

## Unlocking the power of collaborative learning in secondary schools. A transnational comparative analysis between Italy and Malta

### Liberare il potenziale dell'apprendimento collaborativo nella scuola secondaria. Un'analisi comparata tra Italia e Malta

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#### Abstract

This paper presents a transnational comparative study on the use of Collaborative Learning (CL) techniques in lower and upper secondary classes in Italy and in Malta as it analyses the factors which impede its use. The qualitative analysis of open-ended questionnaire data, supplied by participating educators (30 Italian precarious teachers and 50 Maltese Learning Support Educators) at the end of their respective training courses, highlights an appreciation of CL practices besides strong criticism of the factors which inhibit the application of a student-centred philosophy. Findings indicate that teachers in Malta seem to be conditioned by postcolonial socio-cultural aspects, such as a highly centralised education system, a competitive exam-oriented approach to learning and a traditional curriculum-driven attitude to teaching; issues which debilitate the application of CL. Moreover, teachers are seen as reluctant to implement active learning techniques since these are perceived as non-compatible with the inclusion of all students. In contrast, systemic-organisational deficiencies for the recruitment of precarious Italian teachers discourage the use of CL. While resistance from colleagues, students and parents further demotivates upper secondary school teachers, lower secondary school teachers view schools as the ideal places for the experimentation of these techniques. The thematic analysis of focus group data implies an urgency to revisit the understanding of 'education' in Malta, the need for Italian teachers to collaborate with education stakeholders and the necessity of continued professional development which can empower teachers to proactively embrace a 'methodological transition' towards CL.

**Keywords:** Secondary School Teachers; Barriers; Collaborative Learning; Active Learning.

#### Riassunto

L'articolo presenta uno studio comparativo sull'utilizzo delle tecniche di apprendimento collaborativo nelle classi della scuola secondaria di primo e secondo grado in Italia e Malta e analizza i fattori che ne impediscono l'utilizzo. L'analisi qualitativa dei dati emersi dai questionari somministrati a 30 insegnanti precari italiani e 50 educatori di supporto all'apprendimento maltesi al termine dei rispettivi percorsi formativi, evidenzia una valutazione positiva delle pratiche di apprendimento collaborativo, ma anche fortemente critica dei fattori che inibiscono l'applicazione di una filosofia centrata sullo studente. I risultati indicano che gli insegnanti a Malta sembrano condizionati da aspetti socioculturali postcoloniali, come un sistema educativo centralizzato ed un approccio all'apprendimento competitivo basato sul curriculum tradizionale. Inoltre, gli insegnanti sembrano riluttanti ad implementare tali tecniche poiché le percepiscono come poco compatibili con l'inclusione di tutti gli studenti. Per i precari italiani, sono le carenze relative al sistema di reclutamento dei docenti a contribuire a tale esitazione. Mentre la resistenza da parte di colleghi, studenti e genitori demotiva gli insegnanti della secondaria di secondo grado, quelli della secondaria di primo grado sembrano vedere nella scuola il luogo ideale per sperimentare le tecniche di apprendimento collaborativo. L'analisi tematica dei focus groups richiama l'urgenza di rivisitare il concetto di "educazione" a Malta, la necessità per gli insegnanti italiani di una alleanza educativa multi-stakeholder e il bisogno di uno sviluppo professionale continuo che consenta di cogliere in modo proattivo la "transizione metodologica" verso le tecniche di apprendimento collaborativo.

**Parole chiave:** Insegnanti della Scuola Secondaria; Barriere; Apprendimento; Didattica Attiva.

## 1. Introduction

In the current trend of international cooperation and global integration, schools are required to promote the comprehensive development of students' intellectual, emotional, social and creative abilities. They must empower learners with skills such as critical thinking, cooperation and social awareness, enabling them to make ethical choices in life.

This mission is fulfilled through active learning methods, which involve educators and students in co-constructing knowledge.

European policies regarding teacher education (UNESCO, 2019; Council Conclusions on European teachers and trainers of the future, 2020/C 193/04), encourage teaching methods that facilitate the transition from a purely transmissive teaching model.

In Italy, the National Guidelines for the Curriculum (2012) and the Ministry of Education's Programmatic Guidelines (2021) advocate for competence-based, collaborative teaching methods (Eurydice, 2018). These aim to personalise learning and move away from strict classroom structures towards more open approaches.

In Malta, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) promotes quality education based on active learning. Furthermore, the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 highlights the importance of collaborative learning techniques that foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2012; 2014).

