research is most suitable to offer this support?
- IV. What are the skills, competences and abilities needed to perform mentorship duties?

Literature Review

Defining Mentoring

It is pertinent to note that the term 'mentoring' traces back to François Fénelon who in 1699 published a book entitled "Les Aventures de Télémaque" (Roberts, 1999). Fénelon's book develops on Homer's epic narration of the Odyssey. He narrates the adventures of Telemachus, the young son of Odysseus, king of Ithaca, and of an older man, named *Mentor*. This Mentor is shown as a wise man who constantly offers advice to Telemachus (Roberts, 1999).

This fictional representation of Mentor initiated the use of this term which acquired the meaning of

a nurturing process in which a more skilled or more experienced person, serving as a model, teaches, sponsors, encourages, counsels and befriends a less skilled or less experienced person for the purpose of promoting the latter's professional and/or personal development. Mentoring functions are carried out within the context of ongoing, caring relationship between mentor and protégé

(Anderson, 1987, cited in Anderson and Shannon, 1988: 40)

This nurturing element stresses the importance, as noted by Anderson and Shannon (1995), of fostering a 'caring relationship' (ibid, 1995: 29). This concurs with Bezzina's (2008) line of thought that the relationship between mentee and mentor should be of mutual trust and confidentiality. However, Bezzina (2008) elaborates further by claiming that the elements of trust and confidentiality should be tied to two other important characteristics. The first one is that the mentor should be a colleague not a superior, whereas the second is that the mentor should not be involved in the assessment procedure. Bezzina (2008) acknowledges that the positional power implied in being a superior or an assessor would lead to a degree of fear by the mentee to express his/her limitations, which in turn would diminish the openness of the relationship. This reflection leads to the conclusion that the relationship between mentor and mentee should be that of critical friends, bestowed with the ability to challenge the mentees to re-examine their teaching while offering encouragement and support (Furlong and Maynard, 1995).

For the purpose of this study, Maynard & Furlong's (1994, 1995) model of mentoring is used to measure the adequateness of mentoring within the Maltese context.

Mentees

In Malta, there are two mentoring provisions, one for student-teachers and one for newly qualified teachers. During the Induction Phase, the new qualified/recruited teachers have an obligatory one year mentoring phase in which they have to be involved in at least four lesson observations followed by discussion sessions (Quality Assurance Department, 2013). These discussion meetings are organised under strict confidentiality in order to make the mentees

feel at ease while reflecting on their shortcomings. Similarly, from this scholastic year, student-teacher also receiving mentoring guidance.

Both programs encourage an ethos where the mentorship relationship pervades the whole institution and the professional life of all teachers. Ultimately, it establishes a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), where teachers learn together and share practices. Indeed, this 'two-way relationship' envisioned in the mentoring relationship is based on the principle that both mentor and mentee receive feedback (Rush et al., 2008). This enhances professional growth in the teacher-mentors (Hudson, 2013) since they engage in professional learning which they feel must appropriate for their needs (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 2011).

The first year of teaching is a very challenging year where "the beginning teacher struggled to fulfil the multiple demands of the role, often unaided and unsupported by experienced colleagues" (Smethem, and Adey 2005: 87). Wideen et al. (1998) describes the formation years as a 'culture shock' during which the joy of teaching is quickly lost, and "the immediate concern is coping and being seen to be able to cope with the job itself" (Sikes et al., 1985: 27).

Consequently, it is crucial, as stated by Corbell, Osbourne, Rieman (2010) that these two initial phases in a teacher's formation offer professional learning. This study concurs with Attard Tonna's (2015) that the Maltese education system needs to progress from 'professional development' to 'profession learning', which implies greater ownership by the learners in determining their needs. It echoes Huling, Resta and Yeargain (2012) regarding the importance of establishing the role of a teacher-mentor to offer individualised support to student-teachers and newly qualified teachers. This assistance has to serve as counter-balance to the daunting task faced by these individuals at the beginning of their profession journey, which Kutcy and Schuls (2006) describe as "a time of survival" (p.82).

