Informing Educational Change: Research Voices from Malta

Edited by

David Hyatt

with Peter Clough and Cathy Nutbrown

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Jonathan Borg graduated as a Primary School teacher in 2008. He furthered his studies in 'Responding to Student Diversity' with a Masters Degree in 2011 and was recently awarded a Doctorate of Philosophy in Education at the University of Sheffield. Dr Borg is a lecturer at the Faculty of Inclusion and Access to Learning at the University of Malta.

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Rosienne Farrugia has taught and researched in the fields of the Early Years, literacy development as well as giftedness in young children. She began her career a primary school teacher working with young children in a number of schools, eventually moving on to a lecturing position at a higher education institution. She is now involved in the management of higher diploma and degree programmes within the University College at the Malta College of Arts Science and Technology.

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Christine Porter Lofaro completed her Ph.D. at the University of Sheffield (UK) where she combined her involvement as a practicing artist, art educator and researcher with particular reference to studio spaces and creativity. Christine is a visiting lecturer at the University of Malta and amongst her research interests are studio research, praxical knowledge, visual literacy and reflective visual journaling.

David Hyatt

Dr David Hyatt works for the School of Education, University of Sheffield where his roles include Director of the Doctorate in Education (EdD Part 2), Director of the EdD Language Learning and Teaching and Director of the Singapore Educational Studies Programme. He is also the Chair of the School of Education Ethical Review Board and the School's Director for the Teaching Excellence Framework. David is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, a Senate Award Fellow for Excellence in Learning and Teaching and a EU Marie Skłodowska Curie Fellow. His current research interests centre around doctoral pedagogies, and he has wide experience of supervision and examination at doctoral level

Foreword

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, 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 the launch of this book, *Informing Educational Change: Research Voices from Malta,* as am I.

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. This makes the process of doctoral research a journey shared with others and this is rich and rewarding as well as demanding.

The first doctoral students enrolled in October 2009 and it was my joy to witness the first students graduate in 2015. Maltese Flags waved proudly in the University's Octagon Centre as I joined students' families and friends who had made the journey and the Sheffield team to witness their graduation and celebrate their success.

We are proud of the contributions these graduates of the Malta Doctoral Programme have made to research in our country 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 funded the journey 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 supervisors and the Sheffield team.

The chapters in this book make an important contribution to educational research in Malta and beyond, and each bears testament to the commitment of their authors to make a difference, for good, in our country.

I would like to congratulate all whose work is represented here and, with many more doctoral students following the programme, I hope this represents volume one of many more to come.

I thank the Sheffield academic team for giving our recent graduates of the Malta Doctoral Programme the opportunity to share their work in this way and for making it available in electronic form for a wide readership. It is a most useful resource and a fine example of what can be achieved through working collaboratively with the shared aim of making a difference.

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, St. Catherine's High School Higher Education Tuition Centre

April 2017

Introduction

David Hyatt

Education currently occupies a rapidly shifting educational terrain, locally and internationally – and teachers are central to this. They experience these fluctuations through the demands placed on them by policy mandates and developments, economic and social demands and transformations, new technological advancements in communication, expanded access to information and education, as well as through coming into contact with challenges and opportunities relating to their professional identities and status. Given this demanding context, the significance of teachers researching their own practice has arguably never been greater. The value of this lies in the conduct of contemporary research, grounded in the local context, that can inform pedagogic practice & policy, help to develop innovative approaches to teaching and learning, aid resistance to the ubiquitous moves towards the technicization and deskilling of educational professionals and, in becoming active agents of change, create new opportunities for their students to construct critical and progressive understandings of the world around them. In telling the stories of their research in the following seven chapters, the authors have contributed significantly to educational understanding within the Maltese context. The research described is diverse in many ways – its context, its methodologies and its motivations. What the chapters do share are rigorous, critical insights into aspects of education in Malta that have previously not been researched and as such make an original contribution to knowledge in their various field of enquiry, both locally and internationally. The origins of this book lie in the Malta PhD programme initiated by the School of Education, University of Sheffield, which enrolled its first PhD students in October 2009. The programme was grounded in the university's close collegial relationship with, and support from, St Catherine's High School Higher Education Tuition Centre. The first three doctoral students graduated in July 2015 and by May 2017 seven had successfully completed their studies and there are presently eighteen students at various points in their doctoral studies on the Malta Programme, many of whom benefit from scholarships via the Malta Government Scholarships Post-Graduate Scheme and the ENDEAVOUR Scholarships Scheme. The Malta PhD programme is unique in offering a collaborative cohort based approach to doctoral pedagogy, differing from more traditional models of individually supervised PhD's or taught doctorates (EdD's). Malta-based part-time PhD students are subject to exactly the same regulation, quality assurance and academic support systems as all other such students in the Faculty of Social Sciences. They have two Supervisors, one of whom is always a member of the Malta Core Teaching Team who visit Malta three times annually for intensive study schools; the other supervisor maintains contact and conducts research supervision by a variety of electronic communication technologies. Every research topic is different but what they have in common is a commitment to contribute to research, which can have an impact on national policy and practice around education and learning in Malta and to produce high calibre research studies which claim their place on the international stage in peer review journals and other academic routes of dissemination. Our Doctoral students work in cohort groups whilst also being located firmly in our wider learning community of Masters and Doctoral students. Each cohort has differing research interests, calling on similarly diverse methods and rooted in quite radically different literatures; yet they have work together to develop their proposals through group tutorials where a process of 'critical friendship' has required often minute justification of their emerging decisions and designs. Further, their exposure to a full range of Social Science research methodologies has provided a rich and immediate supplement to the Research Methods Programme.

This approach is grounded in a collaborative, collegial approach to developing our students by cultivating a 'decentred' approach to supervision relationships. We argue that the role of doctoral development is an enculturation process (Paré 2010), through which students learn about the community they are joining; its history, its key debates, as well as its culture and discourses. As such they are being inducted into an academic discourse community (Swales 1990) through a process of critical inclusion (Hyatt 2013). This is aimed at, as Golde and Walker (2006) put it, envisaging doctoral education as the preparation of the future stewards of the discipline, and we would echo this in relation to our students as future stewards of the discipline in Malta and beyond.

Critical inclusion is based on collaborative relationships, and moves beyond a transactional 'tips and techniques' approach to one whereby students are invited into a discourse fellowship. Through the theoretical resources and metaphors of 'the doctoral journey' and 'rites of passage', the liminal spaces students pass through offer opportunities for productive decentred pedagogies in which supervisors construct ways of valuing their students' expertise and their academic contributions, and facilitate their critical induction into the academic community.

Doctoral pedagogy is then conceived as the development of research literacies, helping students to develop the repertoire of successful members of the academic discourse community - one that mirrors established professional norms, ways of being, and ways of doing research work. Each repertoire will differ in different contexts/disciplines and is more than just a measurable list of competences. Doctoral students, in our current super-diverse times, engage with a broad variety of networks, communities and resources and learn through many different trajectories, tactics and technologies to form a distributed patchwork of competencies, skills, dispositions, and values. A student's doctoral repertoire will be biographical, reflecting who they are, where they come from, and what they bring to their research.

As a result of this principled approached to our doctoral pedagogy, our students graduate as well-equipped researchers, skilled in: searching and critically reviewing the literature; presenting their work in seminar/conference fora and through a wide array of written modes; aware of ethical considerations in social science research; and confident in using a range of research methods of data collection and analysis. Our doctoral student community work together and with Sheffield academics to: practice disseminating their work; share their issues and questions as a learning community; develop skills in critical friendship and reflection; and learn about the studies being carried out by other students on the programme.

We view this book as a celebration of our students' excellent work as well as a significant contribution to educational knowledge and understanding, both within Malta and amongst the global educational community. We wish to thank all our doctoral students for their part in the communal voice from which this book has emerged but specifically the authors for their individual and distinctive contributions. We would also like to acknowledge the involvement and influence of all our colleagues, both past and present, who have contributed so much to the Malta programme, as well as the unwavering and crucial support provided by our colleagues at St Catherine's High School. This book has much of import to say to its diverse audience of teachers, parents, researchers and policy-makers and, as such, we are, and the authors should be, justifiably proud of this work.

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Chapter 1

The content and meaning in young children's drawings

Josephine Deguara

Introduction

This chapter draws on my doctoral study where I investigated the drawings of three, four-year old children (Deguara 2015). One of the aims of the study was to examine the "ordinariness" (Mavers, 2011, p. 1) in children's every day drawings. Another aim was to encourage and enable them to articulate the meanings they attributed to their drawings and together with them explore the complexity of their interpretations. Taking a social semiotics theoretical framework, this chapter is designed around two main research questions: to examine the content children illustrate and the meanings they convey through their drawings.

Drawing as a sign to be interpreted

Describing drawing as a product, a process and an expression of relationships, several scholars (Coates and Coates, 2011; Hall, 2008) regard it as a purposeful way of making meaningful marks. Embracing this definition, I consider children's drawings as a process which they use to form and interpret a system of sign-making that permits them to shape and translate their mental images onto paper. I also deem drawing as an effective way that resonates with children's ways of communication; a visual language which, helps them convey what they cannot easily express through other modes. I explicitly regard children's drawings as "multisemiotic" (Kress, 1997, p.79) where children use a multiplicity of semiotic means concurrently that helps them to construct and communicate ideas, knowledge and experiences to others (Matthews, 2003; Wright, 2010).

In this chapter, I explore children's drawings from a "contextual drawing analysis" (Frisch, 2006, p. 76), that is, the children's ordinary drawings, which they do out of their free will or as encouraged by adults. Children develop such a process through an on-going dialogue with themselves, the image they create, the materials they use and the people who are within close proximity, where they use drawing as a language to symbolise and communicate their world in a meaningful way to others (Cox, 2005; Wright, 2011). I therefore hold children's drawings as "graphic representations" (Machón, 2013, p.77), as, "the depiction of an object, situation or event which may or may not be preset". I also consider drawings as a means of knowing and understanding, of thinking and feeling, and a form of social and interactive communication, where children engage in "a constructive process of thinking in action, rather than a developing ability to make visual reference to objects in the world" (Cox, 2005, p. 123).

A social semiotics theoretical framework

Within this chapter, I perceive drawing from a social semiotics viewpoint, as developed by Gunther Kress and others (Kress, 2010, 1997; Kress and Jewitt, 2003; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001). Social semiotics is the study of signs, which are recognised as "anything that communicates meaning" (Wright, 2011, p. 159); as "something that stands for something else in some way" (Danesi, 2007, p. 29).

Kress (2010) underlined three important principles of sign-making which provide a starting point for analysing meaning. These include the notions that "signs are motivated conjunctions of form and

meaning; that conjunction is based on the interest of the sign-maker; [and this is done by] using culturally available resources" (p. 10). Thus, as Barthes (1964) claims, a sign is a composition of the "signifier" (p. 10), that is, an amalgamation of *form* and *content*, or in other words, the *how* and *what* children draw (Thompson, 1999) and the "signified" (Barthes, 1964, p. 10), that is, the meaning conveyed.

Kress (1997) argues that "children are competent and practiced sign-makers in many semiotic modes" (p. 10), where, making use of multiple signs, modes and literacies in a natural and spontaneous way, they show their ability to aptly connect form and meaning. During this process, children learn how different semiotic resources help create different symbols. In their representations, children act as sign-makers who become agents within their social lives and cultures. Their engagement with the text is frequently serious, intentional and purposeful to effectively produce meaning. The challenge is for adults to understand children's signs and meaning-making from their perspective.

Literature Review

The Content of Children's Drawings
Children's choice of subject matter is very wide ranging (Mavers, 2011). Children frequently use drawing as a source of pleasure where they link their inner thoughts, emotions and imaginings to the external world. Reflecting their cultural spheres, values and concerns, children's drawings represent a collage of personal events merged with fictional popular culture and real-life episodes (Jolley, 2010; Wright, 2010), where "ordinariness" (Mavers, 2011, p. 1) takes centre stage. Children draw for several reasons: to document special occasions, to keep record of places they visited, to "pursue personal inquiries" (Thompson, 1995, p. 8) about objects or ideas that intrigue them, to share affections about people they care, to plan, to solve problems, or to communicate issues of concern (Jolley, 2010; Mavers, 2011). Through their drawings children also create narratives that take a life of their own, where they capture the "mundane and the marvellous, the world as it is experienced and as it is imagined" (Thompson, 1999, p. 160). At times these representations can be limited to a single category annotated to a specific object or theme, while on other occasions, they are amalgamated into a cluster of topics that share a common orientation and are construed and related to each other (Thompson, 1999).

Classification of the content themes in children's drawings has been the issue of many research studies with various attempts made to organise them into practical, flexible and broad categories. In her book, *Analyzing Children's Art*, Kellogg (1969) categorised the content of children's drawings under five headings: humans, animals, building, vegetation and transport – umbrella terms which can still be identified in more recent studies. For example, Wright (2007) claims that the content of children's drawings includes images of living things, environments and socio-cultural patterns, while in subsequent studies she (Wright, 2011) categorises them into people, places, objects and events, a taxonomy also adopted by Matthews (1997). Excluding places and events, Hopperstad (2008), similarly suggests that children's drawings represent objects, humans, animals or other inanimate. On the other hand, Machón (2013), classifies children's drawings under eleven categories listed here in order of popularity: human figure, houses, sun as star, trees, clouds, flowers, cars, birds, mammals, transport and polymorphic natural elements. Likewise, in her doctoral thesis, Hall (2010) made an attempt to catalogue the content of children's drawings, under fourteen main "content strands" (p. 116): people, natural environmental features, weather/sky features, animals, writing, symbols/patterns/abstracts, miscellaneous objects, names, fire, vehicles, buildings, human-made environmental features, toys/play equipment and numbers. While, as Hall (2010) argues, there were

common strands that were exemplified in all drawings, yet, children in her study had their own individual preferences for drawing particular themes. Coates and Coates (2006) also indicate that certain topics are recurring in children's drawings. Referring to their findings, and in line with the above-mentioned studies, they argue that, for example, rainbows and butterflies, as well as houses, flowers and trees are frequently illustrated in children's drawings, where they often use a formula to produce them. Supporting Machón's (2013) findings, Hall (2010) and Jolley (2010), claim that the human figure has also regularly been one of the most depicted topics drawn by children across the world, albeit, with varied intensity that mirrors curtural variations. Furthermore, Coates and Coates (2011) specify that family members form a fundamental part of children's drawings, with the most common people depicted, being those of their parents; a claim confirmed by Machón (2013).

I argue that the content of children's drawings is frequently influenced and reflects their immediate social and cultural contexts across times. In his book *Education: Intellectual, Moral and Physical,* Spencer (1854/1929) limits children's subjects in their drawings, to men, houses, trees and animals. Decades later, Kellogg (1959) concluded that children draw cars, boats, flowers, aeroplane, people, animals and houses; illustrating a potential cultural and historical gap that might exemplify the upsurge in the use of transportation in everyday life. A similar progression was also noted by Coates (2002) who posits that children's drawings have experienced a progression, from drawing figures, houses and vegetation to include more culturally specific objects such as school buildings, motorways and popular culture characters such as Superman, Batman, and Pokémon, a phenomenon also illustrated in other studies (Anning and Ring, 2004; Boyatzis and Albertini, 2000; Coates and Coates, 2006). Such an evolution is also underscored by Marsh (2003), Hall, (2010), Dyson (1997), and Coates and Coates (2011), with the latter specifying that storybooks, fantasy world and cartoon characters, television programmes, images from software, as well as digital games together with artefacts that are linked to these media texts, play a predominant influence in present-day children's drawings. It appears that influences from popular culture where the "commercial culture often does become semiotic material for making sense of social experience" (Dyson, 1997, p. 15) brought unavoidable changes in children's graphic creations and concocted storylines, to include the drawing of animated superheroes and scenes rooted in mythical legends.

An added prolific influence on children's choices of subject matter, worth mentioning at this stage, is that children's drawings are frequently mediated by gender. Anning and Ring (2004) argue that significant others, together with the stereotyped messages that emanate from mass media and popular culture products, constantly send strong messages and beliefs about boys' and girls' identities and positions in society, that are reflected in the apparent dichotomous content of their drawings. Findings from various studies (see for example, Boyatzis and Albertini, 2000; Dyson, 1986; Hall, 2010, 2008) suggest clear gender differences could be identified in children's drawings, and indicate that, generally speaking, boys prefer to draw themes of fire, monsters, vehicles and weapons as well as imaginative action scenes. Contrastingly, girls typically opt for serene and natural scenes of houses, flowers and people engaged in social, harmonious and romantic relations within the "family genre" (Niolopoulou, 1997, p. 164), that could also include elements of decoration and embellishment. Their drawings also include fashion elements, hearts and flowers (Anning, 2003).

Drawing for Meaning: Communicating Inner Designs
Referring to a theory of social semiotics, I consider drawing as a semiotic "meaning-making tool" (Brooks, 2004, p. 42), "a means for surfacing the meaning-making of young children" (Wright, 2011, p. 158). Children draw signs to convey their thoughts, understandings and emotions in a visual-graphic form, where they not only represent objects but they use their drawings to externalise and communicate inner meanings and designs (Ahn and Filipenko, 2007; Hope, 2008; Hopperstad, 2008). Kress (2010, 1997), and Mavers (2011) also support this notion and contend that children draw to

explore and share their ideas with others, to record their experiences, to convey their learning, and to develop imaginary texts.

Atkinson (2009) describes drawing as a "powerful tool" (p. 7), which children use to articulate their notions and reflect the ways they shape their understandings. Children's drawings therefore, resemble a potpourri of intricate events, knowledge, emotions, narratives and perspectives, which as Malchiodi (1998) argues, make them complex texts to analyse where, "simple explanations and interpretations … are not always possible" (p. 19). Various scholars (Brooks, 2009; Kress, 2010, 1997; Wright, 2010) agree that drawings provide invaluable insights into the children's thinking processes and present evidence of their cognitive and emotional growth. Likewise, Hope (2008) regards drawing as "a tool for thought" (p.7), where children use drawing as a receptacle for their ideas. In my view, children's drawings are a "dynamic enactment" (Wright, 2008, p. 18) of meaning generation, where they make sense of their ideas, emotions and knowledge to subsequently construct their own theories. Congruently, Susan Cox (2005), states that constructive processes of drawing allow children to be active participants and agents of their own learning, where they use their drawing to "purposefully bring shape and order to their experience, and in so doing, their drawing activity is actively defining reality, rather than passively reflecting a 'given reality'" (p. 12). Thus, drawing combined with talk, vocalisation and gestures, provides children with opportunities to "not only 'know' reality, but to create' it" (Wright, 2011, p.159). From my interpretive and constructionist position, it was fundamental for me to use the children's drawings as "a means of investigating what children know" (Kendrick and McKay, 2004, p. 111) and bring out what Nicolopoulou, Scales, and Weintraub (1994) describe as the "structures of meaning" (p. 106).

Methodology

Adopting a qualitative research design, I conducted my study through a multiple case study approach, which I developed around three case studies of two boys and a girl, who attended the same kindergarten class in a school in Malta. The three children Luke, Thea and Bertly, were four-years old at the time of the study. They shared many commonalities: they all came from similar home backgrounds that seemed to enjoy economic and emotional stability, they all lived with both their parents in the same village, and all three had an older sibling.

Throughout the study, I adopted a participatory approach, where I gave *a voice* to children to participate in the research process. I did this by involving the children as much as possible, constantly following their cues, listening to what they had to say and trying to understand their ways of thinking and making sense of the drawing. Thus, I provided children with ways to be involved in the data collection where they video-recorded themselves, collated the drawings and voiced their unique understandings and interpretations. This challenged me to find "new ways of listening, and new interpretations of what counts as 'voice'" (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012), where I had to revalue, relearn and understand the languages children use to create and communicate meaning.

To conduct my cases, I made use of multiple tools for data collection, and relied on different sources of evidence. I observed and made use of the drawings children's did in both their school and home settings. I also held informal conversations with them, and their parents and even siblings, when present, about the content of the drawings and their meaning. Both the process of drawing and the conversations were video-recorded.

After I acquired the necessary ethical consent from all the respective gatekeepers, the parents and the children, I held a number of preliminary visits in the school setting and in each child's home. The

aim of these visits was to get to know the children and their environment, inform them about the study and introduce them to the visual methods of data collection to be used.

Following this I undertook a three month data collection phase, where I observed the children drawing both at home and at school. While at school I video-recorded the drawing process myself, at home it was the children and their parents who did so. In total I held twenty-six visits in the school setting, and five visits in each child's home to a total of fifteen visits. Table 1 above provides a detailed list of the home and school visits.

Table 1. A schedule of the home and school visits

Type of visit	School Visits		Home Visits	
	Number of Visits	Duration	Number of Visits	Duration
Preliminary visits	7 visits	26 hours 30 minutes	3 visits	4 hours 15 minutes
Study visits	26 visits & 5 concluding visits	79 hours 45 minutes	15 visits & 3 concluding visits	18 hours 15 minutes

By the end of the study Luke had drawn 80 drawings, Thea had drawn 84 and Bertly 59 to a total of 223 drawings. Table 2 provides a summary of the duration and number of drawings each child created in the respective setting.

Table 2. Total number of home and school drawings and their duration by child.

	Home Drawings		School drawings		Total of home and school drawings	
	Number of drawings	Duration	Number of drawings	Duration	Total drawings	Total duration
Luke	55	hrs 23 mins	25	4hrs 15mins	80	9hrs 38mins
Thea	40	5hrs 1mins	44	16hrs 8mins	84	31hrs 9 mins
Bertly	39	hrs 46mins	20	3hrs 56mins	59	6hrs 42mins
Total of drawings	134	3hrs10mins	89	24hrs19mins	223	47hrs 29mins

Findings and Analysis

Content Themes Arising from the Data

To investigate the form and content of the drawings, I created an *Inventory of Content* which, based on Barthes (1977) level of denotation, itemised the three children's drawings into thirteen, most common, content themes. My intention to highlight a quantifiable aspect of the drawings was to show the richness of the data and to establish a link between form and meaning, while providing a supporting analysis to the case studies. However, classifying the drawings under specific headings proved to be challenging and problematic as frequently children drew drawings with multiple objects, scenes or stories that corresponded to different themes. Here, I join Coates and Coates (2006) and Hall (2010), who state that a process of categorisation underscores the shortcomings and limitations of organising children's drawings under neat classifications and titles. I also emphasise that children's drawings are extremely complex, carefully composed and rich with a sense of visual acuity. To overcome this limitation, sometimes I classified the same drawing under different thematic headings and sub-categories according to the variety in the objects depicted.

Coates and Coates (2006) claim, that the recurrence of generic thematic strands is quite common in children's drawings across cultures. Several scholars (Anning and Ring, 2004; Hall, 2010; Hopperstad, 2008; Kellogg, 1969; Machón, 2013; Wright, 2011, 2007), validate this and offer insights into the broad subject matter of young children's drawings. They claim that these frequently include people, mainly family members, fantasy characters, objects and vehicles, or living things such as animals and vegetation, as well as places children visit. However, these scholars also acknowledge that the specific content of children's drawings is also influenced by their immediate socio-cultural contexts, personal events, experiences, traits and interest. As is argued by Coates and Coates (2006), while the children's drawings include some generic subject matter that are similar for all children worldwide, they also represent cultural variations with specific content that is unique to each child and his context.

Commonalities, idiosyncrasies and the gender factor
Analysing the corpus of the 223 drawings, it became apparent that the content could have been influenced by gender, a finding which is confirmed by other studies (Dyson, 1986; Nicolopoulou, et al., 1994). It appeared that some themes, patterns and ways of drawings were favoured by Thea, while others were preferred by the two boys. However, while I could denote apposite gender-related differences, I do not deem them as absolute, because the children's drawings could be driven by individual traits, preferences and interests as well as influenced by the surrounding social interactions and the environment. I also consider the gender differences highlighted, as rather specific to the three participant children, as the sample is too small to allow me to draw specific conclusions in relation to gender.

Consistent with findings from other studies, (see for example, Anning and Ring, 2004; Hall, 2008; Millard and Marsh, 2001; Nicolopoulou, 1997; Wright, 2010), in general, the themes in Thea's drawings epitomised girls' stereotypical preferences that evolved around stable family scenes, social relationships and fairy tales of kings and queens. They also included soft adornments such as hearts that conveyed elements of romance, and flowers and butterflies that show the soft side of nature (Figure 1, Image 1). While both Bertly and Luke drew kisses and hearts, these were sporadic and limited in quantity. Moreover, none of them drew flowers as a mode of decoration. Several studies suggest that social and cultural texts that emanate from mass media and popular culture products transmit strong stereotyped gendered messages about girls' and boys' identities and positions in society, which is reflected in the apparent influence in the dichotomous content of their drawings and their choices of what and how they draw (Coates and Coates, 2006; Thompson, 1999). This does not mean that Thea's drawings were completely void of action, heroes and bravery. The heroes in her drawings, however, were fairies who used magical pixie dust to "help people fly", "make the aeroplane fly" and "to save the animals" rather than superheroes who fought villains like in Luke's drawings.

Figure 1. Drawings that indicate gender-related traits

1

Rings and hearts for Domenic

2

Shooting

3

A whale at the beach
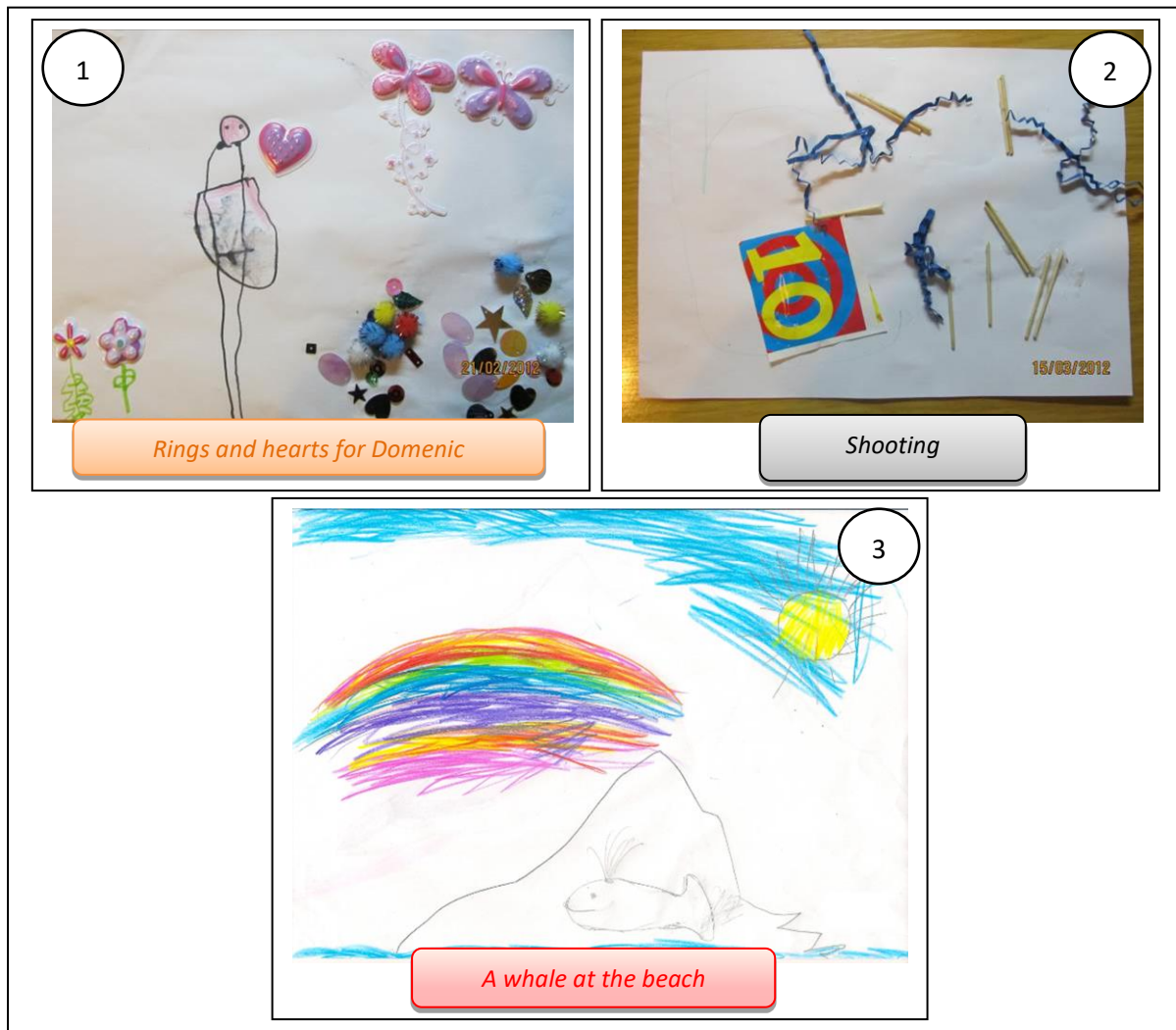
On the other hand, most of Luke's drawings in particular, were of the "heroic-agonistic genre" (Nicolopoulou, 1997, p.166), based on depictions full of action that were inspired by the "superhero myths and mediation of popular culture" (Thompson, 1999, p.160). Figure 1, (Image 2), represents such an example, where Luke drew good guys shooting bad guys; a phenomenon in boys' drawings also identified in other studies (Anning and Ring, 2004; Hall, 2010b, 2008; Thompson, 1999). Conversely, while both boys drew action representational drawings, there were differences between them. Luke's drawings seemed to be more archetypal of boys' drawings than Bertly's, and tended to be more dominated by warfare scenes of conflict, violence and destruction; characteristics in boys' drawings that were also observed in other studies (Boyatzis and Albertini, 2000; Millard and Marsh, 2001; Nicolopoulou, 1997; Nicolopoulou, et al., 1994). On the other hand, Bertly's drawings rarely depicted violence and combat, and focused on action as inspired by powerful imagined animals and positive cartoon characters such as Fireman Sam, who saved a stranded whale on the beach (Figure 1, Image 3).