Collaborative Learning (CL) is a method of active learning (Loh & Teo, 2017). It involves a group of two or more learners in larger groups who work together to solve problems, complete tasks or learn more concepts, having a common goal and shared responsibility. Research which documents the benefits of CL in the academic, cognitive, social and psychological domains is extensive (Johnson & Johnson, 1987; Hattie, 2008; Slavin, 2014; Sharan, 2021; Sidgi, 2022).

## 2. Benefits and Challenges in Implementing Collaborative Learning

An evaluation of previous studies outlines some of the key benefits of CL.

### *Benefits for learning ability and cognitive processes*

CL moves students from a passive role to a more active role in the learning process. When learners engage actively to co-construct knowledge, a deeper understanding and retention of the subject matter is possible (Andres & Rapp, 2015; Atman & Durak, 2022). This is agreed by Lange et al., (2021) who suggest that the effective sharing of information between group members results in more productive cognitive processing. Harianingsih and Jusoh (2022) identified some advantages as a result of effective CL and claim that: learners learn better through peer explanation; working in groups allows students to design the best way to address assigned tasks; issues are examined from different perspectives and CL allows members to manage tasks which may be challenging for some group members.

### *Benefits for skill development and for boosting motivation*

The social interactions that CL can generate are a precondition for effective CL (Andrews & Rapp, 2015). CL develops personal autonomy through a team-based approach that moves students away from the traditional, unidirectional teaching system and encourages student responsibility for individual and group learning. Sidgi (2022) explains how CL can increase their motivation and satisfaction. In this scenario, the educator renounces control of the learning process, empowering students to shape their classroom experience. This fosters self-control and boosts students' cognitive self-confidence (*Ibidem*). Moreover, better school attendance, improved academic performance, and increased productivity are proven advantages of CL (Munir et al., 2018; Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2022).

CL similarly cultivates empathy by prompting students to view situations from diverse perspectives and approach concepts critically rather than individually.

Despite the evidence supporting the effectiveness of CL, schools continue to rely on traditional methods.

The scientific literature outlines the factors that influence teachers' resistance:

#### *Difficulty in applying collaborative learning principles and time management issues*

According to Burke (2011), Tharayil et al., (2018) and Nguyen et al., (2021), teachers are reluctant to modify their teaching approach because of the time and investment needed, but also because they worry about students' resistance to CL.

There are some causes of resistance discovered among students towards CL: inequalities in tasks and work sharing, difficulties to reach an agreement, loss of concentration during groupwork and boring discussions which require time and an effort to actively construct knowledge (Owens et al., 2020). Some students find themselves reliant on passive learning and are not trained to take initiative in a student-centred setting (Bächtold et al., 2022).

Some studies (Mukuka et al., 2019; Liebech-Lien, 2020; Veldman et al., 2020) have shown that teachers refuse to adopt CL in their classrooms due to a lack of resources, a lack of orientation or a lack of Continued Professional Development (CPD) workshops in CL techniques.

#### *The teacher's role as a moderator*

Teachers prefer using expository teaching methods in their classrooms to ensure a disciplined class environment and an easier way to assess learners' achievement. In traditional learning setups with exam systems focused on memorisation, teachers often view student collaboration as unnecessary since the emphasis lies on memorising concepts likely to appear in exams. Students' low reasoning ability together with poor communication skills are seen as further obstacles to an effective implementation of CL.

#### *Curriculum fit*

CL techniques are demanding in terms of preparation and practice; thus, teachers tend to use traditional teaching to complete the syllabus and have their students pass exams. Although a rigid curriculum does not exclude the application of CL, such practice can be challenging for teachers if they do not have adequate knowledge and trust in it.

CL requires teachers to feel motivated, appreciated and reliable (Murdaca, Oliva & Panarello, 2016; Fiorucci, 2019) and empowered to shape their classrooms and their curricula as they deem fit.

If teachers do not have time to meet, learn, exchange ideas and help each other, it is challenging for them to offer a pedagogy that may be quite different from what they are familiar with.

#### *Insights from Italy and Malta*

In the light of extensive positive literature findings, one would expect CL to be widely implemented. Is this actually the case in Italy and in Malta?

Research highlights that teachers in Italy recognise the importance of involving students through CL to achieve social, cognitive, and academic goals, surpassing those attainable in an individualistic or competitive learning context (Caon, 2023) to promote self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation (Magnanini & Morelli, 2021).

The adoption of cooperative strategies through an intercultural approach encourages positive interdependence (Chiappelli, 2016). CL environments promote inclusion (Baschiera, 2014; Sgambelluri, 2016) and enhance tolerance; giving value to less integrated students (Chiari, 2022). However, not all teachers are familiar with CL characteristics and often confuse it with groupwork. Even if secondary school teachers are knowledgeable about the methodology, many do not implement it (Magnanini, 2022) due to challenges in applying the principles of positive interdependence (Chiari, 2022). This difficulty arises because CL demands extensive planning and long-term schemes (Spagnuolo, 2017; Magnanini & Morelli, 2021).

