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## Language use in the primary classroom: Maltese teachers' views on multilingual practices

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### ABSTRACT

**EN** Recent global migration trends and an increase in worldwide human mobility are currently contributing to unparalleled challenges in the area of literacy and education within multicultural and multilingual societies (Leikin, Schwartz, & Tobin, 2012). Malta, a small island in the Mediterranean, is one country currently seeking ways in which to adapt to the realities of today's diverse classrooms. This paper details original research into Maltese teachers' perceptions and practices in multilingual classrooms. Following a brief overview of Malta's language history and educational system, we draw on the experiences of eight bilingual primary school teachers through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Recent demographic changes in Malta necessitate a paradigm shift in education. With Malta's challenges mirrored at global level, this study makes an important contribution to understanding the issues faced by educators and children, exploring pathways towards an equitable and socially just education for all.

**Key words:** MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION, MULTILINGUAL TEACHING PRACTICES, TRANSLANGUAGING, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION

**ES** Las tendencias migratorias recientes y el aumento de la movilidad en todo el mundo están contribuyendo al desafío sin paralelo en el área de la educación y la alfabetización dentro de sociedades multiculturales y multilingües (Leikin, Schwartz, & Tobin, 2012). Malta, una pequeña isla en el Mediterráneo, busca formas de adaptarse a las realidades de las diversas aulas de clases de la actualidad. Este estudio detalla investigación original en la percepción y las prácticas de maestros malteses relacionadas con las aulas de clase multilingües. Después de una breve descripción de la historia lingüística de Malta y su sistema educativo, nos basamos en las experiencias de ocho maestros de escuela primaria bilingües por medio de entrevistas profundas, presenciales semiestructuradas. Los cambios demográficos recientes en Malta requieren un cambio de paradigma en la educación, y con los desafíos de Malta reflejados a nivel mundial, la investigación proporciona una contribución importante para comprender el problema al que se enfrentan los educadores y los niños, explorando caminos hacia una educación equitativa y socialmente justa para todos.

**Palabras clave:** EDUCACIÓN MULTILINGÜE, PRÁCTICAS DE ENSEÑANZA MULTILINGÜES, TRANSENGUAR, DESARROLLO PROFESIONAL, FORMACIÓN INICIAL DEL PROFESORADO

**IT** Le recenti tendenze migratorie e l'aumento della mobilità a livello globale pongono sfide senza precedenti in termini di alfabetizzazione e istruzione nelle società multiculturali e multilingue (Leikin, Schwartz, & Tobin, 2012). Malta, una piccola isola nel Mediterraneo, è in cerca di soluzioni per adeguarsi alle realtà scolastiche di classi eterogenee. Questo articolo descrive in dettaglio una ricerca su percezioni e pratiche di insegnanti maltesi nelle classi multilingue. Dopo una breve panoramica della storia linguistica e del sistema educativo di Malta, attingiamo alle esperienze di otto insegnanti bilingui della scuola primaria attraverso interviste in profondità, semi-strutturate, faccia a faccia. I recenti cambiamenti demografici a Malta richiedono un cambio di paradigma nell'istruzione e, con le sfide di Malta, riflesse a livello globale, questo studio offre un contributo importante alla comprensione delle questioni affrontate da educatori e bambini, esplorando percorsi per un'istruzione equa e socialmente giusta per tutti.

**Parole chiave:** ISTRUZIONE MULTILINGUE, PRATICHE DI INSEGNAMENTO MULTILINGUE, TRANSLANGUAGING, SVILUPPO PROFESSIONALE, FORMAZIONE INIZIALE DEGLI INSEGNANTI

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## 1. Introduction

The world is presently undergoing an unparalleled rise in global immigration, leading to a shift in societies towards more cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity. Human mobility reached 258 million in 2017 (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2017), with migrants comprising 14% of the population residing in high-income countries, an increase of almost 5% since the beginning of the millennium (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2017). The past decade's global demographic shifts have led to populations becoming increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse. This diversity is increasingly represented in the classroom, with global figures showing that multilingualism in schools is on the rise. In England, for example, 21.2% of primary school pupils are exposed to a language other than English in the home (UK Department for Education, 2018). In the US, the most recent census in 2014 revealed similar numbers, with 22% of the school population (5-17 years old) speaking a language other than English at home (Camarota & Ziegler, 2015). While these figures illustrate an increasing trend within individual countries, gaining a holistic, international overview is difficult, since countries adopt diverse reporting and tracking strategies. For instance, some countries track first-generation migrants only, leading to issues with respect to the reporting of multilingual children, due to an oversight of children born in-country to migrant parents (European Commission, 2019).

Beyond counting students, the recent developments regarding diversity, both in the classroom and in society, have led to a call for an increased understanding of and engagement with multilingualism in education. Language ideologies which advocate the strict separation of languages are now making way for more flexible practices including translanguaging, which supports the concept of fluid language repertoires that human beings naturally utilize as a communicative tool, depending on context or circumstances (García & Kleyn, 2016; Sabino, 2018). Within the classroom, however, these practices are still in their infancy, with many teachers reporting insecurity when it comes to the teaching of multilingual students (Tinsley and Board, 2016). A look at the international figures highlights the need to understand more about the complexities of multilingualism in the classroom, in particular, the need for research with practising teachers who are called upon to implement national education policies, which are frequently operating on insufficient or unclear data (European Commission, 2019; Tinsley and Board, 2016). This study uses Malta as one example of the larger global trend of diversity, addressing the following research questions:

- In which ways are Maltese primary school teachers supporting multilingual students within their classroom environments?
- What are these teachers' current practices and perceptions of using flexible language pedagogies such as translanguaging in bilingual and multilingual classrooms?

