COVID-19 school closures turning a spotlight on inequities and other shortcomings from the voices of those in danger of falling through the cracks

Le chiusure scolastiche per Covid-19 mettono sotto i riflettori le disparità di trattamento e altre carenze: Le voci di chi rischia di scivolare tra le maglie del sistema

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ABSTRACT
This study presents five themes which were highlighted by Maltese educators and parents when reflecting on their experience of sustaining the education of their students and children during the COVID-19 pandemic. By capturing these voices, the study seeks to gain insight into how these educators and parents reflected on their practice and daily experiences and how this has impinged on the educational experience of the students.

Questo studio presenta cinque argomenti evidenziati dagli educatori e dai genitori maltesi nel riflettere sulla loro esperienza di sostegno all'educazione di studenti e figli durante la pandemia da COVID-19. Nel cogliere queste voci, lo studio mira a raggiungere una migliore prospettiva su come questi educatori e genitori riflettano sulle loro pratiche ed esperienze quotidiane e su come ciò abbia influito sull'esperienza educativa degli studenti stessi.

KEYWORDS
COVID-19, Malta, Reflective practitioner, Educators, Parents
COVID-19, Malta, Praticante riflessivo, Educatori, Genitori

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST
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1. Introduction

Achieving equity in education is an important policy priority especially in this time of crisis brought about by the pandemic. It is without doubt a debated and controversial issue with much to be lost or gained by all. Equity is defined as «the extent to which individuals can take advantage of education and training, in terms of opportunities, access, treatment and outcomes» (European Commission 2006, p. 2). Equity is the equal access to educational resources and services commensurate to the level of need of the individual child. The European Parliament resolution of November 11, 2021 on the European Education Area insists that the entire education sector has been negatively impacted by the pandemic,

> «with the existing differences in educational infrastructure, expertise and access to resources within and across Member States and between different levels and types of education having become even more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily as a result of increased inequality, including lack of access to IT infrastructure for people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, which has had negative repercussions on access to education» (European Commission, 2021, article F p. 3).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore the challenges faced by certain families who, due to their socioeconomic situation, are facing unprecedented difficulties. The socioeconomic reality of a minority of the population has impacted on the educational experience of children and will undoubtedly continue to be exacerbated in their future when they transition to the labour market. (ETUI – Benchmarking working Europe 2020, p.61). The pandemic has profoundly affected all students' holistic well-being, but there is evidence that certain categories of students, particularly those coming from families with challenging socioeconomic reality, children of migrant families and children with a statement of needs, are disproportionally worse effected. (Di Pietro et al., 2020).

This study presents 5 themes which were highlighted by Maltese educators and parents when reflecting on their experience of sustaining the education of their students and children during the COVID-19 pandemic. By capturing these voices, the study seeks to gain insight into how these educators and parents reflected on their practice and daily experiences and how this has impinged on the educational experience of the students.

2. Methodology and research design

The data for this study was collected via online focus groups. One focus group was with Primary school teachers, another with teachers teaching students at Middle school and Secondary level (years 7 – 12) and another focus group was composed of parents. These three focus groups were invited to reflect on how the pandemic situation has changed their reality, both as educators and as parents of children attending Maltese schools. They were also asked to reflect on how this situation was affecting their students coming from different backgrounds – including those coming from a low socioeconomic background. Recruitment was done randomly through a call for participation on Facebook. Parents on the other hand were purposively selected to ensure a representation of the various sectors and needs.

The chosen method, namely the focus group, is featured as an organized dis-

cussion (Kitzinger, 1994) or a collective activity (Powell et al, 1996) that informs the research study with insights by individuals forming part of the focus group, enriched by the collective reflection of the group. This small study used the focus group to allow participants to share and discuss personal experiences of the pandemic, both as professionals and as parents of children who had to remain at home due to the lockdown or the self-imposed lockdown due to vulnerability. The semi-structured questioning technique used for this study helped participants to go beyond giving narrow, close-ended answers. They gave rich narratives emanating from interactions between participants.

Due to the COVID situation the focus groups were held using the Zoom platform. This mode gave the researchers the possibility to record the discussion (with the participants' permission) for eventual transcription and analysis of the data generated through these healthy discussions. All participants seem to have been very relaxed as evidenced by the length of the interviews and the detail, often giving many personal details, that these participants chose to share.

