When migrant learners are Italian:
perceptions of learning support educators on the inclusion of Italians in Maltese schools

Quando l'alunno migrante è italiano:
percezioni degli educatori di supporto all'apprendimento sull'inclusione degli Italiani nelle scuole maltesi

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Abstract

In this paper we first provide an overview of recent Italian migration to Malta and we then focus our attention on the experiences and perceptions of 42 Learning Support Educators (LSEs) in relation to the inclusion of Italian learners in Maltese secondary, primary and pre-primary schools. Through quantitative findings from a questionnaire and qualitative reflections based on three focus groups we investigate linguistic and socialisation issues, as well as pedagogical practices, and how these lead to the inclusion of Italian nationals in Maltese schools. Results indicate that inclusion in a bilingual schooling system, characterised by the interplay between English and Maltese, presents several challenges for Italian students. While knowledge of English is highly important for their scholastic attainment, Maltese has a fundamental role too especially for socialisation. Problems with language competence also lead to other difficulties. In a system which is often geared towards achieving results in high-stakes examination and in which students are ranked on the basis of achievement, a rethinking of some of the principles that guide education is required, through inclusive pedagogical paradigms based on discovering and giving value to the educational potential of all learners.

Keywords: Malta; Italian migrant learners; Learning Support Educators; Language; Socialisation; Inclusive pedagogies.

Riassunto

In questo articolo vogliamo offrire una panoramica della recente migrazione italiana a Malta e focalizzarci sulle esperienze e le percezioni di 42 educatori di supporto all'apprendimento (LSEs) maltesi, in relazione all'inclusione degli studenti italiani nella scuola materna, primaria e secondaria. In base alla analisi dei dati quantitativi emersi da un questionario somministrato agli LSEs e dei dati qualitativi raccolti nel corso di tre focus groups, mettiamo in luce questioni linguistiche, di natura socio-relazionale e pratiche pedagogiche, che portano all'inclusione dei bambini e ragazzi italiani che frequentano la scuola a Malta. I risultati indicano che l'inclusione in un sistema scolastico bilingue, caratterizzato dall'interazione tra inglese e maltese, presenta una serie di sfide per gli studenti italiani. Mentre la conoscenza dell'inglese è molto importante per il loro rendimento scolastico, il maltese ha un ruolo fondamentale ai fini della socializzazione. La scarsa competenza linguistica comporta, comunque, anche altre difficoltà di cui si rende conto. Di fronte ad un sistema educativo fortemente orientato al superamento di esami e in cui gli studenti vengono classificati sulla base della propria preparazione, si sente l'urgente necessità di una nuova riflessione sulla scuola, di un ripensamento di alcuni principi che governano l'insegnamento, sulla base di paradigmi pedagogici inclusivi fondati sulla scoperta e la valorizzazione del potenziale formativo di tutti gli studenti.

Parole chiave: Malta; Alunni migranti italiani; Educatori di supporto all'apprendimento (LSEs); Lingua; Socializzazione; Pedagogia dell'Inclusione.

Credit author statement

This contribution is the outcome of collegial work between the two authors and of their shared reflections. Sandro Caruana is the main author of sections 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.1 and Barbara Baschiera of 5.2, 6 and 7.

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1. Introduction

Migration has led to unprecedented changes in the demography of Malta in the recent years and these changes, as documented by Caruana et al. (2019), have an impact on schools. Since 2018, more than 25% of EU nationals regularly employed in Malta are Italian. This is now the largest group of non-Maltese nationals employed on the island, surpassing even the British who, since the colonial era (1800-1964), held a strong presence among the local workforce. This community represents a continuation of Malta's relationship with Italy, which has profound historical roots and has been characterised by frequent contacts which have left their mark of the island's social, economic and linguistic spheres, among others (Brincat, 2011, pp. 183-337).

Within this context schools play a vital role and they are instrumental to provide all learners with the necessary knowledge, skills and tools both to feel part of the local society and to be able to transfer them to other contexts, should and whenever this become necessary.

In this paper we first provide an overview of recent Italian migration to Malta and we then focus our attention on the experiences and perceptions of Maltese secondary, primary and pre-primary learning support educators (LSEs) in relation to the inclusion of Italian learners. We do so through quantitative findings from a questionnaire and qualitative reflections based on focus groups. Our main objective is to provide a data-driven snapshot of these experiences and perceptions, with a special focus on the extent to which linguistic and socialisation issues, as well as pedagogical practices, lead to the inclusion of Italian nationals who attend school in Malta.