The present study focuses on participants' perceptions of bilingual and multilingual classrooms, together with their views and practices related to translanguaging pedagogies. Findings from the study aim to contribute to the growing understanding of teachers' practices and requirements related to diversity in the classroom, highlighting the need for more qualitative research to explore necessary changes to both educational policy and practice.

## 2. The Maltese context

Malta is a small island nation in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, with an area of 246 square kilometres. Neighboured by Italy and Libya, the Maltese islands boast of a rich history that has witnessed many a foreign rule. As part of their historical legacy, the Maltese people have lived within the reality of multilingualism for many centuries as the linguistic traits of the island's inhabitants were influenced by an assortment of different languages, with Arabic, Latin, Sicilian, Italian, French, English and Maltese spoken on the island throughout the years. As part of Malta's British colonial heritage, the English language was introduced in schools in 1833, eventually replacing Italian as the country's official language, whilst Maltese was recognized as an official language alongside English in 1934 (Brincat, 2011; Camilleri Grima, 2013b; Frendo, 1988). Notwithstanding its Semitic origins, the Maltese language is written in Latin script and is essentially a hybrid of Arabic, English and Italian (Vella, 2012). The Maltese vernacular includes a plethora of English vocabulary and expressions, whilst code-switching is a ubiquitous and natural part of local communication (Camilleri Grima, 2013b). Most Maltese people are bilingual to some extent, however the level of proficiency varies considerably amongst individuals, depending on their language backgrounds,

preferences and contexts (Farrugia, 2016). The Maltese language is spoken by over 95% of Maltese people, whilst over 85% speak English (Camilleri Grima, 2016). Italian is also spoken by many Maltese people, albeit to varying degrees of fluency. This is due to the countries' geographical proximity and the influence of Italian television stations, which are popular amongst Maltese households (Caruana, 2013).

In spite of the small size of the island, there appears to be a linguistic divide according to locality, as inhabitants of certain parts of Malta such as Sliema, St. Julian's, and the surrounding areas tend to speak English more fluently, whilst those hailing from Southern areas are usually perceived to be more proficient in Maltese. The Constitution of Malta recognizes both Maltese and English as official languages, and Maltese is also one of the official languages of the European Union. The population of Malta stood at 475,700 in 2017, signifying the largest relative increase in population in Europe during this year (+32.9 per 1000 residents) (Eurostat, 2017). Paradoxically, in the same year, the Maltese islands had the lowest birth rate in Europe (Eurostat, 2017). This indicates that globalization and intensifying migration trends are seeing asylum seekers and refugees entering Malta in unprecedented numbers, since the island is presently considered a symbolic gateway between Africa and Europe. Moreover, Malta's accession to the European Union in 2004 has also brought about many EU citizens benefitting of their free right of movement within other member states (International Organization for Migration, 2016). Despite Malta's multilingual and multicultural history, this sudden and rapid demographic shift is nonetheless giving rise to unprecedented challenges as the island's inhabitants are striving to welcome and provide for the ever-increasing number of foreigners within their society and educational settings. As a result, classrooms that were previously bilingual are increasingly multilingual (Farrugia, 2017; Scaglione & Caruana, 2018). This transformation is proving to be positive and enriching on many levels, though educators are also struggling with issues pertaining to language use, for which they do not feel sufficiently trained.

### **3. Malta's multilingual classrooms**

Malta's educational system is an integral part of its British colonial legacy, and hence built on the British Educational system. Maltese families have the choice of enrolling their children into state, parochial, or private schools, where both Maltese and English languages are taught concurrently from pre-school. All other subjects are taught in English, Maltese, or a variety of both (depending on school policy), with code-switching featuring regularly during the majority of lessons. The large part of reading and writing is conducted in English, due to the greater availability of English textbooks over those in Maltese. A third or fourth language is introduced to students during the end of their primary school years or in their first year of senior school. Malta's language policy endorses bilingual and multilingual development as it encourages young students to adopt positive attitudes towards English, Maltese, and other languages (Malta Ministry of Education and Employment, 2015).

The population of non-Maltese students in schools has doubled over a span of 4 years, from 1,890 in 2012 to 4,289 in 2016 ((NSO, National Statistics Office - Malta, 2018). This means that Maltese schools are witnessing a rapid and inevitable transformation from bilingualism to multilingualism, which is mirrored in other countries across Europe, particularly higher-income nations (European Commission, 2019). Since this demographic shift is a rapid and unprecedented one, Maltese teachers do not feel sufficiently equipped with the necessary skills required to meet the challenges which multilingualism and multiculturalism in the classroom inevitably create. Teachers are presently faced with students in class who are required to comprehend and communicate in both Maltese and English in order to access the curriculum, whilst also striving to preserve their mother tongue, which is an integral part of their identity (Micallef Cann & Spiteri, 2014). This is proving to be problematic for teachers and students alike, especially in cases where migrant children do not speak any Maltese or English at all. Additionally, this predicament is also contributing to family pressures, as many are faced with the intricacies of negotiating language use within their host country (Little, 2017).