Mentors

It is important to understand that these mentoring provisions are established within the content of the current scenario which is of professional isolation (Buhagiar and Murphy, 2008). Indeed even in those schools which urge young teachers to voice their opinion and challenges, "it seems that there are fears of appearing incapable, of a reluctance to emphasize one's powerlessness vis a vis colleagues" (Smethem and Adey 2005: 188). To overcome this fear, it is vital to establish a bond of trust between the mentor and mentee. Marlow, Kyed, and Connors (2005) promote the 'a feeling of caring and a sense of advocacy', which 'emphasizes relationship, not just institutions, and demands consideration of the needs and feelings of all partners (p. 559).

Nonetheless, for mentorship programs to be successful, they need to be organised, personalised and well supervised (Ingersoll and Smith, 2004). This is why within the Maltese context, the Handbook for Job Description (Ministry of Education, Employment and Youth, 2007) outlined a detailed list of duties of a teacher-mentor whilst the Faculty has defined its own guideless.

Both programs concur with Tomlinson (1995) about the need that a teacher mentor is 'a reflective coach' who assists the mentee to reflect on his/her own teaching practices, and 'an effective facilitator', which implies that the role of mentoring also includes counselling.

In concrete terms, it means that the mentor should have continual access to lessons plans, to the records of work, to the assessments of students and also, to lesson observation. A very important feature is also that the mentor discusses with his/her mentee, in order to assist him/her in determining how to improve further. The aim is to develop schools into centres of learning (Bezzina and Camilleri, 2001; Bezzina and Testa, 2005).

There seems to be agreement that the skills essential for mentoring are not the same as those needed for quality teaching. Still, some contend that a degree of overlapping does exist (Cunningham, 2007), while others affirm that mentoring is an entirely different professional identity to classroom teaching (Smith, 2015).

It is also important to note that “mentoring only flourishes when it is perceived by senior managers as an important aspect of staff development” (Stephens, 1996:4) and when working conditions, specifically a reduction in workload and remuneration are offered for those individuals who assume mentoring duties (Clow, 2005). In fact, in Malta mentoring of newly qualified teachers is considered as equivalent to two lessons contact time with students. On the other hand, the Faculty is proposing remuneration for those who are selected as mentors.

Mentors are also trained, and due relevance is given both to the theoretical perspective and case studies of mentorship (Cunningham, 2005). This training helps mentors “make their practice and the rationale underpinning that practice accessible” (Corrigan and Peace 1996: 25). In other words, mentors would learn to distinguish between ‘espoused theories’ and ‘theory in use’ (Argyris and Schön, 1974). Mentors must also be conscious of the cultural knowledge that bestows “the lens through which [teachers’ practical knowledge] is viewed and interpreted” (Maynard, 2000:8).

Concerning the involvement of mentors in the assessment of their mentees, Jones and Straker (2006) believe that school mentors should be ‘required to act as their assessors and as gatekeepers to the teaching profession’ (p. 166). Nonetheless, I believe that this view might be a limitation on how inclined student-teachers and new teachers are to expose themselves to that person who has to evaluate them. In fact, in view of this, in both mentoring programs in Malta, the mentor is not involved in the assessment and/or evaluation procedure.

Methodology

The process through which a researcher attempts to answer questions, resolve situations or develop a greater level of understanding of an organization is central to the field of education research. Basse (1999:38) writes that “research is systematic, critical and self-critical enquiry” (p. 38), implying that, that to be successful, the research has to be carefully planned, structured and well-organized.

Positivism or Interpretivism

The main paradigms of research methodology available for research designs are positivism and interpretivism. Positivism is defined as “a social theory” (Morrison, 2007). A positivist approach presumes that a right answer is achievable and that a scientific truth exists. This suggests that inductivism implies the notion that a theory can be determined by empirically established facts. Nonetheless, empirical research can also be grounded on theories because hypotheses can be extracted from these theories. This process denotes the deductive nature of research.

In contrast, interpretive research centres on the ontology of ‘what is’. The researcher, in this perspective, uses qualitative data to interpret and to objectify the issue under investigation. Subsequently, the researcher will have manipulated the ‘what is’ by the very nature of this research. Interviews, diaries and observation are the methods used in this approach.