In accord with Nicolopoulou et al.'s (1994) conclusions, I suggest that while all three children copied and incorporated images from popular culture, they did so selectively, in ways that met their character and gender inclinations. At the same time, I challenge suggestions from the same study and, as argued above claim that, whereas in the main, Thea's drawings included girls' stereotypical preferences such as the drawing of family scenes and soft adornments, she also drew graphic-

narratives, which Nicolopoulou et al. (1994), identified as stereotypical of boys'. However, such drawings, which included fairies, princesses, kings and queens who fought monsters, giants and witches with pixie dust, differed from the boys', who drew superheroes fighting bad guys with weapons, knives and guns. Likewise, both Bertly's and Luke's drawings included family-related drawings that revolved on placid kinship relations, with Luke having the largest number of drawings of family members amongst all three children. My finding contrasts with conclusions from other studies (Boyatzis and Albertini, 2000; Hall, 2010; Nicolopoulou, 1997; Nicolopoulou et al., 1994), who proposed that boys do not usually draw family members and relations, which are more archetypal of girls. However, although most of Luke's drawings were based on stable family relationships, many of these also portrayed his typical fascination with violence and disorder. A particular gender-related idiosyncrasy was that in connection to the drawing of vehicles. Out of a total of thirty-six drawings of vehicles which the three children drew, seventeen were drawn by Thea, fifteen by Luke and only four by Bertly. I considered this as highly unconventional, especially when studies (see for example, Anning and Ring, 2004; Boyatzis and Albertini, 2000; Hall, 2010; Thompson, 1999) indicate that vehicles are predominantly drawn by boys. My findings, as well as those by Wright (2010), contradict this, though I acknowledge that it is not possible to draw a conclusion on this, due to the small sample size.

The Meanings Communicated

Basing my analysis on Barthes' (1977), connotation level of representation, I then moved to investigate the meanings the three children conveyed through their drawings. This was problematic not only because meanings are complex, unpredictable and ambiguous, but also because of the "spontaneous imagework" (Edgar, 2004, p.7) that characterises children's drawings. Children modified, elaborated or adapted their narratives according to their understanding and interpretations, which at times, were dynamic and fluid, and thus, changing instantaneously; an observation also noted by other researchers (see for example, Cox, 2005; Kress and Jewitt, 2003; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001; Wright, 2008). In this section, I discuss one drawing from each child to bring an example of the meanings conveyed while providing insights into how young children think and make connections.

Tying the Blue Lady by Luke
Generally speaking, the children's representations were a combination of real-life experience merged with fantasy narrations and myth characters, based on "immortal story themes such as good-evil and capturing-defending" (Wright, n.d., p.2). The drawing *Tying the Blue Lady* by Luke (Figure 2), was one such representation. It was a drawing inspired by Luke's family visit to one of the local castles. As part of the castle tour, the family watched a short video-clip, about a Blue Lady who, as the legend went, haunted that same castle. Dressed in blue, and projected very much like a ghost, the Blue Lady instilled fear in Luke and his brothers.

Figure 2. A drawing based on real-life experience, merged with fantasy and myth.

Tying the Blue Lady

Luke initiated the drawing by sketching his younger brother, Jacob, fearful of the *Blue Lady*. Violating any sense of logic, that is only permissible in play, narratives and drawing, Luke then drew two other figures, all representing Jacob. This confirms Wright's (2007) conclusions who stated that children's drawings have "fluid structures" (p. 2), that are not always linear, sequential or rational, and which take the narratives beyond the confinement of reality. Luke then sketched an image of the Blue Lady at the far, top right with a pink marker (covered with black lines). Using pink was no mistake. It was an intentional and metaphoric choice; a colour which Luke used whenever he wanted to despise someone. The drawing developed into an action story, where, using the pink marker, he drew "iconic links" (Wright, 2011, p.166) to connect the Blue Lady to the third figure on the right, who represented his younger brother. These action lines signified the gunshots that the Blue Lady fired at Jacob. Luke accompanied his narrative with "expressive vocalism" (p. 165), that resembled fighting, "Heyah! Heyah! Huyah! Chuck. Chuck. Chuck … Buff. Buff. Buff.". Stating that he wanted to catch the *Blue Lady*, Luke then opted for a black marker and haphazardly drew long, black vertical lines over her to signify tying her with "a rope to trap her". Emulating the characters and actions of Ben Ten (TV Tropes Foundation, n.d.), his television superhero, Luke took it as his responsibility to protect and save his brother, from the terrible fate of the scary and evil Blue Lady. This action narrative showed Luke's predisposition and competence to graphically organise and compose imaginary and dramatised narratives ad hoc, and transform and recontextualise his drawing by "sampling and remixing" (Dyson, 2003, p.103) different symbolic material from real-life, popular culture and his play activities, to analytically constitute his reality (Cox, 2005). Observing Luke conceptualising the drawing as an "imagined space of play" (Edmiston, 2008, p. 6), and accompanying it with verbalisations, action, sound and running commentaries, made the characters

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drawn on paper seem to take a life of their own, where a whole fictive story full of action evolved. Like toys in children's small world play, Luke manipulated the characters depicted on paper to create his story.

The interactive whiteboard activity by Thea
The interactive whiteboard activity (Figure 3) was a drawing by Thea which was likewise based on a real life experience merged with an imaginary tale. On that day Thea was encouraged by the Kindergarten Assistant to write the letter 'm' on the interactive whiteboard. Inspired by the rarity and uniqueness of the activity, Thea depicted the experience. However, giving a twist to her drawing, she also included an aside story where she referred to a separate, but likewise, real episode, when two handymen came to carry some maintenance work in the class. Perceiving the tough-looking men as monsters, she flavoured her drawing with an imaginary narrative where monsters (signified by the rectangular, colourful shapes on the right, left corner of the drawing) visited the class unwelcomed, "Now somebody is coming to crush the papers … the ones displayed above the whiteboard … because he is a naughty guy. He gets on everybody's nerves, even the teacher's". Changing the monsters into giants, Thea continued with her story by stating, "They are on top of each other … the giants came from the prison… they fell and got hurt." The drawing told and represented two, different but parallel stories: the first communicated her happiness at writing on the interactive whiteboard, the latter, which verged on the imaginary, conveyed the fear and threat she experienced when the handymen came to the class and her courage in dealing with them. This confirms Wood and Hall's (2011) affirmation that frequently children use imaginative play to help them deal with "emotional opposites" (p. 277), in this case, those of happiness and fear, as experienced by Thea.

Figure 3. A drawing by that reflected an activity Thea did in class merged with an imaginary tale.

The interactive whiteboard activity

When a dragon came to school by Bertly

Bertly too had drawings which were a combination of real-life experience merged with the imaginary. *When a dragon came to school,* (Figure 4), is one such example, where Bertly drew himself with his friend fighting a dragon who came to school. Projecting himself as the hero of the text, Bertly specified that he threw the dragon in the water, shot and killed him. The drawing, which is dominated by action lines, captured a complex story packed with fear and acts of conflict and heroism where reality and myth interweaved with concepts of friendship.

Figure 4. Bertly taking the role of a superhero who fights and kills the dragon.

When a dragon came to school
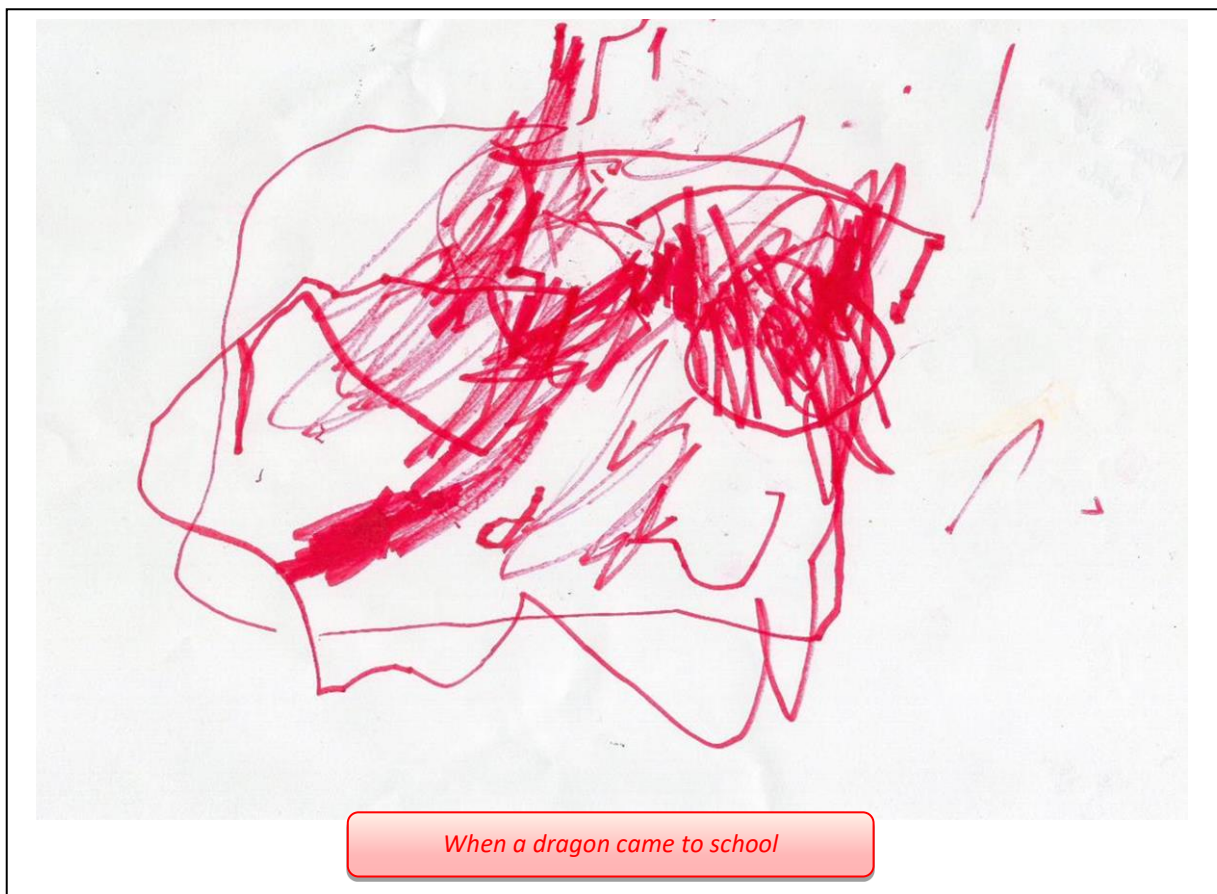
In this case, I consider Bertly, who was introvert and not very popular with his peers, as using this drawing as, "a means of entry" (Dyson, 1997, p. 47), into his friends' social world, where his aim was to parade his courage in overcoming the evil dragon. He conceptualised himself within "power relationships" (Ahn & Filipenko, 2007, p.287), representing himself as "powerful in a (pretend) danger-filled world" (Dyson, 1997, p.14), where he was in control of the dragon's fate and of himself as the hero of the story. This placed Bertly at making meaning on an "interpersonal level" (Halliday, 1978, p.45)*,* where he analysed his position in view of his social relations.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have analysed the content of examples of three children's drawings, as well as the meanings they conveyed. The content themes of the three children's drawings were striking in that they included the "unremarkable … [and] ordinariness" (Mavers, 2011, p.1), of their lives: family members, home scenes, animals, vehicles and objects, routine activities and mundane experiences that mirrored a situation they experienced, which they integrated with their knowledge and fantasy characters borrowed from contemporary popular culture. While in most instances my results supported findings from the studies mentioned above, there were also other times where idiosyncrasies were identified. What was evident from my analysis was that while some content themes such as *People* and *Animals* are common across studies of young children's drawings (Coates and Coates, 2011; Hall, 2010), there were other subjects which were specific and typical of the children's lives and the social, historical and cultural local context they lived in, which were unique to this study.

Analysing the content themes of the three children's drawings, I concluded that while the children's thematic preferences seemed to be influenced by their personalities, experiences and individual inclinations, gender could also have played a factor. Thea's drawings, for example, were characterised by stereotypical girls' thematic preferences, that typically focused on family scenes, relationships, and soft decorations with hearts, flowers and butterflies. Contrastingly, the boys preferred to draw action pictures of superhero drawings; findings which are also corroborated by several scholars (Hall, 2008; Millard and Marsh, 2001; Wright, 2010). However, whilst I acknowledge the small sample with reference to my own data, I suggest that these gender dichotomies are not absolute. Contradicting findings from Boyatzis and Albertini (2000), Hall (2010), Nicolopoulou (1997), and Nicolopoulou et al.'s (1994), I have shown that Thea's catalogue of drawings included also action representations, while Bertly and Luke had depictions of family members and home scenes, with Luke having the largest number of such drawings from among the three children; a phenomenon which is considered a rarity according to these studies. Another anomaly resided in Thea's depictions of vehicles, which according to Anning and Ring, (2004) and Hall (2010), is a theme usually prominent in boys' drawings.

Another aim of this chapter was to discuss the multiple layers of meaning-making young children create and communicate through their drawings. It contributes to understanding the richness of young children's unique meaning-making process through a semiotic perspective. By listening to the children's personal narratives, subjective interpretations and ways of meaning-making, my study led me to conclude that the three children used drawing as a meaningful semiotic space to make sense of everyday life episodes which they merged with fantasy ones. Through this chapter, I brought to the forefront the importance and value of children's drawings, and hence, the potential role and function of drawing as a language of communication. This suggests the need for a wider acknowledgement, understanding and appreciation by adults of children's drawings.

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Chapter 2

The narratives of gay male teachers in contemporary Catholic Malta

Jonathan Borg

Introduction

The study '*The Narratives of Gay Male Teachers in Contemporary Catholic Malta*' attempted to reveal the significance of being a gay teacher in Malta through five fictionalised narratives. The narratives featuring in this study, communicate how five Maltese, gay male teachers negotiate their personal and professional identities as they navigate the highly conservative terrain of Maltese education system. Centred on one chief research question, namely; '*What do the experiences of local gay teachers reveal about contemporary Maltese culture?*', this research challenges the deafening silence characterising issues which have traditionally been hushed. The generated narrative data provided deeper nuances on exclusionary practices that are deeply embedded in the Maltese education system as it exposed the pervasiveness of heteronormativity in 21st century Malta.

This research adopts an unorthodox approach to investigating narrative data. The thematically-driven narratives are themselves made 'transgressively' (St Pierre, 1997) from an artistic re-casting of interview data as composite fictional accounts - a methodological aspect which is further elaborated, later on in this chapter. In this way, the identities of the actual participants are invisible, whilst the issues characterising their lives have been dramatically foregrounded. These fictionalised narratives were deconstructed critically so as to locate the story in the context of literature and to feature directly the reflections of the interviewees themselves on the re-working and re-presentation of their life accounts. The combination of these elements generated a fusion of critical and reflexive inquiry which was intended to persuade the reader on the human issues so revealed.

The narratives themselves tell of suffering and exclusion, of ambiguity but also of success; of experiences which are heavily conditioned by the sexuality of these teachers and by the context in which they are situated. The ramifications of homophobia across different countries and contexts may actually be comparable, however, in Malta, often considered as an 'urban village' (Gans, 1962, p.16) with its small size, high population density and close-knit culture, the difficulties that these invisible educators encounter are exacerbated. Life in Malta "has a quality of intimacy that centres on family, children, Church and local community" and knowledge about other people and families is frequently made known through the "mechanism of gossip" (Bradford and Clark, 2011, p.181). As with other Mediterranean societies, honour and shame thus develop into two constructs which determine the social judgment of an individual in some of Malta's insular communities. When a person infringes the value norms of a culture, he taints his honour and is often rejected by society and treated with contempt. Similarly, shame embodies disgrace and humiliation and the resultant loss of social status. Preserving one's honour becomes therefore fundamental. Interestingly, O'Reilly Mizzi (1994) suggests that "... if your behaviour deviates from the norm you cannot move to another part of the community and start again. Your reputation will follow and catch up with you very quickly" (p.375). This study revealed how the effects of a heterosexist society, fused with the dominance of the Roman Catholic faith, prove to be chief factors which impede most Maltese homosexual educators from

presenting their sexuality to students, their parents and their teacher colleagues. Furthermore, the recent enactment of national legislations, aimed at safeguarding *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex* (LGBTI) individuals, though being a positive progressive step, it does not necessarily guarantee true inclusion. The sad reality is that Maltese educational institutions do not mirror the legislative advances that have taken place outside school boundaries since education on LGBTI issues is practically absent whereas homophobic bullying remains rampant.

Review of Literature

An expanded version of this brief review of literature can be accessed on http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/14301/

The Repercussions of Legitimised Masculinity
Shedding light on the meaning of the life experiences of male teachers who self-identify as homosexual in predominantly Catholic Malta, this research demonstrated that 'being gay' is a criterion for the exclusion of students and teachers from the culture and philosophy of education in Malta. From the marginalisation point of view, the concept of exclusion is governed by what society conceives as 'normal'. Throughout the process of hegemony, a ruling category establishes its ideals and portrays them as instinctive. In this case, the hegemonic privileging of absolute masculinity promotes "values such as courage… certain forms of aggression … and considerable amounts of toughness in mind and body" (Carrigan, Connell and Lee, 1987 p.148). Men who fail to fulfil such criteria are not only at an increased risk of social alienation but they endure an intricate process in defining their masculinity vis-à-vis 'mainstream' norms. Consequently, pressures to conform to gender stereotypes from parents, media and peers are pervasive and the perpetration of homophobic violence become tolerable.

The resulting societal discrimination, internalised heterosexism (Hetzel, 2011) and disruption in social support networks can precipitate mental distress, impacting one's psychological well-being (Meyer, 1995; 2003). Conversely, 'coming-out' and therefore disclosing one's sexuality may be an anguishing process (Armstrong and Moore, 2004) and incidence of suicide and self-harm in LGBT populations has been documented (Scott, Pringle, Lumsdaine, 2004). While it is difficult to defend one's rights when 'closeted', 'coming-out' may not be ideal for all *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual* (LGB) individuals since unsupportive parents and abusive reactions may have dismal ramifications for LGB adolescents (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009).

Attitudes Towards Homosexuality
Spargo (1999) elaborates Foucault's (1980; 1985; 1986) comparison of homosexuality in the 16th and 19th century, and confirms that in earlier times, the weight was on the sinfulness of the act but as from the 19th century, the emphasis shifted onto the individual's 'scientifically' determined condition. However, it was only in 1986 that homosexuality was removed from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) (APA, 1987). Back in the Late Middle Ages, church authorities considered homosexuality as an atrocious sin whereas the First and Second Vatican Council referred to homosexuality as the worst crime. Nowadays, the Catholic Church condemns homophobic discrimination, claiming that homosexuals "must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity", however, they "are called to chastity... to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2358). Interestingly, Borg (2006) refers to the 'Catholic hegemony' in Malta as "one dominant culture"

(p.61) which "works through education to reproduce its position within society" (p.62). Research by Conti (2011) with therapists who deal with Maltese LGB clients confirms that the predominance of the Catholic Church results in "religious fundamentalism, guilt, parents fearing for their children's spiritual well-being, individuals fearing that they will end up in hell, lack of acceptance by society and family, and lack of self-acceptance" (p.58).

The Heteronormativity of School Environments
At school, students are enmeshed in heteronormative discourses (Atkinson, 2002) that reinforce compulsory heterosexuality (Mac an Ghaill, 1994). Considerable evidence of discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation in schools was reflected in a *Fundamental Rights Agency* survey (FRA, 2012) conducted with three hundred and fifty-seven Maltese respondents. Eighty-eight per cent of participants were 'never' or 'rarely' open about them being LGBT while eighty-three per cent hid their LGBT identity during their school years. This reflects the schools' resistance to non-normative sexualities and justifies why LGBT students opt for 'invisibility' as the safer alternative to possible abuse. Despite the enactment of supportive legal frameworks, LGBT educators are, on the other hand, "caught in the dilemma of wanting to be out as role models for young people whilst needing to be […] protective of their identity in the normative gaze" (Biddulph, 2013, p.235). The separation of personal life from the professional career becomes a strategy that LGBT teachers negotiate to ensure their safety and safeguard their employment (Griffin, 1992). However this would require LGBT teachers to isolate themselves from the rest of their colleagues and students. Butler (2004) argues that this 'paradox of invisibility', in a society that necessitates their visibility, maintains normatives of power. Toynton (2006) believes that "by allowing false 'straightness' to be assumed through silence, the queer teacher does not offer their honest selves to their learners" (p.191) whereas queer students are denied the opportunity to identify with them as part of their 'coming-out' (Grace and Benson, 2000).
In Malta, schools, families and media are mostly silent on this topic. In maintaining a discursive silence, educators preserve a heterosexist view of the world. The taken-for-granted status of the heteronormativity of school environments lies at the heart of the unease in which non-heterosexual issues are addressed in Maltese schools. Furthermore, teachers' access to formal training on these issues is very limited and educators are poorly equipped to grapple with complex issues concerning sexual orientation and identity.

Fusion of Homosexuality and Paedophilia
Interestingly, in 21st century Malta the male elementary school teacher may still be stereotyped a homosexual or a paedophile (King, 1998), reinforcing the taboo that "real men don't do so-called feminine things like teaching… they must be paedophiles or gays" (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006, p. 64). Parents' concerns about the sexuality of their children's teacher are centred on the potential for the teacher's sexual involvement with their children. When parents suspect that their children's teacher is gay, "and that being gay is a predisposition to sexual desire for children, then the teacher's behaviours, *all* of them, are likely to be interpreted from a prefigured sexual stance" (King, 1998, p.137).

An Endnote
Clearly, being the 'other' in a culturally-sensitive society is problematic. Hostile attitudes, stemming from cultural beliefs, social discourse and from religious dogma may further complicate the life of individuals whose sexuality is categorised as 'deviant'. These difficulties are exacerbated when the 'othered' individual is a teacher within an educating institution that is meant to preserve social order.

Methodology

A Narrative Inquiry

The significance of being a gay student and, eventually, a gay teacher in the Maltese setting could only be accomplished through qualitative research in which the unquantifiable context of participants' lives is given primary importance. The generated narrative data was so 'thick' (Geertz, 1973) that it would have been problematic to describe this form of life via alternative research methods. The personal narratives of five gay male teachers, who are employed in teaching roles with children and young people aged three to eighteen years in Malta, were re-worked as creative fictionalised accounts (Clough, 2002).

Framed by a subjectivist ontological paradigm, this study analysed culturally and historically situated interpretations to elucidate meaning. From an epistemological point of view, narratives incorporate the capacity to elicit meaning from human experience, helping us discover 'human knowledge'. This methodology reflects my ontological and epistemological positioning since I adopted a phenomenological stance which emphasises how 'reality' is mutually-constitutive of experiences as lived and understood through human consciousness. Indeed, this work reflects how the narratives of these gay teachers can be shared and valued as 'knowledge' or as a possible interpretation of reality.

Sampling of Participants

Two of the five participants were identified through the *Malta Gay Rights Movement* (MGRM) which forwarded a mail shot to its members, describing the project and the criteria for eligibility for participating. Two other informants were identified through 'snowball' sampling (Morgan, 2008). The fifth participant was a personal acquaintance whom I approached and who was willing to be part of this study. Prospective participants were all from a middle-class background and were not limited to a specific educational age-range.

A sample of five participants may be contested when dealing with issues related to hypothesis or generalizability. However the kind of research I have dealt with was a search for meaning and it did not seek to make generalised hypothetical statements. I was more concerned with how informants assigned meaning to their experiences and whether such data 'answered' the research question effectively.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of the study, I ensured that appropriate ethical measures were taken throughout the different phases of this research. The risks and benefits of the research, along with steps being taken for the safety of all participants, were discussed during a meeting with informants who were then provided with an information sheet. Upon providing informed consent, prospective participants were told that they could terminate their participation at any point throughout the research. Professional organisational details were kept close at hand to pass on, in the event that anyone of the participants needed further support. All of the collected data was kept confidential, pseudonyms were used and the participants' identity was never disclosed. The proposed study had received institutional ethical approval.

The Research Process

The experiences of informants were collected through two rounds of one-to-one, recorded semi-structured interviews which were generally sixty to ninety minutes long. Interview data was thematically analysed and, resultantly, a number of tentative themes emerged. The second in-depth

interview served to further elaborate on insights which might not have been raised during the first encounter. Data collected from the second interview was again thematically coded. The two sets of themes, emerging from the two interviews, were compared and fine-tuned accordingly. Recurring themes were filtered so as to identify five key themes upon which five fictionalised narratives were constructed. Consequently, each fictionalised narrative addressed one of the following themes:

- Aspects of power in a binary gender regime
- The conflation of homosexuality with paedophilia
- The influence of the Catholic religion (and gay teachers' accessibility to employment in Church schools)
- Issues of safety for gay individuals in educational environments
- A culture of silence, invisibility and a dual identity

In order to intertwine the possibility of alternative interpretations, the fictional narratives were returned to research participants, asking them to carefully read the narratives and to provide written response on each. Participants were not given any specific guidelines which they needed to adhere to but their written feedback, which was also instrumental in consolidating the trustworthiness of each narrative (as discussed in the upcoming sub-section), was eventually included after each commentary.

Issues of Validity and Reliability in Fictional Approaches to Research

Clough (2002) defines fictional narratives as "stories which *could* be true" and that "allow the report of those experiences which might otherwise not be made public" (p.9). The vibrant interplay between fact and fiction, featuring in these narratives is not only intended to facilitate the understanding of embodied facts but it has the "potential to provoke multiple interpretations and responses from readers who differ in their positioning to the story provided" (Sparkes, 1997, p.33). In Clough's words, "translating life's realities *as lived* by men and women into story, and doing it in such a way as still to be believed, is *the* ethnographic challenge" (p.64).

While I intended to bring forth the experiences of Maltese gay teachers, I was highly aware of the subjective implications that my own location within the Maltese context, my values and my interpretation, bear on the research and also on the creation of these narratives. In this context, phenomenology justifies this methodology: "these are my ways of seeing the world I both create and inhabit" (Clough, 2002, p.10).

Trustworthiness

It is via the capacity of effective fictions that "each reader brings to the reading his or her own structures of analyses" (Clough, 2003, p.446) to match the presented version of 'truth' with their lived experience. Stories should be judged "by their aesthetic aspects, their verisimilitude, and by criteria of authenticity and integrity to the people they portray" (Badley, 2003, p.442). The validity of a story lies in the hands of "the artfully persuasive storyteller" (Smith, 2002, p.114) who renounces control over the story's meaning to the readers who interweave their own interpretive and emotional responsiveness.

Indeed, the commentaries which follow each fictional narrative are not *analyses* of narratives but a means to encourage further reflection, alternative 'truths' … or endless interpretations.

An Endnote

Considering the sensitivity of the issue under investigation, this unorthodox representational method was meant to function as an emblem of the diversity of sexuality that defies the deeply-seated heteronormative culture of education in Malta.

Analysis – The Narratives

The full version of the upcoming narratives is available via http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/14301/

Albert's Narrative

Faced by the sudden and co-incidental discovery of his son's homosexuality, Albert's father rejects his son and even tries to opt for 'conversion therapy' in an attempt to heal his 'sickness'. Despite his hardship, Albert eventually emerges as a highly motivated and energetic pre-school educator until, one day, his homosexuality gets discovered by one of the parents of his students.

Commentary

Albert's narrative, is an attempt to expose the difficulties that a family network may experience after the 'coming out' of a family member. It additionally presents a challenge to societal expectations about gay teachers who audaciously navigate the feminised territory of early childhood education. Whilst the locational components that constitute Albert's narrative are entirely fictional, the fact that one of the participants worked as a pre-school educator was instrumental in the modelling of this narrative primarily because of his exceptional 'male presence' in the field of early childhood education and also because of my interest in how gay preschool educators construct their identity (ies) in the context of the Maltese educational system.

Historically, society has constructed teachers as desexualised subjects. It thus becomes problematic for society when teachers themselves violate their expected asexuality. Similarly, men's work as caregivers in the context of primary education, where care is a requisite, is altogether perceived as problematic. Albert's narrative embodies the hidden yet pervasive relationship between male educators and paedophiles. The effect of catastrophic and erroneous correlations between homosexuality, teaching, gendered behaviours and sexual relationships between adults and young people have left an undesirable effect on the number of males who opt to enter the teaching profession (King, 1994). The uncontrollable paranoia of 'being discovered' is personified through Albert whose unease obliges him to constantly monitor his behaviour and interactions, in order to deflect any suspicions. At one point in Albert's narrative, Albert's neighbour, who previously used to send her son André to school with Albert, has a change of mind. She had so far been more than satisfied with her son's academic progress in Albert's class and therefore her sudden, impulsive decision to withdraw her son from Mr Albert's classroom is disconcerting. The possibility that the mother had somehow become aware of the teacher's homosexuality is clearly implied and is suggestive of the notion that if a gay man expresses his interest in becoming an early childhood professional, "others are prepared to think him perverted, paedophilic, and certainly wrong-headed in his intent to teach youngsters" (King, 2004, p.122). Three teachers participating in this study claimed there were instances when they feared that they could face defamatory accusations in this regard. These participants have therefore internalised the belief that being gay might increase the possibility that they might be perceived as paedophiles.