2. The recent migration of Italian nationals to Malta

Recent works, including the Fondazione Migrantes (2018; 2019) reports, indicate that Italians relocate to other countries in the Mediterranean mainly because of work-related opportunities. 2019 figures for Malta indicate that almost 7,000 Italian were listed in AIRE (Registry of Italians Resident Abroad), this figure being more than double the one registered in 2016, and a huge increase when compared to those included in two censuses held in the early Noughties by Malta's National Statistics Office - 585 Italians in 2005 and 947 in 2011. This is a noteworthy increase, especially in consideration of the physical dimensions of Malta, also because not all Italians enrol on AIRE.

In her study on Italian migrants in Malta, Iorio (2019, p. 2012) reports that 19% are aged between 0-18 thereby indicating that there are several children and youths who are within the compulsory education age bracket and who therefore, attend schools in Malta. This is also evident through the numbers in Table 1 regarding the presence of Italian children in Maltese schools (2017 till 2020), from the kindergarten to the post-secondary sectors:

School sector	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
State (public) schools	628	758	802
Church schools	25	23	22
Independent (private) schools	275	273	232
TOTAL	928	1,054	1,056

Table 1: Italian migrant learners in Maltese schools (data provided by the Ministry for Education & Employment, Malta)

The above figures clearly indicate a significant increase of Italian learners in schools (+16% between 2017 and 2019), keeping in mind that they do not include learners with an Italian background but with Maltese (or other) nationality, such as children of one Italian and one Maltese parent. It is also noteworthy to point out that both in 2018-19 and in 2019-20 around 65% of the learners either attended kindergarten (ages 3-5) or primary schooling (ages 5-11), implying that most Italian students are young and that numbers could increase further in the future as they move to secondary schooling. In the following section we

turn our attention to the Maltese schooling system and to educational issues that are key to contextualise inclusive practices in Malta.

3. Schooling in Malta

Malta's system is regulated by the Education Act, Chapter 327 of the Laws of the Republic. This legislation has been subject to many reforms, among which a proposed move towards outcome-based models of education (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014). Schooling is still modelled, by and large, on the structure inherited from British colonization (1800-1964). This is an important premise, as the organisation of the local system diverges significantly from Italian schooling.

Pupils' first entry into Malta's educational system is at age 3, where 93% attend public or private kindergartens. Formal compulsory schooling starts at age 5, with students entering primary school at Year 1 while the secondary cycle takes them from Year 7 to Year 12. At age 16 most students sit for national examinations in a number of curricular subjects in order to obtain the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC), which is loosely based on the UK's GCSE.

The Maltese educational system has been historically characterised by highly competitive and exam-based structures, often geared towards selection on the grounds of scholastic achievement, thereby also rendering problematic the inclusion of learners who, for various reasons, face difficulties to perform well in examinations. Rigid streaming from primary school was completely phased out by 2014 and replaced by a 'benchmarking' exercise which gauges pupils' attainment also in view of the classes in which they would be placed in the the secondary cycle. The system itself is also inherently selective because of its tripartite nature: around 10% of students attend fee-paying private institutions, 30% attend schools run by the Catholic Church, whereas 60% are educated within public schools. The results achieved in many subjects in the aforementioned SEC exams confirm that there are differences in attainment between the three school sectors which also condition parents' choice in relation to which school to send their children, although socio-economic status also affects this significantly (European Commission, 2019, p. 8).

Another important discriminatory factor in schooling is language, as amply documented by Caruana (2011). As far as obligatory schooling is concerned, Maltese and English are both compulsory subjects from the start of primary schooling. Maltese is generally the vehicular language for subjects related to the local context (Maltese, Religious Education, Social Studies etc.), while English is the medium of instruction for others (English, Maths, Science etc.). The language used by teachers depends heavily on the background of their learners, as well as on their abilities. Since English is also the language in which most examinations are taken, it follows that high achievers generally possess a good competence of this language. Furthermore, as widely documented (Camilleri, 1995; Camilleri Grima, 2013), teachers code-switch frequently between Maltese and English throughout their lessons, with both languages used interchangeably both to explain the content being tackled, to address students' needs and for several other communicative functions. In addition to this, since Italian is the 'third language' of Malta rather than a foreign language *stricto sensu* (Caruana, 2013), it can be assumed with a fair degree of certainty that most teachers in Malta, regardless of the sector in which they are employed, have some knowledge of this language although recent research in this respect is not available. However, not all teachers feel confident enough to use this linguistic resource, even in the presence of Italian nationals, and this issue deserves investigation which we will also address briefly in this paper.