Selecting the Research Method to adopt

The ‘*Combining approach*’ or mixing of methods was adopted to reach trustworthy conclusions, since “in combination they provide the best opportunity to address the question set, or specific sub facets of the research topic” (Morrison, 2007:29).

The arguments in favour of this approach are both technical and epistemological. The technical argument is primarily about practicality and appropriateness of the method selected to examine the questions raised or specific sub-facets of the study. The epistemological argument raises the question that the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research can be both misleading and of limited value (Hammersley, 1992).

The advantages of mixed methods are that this approach enhances triangulation and gives a holistic picture of the problem under investigation. In so doing, it facilitates a better relationship between variables, and supports better links at micro- and macro-levels of analysis. Concurrently one method can be used to help another. Hammersley (1995) named this reciprocal support as ‘facilitation’.

Case Study

For this purpose, a *case study* is the best technique to investigate the research questions raised, due to the fact that this study is set within the boundaries of a specified timeframe and location. A case study is also part of the natural context and of relevance to the institutions where it is carried out (Bassey, 2007). Case studies involve analytically gathering enough information to determine how the subject operates or functions (Berg, 2004). Bassey (2007) elaborates that the amount of data gather should be sufficient to explore significant features of the case, and to reach credible conclusions which convey a persuasive argument to the audience. In this scenario, a case study was considered the best approach to identify the scenario as depicted within two colleges.

Research

The research took place in two different colleges, specifically the secondary sector of one college and the primary schools of another college. In concrete terms, it means two secondary schools and seven primary schools, as illustrated in Table 1.

College	Secondary	Primary
1	2	0
2	0	7

Table 1 Research Context

Nonetheless, the number of persons involved were only those individuals who were involved in the induction phase. Subsequently, the persons involved was minimal. In the primary sector there were seven newly qualified teachers, and six mentors. He these mentors two were assistant head of question whereas the rest were peripatetic teachers.

It is relevant to note that classroom teachers, although entitled to serve as teacher-mentors, in practical terms cannot, since no cover would be provided for them in the classroom.

In the secondary sector, all mentees are within one school. This is because of the reform initiated to divide the secondary sector into middle and senior schools. Subsequently, in these last two years, intake of students was only in the middle school. Concurrently new teachers had to be employed in this school, of which some are newly qualified teachers. In fact, in this school there are twelve newly qualified teachers in their first year and another eight in their second year. To support these students, there are seven mentors, of which one works within this school, whereas the others work in the other school. Also, four of them are Heads of Departments since mentoring at secondary level can be done by teacher-mentors and Heads of Department only. This structure is represented in Table 2:

Induction Phase Organizational Structure (Secondary Sector)				
Schools	Newly Qualified Teachers 2 nd year	Newly Qualified Teachers 1 st year	Teacher-Mentors	Heads of Department
School 1 – Middle School	8	12	0	1
School 2 – Senior School	0	0	3	3

Table 2 – Induction Phase Organizational Structure (Secondary Structure)

Sampling and Questionnaires

The questionnaire was distributed to all newly qualified teachers consists of three sections; a personal information section, a personal opinion section of close-end questions, based on the *5 point Likert-Scale*, and a further personal opinion section for open-end questions. The data of section A was used for the formulation of stratified sampling of the population for the subsequent interview. Consequently, I needed to divide the sample into groups, with members who had common characteristics. (Fogelman, and Comber, 2002).

Questionnaires were distributed to all nine Heads of School, to all thirteen mentors, and to fifteen student-teachers allocated to the school were the research took place. Another questionnaire was prepared and distributed to five practicum supervisors. The stratified sampling was based on having a proportional representation between the two sectors based on the number of student-teachers allocated in these schools as shown in Table 3.

	Student-teachers	Percentage of whole population of student teachers	No. of supervisors included in research
Secondary Schools	12	80%	4
Primary Schools	3	20%	1
Total	15	100%	5

Table 3 Proportional representation of supervisors

These questionnaires explored the same key areas as the newly qualified teachers' questionnaire, and were also divided into three sections, following a similar structure to the first questionnaire.