Furthermore, Albert's narrative shows how, gay adolescents may find it harder to disclose their sexuality to family members fearing a possible lack of acceptance. The reaction of Albert's mother to

her son's 'coming out' is shocking. Eventually, she becomes more supportive of her son. During the data collection phase, three participants tellingly justified their parents' initial, impulsive reaction suggesting that parents were almost expected to react in such a way, given their urge to protect their children from unavoidable discriminatory social treatment. Implicitly, this suggests that in Maltese society, discrimination as a result of perceived sexual deviance is somehow conceived as inescapable. Albert's dad's initial illusionary supportive stance is sadly obliterated by the expressed belief that his son's homosexuality could be 'cured' through reparative therapy and the subsequent rejection of his son and his homosexuality. The parent's negative way of dealing with the 'coming out' of his son is rooted in issues of culture and religion which eventually irradiate the lives of Maltese gay teachers. Instead of providing Albert with the support he desperately required at a most vulnerable moment, Albert's father throws his son out of the house. The need to address familial rejection was evident from the initial phases of data collection wherein two participants told of events that highlighted parental rejection.

Having read Albert's narrative, three participants claimed that many still make *"the unfortunate and unjust false connection between homosexuality and paedophilia ... a connection that does not exist ... how ungrateful and unfair!"* One participant could strongly relate to this narrative, given his work as a Kindergarten assistant. He explains that although the events told in Albert's narrative may not necessarily reflect his personal circumstances he is still *"attentive"* to his personal actions lest these may be *"interpreted wrongly by others whose intentions are bad"*.

Nick's Narrative
Since birth, Nick had always been immersed in a Catholic environment and therefore being attracted to other boys proved to be quite confusing for the developing teenager. To further complicate matters, Nick witnessed episodes of homophobic bullying on one of his secondary school peers but was unable to defend him, for fear of having his own homosexuality discovered. Ironically, as an Assistant Head of a Catholic Church School, Nick still feels that revealing his sexual identity might even jeopardise his employment.

Commentary
In my duty as a researcher, I felt responsible to use data provided by a participant working in a local Catholic Church school to bring to light the distinct complexities that these employees face. Nick's story is a representation of educators whose accessibility to employment can be questioned because of 'substantive Catholic life choices' which educators working in Maltese Catholic Church schools need to exhibit.

Flashback to festive scenes that introduce this narrative serve to accentuate how religion is embedded in Nick's identity since his childhood years. The sense of refuge that religion offers since childhood ironically evolves into a source of tension that is responsible for much of Nick's confusion at different stages of his life history. He, who has always sought refuge in religion, becomes annihilated by the guilt which that religion has now burdened his conscience with. The developing teenager feels condemned and rejected by the same religion that he has always embraced just because he is sexually attracted to other boys. However rejecting this integral part of his identity and his culture is something which he deems impossible. In a society where masculinity triumphs, religious fundamentalism aggravates outlooks on homosexuality in the way it perceives the homosexual act as 'immoral'. Although Nick, an assistant Head of School in a Church School, practises his teaching vocation with a sense of pride, a subtle, persistent source of tension characterises his employment – he does not disclose facts about his personal life and lets colleagues assume that he still lives with his parents.

Leading this dual identity is more secure to Nick yet it is also burdens educators like him with an insurmountable sense of guilt for not presenting their true selves.

A confidential Curia document, leaked in 2014, revealed that the Maltese archdiocese were requesting Heads of Catholic schools to discuss new employment terms which would ensure the exclusive hiring of staff who can be safely considered as "practicing Catholics" (Archdiocese of Malta, 2014, p.18). Although no specific reference is made to gay teachers, the conclusions of this document, warned of "decisive disciplinary action" against staff whose "life choices give scandal or run counter to the ethos of the school" (ibid, p.19). This explains that the narratives in this study do not represent 'out of date' stories, but they embody experiences which are typical of 'modern' gay teachers in 21st century Malta. Aspects of masculine hegemonic environment at school, and specifically during Physical Education sessions were recurrent issues that participants raised during the interviews. Parts of a homophobic incident, which features in Nick's story, were drawn from the experience of one participant. This instance of physical bullying, reminiscent of homophobic intimidation in educational settings, confirms the power of masculine hegemony in sport within educational settings. Though 'Harry' - the bullied student - and his story never 'existed' as told in the narrative, he embodies experiences which are well-known to students who violate the rules of heteronormativity. In addition, I have included memories from my secondary school years where I had witnessed instances of homophobic bullying on fellow students. Through my own imagination, I crafted a scene that encompass these amalgamated sources and which would be representative of the data that participants contributed to my research.

In reacting to Nick's narrative, all interviewees confirmed the difficulties that they encountered in constructing their identity and how these challenges, often led to their social alienation. None of the participants believed that Nick's narrative mirrored *their* story from beginning to end, however they all felt they could identify with aspects of this narrative. One narrator claimed that *"[he] could really empathise with Nick… The flow is superb and emotional. Very, very intense in the way it portrays the realities of gay teachers. Gripping indeed. It is a heart-rending story… there were moments where I could see myself in Nick"*.

Silvio's Narrative
During his school years, Silvio experienced appalling homophobic bullying which was authored by his peers and, even worse, provoked by one of his educators. Ironically, Silvio never felt safe enough to trust anyone at school. Later on, as a student teacher, Silvio feared that students could easily detect his homosexuality and, as a result, he strives to be an excellent teacher as he carefully avoids situations which could reveal his sexuality.

Commentary
The development of Silvio's story is rooted in the description of excruciating harassment shared by teacher participants, which reportedly took place from their late primary school years right through to the end of their secondary schooling. Furthermore, the horrific suicide of an Italian teenager, which had coincided with the data collection stage, amplified the significance of the participants' narratives. This strengthened my resolution to advocate the urgent need of education authorities to help address the reality of homophobia in local schools via this specific narrative.

In Silvio's story, interview data was intertwined with factual information. This synthesis of events, reworked through my own imagination led to the construction of *Silvio* and his narrative. Flashbacks included in this narrative were founded on a combination of both true and fictional segments which

constituted an ultimate fictional whole. The application of fiction was instrumental in rendering the description of Silvio's abuse more vivid. The resulting blend is poignant since the detailed account encourages readers of the narrative to re-live Silvio's plight and seriously consider the implications of his story. Suicidal thoughts were specifically mentioned by one of the interview participants. The discussion of the participant's thoughts on suicide, entirely non-fictional, was one of the fragmented puzzle pieces which led to the creation of 'Silvio's Story'.

Furthermore, Silvio's story demonstrates how heterosexuality is reproduced through daily classroom practices, where Silvio remains 'invisible' since his needs remain unacknowledged. In Malta, the invisibility of LGBTI issues in education was raised by the MGRM which stated that:

> … the new National Curriculum Framework [NCF] currently fails to make any specific reference to issues that most effect lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students. This continues to render members of the LGBT communities… invisible in the Maltese education system (MGRM, 2012, p.3).

Silvio's narrative sheds lights on aspects on school safety. Although the recently launched national policy entitled '*Addressing Bullying Behaviours in Schools*' (Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education, 2015) focuses on addressing bullying behaviour in schools, it does not specifically address homophobic harassment that is experienced by LGBTI teachers, who are bullied by their own students or by their colleagues. In the way it views LGBTI students as 'vulnerable', this policy only highlights the difference as it preserves heterosexuality at the top rank of a hierarchy of sexualities.

At one point in the narrative, both Silvio's caregivers and his teachers correlate his academic failure with a lack of motivation. Clearly missing the woods for the trees, they fail to inquire over the origins of the student's anxiety. The passivity of the teaching staff is regarded as compliance with the atrocious acts of homophobic harassment and is representative of the education system's insensitivity to human issues. Silvio's disheartened view of his teachers represents the standpoint expressed by one of the participants who defined his attempts to speak about his bullying experience to a school counsellor as 'pointless'.

In being the 'only male' who did not participate in the annual Christmas football match, Silvio fears drawing attention to his 'non-conformity' and although his engagement in a relationship with his male partner can be perceived positively, Silvio does not feel safe enough as yet to 'be himself' at school, despite being in his eighth year of teaching. The aspect of concealment was again raised in the participants' response to Silvio's narrative as he described how he *"could not tell anyone about [his] sexuality till the age of twenty-seven"* and that *"it was a nightmare hiding this secret"*. One participant described how the issues that Silvio's story raises *"reflect reality"* and that *"there are many staff members who pass comments that are homophobic… even when you are around and when they know that you are gay"*.

Manuel's Narrative
Manuel is a gay post-secondary lecturer whose life was heavily influenced by a very religious upbringing in the highly conservative context of Malta. He fears social rejection as he opts to leave the Society of Christian Doctrine which had ensured the invisibility of his homosexuality for years. He, moreover, experiences an inner conflict between his outward role as a heterosexual male teacher and his true self which he has difficulty acknowledging, accepting and being. He is reluctant to give

up the religious teachings he was brought up with but he is simultaneously aware of the Church's antagonistic attitude towards issues related to homosexuality. Quite surprisingly, towards the end of the narrative, Manuel comes-out as an activist who supports parents of LGBTI individuals.

Commentary

In order to substantiate Manuel's uncontrollable anxiety in terms of morality and spirituality, the narrative is deliberately constructed to include Manuel's childhood years through a flashback. He sinks in thoughts of a blissful childhood with a sense of reminiscence which clearly contrasts with his actual turbulent state of being.

Manuel's story was specifically fuelled by local on-going political debates on 'controversial' issues which featured in the run-up for the 2013 General Election. In a country which introduced divorce only in 2011, the eventual introduction of same-sex civil unions and particularly the adoption of children by same-sex couples were highly controversial. A survey commissioned by the local Church authorities (Sansone, 2014), which demonstrated that more than eighty per cent of respondents disagreed with gay adoption, had been criticised by government MPs who accused the Church of trying to "suffocate the logical and civil argument with nonsensical statistics" by exerting undue pressure on MPs to vote against the legislation as if they did otherwise they would be committing a "grave immoral act" (Schembri, 2014, p.2). In this context, whether to conform to the teaching of the Church or advocate for the fundamental rights that all individuals in a just society ought to be afforded was a dilemma in which many individuals, including myself as a Roman Catholic man, were trapped in.

Indeed, Manuel struggles between being morally correct and simultaneously being honest to himself and those around him as his rigid spiritual creed had always instructed. In a highly religious context, the teacher comes to internalise an innate belief that it is aberrant for homosexual individuals to own sensitive jobs such as his teaching post. Manuel feels the urge to share his 'big secret' but he knows that increased social visibility might put his own well-being at stake. The main character, therefore, encompasses the fears of gay teachers who fear social alienation and perhaps even victimisation by students or fellow colleagues should they become aware of their sexual orientation.

Surprisingly, towards the end of the narrative an emancipated Manuel opts to 'come out' 'publicly', by helping out with a parents' support group even though, ironically, he is not yet prepared to disclose his sexuality to his parents. Interestingly, in reacting to Manuel's narrative, one interviewee who has a managing position at the school where he works claimed that:

> *I could identify with Manuel since I try to help out students in all cases but especially in matters that deal with homosexuality. I somehow feel more confident when these issues arise. I feel it is my duty… my obligation to give a helping hand… even by simply using the right words to address the situation.*

Edmond's Narrative

Edmond, a primary school teacher is trapped in a relationship that is significantly compromised by a sense of anxiety and by his partner's own vulnerable state of mind. He 'deliberately' resists sharing his distressed emotional state in order to safeguard his own security. This concern keeps Edmond back from engaging in genuine relationships with his colleagues.

Commentary

Edmond's story embodies the capacity of narrative methods in reporting the messiness and ambiguity that is inherent in human experience. It is an emotionally-charged account which may evoke sentiments of compassion, melancholy or perhaps resentment. Moulding "implausible" and "disproportionate" experiences into a single character may, in the eyes of some readers and critics, undermine the narrative's trustworthiness and its connection to reality. Indeed, in the context of this fictional narrative, Edmond's story may attract "criticism because it is too dark" however this narrative "translates life's realities as lived" (Clough, 2002, p.64) by some of the research participants.

Characterised by strong feelings of isolation and loneliness, Edmond's narrative reveals the inherent tensions of living under the double burden of oppression and invisibility. The narrative necessarily exposes the relational crisis which has taken its toll on both Edmond's and his boyfriend's psychological and emotional well-being. Apart from the psychological strain that often accompanies stressful relationships, Edmond and his partner belong to a 'devalued minority' in society – an aspect which naturally complicates matters for individuals whose sexuality is socially constructed as non-normative.

The story is rooted in a key episode that was shared by one of the teacher participants and which eventually proved to be instrumental in shaping the essence of Edmond's narrative. The described event, eventually refashioned into a fictional narrative, conveys the complexity of social discourse and the tensions that arise as 'Edmond' negotiates his intersecting identities in the professional and personal spheres of his life.

For gay students and teachers, revealing their sexual orientation in the average Maltese school means taking tremendous risks that may ultimately render them more vulnerable. This narrative portrays a painful split between the professional identity and sexual identity of Edmond who is indirectly inhibited from being his true self. Rather than being perceived a whole, the identity of gay teachers seems to be fragmented in a dual identity: a professional self and a sexual identity. Notwithstanding his colleagues' evident loyalty, Edmond chooses to withdraw the more personal dimensions of his identity from the place of work. Suffering in silence without the comforting words of a supportive teacher colleague is sadly a common element that emerged from the narrative interviews. His sexual orientation is prone to the social and political power that he owns and the way he exercises his power in the professional domain. It shapes his experiences and the way he builds his immediate social network.

To make matters worse, Edmond has not even 'outed' himself with his parents. His mother, in her eighties and with a 'church mentality' is hopeful that one day Edmond would make her a grandmother. Edmond conveys the impression that his parents might not be able to understand what homosexuality is all about, let alone attempt to grapple with the reality of a homosexual son.

In reacting to Edmond's narrative, one participant reiterated the artistic characteristics of the narrative and its potential in evoking real-life scenes and 'humane' sentiments. This interviewee explained that:

> *the way the narrative is written immerses you (meaning, the reader) in the story. It reminds me of difficult moments in my life, which I had to sort on my own… without anybody's help – and this because I risked revealing my sexuality by sharing my difficulties.*

Conclusion

This research has achieved a more authentic understanding of the difficulties that Maltese gay teachers may face in the Maltese cultural context. Although the challenges described in these fictional narratives mirror the conclusions of extra-Maltese research, the authoritative influence of the Catholic Church in Malta has a distinct impact on the lives of these individuals.

Despite the adoption of legislative measures regarding same-sex civil unions, protection from homophobic discrimination and the adoption of children by same-sex couples, formal and hidden curricula are not synchronized with these advances. Not only does Maltese educational policy fail to address the needs of all students (in terms of sexual identity and orientation) but it is exclusionary in the way it dictates a binary notion of sexuality. Teachers who have undergone local teacher training courses may not be professionally equipped [if not resistant] to educate on the diversity of human sexuality.

A fundamental religious outlook is often one of the main reasons prompting adverse reactions or prejudice towards gay individuals. The socio-cultural embeddedness of the Catholic religion in the life of an average Maltese citizen exacerbates the difficulties that a gay individual may experience elsewhere. With the Catholic Church being one of the main providers of education in Malta, the regulatory discourse on 'deviant' sexualities is maintained. Adopting a dual identity and maintaining invisibility [when and if possible] is for many Maltese educators, the safer option for a stable career. Moreover, given that the employment of teachers in Maltese Church schools is restricted to candidates who have committed themselves to 'Catholic Life Choices', gay teachers' entitlement to employment in this sector is therefore compromised. Furthermore, an erratic conflation of homosexuality and paedophilia heightens difficulties for gay teachers working in the Primary Education sector.

Recommendations

• Sharing these narratives can potentially serve as a means to sensitise people on issues of sexual diversity. These stories can be discussed in workshops, held as part of teacher training initiatives. These case studies can also be used in preparatory meetings for parents who, ideally would be approached to discuss the main aims behind awareness campaigns.

• The introduction of Gay-Straight Alliance clubs (GSAs) which are effective school clubs that help support LGBT students and which help educate all students on issues of sexual diversity may encourage students and school staff members to ally with LGBT and gender non-conforming students (Macgillivray, 2005).

• Educators who throughout the scholastic year strive to ensure an inclusive school climate should be acclaimed for their effort. This helps promote the school's commitment to diversity.

• Educators should ideally be provided with professional development programmes that may clarify any misconceptions that teachers may have on issues related to sexuality. Such training would sensitise teachers to the challenges that students with a non-conformant sexuality may face in society. It also enables educating staff to reflect on what constitutes homophobic bullying and on how they are to react in the eventuality of such happenings. The input of students, staff members and parents may also be valuable in revising anti-bullying policies in a way that it publicly affirms the school's commitment to the safety of all students.

- Theatrical representations involving music and art that teach students about sexual diversity and the screening of LGBTI-themed films or biographies of famous LGBTI people in schools may also be effective.
- In schools, campaigns which raise awareness on the topic of sexual diversity can be organised in collaboration with the MGRM. These can be spread over a number of days or weeks and should ideally be held as a nationwide initiative. This campaign may include special assemblies and an 'LGBTI week'.
- With the help of MGRM, other National Government Organisations (NGOs) and with the collaboration of Educational Officers, college principals and school management teams, a cross-curricular toolkit for educators may also be developed and implemented initially in one of the school colleges, possibly as part of a pilot project.

School environments, teaching and learning should mirror the realities of society and should not conversely attempt to hush them. This should be implemented in a way that does not underline 'difference' but through an approach that treats different sexualities with equal importance and respect. Stakeholders in education ought to commit themselves to render schools safer. An increased sense of safety in educational spaces would encourage students and teachers to strip off the disguise which cloaks their true self.

The recommendations of this research attempted to shine light onto the cultural and educational lacunae in which the identities of gay teachers are frequently lodged; and thence to give voice and profile to those otherwise silent and invisible figures.

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Chapter 3

Teaching Maltese as a second language to adults

Charles Saliba

Introduction

Malta as an EU member state
When in 2004 Malta joined the EU, Maltese became an official language of the EU. Due to this accession and for other reasons, such as economic prosperity, political stability, and archipelago safety, an ever-increasing number of foreign people have opted to live on the islands. Most Maltese are bilingual and speak both Maltese and English, so foreigners who speak English have little difficulty in practical communication. However, most foreigners who cannot speak Maltese feel disadvantaged, and prefer to learn the language to integrate into Maltese society. As Sammut (2004) indicated in his thesis, *The 'Alien' Experience: Returned Migrants in Gozo Secondary Schools*:

> ...in the Maltese culture, everyone speaks Maltese. You can't sit there and babble in English and tell them how you feel. You do feel different. As much as you don't want to be, as much as you want to get on with the other people, you are different (p. 48).

Additionally, for foreigners who do not speak English, the need to learn Maltese is greater, to survive within a community in which Maltese is the dominant language. Still others may want to learn Maltese for special or specific purposes such as occupational (Harmer, 2000) or academic purposes. It is noteworthy that nowadays certain foreign professionals who accept positions in Malta are bound to learn Maltese. Others such as refugee immigrants, who seek asylum in Malta, try to learn it to integrate within the Maltese community. Still others who may be interested in learning the language and improving their communication skills are emigrants or their kin, who have returned to Malta after long durations, without previously learning their native language. All these reasons lead to a demand for Maltese language courses, which is not fully satisfied, as such courses are not always available (especially in Gozo) or may not be in accord with a learner's aims.

Directorate for Lifelong Learning Courses (DLL)
Under the education department of Malta, in 2012-2013, the DLL organised three courses for foreigners at the Lifelong Learning Centre or in specific local councils or schools around Malta.

1.   Maltese as a Foreign Language (MFL)–Malta Qualifications Framework Level 1 (MQF-1);
2.   MFL–MQF Level 2 (MQF-2);
3.   Maltese Language–Conversation.
(For more information about the MQF levels visit https://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/Pages/MQF.aspx)

In this research, the MFL levels 1 and 2 were chosen, because, when compared to other institutions that teach Maltese to foreigners, these had by far the most participants. The reason for the popularity of these courses could be because they were offered all over Malta and Gozo, at different times and levels (DLL, 2017). Since the MFL-1 and MFL-2 courses claimed to teach learners four language

skills, I focused my research on these courses; the Maltese conversation course was excluded from my research since it is an independent course, and is unrelated to the MFL-1 and MFL-2 courses.

Statement of the problem

Responding to the increasing demand to learn Maltese as a second language (MSL), the DLL offers courses of various types and levels. However, courses are often taught by anyone who can speak and write Maltese, whether he or she is a qualified Maltese language educator or not. Despite the teachers' best intentions, their lack of qualifications and resources inevitably lead to a certain degree of amateurism in the field, which undermines the educational value of this enterprise. However, this issue could be counterbalanced by using appropriate syllabi, learning materials and teacher training. Therefore, it is important to investigate whether the MFL-1 and MFL-2 courses offered by the DLL meet the learners' expectations in terms of the course syllabi, teaching methods and learning materials. It is also essential to investigate the teachers' needs, considering that teachers are a determining factor in the success of the courses.

Research Aims and Questions

This research addressed the following aims:

1. To obtain a snapshot of the conditions, attitudes and needs of learners and teachers attending or delivering these courses.
2. To compare the learners' needs in terms of the syllabus, teaching methods and learning materials, through their perceptions of what is being offered in the course they are attending, and to determine if their needs are being satisfied.
3. To compare the teachers' perceived needs in terms of the syllabus, teaching methods, learning materials (including the teachers' perceptions of learners' needs) and teacher training, with their perceptions of the courses being offered by the DLL.
4. To gain insights into the similarities and differences between the teachers' and students' perceived needs and suggestions.
5. To evaluate the entire system, and pinpoint what should be amended in the present teaching scenario.

My main research question was to investigate whether there were discrepancies between the current MSL courses offered by the DLL, and the learners' and teachers' perceptions of what and how they should be taught. My secondary questions were as follows:

- To what degree does the current programme meet the needs and expectations of its adult learners in terms of the syllabi, teaching methods and materials?
- What are the learners' perceived needs and suggestions regarding the MSL courses for adults in terms of the syllabi, teaching methods and materials?
- What are the teachers' perceived needs and suggestions concerning the MSL courses for adults in terms of the teacher training, syllabi, teaching methods and materials?
- To what degree does the current situation meet the teachers' needs and expectations in terms of the teacher training, syllabi, teaching methods and materials?

Literature Review

Adult learners' characteristics, needs and motivations
The human capacity for language acquisition is impressive, and can be exemplified by the ways in which children acquire their native languages (L1), and many adults learn their second (L2) or third languages through everyday experience. However, occasionally language acquisition is a source of frustration for those who are striving to learn or teach a second language (SL) in a classroom setting. Although the classroom environment helps in the learning process and is generally handled by competent teachers and equipped with instructional methods, textbooks and resources, not every learner who attends these classes learns the skills needed to cope with the language demands of the outside world (Pica, 1987).

Language input is an essential part of learning a language. Children acquiring their L1 receive long hours of exposure (Lightbown and Spada, 2006), while adults learning an SL, especially those learning it as a foreign language (FL), have limited language exposure. In the latter case (which may hold true for English-speaking foreigners learning Maltese as an SL), as Malta is bilingual, learners are only exposed to the language as it is taught in the classroom setting, which is often more formal than the language used in social settings (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). Thus, learners need exposure to authentic language in the classroom, and the teaching materials they use should contain authentic texts so that they are introduced to a range of discourse types. As Lightbown (1985, p. 265) stated, 'the virtual absence of a particular form or structure in the input makes its acquisition impossible'. Thus, recently many teaching resources and activities have been designed to reflect the 'authentic' language that the learner will encounter in the real world, to enhance success in SL acquisition (Pica, 1987). This reflects SLA theorists' agreement that to acquire a language, learners must be exposed to its spoken or written form in natural settings or through formal instruction (Klapper, 2006).

Adult SL learners are more developed cognitively, possess greater problem-solving abilities, already communicate in their L1, have a mental picture of a language, and have different motivations for learning a language (Klapper, 2006). One of the motivations for learning a new language is migration to a new country. McKay and Tom (1999) stated that some adults move to a new country to learn the language and culture, but the majority come to work, study, accompany their families or friends or escape from difficult conditions at home. Others learn languages so that they can find better jobs or advance in their careers. Adult SL learners may have different backgrounds, languages, cultures and aims, but all share a common goal – to 'function successfully in their new environment […and...] be able to speak to and understand the people around them as well as read and write' (McKay and Tom, 1999, p. 2).

Criteria, such as exposure to a naturalistic environment, motivation, personality, amongst others influence a person's success when learning an SL. However, many adult learners end up with lower than native-like levels of proficiency, because some 'fail to engage in the task with sufficient motivation, commitment of time or energy, and support from the environments in which they find themselves to expect high level of success' (Marinova *et al*., 2000, p. 27). Hence, motivation affects learners' success because 'it provides the primary impetus to initiate learning the L2 and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process' (Csizér and Dörnyei, 1998, p. 203). Learners' motivation can be affected by other factors, including curiosity, desire for a new experience (Littlewood, 1984), the learning place conditions, the methods used to teach the target language, the challenges faced in the activities and the success obtained (Harmer, 2000), the lessons' content relevance to the learners' respective ages and abilities, a supportive atmosphere (Lightbown

and Spada, 2006), enthusiasm of the tutor and an (un)favourable time slot (Klapper, 2006). Moreover, Csizér and Dörnyei (1998, p.215) proposed what they call the '10 commandments' for motivating language learners, as follows: setting a personal example; creating a pleasant atmosphere; presenting the tasks properly; developing a good relationship with the learners; increasing the learners' linguistic self-confidence and goal-orientedness; making lessons interesting; promoting learner autonomy; personalising the learning process; and familiarising learners with culture. Littlemore (2002 cited in Klapper, 2006) also provides a list to help language practitioners create interesting teaching materials to accommodate different learning styles, as follows: use visual aids; encourage visualisation; provide concrete examples; make use of metaphor, analogy and paradox; employ language that makes a topic come alive; help students make connections between ideas; link the materials to students' lives; provide opportunities for hands-on learning; make use of graphic organisers; provide opportunities for multi-sensory learning; encourage creative writing; use music; employ creativity; use video interactivity and the total physical response approach. The foregoing concepts lead to the conclusion that to increase the learners' motivation, tutors have to present their students with adequate learning experiences and materials to meet 'their needs for competence, relatedness, self-esteem and enjoyment' (Ehrman et al., 2003, p. 320).

Moreover, a syllabus is vital in providing transparency, since it clarifies the course objectives, contents and teaching methods to the parties concerned, and helps in regularising teaching and learning, and in providing uniformity and guidance by offering the methodology for the content to be taught (Newby, 2000). According to Breen (1987, p. 82) a syllabus would 'provide an accessible framework of the knowledge and skills on which teachers and learners [would] work' and would offer a plan for teaching and learning, thus giving its learners direction and continuity. Further, McKay and Tom (1999) suggested that teachers should use applications, formal tests and interviews to collect information about the students, to help teach them as individuals. This information can serve as a basis for further development of learning programmes, learning activities, teaching materials, etc. (Brown, 2009). Moreover, Dublin and Olshtain (1986) recommended that before developing a new language programme, it would be crucial to assess the one currently in operation because new programmes would be created either to expand and improve the present ones or remedy their shortcomings. Nevertheless, although needs analysis is a key step for effective course design, 'it would seem that most language planners in the past have bypassed a logically necessary first step' (Schutz and Derwing, 1981, p. 30).

In needs analysis, it is vital to survey the teacher population because they are a determining factor in the success of a course, new syllabi or learning materials. Brown (2001) echoed this point, asserting the importance of involving teachers, because they 'are the people who will have to deliver the [syllabus] and live with it long after the current students (and perhaps the needs analysts) have moved on. [Moreover,] we must never forget that teachers have needs, too' (p. 287).

Since the study participants comprised adult learners, this literature survey described the characteristics and motivations of adult language learners. Moreover since this study consists of a needs analysis of adult learners and their teachers, this process was briefly defined. The literature also shows that when developing new programmes, it is essential to assess, improve on or remedy shortcomings in those currently used.
(For a more comprehensive literature review visit: http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/8658/)

Research Design and Methodology

In this study, the two primary sources were the learners and teachers attending and teaching both courses at the DLL. An education spokesperson from the education department of Malta, in charge of the DLL courses, was also interviewed to corroborate/contradict/supplement the data retrieved from the other sources.

Two paradigms guided this investigation: the positivist which is more objective, in which one truth exists, and the interpretative view, where many truths and realities exist, with different persons having various needs and perceptions, thus providing an opportunity for research participants to be heard (Weaver and Olson, 2006). Thus, this research simultaneously employed quantitative and qualitative methods, with limited interactions between the two sources of information during the data collection stage, but the findings complemented each other at the data interpretation stage (Morse, 1991, cited in Burke Johnson *et al*., 2007). The mixed methods were not aimed at triangulation in any positivist sense, and there is no claim to the research being able to arrive at 'objective truths'. Thus, this work offers indicative data and the purpose of the analysis was 'to obtain a snapshot of conditions, attitudes, and/or events at a single point in time' (Nunan, 1992, p. 140), thus helping to evaluate the whole system. This needs analysis was conducted with two sets of instruments; in the first stage a questionnaire for teachers and another for learners was administered, and for the second stage the questionnaires were complemented by semi-structured interviews.