The demographic changes experienced recently in Malta have led to increasingly multicultural and multilingual classes in which English is often used as a lingua franca of communication (Caruana et al., 2019, p. 334). Nevertheless, this does not necessarily lead to effective inclusion mainly because Maltese has a strong function in terms of the identity of locals and their involvement in the larger community, used frequently in informal situations at school as well as to communicate among peers after school hours, including on social media. For this reason, over the recent years some innovations have been introduced in the local educational system to facilitate the inclusion of migrant learners and recent policies (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2019a; 2019b) have been drafted with this intent. In addition to these, the 2016 restructuring of the Faculty of Education, University of Malta, led to the formation of the Department of Inclusion and Access to Learning to invest specifically on the formation of learning support

educators (LSEs) and, more recently, to introduce courses for cultural and linguistic mediators. The role of LSEs is mainly to support children with disabilities and/or learning difficulties as well as to assist teachers in order to create an effective classroom experience for all students (Baschiera et al., 2016). Cultural and linguistic mediators, on the other hand, are still absent from the Maltese educational system and LSEs and teachers often must take on roles which could be assigned to these mediators.

Since 2013, a unit established by the Ministry for Education & Employment, the Migrant Learners' Unit (MLU), is responsible, together with schools, for different initiatives geared towards the inclusion of migrant learners, especially non-EU citizen. The MLU is also responsible for so-called 'induction class-rooms', wherein the needs of migrant learners who have limited competence of both Maltese and English are addressed, in some cases also by removing them from mainstream classes or by providing them with tailor-made courses. A discussion of these measures is beyond the scope of this paper, although they have both advantages and disadvantages.

Most Italian students are placed in mainstream classes, although MLU figures for 2019-20 indicate that 88 Italian students were supported by the MLU, out of which 43 were given full induction. Although some initial research suggest that they integrate quite well, and that there are teachers who sometimes also use Italian with them to facilitate their inclusion (Caruana, 2018; Palazzo, 2020), there are also situations in which these learners face problems. These are mainly related to their social inclusion within classes and schools which are becoming increasingly multilingual and multicultural, but especially to linguistic issues since their knowledge of English may be limited and that of Maltese totally absent.

While there is exhaustive research on Italian migration, and on various social matters related to it, there seems to be a very limited body of scientific knowledge dedicated specifically to how Italian migrant learners fare when they attend schools outside of their home country. Our study aims to address this, as we investigate linguistic, socialisation and pedagogical issues by means of a questionnaire and focus groups, with our main research questions being: Does teaching carried out in the context languages - Maltese and English - create obstacles for the inclusion and socialisation of Italian learners and, if so, how do educators attempt to address such matters? Are Italian learners included in daily classroom processes and out-of-class activities?

4. Sample and settings

An online questionnaire, made accessible via a Google documents link on the University of Malta platform, was distributed among 109 kindergarten (pre-primary), primary and secondary LSEs, attending courses on inclusive education at the University of Malta. Answers were received from 42 (38.5%) respondents, who provided both biographic data, as well as answers to questions divided in two categories: perceptions of inclusive practice in the classroom on the one hand, inclusive classroom techniques and practices on the other.

Some of these respondents were then involved in three separate focus groups, involving pre-primary (2 groups) primary (one group) and secondary (one group) LSEs. During these focus groups, as customary with this research instrument (see Appendix), participants could engage among themselves and with both the researchers and elaborated freely on matters that they deemed worthy of note.

5. Results

5.1 The questionnaire

Out of the 42 respondents of the questionnaire, all Maltese nationals, 40 are female and only two are male. Most subjects fall either within the 46-55-year-old bracket (13 of them, equivalent to 31%), in the 25-35-year-old range (12, 28.6%) or in the 36-45-year-old one (11, 26.2%). 36 subjects (85.7%) are employed in a state school, 5 of them (11.9%) work in a church school, and only 1 (2.4%) in the private sector. 9 (21.4%) subjects are LSEs in secondary schools, 30 (71.4%) work at primary level and 3 (7.1%) in the pre-primary sector. Most LSEs, as normal practice in the Maltese educational system, support individual students.

In the first part of the questionnaire we asked the LSEs to provide their response based on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree') to eleven statements regarding language use in Maltese classrooms as well as the active involvement of Italian learners in classroom and out-of-classroom activities. In Table 2 below we present the responses received:

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD[1]
1. Students/pupils of Italian nationality can follow well when lessons carried out in English	2.4% (1)	35.7% (15)	33.3% (14)	28.6% (12)	-
2. Students/pupils of Italian nationality can follow well when lessons carried out in Maltese	-	9.5% (4)	14.3% (6)	52.4% (22)	23.8% (10)
3. Students/pupils of Italian nationality can follow well when the teacher code-switches between Maltese and English[2]	-	17.1% (7)	34.1% (14)	39% (16)	9.8% (4)
4. Students/pupils of Italian nationality can follow well when the teacher/s uses Italian during his/her lessons[3]	33.3% (14)	38.1% (16)	2.4% (1)	-	-
5. Students/pupils of Italian nationality participate actively during lessons carried out in English	4.8% (2)	45.2% (19)	31% (13)	19% (8)	-
6. Students/pupils of Italian nationality participate actively during lessons carried out in Maltese	-	11.9% (5)	26.2% (11)	38.1% (16)	23.8% (10)
7. Students/pupils of Italian nationality participate actively during lessons when the teacher code-switches between Maltese and English	-	19% (8)	45.2% (19)	31% (13)	4.8% (2)
8. Students/pupils of Italian nationality can participate actively when the teacher/s uses Italian during his/her lessons[4]	26.2% (11)	42.8% (18)	4.8% (2)	-	-
9. Students/pupils of Italian nationality interact readily with all other students in class	16.7% (7)	45.2% (19)	21.4% (9)	14.3% (6)	2.4% (1)
10. Students/pupils of Italian nationality mix healthily and interact with all students in out-of-class activities and during break time	19% (8)	61.9% (26)	4.8% (2)	14.3% (6)	-
11. The class teacher/s value/s the potential of students/pupils of Italian nationality and uses their linguistic and cultural background to motivate them further, and/or motivate other learners	19% (8)	42.9% (18)	23.8% (10)	4.8% (2)	9.5% (4)

Table 2: Perceptions of Inclusive Practice in the Classroom

The above results indicate that students of Italian nationality follow and participate quite actively when lessons are held in English, and can do so to a greater extent when the teacher uses Italian. They encounter difficulties to follow and participate when Maltese is used, as expected. Code-switching between Maltese and English does not enable them to follow lessons better, or to participate more actively. The level of interaction of Italian students with their peers is healthy, especially in out-of-class activities and in break time. However, 6 (14.3%) respondents out of 42 report that this is not the case. From the response of our LSEs, a good number of teachers value the potential of Italian students, and refer to their linguistic and cultural background to include them. Nevertheless, 16 (38.1%) subjects either provide a 'neutral' response to this statement (no. 11) or disagree with it.

In Table 3 below we summarise the response obtained, using a 4-point scale (ranging from 'frequently' to 'never) to four statements, when we asked our LSEs to reflect on inclusive classroom techniques and practices that they witness as they are providing support to their students:

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1   SA = strongly agree; A = agree; N = neutral; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree.
2   n = 41
3   Not applicable for 11 subjects (26.2%) as the teacher does not use Italian.
4   Not applicable for 11 subjects (26.2%) as the teacher does not use Italian.

Statement	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
1. In class, didactic techniques designed to exploit the potential and interactive skills of all learners (e.g. Group work - Peer tutoring – Cooperative Learning - Problem solving – Debate – Role plays) are used	33.3% (14)	47.6% (20)	19.1% (8)	-
2. Teaching materials and tools are adapted in order to value different learning styles of all students/pupils[5]	34.1% (14)	51.2% (21)	14.7% (6)	-
3. Students/Pupils who are not of Maltese nationality are supported specifically in cases when this is needed for them to comprehend the lesson and to ensure that learning occurs	47.6% (20)	42.9% (18)	7.1% (3)	2.4% (1)
4. Verbal and paraverbal cues (e.g. pictures, photos, gestures ...) are used in order to facilitate the comprehension of the lesson, especially in cases where students/pupils who are not of Maltese nationality may have difficulties to do so	59.5% (25)	28.6% (12)	9.5% (4)	2.4% (1)

Table 3: Inclusive Classroom Techniques and Practices

Most respondents refer that didactic techniques which exploit interactive skills of learners are used occasionally; a similar response is also given with reference to the adaptation of teaching materials according to the learning styles of students. Overall, there is therefore an indication that non-Maltese nationals are supported in the classroom. This also occurs though the use of verbal and paraverbal cues, which are reportedly used frequently or occasionally by teachers.

The quantitative results, based on our LSEs perceptions, indicate that Italians learners are generally included within their Maltese classes, although there are clearly some cases in which this inclusion does not occur effectively. The Maltese language undoubtedly represents a challenge for these students, even insofar as their socialisation is concerned. Code-switching between Maltese and English does not increase participation and involvement. Teachers are inclined to use inclusive practices, but there are exceptions to this too and, also in consideration of such exceptions, the qualitative data presented in the next section will give us the opportunity to delve further into these issues.