The questionnaires were first piloted among a number of colleagues since, "only when a group similar to your population completes your questionnaire and provides feedback you know for sure that all is well" (Bell, 2007:232). Firstly, *exploratory pilot work* was carried out, where through lengthy unstructured interviews with colleagues, key areas were identified, and which supported the process of the actual writing of the questions. Subsequently, the piloting of the actual questionnaires was carried out to verify and, where needed, make changes to the wording and the layout (Oppenheim, 1992).

Sampling and Interviews

The data of the said questionnaires were collected, and from this data, key areas were determined. These key areas were then investigated further through different types of interviews, respectively to three newly qualified teachers, to two Heads of School, three mentors, three practicum supervisors and three student-teachers. The interviews offered the possibility to explore in depth some key issues and to compare 'many sources of evidence in order to determine the accuracy of information or phenomena' (Bush, 2007: 100), aiming for both **methodological** and **response triangulation**. In order to reach trustworthy conclusions, both triangulations are needed, for the validity and the reliability of the study (McFee, 1992).

All interviews were of the semi-structured type, which give more opportunity for the interviewees to express their opinion in depth, whilst still controlling the agenda and the process of the interview (Ribbons 2007).

All individuals interviewed were selected using the *stratified sampling* approach, with each group having a different set of variable on which were chosen. For mentors, the primary variable was an equal representation of male and female mentors, whereas the second variable was a microcosm of the population under investigation (specifically, number of years in the profession and qualification). For the student-teachers, the mentees and the Heads of Schools, the only variable used is that of proportional representation from the primary and the secondary sector. For practicum supervisors, the key criteria were to have an equal distribution between Faculty members, teachers enrolled as supervisors and Education Officers.

Potential Bias

As a member of all these communities, sole interviewer and author of the research, I was aware of the dangers of bias. I avoided formulating supplementary questions during the interviews, since these question could have been phrased in a biased manner, giving an indication of my own position and/or educational philosophy (Moser and Kalton, 1971). On the other hand, during interviews, I tried to establish *rapport* and *neutrality*.

However, I still opted to use the response triangulation method which gives a multi-facet perspective of the issue under investigation, and therefore, increases objectivity, reliability and validity of the data gathered. Reliability was further enhanced by the 'test-retest' procedure, that was used for both questionnaires and interviews, in which "when tests are developed, they are typically tested for reliability by giving them to a group of people then calling back those same people a week later to take the test again" (Bernard, 2000: 49).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines published by the British Educational Research Association (2011) and the University of Sheffield Code of Ethics were used as a reference point for this study. In fact, this study was ethically reviewed and approved by the University of Sheffield. The issues encountered were the protection from harm and informed consent. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) argue that protection from harm is about

protecting the rights of the participants by maintaining privacy, anonymity, confidentiality, and avoiding harm (physical and psychological), betrayal and deception.

(Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000: 83)

For this reason, the schools were referred through the use of numerical identification. In this context, it is significant to confirm that privacy and confidentiality were guaranteed by not making reference to individuals or departments in the write up. This approach preserved anonymity to all, except the researcher. This is more relevant, due to the delicate position of newly qualified teachers and student-teachers in relations to the power dynamics and hierarchical structure still persistent in Maltese schools (Bezzina and Grima, 2007).

The issue of informed consent was dealt through an information sheet given to all participants, outlining their role as participants. All the participants had the possibility to withdraw at any time and agreed in writing that their data would be used. The participants were also informed that they can contact my supervisor for any clarifications and/or concerns.

Findings and Discussion

The section aims to give answers to the four research questions raised in this study. This section is divided into four subsections, each addressing one of the research questions. Subsequently, the headings of these subsections are the research questions themselves.

How do the expectations, desires and aspirations of student-teachers and newly qualified teachers influence the way they react to the challenges of teaching?

This study concluded that beyond any doubt both student-teachers and newly qualified teachers alike feel that teaching is a very demanding profession. In fact all participants strongly agreed that the Ministry of Education was right in establishing the role of mentor within the Induction phase of newly qualified teachers whereas just one participant disagreed with the introduction of student based mentoring. Indeed, this divergent view, who is a mentor believes that including the role of mentor in the practicum experience, would make the student-teacher feel as “if he was in a reality show with continuous scrutiny”¹. This mentor continued by stating, that he feels that this reform would increase the fear and tensions that the student-teachers feel doing their practicum. In reality this is in direct antithesis to the reasons which led for this reform, as outlined both in the literature review and in the interviews carried out with the two Faculty members.