The sole research into student engagement conducted in Malta demonstrates that the pervasive highly

competitive school culture undermines the advancement of CL (NCFHE, 2017). Additionally, research affirms the predominance of a teacher-centric approach in assessment methods (Said Pace, 2018; Giordimaina, 2020). The limited research on the broader CL framework is confined to undergraduate studies focusing on inquiry-based learning (Grech, 2014; Agius, 2016).

Therefore, the question arises as to how CL can be strengthened and promoted within inclusive school teaching.

### 3. Research Problems, Objective and Questions

This research aims to investigate the implementation of CL in lower and upper secondary schools in Italy and Malta based on the experience of educators and teachers in training at Ca' Foscari University of Venice and the University of Malta.

Specifically, it seeks to understand the current CL practices employed, identify obstacles hindering their use, and propose strategies to overcome these obstacles. This study addresses the need to enhance the understanding of CL methodologies and their challenges within the context of secondary education in both countries, providing insights that can contribute to the improvement of educational practices in these settings.

The following research questions were addressed:

- 1) How are CL techniques used in secondary schools in Italy and in Malta?
- 2) What are the obstacles to their effective use?
- 3) What strategies can be implemented to overcome these obstacles and achieve more participative and motivating learning?

## 4. Materials and Methods

### 4.1 Research participants

The study involves a sample of 30 probationary teachers attending the 5 CFU Master's Degree course in Italy aimed at providing teachers with the knowledge and skills to implement inclusive practices in their classroom and 50 Learning Support Educators (LSEs) (whose role is explained in Appendix A) attending the top-up Degree in Inclusive Education in Malta during the academic year 2022-2023.

The Italian participants are mostly female (70%), aged between 30 and 60 years on average (60% are over 45 years old). 26 of them have a university degree: 8 in Humanities, 2 in Cultural Heritage, 1 in Journalism, 4 in Languages, 1 in Geography, 3 in Architecture, 4 in Engineering, 3 in Chemistry. 2 teachers hold a PhD. The sample is evenly distributed between lower and upper secondary schools (16 teachers in the former and 14 in the latter). They have experienced between 4 and 15 years of temporary teaching (40% for 4-7 years; 40% for 8-11 years; 20% for 12-15 years) and 60% have worked at least 2 years as support teachers.

The Maltese participants are mostly females (88%), with an average age between 24 and 56 years and all have a diploma in Inclusive Education. 74% work in middle schools (forms 1 and 2, age of pupils: 11-12), the remaining 26% in secondary schools (forms 3, 4, 5, age of pupils: 13-15). 56% work in state schools, 28% in church schools and 16% in the private sector. 44% have up to 10 years of support experience, 56% between 11 and 20 years.

Although the sample is heterogeneous in terms of qualifications (the Italians are almost all university graduates), professional experience (the Maltese are educators who have never been on temporary contracts) and age (the Italians are slightly older), this exploratory study has focused on these participants because they provide privileged observations in two very different educational contexts (schools in Malta have a British imprint) that are interesting to compare. Maltese undergraduate teachers would not have been exposed to the classroom experience in-depth and therefore they were not considered as potential research participants.

The Italians were able to observe the situation of 152 secondary schools in Northern Italy during their years of temporary work and the Maltese supported pupils with disabilities, working with teachers in different classes in more than half of the secondary schools on the island.

## 4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers utilised:

1. a form to collect personal and professional information: age, gender, qualification, length of service, years of temporary work and type of assignment (for the Italian sample), details of years of work for each school considered.
2. an adapted questionnaire (Appendix B) that builds on questions raised by Davidson (2021).
3. focus group discussions.

Once informed consent was obtained, the questionnaires were given to all trainees at the end of their training, after they experienced the main CL techniques. These were completed anonymously and voluntarily by all 80 participants, together with the form on professional and personal data. One month later, the researchers moderated two focus group sessions in each country, enabling an examination of attitudes and perceptions towards CL.

Data were stored in a password-protected online repository, accessible only to the researchers. All recordings were purged and identifiers in the transcripts were replaced with the participants' initial. In the Focus Group Data (FGD) excerpts, this initial is reported instead of the questionnaire number. Results from Italy were translated into English, ensuring that the intended meaning was retained.

Research data were analysed through the six-phase coding framework for Thematic Analysis (TA) which Clarke and Braun (2016) define as a method for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning. This enabled a comparative analysis of the open-ended questionnaire data and the responses generated by the focus group interview questions (Appendix C).