5.2 The focus groups

In order to probe the quantitative results referred above in more depth, we carried out three focus group sessions, one with two kindergarten (KG) LSEs, the second one with six primary LSEs and the third with four LSEs in secondary schools, all females employed in the state (public) sector. In Table 4 below we present information regarding these LSEs:

School sector	Location of school	Years of support	Code
Kindergarten	Mosta	9	01_KG
Kindergarten	Qormi	6	02_KG
Primary	Saint Paul's Bay	19	03_PR
Primary	San Ġwann	6	04_PR
Primary	Saint Paul's Bay	19	05_PR
Primary	Baħrija	16	06_PR

5   n = 41

School sector	Location of school	Years of support	Code
Primary	Mosta	19	07_PR
Primary	Naxxar	20	08_PR
Middle School	Birkirkara	21	09_SEC
Secondary	Kirkop	14	10_SEC
Secondary	Mosta	13	11_SEC
Secondary M	Qormi	20	12_SEC

Table 4: Focus group participants

The questions that were discussed by the LSEs (included in the Appendix), together with both researchers, can be categorised into four different areas: language, socialisation, family matters and pedagogy. Due to space limitations, in this contribution we do not provide reflections on family matters.

For the purposes of the qualitative analysis the transcripts were analysed and annotated using sentence-by-sentence coding and, whenever necessary, line-by-line coding (Elliott, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). We then categorised the themes according to semantic and conceptual analogies, thereby identifying the salient ones. During the final stages of the analyses we compared the themes selected to identify recurring information, thereby re-organising and renaming them accordingly (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). This exercise led to the identification of the following themes: language use and preferences, obstacles to learning, the role of the LSEs, bullying, selection based on achievement, reactions and effects of being placed in a new educational context, a learner-centred pedagogy as opposed to a teacher-centred one. These are presented within the next three sections, entitled language use and preferences, socialisation and pedagogical matters.

5.2.1 Language use and preferences

From the responses of the LSEs, English is the preferred medium for Italian children to communicate with their schoolmates. The only exception to this regards some Sicilians who occasionally show interest towards Maltese, generally because they gain awareness of some lexical similarities with their local variety which stimulates their curiosity.

There are less difficulties to acquire both Maltese and English when relocation to Malta occurs when children are at KG level. On the other hand, difficulties increase, especially in relation to learning the Maltese language, when children join primary schools, and more so when they are older. Language can also represent a barrier for comprehension and, consequently, lead to problems in scholastic performance. Again, according to the response of our focus groups, this matter is more accentuated at secondary level. Such linguistic difficulties are sometimes addressed through the support of LSEs who know Italian. In some cases, even though they are not assigned specifically to support learners of Italian nationality, they intervene and act as linguistic mediators, thereby facilitating the inclusion of these learners and helping them with their scholastic progress in the process of doing so. The LSEs expressed this very clearly during our focus groups:

1) *We (the educator and the LSEs) had to translate in Italian for her to understand. We did that for her (01_KG).*
2) *They had an Italian student who gave a bit of troubles and they were used to leave him at our class so he could communicate with us in Italian (01_KG).*
3) *We (the LSEs) used to translate for him. I really wanted to help him, he called me when he didn't understand (09_SEC).*
4) *The Maltese students spoke Maltese and the LSE translated into Italian (12_SEC).*

As referred earlier, Italian learners communicate with their peers mainly in English. This gives rise to a situation wherein they therefore prefer spending their out-of-class time (including assembly time, breaks

and free time after school hours) with other foreign students rather than with other Maltese peers, who use their own language for informal communication. In some cases, Italian learners also form a community of their own – this occurs especially in the case of young adolescents. This community is also characterised by the maintenance of the mother tongue, especially among younger cohorts. In one case this is also manifest through a pupil's outright refusal to use English with her mother, as in (5) below:

5) *The mother used to speak in English and she answered her mother in Italian (she was from Sicily). (01_KG).*
6) *She used Italian with her family not with us. She is still proud of her language (02_KG).*

5.2.2 Socialisation

During the focus groups we probed matters related to socialisation, and the outcome confirms the differences which we already mentioned between younger and older learners.

Comments (7) and (8) below refer to two positive experiences. In (8) the positive effects of competence in English, also from a socialisation point of view, are underlined. On the other hand, examples (9) and (10) highlight the lack of inclusion of Italian nationals, marked strongly by the terms 'segregated' and 'outsiders':

7) *She was one of the popular students. At her birthday they went to her party (02_KG).*
8) *Those who spoke English, they had a lot of Maltese friends. They didn't stay with the Italians during the break. They preferred to stay with the Maltese (09_SEC).*
9) *In our school the Italians stay together. The Italians are really segregated, they formed a group, males and females (12_SEC).*
10) *The Italians are the outsiders. There are children who try to be friends, but not everyone (09_SEC).*

Especially within KG and primary settings, Italian children maintain many elements of their own native culture while they also gain familiarity with Maltese cultural features, showing a good degree of inclusion. In secondary schools, on the other hand, Italian students show more resistance towards the new culture also by accentuating the strong ties with their own. There are several reasons, both endogenous and exogenous, for this. For instance, inclusion is affected by the realisation that one may be in Malta for a short period thereby limiting efforts to create social relationships. A few LSEs state that according to them some secondary students consider their Italian cultural background as 'better' than the Maltese one and that they show little interest towards it as a result of this.