The research also outlined an anomaly in the induction phase where all newly employed teacher within the state sector have to undergo an identical induction phase, as noted by a participant, irrespective of whether they are new teachers or newly recruited with a number of year of teaching experience. The opinion of this teacher clearly indicates a divergent view from that expressed in the literature review which denotes the role that mentoring has in the continuous professional development of teachers and the importance of reflective and collaborative practices.

Nonetheless, this study also determined that both student-teachers and newly qualified teachers feel a lot of anxiety and are affected by comments from their colleagues. They are also not able to link the theory they have studied at University with the practice of everyday teaching. This leads to a sense of inadequacy and unpreparedness to fill their professional role.

What type of support is needed by student-teachers and newly qualified teachers in their formation years?

This study affirms that both student-teachers and newly qualified teachers need the assistance of someone who can be a critical friend. This person needs to offer guidance, encouragement and sympathize with them while they are facing difficulties. This person has also to be available to offer immediate support. Nonetheless, this study identified that this is not always the case since in the current mentoring provision for newly qualified teachers, a number of mentors work in different schools. This anomaly also raised concern about the type of support a mentor can offer if s/he does not know the mentee’s school culture and ethos, which this study noted as an essential component of mentoring. Furthermore, if the mentor and mentee work in different schools, it is difficult to meet on a regular basis. Subsequently, the relation of mutual trust and respect cannot be established. Ultimately, without this condition, the scope of mentoring is not being reached. On the other hand, this same anomaly should not be an issue in the student-teachers’ mentoring provision, since the Faculty decided to adopt a school-based mentoring approach.

In concrete terms, this study also highlighted the individuality of the provision, or in other words, that the mentoring provision has to be based on the mentee’s needs. This study aligned itself with Maynard and Furlong (1995) Reflective Model of Mentoring which both the Faculty of Education in Malta and the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education adopted as their theoretical background for this provision.

¹ Translated to English from Mentoring interview 4

Concurrently, this study also came to the conclusion that mentoring provision can initiate communities of practice at schools (Wenger, 1998) and also, be a form of profession learning for the mentors (Smith, 2015).

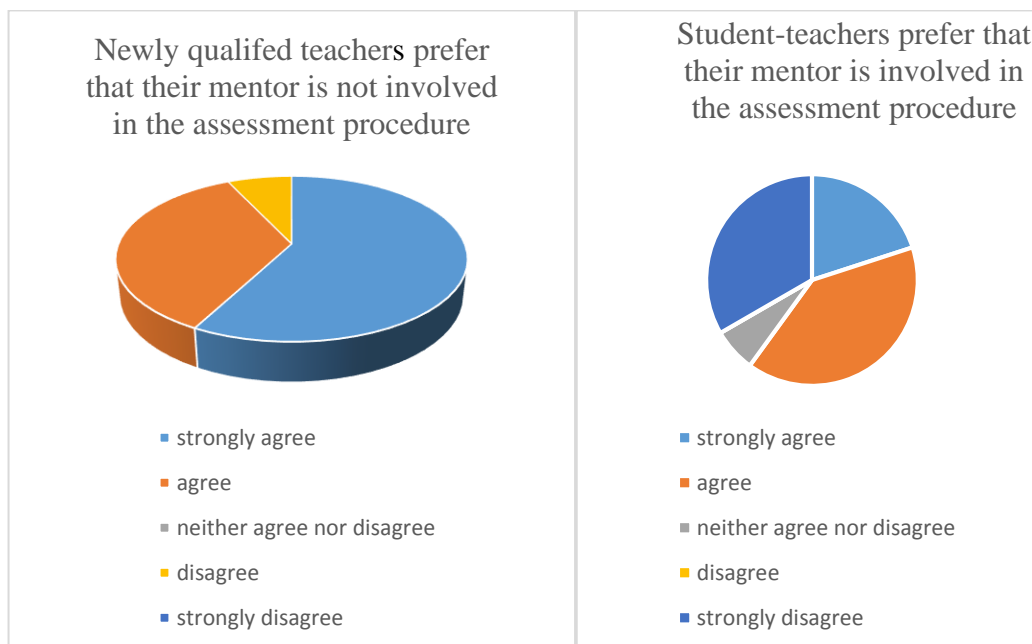
Who is most suitable to offer this support?