Questionnaire and semi-structured interview design
The questionnaire for the learners was divided into three sections: Background Information, Current Course (with the Syllabus, Teaching Methods and Materials subsections), and perceived needs and suggestions (with the same subsections). The teachers' questionnaire contained the same sections to enable comparison, plus the Teacher Training section. For the interviews three sets of questions were created; one for learners, one for teachers, and one for an education spokesperson. A schematic diagram (Figure 1) represents the study design.
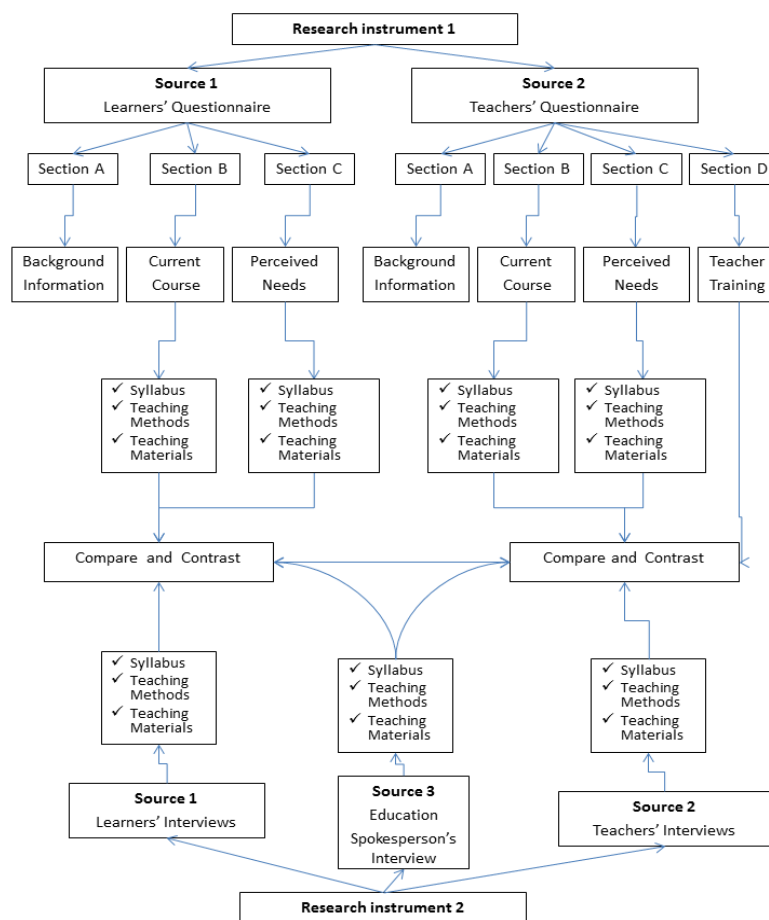
Figure 1. Study design

Data collection: Questionnaires and Interviews
In this study, a group administration of the questionnaires to the whole population of teachers and learners in both courses was chosen. There were 12 groups of MFL-1 learners which together had 60 learners. From these, 58 respondents participated in the survey questionnaire. There were nine teachers for the 12 MFL-1 learning groups. When the study commenced, there were two groups of MFL-2 learners, totalling nine students, who all participated in the study. Initially, there were three groups; however, one class was cancelled in May 2013. Nevertheless, all three teachers participated in the survey.

When conducting interviews it was not possible to sample the entire population of learners because 'interviews might be used effectively with a few of the participants in a language programme' (Brown, 2001, p. 6). Thus, for the learners' interviews only, stratified random sampling was used, where in the case of MFL-1, a learner from each group was interviewed; for MFL-2, two learners from each group were interviewed, since the former course had 12 groups, whereas the latter only had two groups. When conducting interviews with the teachers, although the aim was to sample all of them, two teachers of the MFL-1 did not show any interest in participating. On the other hand, of the three teachers teaching the MFL-2 course, only one agreed to be interviewed.

Data analysis
In this research, descriptive statistics were used to analyse the nominal and ordinal data in the questionnaires. As the term implies, descriptive statistics 'describe and present data in terms of [the]

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summary of frequencies' (Cohen *et al*., 2009, p. 503). Since the last question in the second section was an open one (What would you change in the course that you are currently taking?) and contained qualitative data, statements were coded, grouped by similarity, and a theme was identified. Thus, themes were generated *a posteriori*, and then plotted in a table with the themes and the corresponding participants' codes, indicating which theme each one chose. Although with certain limitations, this system made comparison possible between what the learners or teachers had and what they needed. This statistical approach was used because this study did not aim to look for different variables but to obtain descriptive snapshots of the courses, together with the learners' and teachers' perceived needs. Additionally, due to the limited number of participants in courses such as MFL-2, presenting the data as variables would have jeopardised the participants' anonymity; in cases such as the MFL-2 teachers' population, the approach was impossible to consider due to insufficient numbers and was thus eliminated. Unlike inferential statistics (which need to be tested for statistical significance), 'simple frequencies and descriptive statistics may speak for themselves'; however, these 'make no inferences or predictions [but] simply report what has been found' (Cohen *et al*., 2009, p. 504).

The interviews recordings were transcribed and analysed manually, and the data were presented as per individual responses. These were then amalgamated or contrasted with what emerged from the questionnaires' tables and the responses to the open question.

Validity and reliability
Although attaining absolute validity and reliability is an impossible goal for any research model (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982), measures were taken so that data would be both reliable and valid, externally and internally. Amongst these were the piloting of the instruments, the use of questionnaires and interviews as, 'the more the methods contrast with each other, the greater the researchers' confidence' (Cohen *et al*., 2009, p. 141); questionnaires and interviews were also administered consecutively at the various centres, and the response rate was high, thus increasing validity, and eliminating what Belson (1986) calls 'volunteer bias'.

Ethical issues
Since this research involved human subjects, it entailed 'an intrusion into the life of the participant, be it in terms of time taken to complete the instrument, the level of threat or sensitivity of the question' (Cohen *et al*., 2009, p. 317). Thus, after clearance was obtained from the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee, and permission was secured from the education department of Malta to conduct the research, concrete steps were taken so that participants could be identified, approached and recruited with their consent.

Findings

Addressing the main research question
The various sources and research instruments revealed discrepancies in the syllabi, teaching methods, learning materials and teacher training between the MFL-1 and MFL-2 courses and the learners' and teachers' perceptions of their needs. The teachers and learners were aware of the problems, and their needs analysis showed that in most the cases they shared similar desires concerning improvement. These are discussed in more detail in the following sections addressing the secondary research questions.

Learners' Responses (MFL-1 and MFL-2) to the Secondary Questions - Syllabus

Both the questionnaire and interview responses demonstrated the failure of the existing MFL-1 syllabus and the 'adapted' MFL-2 syllabus to meet the learners' needs and expectations, for various reasons. Mainly, the syllabus was vast in scope and vague; thus, it did not offer a standard guide for all the groups. It did not focus on speaking skills as much as most learners wanted, and the course content needed more revision. In fact several MFL-1 interviewees expressed dissatisfaction:

[It] is very advanced for beginners…I cannot [yet] express myself naturally in Maltese (Interview Participant 1 (IP1)).

The problem of course is that [it] goes too fast...we start out [with] 24 [students in class] and end up [with] seven (IP3).

[It] is too advanced. I don't think it has been sufficiently revised…the drop[out] rate is alarming (IP5).

You learn something but it's difficult. [This course is] not [intended for] begin[ners] (IP7).

MFL-2 learners also elaborated on these issues:

The [scope of the] syllabus is too much for the length of the course; course 1 [MFL-1] starts with the alphabet till verb forms, and it is impossible to learn all that. [These lessons] are repeated at the higher level [MFL-2], [but] I [still] can't talk Maltese. (Interview Participant 2 Advanced (IP2-A)).

For someone who is a beginner…it's like squashing five years into one…There is too much grammar, rather than emphasis on everyday things (IP3-A).

Ideally, an effective syllabus should include 'the specification of aims and the selection and grading of content to be used as a basis for planning … courses' (Newby, 2000, p. 590).

Thus, the learners expressed their need for a standard syllabus at different levels, practice in the four skills (especially speaking), inclusion of day-to-day topics while retaining grammar and vocabulary lessons, and enhanced content with more tasks and repetitive lessons for reinforcement.

Teaching methods

Both research instruments indicated that for the teaching methods, the programme did not meet the learners' needs and expectations in some instances; the main issue (which also emerged in the syllabus section) was that the course did not emphasise on speaking skills as much as most learners wished; rather, it was heavy on grammar. In fact MFL-1 interviewees elaborated on this:

[The course] does not focus on speaking the language (IP1).

My main goal is speaking [Maltese]. I am not reaching that goal…I've learned much more than when I started, but I am not happy enough with the speaking [part] (IP8).

[Maltese] is a very difficult language…and I want to speak it, not particularly write it (IP9).

It is heavily on grammar, reading and writing, but I live in Malta and what I want to do is speak to people around me (IP1-A).

MFL-2 interviewees elaborated on these points too:

You don't expect someone to come three hours a week during a scholastic year to learn a language in two years. I think…with the first year, they [should] introduce…something of the culture, some basic words, some basic grammar structure, how to put sentences…[they should simply] focus on that (IP2-A).

[It must be split into] three or four levels…which is our level?…we don't speak Maltese…we are intermediate but that doesn't [mean] anything, so if we were to say when I did my [MFL-1] exam, I [had] a school certificate, which in my mind [equates]…me to a senior in Maltese who has spoken Maltese all his life…I don't have that level (IP3-A).

Thus, teachers should 'ensure sufficient opportunities for communication exchange in small, non-threatening groupings and to impress on students the crucial importance of eliciting FL input at every opportunity from, in particular, native speakers of the FL' (Klapper, 2006, p. 79). The learners perceived that copying from the whiteboard was the learning method used most often during the course; however, it was their least preferred one. Moreover, the European language portfolio, which was used in this course, was the least favoured assessment method.

The learners suggested various ways to compensate for these deficits including: more speaking and listening activities without ignoring the practices already used, more homework and tests, less copying from the whiteboard, and more engagement with the teacher.

Learning materials
The questionnaire and interview responses revealed that, except for the teachers' notes, the learning materials did not meet the learners' needs and expectations. The learners suggested that the teachers' notes be retained and reinforced in a coursebook, word lists and extra listening resources. In fact MFL-1 interviewees elaborating amongst others that "I think I need 20 good sentences on tape that I can use in everyday life and practice" (IP3); "a word list with 2000 to 5000 Maltese words" (IP1-A) and a coursebook (IP4-A) because "[although] the teacher puts together her own notes … it's not a standard thing" (IP2-A). Another participant said,

A textbook would be more structured…the teacher asked us…['Have you done this last year?' Because] last year we were all in different classes, the level was a bit different for everyone. Some of us [said] yes; some [said] no (IP3-A).

Thus, more resources could be amalgamated with the present reading, listening, writing and speaking activities, which the learners thought should be continued, strengthened and used more effectively so that adequate learning experiences and materials meet 'the [learners] needs for competence, relatedness, self-esteem and enjoyment' (Ehrman et al., 2003, p. 320).

Teachers' Responses (MFL-1 and MFL-2) to the Secondary Questions - Syllabus
Both the questionnaire and interview responses showed that for various reasons, most of the teachers thought the syllabus did not meet their needs and expectations. The MFL-1 syllabus was vast in

scope, vague and based too much on grammar. In fact, one MFL-1 teacher encapsulates all of this in his/her comment:

> The syllabus is not adequate because it is too vast…I feel that I am taking learners for a ride…the grammar syllabus for Maltese natives and that for foreigners are the same…the syllabi for MFL-1 and MFL-2 are the same…Starting with] a group of 19, I finished with seven (Teacher Interview Participant 7 (TIP7)).

Moreover the teachers were aware of the learners' desires to concentrate on speaking lessons. Thus, this syllabus failed to provide the necessary information because it was too generic, and left teachers and learners without a specific direction, which led to 'a lack of cohesiveness in materials and examinations used within the system' (Dublin and Olshtain, 1986, p. 28). For MFL-2, the sole teacher interviewed indicated that speaking was not given importance and needed to be enhanced:

> I believe that oral practice should be given more importance. Basically, we are instructed that they should be taught grammar, writing and also a bit of literature, and we don't give much attention to speaking (TIP1-A).

The teachers also expressed the need for a standard syllabus for different levels, practice in the four skills, inclusion of day-to-day topics while retaining grammar (to a lesser extent) and vocabulary topics, and enhancing content with more tasks:

> [I would include] realistic situations in which [learners] find themselves because these [are the] sort of things [they] want (TIP2).

> [The way the syllabus is], I can cover certain [grammar] topics, e.g., the first form [of the trilateral verb], and when I speak with [another teacher], he/she says, 'I have covered all the forms [of the trilateral verb]' (TIP3).

> I would split it into different levels because it seems that there is one syllabus for everyone, and I would also include more realistic things (TIP4).

> It is important to limit [the grammar] and cover the [basic things] … [this syllabus] binds the teacher to teach everything, but [one] could not cover the things in detail (TIP5).

> [I would] eliminate a lot of grammar. I would emphasise conversation (TIP7).

> Students should be more active …I give students a topic, and they conduct a very basic presentation about the subject…to hone their speaking skills in Maltese (TIP1-A).

Teaching methods
Both the questionnaire and interview responses revealed that in relation to teaching methods, the programme did not meet the teachers' needs and expectations in a few instances. For MFL-1, the teachers noted problems with the European language portfolio as used in this course with one teacher (TIP5) elaborating, 'I don't feel that the portfolio is that important', while some of the MFL-2 teachers perceived that learners needed less copying from the whiteboard.

The teachers suggested that engaging in more interactive methods, without ignoring the practices already used, would help students achieve their aims. Interactive methods give learners the

opportunity to activate their knowledge as language production helps them select from the input they have received, and rehearse and receive feedback especially in a classroom setting; such methods in turn allows learners to adjust their language based on the fresh perspective offered to them (Harmer, 2000).

Learning materials
Both the questionnaire and interview responses indicated cases in which the learning materials did not satisfy the teachers' needs and expectations. Leaving the production and usage of learning materials in the hands of individual teachers leads to different standards amongst learning groups.

Thus, the teachers suggested retaining the notes they provided, supported with a custom-made coursebook, word lists and audio-visual resources. As the literature shows, coursebooks are generally an inexpensive and attractive resource, saving teachers time because it provides ready-made teaching texts and materials (Ansary and Babaii, 2002). These resources could be combined with the present reading, listening, writing and speaking activities, which the teachers agreed should be retained, reinforced and used more effectively.

Teacher training
In both the questionnaires and interviews, most of the teachers reported that the prevailing situation did not meet their training needs and expectations.

Teachers should be trained in SLA-related areas, to enhance their ability to determine the objectives of a proposed method and whether it is practical, adaptable and adequate to their teaching situations and the type of learners. This training can also help teachers assess their capacity to manage the demands of working with a specific method, depending on their teaching load (Rivers, 1981). However teachers from both courses indicated that:

> We need realistic training, not too much rhetoric as [it is not] practical (TIP1).

> I believe we need effective courses…[because] there is a difference between teaching a Maltese native student and teaching foreigners (TIP1-A).

Limitations of the study
Although the timing was one of the strengths of this research, its limitation was that conducting it in the last weeks of the course did not allow early dropouts the opportunity to complete the questionnaire or participate in the interview. Another limitation regarding the MFL-2 questionnaire was the small number of participants, comprising three for the entire teacher population at that time and, nine for the entire learner population. Thus, the data retrieved from these few numbers could only be indicative, and is not representative of the entire sample. Another limitation of the same course was that of the three teachers, only one consented to be interviewed. However, both the quantitative and qualitative approaches were used to keep the MFL-2 data coherent with the MFL-1 learners' and teachers' data, to enable comparison and contrast. Additionally, all the feedback obtained from the participants and thus the findings were based on their perceptions.

Contribution to knowledge
This research pinpoints the main issues that should be amended in the present teaching scenario, as follows:

- Problems related to the vast scope and difficulty of the syllabus,
- lack of a specific syllabus for MFL-2,
- speaking skill deficits in the courses,
- less focus on grammar (except MFL-2 teachers),
- less need of learners to copy from the whiteboard,
- problems with the portfolio,
- desire for teacher training,
- need for more resources to teach and learn Maltese,
- necessity for needs analysis and course evaluations.

Recommendations: Policy, Practice and Research

Policy: Needs Analysis, Course Evaluation and Teachers' Training
For every MSL/MFL course, a short needs analysis questionnaire should be distributed to the learners before or during the first lesson to obtain information about their backgrounds, aims and teaching method preferences. If this step is not performed, the teachers should obtain oral feedback from the learners. A course evaluation should also be distributed at the end of the course, so the learners' needs can be identified and translated into learning objectives to serve as a basis for further development of learning programmes, learning activities and teaching materials (Brown, 2009).
Further, many of those who teach Maltese to foreigners have never received any specialised training in the field. Teacher trainees and teachers need to be trained in SL areas.

Practice: New Syllabi and Learning Materials
While conducting this research, especially when analysing the data, I became aware of certain issues in the courses that needed to be amended. Thus, I was ethically bound to address these shortcomings so that future courses would have better resources and syllabi. One of the main problems at both levels involved the syllabi. For this reason, the information gathered in this needs analysis, together with new input from the learners and teachers was used to develop three syllabi for MSL courses based on the CEFR. The drafts of these syllabi were given to different learners and teachers attending or delivering MSL courses for their feedback, which in turn was used to refine them. Moreover, learning materials were produced to support the teachers and learners. These learning materials encapsulate the learning goals in the newly created syllabi for MSL courses, and the learners' and teachers' methodological preferences. The aim was to help in the learning and teaching process, in preparation for exams.

Future Thinking and More Research
Further research is needed to continually update these syllabi, and to create additional syllabi for students who want to advance to level C2. A checklist of the communicative aims, vocabulary and grammar lessons taken from each syllabus should be created, as part of the self-assessment process, which in turn could be integrated with the learners' portfolio.
Like courses in other languages, learners could attend specialised courses when they reach the intermediate level. Through research, specialists in the field could produce customised syllabi for teaching Maltese for special purposes, such as commerce and industry, diplomacy, law and medicine. However, a prerequisite for these courses should be the learner's attainment of a pre-intermediate level. A more ambitious project could be a two-year diploma in Maltese for Functional Purposes, to teach learners the appropriate use of the language in different sectors within the country. Once

learners have obtained this diploma and reached a certain level, they could proceed to the Bachelor of Arts in Maltese course, offered for Maltese natives at the University of Mata.

Under the direction of a university/institute, intensive MSL courses based on the CEFR levels should be organised. This is important for foreigners who want to learn Maltese within a short time, including those who come for a brief visit to learn the language. This need was suggested by various participants, and by a speaker at the Convention of Leaders of Associations of Maltese Abroad and of Maltese Origin. This speaker proposed that the children of Maltese people living in Australia be given an opportunity to visit Malta during their school holidays from December to January, to attend 8–10-week courses, covering the Maltese language and culture (Borg, 2000). The idea of using syllabi based on the CEFR is practical because a learner can prepare for the level that he/she requires (from any institution that offers such instruction, including private lessons; once ready, he/she can take the exam). Since universities have their examination boards, and could potentially produce exam scripts for these courses, the checks and balances of an academic institution would ensure that exams are conducted smoothly. Moreover, when the exam papers or aural/oral recordings are collected, the university/institute's researchers could analyse these scripts for the common errors associated with each level, and for typical vocabulary used. This data could be used to produce a glossary of the vocabulary and phrases for each level.

The Maltese government was asked to provide resources for coordinating Maltese language and cultural courses in Australia (Borg, 2000). More than once, stakeholders expressed the need for a 'syllabus and accompanying textbooks to teach Maltese as a FL appropriate for Australian conditions…and the adult learners' (Borg, 2010, p. 165). For these reasons, and keeping in mind some Maltese-Australians' desire to attend courses and take exams in Malta, having syllabi based on the CEFR system would improve standardisation in Malta and abroad. Schools in Australia could download the syllabi for free and use these to teach their adult learners. They would then have two options; once a certain level is reached, students could travel to Malta to sit for their final exams (Scerri, 2010). Another possible solution would be to partner with a foreign examination centre to which papers could be sent for printing; learners could take the exam there, and the written exams could be corrected in Malta. The aural/oral exercise could also take place in Australia, and the marks could be added to the corrected exams. Setting aside the courses for adults, which can be accommodated by the CEFR syllabi, the quotation above referred to 'Australian conditions' (Borg, 2010) thus including other exams available in Australia. As some Australian exams' aims and methods of assessment could vary, the conditions should be analysed through contact with the future entity or persons in charge of MSL/MFL teaching, who would have to analyse the problems and suggestions and find solutions thus serving as a reference point for MSL/MFL teaching and learning. Thus, it is likely that Malta requires one or more specialists in this field (MSL/MFL), under the sponsorship of a university or an institute to perform the following tasks:

1.   offer expert advice;
2.   conduct further research on other MSL/MFL areas;
3.   offer intensive courses at the same university/institute;
4.   guide other Maltese institutions in the creation or use of available syllabi;
5.   offer courses online or abroad to foreigners; and
6.   coordinate or collaborate to teach Maltese in other countries.

These recommendations hint at further research to achieve the following:

1. obtain feedback on the needs of teachers and learners in other MSL courses held in Malta;
2. create the other levels of CEFR syllabi or other syllabi for specialised courses;
3. review all MSL/MFL published books and publish reviews so they are accessible to everyone;
4. develop a checklist to analyse existing coursebooks;
5. produce a glossary of words for each syllabus level; and
6. create a register of student error analysis, to note the learners' mistakes at each level.

Final thoughts

Teaching and learning MSL/MFL is an interesting, emerging educational area within Maltese language and culture that has never been studied before at PhD level. Although the needs analysis included in this study has provided knowledge on certain issues that should be addressed, and has led to beneficial outputs, considerable work is still required in this academic endeavour.

If this promising field is given the necessary political attention by the stakeholders and authorities concerned, especially politicians and educational bodies, it will attain the professional status it deserves. In turn, this recognition will promote Maltese culture and language worldwide, thus attracting more participants to the sector, which will generate the necessary revenue for advanced research in this area of specialisation.

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Chapter 4

The Therapeutic Alliance in Mental Health Services: A Politico-Critical Analysis of Knowledge and Power

Paulann Grech

Introduction

The therapeutic working alliance in mental health services is one of the most important tools used in addressing mental health challenges and facilitating recovery (Castonguay, Constantino & Holtforth, 2006; Johannson & Eklund, 2003). Research around this area seems to focus on the theoretical structure of the alliance and on the impact of care provider and care receiver personal characteristics on the nature of the alliance. Although the dominant discourses that have affected the evolution of psychiatry have been explored, it seems as if this research may have not been extensively applied to the therapeutic alliance in practice. In this thesis, it is hypothesised that the identification and exploration of dominant discourses in mental health may shed light on how they influence the behaviour of the care provider and care receiver in the therapeutic alliance. Furthermore, this process may illuminate the types of knowledge that care providers and care receivers need in order to steer the knowledge-power balance in a manner that facilitates a care receiver-friendly therapeutic destination and plots the best route to it.

A glance at the literature dedicated to the therapeutic alliance reveals that the concept has been practically raised to deity status. This is due to the fact that numerous studies have routinely revealed that the quality of the working alliance between a care provider and a care receiver is directly linked to treatment outcomes and is thus a highly important factor in an individual's recovery journey (Gilburt, Rose & Slade, 2008, p.1).

Undeniably, the underlying current beneath this concept has been linked to the latent issues of knowledge and power within the alliance and this has been subsequently explored by several theorists such as Brown (2003, p.231), Foucault (1995, p.214) and Flaskas and Humphreys (1993, p.35). These issues have moulded psychiatric practice and may have been influential in the move from oppressive psychiatry that featured an all knowing professional to enhanced mental health services that regard the patient and the professional as both being partial knowers (Brown, 2007, p.4).

The main interest in my study was to identify the discourses which affect modern-day psychiatry and their role in the knowledge-power balance management in the contemporary therapeutic alliance. Current research in this area focuses mostly on care provider and care receiver personal characteristics and not specifically on dominant discourses. Thus, my study attempted to address this gap and to add an additional piece to the rich knowledge base that can be found in relation to this area.

The setting of this study was the state psychiatric hospital in Malta. Although a range of private psychiatric services are available, the state psychiatric service is the only one to offer a range of specialist services and inpatient facilities on the island (Mental Health Services, 2011, p.2).

Since 1995, the local political agenda has been giving more prominence to mental health. The National Health Systems Strategy for Malta 2014 – 2020 listed mental health as one of the main target area for the allocation of resources (Ministry for Health, 2014, p. 39). At the moment, there is an

ongoing transition from the old Mental Health Act enacted in 1976 to a new one. The emphasis of the new Act is the provision of holistic care and enhanced service-user autonomy. Although this is indeed an important step for mental health care in Malta, I feel that there are a number of cracks beneath the smooth façade that is being projected. For instance, a survey carried out by the Maltese Association of Psychiatric Nurses (2013) showed that only 4% of nurses stated that they have adequate information about the new law, with 80% of them believing that they have been poorly informed about it. My concern is that these nurses are the frontline professionals who have to implement the Act in actual practice and so it is worrying that they may not really know what they need to be implementing. On a similar note, it seems as if though several consultation groups were carried out in the construction of the new Mental Health Act, only two service users contributed to the process (R.Xerri, personal communication, December 9, 2014). It seems to me then as if, with regards to service users: we have been doing things for them and about them but perhaps it is high time that we start doing things with them.

The first phase of the study involved the interviewing of ten individuals who were receiving psychiatric/ mental health care in the inpatient setting at the psychiatric hospital. The focus of the interview was to listen to each individual's account of his/her experience of knowledge and power in the relationships that s/he has with the different members in the multidisciplinary team. The second phase of this study involved the analysis of the medical and nursing records that pertained to the participants in Phase 1. A Politico-Critical Analysis framework was used to guide the study in both phases.

The main research question guiding this study was:

> What is the nature of the combination of knowledge and power in therapeutic alliances in a mental health in-patient setting in Malta?

This was accompanied by two sub-questions, namely:

> What role do dominant discourses play in the positions occupied by care providers and care receivers in therapeutic alliances in a mental health in-patient setting in Malta?

> What type of knowledge is required by care providers and care receivers for power to be managed in a manner that may enhance therapeutic effects in this setting?

Literature Review

This chapter cannot provide a full review of the literature but readers can follow up by referring to the original thesis at etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/7781/1/Paulann%20Grech%20thesis.pdf

The therapeutic alliance
The concept of the therapeutic alliance is believed to have its roots within the Freudian school of thought, particularly in relation to the theory of transference (Howgego et al., 2003, p.171). Transference and countertransference, which typically refer to redirection of feelings between individuals in a therapeutic relationship, were originally perceived by Freud as being the patient's resistance to therapy but later he asserted that "the transference, which, whether affectionate or hostile, seemed in every case to constitute the greatest threat to the treatment, becomes its best tool" (Freud, 1915/1989, p.496). Thus, it became more evident that if transference is managed in a

professional manner, then it can serve as a powerful vehicle in engaging with individuals who are seeking care.

Rogers (1961) proposed three fundamental constructs of the therapeutic alliance, these being empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence (p.285). He also devoted effort to identifying the role of the therapist in the relationship – he contended that the primary value of the professional is that of providing a "scaffolding" structure for the patient so that the latter could increase reflective capacity in a supported manner:

In my early professional years I was asking the question: How can I treat, or cure, or change this person? Now I would phrase the question in this way: How can I provide a relationship which this person may use for his own personal growth? (Rogers, 1961, p.32).

In a parallel manner to the psychological discipline, the therapeutic alliance has been of particular interest to several nursing researchers and authors, including the influential work carried out by Barker (2001) and Dziopa & Ahern (2009).

Knowledge and power in the therapeutic alliance
In one of his articles about power in psychotherapy and counselling, Zur (2009) noted that it seems as if the general consensus in the literature is that power in the therapeutic alliance is unidirectional and features a professional in control of a vulnerable patient (p.160). This perception is perpetuated by a number of factors, with the concept of transference being at the forefront. Zur (2009) added that the idea of a "slippery slope" and "power differential" has been another major contributor to the perception of power as being monolithic and held by the professional (p.161). He referred to the overemphasis on boundaries in therapy to such an extreme that natural and potentially therapeutic gestures such as touch, self-disclosure and gifts may be pictured as demonic and as leading to a slippery slope in the alliance:

> This rather paranoid view asserts that due to the client's inability to resist their omnipotent therapists, a routine hug is likely to lead to sexual relationships and a simple social encounter in the community to intricate relationships (Zur, 2009, p.161)

Zur (2009) proceeded to discuss how in relation to the consensus on the presence of a power imbalance in the alliance, literature on the topic can be classified in three categories (p.161). One of these categories or approaches is composed by those who are highly critical of psychiatry. The second group of scholars who explored the power imbalance in the therapeutic alliance held that power is not necessarily abusive but warned that it can be detrimental if misused. Another group who contributed to literature related to the power imbalance in the alliance is composed of feminists, humanists, existentialists and postmodern academics. Their main efforts are dedicated to reducing the power imbalance in order to create therapeutic relationships that are egalitarian and mutually respectful. In an addition to works that feature this approach, I include the psychiatric nursing research carried out by Dziopa and Ahern (2009) in which the "promotion of equality" has been shown to be one of the prominent attributes of an effective therapeutic alliance. In their article, the authors initiated the discussion about this area by stating that the relationship between a psychiatric nurse and a patient is intrinsically imbalanced. This is supported by the fact that the "helper" role of the nurse is inherently linked to power (Dziopa & Ahern, 2009, sec.9). I view this quasi-assumption about the seemingly unavoidable existence of a power imbalance in the therapeutic alliance as being disturbing and questionable. It seems as if the suggestion here is that the natural state of the therapeutic alliance is characterised by a power imbalance. Later on, the researcher clearly depicted the specific psychiatric nursing skills that facilitate equality in the relationship. These include "casual conversations, allowing

time to inquire how patients are doing, creating the illusion of choice and allowing the patient to speak and to be heard" (Dziopa & Ahern, 2009, sec.9). Despite the benevolent intention of these listed activities, this perception of the nurse-patient alliance is felt to pose a major ethical and philosophical difficulty. At this point, my counterargument is that the natural state of the alliance does not need to constitute a power imbalance that the nurse attempts to amend by using special skills as it does point towards a helpless patient who is then at the mercy of the knowledgeable nurse. On referring back to approaches that supposedly diminish the power gap in the alliance, it may also be worthwhile to reflect on the discourse being used in the above excerpt by Dziopa and her colleague. Wording used includes: "expert knowledge", "teaching", "mothering", "compliance" and finally and perhaps the most controversial of all, at least to myself: the provision of an "illusion of choice" to the care receiver. Consequently, I wonder why choice needs to be presented as an illusion because this seems as if the care receiver does not really have a choice but needs to be tricked into perceiving that s/he has a choice.