These cases in which different cultures can create to a sense of 'otherness' lead to instances of bullying. These do not regard only Italian students, as referred in examples (11) and (12) below:

11) *I asked some Maltese children if there was bullying, they answered that there is a lot of bullying between multicultural students, not just with the Italians (11_SEC).*
12) *They were bullied by their peers (not only Maltese); they were like the aliens in our class (12_SEC).*

Although these negative experiences are cause of great concern there are other instances, as reflected in example (13) below from a primary LSE, in which the presence of non-Maltese nationals is seen as a positive example of multiculturalism and of the values attached to it:

13) *The children at school have got the idea that there are several cultures, so there are not such differences. They have accepted the idea (07_PR).*

Since, where socialisation is concerned, the positive reactions in the KG and primary sectors outweigh the negative comments, one may be reasonably optimistic for the future especially if pedagogical measures are taken to raise more awareness in relation to the potential of multilingual and multicultural classrooms, as we will highlight in the concluding sections of this paper.

5.2.3 Pedagogical matters

The LSEs who participated in our focus groups provided varied insights in relation to pedagogical practices in classes in which there are Italian nationals. In some classes there is an openness towards them, as already expressed in (13) above, and their presence is viewed as culturally enriching for the whole class:

14) *Since we used to speak with her sometimes in Italian, the other children used to look at us and then we explained to them what we were saying and sometimes we started the lesson with a word in Italian and since we had other foreigners, we were used to teach other words as well (Arabic, Italian and another one) (01_KG).*

15) *The Maltese children and the other foreigners they integrate, they learn from each other, they learn different culture, games, food (04_PR).*

Others, again mainly in the secondary sector, give mixed reactions such as the following example (16) in which both difficulties and acceptance are mentioned:

16) *Some teachers saw it difficult; they don't like to teach in a different way. They do it, but they don't like it. Some others who just do it with pleasure, they accept the diversity and really help (10_SEC).*

Some teachers are well disposed towards Italian students who encounter linguistic problems and they help them by using translation as a pedagogical resource (Macaro, 2009), as in examples (17) and (18). As suggested in Section 5.2.1 such practices are necessary in the absence of the role of linguistic mediators, and they represent positive examples of how different linguistic resources are used, as in the case of translanguaging (Garcia, 2009; Garcia & Li Wei, 2014; Panzavecchia & Little, 2020, pp. 162-163), to engage learners and facilitate comprehension:

17) *I had a couple of teachers who speak to them in Italian if they can't understand (08_PR).*

18) *If the teachers know Italian, they translate the lesson directly by themselves. If there is an LSE who can help. For the notes not all the teachers manage to prepare notes in English. I translated them in Italian (12_SEC).*

Other teachers, on the other hand, are not well-disposed and this also led to clashes with the LSEs, creating tensions between them:

19) *The teacher didn't want to speak Italian with her. Even when she wanted to ask something in Italian the teacher didn't leave her. Never! I couldn't understand why not. If there is something that she is not understanding, why not let her use Italian? Maybe the teacher didn't feel competent? Maybe the teacher thought that I was more competent than her"? This year I wanted to help the Italian student and the teacher didn't want (07_PR).*

In some cases at secondary level, because of deficiencies related to language competence in Maltese and/or English, students of Italian nationality who achieved well in schooling in their country are placed in lower bands or sets in secondary schools. Because of this, their own motivation may be affected negatively as they are not faced with the cognitive challenges necessary to fulfil their potential. This is evident from the comments below:

20) *Even the setting makes a difference: this year he was in a CCP (the last band) and he could understand well (10_SEC).*

21) *Due to his language barriers he was placed in a lower stream class, but when it came to other subjects (Maths, Physics) he would have done better than the other students. He was not happy at school (12_SEC).*

22) *One of them was put in a lower stream and she was really intelligent (09_SEC).*

5.2.4 Focus groups – overall picture

The overall picture that emerges from the focus groups confirms some of the information gathered via the questionnaire (Section 5.1) while providing further insights into some of the experiences of Italian learners in Malta – especially problematic issues, which emerged more distinctly when we engaged directly with our respondents. The linguistic issues mentioned in Section 5.2.1 are generally confirmed, although in some cases there is direct reference both to how these create barriers between nationals and non-nationals (not only Italians) and how these are accentuated if educators do not intervene. Such interventions are deemed especially useful when they are carried out in Italian, thereby helping learners both in their educational and socialisation processes. The role of LSEs who know Italian can be especially beneficial in such situations.