This study affirms that a colleague should assume the role of mentor, thus concurring that positional power affects the relationship at work (Bezzina, 2008). Indeed, the majority of the student-teachers and newly qualified teachers, as indicated in Table 4, do not find it easy to express their difficulties to their superiors.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Newly qualified teachers	11 (73.33%)	2 (13.33%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (13.33%)	0 (0.0%)
Student-teachers	11 (84.62%)	2 (15.38%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)

Table 4 Newly qualified teacher and student-teacher² do not feel at ease expressing their challenges and limitations to their appraisals

Concurrently, this led to overwhelming agreement that the confirmation and/or assessment procedure should not be carried by the mentors. Nonetheless, there were divergent views about whether the mentor should be involved or not it, as indicated in the following figures.



² Results for this table derived the respective questionnaires

Fig. 1 Newly qualified teachers prefer that their mentor is not involved in the assessment procedure

Fig. 2 Student-teacher prefer that their mentor is involved in the assessment procedure

What are the skills, competences and abilities needed to perform mentorship duties?

The results indicate agreement by all stakeholders (Fig.3) that the mentor has to be a teacher.

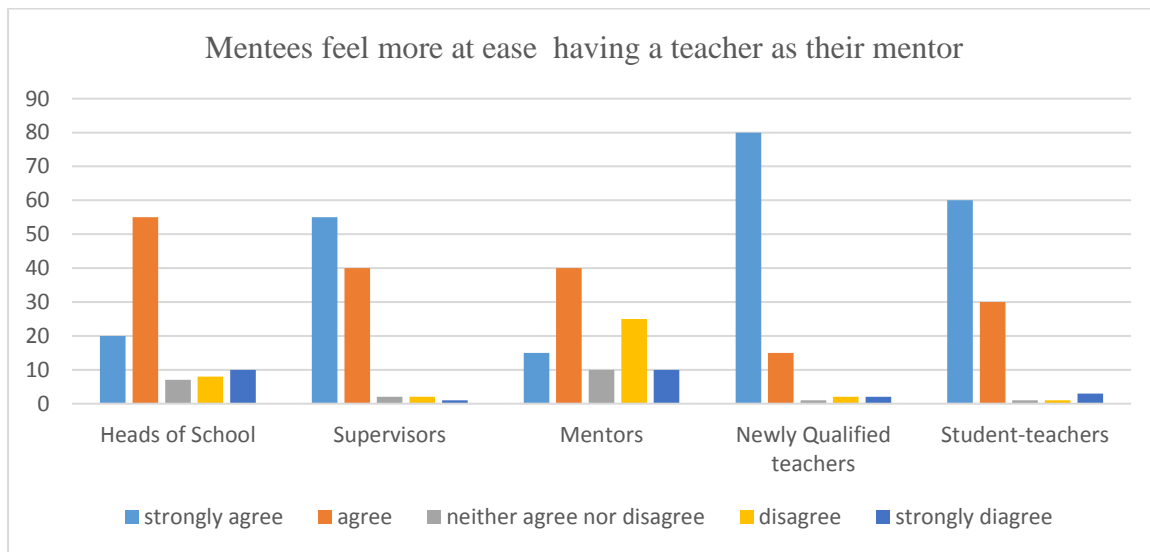


Fig. 3 Mentees feel more at ease having a teacher as their mentor

This result is in line with the belief as previously explained that a mentor should be a colleague and not a superior. However, it is important to be aware that some of the participants, as indicated in the methodology section, who participated in this study as mentors are Heads of Department or Assistant Heads of School. This factor might be the reason behind the higher percentage of disagreement with the statement posed from this category (i.e. 24.59%) when compared with the other stakeholders.