Another challenge is a shift in educational paradigms within teacher training for which Malta is not yet sufficiently prepared. Language education needs to respect linguistic heritage whilst preparing children for a globalised world, and there seems to be a gap in research and professional training in the field at a local level. As a result of this, initial teacher education programmes, together with continuous professional development sessions for experienced educators, are still not adequately addressing these issues, and hence teachers are striving to meet the needs of the linguistically and culturally diverse pupils in their classrooms through personal empathy, rather than professional skill (Scaglione & Caruana, 2018). This, again, is representative across Europe, with teacher training for the integration of migrant students being

comprehensively monitored in Spain, France, Cyprus, Latvia, Luxembourg and Serbia only (European Commission, 2019). Educators need to be trained to maximise the potential of multilingualism and multiculturalism for the benefit of all their students alike. This can be achieved through innovative pedagogies including translanguaging, programmes that support the conservation of the Maltese language, programmes that promote the universal value of English, and structures offering ample support for the children's own cultural identity and linguistic heritage. Involving families in their children's education may also be a way of celebrating and valuing student diversity. Moll (2015) states that in today's globalised world we need to "[engage] teachers strategically with their cultural environments for teaching – an absolute necessity in today's rapidly changing sociocultural contexts of schooling" (p. 114).

#### 4. Translanguaging

One theoretical lens that is helpful in supporting these shifts, both within classrooms and teacher training, is translanguaging. A theory of translanguaging views the aim of language as primarily as a communicative tool, and therefore sees shifts in language use as a natural part of globalization and migration trends. This challenges the concept of societally labelled languages, replacing them with linguistic ideologies, approaches to research, and understandings of speakers' practices which view languages as uncompartimentalized and fluid. The idea of translanguaging was coined in Wales where it originated as a pedagogical practice whereby bilingual students were provided with input in one language and were asked for output in the other language (Williams, 2002). It was subsequently researched in depth by language scholars such as García, Cenoz, Baker and Wei, amongst others. Translanguaging refers to the naturally occurring language practices employed by bilingual and multilingual speakers which consider languages as hybridized repertoires into which speakers may delve as necessary, as opposed to the idea of formally separated and societally constructed systems (Baker, 2011; García, 2009; Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015). Gort and Sembiente (2015) point out that translanguaging is not distinct or unusual, but rather is the standard manner in which bilinguals communicate within multilingual communities, since "bilinguals pragmatically draw on their entire linguistic repertoires to maximize understanding and performance across a variety of contexts, to shape experiences, and to make sense of the world" (p. 8).

Although translanguaging is a naturally occurring practice amongst multilingual speakers, educators need to be competent in utilizing it strategically. They must also be aware of the importance of distinguishing between language as a learning and communicative tool, and language which is used for assessment purposes. Translanguaging encourages the strategic shifting between these two languages during instruction time, depending on the circumstances and the requirements of the task involved. Teachers may thus encourage students to draw from their entire linguistic repertoire during brainstorming sessions, discussions, debates or oral presentations, whilst the use of the target language would be promoted for the publishing, presentation or a final written product, or for assessment purposes. Merging and extending naturally occurring language practices such as translanguaging into pedagogical strategies may thus be one way forward within our ever increasing linguistically and culturally diverse societies, in order to ensure a truly inclusive and equitable education for all (Cenoz, 2017; García, 2005; Scaglione & Caruana, 2018).

Using translanguaging pedagogies may hence help to mitigate challenges within multilingual and multicultural classrooms, and the judicious use of language mixing may enable children to reach their full potential as they feel free to naturally think, feel, discuss and communicate in the language or languages they feel most comfortable in (Beres, 2015; García & Wei, 2014). Translanguaging practices in class encourage children to participate and interact further during lessons, since they may feel less self-conscious when drawing on their entire linguistic repertoire as a resource (Park, 2013). Translanguaging also enables students to tap into both their creative and critical skills, whilst bending the norms of traditional language use, as they make use of all their linguistic resources to inquire, discuss or express views (Wei, 2011). Additionally, translanguaging pedagogy can facilitate curriculum access, whilst also supporting students' mastery of language (Durán and Henderson, 2018).

Mifsud and Vella (2018, p. 94), advocate a flexible approach to language use in class, particularly within the early years, rather than employing a "one size fits all" model. They believe that the specific needs of the children in class need to be addressed and go as far as recommending that "a clearly agreed learning contract could be established between teachers and pupils, and their parents, relating to a more systematic alternation of languages in the classroom" (p. 93). Palviainen, Protassova, Mård-Miettinen, and Schwartz (2016) also promote the idea of flexible language practices in the classroom, and state that these are many times developed naturally, through experience and over time, rather than being formally taught. They also

state that traditional language practices which advocate the strict separation of languages are making way for more flexible approaches as a result of increasingly diverse classroom populations.