After examining and comparing the responses to the open-ended questionnaires and the focus groups, both researchers identified recurring elements and meaning associations, highlighting significant themes and sub-themes (Table 1).

The fourth theme emerged from the focus groups. For the purpose of this article, only some of the key themes are presented here. As for the quotations regarding the first three themes, researchers refer to participants by their country (Italy: IT or Malta: MT), the questionnaire number, the school they belong to (Lower Secondary: LS or Upper Secondary: US for Italians; Middle School: MS or Secondary School: SS for Maltese) and the subject taught (for Italians).

The study's findings' reliability was affirmed through an evaluation of the credibility, transferability, and dependability of diverse data sources (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). To ensure credibility, member checking with FGD and peer reviews were employed (Creswell, 2007). The consistency and alignment of results contributed to demonstrating the dependability of the findings.

Given the exploratory nature of the research, the following data should be considered only as indicative indicators to be further investigated including a larger number of teachers, especially from Italy.

## 5. Results

Four themes emerged from the analysis of data.

Theme	Sub-themes	Sub-theme features in: Italy/Malta/in both countries
5.1. An appreciation of strategies for active learning	5.1.1 A positive attitude towards CL 5.1.2 Setting as a key factor for the use of CL	Both Both
5.2. Teachers' criticism	5.2.1 The education system 5.2.2 Education resources 5.2.3 Precariousness	Malta Both Italy
5.3. Teacher Resistance	5.3.1 Assessment and inclusion as sources of resistance 5.3.2 Resistance from students, families and work colleagues	Malta Italy
5.4 A proactive vision for the future of education	5.4.1 The need for further training 5.4.2 Cooperation between colleagues and involvement of families 5.4.3 Schools as a place of experimentation 5.4.4 Challenges	Both Italy Italy Both

Table 1: themes and sub-themes which emerged from the thematic analysis of questionnaire and FGD

### 5.1 An appreciation of strategies for CL

The importance of CL is an aspect which featured across the open-ended questionnaire data supplied by both Italian and Maltese educators. Respondents acknowledged the implementation of these strategies in several primary and in some lower secondary schools in the respective countries and their array of benefits. Respondents claimed that the use of CL techniques is developing into an unavoidable necessity. Moreover, modern classroom environments which are equipped with the latest technology seem to further stimulate and facilitate the application of these learning techniques.

*“CL techniques are carried out and increasingly recommended. We are living in a period of transformation and we have reached a turning point: the school of the future will not only be increasingly digital-based, but will promote teaching activities that stimulate CL” (IT-10-LS-Languages).*

#### 5.1.1 A positive attitude towards CL

CL bridges the gaps that prevail in the classroom community and whilst it develops the required transversal 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, it enables learners to develop a sense of responsibility and a feeling of belonging to the learning community. For some educators, the use of CL is ideal to deal with complex interrelation dynamics and to address difficulties related to student motivation and engagement. The majority of participants agreed that CL contributed to the feel-good factor of the class community.

*“Collaborative techniques increase skills, by reducing the distance between pupils and developing a sense of belonging” (MT-36-MS).*

*“From what I could see, teachers have been more consciously trying to apply collaborative techniques, especially brainstorming, role playing and case analysis to actively engage students” (IT-2-LS-Humanities).*

*“This type of teaching and learning can completely shift the way educators and students perceive schooling” (MT-41-SS).*

*“I use this way of working especially in the third class with a low level, difficulty in keeping concentration and complex relation dynamics. It appeared clearly that CL techniques are much more motivating, involving and effective for them to achieve the objectives and to build serene relationships among peers and with the teacher” (IT-16-LS-Humanities).*

### 5.1.2 Setting as a key factor for the use of CL

Participants agreed that the nature of the setting can facilitate the implementation of CL techniques. Some teachers in Italy explained that at the High School level, CL approaches are more possible in practical lab sessions.

*“In the school where I am doing my probationary year, CL is very much encouraged because the school is equipped with innovative classrooms where the learning environment facilitates this type of teaching” (IT-1-LS-Humanities).*

*“When students enter the lab, their attitude turns from being passive and mostly absent in the classroom into lively and enthusiastic when they are asked to engage collaboratively in operational tasks” (IT-12-US-Chemistry).*

## 5.2 Teachers' criticism

This second overarching theme was identified as a result of the educators' strong criticism of the education system which, they claimed, discourages the implementation of CL. One Maltese LSE asked:

*“Could it be that the heavy curricula and vast syllabi are a contributing factor to some teachers' negative approaches to changes in instructional pedagogies like CL?” (MT-36-SS).*

### 5.2.1 The education system

Ten Maltese participants identified a highly competitive exam-oriented approach to learning, the pressures of a vast school syllabus and a traditional curriculum-driven approach to teaching as factors which undermine the use of CL. Context-specific data reveals how Maltese educators are disempowered by a centralised system, that is characterised by numerous reforms. Several secondary school classrooms in Malta maintain traditional teaching methods, assessment approaches for student knowledge, and limited interaction quality among students.