Furthermore, due to the nature of the role of mentor, qualitative research technique, specifically interviews were more useful to extrapolate the characteristics required for a good mentor. In general, student-teachers, newly qualified teachers and mentors themselves emphasized that mentors need to be good listeners, good observers, good communicators, caring, friends, and be honest in their relationship. The Heads of School interviewed both emphasized the need that the mentor stimulates the mentee “to go beyond subject teaching, and offer an extended curriculum to the students”³ while the College Principal interviewed emphasized the importance that the mentor acts as a role model.

On the other hand, the Faculty members discussed how a mentor can be the link person to close the gap between theory and practice. The mentor, according to these University lecturers, needs to be someone who has the theoretical background and the skill to implement

³ Translate from Head of School Interview 2

the theory in the classroom. The mentor should be able to discuss and to stimulate the mentee to reflect about these teaching practices. The study emphasized that teachers need to be trained for the role of mentor.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It has to be stated that this study has two limitations. First of all, it is a case study of the realities and opinions within specific schools. Therefore, it cannot be interpreted as giving a picture of the beliefs of the situation for the whole education system in Malta. Nonetheless, it is relevant to note, that the research was carried within two different colleges and within two different sectors (i.e. Primary and Secondary Sector), and still the results showed a significant congruence in the data, thus indicating a possibility that the issues investigated go beyond the boundaries of the institutions, where it was carried.

The second limitation is related to the student-teachers' provision. Indeed, this study is reflecting and investigating on the need for its introduction and the rationale behind its implementation. However, this study cannot elaborate on the actual effectiveness and limitations of this provision

Recommendations

This study recommends the allocation of one the school's committees on mentoring and training. The study also noted the importance of mentoring for the professional development of teachers. The fact that mentoring would be one of school's committees⁴, gives a strong message to the whole institution, that it is an important aspect within the institution. It also gives the opportunity to offer a working platform⁵ for those individuals, which the Head of School believes can be an asset for the school in this area. This school committee should discuss the matching exercise between mentors and mentees, since they would have a better knowledge than the Faculty or the Office of the College Principal, of the personal character of the mentors present at school. This exercise would also empower some teachers to extend their role beyond classroom teaching. It will also mitigate a possibly anomaly between the two provisions.

Heads of School should offer practical support if they truly want mentoring entitlement to flourish within their institution. At secondary level, it is mainly an issue of designing a timetable for the teacher-mentors to allow them to perform properly their duties. At primary level, the Head of School should, within the limitations of the present provision, find solutions to allow the teachers to leave their classroom to perform their mentoring duties. Once again, if appropriate timetabling is carried out, the teacher might leave his/her class, whilst under the supervision of a peripatetic teacher or during curriculum time⁶.

⁴ By regulations each teacher in a State school has to be member of one the school's committees establish during the Schools Development Plan

⁵ The school committees have an allocated time in the Secondary teacher's timetable, whereas at primary level, have catered for by the School's Management team, they can meet during curriculum time.

⁶ It is a time dedicated for professional development and meetings within the primary sector

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End Note

In 2008, we had a dream that St Catherine's High School Higher Education Tuition Centre would launch a programme to enhance educational research capacity in Malta. We wanted to give Malta-based students the opportunity to study with a world class international university through a locally taught programme. In October 2009, my mother, the principal of St. Catherine's High School at that time, Mrs Marie Midolo opened the first study school, wishing the first and future students every success in their journey of lifelong learning. She met with the Sheffield team and the students at every study school, making it a point to pop by at coffee time on a Sunday morning to see how things were going. She would be truly proud of *Studies in Education: Perspectives from Malta*, which is the second e-book of Malta-based MA students' work.

The partnership which has grown between St Catherine's High School Higher Education Tuition Centre and the School of Education at the University of Sheffield is one of mutual respect and trust. Three times each year, we welcome the team of academics from Sheffield to run study schools at St Catherine's – and the buzz of dialogue is rich and nourishing for all involved. Our MA students – studying in the fields of Early Childhood Education, Educational Studies, and Languages' Education have chosen such interesting topics for study.