As a pedagogical tool, using multiple languages for learning is actively encouraged in many European countries, such as Finland and Germany, but although fostering plurilingual education is actively encouraged, the term *translanguaging* does not feature in the most recent European report (European Commission, 2019). Notwithstanding similarities among these two concepts, the terms are not interchangeable, since they are “at times [...] seen as oppositional and other times, seemingly fused into one similar framework” (Vallejo & Dooly, 2019 p. 3). García and Otheguy (2019) also state that plurilingualism and translanguaging have different socio-political roots which contribute to many divergences in educational practices.

## 5. The present study

The current paper forms part of a larger study which focuses on bilingual teachers’ identities and the ways in which their backgrounds impact their perceptions and pedagogical practices. According to García (2009), “bilingual education is the only way to educate children in the twenty-first century” (p. 5). She advocates the development of “an integrated plural vision for bilingual education, by which bilingualism is not simply seen as two separate monolingual codes” (p. 5), for the benefit of children and adults worldwide. In this respect this study aimed to explore to what extent Maltese teachers share this vision and put it into practice.

The impetus for the study came about as a result of the researchers’ own interest in bilingual teachers’ philosophies and pedagogies, and in innovative fluid language practices such as García’s (2009) concept of *translanguaging* and *transglossia*, where different languages are not separated but interrelate dynamically within globalised, multilingual communities. The research questions to be addressed in the current study concern how Maltese primary teachers support bilingual and multilingual students within their classroom environments, together with their current practices and perceptions of using flexible language pedagogies such as translanguaging. Teachers’ voices can be empowering and emancipatory, as their insights are often the catalyst to effect changes to social policy and practice (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Hence, the main aim of this study is to shed more light on several lacunae in current translanguaging practices, as well as on educators’ viewpoints about Malta’s specific bilingual status and its educational system, in light of migration trends, and about the presence of additional languages in the classroom. These perspectives add significantly to our understanding of multilingual pedagogy, whilst having implications for the improvement of professional practice and for the design of professional development and initial teacher education programmes.

### 5.1. The participants

Data from eight primary school teachers, each with over ten years teaching experience were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews (two per participant). Three teachers were chosen from state schools, another three from church schools, and two from private independent schools (of which there are fewer in Malta). Choosing state, church and private independent schools enabled the gathering of teachers’ perspectives as they might vary by school context, which differ significantly in Malta (Camilleri Grima, 2013a). The teachers also had diverse language and schooling backgrounds, in order to be able to compare patterns related to home and educational backgrounds. Participants also taught at different ends of the primary spectrum, i.e. early and junior years, to gain insight on how teaching methods and viewpoints may or may not vary depending on age group taught. Participants included seven females and one male teacher, a ratio that is representative of the gender imbalance within the teaching profession, where female teachers are largely over-represented in primary education in the EU (Eurostat, 2017). Ages ranged from late thirties to late fifties, and participants hailed from different parts of Malta, which also influenced their spoken language of preference. Despite diverse backgrounds and school contexts, the participants were nonetheless relatively homogeneous in that they were all experienced and all directly involved in the topic being researched (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Table 1 offers an overview of the teachers, each of whom has been given a pseudonym to protect their identity.

For the purpose of the current paper, key quotes were selected from the interviews and excerpts will be provided in the Results section (section 6) in order to highlight the perceptions and practices of the participants in the study.

Table 1  
*Participants' information*

Participant	Age	Education	Teaching Experience	Year Group
Diana	37	BA, MA	Church school, 13 years	Early years (years 1 and 2)
Elaine	48	BA, MA	Church school, 13 years	Junior years (years 4, 5, and 6)
Jonathan	36	BA	State school, 12 years	Junior years (year 6)
Laura	43	BA	Various state schools, 11 years	Early years (year 2)
Liliana	59	BA	Private school, 24 years	Early years (years 1 and 2), year 3 for past 10 years
Mandy	40	BA, MA	Church school, 14 years	Early years (years 1 and 2); currently subject teaching (English) in junior school (year 6)
Maria	40	BA, MA	Private school, 16 years	Junior years (year 6)
Ingrid	42	BA, MA in progress	TEFL, 4 years; state school, 10 years	Junior years (year 4)

## 5.2. Methods

We used a narrative inquiry approach, through semi-structured life history interviews, which were analysed thematically, as this approach gave the participants the opportunity to relate the untold stories pertaining to their bilingual identities, which in turn affected their perceptions and pedagogical practices (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). The semi-structured interview comprised a set of 32 questions. The first part focused on the teachers' own identities and life histories, whilst the second part focused on their views on language pedagogies within bilingual and multilingual educational settings. Richness of the in-depth data was favoured over quantity or broadness, since the aim of the study was to gain insight into teachers' perspectives about language use, while learning about their teaching experiences that currently underpin their philosophy of education (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). In the words of Goodson (1981), "in understanding something so intensely personal as teaching, it is critical we know about the person the teacher is" (p. 69).