Some marked differences emerge between sectors, with issues of concern being highlighted especially in secondary schools. The selective system that exists in Maltese secondary schools, with setting and banding, confirms some indications already documented in Caruana (2018) with Italian students who attain highly in their home country having to cope with situations where they are placed in classrooms in which they are unable to exploit their full potential – often this is determined by linguistic difficulties in Maltese and English. While LSEs are sometimes involved to address problematic issues and to help Italian learners' inclusion, some isolated cases of clashes with teachers are also reported.

From a socialisation point of view, while there are indications that multilingualism and multiculturalism are exploited as important assets, there are also issues that are cause for concern, the gravest of which regards bullying based on discrimination because of one's nationality.

6. Discussion

Our results confirm that in Malta, just as in the case of other migratory contexts (Caruana, Scaglione & Coposescu, 2013), the private and/or family domain of Italian children is linked to the language and/or dialect of their home country, while the public domain develops through contacts within the host country. The linguistic context of migrants is restructured through contact with culture and language of which one would have no direct experience in one's homeland (Pugliese, 2018).

Insofar as our research questions (Section 3) are concerned, our quantitative and qualitative data confirm that developing competences in both English and Maltese is an important stepping stone for inclusion and scholastic attainment. Nevertheless, although the MLU offers tailor-made courses for foreigners in these languages, once learners are mainstreamed there are few provisions in place to teach these two languages based on methodologies that meet the needs of non-natives. In mainstream classes Maltese is taught as an L1, and English as a context language – both are not geared to meet the needs of migrant learners, and recent initiatives to teach these as foreign languages are welcome and require urgent effective implementation in Maltese schools.

Although many Maltese have a good degree of familiarity with Italian (Caruana, 2018), our results indicate that some teachers are not confident enough to use this language to address their Italian learners. Sometimes LSEs are asked to help, but in others this potential resource is not adequately exploited. The absence of linguistic and cultural mediators is a gap that needs to be filled, sooner rather than later, especially in the extraordinary demographic circumstances present in Malta, as we mentioned in the initial parts of this paper.

In our second research question we asked whether Italian learners are included in daily classroom processes and out-of-class activities. Our LSEs observations shed light on some positive inclusive practices as well as on others which require substantial improvement, within a very heterogenous schooling system. Some reactions obtained from LSEs, especially in the secondary school sector, point to limited use of teaching techniques directed to problem solving, or to developing abilities necessary to organise one's own learning also by sharing responsibilities and by understanding, collectively, which objectives are to be reached. This is hardly surprising in an educational system which is still heavily based on selectivity, as explained in Section 3. Education in Malta is sometimes valued only in terms of imparting content and passing exams. We still do not give adequate prominence to 'learning how to learn' techniques, useful for

all learners irrespective of their nationality. Consequently, compensatory practices are implemented, geared mainly at *making up* for the social and linguistic *disadvantages* of Italian learners, rather than understanding how they can be included effectively in their schools by valuing, first and foremost, their own background, language and culture.

Some practices and attitudes observed by LSEs at school indicate that some Maltese teachers and parents still embrace the idea that Maltese society has one 'official' culture which acts as a reference point for all. Because of this cultural model, individual and collective differences (Tessaro, 2012) brought along by Italian learners are not valued enough and seem to remain in the background because of assimilation based on the worldview of the dominant culture (Bennett, 2004).

The exam-oriented system often involves reaching a common target, thereby creating a form of normality with which learners are expected to conform. As a result, those who do not match expected standards are labelled as *different* and addressed in terms of *deficits*. Most of the negative comments of the LSEs can easily be explained through these terms, including those situations where Italian migrant learners are placed in classes in which they find it hard to realise their potential because of linguistic barriers. Undoubtedly, such situations, represent the seed for exclusion and marginalisation, thereby leading to other problems, for example in attainment and for socialisation.

The presence of learners with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds is also a matter that must be taken into consideration in the light of the entitlement for quality education for all. Teacher's professional expertise is therefore required to address this: "Teaching quality has a tremendous influence on student outcomes, regardless of student socio-economic and demographic background factors" (Bartlett, 2015, p. 7).

The emphasis on quality education implies that teachers, in their professional capacity, are to value the talents and personal potential of each learner, thereby strengthening their competences (savoir, savoir-être, savoir-faire) and rendering them active participants of the teaching-learning processes. Quality teaching also implies supporting personal growth based on each individual's situation and creating a welcoming atmosphere in class and at school. Schools, after all, are the place where citizens are formed, citizens who will not only be engaged in the labour market but who will be an integral part of the society in which they live.