*“In Maltese classrooms, it is the teacher that structures the knowledge that students need to learn and students are to rote learn everything that the teacher presents to them” (MT-18-SS).*

*“Many Maltese schools still use a top-down approach where normally educators tend to be dogmatic in their way of teaching, and the student is dependent on the information that is provided by the teacher. Most of our teachers still adopt old pedagogies” (MT-41-SS).*

### 5.2.2 Education resources

The majority of both Italian and Maltese respondents claimed that teachers who are motivated to engage in CL practices must seek ways to integrate CL in their teaching. Nonetheless, despite the teachers' efforts to maintain their ongoing professional development and their will to include CL strategies, official education resources such as textbooks and the 'imposed' tight syllabus in the case of Malta are not synchronised with this pedagogy.

*“The textbooks in use should be up-to-date on the development of today's citizens' required skills. Yet books appear disconnected from reality. The Italian school asks us teachers to adapt to new teaching styles in order to foster active learning, including CL, but the tools in use at school are not always satisfactory” (IT-23-LS-Humanities).*

*“Being that our education has put great value in exam assessment with a loaded syllabus, the time and organisation for CL could be challenging. Educators are most of the time rushing through material to manage to cover it all” (MT-45-SS).*

### 5.2.3 Precariousness

One of the major issues affecting teachers in Italy is precariousness, with over 220,000 temporary teachers (De Angelis, 2023). This instability threatens teaching continuity; an essential factor in the Italian education system, though non-existent in Malta. According to the interviewed teachers, temporary employment leads teachers to devote less energy to demanding tasks that are unlikely to continue the following year.

*“Although I am fascinated by CL, after 11 years of being a temporary teacher, I have not yet been able to put it into practice but I try to approach it every year. The situation is tough for precarious teachers: we change schools, disciplines and classes every year. Only a small part of a year’s work can be re-used and the preparation of CL activities takes a lot of time” (IT-14-US-Engineering).*

*“Teachers should change the entire approach to their disciplines, but this requires stability and teaching continuity which precariousness does not allow: if classes change teachers every year, it is difficult to set up innovative methods if they are not continued by future colleagues” (IT-15-LS-Humanities).*

## 5.3 Teacher resistance

An exuberant majority of Maltese respondents claimed that the Maltese secondary classroom features a highly traditional setting whereby the teacher moderates what content is learned, how it is learned, what should be assessed and how it should be examined. Questionnaire data suggests that some of the upper secondary teachers in Italy and secondary school teachers in Malta are uncertain and not sufficiently confident to implement CL practices in their teaching. Others claimed that they fear a degeneration of class control as a result of CL. Furthermore, a number of LSEs from Malta explained that fellow teacher colleagues had a blurred understanding of CL, often misinterpreting this as ‘traditional groupwork’. One Maltese participant described a typical groupwork activity:

*“[Teachers] assign an activity to be completed by a number of peers, where work is divided and independently completed. A leader takes over and carries out most of the work assigned. Minimal interaction is present, where some group members contribute reluctantly, while others do nothing at all. Each group member is only accountable for himself. The teacher fails to observe the dynamics of the group and grades are given as a whole group” (MT-8-SS).*

Furthermore, educators are reluctant to modify their teaching approaches because of the time that is required for planning.

*“One of the main critical issues a teacher encounters when proposing a teaching activity through an active technique is undoubtedly time. It is crucial to accurately structure the activity planning” (IT-10-LS-Languages).*

### 5.3.1 Assessment and inclusion as sources of resistance

The structuring of CL activities is an onerous task. Participants explained that assessing students’ performance and understanding was much easier through a traditional approach since an exam-oriented method is quicker, less time-consuming and individual. In CL, assessment is far more laborious.

*“One of the aspects that I find most difficult in this technique is the moment of the final assessment which always remains individual” (MT-6-SS).*

Three participants from Malta remarked that although CL promotes an inclusive philosophy, teachers feel helpless as to how they can involve neuroatypical learners. Consequently, these students are excluded from these activities.