Data were collected through semi-structured, one-to-one interviews, which were held over a period of six months. Each participant was interviewed twice with a break of several weeks in between interviews. Participants were made aware of the confidential nature of the interview. Despite being a small island, the information provided is generic enough to facilitate anonymity, and the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) was strictly adhered to when conducting this study. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Member checking allowed for a level of both validation and further engagement of participants with the study (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants were invited to read and comment on transcripts between and after each set of interviews. This verified that the researcher's interpretation of the participants' perspectives was truthful and accurate, and further facilitated clarification of any parts of the interview transcripts which were inaudible or unclear.

A thematic analysis approach was chosen in order to gain insight into the participants' personal and professional lives, as to better understand their views, their pedagogical practices and the motives preceding them. Collated data was organised according to similarities, differences and other issues and colour coded accordingly. Overlapping themes were reviewed and refined whilst emerging ones were divided into sub themes. The main themes emerging in view of the current paper included the demographic changes in Maltese classrooms, challenges experienced by teachers in view of rapidly shifting student populations, attitudes towards multilingual and multicultural classrooms, teacher training needs, language use in class and recommendations for change. For the purpose of the present paper, we focus only on data pertaining to participants' perceptions and pedagogical practices related to multilingual classrooms.

The four criteria identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985)—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—were pivotal during the design of this study in order to ensure that the results were both reliable and credible. Credibility was ensured through an honest and precise account of the participants' experiences, whilst transferability was achieved as findings may be applied within other similar educational contexts. Dependability was sought through member checking, and confirmability was attained through being fully aware of researcher's own biases, assumptions and beliefs which may taint the research process.

## 6. Results

All the educators teaching in state and private schools voiced their concerns about the ever-increasing number of foreign children in class. As Ingrid explains,

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### *Excerpt 1. Ingrid - Number of foreign children in class*

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... the intake is changing. Every year we see a larger number of foreign children. We have children from Africa, Bulgaria, Russia, Serbia, Italy, the UK for example. Sometimes they are not even fluent in English and can just string a few phrases together ... it's not easy to teach these children.

Teachers in church schools also described facing this reality but somewhat to a lesser extent. This may be because children are enrolled in church schools through a ballot system, which is predominantly applied for by Maltese parents who wish to give their children a Catholic education. Asylum-seeking migrant children are generally educated in state schools by law. Children of foreign workers, who typically come from families with a higher socio-economic background, are usually enrolled in private schools. Diane, a church schoolteacher, explains that so far there are few foreign children being enrolled in church schools, and the majority of these children usually possess at least a basic knowledge of English. However, Diane feels that church schools do face similar issues to private and state schools when it comes to working with migrant children.

In the rest of our findings, we focus on four themes emerging from the data, which are particularly pertinent to the scope of this paper: Attitudes towards multilingualism, strategies used in class, training needs, and recommendations for policy and practice.

### **6.1. Attitudes towards multilingualism**

All teachers had complex and interlaced views on the use of multiple languages in the classroom. Some of these views were based on personal as well as professional experience. For example, Liliana, the oldest participant at 59, appeared to be adamantly in favour of full immersion programmes in class, especially for the Maltese children. However, witnessing the shift from bilingual to multilingual classrooms, she felt that alternative pedagogies may nonetheless be appropriate for foreign students.

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### *Excerpt 2. Liliana – Alternative pedagogies for foreign students*

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I'm not in favour of mixing languages ... my grandson is two years old. He goes to playschool. They speak to him in Maltese. My son speaks to him in Maltese and his mother in English. I can already see how mixed up he is in his language ... he tells me, "il-man qieghed fil-car" [the man is in the car] ... he's not really speaking in English or Maltese. It's the product of him being exposed to two languages. Foreigners are different. When they go home their parents are going to speak to them in their mother tongue. It makes more sense to use different languages with the foreigners in class.

Liliana's perception highlights both a desire to maintain distinct languages, whilst at the same time acknowledging related complexities, particularly for non-native speakers of either Maltese or English. For three participants, the maintenance of the Maltese language in and of itself was a genuine concern. Due to an increasing proportion of foreign children in class, there was a general feeling that this may eventually lead to the extinction of Maltese, as it would no longer be a necessary form of communication within an increasingly globalised society.

Below, another teacher, Maria refers to a situation in which half of the students have at least one parent who is foreign. The other half consists of Maltese children, many of whom consider English to be their L1 and are not proficient in Maltese.

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### *Excerpt 3. Maria – the role of Maltese*

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I use in English at school and when I'm teaching, many times because of the number of foreigners we have, unfortunately I can only use Maltese during Maltese language lessons you know. . . Maltese is not given the importance it deserves. I mean, we expect them to learn through a one lesson a day slot and that's it. And unfortunately, some teachers will speak English to the children during a Maltese lesson trying to explain it in English because it's a grammar point they're trying to put across. . . children will learn a grammar point by rote but they're not really learning the language. They're not exposed.

Ingrid spoke of a time when the language used in class was mainly Maltese, except for the English lesson. This is now changing due to the greater proportion of English speakers,

*Extract 4. Ingrid – the role of Maltese*

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...the policy seems to be changing. *Qisu* [it seems as though] English has become more important. In a way it worries me because I feel we may be losing our language... our identity.