Foucault (1961/ 2001) may have touched upon the concept of illusions when he described the dinner parties that Tuke (a philanthropist and mental-health reformer) used to hold for patients in his asylum. The aim of these parties was to provide the opportunity for the inmates to interact with 'normal' people in a setting of respect and etiquette (p.236). Foucault (1961/ 2001) described how despite the apparent therapeutic purpose of these parties, in reality, they did not do much for the "madman" as they were simply an illusion – a re-creation of a reality where the mad man was seen as being accepted and given choices: "It is the organisation around the mad man of a world where everything would be like and near him, but in which he himself would remain a stranger, the stranger par excellence" (p.237).

Methodology

Having in the first instance set my position of alignment with the interpretivist approach, several qualitative methods could have lent themselves to the investigation of this topic. Utilising a discourse analysis approach was probably an effective tool for critique in order to elicit a deeper critical understanding of how different stakeholders in this particular area of interest speak about and make sense of the reality around them (Taylor, 2004, p.436). In a faithful manner to the philosopher himself, Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2008) discussed how in the Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis, it is customary to contend that there are no hard rules but only guidelines (p.91). However, they proposed three dimensions that may serve as the basis of a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis:

> Firstly, the analysis of discourse entails historical enquiry…secondly, analysis attends to mechanisms of power and offers a description of their functioning. And lastly, analysis is directed to subjectification – the material signifying practices in which subjects are made up (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2008, p.91).

The method of research in this study has been broadly based upon the broad guidelines discussed by the mentioned authors but custom modified according to the needs arising from the study.

Study design
The aim of the first phase of the study was to interview care receivers in order to explore their perception regarding the area of the knowledge-power balance in the psychiatric therapeutic alliance. The participants who were selected for potential inclusion consisted of five males and six females

within acute, chronic and rehabilitation wards. A semi-structured interview was utilised to collect data from the participants.

The second phase consisted of a data collection process by means of exploring and analysing the medical and nursing records of the ten participants interviewed in Phase 1. The decision to use records as a data source was based on the fact that records are an important means of professional communication and contain feedback that may delineate care (Berman & Snyder, 2007, p.252). More importantly, records contain information about the nature of the therapeutic alliance and the care process.

In this manner, Phase 1 of the study involved the recruitment of human subjects in order to collect verbal data, as opposed to, but also complementing the collection of written data from existing documents, which was carried out in Phase 2. Essentially, the involvement of two phases was targeted at allowing data and methodological triangulation, by the use of a different data source and method during each phase.

The interviews were transcribed by the researcher using a denaturalised verbatim technique. At this stage, the transcripts and the typed records were ready to undergo analysis. Since the dissertation was based on the tenets of the Foucauldian philosophical view, the application of a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis technique was seen as beneficial. To this extent, a number of guiding frameworks have been proposed in an attempt to lend structure to a type of analysis that can be quite complex to address (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008, p.95). On a parallel note, general guidance on the subject offers the luxury of a freehand approach that allows the researcher to be creative and to borrow Foucault's methods without adhering religiously to any existing framework. To this extent, the steps of five existing frameworks were merged, synthesised and adapted for use into a new model that is, by nature, based on an eclectic approach. This led to a new framework that is being given the name that eventually became part of the title of the thesis: *A Politico-Critical Analysis.*

Analysis and Findings

At the beginning of this study, one research question and two sub-questions were posed. In this part of the chapter, these questions are going to be reviewed again and discussed in terms of the findings of the study.

The first two questions that were addressed were:

> What is the nature of the combination of knowledge and power in therapeutic alliances in a mental health in-patient setting in Malta? (Main question)

> What role do dominant discourses play in the positions occupied by care providers and care receivers in therapeutic alliances in a mental health in-patient setting in Malta? (Sub-question 1)

The findings related to these two questions have been categorized underneath the discourses arising from the interview transcripts and those that emerged from the medical and nursing records included in the study as follows.

Care receivers

The dominant discourses that were identified from the care receivers' transcripts have been classified underneath four main discursive themes. Furthermore each of these themes also acted as a classification system of the therapeutic alliances based on the type of knowledge-power balance in each alliance, as described by respective dominant discourses.

The first theme and type of alliance identified was *Satisfaction-Acceptance*. This featured an alliance which may be characterized by a knowledge-power balance in favour of the care provider. Most of the care receivers were satisfied with the imbalance and with the alliance. The majority were also seen to be compliant but at the same time they were also quite active in care by eagerly following professional guidance. The dominant discourses within this theme were those of romantic discourse and compliance discourse. This theme is felt to introduce an interesting view to the analysis of the discursive object. This is a theme characterised by dependence on traditional systems of care which are not considered as ideal practice by contemporary standards. However, this alliance-type features a group of care receivers who are mostly satisfied and who view their alliances in a positive light. Perhaps here, it is vital to attempt to measure whether alliance satisfaction automatically translates to beneficial care outcomes or if this tangible serenity within the alliance is simply a reflection of covert institutionalisation.

On the other hand, the *Dissatisfaction-Compliance* alliance-type features a care receiver who may be quite passive and dependent on his/her care providers. In a similar way to the first type of alliance discussed, this alliance may be characterized by a power imbalance in favour of the care provider. Most of the care receivers seemed accepting of this power imbalance yet they did not seem generally satisfied with the alliance. The dominant discourses that emerged were compliance discourse and discontentment discourse. Since this study was not a longitudinal one, the long-term outcomes of the *Dissatisfaction-Compliance* type of alliance could not be adequately explored. However there seems to be a clear possibility that such an alliance may eventually lead to chronic care and institutionalisation brought about by overly dependent states such as those seen in the 'revolving door syndrome' or 'psychiatric communities'.

The third theme and type of alliance, namely the *Resentment-Opposition*, featured most of the care receivers in it as being angry and irritated due to a knowledge-power imbalance in the alliance which they perceive as being detrimental to them. Hence this may be viewed as the care provider being commonly perceived as having full control of the alliance, much to the care receiver's resentment. In this regard, the dominant discourses were those of anarchist discourse and discontentment discourse. Upon deeper reflection on the *Resentment-Opposition* theme, one may elaborate further by pondering on whether each of the parties in the therapeutic alliance are acting or else reacting to their counterparts. Thus, one may ask: Are the care receivers reacting to an oppressive system by exhibiting anger and engaging in a power struggle? Or are they acting in this manner due to other reasons with the professionals' actions being a direct reaction to this hostility? Although the findings of this study suggest a mixture of both of these possible scenarios, it is felt that there is no clear answer to these questions. However, it is evident that this alliance-type seems to be mostly characterised by hostility and excessive focus on maintaining control. This suggests an unhealthy interaction and the long-term impact on recovery is a concern.

The final theme and alliance type was that of *Collaboration*. This depicts the care provider and the care receiver as being on the same level with no significant knowledge-power imbalance in favour of one or the other. Contrastingly, both stakeholders may be seen as contributing to the alliance and collaborating to facilitate the recovery journey. This type of alliance may bear resemblance to the

contentions of the Recovery Model and features most of the care receivers in it as being satisfied with the knowledge-power balance and with the alliance. The dominant discourses were those of assertiveness and equality. As a crucial note to this theme, it may be worth to pay a degree of consideration to the effectiveness of this type of alliance. As discussed, it would not be erroneous to state that if this alliance-type is viewed against a postmodern background and an approach based on the contemporary meaning of recovery, then it would probably be an ideal template. It can be noted that the *Collaboration* alliance-type shares similar characteristics to those advocated in the Recovery Model, especially due to the fact that this alliance is coloured by hope – by a perception that the recovery journey is being viewed in a positive light. Although it was not the scope of my study to measure the outcomes of the different alliance-forms, it is interesting to note that the effectiveness of the Recovery Model has been studied extensively. For instance, Warner (2010) carried out a review of published outcome studies and depicted the effectiveness of approaches based on the philosophy of the Recovery Model (p.5). In another study that may have important implications for my study, Tilsen and Nylund (2008) described how the effectiveness of the recovery model is strongly dependent on the therapeutic alliance (p.340). To this extent, they identified a meta-analysis by Wampold (2001) which showed that 54% of therapy variance was accounted for by the alliance (p.345). This led the authors to conclude that care providers must be flexible to care receivers' needs in a collaborative alliance in order to facilitate recovery. Thus it seems as if the *Collaboration* alliance-type may be one that leads to positive care outcomes.

In practice, these alliance-types may feature as being on a continuum rather than being clearly distinguishable as they may have been in the theoretical description offered in the thesis. One may argue that the care receiver's personality and pathology may have determined his/her perception of the knowledge-power balance in the therapeutic alliance. Whilst acknowledging this possibility, it has to be noted that the potential effect of these factors may not have really affected the care receivers' perception to a large extent. This is due to the fact that each care receiver was able to delineate clear differences amongst the multiple alliances that s/he was a part of. Hence each care receiver in this study was part of several alliances, each of which was associated with one of the four different types or themes, according to my interpretation.

Care providers
The dominant discourses that emerged from the Medical and Nursing Records were also categorized underneath discursive themes. Three discursive themes were perceived as being constructed, namely the *Pathological Lens, Depersonalization* and *Humanistic* themes.

The *Pathological Lens* theme featured some of the care providers who wrote about the care receiver and the interactions within the therapeutic alliance in a way that tended to be clinical and shaped by the Medical Model. This was likened to a metamorphosis where most of what the care receiver did and said was then restructured to fit a pathological understanding. In particular, this refers to the overuse of medical jargon and to a phenomenon which I termed as 'automatic wording'. The latter refers to words that feature with a high frequency in the records reviewed and that may be a result of professional auto-piloting – such terms include "comfortable day/night" and "treatment given as per chart" – terms that may not really be providing any valuable information about the alliance or care receiver. The dominant discourses in this theme were: authoritarian, conservatist and pathological. A possible implication of these discourses on practice is that in the same instance as providing the professional with the claim to superior knowledge and power, it may simultaneously place the care receiver in a vulnerable position. One may wonder then if such medical dominance may potentially serve as a catalyst for coercive practice, in particular, 21st century covert actions such as the neglect of care receiver rights, overprescription of psychiatric drugs and non-action/ reinforcive actions in

light of a care receiver's passive attitude (Szasz, 1970, p.xxvii). On referring to these undesirable actions, a care giver's custodial and patronising attitude is also here being considered as falling within the remit of such coercive practice. This may be exemplified through written phrases such as "Patient wants to have things her way" [MR6:E4] – a standalone statement found in one of the professionals' records with no accompanying proof or description of how this judgement was made. Thus, through this lens, the care receiver may be viewed as not possessing valuable knowledge and is expected to practice submissiveness to the psychiatric discipline with an image of the world in pathological terms. This viewpoint connotes potential losses, especially for the care receiver who may have to compromise his/her independence and autonomy. In fact this was verbalised by this same care receiver who narrated how she feels that some professionals, especially nurses, do not treat patients with respect by shutting them out and treating them as inferior. Alternatively the pathological, authoritarian and conservatist discourses may hold special appeal for a care receiver whose perception of the professional alliances that s/he is part of, is ingrained in traditional and hierarchical discourse, such as commonly seen in the *Satisfaction-Acceptance* alliance type. In this regard, pathology and conservatism may offer the care receiver a position of safety – a constant, predictable and rigid ledge in the steep cliff that may characterise the experience of mental illness.

The theme of *Depersonalisation* described those professional texts which tended to remove the person out of the patient. This may have resulted in a care provider's perception that s/he has an alliance with a non-person, with all the negative consequences that this may have brought about. For instance, it could be noted that the words written by some of the professionals did not provide any information that indicates that the patient being described is in fact a person and not an object. The lack of use of the person's name in the records was also observed with most of the professionals opting to use the word patient or use of the third person instead of the person's actual name. Minimalistic and depersonalising discourses were the dominant discourses in this theme. It is felt to be rather odd for a professional to indulge in such a cold and mechanical manner of writing whilst describing an alliance that is supposedly care receiver-centered and targeted towards independence and recovery. In actual practice, is the care receiver simply a chess pawn who is transferred to other wards, sent on leave and brought back as necessary? Is this Foucault's subjected body?

Perhaps some of the themes that emerged from the care receivers' interviews, particularly those which form the *Resentment-Opposition* alliance type could be a result of the use of depersonalising discourse from the professionals' part. Surprisingly though, it has to be mentioned that out of 27 identified alliances by the care receivers, only five were categorized underneath the *Resentment-Opposition* alliance-type, which is the only type where care receivers are dissatisfied with the power-balance in the alliance. Perhaps this relates to Foucault's contention that power may not necessarily be negative and it does not automatically lead to repression. This is because it can also produce reality, ritual and knowledge (Foucault, 1978/1990, p.93). Consequently, this may indicate that depersonalising discourse does not necessarily result in care receiver dissatisfaction. However, it is important to note that care receiver satisfaction with the knowledge-power balance may not be the sole indicator of positive therapeutic outcomes or a definite track to recovery.

The final theme of *Humanism* involved those discourses that to an extent seem to be describing an alliance that is based on a somewhat holistic and person-centered approach. This shows a degree of importance being given to the use of the care receiver's name and his/her words rather than attempting to restructure the whole rapport. In this manner, collaboration rather than compliance may be the guiding model for interactions within the alliance. The dominant discourses in this theme were those of equality, humanistic and recovery discourses. Notably, this is the only occasion in the data collected where the care receiver's actual name and direct words found their way in the medical and

nursing records. Perhaps for some, like myself, this adds colour to a black and white portrait and a breath of life to what may otherwise be a cold and pathological scripture. But then for others, this writing style and attitude may be deemed as unprofessional, maybe too personal or generally undesirable. This may explain its minimal appearance within the medical and nursing records that were examined.

Although definite correlations cannot be made, it can be tentatively suggested that the two sources in the study may have complemented each other in describing the knowledge-power balance in the therapeutic alliances in the study. For instance, the professional theme of depersonalization may shed light on alliances such as the *Resentment-Opposition* type. Similarly the professional theme of *Humanism* may be related to alliances such as the *Collaboration* alliance-type.

Knowledge required by care providers and care receivers
The last sub-question leading this study was:

> What type of knowledge is required by care providers and care receivers for power to be managed in a manner that may enhance therapeutic effects in this setting? (Sub-question 2)

In the analysis section, this research question was addressed by exploring that separate and specific knowledge that may be required by care receivers and other knowledge that may be required by care providers. The knowledge types that may be required by the care receivers were incorporated in one overarching theme, namely the theme of *Empowerment*. This theme is concerned with the need of knowledge related to self-empowerment. It may involve learning how to acknowledge inherent resources, being aware of the current situation as well as communicating assertively within therapeutic alliances.

On the other hand, two themes led the discussion pertaining to the knowledge that may be required by care providers. The first theme that was discussed was that of *Humanism*. This features the need for some of the care providers to learn how to engage in behaviour that places the care receiver at the forefront by actions that are targeted towards the individual's personal recovery. The second theme that was presented was: *A Tailor-Made Approach*. This concerns that type of knowledge that may be required by some care providers in relation to the need to embrace the concepts of individualism and diversity whilst building alliances with different care receivers.

In the literature, there are several techniques that may be useful in addressing the different types of knowledge that may be required – in fact some of these were included in the analysis section. However, here I re-iterate the crucial need to view these skills and techniques as **examples** and **options** that may be occasionally applied to **some** therapeutic alliances. The emphasised words in the previous sentence are intended to highlight the risk of alternatively viewing my recommendations as prescriptive – 'grand narratives' (Timimi, 2013) or new dogmas of care that have to be applied religiously and routinely. If this were the case, it would indeed be a poor outcome of this study since it would probably simply instigate the repetition of more of the same – the replacement of the medical model with yet another framework that may be applicable and beneficial to some but most definitely not across different situations and cultures. Instead I am recommending that it may be more useful for care receivers and care providers to become familiar with different options and approaches that have worked for others and explore their application throughout the recovery journey. Timimi (2013) described this concept as a tool box which (during professional and personal endeavours/ experiences) gradually becomes filled with mainstream, alternative and complementary skills/ frameworks that one may pick up and use according to the circumstance.

Conclusion and Discussion

The findings that emerged from the analysis and discussion of the medical and nursing records have helped to explore some of the discourses related to the ways that different care providers may perceive the knowledge-power balance in the therapeutic alliance.

On a final note, it seems as if the findings that emerged from this part of the study may bear resemblance to those reported in a study carried out by Bjorkdahl, Palmstierna and Hansebo (2010). In their study, the researchers explored caring aspects of nursing care in acute psychiatric settings and classified the two main caring approaches that emerged as the *ballet dancer* and the *bulldozer*. The *ballet dancer* approach signified a caring approach that emphasised the cultivation of safety and trust. The sub-themes identified were: signalling a caring approach, putting yourself in the care receiver's shoes and using yourself as a finely tuned instrument (p.512). This may reflect the third theme that emerged from the professionals' written records in the current study – the *Humanistic Approach*. Bjorkdahl et al. (2010) described the *bulldozer approach* as a type of care that tends to treat the care receiver as an object that can be controlled by the bulldozer (p.513). This approach may bear some resemblance to the first and second discursive themes that I have identified in the medical and nursing records – *The Pathological Lens* and *Depersonalisation*.

As this chapter nears its conclusion, it may be useful to engage in a final reflective exercise by attempting to combine the main outcomes in a succinct summary. Thus I feel that the following issues are the ones which are at the forefront of the research that I have undertaken, and that may need to be considered in the application to practice in the setting explored:

- Equalisation of knowledge and power in the therapeutic alliance

- The need to include and emphasise the care receiver's voice

- The need to promote the therapeutic alliance in the light of the ordinary

On reflecting upon the first point, I am reminded of Zur's contention that little research has been carried out beyond the seemingly forgranted notion that therapeutic alliances are characterized by a power imbalance (Zur, 2009, p.163). In this regard, this study has provided useful information since those alliances classified underneath the *Collaboration* alliance-type were not perceived by most of the participants as having a power imbalance. However, all the other alliance-types seemed to be characterised by a power imbalance. Whilst acknowledging that my research study was not aiming to explore the direct link between different alliance types and therapeutic outcomes, it can be tentatively suggested that some of the characteristics found in the different types of alliances may also link that particular alliance to positive or negative therapeutic outcomes. In particular, the majority of the alliances that were characterised by a power imbalance were linked to care receiver anger, resistance, fear and covert institutionalisation. In relation to the psychiatric setting explored in this study, I feel that this calls for the need to re-think the construction of some of the alliances. This may be done in order to focus on a knowledge-power balance – a situation where care receivers and providers behave as partial knowers, as discussed by Brown (2007, p.12).

The second point is particularly linked to my personal satisfaction in knowing that this study gave a voice to care receivers. During the data collection, I was pleased and surprised by the fact that some of the care receivers thanked me for listening and for providing the opportunity for them to speak. On further reflection, I realized that this may be highlighting the need for similar opportunities to be provided within the hospital setting that has been explored in this study. In this regard, I strongly feel

that it is empirical to start including care receivers in seminars, care planning, the implementation of new acts (such as the new Mental Health Act which is currently being introduced in Malta) and the auditing of care. Here I emphasise that inclusion does not refer to simply asking care receivers to come forward - this may be challenging for a care receiver who is situated in a setting where custodial care and power imbalances are in play. Rather this may necessitate reaching out to care receivers and providing non-threatening opportunities for them to voice their opinion. Perhaps the one-to-one qualitative method employed in this research study may be a good example.

The final point culminates in the simple yet profound awareness that perhaps it may be more useful to view the therapeutic alliance as a rather ordinary relationship – indeed a template for other relationships that the care receiver may form during and after his/her recovery journey. This is a shift from a perception of the therapeutic alliance as a complex system that has to be technically manoeuvred by highly skilled professionals by the application of specific advanced skills. Instead it may be more beneficial to focus on building a civil humane relationship that is based on anything that may help a person during his/her recovery: this may be a mix of ordinary stuff and professional knowledge (as an 'invited guest and not as an overarching paradigm' – Higgins, 2008, p.11)

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Chapter 5

An Enquiry into Young Children's Perceptions of Learning, Ability and Schooling as an Uncovering of a Teacher's Pedagogy and Practice

Rosienne Farrugia

Introduction

The rationale behind this research is to explore how young able learners' perceptions and experiences of learning, ability and schooling can be used to shed light on the pedagogical choices and practices adopted by their teacher in an Early Years classroom in an independent school on the island of Malta. It seeks to understand and highlight the impact that teachers and learners in ecologically diverse classrooms may have on each other's identities, learning and experiences. It also attempts to examine the kind of inclusive practices that effectively stimulate young able learners' minds, motivating and engaging them, and ultimately meeting their learning and overall needs. To accomplish this, both the learners' and the teacher's perspectives and experiences are sought through the construction of intertwined narratives.

This study originally stemmed from a professional interest in the field of giftedness in young children. In Malta, so far, no national educational policy focuses on inclusive practices that promote and nurture the emergence of abilities and talents in learners who have the capacity to reach high levels of performance. It is however important to point out that our National Curriculum Framework (2012), which promotes empowerment of all learners to achieve excellence through flexible and diverse routes to learning, has specifically endorsed 'education for diversity' as part of its general principles and as a cross-curricular theme within its framework. Most recently, the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education for Malta launched a Learning Outcomes Framework, originally proposed by the NCF (2012) as the keystone for new approaches to learning and assessment. The aim of the LOF (2015) is to provide more freedom in the development of programmes that move away from centrally-imposed content-based syllabi towards a framework of knowledge, attitudes and skills-based outcomes. Although still in its early stages of implementation, this framework seems to provide a more inclusive approach that would ultimately benefit all learners, including the gifted and more able learners. This, together with more recent educational efforts to integrate existent frameworks and strategies and to work towards improved learner outcomes and increased participation in lifelong learning (MEDE, 2014) in line with European and international benchmarks, seem to indicate that our curriculum together with other important policy documents, at least in theory, provide a backdrop and a right direction for the consideration of a range of needs including those of the gifted and talented.

One of the purposes of this research is therefore to contribute to the discussion on how best to acknowledge and provide for the very able learners in mixed-ability classrooms in the Early Years. It also attempts to challenge and extend the educational debate around teachers' and learners' identities and how these impinge on one another as well as how such identities impact the learning process. Furthermore, this study strives to understand and expose the implications of listening to children's voices and using their constructions and interpretations to inform and assist teachers as professional practitioners who constantly reflect critically upon their own pedagogical choices and professional

identities in order to improve their practice and ultimately create meaningful educational experiences for their students.

My background as a practitioner-researcher with a passion for reflective practice and with a persistent need to examine deeply my own professional practice has had an influence on the design for this inquiry as has my belief in the centrality of relationships in schools and classrooms. Apart from helping me find a voice and give Early Years' teachers validation as professional practitioners working with young children, through this study I also aimed to validate, represent and share the perceptions and views of very able learners as I sought to find ways of working with them respectfully to enhance their learning trajectories, all along guided by Nutbrown's notion of respectful educators – capable learners (Nutbrown, 1996), Sutherland's conception of effective provision before any attempts at identification of high ability are made (Sutherland, 2008) as well as Barab and Plucker's view of 'smart learning contexts' for 'smart learners' (Barab & Plucker, 2002).

Literature Review

The literature review covers the following four distinct but intertwined areas to provide a theoretical background for this research study: theories of learning, development and ability, the notion of emerging abilities and talent development in young children, the use of inclusive practices for the provision of challenge in the Early Years, and the concept of teacher and learner identities.

Socio-cultural and cultural historical activity theories provide an account of learning as the outcome of participation in socially organised, goal-oriented activity where learners develop their skills, knowledge, competences and attitudes through interaction with others as well as with their environment (Engestrom, 1993; Daniels, 2001). Triggered by Dewey and Vygotsky, this family of educational theories attempts to set the methodological grounds for investigating processes by which social, cultural and historical factors shape human functioning, including development, learning and knowledge. In this manner, social and environmental factors are placed at the centre of all activity that leads to learning and development through participation in culturally-mediated activity characterised by the use of tools and artefacts.

An account of learning that is socially mediated and knowledge that is socially constructed challenges the notion that competence and talent can be assessed and quantified using single IQ tests or end-of-year examinations, thus questioning the ways in which outcomes are measured as well as the manner in which such measurement may lead to the categorisation and ranking of learners into privileged, mainstream and marginalised groups. In an article on cognition, ability and talent development, Barab and Plucker (2002) argue that traditional notions of learning and ability tend to separate the learner from the learning context and to treat ability and knowing as psychological constructs pertaining to the individual minds and distinct from their social and environmental contexts. A more dynamic and situated approach to knowing and learning gives a significant role to the educator who is encouraged to facilitate the development of 'smart' contexts designed to support student-environment interactions that are meaningful and that consider the learner as an agent who actively coproduces meaning and context. In this manner, potential for high ability is regarded as an opportunity available to all through the creation of stimulating learning environments that support talent development and that encourage learners to function effectively and participate successfully as part of multiple systems of learning (Barab & Plucker, 2002, p.175).

In this study the practice of labelling young learners as 'gifted' is refuted and replaced by the notion of emerging abilities, talent development and potential to reach high levels of attainment and performance. However, it is worth reviewing briefly what is traditionally known as the field of 'giftedness' to start up a discussion about those learners in an early years classroom who have the potential, given the right opportunities, to develop at advanced rates and reach high levels of performance in one or more areas of endeavour. The field of gifted education has been inundated with debates over issues of definitions and conceptions of giftedness which are evident from the great deal of literature and research available both within a US context as well as a European and international one (Bailey et al., 2008; Brown et al., 2005; Colangelo, 2003; Eyre, 1997; Freeman, 2007; Heller et al., 1993; Koshy & Casey, 1997; Morgan, 2006; Plucker & Callahan, 2014; Sutherland & Stack, 2014; Wallace et al., 2010). Historically, there was a hierarchical view of giftedness and talent which benefited the intellectually and academically gifted over other forms of talent outside the academic sphere but which eventually gave way to a wider and more dynamic understanding of what constitutes intelligence, ability and cognition (Gardner, 1983; Passow, 1994; Porter, 2005;). Nowadays, giftedness in young children is likely to be seen more in terms of potential or promising accomplishment. Sutherland (2008) talks of 'emerging abilities' in young learners and emphasises the importance of developing positive learner identities in potentially gifted and talented young learners. Given a lack of concordance on the extent to which nature and nurture may influence a child's learning trajectory, the inclination is towards a focus on effective provision and an enriched learning experience for all as a more productive and sensible educational strategy, particularly in the early years when high ability is still emerging and learner identities are beginning to develop (Barab & Plucker, 2002; Sutherland, 2008).

According to Nutbrown and Clough (2006), inclusive processes can be embedded in the early years curriculum, pedagogy and services designed to encourage all children to discover and gain confidence in their own capacity for learning. Sutherland and Stack (2014) outline a legislative move in the Scottish educational system from a 'needs-based' model to one focused on the rights of the child in terms of inclusive practices where education becomes a right for all and where provision for different groups of learners (including the potentially gifted) is embedded in a curriculum that is flexible, adequate and responsive so that they are given access to appropriate and challenging learning opportunities. A similar approach is embraced by a Maltese policy document entitled *Creating Inclusive Schools: guidelines on the implementation of the National Minimum Curriculum on Inclusive Education'* (Ministry of Education, 2002) which acknowledges the notion that student diversity may arise from any factor and not just a disability, and which includes the 'full range of educational interests, potential and needs of students'. In an article that synthesises curricular voices from both the fields of gifted education and general education, Hockett (2009, p.415) suggests that experts in both fields connect high-quality curriculum to authenticity in terms of real-life problems and situations, outcome-driven and meaningful instruction, flexibility for individual differences including the possibility for learners to make choices and to have access to a qualitatively different curriculum, and the use of challenge both in content and pedagogy. Moreover, having higher expectations for all learners irrespective of culture, identity and individual differences is also highlighted. Hertzog (2005, p.249) recommends an amalgamation of inquiry-based activities with structure and consistency in trying to capture students' interests and engage them in meaningful learning experiences to raise teachers' expectations of potential and talent.