The transcripts were later analyzed thematically giving 5 themes related to inequalities and issues related to challenges posed by the realities created by the pandemic. This small-scale study was conducted in full compliance of research ethics norms. The researchers sent out to all participants a detailed study information sheet; a 'permission to participate' document; an indication of the time commitment; as well as a link to join the Zoom meeting. Anonymity and confidentiality are respected as neither participant nor institution names appear, or any other means of personal identification. The participants have been given fictitious names.

3. Presentation, discussion and analysis of data

The study generated the following themes related to inequalities caused by the pandemic. The themes emanating from the 3 focus groups were: (1) Poverty (2) Ethnicity and students from migrant background (3) Socio-emotional and mental wellbeing of children (4) Emotional and mental wellbeing of teachers (5) Distance learning and exacerbation of inequalities. These themes are presented and discussed in the sections below.

3.1 Predictors of Attainment (A): Poverty and socioeconomic status

The Cambridge report back in 2010 (Alexander, 2010) highlighted a number of predictors of attainment which in our view still persist to this day. Poverty has been highlighted as a strong predictor which affects both educational attainment and health. The report has emphasised the negative influence on a child's cognitive development due to poverty. The report also refers to American studies, that show that brain activity is impacted by impoverished childhood. They insist that

> «This is a wake-up call – it's not just that these kids are poor and more likely to have health problems, but might actually not be getting full brain development from the stressful and relatively impoverished environment associated with low socioeconomic status. Fewer books, less reading, fewer games, fewer visits to museums… plus fewer opportunities for the conversation and social interaction vital to healthy development» (Alexander, 2010, p. 120).

More recent studies continue to confirm these findings (Bouchghoul et. al., 2020; Green et. al., 2022; Volante et. al., 2019).

In our study the parents that participated were both teachers, lecturers, one working in financial services and another works with a technology related industry. As parents with a 'privileged' background they could understand that although this pandemic affected the lives of everyone, they felt that their children were somehow privileged because they, as educated parents, could attend to their academic needs better.

In their study Pensiero et al. (2020) found a positive association with the occupation of the main parent. Children in families where the main parent has what they call a routine job spent on average less time per day (2 hours per day in Primary and 2.9 in secondary) on schoolwork compared to 2.6 and 3 hours respectively for children in families where the main parent is in the 'top' occupations. They also noted that parental support or adult support in Primary school is positively associated with the occupation of the parent in the primary sector, but negatively associated for the secondary school students.

Kathrine, a mother of a 9-year-old with a disability and a lecturer in a post-secondary college explains:

> *"I would say that we were privileged. I mean our reality is not the same as the reality of other parents that were in similar situations."*

She continues to explain that while in their family they could attend to the educational needs of their son because both the husband and herself are teachers and could dedicate some time with him, they appreciate that:

> *"This is not the reality of most parents. There were parents who had similar experiences and found difficulty in following their children – especially those children who had certain specific needs."*

Dianne, a Primary teacher in a church school observes that the home situation varies from one household to another. She claims that there are those who had very little support from home:

> *"Not everyone used to send the work, obviously because the home situation is not the same for everyone… there were those who had no help from home."*

Mario, a parent working in the technology industry, admits that although with some difficulty, he could provide the technology required for his two children. He could to some extent understand the difficulties other parents could have faced in providing the needed technology for all the kids.

> *"If you have 2 or 3 kids – 3 kids therefore they are studying together so you need 3 laptops or 3 desktops or 3 mobiles."*

The unavailability of the devices was surely a challenge that some parents had to face in helping children to connect with their respective class teachers and to follow lessons. Some children had to share one device with one or more siblings and therefore had to do their school work at different times asynchronously.

3.2 Predictors of Attainment (B): Ethnicity and students with a migrant background

One other strong predictor of attainment mentioned in the Cambridge report (Alexander, 2010) is the influence of ethnicity. Maltese schools over the past few years have experienced an increase in the number of students with a migrant background. The population in Malta has increased by close to 50,000 over the past 20 years, partly with the large influx of migrants coming to Malta. This, notwithstanding a drop in fertility rate over the years, has caused the population to continue rising and is set to increase by around 8000 in the next 10 years, with a stable yearly increase of migrants making Malta their country of residence.