Notwithstanding the participants' concerns related to the preservation of the Maltese language, they still mention the value of English as *lingua franca* and acknowledge that students in Malta are fortunate to be given to the opportunity to learn the language. These views reflect Malta's sociolinguistic situation of societal bilingualism without diglossia, where the two official languages are used in most domains and are viewed as equally important (Camilleri Grima, 2013b). As Jonathan put it, English allows students to travel and to study; "... they can become whatever they want. So many opportunities nowadays!"

## **6.2. Strategies used in class**

One common concern amongst participants was that they feel unsure of the strategies they are employing in order to support their multicultural students. The word "guilty" was mentioned by different educators in relation to their code-switching or language mixing during lessons. This may be a legacy of past education programmes and policies such as the National Minimum Curriculum (1999), which advocated the strict separation of languages. This is in contrast with more positive views on plurilingual strategies such as those expressed in the National Literacy Strategy, which refers to code-switching as "an essential element of a bilingual country," as it promotes access to different languages and to a "wide and varied linguistic heritage" (National Literacy Strategy for All in Malta and Gozo, Ministry for Education and Employment, Malta, 2014, pp. 28-29). Moreover, the Council of Europe promotes the concept of a plurilingual society, where individuals have competence in more than one language and can switch between languages, according to circumstances (Language Education Policy Profile for Malta, Language policy unit. Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2015).

Some teachers were in favour of language mixing during certain activities, such as brainstorming and discussion, if the end focus is on the target language. Elaine thought that her opinions on language mixing are changing over time in order to be in line with the requirements of today's classrooms, and she expressed this view:

*Extract 5. Elaine – Language of instruction*

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it was understood... me included 'jigifier' [that is]... that total immersion in a language was the best way to learn it. Even I used to feel very strongly about this. But I'm not sure now. You see... based on my experience I have come to believe that it is okay to use one language to teach another... I think it is easier... for the student... and the teacher. Better understanding... less frustration.

Ingrid spoke of a time when she used to have a Maltese speaking and an English-speaking doll present in class during language lessons:

*Extract 6. Ingrid – Code-switching while teaching*

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These dolls did not understand the other language *allura* [so] this meant that the children could not speak in the other language. So, I strongly believed in this and that's how I used to teach. Now I think the situation is changing. We need to adapt. I think switching between languages is not so harmful really if it helps the children understand better. I mean even for the foreigners ... thing is where do you draw the line then? Is this causing confusion?

Although Diana tried to use visuals as much as possible during language lessons, she did use code-switching or translating with children "who look at [her] blankly." She also mentioned using what she considered to be her third language in class when the need arose:

*Extract 7. Diana – Using any language as a resource*

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Last year I had an Italian boy. They did not understand Maltese or English. I used to communicate with the parents in Italian. With the child I used to use Italian just to make him feel at ease. For example, when he walked in, I used to tell him “*buon giorno come stai oggi?*” [good morning how are you today?] but only so that he feels at ease and he settles down in class.

Elaine believed that when students are free to use their native language, this engages them academically, as “using their native language as a tool to learn a second language helps them learn more effectively”. She recalled her own schooling years when students were made to learn foreign languages through full immersion practices,

*Extract 8. Elaine – When I was a student*

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. . . I found it extremely difficult to cope. Instead of trying to use the cues to learn it, I completely switched off when it came to that lesson. For me, it was as good as nothing... perhaps even worse, because I remember being very frustrated... not to mention that I barely learnt anything in three years!

Participants also reported drawing on digital literacy and technology in order to overcome language barriers. Jonathan was one of several participants highlighting the use of technology to mitigate communication problems in the classroom:

*Extract 9. Jonathan – Multimodal communication*

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We use signs and pictures, visuals, Google translate... I think it’s easier nowadays with the Internet. I also ask the children themselves to help me. Children have this special gift of communication. They manage to communicate with each other in spite of the language barriers. It is amazing.

Ingrid stated that in a rapidly changing digital world teachers need to keep abreast with the latest developments and,

*Extract 10. Ingrid – Digital literacy*

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work on ways to leverage [children’s] amazing technology skills. I mean digital literacy is very important today. Perhaps we are not channelling the children’s skills in the right direction. It’s not easy. Sometimes they know more than us. Plus, things are constantly changing. It’s difficult to keep up.

Maria also mentioned the use of technology, particularly the internet, in order to enable all children to access the curriculum. She also highlighted the need for teachers to be creative in order to meet their students’ diverse needs:

*Extract 11. Maria – Non-verbal communication*

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You simplify instructions, you use the board, power points, you use pictures you know ... you try and use actions, there are times when you have to change if the book gives you verbs for example which are really difficult to conjugate I might change... instead of “to whatever...” I use “to drink” ... “to write”, where I can mime. Something that is more tangible for them.

The teachers interviewed displayed creativity and innovation in their strategies, sharing their unique perspective on multilingual development. The fact that, in such a historically multilingual context, teachers still felt uncertain about their teaching demonstrates the need for greater attention to teacher training in this context.