*“Teachers claim that despite organising different types of student groups, it is difficult to structure these group interactions to foster collaboration, as students with individual needs end up experiencing unequal individual participation. This proves that educators still find it very difficult to adopt strategies where they have to blend students’ abilities into groups” (MT-17-SS).*

### 5.3.2 Resistance from students, families and work colleagues

Teachers from Italy explained that even students themselves contribute to the educators’ resistance to adopt these teaching and learning methods, since they need so much help in so many different domains that the alternative frontal lesson mode becomes the easier option.

*“After the pandemic, I have noticed how difficult it is to put these activities into practice. I work with pupils whose problems often discourage alternative methods to frontal teaching. They have grown up without any form of discipline or respect for others, which are fundamental elements of a choral activity. In other cases, the minimum skills provided by the primary school are not enough to understand simple texts or assignments. For all these reasons, I believe that CL can only be applied effectively in other scenarios” (IT-30-LS-Humanities).*

*“I see that several colleagues use brainstorming and groupwork, but they do not really know what the objective of these techniques is, as they use them very superficially, and then they complain: ‘It takes too much time!’, ‘We have real pupils and not ideal pupils!’ (which means that instead of working in groups they play, laugh and so do the good ones), ‘Today’s kids don’t know anything, they are incapable, you have to do everything for them!’. Finally, even worried mothers come to meet the teachers (my colleagues) and complain that their son always has to be with ‘the losers’ to help them” (IT-26-LS-Music).*

The individualistic culture that is one characteristic of contemporary western societies has also been identified as a motive for teachers’ resistance to CL. Interestingly, two Italian respondents claimed that they were sided by colleagues since the fact that they were using innovative teaching strategies could potentially reflect badly on teacher colleagues who were teaching in the traditional way.

*“Not all teachers are willing to get involved and innovate their teaching, implementing it with new solutions and ideas: in some schools, those who experiment are viewed with suspicion and are openly criticised or accused of providing a service that falls short of their parents’ expectations” (IT-13-US-Photography, Video).*

## 5.4 A proactive vision for the future of education

A focus group participant likened the state of CL in Malta to someone attempting to walk up a descending escalator. This analogy highlights educators’ willingness to shift from traditional teaching to active student-centred learning, but they face significant resistance hindering progress. Participants propose that for a complete adoption of this methodology, authorities need to re-evaluate organisational aspects like knowledge creation and assessment methods. Additionally, the FGD indicates that teachers in Malta seek more autonomy in syllabus-related matters while also desiring increased accountability for the quality of teaching and learning in their classrooms.

Italian teachers believe that the methodological transition must be gradual but, in any case, it must start now, since the 2012 National Guidelines have been advocating the use of collaborative methods and techniques for more than ten years. Furthermore, teacher training should be aligned with the Ministry’s suggestions.

*“Only by implementing CL will we be able to meet the multiple educational needs of each class and ensure that each pupil acquires the necessary skills to become an autonomous and responsible citizen” (IT-F-LS-Languages).*

#### 5.4.1 The need for further training

Feedback from eight Maltese educators in the focus group discussion highlights the crucial necessity of training teachers in CL. Empowering confident learners to utilise innovative teaching methods, where students play a role as knowledge mediators, is emphasised. The educators suggest that participation in practical CL workshops could gradually diminish the prevalent competitive culture in Maltese schools and foster a stronger sense of positive interdependence.

Italian teachers regard training in CL techniques as essential. This dynamic process considers professional growth in dialogue with today’s complex society and the variety of new educational needs.

*“CL requires very deep training, not just a few hours, it requires a “Copernican revolution” by teachers on aspects of enormous importance, it requires a much broader view of the human being. Until now, teachers have focused on the curriculum to be taught. A real change has not yet taken place. It requires inner work, not just more knowledge. You have to set out on a journey” (IT-C-LS-Music).*

*“Hands-on training, positive experiences and a clarification of what CL is, might accelerate the phasing out of older teaching models that may not suit today’s post-industrial society” (MT-R-MS).*

#### 5.4.2 Cooperation between colleagues and the involvement of families

The Italian teachers who participated in the focus group believe that in order to overcome resistance to CL, it is necessary to cooperate with colleagues and inform families:

*“My personal experience in secondary school, has led me to reflect daily on CL, both within classes and within the teaching team, and I consider it fundamental, it is certainly one of the main objectives to be set and achieved. To this end, collaboration (multi- and interdisciplinary activities) and discussion among colleagues, as well as the involvement of families, are fundamental. Of course, the classroom is the main focus: it’s there that pupils need to understand that school is not only about learning knowledge, skills and competences, but also about doing it together, helping and recognising each other, appreciating and being appreciated, accepting and being accepted” (IT-L-LS-Humanities).*

#### 5.4.3 Schools as a place of experimentation

FGD revealed that the Italian teachers believe that schools can be a place for experimenting with different teaching techniques; teachers should be able to activate different methods according to their different classes and according to their different learning projects.