7. Conclusion

Maltese schools, at all level and sectors, are very much part of demographic and anthropological challenges which are personified by hundreds of migrant learners. Aspects of Italian culture in Maltese schools, but not only, are often limited to stereotypes and traditions, through gastronomy, music, popular and traditional dance (Favaro, 2013). Learners of Italian nationality as well as children born in Malta of Italian parents can bring much more than this to their classroom. For example, what about the language and/or dialect that Italian learners use at home with their parents? What about the promotion of language awareness, focusing also on different languages? Is it possible to render learners more aware and appreciative of linguistic diversity, in its richness, thereby also encouraging multilingual practices, such as translanguaging?

In order to help all learners to develop their potential, the Maltese educational system requires further investment in quality education and the adoption of an inclusive paradigm, by virtue of which prominence is given to dialogue, collaboration, hospitality and empathy, also in line with a number of the Council of the European Union's (2019) recommendations, and suggestions made by Panzavecchia & Little (2020). The increasing presence of students of foreign nationality, including Italians, represents an opportunity to view schools as a space where all can participate and in which identities are not only constructed but are also shared. This could also occur if, at a practical level, LSEs who have a good competence in Italian are assigned to support students of this nationality, whenever it is possible to do so. Inclusive pedagogies would also involve parents and the larger community, thereby giving rise to schools which are open to internal reflection as they reach out to the society which they are part of.

In order to summarise our respondents' reactions, in the concluding part of our focus groups we asked LSEs to give us a metaphor to describe inclusive practices in the school in which they are employed. The following three examples are a good representation of their thoughts, as they are critical of the rigidity of

the educational system although there is reference to the underlying potential of heterogenous classrooms if inclusive practices value diversity, thereby counteracting homogeneity:

23) *A basket of mixed fruits. You have different fruits, different children from different cultures and countries and they are all in the same basket, school, treated the same (02_KG).*
24) *Springtime with some grey clouds because of some teachers who prefer Maltese students (04_PR).*
25 *A bus, tutti insieme in una direzione, quella dell'insegnante. Non ci sono fermate*[6] *(11_SEC).*

Inclusion is a continuous process, an endless search, aimed at nurturing people's sense of belonging in school and society. Inclusive schools invest in the participation and achievement of every student, their agency and their capabilities are meaningful, everyone's presence is valued and all learners have opportunities to achieve and show their talents. The recent formulation of policies for inclusive education, which underline the importance of 'quality inclusion' (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2019a; 2019b) is undoubtedly a step in the right direction. The next step is to ensure that these are owned by all educators and that practical implications permeate to classroom level, therefore leaving a positive impact on all learners.

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6 A bus, all together in the same direction, the one of the teacher. There are no stops.

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Appendix

Questions for focus groups

Part A: Hypotheses regarding language use

1. From your experience at school, what can you say about language difficulties faced by learners of Italian nationality?
2. Do they face more difficulties in relation to English or Maltese?
3. In which language/s do they interact with their peers and/or with teachers (in class and out-of-class activities)?
4. Do these difficulties affect their scholastic attainment?
5. Do they show interest towards their L1 (e.g. do they feel more motivated when their teacher addresses them in Italian etc.)?

Part B: Hypotheses regarding socialisation

1. Do language difficulties influence their socialisation with peers at school?
2. What consequences could such linguistic difficulties have, in relation to these students feeling welcome, making friends etc.?
3. Do Italian learners interact with their peers, or are they isolated?
4. Do they form groups and/or communities of their own?
5. How would you define the behaviour of Italian learners (e.g. are they assimilated, integrated, separated, marginalised ...)?
6. Did you ever notice any specific occasion wherein they showed a special interest, or a refusal, of their L1?

Part C: Hypotheses regarding the family

1. How does the learner's family intervene in his/her education?
2. Do you notice the family's presence, or do you perceive a certain distance of it from the school?

Part D: Hypotheses regarding classroom-related consequences

1. How is the presence of Italian learners acknowledged and catered for, in schools and in their classes? Is it perceived as a difficulty or an enrichment (by peers, teachers etc.)?
2. How do teachers react when they notice that an Italian learner may be facing difficulties?
3. Do class teachers value the potential of learners of Italian nationality and do they refer to their linguistic and cultural background to motivate them further, and/or to motivate other learners?
4. Which pedagogical techniques are used? (e.g. group work, peer tutoring, cooperative learning, problem solving, debates, role plays etc.)
5. Are teaching materials and tools adapted to value different learning styles of all learners?
6. Is the Universal Design for Learning used?

Part E: Conclusion

Can you provide a metaphor to describe your school's inclusive practices, especially in relation to non-Maltese nationals?