The first MA students enrolled in October 2009 and graduated in style in January 2012. There was great celebration in Sheffield on that day and Maltese Flags waved proudly in the University's Octagon Centre as I joined students' families and friends, and the Sheffield team to celebrate their success. Since then, we have welcomed eight more cohorts of MA students – all studying part-time – most working full-time and many having their own children. Their commitment to studying and to making a difference to their own practice and to informing wider national policy is impressive and a matter of great pride. This is why we chose to offer an annual award (the St Catherine's Post Graduate Prize now the Marie Midolo prize in memory of my mother and her contribution to establishing the Sheffield Post Graduate programme) to celebrate the student whose contribution to the field via their dissertation would have been considered the most original and mark-bearing.

We are proud of the contributions our MA graduates have made to understanding aspects of education policy and practice in Malta and we celebrate their work in the pages of this book. Some have benefited from Maltese Government Scholarships and others have been funded by their institutions or have funded their studies out of their own pockets. Every one of them has enjoyed the practical and emotional support of their families as well as the scholarly supervision and encouragement from their Sheffield tutors.

The chapters in this book make an important contribution to education in Malta and each bears testament to the commitment of their authors to continue their own learning in order to support the learning of their students – whatever their age. I congratulate all on their work.

I thank the Sheffield academic team for giving the students on our MA programme such a rich learning experience and for the opportunity to share their work in this way. It is a valuable resource and demonstrates what can be achieved through working collaboratively with the shared aim of making a difference to learning.

It is now our duty and responsibility to read these chapters with eyes wide open, a heart ready to capture soulful experiences and a spirit willing to go the extra mile. May we all be inspired to walk the extra mile in this educational road we have embarked on as parents, educators, leaders.

Sue Midolo

Director of St. Catherine's High School Higher Education Tuition Centre

April 2017

Biographies

Pauline Mallia-Milanes is a Learning Support Assistant within the Primary Sector. After graduating from the University of Malta and working for the last thirteen years in the field of inclusion encouraged her to read for an MA in Early Childhood Education. Study units were planned according to her area of specialisation, which enhanced further both the knowledge and practice holistically.

Julia Bianco is a support tutor and teaches study skills in an independent secondary school. Before a break of 14 years, she worked as an operating theatre sister in the UK for a number of years. The Masters in ECE followed a Diploma in Inclusive Education. Julia's main interest is Autism.

Giselle Theuma obtained a diploma in Early Childhood Studies with University of Dundee in 2009. She graduated at the University of Malta in Primary Education in 2011 and recently completed a Masters' Degree in Early Childhood Education with University of Sheffield. Her research focused on children's science-related discourse during water play. She is presently employed as a Primary school teacher.

Joanne Falzon Zammit Munro is a Personal, Social and Career Development teacher in a State School (Malta) and has been in the educational field for the past 20 years. She has obtained a BA Hons. in Youth & Community Studies, a Post Graduate in Education (PGCE) PSCD and a Masters in Educational Studies: Learning, Teaching and Research (Sheffield, UK).

Alessandra Balzan is a B.Ed. (Hons.) primary teacher, who specialised in Early Childhood Education and Deaf Education. In 2013 she started working as a literacy support teacher, responsible for assisting the administration personnel, teachers, children and their parents in literacy related issues, across eight primary schools in the southern region of Malta.

Rita Saliba is currently a complementary teacher in a state school where she helps learners aged 5 to 10 who encounter difficulties in literacy in both Maltese and English languages. Her MA research focused on the effects of digital technologies, mainly the iPad, on emergent readers and their motivation to learn.

Vanessa Saliba, B.Ed. (Hons.), M.A. (Sheffield), is a lecturer at MCAST. She lectures on inclusive education. Previously Saliba was a teacher of Maltese and then an autism support teacher. On completing her M.A., Saliba was awarded a share from the St Catherine's Student Prize for her high standard of work.

Tony Mizzi is an Education Officer within the Accreditation Unit. He started his career as a teacher of Italian within State Secondary schools. He was awarded a M.A. Education Studies, a M. Sc. Education Leadership, B. Ed. (Hons.) and a Postgraduate Certificate as a Train the Trainer for the implementation of a Learning Outcome Framework.

Sabine Little (PhD) directs the MA courses on the Malta Programme. Her own research focuses on the experiences of multilingual children at home and in educational contexts, making her work in Malta and the exchanges with students and teachers there particularly poignant and interesting.