They think that pupils are ready for this way of teaching/learning and that it would be important for teachers to be provided with courses, texts and guidelines that are truly embedded in the context (secondary, primary, etc.) and that do not devote too much time to speculation.

They feel the need for CL to be proposed as early as primary school in order to achieve significant results in secondary school and the need to rethink textbooks and resources to be shared among colleagues.

*“CL activities should not remain sporadic moments of happiness during the school year, otherwise their importance would be diminished and they would be remembered in the same way as a nice trip. It should be made clear to the pupils and teachers that the playful part of certain activities is not something «allowed» because there is a good behavioural situation, but because it is necessary to constantly and increasingly engage and be creative” (IT-T-LS-Music).*

#### 5.4.4 Challenges

Some focus group participants explained that in order to implement real change in schools, it is necessary to accept challenges.

*“It is necessary to believe in the endless possibilities of human interaction. When a project succeeds, the whole class group achieves the goal. It succeeds because the process has been taken care of and managed by the teacher in a collaborative way and at a time that allowed it to succeed. It succeeds because the teacher sees beyond the initial obstacles, s/he activates multiple intelligences and mutual strengths, s/he believes in the students’ potential, in their intuitions and interacts wisely. Not an easy task!” (IT-R-LS-Music).*

*“CL is a creative challenge: inventing projects, various learning paths, settings etc. is very exciting. Seeing the students work, is pure joy. Another challenge is classroom management: getting away from the ‘desk’ and getting close to students. You have to find a new balance and it’s not easy. Losing control is definitely another sore point for many colleagues” (IT-S-LS-Humanities).*

*“A shift in some teachers’ mentality and way of proceeding has to be made in order to move away from the teacher-centred approach to a student-centred approach. This is a challenge for some teachers but a development which is necessary for the benefit of all students” (MT-M-SS).*

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper shows an emergent discrepancy between the current traditional practices, the CL principles which key national educational policy documents promote and the educators’ trust in CL techniques. This incongruity calls for context-specific measures that can address the obstacles which impede Italian and Maltese secondary school teachers from implementing CL.

The need to rethink the philosophy of education is the predominant necessity across the two examined contexts.

### 6.1 The Maltese education system: the challenge to the implementation of CL

The educational context in Malta is influenced by its postcolonial legacy, as highlighted by Mayo and Borg’s research (2015). The current educational model, shaped by 164 years of British rule, remains strongly guided by various British education models.

One concerning aspect raised by Maltese respondents is the issue of ‘inclusion.’ Participants noted that not all students can participate in CL activities, indicating a need to equip teachers with competencies for student-centred teaching. This deficit-based perspective perceives some students as unfitting to the system and exclusive practices are the bleak consequences when, in reality, as Rossini, Zappatore and Loiacono (2015) suggest, peer-tutoring can potentially improve learning and socialisation.

Assessment in Malta remains heavily exam-focused, causing pressure on teachers, students, and families due to the curriculum’s design. This emphasis fosters highly competitive school environments that lack positive interdependence. The prevalent approach to ‘constructing new knowledge’ is curriculum-driven. This aspect, along with the fear of class control and discipline problems mirror the sources of teacher resistance that were identified in research by Mukuka et al., (2019); Veldman et al., (2020) and by Liebeck-Lien, B. (2020).

In Malta’s highly centralised education system, professional development opportunities are typically imposed rather than chosen by practitioners. Despite this, teachers seek alternative training to enhance their teaching methods. Pillay and Elliott (2005) advocate for educators in small island states like Malta to challenge the education system and its conventional approaches. While some participants acknowledge the benefits of CL strategies (Graesser et al., 2020; Munir et al., 2018; Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2022), overall support for CL remains subdued due to teachers’ resistance towards transitioning to student-centred education. To break free from a ‘historical comfort zone,’ teachers must boldly question and reassess their

goals for the teaching and learning process, avoiding compliance with a patronising system that has long failed numerous students.

## 6.2 Italian teachers: The need for collaboration with colleagues, students and their parents

In Italy, precarious teachers feel disempowered by a system which expects them to give their utmost in a context where they are merely considered as a substitute figure. Education authorities should address the way teachers in Italy are employed in schools so as to ensure more stability.