Another key factor in ensuring that all learners in schools have access to suitable and challenging learning experiences that stimulate their minds, engage them in the learning process as active participants and encourage them to discover and develop their emerging gifts and talents is

undoubtedly teacher education, teacher training and continuous professional development (Adey, 2004; Borko, 2004; Hirsh and Hord, 2008; Sutherland & Stack, 2014). Borders et al., (2014) assert that different forms of professional training should be sought by teachers to be able to choose appropriate pedagogical approaches and strategies to enhance the learning and development of all learners including the very able ones (Borders et al., 2014; Dixon et al., 2014).

Within the educational sphere, the concept of a teacher's professional identity is viewed as a dynamic and intricate balance between one's professional self-image and the roles one feel they must play inside and outside the classroom, thus an integration of the 'personal' and the 'professional' (Beijard et al., 2004; Day, 2007; Volkmann & Anderson, 1998). Rodgers and Scott (2008) highlight the influence of social, political, cultural and historical forces as teachers construct and reconstruct meaning through the formation of their professional identities which are in turn ever-changing and multiple as opposed to fixed and stable, and also built in relationship with others rather than in isolation. According to Clandinin and Connelly (1999), teachers make sense of their roles and their practices by drawing upon the stories and experiences they live, tell and retell, stories which ultimately form their teacher identity. Huber et al., (2003) build upon this narrative concept of teachers' *stories to live by* to explain how often these provide a context and backdrop for children's construction of their own stories as they are engaged in identity-making processes. Furthermore, Clandinin et al., (2006) point out the connection between teachers' and learners' identity formation which happens as a result of the dynamic interactions between various factors in the school landscape. These do not only include the people involved, but also the subject matter, the artefacts and resources as well as the environment itself. Sutherland (2008) also argues in favour of teachers' significant role and impact on the development of positive learning dispositions, which in turn lead to the construction of positive learner identities in the early years. In her exploration of how people recognise and construct themselves as learners whilst dynamically interacting within the social contexts they inhabit, Falsafi (2010) adopts a sociocultural approach and highlights the way individuals alter perceptions of their learning dispositions and capacity to learn as they experience different situations and contexts.

Methodology

Located within an interpretative, social constructivist paradigm in its attempt to construct meaning and knowledge inductively and in its approach to understand participants' perspectives and experiences, this qualitative study set out to explore the interpretations and meanings of a teacher and a group of six year old learners within the social reality and social context in which their experiences and stories unfold. The research study was conducted in a primary classroom with a group of six to seven year olds with the aim of documenting and narrating a teacher-researcher's journey as her own professional identity, pedagogy and practice are unveiled. This was in turn achieved through an examination of her pupils' constructions of learning, ability and schooling. It was felt that narrative inquiry would be effective in capturing both a teacher's and her learners' voices whilst presenting a thick and rich picture of the interactions and connections that occur as they go about their everyday lives in a young learners' classroom. This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

What are young children's constructions of learning, ability and schooling?

What do young children's constructions of learning, ability and schooling reveal about a teacher's own pedagogy and practice?

In what ways, if any, does a teacher and a group of young learners aged six years in a mixed-ability classroom impact each other's experiences, performance and identities?

The notion of 'giftedness in young children' acted as a spring board from where this research study took off. My fascination with the roles educators play in helping unveil and foster young children's learning dispositions ultimately led to a deeper and more philosophical questioning exercise into the notions of teacher-pupil interactions and how both teachers and learners constructed knowledge and understanding of their worlds as they interacted with one another. Rather than solely focus on elements in the classroom environment that are conducive to learning and talent development as perceived by a teacher-researcher, it was the point of view of the learners directly involved in the research study that were to enrich and render a more complete perspective to the investigation.

Narrative inquiry as research methodology fitted my educational quest. Narrative research is said to be effective when a researcher seeks to capture the detailed stories or life experiences of a single person or a small group of individuals (Creswell, 2013; Reismann, 2008). It is undertaken by qualitative researchers who are interested in collaborating with their participants or who wish to have a more subjective place in the research so that the researcher-participant relationship becomes central to the study (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The use of narrative inquiry as a source for teacher reflection, learning and growth has increased in the past years as it is seen as an opportunity for teachers to develop professionally through the documentation and sharing of their own learning within the educational context (Lemon, 2007, p.182).

Different sources of qualitative data were used to capture the participants' perspectives and to eventually present an interpreted and intertwined narrative told by a small group of participants within a specific situation, retold by a teacher-researcher in an attempt to describe educational phenomena in an effective and authentic manner. Cohen et al., (2007, p.149) argue that, in qualitative research, rather than seeking to generalise findings or apply them universally, reliability is more connected to the 'fidelity to real life, context and situation specificity, authenticity, comprehensiveness, detail, honesty, depth of response and meaningfulness to the respondents.'

The choice of the setting and the study participants was mainly determined by my role as an Early Years classroom teacher at the time of the study. This research became a self-reflective project which I conducted within my own classroom with the students I was currently teaching. The research study was initially conducted with a group of 22 students aged six to seven years within the same class. The setting was a co-ed private independent school that caters for children aged between the ages of two years and sixteen years of age. As a teacher-researcher, I was also a main participant in the study. Based on my belief that effective provision and the creation of a stimulating learning environment should precede identification of high potential and ability, all twenty-two students were asked to participate in the first phase of the study and consent by their parents was sought and obtained. In the second phase of the study, six students from the group were selected to take part in the case study part of the research. Criterion sampling was used in that the six students chosen demonstrated an ability to reach high levels of performance in one or more areas of endeavour.

The following data collection tools were used: a reflective diary, visual narrative and participatory methods with children which consisted of conversational interviews with six participants as well as a photo collage group activity towards the end of the study. Used separately, each of these tools would be able to tell a specific story about the experiences of the participants in a Junior 2 classroom within an independent school situated on the island of Malta. However, when each piece of data collected through the various tools was pieced together, a more holistic picture emerged, one that enabled the

researcher to create a reliable and authentic evidence base on which to construct, interpret and re-tell a number of intertwined narratives that ultimately aimed to inform, instruct and inspire educators and professionals working with young children to reflect upon their practices by listening to, acknowledging and validating young learners' voices.

Analysis and Discussion

The presentation of the data took the form of six intertwined narratives, one for each child participant, where the teacher's voice and the learners' voices were merged. In this way, experience was represented through the telling of their stories. As a teacher-researcher, I told my own story alongside the stories of these six learners in my class, and in so doing, I provided an interwoven picture of the inner reality of an Early Years classroom to the outside world, inviting others to have a glimpse of our interactions and everyday classroom occurrences. It is important to point out that although I have done my utmost to be ethical (Richardson, 2005) and faithful in my representations (Riessman,1993), the narratives are my interpretations of what the participants were saying and doing, and are therefore 'interpreted narratives'.

Following the writing of the intertwined narratives where two distinct voices were used, one related through my eyes as teacher-researcher and the other one told in the children's own voices, I went back to the original data as well as to the interpreted narratives and began another cycle of reading and re-reading both the field texts and the research texts, looking out for statements or epiphanies that would shed light on the area being explored, paying particular attention to any patterns, themes, recurrences and consistencies within and across data and texts. Focus was also placed on any idiosyncrasies and peculiarities that would render particular insights and enhance the process of making meaning. As teacher's voice and children's voices merged and diverged, themes began to emerge, which led to the grouping of these themes and further interpretation and analysis took place.

Three main themes emerged from the process of meaning-making and analysis, namely the importance of **supportive learning contexts** for meeting the needs of highly able learners, the impact of **powerful interactions** with others and with the environment as well as the notion of **identity construction** that was observed to form an integral part of the daily interactions and occurrences as learning dispositions were acknowledged, inclusive practices were adopted to promote the development of these learning dispositions, and as a result, positive learner identities were enhanced, developed or confirmed.

The research data gathered strongly indicates that despite their age, young able children are already aware of what makes their current learning experience a meaningful one, one that enhances and promotes their overall development. This is in line with the view that children are active participants and active agents in our societies and thus should be given a voice particularly on matters that have a direct impact on their lives. Promoted by the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989), the need to engage children and seek to listen to the experiences and perceptions of their everyday lives was encouraged and highlighted by researchers and educators who worked with children and believed in their capacity not only to learn but also to discuss issues and topics that touch their lives (Christensen & James, 2008; Clandinin & Connelly, 1999; Nutbrown & Hannon, 2003).

Supportive Learning Contexts

The data points to a kind of environment that is supportive of and conducive to learning and development which includes the physical spaces in which children learn, both inside and outside the classroom walls, the kind of activities and opportunities for learning provided as well as the quality and variety of such learning opportunities in terms of novelty and challenge. In this narrative inquiry, the six participants and myself as teacher-researcher frequently mentioned features in the learning environment that both gave learners a sense of familiarity, security and safety whilst stimulating and inspiring them to engage in the process of learning. Apart from the physical space per se, reference was also made to other important articles that made learning possible – such as the resources used, objects and artefacts that grabbed the children's attention and facilitated their understanding, as well as multimedia resources. All of this coupled with the people who joined their learning trajectory over the scholastic year succeeded in creating an environment that was both safe and interesting, and that was ultimately conducive to learning.

Both Piaget and Vygotsky seemed to agree that learning occurs as children act upon and interact with their environment and with others. This knowledge and perspective is reflected in this inquiry where I, as teacher-researcher, place an emphasis on maximising the use of different areas, resources and materials within and outside the classroom environment for the benefit of the learners. This professional attitude function as a means to embed challenge within our daily interactions and learning situations, in a conscious effort to meet learners' diverse needs, including those of very able learners who can reach high levels of attainment and performance. The excerpt below taken from my narrative of Jeremy, one of the very able learners in my class, provides evidence of the ways in which the learning spaces were organised to meet these learners' needs.

Jeremy's Interpreted Narrative – through my (teacher's) eyes
Having such a talented and motivated learner in my class was definitely a privilege in many ways and a chance for me to strive to make a difference in his learning trajectory by creating as many meaningful and relevant occasions that would quench his thirst for more knowledge and for challenge. The downfall for this was that there were sessions or days when I did not manage to meet his needs (and those of other children who required a more challenging curriculum) and thus felt that I may have failed him and others like him. At times I felt that the pressures of teaching in a mixed-ability class and the demands of working in a very busy school environment that increasingly organised activities that would take away our classroom learning time had an adverse impact on the quality of the activities that were presented during particular days.
To make up for these moments of overwhelmingly busy school days, I tried to use these out-of-classroom time events as learning opportunities, presenting them as a challenge as well as assigning different responsibilities to different children, thus enabling them to feel a sense of belonging and ownership of what was going on around our school. Within the classroom walls, I also sought to create areas or activities that did not require my attention or input so that children, who, like Jeremy, were early finishers, would be able to choose from various activities or projects that interest them or that were in one way or another connected with our theme. A number of tools such as our computers, our reference books like dictionaries or the children's own index books, our library area and the resources placed at an accessible level were always at their disposal. The children were instructed to make use of certain resources and tools but also learned that it was their responsibility to put everything in its place for others to find next time. This helped reduce the pressures I occasionally felt to constantly be on my toes and provide challenge and interesting work to children like Jeremy.

Noddings' (2003) idea of practising an ethic of care within educational settings where teachers aim to make a difference in children's lives comes to mind since learners are cared for through the adaptation and creation of contexts that are stimulating and enabling as learning spaces developed by teachers who plan carefully and think about how their actions and practices impact individuals' lives and educational trajectories. These observations also link well with the notion of creating 'smart contexts'

as an opportunity for learners to excel and develop their emerging abilities and talents suggested by a number of educational writers included in the literature review (Barab and Plucker, 2002).

In this inquiry, data seems to point to an increased awareness by both the teacher-researcher and the participants of the ways in which meaningful student-environment interactions bring about learning and at times even talent development. This points to the need for adequate teacher training, both initial and in-service, that aims to create awareness of the diverse needs of learners in classrooms and that equips teachers with the knowledge, competences, attitudes and skills needed to create stimulating environments and adopt inclusive practices. As teachers develop their pedagogical repertoire over the years, they are ideally provided with and/or encouraged to seek and attend professional development sessions and programmes to be able to create such learning environments that are supportive and nurturing of the achievement and learning of young able learners (Adey, 2004; Borders et al., 2014; Borko, 2004; Robinson & Dailey, 2014).

During the conversational interviews, it became apparent that there was a link between the need for new learning and variety in the provision of learning experiences on the one hand and young able learners' motivation and participation on the other. The six participants all value learning new things and acquiring new skills and knowledge. The extracts from Giorgio's interpreted narrative and Nicole's conversational interview provide evidence of their expressed need for new learning and challenging work to keep them interested and enthused to strive for excellence. Giorgio's need for challenging work relates closely to Holt's (1982 in Winstanley, 2010) thoughts about the feelings of pleasure, satisfaction and relief that are borne out of challenging activities aimed at awakening curiosity in young children.

Giorgio's Interpreted Narrative – through his eyes
I love doing hard things especially in Maths and English. There are many things that I cannot understand straightaway and lots of things that I can't realise or figure out what they are. So when that happens I just think with my head or at least I ask the teachers to help me out. I prefer when I have to think hard to figure something out because easy work does not make me feel smart. Easy work like not so hard sentences that we write sometimes or easy words that you can draw like cat and hat or just sticking things for art and craft – I prefer to create something than stick things.

In the following extract, Nicole also refers to her preference for new learning and difficult work and she makes a direct connection between the two, explaining that she enjoys 'hard things' because they teach her something new and it is always enjoyable to learn new stuff. Moreover, when asked to provide examples of new/ challenging learning that she particularly liked, Nicole's response also indicated that in addition to challenging work, being provided with varied learning activities was also important.

Nicole's Conversational Interview
R: Okay ... very good. Now another one: if you had to give your Junior 2 experience a number from one to ten, what number would you give it? One is too little and ten is super good. How was your experience – you can say 2,3,4,5 ... 6,7,8,9,10 – how many points would you it?
N: [pause] Ten!
R: Wow! Why ten?
N: You learn a lot of fun things, you do things in class, you learn ...
R: Okay, so it was good for you.
N: Ehhe ... I want it to be ten because we the children learn a lot of things so then we can manage to go up to Junior 3 ... so we learn a lot.
R: Is there anything that you would change if you were one of the teachers or if you were the Head of School?
N: No.
R: No?
N: I like the school how it is. I like it like this.

> *R: Do you enjoy learning new things. What do you enjoy learning about?*
> *N: Yes. New things about science ... I enjoy learning mostly about things like hard things because hard things will be new and I will start learning hard things and it will be nice to learn new things.*
> *R: Okay, do you remember learning any new things that you really enjoyed?*
> *N: Yes, I enjoyed learning about the weather when we used a puppet to learn about that, I liked learning about dinosaurs, I made a mind map on the computer about them.*
> *R: How do you learn best Nicole?*
> *N: I think mostly sometimes like when I made a book to learn.*

In my view, one of the strengths and successes in my dealings with the multitude of factors that required to be considered as I sought to create supportive and motivating environments, cover curriculum content whilst at the same time maintaining student engagement and involvement, was the fact that I adopted a largely constructivist methodology where all new concepts, knowledge and skills were presented and built upon learners' previous knowledge and experiences. Moreover, this approach encouraged inquiry-based learning through social interaction and active participation. This is in line with sociocultural approaches to learning and knowledge triggered by and developed on Dewey's and Vygotsky's theoretical views that give an account of learning and development as the outcome of participation in socially-mediated and socially constructed activities. Inherent in such an approach is also a wider and more dynamic view of ability, cognition and intelligence, one that is closer to Gardner's idea of multiple intelligences as opposed to the quantification of a child's ability in terms of a single IQ score through the use of standardised tests.

Vygotsky's (1978) idea of learning and development encourages educators and teachers to present opportunities for new learning through tasks that are just out of reach of their current abilities – in this manner, as opposed to Piaget's role of maturation in children's cognitive development, Vygotsky proposed that learning precedes development as one's state of development is changed and enhanced through new tasks that are slightly above a child's current level of performance and ability. The pedagogical choices and approaches adopted in this research inquiry put these theoretical ideas into practice – I strongly feel that these approaches to learning reaped benefits for all children, including and most especially those who were coming across as having potential in various areas of endeavour.

In an article on creating regular classrooms that are responsive to potential giftedness, Hertzog (2005) proposed that through their conscious efforts to capture students' engagement and curiosity through inquiry-based activities, teachers increase their expectations for all learners and in this manner may succeed to close achievement gaps between groups of students. In reality, having been highly aware of the significant role of early years practitioners in providing the right environment for emerging abilities and talents to be developed and sometimes discovered, has led me to adopt this constructivist approach to learning where activities encouraged social interaction, active participation and inquiry-based learning. The results were evident as our classroom transformed itself into a community of learners characterised by motivation, engagement, curiosity and keen interest to learn despite the diversity of needs, learning dispositions and interests amongst the students. This led to a kind of inclusive practice, suggested by Nutbrown and Clough (2006), where all learners in early years settings should be provided with the opportunity to be the best they could be through inclusive processes embedded in the curriculum, pedagogy and the services. One is not suggesting that the classroom in which the research was conducted was an ideal one – there were instances where as a teacher-researcher I felt that pressures and challenges of dealing with the demands of an ecologically diverse classroom. However, in many ways, efforts were constantly made to celebrate diversity and thus adopt a 'complimentary' as opposed to a 'compensatory' pedagogical approach in terms of appropriate inclusive provision (Watkins et al., 2014; Smith, 2003). This is in line with recommendations made by the external audit carried out regarding the current situation of Special

Needs and inclusive Education in Malta whereby it was suggested that teachers maximise learning opportunities for all learners in a climate of more flexible curricula, assessment frameworks and pedagogical approaches that stimulate children's minds and encourage engagement and active participation (Watkins et al., 2014).

Powerful Interactions

The participants in my study all place emphasis on interaction as a vehicle for learning. Throughout the various data gathered, there is constant mention of how learning takes place with and through others. Both teacher and learners in this inquiry talk about the power and centrality of relationships that are formed and sustained throughout the scholastic year as well as the value of personal and social interaction with other learners, with adults as well as with their environment. The notion of 'powerful interactions' as one of the main themes that emerged during the thematic analysis exercise consists of the following subordinate themes, all of which will be discussed further below: learning through interaction with others and with the environment, teacher's professional attitude and learners' engagement and motivation, as well as the links between the home, school and community.

The twinning project described in the journal entry below (only an excerpt from the whole story) demonstrates how learning can be socially-mediated and participatory just like sociocultural and cultural-historical activity perspectives propose (Daniels, 2001; Engestrom et al., 1999; Roth & Lee, 2007). Collaborative projects where older learners work with younger ones on a joint task can be effective in fostering children's potential to develop their thinking and their language through cooperation as well as their social and emotional skills too as they negotiate ways to work well together and achieve goals set by their teachers at the start of the activity. The project below succeeded in providing opportunities for meaningful and authentic learning to take place through elements inherent in the whole activity that have been recommended and proven to be effective in stimulating children's minds and developing their emergent abilities in general education classrooms by various educational writers, namely constructivist approach to learning, inquiry-based learning, project-oriented curriculum, connection of new ideas with prior knowledge, modelling, scaffolding, explorations, flexibility and adaptation to the learning situation. (Camilleri, 1998; Eyre, 1997; Hertzog, 2005; Porter, 2005; Wallace, 2002; Winstanley, 2010). This is connected to the idea that creating opportunities for collaborative and group activities is an effective strategy that teachers could adopt to support the attainment, achievement and participation of learners of high potential and ability, and that teachers have a crucial role in the quality and character of such group interactions (Bailey et al., 2008). This also ties in well with the notion that task-related interaction between learners and others is beneficial and conducive to deeper learner and understanding (Patrick et al., 2005; Webb, 1983). Moreover, it also points to the idea that learners engage in 'talented transactions' that facilitate the development and nurturing of emerging abilities and talents when they make use, explore and interact with tools and artefacts in the learning environment (Barab & Plucker, 2002; Daniels, 2001; Daniels et al., 2010).

> *Reflective Journal: "A chameleon may change colour to show another chameleon how it is feeling and sometimes also to find a girlfriend!"*
> *What a very exciting morning! We knocked on the Pre-Junior Class' door at half past 8 sharp, armed with cushions, pencil boxes as well as a big curious smile and a beating heart. The Junior 2 children were all so eager to find out why they were there and what was going to happen! After the usual introductions, a few Pre-Junior and junior 2 kids were asked to come to the front and try and guess what was hiding inside my tummy. Some said lizard, others said crab and finally the children guessed that it was a chameleon. That is when we brainstormed ideas about what the children already knew about this wonderful reptile. Both Junior 2s and Pre-Juniors had a lot to share with other children. The little ones mentioned mostly the fact that chameleons change colour, (some said chameleons cannot go on something red because that would kill them). One Pre-Junior*

child (who happens to have a brother in Junior 2) told us that chameleons are cold-blooded and when I asked what does that mean, she specified that they are cold-blooded and we are warm-blooded. As expected the Junior 2s knew more details – that a chameleon is a reptile, has scaly skin, that it lives in warm places such as the desert and the jungle and that it needs the sun to keep it warm. They were able to reproduce many reptile features discussed during last week's session. They also mentioned the long sticky tongue and that it eats flies. As always many children wanted to share their thoughts, ideas and current knowledge with the rest but not all got the chance – this is always a downside of working with large groups of children. But then we moved on to the next activity which proved to be fascinating for all. One of the children in the Pre-Junior class, brought in two pet reptiles in a heated aquarium along – so we had these two visitors for everyone to see. The child, with his teacher's help, explained things about the green water dragon and the bearded dragon. The look on the children's faces was an expression of awe and bewilderment - both reptiles barely moved and every time one of them moved a limb or opened an eyelid, the children would utter in surprise! It was a wonderful experience indeed!

Learning within a sociocultural perspective is not confined simply to the four walls of a classroom. It occurs and is increased and encouraged through connections and interactions with others, both within and outside the classroom. The research inquiry included references to learning experiences being extended and expanded to children's families as well as to other classrooms and schools outside our learning community. The planning and implementation of twinning projects with younger or older learners, the use of classroom blogs, wikipage and online platforms, parent-child sessions in the classroom, visitors who come to class to talk about their particular occupations or a topic of interest, as well as visits and outings to places of interests all formed part of the learning experiences provided to this group of young learners.

In the extract taken from Kelly's interpreted narratives, she talks about her mother's reaction to her participation in our Christmas play where she was the narrator of the play and also had a small part as a 'she-viking'. Many children mention the play to be one of their favourite and best moments in their scholastic year – and talk about positive feelings connected to taking part in it as well as their pleasure and enjoyment in having their families and the whole school come to see them in action.

Kelly's Interpreted Narrative – through her eyes
I enjoy our Science lessons so much. I like learning about the world and the animals. I also like it when the teacher reads us stories like that story of Shen and the magic paintbrush we did in term 1. After the story, we did a play and everyone was a different character in the story. That was the very first play we did. I love drama. I really enjoyed our play of Emma the Red for the Christmas concert. I was a narrator and a 'she-viking' and I felt so proud and happy. I wore a pink dress, a pink furry coat and a pink Viking hat. I think the Christmas concert was the best thing this year. That's what I really liked because I had fun practising with my friends but mostly I had fun showing it to my mum. Before the show, I told her the title of the play but nothing else because I wanted it to be a surprise. She was so excited on the way home and she nearly cried in the car. When I saw her like that, I felt happy and excited, just like I feel when I go to the beach, so I jumped up and down on the backseat of mummy's car.

Identity Construction
In addition to talking about their own perceptions and experience of learning, ability and schooling, the young learners in the study concurrently refer to how they view themselves as learners in relation to others, what makes them and others effective in their learning, and how other people at school or outside school recognise and validate their efforts and hard work. There seems to be a thread that runs through the whole inquiry whereby participants negotiate ideas and thoughts about who they are and who they are becoming, about self-concept and perceptions of others, about confidence and capabilities as they work and learn together. Ultimately, there is evidence that identities are being constructed, altered and renegotiated throughout the process of interaction and learning and that each individual participant actively shapes and impinges on own and others' identity construction.

As I attempted to bring the research data into a coherent and unified research text in the form of 'interpreted narratives' and sought to seek further meaning and understanding through the thematic analysis, I was constantly reminded of Billington's (2006) advice to compare and contrast my own constructions of the children I was working and researching with to those that the children were themselves negotiating and forming as they participated, worked, learned and developed through the whole schooling experience. The notion of identity construction emerged through the following sub-themes: self-concept and awareness of self and others, emotions and feelings connected with learning and schooling, and the need for validation and recognition.

Through the reading and re-reading of the data, it became evident that as an Early Years educator I sought to work respectfully and positively with young children particularly through my interaction with them and my view of them as capable learners – this undoubtedly was influential on the construction and reconstruction of my own professional identity.   For instance, in the journal entry that describes the children's information session where I informed them about this research inquiry and their participation in it before I started to collect the data, there are comments that demonstrate a specific view of children and childhood from my part as a practitioner working with young children, one that concords with Nutbrown's (1996) approach of 'respectful educators – capable learners' and also one that indicates a firm belief in the validity of seeking children's views to help us improve our dealings with them and our practices in general. This is also in agreement with Corsaro's (2011) view of children as active participants and active agents in our societies.

Reflective Journal: Children's Information Session
I placed the children's cushions in the shape of a circle around the mat in the library area of our classroom. I started the session by showing them the information sheet and consent form I had previously sent to their parents and asked whether they knew what they were and why I had given the sheets to their parents. Jeremy instantly said "I know" followed by another two kids – Mireille said "It's for your university"... Then Jeremy said "It's for your assignment for university". How do you know? "It's because my mummy did something like this ... she had an assignment about me." Do you know what it was about? "Yes, it was about me and about the things I like"... I explained that apart from being a teacher, I was currently a student at the University of Sheffield in England and that this year was a very special one for me as I need to conduct a study (a bit like my homework). I tried to explain that although I learn many things by discussing with my 'university teachers' or by reading books about school and about learning, I feel that I can find out how to be good at my job and how to make learning a great experience for them (the children I teach) by observing and writing about how the children in my class learn, about what activities help them to learn and to be good at what they do and the kind of lessons and activities that help children to be the best they can be. Most of all, I wish to listen to what children have to say about learning, about school and about being good at doing different things ...

In this example taken from an excerpt about children's information session, I talked to my class about the reasons behind my research inquiry, what it entailed and why I needed their participation, all along keeping in mind that the children had a right to know what was going to happen and most importantly, for them to understand that I valued and acknowledged their views so much that I wished to document them in my study so that they could help me understand more the strength in my pedagogy and practices as well as those areas that needed to be improved. Such an approach has also been advocated by Christensen & James (2008) and by Nutbrown & Hannon (2003), whose work promotes the idea of seeking children's perceptions and constructions about their own experiences of issues and topics that directly influence aspects of their lives.

The data seems to indicate that as a teacher of young learners, I view myself as one who seeks to build strong teacher/ pupil relationships based on mutual respect and trust. This comes across clearly through the efforts that I seemed to make in practising an approach that regards children in my class as active agents – ones who made an impact on the learning process whilst their identity, learning and

development were also being shaped by the learning process itself and by the contexts and relationships in which they happened. This is in accordance with more recent perspectives on learning and development, namely cultural-historical activity theorists such as Daniels (2001) who departs from the idea that human beings actively shape the very forces that are active in shaping them. Thus, in seeking to understand able children's perceptions of learning, ability and schooling, I seem to be promoting their participation and active involvement in the creation of those factors which might have a direct effect on their learning and education.

Research data from the conversational interviews and the reflective journal included children's own views of themselves as learners – their comments show a certain degree of self-awareness and generally also revealed that positive learner identities were being confirmed, negotiated, developed and sometimes reconstructed as children participated in our daily interactions and learning activities. The extracts presented below clearly demonstrate that young able children already hold strong views about their own abilities and about what makes them and others 'smart'.

Reflective Journal – 'No book is ever too hard for me'
During the time spent copying the set of new words on their 'Sound Book' (a copybook which contains all sounds/ words learned during the year) – I called children to my desk so we could choose their library book together. I usually like to do this exercise in partnership with the child ... When I called Kelly, she pointed to a book called 'Mermaidia' which had a beautifully illustrated cover and when I opened it and saw that it was mostly text with small print, I asked her whether she would really like to borrow it or whether she thought it was a bit too hard for now. Her reply was: "No book is ever too hard for me!" And what a reply – a reply full of meaning, a reply that tells a lot about this particular six year old's perception of herself as a competent and confident reader.

Nicole's Interpreted Narrative – Through her eyes
All the children in my class are very smart. All of them are good at something. Some are very good at everything too but everyone is clever because everyone can learn new things. I really feel that most of my friends are very smart, because each one of us is good at different things. Jeremy, I know he's really smart because I listen to him when he starts talking about something interesting – I enjoy listening to what he has to say, I learn a lot from him too. I've known him since Junior 1 so I know a lot about him. Then there's my friend Mireille who's good at many things but mostly at Maltese because she can speak it and write it very well and because she goes to Maltese Cathecism so she has friends who speak Maltese. Kelly is smart too – once she made this Show and Tell about nature and she was like a teacher for us and we learned many things about nature because she could explain very well. I can read my big fat book, the chapter books, and I think that this makes me smart too. When you read the big books you learn more, you learn about the world. I like reading fact books, sometimes I read them to my sister when she comes in my bed. Making things can make you smarter – like once I was trying to make a kite with my nannu [grandpa] but it couldn't work at first, it kept coming down so my nannu got more bamboo until we managed to get the kite up. That day I learned things about flying and about bamboo and kite paper. We needed to make sure the kite was light enough so it flies. I am good at a lot of things like science. Science is fun and sometimes I make pictures of what I like so once I made a portrait of a scientist and I enjoyed that a lot.