This reality has brought about new challenges both to the general population and to a great extent to schools, in particular state schools who take the greatest number of students especially those from low socioeconomic and ethnic background. At present the number of children in Maltese state schools is 34,216 with 6901 students coming from migrant backgrounds. The migrant population in schools is composed of around 120 nationalities with the largest groups being the Italian group (800), followed by the Serbians (494), British (493), Syrian (485), Libyan (405), Bulgarian nationals (343), Romanian (189), Indian (167), Hungarian (139), Philippines (134), Polish (111), Macedonian (108) and Ukrainian (106). The other nationalities' group size drops below 100 with the smallest group being the Algerian (6).

This relatively new reality brought about specific challenges to schools. Ethnicity and racial diversity brought about linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity that offered new challenges to policy makers and often found educators ill-prepared to handle this new pedagogical scenario. The scenario that includes multiple layers of diversity is in itself diverse. The migrant population is not homogenous and children coming from different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds when combined with poverty weighs in on the students' academic achievement and psychosocial development. Intersectionality of issues, that is learners facing additional and overlapping challenges, such as disability, disadvantaged background and minorities background must be considered in order to support them in ways commensurate to their needs.

One of the participating teachers mentioned the challenges some children with a migrant background exhibit and explained that these could be:

> *"Because they experienced certain difficulties when they were young and they didn't have time or they didn't have patience to learn certain issues […] migrants, people who are coming from other countries, maybe they feel like the situation in Malta, might at times not be helpful for them."*

These children, continued this teacher, might also have psychological scars due to their experience:

> *"Pupils coming from war-torn countries. I had kids […] they brought their perspective, with them, and, sometimes, their attitudes weren't really exemplary, you know? Like, I had a particular kid, who once said, "I, I, I'm going to kill you all". His attitude was like that; he was always pretending to shoot guns, […] and that he wants […] to do bad things to people."*

As a teacher, he admits that such experiences are quite challenging and very difficult to comprehend and address:

"These things for us, as teachers, I mean, they are not kind of normal, you don't really experience kids coming from war-torn countries. And they're obviously people who actually bring out certain kind of emotions like, of fear..."

In both the teachers' focus groups, a challenge which was highlighted was that of language. Newly arrived children often do not have any or at most very limited knowledge of the language of instruction:

"... because they cannot communicate in English... (or) Maltese, uh, they cannot communicate for sure. In English, they struggle, as well. So, they find it hard to make friends, they feel secluded... Even their parents might not fit in with the community."

This, according to this group of teachers, was further compounded during COVID when children had to follow lessons remotely and could not have the support that they needed form the school support services.

Another teacher mentioned "customs" and specific cultural behaviours that they bring from "*a particular country, which might not be really in-tune with the current system, or what, we perceive as Maltese – as right or wrong.*"

These and other issues highlight the need for continuing professional development that cover issues of diversity that help address such challenges. Roger, a secondary school teacher, admits that it takes time and a lot of effort on the part of the teacher both to gain the students' trust and to acquire the skills to build a positive relationship:

*"...in my experience I had kids from all walks of all. I had kids coming from Eastern European countries, kids coming from China, kids who had cognitive difficulties. I had kids, Asperger's Syndrome, kids who had Down Syndrome, I-, I had everyone, like. And it's not easy, and I feel that each year is kind of a new challenge. *sighs* And, I know what you mean, these kids have to learn in a way or another. They are there at school, and they cannot come there just to pass the time..."*

Often such children end up excluding themselves from others and refuse to socialise with their Maltese class/school mates. Many of these children end up either making friends with others from their own country or who at least have a common background, or else keep to themselves:

"When I talk to them, I find that they talk, but they have certain reservations, ... They are a bit shy and they rarely play in the ground, never; they always talk and chatter and chatter and chatter and chatter. And they have a friend or two. So, it's, it's very hard. (Some) are very good – Mathematics, writing, and stuff, they are excellent. But, when it comes to social interaction, I feel that, they are not... they are bit of introverted in their approach. ... So, in a way, that, that's also a kind of seclusion. It's not my fault, kind of, they are secluding themselves. I try to communicate with them, but it's not easy, you know?".

Roger ends by admitting that:

*"There are certain difficulties that ... *pause*, it's not easy to, face these situations. And remember, when you really consider it, the whole scholastic year it's quite short. Like, when you really get to know the kids, it's time that they leave, that they go to another classroom. And, and sometimes you feel that you failed, ..."*

Mel Ainscow and colleagues in their study *Primary Review Research Surveys* (2007) conclude that "belonging to a particular ethnic group, or even having a particular gender, has a value insofar as it inhibits or facilitates the achievement of particular outcomes" (p. 9). In this report they emphasise that such differences "may vary between cultural contexts, whether that be at the national level or at the level of particular institutions" (p. 2). Our participants could also observe that during lockdown, "a number of migrant children had never logged in or came to class."