Since CL gears students towards self-actualisation, teachers feel that the adoption of active learning techniques must start as early as possible. A multi-level approach to this methodological transition must: address the ever-changing realities of 21<sup>st</sup> century society, understand the needs and the dynamics of the individual students, rethink how physical and virtual educational spaces are utilised, revisit materials and resources and reform the way knowledge is stimulated, shared and assessed. The potential of CL environments to generate knowledge through interaction between learners was confirmed by Tran (2013) and Bembich (2020). The data which emerged from Italian participants implies that schools, can potentially serve as the ideal places for the experimentation of varied teaching approaches and CL structures (Travaglino, 2015).

Two upper secondary school Italian participants explained that some students felt unsure about what they were doing during a CL activity. In this regard, age and maturity may not be sufficient parameters that enable learners to assimilate methods which challenge the comfort zone of traditional teaching methods that some students have been accustomed to for many years. This calls for a shift, not only in teaching methods but also in the students' role along the learning process.

Interestingly, several teachers from Italy claimed that whenever CL methods were used, learners were enthusiastic to participate and behaviour-related issues would diminish. This is confirmed by La Marca, Cappuccio (2020) and Sidgi (2022) who claim that CL develops students' self-management skills, their ability for self-control and their cognitive self-confidence. This prompts educators to embed CL activities as an integral part of the daily scheduled activities and not only as a sporadic event along the year.

Italian focus group participants explained that students are 'ready' for this transition and that stakeholders must cooperate to make this vision a routine practice. For this to materialise, a comprehensive collaborative approach needs to be promoted. Teachers must engage in interdisciplinary teamwork, improve their ability to work more effectively with members of the class teaching team, share their practices and resources with other teachers from other classrooms and cooperate more effectively with parents.

Schools do not consist of a dyad -teachers and students- (Epstein, 2009). According to Dewey (1916), schools represent a privileged place that mirror social life, a miniature community, in constant interaction with other associated experience opportunities. For this vision to become a reality, Italian teachers emphasise the need for the entire community to take full responsibility and for teachers and parents to collaborate (Mura A., Zurru A.L., Tatulli, 2020; Russo, 2021), so that families are accompanied, supported and made protagonists in their children's educational journey (Zollo & Galdieri, 2022).

## 6.3 Limitations and Future Research

The sample size, although adequate for the study's aim is definitely not representative of the entire teaching community in either country. Considering the limited number of participants, researchers could not collect significant data regarding the specific CL techniques that are adopted, the amount of time that is allotted for the use of CL and the curriculum areas in which it is implemented.

To conclude, this research emphasises the need to develop and evaluate CL programmes (inclusive of online CL) which can address issues related to teaching and learning and for future research to identify the forms and conditions under which CL can support student achievement.

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## Conflict of Interest

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## Appendix A

### A description of the role of the Learning Support Educator (LSE) in Malta

In Malta, a Learning Support Educator (LSE) is expected to support all learners in a class, or learners with a statement of needs to access learning and assessment. LSEs assist the teaching and learning process that is led by the teacher, promote the independence and fulfilment of all learners and collaborate closely and be guided by the teacher and other professionals who may be supporting this endeavour within or beyond the classroom. Under the guidance of the class teacher, LSEs assist in the education of all pupils in class, in particular pupils with special educational needs so that their individual curricular entitlement is ensured and their learning needs are catered for. LSEs are expected to participate fully in Making Action Plans sessions (MAPs) and to develop and implement an Individual Educational Programme (IEP) together with the class teacher by adapting lesson plans and resources. Moreover, LSEs support pupils with individual educational needs in their personal care and hygiene needs. Learners with a statement of needs are assigned the support of an LSE on either a one-to-one basis or on a shared basis (whereby an LSE supports two to three pupils).

## Appendix B

### Open-ended questionnaire

1. How are Collaborative Learning (CL) techniques used in secondary schools in Italy and Malta?
2. What are some of the benefits of CL that you have witnessed in your experience?
3. What are the main concerns of teachers in deciding whether or not to implement CL?
4. Do teachers implement any form of small group learning or CL techniques?
5. Do teachers with an expertise in CL techniques assist other teachers to succeed?
6. Are teachers designing special CL lessons or are they using it in part of every lesson?

## Appendix C

### Focus Group Questions:

1. Research shows that there is a lot of resistance to make a radical shift into Collaborative Learning (CL) approaches. In your opinion, what are three main challenges which impede teachers from this shift? Why do you think so?
2. In what ways can teachers be motivated to proactively embrace the shift from traditional teaching to CL techniques?
3. Can you recall instances where you have experienced the implementation of positive CL practices? What rendered these practices successful?
4. How do CL strategies support the inclusion of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN)?
5. What image comes to mind, if you were to think of a metaphor to represent this methodological transition? Why?