Having worked and taught the six participants for one scholastic year whilst carrying out this narrative inquiry, I have gathered stories and ideas about who they are as learners, their own perceptions of themselves, of others, of their knowledge about learning, schooling and ability. However, as I analysed and interpreted the data collected, I was at times amazed by what I was discovering, particularly about the fact that the young able children in my class had already formed firm and strong thoughts and ideas about their own capacity for learning, about what made themselves and others smart, about activities that helped them learn and/or have fun whilst doing so, about who in their class was a very able learner. When asked about the reasons behind their assessment of one's ability, all participants mentioned validation and recognition by teachers, family members and other peers.

However, they also own their views and perceptions using phrases like 'I know they are smart …', phrases which seem to imply that even though others confirm their own views, in many ways they already had this knowledge themselves. It is thus evident that children's identities and their views and constructions of the people and the world around them are not formed or reconstructed in isolation but created in collaboration and negotiation with others within social contexts that confirm, alter or introduce new ideas and thoughts through everyday connections and experiences. Freeman and Mathison (2008) suggest that in order to understand children's experiences and perceptions, one needs to analyse and interpret their words and actions as they interact with others within particular social contexts.

Conclusion

In this final section, I look at implications of seeking to reflect upon a teacher's own pedagogy and practice by learning from the protagonists themselves i.e. a group of young able learners and present a number of implications for educational practice and research as well as for different educational stakeholders.

This inquiry undoubtedly reaffirms the validity and contribution to knowledge and educational practice of involving young able children when seeking to understand and examine notions related to their learning and schooling experiences. In terms of the connection between the fields of **gifted education** and **general education**, this research inquiry points out the need for the recognition of the notion of giftedness, high ability and emerging abilities and talents in our classrooms, and thus for more focused attention to effective provision through inclusive practices that support the learning, development and attainment of all learners, including very able ones. This also implies the necessity for **teacher education** in Malta to target this field as part of its inclusive education framework and to provide adequate training and professional learning opportunities to improve school effectiveness and teacher efficacy in including this group of learners. The field of **inclusion** also benefits from the findings of this narrative study as evidence points to the need for a clearer vision of inclusion and subsequent adoption and endorsement by Maltese policy and legislation for inclusive education for all as a rights-based approach. Moreover, this study recommends the recognition and adequate provision of the educational needs of gifted children as learners with special educational needs.

With regards to **educational research** on the exploration of inclusive practices that are supportive of the needs of young able learners, this inquiry seems to fill a gap as the literature available is largely carried out from the perspective of adults and fails to include young able children's own perceptions of ability and learning as they try to make sense of what enables them to perform, learn and achieve at school.

Also, this research has implications for the use of a **wider conception of ability and learning**, particularly in the early years, where the focus should be on creating 'smart' environments and inclusive practices that help develop and nurture children's emergent abilities rather than identifying and labelling children as 'gifted' at an early age without providing the right environment for their gifts and talents to flourish and be discovered. This needs to be reflected in the policy framework for a broader approach to providing adequately for the diverse needs of all learners. In this manner, issues of equity, social justice and access to a 'curriculum of opportunity' for all learners are also targeted and given due attention. This applies to educational systems locally and internationally.

Although, as seen previously in the literature review, mention of 'the gifted and talented' can be observed in some Maltese policy-related documents such as the *Learning Outcomes Framework*

(2015) and *Inclusive and Special Education Review* (2004), more awareness and focus on the creation of learning environments and supportive practices for young able learners is required. Therefore, this needs to be also implicit in policy documents and legislation to ensure that curricular implementation and quality assurance mechanisms take the needs of more able learners into consideration when reviewing effectiveness of inclusive practices as well as attainment and achievement of this group of learners.

This inquiry was originally set in motion by my dissatisfaction with certain practices currently existent in our schools, particularly concerning talent development and the provision of challenge for students who show or may have the potential to reach high levels of performance in certain areas of endeavour, both academic and non-academic ones. It was also an expressed need to share my practical wisdom acquired over years of teaching and researching about the crucial influence that teachers' professional attitude and pedagogical choices may have on the recognition, unveiling and development of individual children's emerging abilities and talents and on their learner identities. The lessons learned from this narrative inquiry will hopefully encourage more practitioners to validate children's capacity for learning by providing rich and meaningful learning opportunities through the use of inclusive practices, to continuously reflect on their pedagogical choices and practices using children's own perceptions as sources of information, and to ultimately understand and work with children in ways that confidently help learners to become aware of their learning dispositions through motivation, engagement, interaction and active participation so that positive learner identities are developed and reaffirmed.

Finally, on the basis of the interpretation and findings of this inquiry, I would argue that teachers of young learners must be consciously aware of how their professional attitude, pedagogies adopted and kind of relationships they build with their students may impact, positively or adversely, young able learners' capacity for learning, recognition of their individual talents and emerging abilities, positive self-concepts as capable learners as well as the richness and extent of their learning experiences in general.

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Chapter 6

Experiences of digital game making with eleven year olds

Leonard Busuttil

Introduction

Playing digital games is an important leisure activity for a large number of us. Players tend to play for hours on end, at times losing track of time. Digital games range from simple two dimensional arcade games to virtual reality three-dimensional (3-D) multi user role playing games. The human – digital game interface is diverse too and varies from the traditional coin operated entertainment machines installed in public spaces such as video arcades to controller free consoles that track your body movement and recognise your face and voice through an array of sensors installed in one's living room.

Whilst playing and interacting with others through and about digital games, players build gaming capital (Consalvo 2007). I share Carrington and Robinson's observation that an increasingly large number of students are obliged to leave an entire suite of competencies, practices and knowledge about digital technologies at the school gate (Carrington & Robinson 2009). I also share Livingstone and Hope's opinion about the inclusion of programming in schools:

Given that the new online world is being transformed by creative technology companies like Facebook, Twitter, Google and video games companies, it seems incredible that there is an absence of computer programming in schools. (Livingstone & Hope 2011, p.29)

I am not arguing that children in class will create the new Facebook or Twitter today but exposing them to programming is exposing them to a new means of expression that might help them shape their identity.

Through this project student volunteers were given the possibility to learn how to create a digital game and express their creativity and knowledge about games. The research was conducted through an after school workshop, and explored the processes research participants go through whilst creating their games and outlined the benefits that the digital game creation process had on the students from a game literacy perspective.

A brief look at digital games and education
Crawford (1984) in his book "The Art of Computer Game Design" suggests that games are the most ancient and time honoured vehicle for education. As Van Eck (2006) points out 'Lions do not learn to hunt through direct instruction but through modelling and play'.

Various authors (Beavis et al. 2012; De Freitas & Maharg 2011; Gee 2003; Squire 2011; Steinkuehler et al. 2012) have stressed the power of digital games based learning.

Irrespectively of whether digital games should be considered for their inherent learning potential, digital games form an integral part of the lives of a lot of students and the minimum schools can do is help students understand them and exploit the students' interest in digital games to support learning.

According to Van Eck (2006) educators have adopted three approaches for integrating digital games in the learning process:

1. Serious games

2. Commercial off the shelf games

3. Provide opportunity for children to author their own games

I briefly outline each approach below:

Serious Games
Serious games are games written with an explicit and carefully thought-out educational purpose. These games are not intended to be played primarily for amusement although they can be, and generally are entertaining.

Commercial off the shelf games
Commercial off-the-shelf games are designed purely for entertainment and not for a purposely thought out educational purpose. This does not mean that these games cannot be used effectively in class.

Making games
The final approach for integrating digital games in the learning process is to have students' author games from scratch. Van Eck (2006) notes that through this approach students develop problem solving skills whilst learning a programming language. Van Eck elaborates that this approach is time intensive and requires specialist skills by teachers. He concludes that this approach is unlikely to be used widely due to these constraints.

There have been various advancements in technology which have resulted in game authoring tools becoming available which do not necessarily require a long period of time for students or teachers to master. These tools can be used by children to author games without having to engage with the intricacies of a traditional computer programming language.

In the following list I outline a number of studies found in literature which deal with game creation by children to attain one or more of the following objectives:

- Enhancing creativity and switch from reading to writing digital games
- Improving engagement and motivation
- Enhancing problem solving skills
- Teaching a subject by building an educational game about it

Digital Game development to enhance creativity and switch from reading to writing games
Literacy has traditionally been described as the ability to read and write. However as Burn (2009) accentuates when it comes to game literacy the balance is skewed towards the reading skills. The three projects that follow try to rectify the balance in game literacy by empower students with writing as well as reading game literacy skills.

Making Games: Developing games authoring software for educational and creative use was a research project conducted between 2002 and 2006 funded by PACCIT-Link programme in the UK. This project developed pedagogic approaches and created the software product *Mission Maker*, to enable young people create their own computer games (Pelletier & Burn 2005)

The *Adventure Author* project led by the University of Edinburgh explores how young authors can be supported to create nonlinear stories with believable and intriguing plotlines and characters. The aim of the project is summarised in the following paragraph taken from the Adventure Author portal:

Encouraging creativity is a major aspect of the modern school curriculum. Kids read books, so we encourage them to write stories, and illustrate them. They watch movies, so we teach them drama. They also play video games, by far the most interactive and engaging of such forms of entertainment. So why not let our young writers, actors and artists become designers too? (Robertson et al. n.d.)

Robertson and Howells (2008) conducted an eight week exploratory study with a class of ten year olds using the Adventure Author toolkit in order to assess successful learning during the game authoring process. They concluded that whilst authoring games children displayed:

- motivation and enthusiasm for learning
- determination to reach a high standard of achievement
- independent and group learning
- linking and applying learning in new situation

Similar results to the ones outlined by Robertson and Howells (2008) are put forward in another research project Carbonaro et al (2008). Carbonaro et al conclude that very little training was required for the students to author their own interactive stories and that factors including gender, programming experience, amount of time spent playing computer games or participating in online activities had little bearing on the quality of interactive stories.

Other studies by Wan Ali et al.(2011) and Navarrette (2013) also conclude that whilst creating digital games students experienced positive opportunities for engaging with the creative thinking processes.

Improving engagement and motivation
Owston et al. (2009) use the web resource Education Games Central to allow a group of students aged between 10 and 11 years to construct electronic versions of popular board games. The web resource provides a series of popular games such as TicTacToe and Snakes and Ladders to which students need to add a list of questions and answers. The students can specify appropriate responses players receive when providing a correct or incorrect answer to the question. Although the level of game authoring in this experiment was less elaborate that that found in projects outlined above Owston et al. (2009) conclude that game development helped improve:

- student content retention
- ability to compare and contrast information presented
- utilize more and different kinds of research materials including digital resources
- editing skills
- insights into questioning skills

In another study Vos et al. (2011) conclude that constructing the game rather than playing it had a positive effect on student motivation to learn the proverbs.

Problem Solving
Problem solving is a thinking skill which is regarded as highly important. Notwithstanding children in schools do not get a lot of opportunities to solve complex problems with multiple possible solutions (Jonassen 2000; Mayer & Wittrock 2012). Instead problem solving is usually introduced in schools through problems which have one solution(Perkins 2013). This approach does not lead to students gaining skills to solve real life problems.

There have been a series of studies that have looked at using game design as a context to teach higher order thinking skills (Akcaoglu & Koehler 2014; Ke 2014).

Teaching a subject by building an educational game
One of the approaches found in literature where game development is concerned is to make students engage with a subject by building a game (Ulicsak & Williamson 2010). This game is then used to teach the subject to fellow students. This approach was first used in the study by Kafai (1996) where fourth grade students in the US spent an hour a day for six months building a game to teach fractions. The students used the Logo programming language and engaged with a thorough understanding of fractions through the game creation exercise.

A similar approach was used in the study by Baytak (2009). In this study children aged between ten and eleven years learned about environmental issues by designing games that involved environmental concepts. These games, created using the Scratch programming language, where then presented to seven year old students.

Yang and Chang (2013) used a quasi-experimental setup where a group of students aged between thirteen and fourteen years were split into two groups. The teaching time for both groups was split in half with the first half dedicated to teaching topics from the biology syllabus using a traditional approach and the second half dedicated to teaching programming using Flash. The control group was taught Flash using a traditional approach whilst the experimental group was lead to create games about biology. Yang and Chang conclude that students participating in the experimental group demonstrated significant improvement in critical thinking skills and academic achievement.

Context of the project
In this research project a group of fourteen eleven year old students volunteered to join an after school game authoring workshop. The group was composed of boys and girls attending a Maltese co-ed school. A teacher was recruited to conduct the workshop which allowed me to participate in the workshop as an observer rather than as a main participant. An online portal was used to maintain communication with the teachers and workshop participants in between the weekly sessions. The membership to the portal was closed to the workshop participants and the teachers conducting the workshop. The portal allowed students to ask questions and collaborate whilst working on their games at home. After each session a video summarizing the session was uploaded on the site in order to provide continuity between sessions.

The pedagogy to introduce programming was based on existing practices found in literature that are used to foster creativity(Craft 2005; Jeffrey & Craft 2004). Unlike previous studies (Baytak 2009; Kafai 1996; Kafai 1995) throughout the workshop the children were left at liberty to develop a game they wanted to create. They were not given any theme on which to base their game. This project is similar to other projects (Carbonaro et al. 2008; Robertson & Howells 2008) found in literature since it empowered the students with writing skills to complement their existing game literacy skills. A major difference from these studies is that instead of using a toolkit based on a commercial game, the Scratch[1] programming language was used. The use of a toolkit based on a commercial game limits the students to using only characters found in the original commercial game. Using a programming language allows the choice of characters to be decided upon by the game authors (Peppler & Kafai 2007).

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[1] Scratch is a graphical programming language developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology media lab's Lifelong Kindergarten Group

Methodology

Through the project I reflect on the game literacy benefits the students attain whilst authoring the game. Given the nature of this project I adopted a qualitative case study approach. The term case study research has a host of different meanings in different disciplines. Notwithstanding the differences there seems to be consensus on key elements of case study research namely: a bounded system – in this case the group of students who volunteered to participate in the afterschool workshop, a real live concept – the school lab where the workshop took place and the online environment where the students interacted with other members of the group in between sessions and using several data sources to collect rich data.

Using multiple methods is characteristic of qualitative research since this reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question (Denzin and Lincoln 2005).   In this research I based my data sources on:

• Questionnaires. Three questionnaires were used. The initial questionnaire, used during the first session of the workshop, was used to identify the gaming habits of the participants and their favourite games. This information was used to compare the games created by the children to the games they enjoyed playing. The second questionnaire was used during the second session of the workshop to elicit the changes the children would make to a simple game provided in order to make it more engaging. In the final questionnaire the children were asked to describe the games they created. The textual description was used during the game analysis process to further understand the games the children created.

• Participant observation during the workshop. The workshop was led by a collaborating teacher allowing me to observe the students whilst they engaged with the process of game making. Notes about the interactions observed between the teacher leading the workshop and the students as well as between the students themselves provided rich information when analysing the processes the students went through whilst building their games. A journal detailing the observed interactions was maintained throughout the workshop and later thematically analysed.

• Informal conversations with participants during the course. Whilst observing the workshop sessions I could conduct informal conversations with the students participating in the workshop about various aspects of the game creation process. These conversations were audio recorded onto a digital device and later transcribed and thematically analysed.

• Discussions with the teachers helping out during the course. Teachers that helped out during workshop sessions participated in planning sessions before each workshop session and a debriefing session soon after the workshop session was concluded. These discussions were audio recorded and transcribed and thematically analysed.

• Interactions in the online space. All the discussions that occurred in the discussion boards of the online portal were also recorded. Google Analytics were enabled on the website in order to collate aggregate data on which parts of the websites were visited, and when. I used this information to identify possible relationships between the phases of the workshop and the visits to the website.

• The game artefacts created by the participants during the course also provided valuable information, especially on how the games were designed and which programming constructs were used.

In this research I strived to collect data from multiple sources but I remained aware that the primary instrument, that is me, remained the same and hence my subjectivity could affect the study. Since as

asserted by Denzin objective reality can never be captured, triangulation can be used as an alternative to validation. Richardson et al take exception at the term triangulation since triangulation presupposes a fixed point that can be triangulated (Richardson, Adams St.Pierre 2005). Instead they propose using the metaphor of a crystal since a crystal is a prism that has multiple faces and what one sees from a crystal depends on the angle of repose. In this research I tried to look through the crystal from multiple angles and tried to make sense of what I saw.

Information sheets about the project and consent forms were provided to the head of the collaborating school, the collaborating teachers, students interested in joining the workshop and their parents. The information sheets and consent forms were submitted to the University of Sheffield ethical review process.

Since the students might feel attached to the games they created, they were given the option to use their real names or pick a pseudonym to be used in the research. Their choice is respected whenever reference to their work is made in this chapter.

Findings

In this section I outline some of the findings from this research[2]. Due to space limitations I will focus on aspects of this study which dealt with the importance of game making for the participants, and on how game playing infused into game making. The gaming capital the participants acquired whilst playing games was extended and used during their game making activities and the fun associated with playing games permeated the workshop activities.

Importance of game making for the participants
Throughout the experience of conducting the game making workshop I was engulfed with an aura of excitement which suggests that the children were enthusiastic to make the leap from game players to game makers, from reading and writing the games by playing them, to writing their own games from scratch.

The importance of game making for the participants was evidenced by the enthusiasm shown whilst signing up to join the workshop, through the sharing of the games created with the members of the family and through the detailed sketching of game ideas which were then implemented into games during the workshop.

Joining the workshop
I was hit with the wave of enthusiasm from the first time I met the students to explain the aims of the project and what they needed to do if they were interested in participating in the project. Fourteen out of thirty one students (45%) chose to attend the workshop. This is a very high rate considering that parents were made aware of the game-making workshop only a week before commencement date. It is quite usual for parents to make all the necessary arrangements for extra-curricular activities before the school term starts.

Interacting with members of the family
During informal conversations with the workshop participants I encountered various situations where the children were show casing their work to their parents. In the third session of the workshop BenL

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[2] . The dissertation is available online and can be downloaded from the White Rose eThesis Online Repository http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/7593/

turned the *Shark and Fish* game into a multiplayer game where a second player could control the fish using the keyboard keys a,x,w,d. Before BenL modified the game, the player could control the shark using keyboard keys whilst the fish were controlled by the computer using rules programmed by the game developers. BenL explained that when he changed the game into a multiplayer game he asked his mum to play with him. She took over the shark character whilst he was the fish trying to escape. Whilst BenL was recounting this episode I could sense the pride of this child who authored a game which was good enough for him to share with his mum.

Similar incidents were recounted by Daniel9000, HallieH and Serafina. Daniel9000 kept adding levels to his maze game which he invited his friends to try out. The activity of trying out the game was not limited to the workshop session but flowed into the home environment too. Daniel9000 was proud that his mum never went past level 6 of his 15 level game. Serafina too shared the game she was creating with her sisters and came back to the workshop with ideas on how to improve the game. These were all instances where the children were experiencing the joy of building – in this case building a digital game.

When I grow up I want to be a game designer
The importance of games in the lives of the workshop participants was further highlighted in the informal chats I had with two of the workshop participants during the first workshop session. BenL explained how he had combined his game playing time with creating videos about his game play to post online:

I downloaded this thing called Fraps and I can now while I am playing some online game like I make them do something cool and I record it and then put it on YouTube... when I grow up I want to be a computer game designer (BenL).

This desire to shift to game making from game playing was also highlighted by another participant, Daniel9000. During one of the sessions, Daniel9000 explained that for years he had wanted to make his computer game. Since he did not know how to create a computer game he resorted to drawing his maze games on paper. The maze games he created were a series of A4 papers on which he drew mazes. The player played these games by traversing the game using his finger as a character in the game. Each maze had a title written on the top of the page and each game consisted of a series of levels. Figure 1 shows level 5 from the game Daniel9000 called *Clash of the Titans*. The maze has an entrance on the top right hand corner of the paper and one exit marked with an F (for finish) Daniel9000 explained that to arrive to the finishing exit for a level, one had to go through the maze. Most of the passages in the maze were guarded by
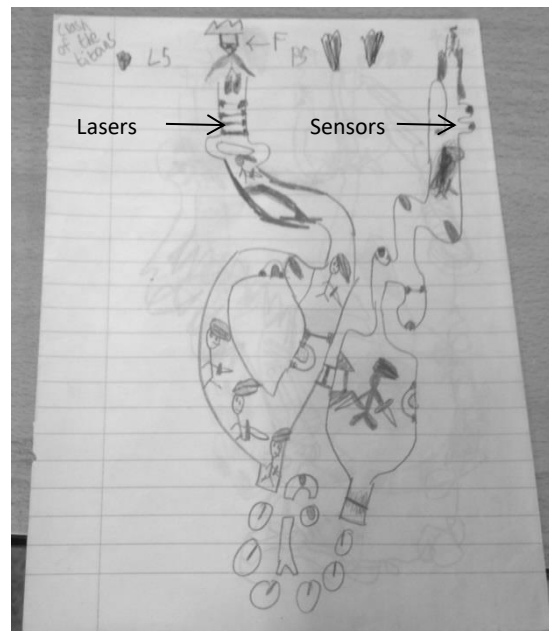

Figure 1. Daniel9000's *Clash of the Titans*

coloured laser beams. The player had to avoid touching these beams as touching them would result in the player being burnt to death. These beams could be switched off by touching coloured sensors, however some of these sensors were also guarded by laser beams hence the player had to figure out the order of switching off the laser beams in order to successfully make it to the end of the maze

without being burnt. Daniel9000's game also included a series of stick figures holding swords which the player had to dodge to arrive to the finish.

The mazes created on paper by Daniel9000 were amazingly detailed and creative. Gaming was such an important activity for him that the drawings he came up with, well before the gaming workshop was even announced, were blue prints for games waiting to be enacted. Most of the features Daniel9000 had drawn in his maze game were replicated in the digital game he created during the final stage of the game creation workshop.

Similar to the study in Carbonaro et al. (2010) there was very little training required for the children to start making their own games. The findings in this study also echo the findings of Robertson and Howells (2008) in that the children showed motivation and enthusiasm whilst creating their games. The enthusiasm was not confined to the classroom/workshop environment, but also spilled over to the home environment further demonstrating the enthusiasm of the workshop participants and the pride in demonstrating their work to family members. The discussions with the study participants also demonstrated that gaming and game design are an important aspect of the lives of some of our students and as schools we must include activities to bridge the gap.

Game inspired activities
The game creation workshop itself was designed to include game like activities so that participants could learn whilst having fun. These activities included the game master of the week award and allowed students to interact with others during the building of their games by moving away from their computers and testing the games created by their peers.

Game Master of the week
In a bid to encourage the students to use the online resources in between the workshop sessions a *Gamemaster of the Week Award* was introduced. Every week we used to pick out a game which stood out from the rest of the games uploaded in the students' areas. This game would then be featured on the front page of the website with a brief note on why it was chosen as the *Gamemaster of the Week*. This feature of the website was popular and at times it was difficult choosing just one game to feature as the *Gamemaster of the Week Award* so we introduced runners up. I used to put up the gamemaster of the week award on the website just before the session started on a Friday, whilst the students were following other lessons in school. The students would not have had time to see who got the award before the start of the workshop and this meant that they would come in asking about who got the award this week. The competitive attitude so evident in video game play had permeated itself into this part of the workshop with children competing in getting their game featured on the front of the website as the game of the week award. The competition was a healthy competition with the children collaborating with each other during the workshop.

Glitch!

Figure 2. *Play testing games of other workshop participants*

A central activity of the workshop sessions was play testing the games created. Whenever a participant felt that their game was good enough to be played by peers, a friend would be asked to play test the game. This usually resulted in a small group of children watching from behind the player's back whilst the player played the game. The game creator usually sat on the side watching in earnest whilst his/her creation was tried out in front of what had become a game making community.

The testing activity quickly developed into an important routine for the group, with the testing period being used to showcase the new features the game presented. One of the most popular testers BenL came up with the term Glitch! Whenever BenL discovered a bug in a game he used to shout the word Glitch! It would be back to the game creator to solve the problem unearthed by the tester in time for another session of play testing.

The ingrained procedure of play testing the games as soon as the game creator added a new feature, resembles the test driven methodology adopted in industry. This software development process is based on the repetition of very short development cycles where the developer first defines a test from the requirements and user-specifications and then develops code to pass the test. In the methodology adopted by the students the game designer/maker first came with a new feature for the game, then developed this feature and had fellow workshop participants test the feature. The additional benefit of the approach adopted was that the game testing acted as a source of ideas for the testers. This cross fertilisation of ideas can be seen in the games created by BenL and Serafina. BenL added a welcome screen to his game where the player could choose a key to start the game and another key to read information about the game. The information consisted of game instructions. Serafina saw this feature whilst play testing BenL's game and asked BenL to help her create a welcome screen for her game too. At the end Serafina's game had a very similar welcome and help screens to that of BenL's game. Testing the games had become a space for transacting in the gaming capital.

Figure 3. *The initial and help screens in BenL and Serafina's games*

Cheating the way out of a Glitch!

Cheating strategies range from consulting strategy guides whilst playing a digital game to purchasing game cheating cartridges which, when attached to a gaming console, allow a player to use cheat codes and attain super powers. Even though the students following the game making workshop were making games and not just playing them they were observed adopting cheating strategies, not to win a game but to bend the rules to iron out bugs which occurred in the game.

Testing a multi-level game can be time consuming especially when a bug is identified in the later levels. Rather than playing the game to reach the level that contains the bug I observed the students using a number of strategies to bend the rules and skip levels.

A game can be run in *Scratch* by using one of two modes. The first mode requires the player to expand the game screen to full screen and then pressing the green flag to start the game, whilst the second mode allows the player to press the green flag whilst the programming environment is still in view. If the second mode is chosen, a player can use the mouse to move the sprites whilst the game is running. BenL was observed using the second mode in his game *Stick with a sword.* Rather than using the keyboard keys to move *Stick* he clicked on the *Stick* sprite and moved him straight onto the dragon. In so doing BenL made sure that *Stick* was not burnt by the fire which blew from the dragon's nostrils. BenL had managed to skip part of the game to test the game sequence when *Stick* can use his sword on the dragon.

Another instance when cheating was adopted was in the case of *Racer.* Manoeuvring the car around obstacles in *Racer* was quite cumbersome due to the size of the pathways and the car. When debugging KyleC was observed reducing the size of the car so that he could easily manoeuvre it to get to the area where the error was occurring.

Indeed cheating became quite a handy practice for the children especially since solving bugs require the child game maker to test the same aspect of the game numerous times to ensure that the glitch is ironed out.

Fun has always been a central characteristic associated with playing digital games (Salen & Zimmerman 2003; Koster 2013). What the experiences of this workshop demonstrate is that the fun associated with playing games also spilled over to the workshop especially whilst testing the work of the other workshop participants. Similarly Consalvo (2007) has written a lot about cheating whilst playing digital and non-digital games however in this workshop cheating was a strategy adapted to helping the participants fix problems in their games.

Cashing in the gaming capital

Gaming capital is acquired by video game players who play their favourite digital games, and transact this capital with other players in spaces that surround the game play be they online or face to face spaces. The game making workshop offered a possibility to the participants to demonstrate the gaming capital acquired by improving a ready-made game as well as building their own games.

Upgrading a game

The first session of the game-making workshop allowed the students to bank on their gaming capital by suggesting ways to improve a simple game provided to the participants. The students had to play a game provided and suggest ways on improving the game.

shows the suggestions made by the participants after they played the game for a short period. The participants' suggestions varied in details from short phrase suggestions such as *make the fish go faster* to more elaborate suggestions such as:

Once you eat 1000 fish and 100 sharks you fight a champion shark. you can attack sharks by biting at their tales and fins. Each shark will leave after thirty seconds, but will come again later. You grow stronger when you eat fish, and bigger when you kill sharks. Getting bigger will help you eat up to five fish at a time and getting stronger helps you inflict more damage to bigger sharks. You start out with seven lives per level. There are up to twenty levels.

The suggestions made were reduced into a number of features as outlined below. The features are ordered according to the number of times each feature was suggested by different participant, with the top most feature being the feature suggested by most participants.

Table 1: Improving the Shark and Fish game

Feature
Add more obstacles for the player such as bombs that can hit the shark or empty plastic bottles that fall from the top of the screen. If the shark hits them then it dies.
Add more levels to the game
Make the fish go faster
Make the fish appear in different locations once the shark eats them
Add more prey to the game
Make the game a race against time so that if the player does not eat enough fish after some time the game comes to an end
If you get enough points the shark should get super powers.
Add more controls to the shark
Make the game a multiplayer game
Add lives to shark so that if a shark dies, a life is lost but the game does not end.
Make the fish run away from shark
Add more sharks to control
Different fish, each harder to get and worth more points

The new features suggested by the workshop participants were all based on experience the participants had acquired by playing games and transacting in the gaming capital. The workshop built on this capital by spending the first four weeks implementing the suggestions made by the students. In this way the students were introduced to the *Scratch* programming language by building on their interests.

Building new games
The gaming capital acquired by the workshop participants was also manifest in the games created after the fourth week of the workshop. An example of this manifestation of this gaming capital picked up through the long periods of playing other digital games and discussing these games with peer players in online and face-to-face spaces can be seen in the game designed by KyleC. KyleC designed a racing game, similar to games he played online. Looking at the early versions of the game saved in the online website, one can note that the game included a screen for an online shop. The plan was that the player would collect coins by racing against the time and once the enough coins were accumulated the player would be allowed to purchase car models to use in the race.