3.3 Predictors of Attainment (C): Children's socio-emotional and mental well-being

Another important predictor of lack of and a pre-requisite for attainment and future healthy adulthood is the socio-emotional wellbeing of the child. Educational policy has often relegated this important aspect of development to pockets of the curriculum. It often resisted to recognize this important aspect of our development and its centrality in the overall health of a person and also for academic success (Brunken, 2008). Social emotional wellbeing skills such as communication, collaboration, empathy and resilience have been highlighted by Brunken and others as "essential in order to learn, form relationships and carry out our day to day lives" (Elias et. al 1997; Weare 2000, 2004 cited in Brunken, 2008, p. 2). Literature often highlights the importance of healthy social and emotional wellbeing for academic achievement. The paper by Brunken reviews a number of studies to show that academic learning can only occur when social and emotional needs are met, positive social emotional wellbeing increase success, accessing and utilising our emotions is essential to thinking processes, emotions support our ability to select, plan, make decisions, and prepare, prosocial behaviour is a strong predictor of future academic achievement and that classroom social skills could act as academic enablers (p. 2). In a study carried out with Chinese children during the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhongren et al, 2021), it is reported that one in five children had PTSD and one in fourteen children had depressive symptoms. In yet another study by Tang et al. with 4342 primary and secondary school students in China, a high occurrence of mental health problems (anxiety, depression and stress) is reported during this period. An important observation from this same study shows that when parents find time to discuss and communicate with their children, a positive relation to healthy mental state is reported. Those who had discussions with their parents about the pandemic experienced less depression, anxiety and stress (p. 356). Seeing these results with other studies on social class and parental communication with children (Li et al 2020, Guo, 2014; Stull, 2013; Turner et al., 2019), one can come to some conclusion that children from low socio-economic background would be in greater danger of suffering from mental health problems during the pandemic. This goes to show that the mental health issue during the time of the pandemic had its toll on school children and requires our undivided attention.

A Maltese study carried out by Cafai et al. (2021) on the resilience of Maltese children between the ages of 11 and 16 years of age during the pandemic confirm international trends that older children reported lower levels of well-being. Those children who reported that they feel depressed (around 3% out of 455 participants) were severely to moderately depressed. During the first lockdown the majority of children indicated that they were resilient but around 12% reported poor resilience. The study also showed that when the lockdown prolonged children

became less resilient. Children whose resilience was low experienced depression, anxiety and mental health difficulties. The study reported that spending time with family and feeling safe at home was the most positive aspect of the lockdown experience. More than half of the participants found the disruption of their normal life as the worst part of the experience, particularly not being able to go for social outings, have direct contact with friends, feeling a sense of loneliness, boredom and anxiety. The study also reported that children found the demands that online learning very challenging and they were missing school, their teachers and their peers. Participants found play, exercise, watching tv and playing video games and music, doing things with family and being supported by their family, social media and communicating with relatives as most helpful to cope with the challenges brought about by the pandemic.

In our study teachers and parents spoke of the stress caused by long hours in front of the screen:

> *"My son told me 'I don't want online teaching' because he started feeling very lonely… if you only knew how lonely he became in front of the screen."*

One of the parents, Grace, spoke of how her son tried to cope by

> *"Sharing videos amongst themselves (between friends). Apart from academic learning they found time to have social contact, so much so that they used to organise zoom sessions amongst themselves on their own initiative."*

This same parent confessed that her greatest worry was and it still is the lack of socialisation:

> *"My biggest worry was and still is how the children are going to socialise. So much so that my son is training football – I find it difficult to tell him not to go to play football due to physical distancing. I am realising that my 15 years old son cannot be limited to the family bubble only."*

Kathrine, a mother of a 9-year-old son with a disability that makes him vulnerable and therefore cannot attend school emphasised the importance of socialisation. She explains that around the last month before the lifting of the lockdown, the school organised online meetings with the students "*not online sessions to give explanations but online sessions for socialisation – for example they organised a cooking session – this type of thing*".