### **6.3. Training needs**

The participants in this study demonstrated a willingness to implement the practices required within today’s rapidly changing sociocultural contexts. However, their responses held an element of uncertainty and they all voiced the need for further guidance. Diane strongly believed that teacher training and continuous development programmes do not adequately address teachers’ needs in the area of multilingual classrooms, and hence educators are often in a dilemma. She told us,

Extract 12. Diane – Code-switching while teaching

We were taught that if we used another language it was a huge mistake, we would confuse the children. That is the general perception, I think. As a teacher, I do allow it sometimes, but I do question it. I feel guilty. I ask myself is it ok? I think we need to be told that it is ok. Even for the new teachers following the course at university. We need to tell them that it is ok to use different languages sometimes to a certain extent. In practice if you think about it, it is what we really do. We do code-switch, although we do encourage the use of one language... it is instinctive to use both sometimes.

Laura also stated that she wished to learn more about innovative teaching methods before implementing them in class,

Extract 13. Laura – Innovative methods

I feel I do not know enough about these new methods. I follow what I feel is right ... I think the fact that more children are coming to school with different language backgrounds might require some changes really but I'm not quite sure what is allowed and what isn't ... what works and what doesn't. There are so many different opinions on this and things are constantly changing. We are told to do it one way then all of a sudden, we are told to scrap the whole idea and do something completely different. It's mind boggling.

Jonathan also felt that further training is necessary, especially in the realm of language use,

Extract 14. Jonathan - Additional training

I think that we should also be informed better about the benefits of these practices perhaps through CPD sessions. We were never taught about this at university ... anzi [on the contrary] we were always told never to mix languages

The teachers' uncertainty and struggles highlight the need for a more organised approach to continued professional development, ensuring that not only newly trained teachers gain adequate skills for working in multilingual settings, but that currently practising teachers can update their skills in line with global changes.

**6.4. Participants' recommendations for policy and practice**

All participating educators stated that Malta is currently undergoing a major paradigm shift in education, mainly as a result of the demographic changes on the island. They were all in agreement about how inadequate their own teacher training was in view of these challenges, and that they were "winging it" on many levels. They all felt that most of the experienced teachers in class were trained during a time when the demographic situation in Malta was very different, and that they were not being offered the right support or further training to meet the needs of students today. Moreover, they believed that initial teacher training programmes needed to be restructured in order to train future teachers appropriately in the area of multilingualism and multiculturalism, regardless of teachers' own backgrounds. Training programmes for both initial and experienced teachers need to be more culturally relevant in ways that reflect the sociocultural changes within our educational settings.

Participants mentioned different positive educational initiatives currently being introduced, such as the introduction of "Ethics" class as an alternative to "Religion" course, in order to embrace multi-ethnic Maltese classrooms. Together with the formation of the Migrant Learners' Unit within the Ministry of Education and Employment, these initiatives focus on promoting the inclusion of migrant learners. However, the teachers all felt that there should be more focus on programmes that value and celebrate diversity and more resources and adequate training, together with further local research on the subject. As Mandy put it, "we are still in the process of learning through trial and error, rather than solid research and empirical evidence."

Maria felt that human resources should be viewed as a priority and that language maintenance programmes should be offered in all schools in order to celebrate diversity and to protect heritage languages. Diana also shared this view, as differentiation requires teaching smaller groups, necessitating the need for more assistance in class. In this regard, Jonathan believed that parental involvement may also be one way to tap into the community as an invaluable human resource. Additionally, he advocated the employment of a more diverse teacher workforce in order to be in line with the rapidly shifting classroom demographics:

*Extract 15. Jonathan – Heterogeneous workforce*

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I also think that we need more multilingual teachers ... native speakers ... this would help to include these children in this multicultural era. I mean, if we have children who are speaking different languages in class, it makes sense to have other people who can cater for their needs.

All participants felt the need to narrow down syllabi, to move away from the idea of standardized testing and to focus more on play-based activities, in order to foster a love of learning, especially in the primary years. Maria highlighted the importance of exposure and fostering positive attitudes towards language:

*Extract 16. Maria - Exposure*

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A lot of it is about getting them to love the language... stories, singing etc. Grammar is boring. A lot of teachers think that because they're seeing blank faces they're not retaining. But they're being exposed... we need to apply grammar in context.

She also felt the need to move away from focusing on formal writing in the early years, saying "[we should] not focus on every word, every grammar point, every full stop, capital letter ... testing everything. Let them try to express themselves and write freely especially in the younger years."

Ingrid also thought that making the lessons interesting and play-based, especially within the primary sector, was fundamental. She highlighted the importance of teaching functional language use in order to prepare children for the future. Mandy echoed these views, stating that providing children with more opportunities to apply concepts is imperative, "...to actually provide children with an education that would be practical, where they can actually put the language into use."

Diana believed that the system needs to prioritise differentiation methods which are in line with the diverse student population of today's classrooms:

*Extract 17. Diana- Differentiation methods*

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We need more resources. We need less content. You set limits and standards yes ... but not grouped by age. Everyone gets there in their own time. Within say these 10 years the children need to get to this... they need to master such and such skills but over a span of time. Each child at their own pace.

She felt that teachers need to be given more opportunities to target different needs within diverse classrooms, and that compressed and rigid syllabi do not lend themselves to differentiated teaching. She explained that language teaching needs to be restructured according to level:

*Extract 18. Diana- Differentiation methods*

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If you have a child who is very fluent in English and you keep on teaching her the same things. . . If you have a Maltese speaking student, you need to start from the basics. So even though the children have the same age they are at completely different levels.