The scheme of exchanging coins collected in-game with upgrades to be used in the game is similar to popular games such as *Subway Surfers*. In *Subway Surfers* the player has to run from a railway inspector collecting coins and other power-ups whilst avoiding a series of obstacles such as trains, light posts, wooden barricades, tunnels and more. The coins collected during play can be used to purchase one-time use items such as hovering surfboards and paint powered jetpacks. Whilst designing his game KyleC was drawing on experiences and knowledge from outside the school. His experiences as a gamer and a consumer were shaping the way he was designing his new game. He was testing the boundaries and trying to add new dimensions to the game.

The planned shop was eventually removed from the later versions of KyleC's game. The skills required to create the online shop proved to be too difficult and KyleC decided to focus more on making his racing game work. The attitude of playfulness adopted whilst testing the boundaries of the software lead him to understand the limits of what is possible in the tool he was using to build the game.

Figure 4. In game shop in KyleC's games

The gaming capital the students build whist playing digital games was fundamental in their suggestions on how to improve a provided game and whist designing and creating their own games. This link to gaming capital was not linked to previous research. I suspect that this was the case because previous research mostly focused on creating games on a pre-existing characters or limited the students to creating games based on a theme.

Conclusion

It has long been established that digital games form an important part of the lives of young children. A previous study on Maltese students had indicated that 88.7% of children aged between 7 and 12 played digital games (Busuttil et al. 2014). This research demonstrates that children in this age bracket are also keen to design their own games in schools similar to the findings of other studies conducted before.

Prior game playing experience contributed to the way the children designed their games whilst also generating a playful attitude with which they engaged with game making. This playful attitude resulted with the children being competitive yet cooperative. A game like experience was observed whilst the students group tested their games and ironed out defects unearthed by their peers.

The children demonstrated their multimodal savviness through the design of their complete games. The games created provided the players with game instructions and appropriate feedback mechanisms.

The teaching for creativity approach adopted in this research resulted in students being engaged in discussions whilst trying to identify solutions to the problems they raised. The workshop structure was also found to be adequate for introducing children to programming.

The study had its share of limitations. The students volunteered to take part in this study. This implies that the enthusiasm demonstrated by the children might not be present if the same exercise was carried out with all the members of a class. The workshop sessions were one and a half hours long. This allowed the children enough time to experiment and interact with other members of the workshop. Since class sessions are usually about forty minutes long, a single session might not be enough for the children to gain the same benefits obtained in longer sessions. Follow up research would ideally be conducted to identify whether a class approach to game making would result in similar findings to the ones identified in this project.

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Chapter 7

The Impact of Studio Space on Creativity – Implications for Practice

Christine Porter Lofaro

You are currently reading this chapter. Where are you? You might be at your office, at the library, in your sitting room or at the park. You might be on your way to another country on board a plane. You might even be braving some reading in a moving car. It is most likely that you are in some kind of space.

Introduction

Spaces. Places. Appropriation. Multiplicity. Individuals are exposed to different spaces and different environments and I have always questioned whether any modifications to such spaces would somehow influence their creative efforts.

Stemming from my doctoral research these are some of the themes that I will be discussing in the pages that follow. In particular, I will be focusing on the relationship between the physical space and the creative process of people engaging in artistic practices (art-production triad). In this chapter I attempt to untangle some of these constructions in an endeavour to shed light on their connectedness.

In the next sections I put forward some perspectives on the related topics. Although I am aware of other issues surrounding the topic under study it is not possible to present here a very detailed review due to space restrictions. For this reason, I will be focusing on only a small part of the literature on space, place and creativity. This will be followed by a description of the process and procedures of the research. In addition, it also delves into how the data analysis and interpretation was carried out. Some of the findings are discussed and this is followed by a concluding section.

A Relationship between topic, theoretical frames and methodology
Building on existing literature and theories on space, creativity as well as artistic practice, this research has used a number of theoretical frames that served as a lens in order to explore and understand the topic under study. These have been employed in view of the fact that they particularly view spaces as processes. Moreover, these theoretical frames position art practices as spatial in that the activities of art are multi-layered and situated and explored the studio and the art room as two specific places where particular modes of the spatial practice occur. Moreover, theoretical frames on creativity position the term as constructed. The methodology selected for this research was designed to reflect the focus on the experience of artists and students, and the meanings they define concerning their practice.

Setting and context
There is a gap in the literature that aims to bring together and also investigates these three spheres and their mutual relationship. Thus, my work attempts to address the gap relating to studies that link the physical space (Massey, 2005; Cresswell, 2004; Lefebvre, 1991; Tuan, 1974) and the creative process (Robinson, 2011; Sternberg, 1999; Wallas, 1926), with particular reference to art studios and art rooms (Sjöholm, 2013; Jacob & Grabner, 2010; Davidts & Paice, 2009; Buren, 1983). This study allocates its focus on practicing artists and their studios, as well as on art students and their art room at

school. Building on existing literature this research has located the need for policy makers, school leaders and educators to recognize and understand more the potential of the spaces used for art-making.

Practicing artists and young people studying art
My work explored the perceptions of both practicing artists and young students studying art. Throughout the research, I have been aware and acknowledged that both groups are influenced and affected by different experiences, motivations, necessities and priorities. Their reasons for making art differ from each other and these different perspectives have been viewed to add valuable insights to this particular investigation. The decision to explore both the studio and the art room as two places where particular modes of spatial practice occur was believed to present a broader outlook. Both outcomes from the two parts of the study could potentially construct insights that inform art practice and education and the combined input of both groups has served to provide a richer understanding of artistic spaces.

Studying art in Malta
This chapter is written from the position that studying art in Malta might reflect a number of different practices and systems when compared to teaching art in other countries, particularly in the UK. Although Malta has been influenced by the latest developments in art that are steered towards a more conceptual nature, art education, here, might still be partly embedded in the traditional approach. The main exams (O Level and A Level) taken by students focus predominantly on traditional skills in art. The Malta Government School of Art is still based on a traditional way of teaching art, in that students study drawing, painting and sculpture in a conventional manner. Nonetheless, at university level, Maltese students find more options to engage with conceptual art and more progressive forms of art. This situation has inevitably affected the way I perceived art in my research. The majority of the participants are also coming from this system. Therefore, they engage more closely with traditional methods of making art.

Research questions
The nature of the questions put forward is very exploratory and these were set apart from any set hypothesis to be proven or disproved. The research was set out to answer the overarching question (RQ1):

What is the relationship between the physical studio space and the creative process of people engaging in artistic practice?

In addition the sub-questions below (RQ2-4) form the basis of this inquiry and the research design was set in a way to address them.

RQ2 – *What meaning do artists attach to the space or environment in which they work?*

RQ3 – *How do art students relate to the space or environment around them in the art room?*

RQ4 – *How does the affordance of a space contribute to the creative process of art students and artists?*

Literature Review

Space and place

The work on the concept of space by the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre is a useful way of looking at the idea and meaning of the term 'space'. In Lefebvre's landmark work, *The Production of Space* (1974, English translation in 1991), his fundamental argument is to challenge the abstract idea of space as an empty thing and he positions his understanding of the term as something that people produce together, hence the term 'production of space'. By looking at space in this way, space is not a given entity but, through ongoing processes, societies engage with physical spaces, organise them and think about them. While space itself is a product similar to produced things and services, it is also a producer because it shapes the way people interact with that space. This duality makes the process of interacting with spaces even more complex, given that the same space has parallel roles at work simultaneously. Hence, one of Lefebvre's major contributions is to define space in terms of its specificity and to lessen the gap "between the theoretical (epistemological) realm and the practical one, between mental and social, between the space of the philosophers and the space of people who deal with material things" (Lefebvre, 1991, p.4). Nonetheless, Lefebvre acknowledged the difficulty of separating in totality the mental space and the lived experience. One of the things he accomplishes is to determine the problems of representations by asserting that, up to a certain extent, images of things do not offer a complete and full view of reality, and in some cases could also disguise and mislead.

Lefebvre's (1991) emphasis on space as the product of social relations, and the way he gives weight to the lived experience to make sense of spaces, has been extremely useful to my study as it allowed me to think about spaces in a way that are not fixed and that people living in them create and construct the meaning they give them. To this end, Lefebvre's conceptualisation is generative for grasping how spaces in schools, together with studio spaces that artists spend time at, are produced and given particular meaning through lived experience and through the way people interact with that space. It is also of great value that Lefebvre's attention to the gap between lived experience and expertise acts as a helpful reminder that the way people who work directly with spaces, such as architects, urban planners and designers, might not always be on the same lines as to how people actually experience and attach meanings to such places. Borrowing on these conceptualisations of Lefebvre presents me with a fundamental framework of how to look at space in the context of education and also art practice.

An area in the literature which has offered a constructive lens that positions the physicality and the materiality of spaces as a fundamental aspect of the making of places is put forward by Cresswell (2004). He presents an interesting argument about the meaning of place, and how a place is that space which has transformed into something meaningful. What is beneficial in Cresswell's perspective is that he acknowledges the physical side of space (location), its material composition (environment) together with its sense of place (meaningful place). This also led to discourses around the idea of placelessness (Augé, 2008; Cresswell, 2004; Relph, 1976).

I have also found it extremely valuable to discuss place as it is presented by Massey (2005; 1994) who claimed that what gives place its specificity are the constructions that people make through the way they interact and relate to the space socially. Similar to other authors, she has presented spaces as being alive and not static. They consist of multiple layers as a result of different stories taking place at different points in time. This has been very important to my research as it has allowed me to view space as an entity that makes it possible for different things to happen at the same time. This look at spaces secures a way of looking at actual processes in action and also at the potential for different

activities to take place within the same spaces. Massey's work also deals with the potential of appropriation. Furthermore, Massey's work has been a reference point to discuss issues of space and globalisation, together with dimensions of multiplicity, and the notion of time-space compression.

Creativity

Defining creativity has been a challenging endeavour. Creativity is considered to be an important ingredient in education and, ideally, it should be fostered and nurtured in educational programmes and curricula (Robinson, 2011). In this study I have presented creativity as a contested term, and I have drawn on a body of discourses on creativity, which highlight what claims and assumptions are being made within each and every standpoint. This approach elucidates the different perspectives on creativity, and which theories and beliefs support these views.

In *The Rhetorics of Creativity: A Review of the Literature*, Banaji et al. (2010) identify a set of nine discourses concerning creativity. This particular report attempts to unravel the different understandings of creativity that make it eclectic in nature. I had found it particularly useful to engage with this report, since it supports an eclectic notion of creativity and illustrates the concept of creativity as constructed and also as a series of discourses stemming from different contexts.

Wallas's (1926) seminal model of the creative process, which involves the stages of preparation, incubation, illumination and verification, was an important reference point in this study. Drawing on this model Kristensen (2004) discusses the physical context of the creative process. The latter maintains that the space and its adequate resources are ideally used and prepared in such a way as to facilitate the initial preparation stage of the creative process. The incubation stage is not directly linked to the physical space. However, being close to the space might help this stage. The illumination stage could take place anywhere. Kristensen also maintains that the verification stage benefits from being in the same space as the preparation stage, although this has not been established theoretically. To supplement these views, I have also reflected on inspiration as a process that motivates and prompts artists to seek information. This process points to the concept of encountering, which relates to unintentional and accidental discoveries (Erdelez, 2005).

Methodology: Approaching my research

In this study I have considered a position which focused on communicating and recounting the human experience. My work is based on more social and practice-based disciplines. I have mainly drawn on the disciplines of cultural geography, philosophy, creativity, art education, arts practice and anthropology.

Choosing the methodology

The inquiry borrows methods from the ethnographic paradigm (Ellis, 2004) together with visual methods from arts practice. It also elicits the views of young people in terms of their environment (Rose, 2012), together with observations and informal conversations. I have turned to these processes, as they seemed to best reflect where my study is situated. It was decided to focus on experiences through methods that directly give rich descriptions of the meanings surrounding the subject of this study.

The data collection process for this research spanned over five months, between January and May 2013. During this period, I have interviewed seven artists who were chosen through snowball sampling (ages ranging between 25 and 69), and also observed and spent time with a group of seven

art students (ages ranging between 11 and 15). The boys' school was chosen through convenience sampling. The sample of artists in this study is made up of a sculptor, four painters, a conceptual/video artist, and a painter/actress/musician. The three data-collection methods used in the study are as follows:

Part 1: In-depth interviews with artists.

Part 2A: Observations and informal conversation with art students.

Part 2B: The students' plan drawings.

Art as a way of knowing

All parts of the study are based on the notion that reflecting on practice and using art as a means to understand experience would lead to new knowledge. Predominant educational theorists, such as John Dewey (1934), Elliot Eisner (2002) and Maxine Greene (1995) encourage arts-based inquiry as a way to expand learning and educational research. Research that draws on lived experience, and engages with materials and objects, provides an alternative mode of knowledge production when compared with a more science-based approach. This type of approach acknowledges that knowledge, and the situations and experience in which it is used, cannot be separated. This makes situated inquiry as that inquiry which brings together problem, context and solution (Barrett, 2007).

Ethical considerations

In the process of contacting the participants, it was ensured that it would cause the least inconvenience possible. It was ensured that they understood the consent form well and that, at any stage of the study, they were free to withdraw from the research without giving any reason. From time to time, the participants were reminded that they could clarify any queries that they might have, while assessing whether they were understanding each step of the process.

All the participants were assured privacy and confidentiality through a process that protects their identity and their research locations. Anonymity was observed through the use of pseudonyms in order for the participants not to be identified.

The use of photographs also required signed consent, which was not given by all the seven artists (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Although, on one hand, it would have been extremely interesting to display some photos of the artists' studios and materials related to their practice, it was agreed not to present any photographs at all so that in a way the data was presented on a level playing field. Moreover, although some of the artists gave their consent to use the photographs, anonymity has been further safeguarded by not presenting any photographs, since artworks could eventually be identified due to style recognition or familiarity with the works. This is especially so in the Maltese art context, where artists could be more easily identified in view of the small population.

Given that the art students were under age, their guardians were also informed about the research and they were also asked to give their consent allowing the students to take part in the research. The students were also given all the information about the nature of the study, and they were left free to decide whether they would be interested in taking part in the research. This was to ensure voluntary acceptance and that they could stop at any point of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The school administration was also kept informed about the entire process and the name of the school was not used in order to further protect the identity of the students. To further safeguard anonymity, photographs were only used for personal reference.

Data Analysis and Findings

Analysis and interpretation

The transcription of the seven semi-structured interviews generated a document of around 58,000 words, collectively. I read through the data set a number of times to familiarise myself with the content, and I worked on pre-coding as well as code jottings to get an initial sense of the data. This generated an initial list of ideas about what would be interesting in the data. The seven interviews were then analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The authors offer a step-by-step rigorous method of analysing data that could be easily followed and, given the nature of qualitative data, it ensures consistency and rigour. At the same time, this method also provides an element of flexibility. At an earlier stage, the pilot study was analysed using the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti. However, later on I decided to analyse all seven interviews manually. According to Graue and Walsh (1998, p.145), handling the data in a traditional manner allows one to "touch the data". Furthermore, the idea of inductive coding, derived bottom-up from the data (Boyatzis, 1998) underpins the analysis process employed for the seven interviews. The same method was adopted to analyse the conversations with the young people.

Prosser (2007) writes about the idea of "talk and draw", which is a helpful process to elicit the meaning students make through their drawings. Apart from the drawings as primary data the texts based on conversations were used as secondary data to confirm and assist my interpretation of the drawings and which enabled more sub-categories to emerge. The drawings were analysed using the ATLAS.ti software program, and the images were coded by content using categories that stemmed from the images directly, and in keeping the research questions as a guide for the analyses. This has permitted me to consider the content and relational aspects of the visual data, and allowed for comparisons to be made.

Findings

Meanings that artists attach to their studios

Reflecting on the studio is a practice that gives many insights on the way artists work and what meanings are formulated in the process of making art and these insights offered a response to the research question that asks about the meanings that artists attach to the space and environment in which they work (RQ2).

The findings imply that developing a relationship with a personal and private studio space leads to a number of benefits. This may explain why artists choose to have a personal and private space that assists their practice. In my research, I have drawn on Massey's (2005) argument that spaces are not the backdrop of activities but they become an integral part of what people do in everyday life. With particular reference to art spaces, this view would assign spaces the affordance of being an active component partaking in everyday life. In addition, the three main benefits of having studios, as revealed in the findings, are that:

(1) it allows cumulative work to take place – productivity and potential

(2) it gives validation (especially concerning female identity)

(3) it lends to the construction of artistic identity.

As is indicated in the first point, having a set space that is readily available for a person in which to practice presents the possibility to work on something – a potential for artistic activity to take place. The second and third points are in line with the respective studies of Bain (2004, 2005) and Buren (1983), who discuss the processes of validation and the construction of artistic identity as an integral part of spatial practices within studios.

Throughout their artistic journeys, artists are likely to change and improve their studios according to their work demands. Studios are improved and appropriated as a result of their reflecting on their practice. In this setting, it could be implied that practice informs the appropriation of studio spaces. Building on Lefebvre (1991) and Massey (2005), who discuss the practices of appropriation within spatial theories, here it is particularly evident that practice itself informs the appropriation of spaces related to art, namely the studio. The findings echo what Massey (2005) asserted that people alter spaces through their actions and their material engagement with it and they support the way Massey presents space as being constantly 'under construction'.

Given that artistic practice is such a delicate, intimate and personal activity it might require the support of physical surroundings with which the artist could identify. This brings to light the notion of 'placelessness' or 'non-places', as discussed by Cresswell (2004), Augé (2008) and Relph (1976). When the connectedness with a space is not attained, spaces remain anonymous and the process of making spaces meaningful is not achieved. According to the findings, some of the artists found spatial practice to depend significantly on the space concerned. The combination of their actions, their use of the space, their movements within the space and also their routines, very much depended on the complete setting of the studio and, therefore, they might take time to adapt to new surroundings. This again brings out the distinction in the way different artists work. Therefore, idiosyncratic qualities should be reflected in the making of a studio. The way artists relate and adapt to a studio is the product of situation, context and culture.

Another important finding transpiring from the data is that studios should ideally be organised in such a way that different areas are allocated for different activities. In this setting, a studio space would have 'stations' for different activities, and each activity planned around related materials, tools and resources. The collection of tools, materials and resources have their own intelligence and potential for activities to take place (Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Carter, 2004; Heidegger, 1996). This also recalls Massey's (2005) notion of the dimension of multiplicity. For Massey, space is not something universal, in the sense that the way people live is made up of a multiplicity of spaces that are present simultaneously. This could perhaps illuminate the idea that different activities within studio spaces provide a sense of multiplicity, since the product of the activities and what happens within these spaces would provide different outcomes depending on the people and contexts involved. Moreover, the emergence of something new is seen to be the result of interacting with materials, methods, tools and ideas which, together, constitute practice. As Massey (2005) explains, people alter spaces through their actions and their material engagement with it. Within this setting, the idea of organising spaces into stations of different activities seems to offer a number of benefits.

Studios – are they indispensable spaces?
A general consensus in the findings is that the studio space is very important but not crucial for the thinking phase of the work of artists. It does influence some of the artist's choices but it does not influence directly the work itself with regards to concepts and ideas. An artist's performance is restricted by the physical boundaries but the ideas and concepts are not necessarily affected by the

particular place in which the work is carried out. The space determines the choices that an artist makes with respect to what is available to him or her within that space, and to what extent it permits him or her to work in it. The findings shed light on the fact that, in the case of studio spaces, they seem to affect the physical and performative kind of activities and not the thinking practices. This finding reflects the specific artists that have participated in this study, so it is not excluded that another group of artists who work in different ways might have produced different outcomes. Although this might not be the case for all artists, this finding endorses the way spatial practice is the product of interrelations between people, contexts and situations, ranging from the large-scale to smaller instances.

Meanings that art students attach to their art room
Attaching meaning to the studio and environment in which art students work sheds light on their artistic process. This gives numerous insights on the way students work and which meanings are assumed in the process of making art. This also gives a voice to students who have much to offer as active agents. A number of different findings have proposed a response to the research question that asks about the meanings that art students attach to the space and environment they work in (RQ3).

Art rooms versus art spaces in the home
The students seemed to associate different activities with both their home and their art room at school. Some students have considered that, for tasks that depend significantly on reflection, they would prefer to work at home because at school it may be noisier and more distracting. Nevertheless, the students still conceded that at school they were able to think and reflect on their work. This finding leads me to conclude that the students tend to look for a quiet place where they could reflect. In a broader sense, they seek to work in a quiet environment and perhaps the existing art room did not particularly cater for this need. This was also evident in the finding that concerns an area for relaxation. The students seem to have pointed towards a need for a place where they could think and reflect, and take time out from the usual lesson routine. This is in line with the work of Clark (2010) where she contends that children seek places for quiet time alone and for reflection. Areas for reflection might also empower students to take control of their own learning, since it encourages independence and personal initiative. Contrastingly, the students also showed that they prefer to work in groups and to communicate with each other. These two distinct points demonstrate the need to have an art room that would offer them the possibility of a time-out area, and at the same time a space where they communicate with their peers. The young people seem to need this flexibility to choose between two different areas according to their requirements. Perhaps the idea of the relaxation area substitutes a personal and private space.

Another point that was underlined in the data is that students are inspired by what is around them. Therefore, the more resources there are around them, the more stimuli are possible. It was not clear from the findings whether this would be most effective at home or at school. It was also not very clear whether students felt inspired from things outside the art room, as this was not mentioned directly. Nonetheless, it is evident that they are inspired by what is around them within the space they work in. Through the experience of making and handling materials, a student generates new knowledge (Eisner, 2002). Teachers and students should ideally make use of this concept to supplement the learning outcomes planned across the syllabus. Art rooms would ideally be viewed as places of research and making.

In response to the research question RQ3, I would conclude that the meanings that art students attach to their art room also reflect the complexity of space and place, and how they are the product of multiple aspects occurring at the same time. Some points that shed light on the meanings art students

attach to their art room are evident. The art room is an important reference point for students. It supports the learning of art and it supports what they do during the lesson. To represent the different needs of the students it has been apparent that both quiet areas for reflection, as well as areas for group work and communication, should ideally be available (Lippmann, 2015). Given their age, the students still found their home to be an important place for their art making. It seems that the students required some characteristics of their home to be replicated in the set-up of their art room, especially as regards reflection and contemplation. In this scenario, art rooms act as a hybrid between normal school classrooms and their homes.

Inspiration

Two types of sources of inspiration, that is, the simple and ordinary elements of everyday life, and the outdoors, were evident in the findings and these reflect the idea of encountering (Erdelez, 2005). Encountering occurs through unintentional and accidental discoveries, and is associated with passive and flexible information acquisition. This reflects the thinking phase and is likely to occur anywhere. This might also be the case with art students. However, the link was not strongly evident in the findings. This could be a lacuna that can be explored through further studies. The way lessons are planned could situate parts of the artistic process to take place in the outdoors, or through experiences happening outside of the art room. In this way, art rooms and studios are extended and are not limited by the actual perimeter of their structure.

In the findings, no particular time has been associated with the occurrence of inspiration. Since the inspiration stage does not seem to be linked to a particular time, this might make it easier for the artist to subject him/herself to the right ingredients that would likely inspire him or her. This strengthens the argument that, knowing what works for your inspiration, ensures that you are prepared and organised to maximise the potential of the experience of encountering (Erdelez, 2005).

The artistic and creative process

The findings illustrate that the artists participating in this study considered the thinking phase to be the period that they associate with creativity. In all the cases creativity, was linked to ideas and exploration of concepts, and this is likely to take place in the beginning – at the very initial stages of artistic production. The thinking phase, as described by each artist, agrees with the seminal model of the creative process presented by Wallas (1926). It could be concluded that the occurrence of the four stages of Wallas's (1926) model of creativity are not directly related to the physical element of the studio space. It is more likely that aspects of these stages happen outside the studio. Once the thinking phase has been finalised, the doing phase comes into play. This latter phase is likely to be linked to the studio, since the artists tend to look for their base during the actual production of their artwork. The studio, with all the materials and tools, becomes a place of performance and a place for making, and it seems that these qualities are what attract the artist to use this space. Although this has been clearly illustrated in the findings, I also acknowledge that there are artists whose first stages of the work are directly linked to the studio.

In an attempt to answer the research question: How does the affordance of a space contribute to the creative process of art students and artists? (RQ4), I would conclude that the creative process is one of the core processes forming part of the spatial practices of artists and art students. It is a mode that combines spatial forms and practices, and their connectedness. From the findings, it has been revealed that the creative process is influenced by spaces (not necessarily the studio or art room) and also by the experiences that artists encounter. The way space assists the experience of art making shapes and guides the creative process. The space of the studio also influences the experience of the artists because the process of their art making is shaped by the full experience taking place within this space.

This was also reflected in the findings with the young people, since their work drew significantly from the space around them in the art room. This situates art practice as that experience that depends on many different factors working together, and therefore the affordance of a space contributes to the creative process of artists and students since it accommodates this interplay between many aspects taking place simultaneously.

Reflecting on the findings concerning the two groups - artists and art students
The findings concerning both groups shed more light on the meanings of art spaces as understood by both artists and art students. This reflects the fact that both groups had different imperatives for producing their work. The art students were generally focused on preparation for their examinations, and their work processes were directed towards this aim. On occasion, there were instances where they emulated how artists work but, predominantly, their work was centred around their lessons at school and their preparation for exams. On the other hand, the artists' intention for doing their work is encouraged by different motivations. Their practice is consolidated through various processes, such as: thinking practices as modes of inquiry, practices supporting their full-time career, working on commissions, and so on. This blend of experiences could help inform the way art spaces are understood, and possibly improved.

Conclusion

Limitations
The current study has a number of limitations that need to be taken into account. The first limitation of this study is my own familiarity with the research setting as an artist. As far as possible, I have tried to focus on presenting the unique voices of the participants, while trying to move away from my own. 'Unknowing' as a stance has helped me to approach the studies looking for fresh perspectives (Vasudevan, 2011).

Given the small sample for this study, the findings cannot be generalised. However, these were not provided as a means of generalisation but as situated knowledge, which emerged from practice itself. Moreover, the sample selection could not be taken as a reflection of the whole population. At the same time, small samples and case studies produce context-dependent knowledge, and these certainly contribute to the cumulative development of knowledge in the field (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Another limitation of this study is that although arts-based methods were carefully considered, it was decided to focus more on the artists' experiences through methods that directly give rich descriptions of the meanings surrounding the subject of this study. My own work and that of the artists taking part in this study draws on materialised art.

Final thoughts
The relationship between the physical studio space and the creative process of people engaging in artistic practice (RQ1) involves a number of points that need to be considered. First and foremost, it could be implied that this relationship encompasses different processes that are at play simultaneously. The creative process has been attributed to the thinking phase of art production. This does not automatically imply that the doing phase is strictly detached from creativity. However, the main link with the creative process concerns the thinking and preparation phase of the work. It has also been highlighted that the creative process is not directly linked to the studio space. This was particularly evident in the parts of the study related to the artists. The part of the study concerned with

art students did not yield strong correlations between the doing phase of their practice and the art room space. The creative process has been seen as being influenced by spaces, but these could be outdoor spaces, other countries and so on. Therefore, this implication focuses on the how the artistic experience is a product of many factors and one of them is space and people's engagement with it.

In addition, it seems that art students in the 11-to-15-years age group are mostly exposed to working in their art room and at their homes, and this seems to carry most of the inspiration for the students. It seems, that they feel inspired both in the art room and their homes.

During practice, the person may learn through the process of doing and different practices inform future work (Barrett, 2007). The studio itself affords possibilities of learning, both through practice and through the thinking and research process (Barrett, 2007). Learning through conversations with other peers is another important form of learning, and this contributes to a cross fertilisation of ideas between groups. There is also a specific type of knowing – that of tacit knowledge – which results from the process of handling materials during practice (Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Carter, 2004; Heidegger, 1996). In my view, this is also a type of ongoing learning that takes place in the process of making art, and which often occurs in the studio.

The major contribution of this study is the insights provided on the relationship between the elements within the art-production triad. This produced situated knowledge that emerged from practice itself. This has implications for both research and practice. Another important contribution would be the insights produced in terms of the studio as a 3-dimensional journal. This highlights the relationship between the creative process and spatial practice, and how the way through which people experience spaces, with all the physical materials within them, affects the way they work. This also leads to another contribution that relates to the idea of encountering. This is a process in which artists are exposed to potential inspiration, both outside and inside the studio. This forms part of the creative process and could take place in different spaces and could have implications for both practice and education, since it focuses on various influences that could affect the creative process.

This work also contributes to literature on spaces in an educational setting by introducing insights particularly related to the use of space in art education. The idea of the art room as a hybrid space between normal school classrooms and their homes emerged alongside the importance of the art room as a reference point for art students.

Building on existing literature, this research has located the need for policy makers, school leaders and educators to recognise and better understand the potential of art rooms and art spaces. This could also have implications for policy makers in terms of working with the potential of spaces. Art students might face limitations if they are only exposed to the perimeter restrictions of their art room. Ideally, as part of their practice they would have the opportunity to work with the notion of encountering and their art room spaces would be designed to have areas for personal reflection and group work, while having the possibility to have their own preferred material and resources. Moreover, if the students were to be given the time to reflect on their art room and the way they use space as part of their practice, this could empower them and give them numerous insights on what actually works for them. For example, this could enable them to notice patterns of inspiration, which could be emulated at will during their practice. In addition, the insights from the study with the artists could also provide understandings from which art students could also benefit.

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