3.4 Predictors of Attainment (D): Teachers' Emotional and mental well-being

The above scenario created the need for teachers to alter their teaching methods, in most cases in very dramatic ways. The classroom as we know it had to give way to other arrangements and setups that both teachers and students had to learn to manage while ensuring continuity. The stress caused by this change has also affected the mental health and well-being of the teachers and consequently the quality of their service. Rose, a kindergarten teacher explains:

> *"[a]s an experience, teaching kindergarten children was not a positive one. There were many difficulties – there were difficulties from the side of children and their families."*

She continues to explain that this period caused her stress and "*as a teacher I went through very dark moments. There were days I didn't have the strength to login with parents. I used to be very depressed … yes it wasn't a happy period for me*". Peter a secondary school teacher explains that during this period "*there was a lot of psychological trauma going on, a lot of exhaustion*".

Home issues of teachers and lack of boundaries between home and work duties weighed heavily on quality of support that they could give to their students. Peter confesses that as his wife suffered COVID:

> *"All the teaching and learning that I was giving and my student were receiving suddenly got at a stand-still… then I had to re-question everything… I had to take care of my 2 young kids – I have a four-year-old and a one year old and those are my priority in the pandemic…".*

Albert, a VET teacher in a secondary school admits:

> *"Having to care for two young children, one of whom has severe educational needs – he is on the spectrum so it's not easy doing life lessons especially in the morning when the children are awake. So usually, my wife and I, waited for the children to sleep, after 10 o'clock in the evening and then start recording our lessons."*

Kathrine admits that the experience of having to care for her son and at the same time delivering lessons, most of which were synchronous, left her exhausted:

> *"I admit that at one point I was exhausted. You try but you don't realise that a week passed bye – I kept the regular timetable, with online lessons and at the same time trying to home school my son and therapy because even therapies stopped. That means that I also had to act as a therapist at that point in time."*

Kathrine continues to say that this situation, where there were no boundaries between home and work, was causing anxiety and hardship.

> *"So, when I am delivering online lectures I have to see that Joseph (son) is doing some independent work, and when he is fed up he comes next to me – it is not the first time that I gave lectures with him on my lap".*

She admits that these were difficult times "*because everything blended together – the boundary (between work and home) was not there anymore.*"

Rose admits that going to school used to give her a relief from her problems and now that she has to remain at home was causing her mental distress:

> *"I confess with you that I have problems in the family. It really makes a difference to be able to wake up in the morning, get dressed, leave home and meet your colleagues. The day passes bye – you say a word and enjoy the company of your colleagues, you forget what you're passing through. The fact that I had to stay at home was really heavy… was too much."*

Kathrine admits that when delivering lectures from home she has to remain alert on the whereabouts of her son and she cannot really be focused on her work.

"When I am giving online lectures, I am really alert what my son is doing and where he is. At the same time that I am supporting and helping my son I am thinking about what I should be doing next and how I'm going to work. There were moments when I felt very tired because you try to give the maximum everywhere but there is a limit."

3.5 Predictors of Attainment (E): Distance learning, technological divide and exacerbation of inequalities

The adoption of distance learning in itself has posed challenges to learning. According to the study by Di Pietro and colleagues (2020) they estimate that on average, students are likely to experience a learning loss during the lockdown. They estimate that data coming out of France, Italy and Germany suggest that students suffer a weekly learning loss of between 0.82 and 2.3% of a standard deviation due to loss in learning time when compared with the time children typically invest when they are in school (De Pietro et al 2020, p.4). This same study continues to explain that this switch exacerbated existing educational inequalities. Children from challenged socio-economic backgrounds and children with a migrant background would most likely have less access to relevant learning digital resources, less likely to have a suitable home learning environment and less likely to have support from their parents as their more advantaged counterparts do (p. 4).

The study by Pensiero et al. (2020) also estimate that children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds will suffer learning loss more severely than other children from more affluent families. The researchers from the University of Southampton found that children from advantaged families whose parents could work from home, could afford to provide their children with their own computer and thus on average spent 2.9 hours per day on school work in Primary and 3.8 hours for Secondary when compared to 2.3 and 2.6 hours respectively for children from disadvantaged households. They also claim that children from disadvantaged families would have lost 31% of a standard deviation in Primary and 23% for secondary by the time schools reopen in autumn as compared to 24% and 14% respectively for children from more advantaged background.