Jonathan voiced his concerns about a language policy that encourages bilingual practice, but which is not always viable due to the growing number of foreign students in school:

*Extract 19. Jonathan – Bilingual practice*

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. . . this is so difficult to do with children who can only speak their own language. We tend to use a lot of visuals and resources and signing with these children. But it's very spontaneous. Some of these children have so many difficulties.

Jonathan mentioned the recently established Migrant Learners' Unit, within the Ministry of Education and Employment, which seeks to promote the inclusion of newly arrived learners into the education system, while focusing on the acquisition of linguistic and sociocultural competences. While Jonathan felt that this was a positive initiative, he also thought that it operated on a deficit model and does not truly celebrate linguistic diversity. These concerns are mirrored across Europe, where multiple levels of integration for newly arrived learners exist, ranging from full initial separation, to partial separation, to immediate, full integration into all mainstream classes (European Commission, 2019). Each of these models highlights issues

linked not only to language acquisition, but also to integration, with students separated from their peers sometimes struggling to access the main curriculum, if too much emphasis is placed on language acquisition above content acquisition (Nilsson & Bunar, 2016).

## 7. Conclusions, pedagogical implications, and limitations

Due to its strategic position, Malta was immersed in a variety of languages as part of its historical legacy. Most Maltese teachers are hence naturally adept at and open to hybridising languages, as it is a part of their history and a natural way of communicating (Panzavecchia, in preparation). Sciriha (2001) states that multilingualism and multiculturalism are natural to the Maltese and that, “what is essentially ‘natural’ for the Maltese themselves is very surprising to visitors who, as soon as they land in Malta, immediately perceive the multicultural component to life in Malta” (pp. 36 – 37).

As in many other bilingual societies, code-switching is common practice within Maltese classrooms and Maltese teachers already engage in natural translanguaging practices to support Maltese-born bilingual students who are less proficient in one of the two official languages. Moreover, many Maltese teachers are proficient in at least one other foreign language apart from their two official languages, and thus find themselves naturally shifting between two or more languages daily.

Multilingual classrooms are on the increase on the island, and therefore Maltese children are now being exposed to several different languages, other than English and Maltese. This is enriching on many levels as educational settings which value multilingualism have been proven to improve children’s self-esteem, encourage the integration of migrant students, shape cultural identities and empower all children to reach their full potential. Children whose home languages are not valued and supported are found to be disadvantaged both socially and academically (OECD, 2012). The situation thus clearly necessitates more fluid and flexible linguistic practices, such as García’s (2009) concept of transglossia, which focuses on the way different languages interrelate within a globalised society. Paradoxically, Maltese educators still feel unsure about how, when and if they should utilise this as a pedagogical strategy. In this regard, the participants in this study all expressed the need to be given more formal guidelines on how to deal with their increasingly multilingual and multicultural classrooms, and how to further explore their spontaneous and naturally occurring translanguaging practices, in order to reach out to migrant students who are struggling with the country’s two official languages. They also felt the need for more research in the area in order to support the development of initial teacher education programmes and specialised training sessions for established teachers.

The participants also advocated for more emphasis on preserving the Maltese language within an ever-increasing multilingual community. Moreover, there is a need for further investment in language maintenance programmes, mother-tongue instruction and culturally inclusive and multicultural curricula for immigrant students, so that every child’s linguistic identity would be valued and celebrated. The educators in this study also recognised the need for more human resources which would enable these ideas to be put into practice, together with more focus on parental involvement, which may prove to be an interesting way in which to value and celebrate migrant children’s diverse identities through capitalising on families as valuable resources. The participants also felt a need for revising course syllabi, and for educational settings to offer a more play-based, fun approach in order to foster positive attitudes towards language learning. They felt that in mainstream schools, curricula, and school syllabi do not adequately reflect the urgent need to support a diverse student population.

Malta serves as an example of a global trend, with countries becoming increasingly multi-ethnic and multilingual. The need for a paradigm shift in education is becoming more pressing. It is thus imperative that educational institutions support today’s diverse students through viewing linguistic and cultural diversity as an enrichment rather than a deficit. Although Maltese educators are naturally predisposed to making use of two or more languages in their personal and professional lives, they still feel they need to be provided with formal guidelines and training programmes which could support and further explore these practices. This could be the catalyst required for changes within educational systems which would meet the challenges of today’s diverse schools.

Although there is a vast body of research dedicated to multilingual classrooms and, more recently, to translanguaging practices, there seems to be a gap in literature concerning language teachers’ perspectives and thoughts about language pedagogy, which we aim to bridge within the limitations of our study. The overall findings of this inquiry offer valuable insights into teachers’ views on language practice within multilingual classrooms, however, due to time constraints and the restricted sample size of our participants,

the conclusions drawn from this study are not representative of all Maltese teachers. The unique views and professional practice of the participants in this study may, however, be used as a resource for further studies and to make suggestions for future practice. A more comprehensive perspective and further research on translanguaging, both in the Maltese context and beyond, would provide further insights into multilingual practices in educational settings.

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