Students who normally were regularly attending school were now told that they had to remain at home because of some medical vulnerability. Children with disability who had for a long time depended on the support of LSEs had now to depend on the sole support of their parents. Children of migrant parents had been 'vanishing' from online classrooms and from school. Children whose parents had to continue working, or could not support them with their education, were visibly falling behind.

Kathrine explains that her experience of school during lockdown was not a positive one. The teacher used to send the work:

"Via email with PowerPoints and resources on Monday morning and it was up to the parent to divide the work throughout the week, to make sure that they do the homework, explain the work given and then at the end of the week, on Friday the teacher sends the answers of the homework so that the parents can correct the work… the resources that the teacher used to send were general resources for all the children – they were not resources specifically adapted for the specific needs of children with particular needs".

Doreen, a primary school teacher in a church school admits that it was through the school insistence that certain children managed to access learning on line:

> *"We kept insisting to reach everyone… I kept on insisting to reach every child. There were those who were computer literate and others who were not, but we kept trying to follow him, sending email after email with guidelines until everyone could join the lessons."*

Lara, a primary school teacher in a state school, explains that some of her students had problems in accessing the work on Microsoft Teams notwithstanding that "*I prepared a PowerPoint with guidelines*." She continues to explain that "*I even had children who did not have internet at home, and the government offered the service. There were also those that did have a tablet but that had to be shared between a brother and a sister*". Rose continues to explain that there were those who had problems using technology, but there were also those that had to use the only laptop for work, "*… so they couldn't work"*

Gillian, a secondary school teacher, reiterates the difficulty that some of her students had using available technology to follow her lessons because "*Sometimes there were students who had other brothers and sisters so during my lesson they had another lesson from another school…"*. She had to adapt and go outside her normal duties to support them at times outside normal school hours.

> *"… they told me beforehand that they cannot enter… so to be honest I made myself available to them even after school hours… but if there was a problem at some point… for example there was one student that had a power cut…. So, I decided to do an extra lesson with her to cover the lesson that we were doing online."*

The Di Pietro et al. report highlights the role of schools themselves in perpetuating these inequalities. The quality of a school IT infrastructure and the quality of the teaching staff and their level of digital skills will reflect on the quality of support that the school offers to its students. In the case of Malta, one can add another level of digital availability, in particular in state schools. State schools are heavily unionised. The teachers' unions have taken over the implementation of the curriculum and have limited schools to what they can do to mobilize the curriculum to the needs of their student population. Many students ended up losing months of schooling due to the fact that the unions were against online teaching and/or synchronous teaching to benefit those students who due to their medical vulnerability had to remain at home. These children for a long time were receiving work via email or the learning platform but had little interaction with their educators and friends. Children who prior to the pandemic were receiving support from an LSE due to a statement of needs were now solely dependent on their parents.

The Di Pietro et al. study cautions that such loss can result in loss of students' emotional well-being and motivation, in particular for those students from less advantaged backgrounds. The study highlights the fact that such disadvantaged households experience more stressful environment due to limited living area and limited digital devices and suffer from pressures due to lack of financial and job security making the situation in such households "probably not in the best position to support their children in these circumstances" (p.4). This situation will, if not appropriately tackled by policy measures, lead to more economic disparity in the future (p. 5). Such loss will also reflect on the future of the economy "with negative effects on productivity growth, innovation and employment, including future lower earnings for the student cohorts directly affected by the (COVID-19) lockdown" (p. 5). The report emphasized on two key challenges for policymakers, namely that «measures should be taken to ensure that more vulnerable students

will be able to make up for the learning loss they experienced during the lockdown…» secondly, educational institutions need to explore alternative methods of delivering teaching and learning and be put in place to limit the learning loss during this time of the pandemic.

4. Conclusion

This paper discussed five themes that emerged from a small study with educators and parents in Malta that highlight the challenges faced by students and teachers during the pandemic. These five themes came out of three focus groups made up of teachers from the primary and secondary sectors, and parents. The identified themes are poverty and socio-economic status, ethnicity and children from migrant backgrounds, teacher and students' socio-emotional and mental wellbeing and the exacerbation of inequalities due to distance learning and technological divide. These five issues were highlighted as strong predictors of attainment or lack of it during the pandemic. These challenges caused much of the learning loss experienced by school-aged children.

This study highlighted the inequalities and shortcomings perpetuated by the education system during a period when schools were on shutdown or working under a lot of restrictions. These often resulted in children with already challenging conditions facing the danger of falling through the cracks.

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