



# Enhancing Personal and Environmental Factors to Nurture the Inclusion of Italian Learners in Malta: A Case Study

## Potenziare i fattori personali e ambientali per favorire l'inclusione degli studenti italiani a Malta: uno studio di caso

Barbara Baschiera

Dipartimento di Filosofia e Beni Culturali, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia – barbara-baschiera@unive.it  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8450-7508>

Sandro Caruana

Department of Languages and Humanities in Education, University of Malta – sandro.caruana@um.edu.mt  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2592-849X>

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### ABSTRACT

In order to investigate how the combination of experiences, relationships, activities and initiatives act in unison, facilitating inclusive processes on some occasions and creating obstacles to it on others, in this contribution on Italian migrant learners in Malta we adopt a biopsychosocial perspective, inspired by the WHO's ICF-CY anthropological model. We interviewed ten parents/guardians to obtain insights on personal and environmental factors that affect inclusion in Maltese Secondary schools. Our findings reveal that parents/guardians relate personality factors to successful inclusion (e.g. adaptability, entrepreneurship and sociability), as well as involvement in extra-curricular activities. The Maltese schooling context, a competitive approach to learning, traditional teaching methodologies and lack of support represent barriers to inclusion. The holistic model we adopt shows that to guarantee quality inclusive pedagogies initial teacher education and continuing professional development must be addressed. Maltese schools must build better bridges with families, embracing inclusive perspectives from an eco-systemic educational viewpoint.

In questo contributo sui migranti italiani a Malta abbiamo adottato una prospettiva biopsicosociale, ispirata al modello antropologico ICF-CY dell'OMS, per indagare come esperienze, relazioni, attività e decisioni agiscano all'unisono, facilitando o ostacolando il processo inclusivo. Abbiamo intervistato dieci genitori/tutori per comprendere come i fattori personali e ambientali influenzino l'inclusione nelle scuole secondarie maltesi. I nostri risultati rivelano che i genitori/tutori correlano una buona inclusione con le caratteristiche della personalità dei figli (ad esempio adattabilità, imprenditorialità e socievolezza), nonché con il loro coinvolgimento in attività extracurricolari. Il contesto scolastico maltese, un approccio all'apprendimento di tipo competitivo, metodologie didattiche tradizionali e la mancanza di sostegno, rappresentano tra i principali ostacoli all'inclusione. Il modello olistico adottato dimostra che per garantire una didattica inclusiva di qualità è necessario potenziare la formazione iniziale degli insegnanti e lo sviluppo professionale continuo. Le scuole maltesi dovrebbero migliorare la relazione con le famiglie, abbracciando una prospettiva inclusiva eco-sistemica.

#### KEYWORDS

Inclusion, Migrant learners, Italian learners in Malta, Parents' views, Guardians' views, Personal and environmental factors  
Inclusione, Studenti migranti, Studenti italiani a Malta, Opinioni di genitori, Opinione dei tutori, Fattori personali e ambientali

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## 1. Introduction

Studies carried out on Italian migrant learners, whose parents/guardians have recently settled in a foreign country, are not numerous (see, for example, Palumbo, 2017; Cassese, 2019 and Caloi & Torregrossa, 2021). This may seem rather surprising, especially in consideration of the increasing numbers of Italians who have moved to other countries in the past years (Fondazione Migrantes, 2022) and it therefore merits further investigation, even in relation to how learners settle in schools.

This increase in migratory movements, including the one related to Italians in Malta on which we will focus in this paper, has led to more pluralistic and culturally heterogeneous societies. This, together with global interdependence, requires rethinking education in terms of quality, equity and inclusion. Many countries face challenges to be in a position to welcome all learners, especially those who traditionally have less opportunities to succeed in their education. This calls for changes to educational and scholastic systems, geared to render them even more inclusive.

The agenda for Sustainable Development 2030 defines inclusive education as the process through which the capabilities of educational systems are strengthened in order to render them open to dialogue with all students (Unesco, 2017), in consideration of socio-economic background, gender, ethnic origin and culture. Inclusive education represents a framework to recognise and value all differences present in the scholastic context, to treat all learners respectfully (Dovigo, 2008), to ensure that they all have the same learning opportunities (Florian, 2015; Ianes, 2008; Pavone, 2014) and that they all can reach their maximum potential.

Although in the Maltese context this vision has gained interest at political and at academic levels and policies have been published regarding a more inclusive approach towards language use in class (for example, MEDE, 2016; Vella et al., 2022), more effort is required in order to apply these principles in practice (Caruana & Santipolo, 2021).

In order to better describe the relationship between the individual and the environment, we base our reflections on a combination of the biopsychosocial model and the ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). From an ecological perspective schools are a microsystem which are structured on the basis of roles, rules, relationships and shared activities, within a mesosystem in which other agencies and institutions are involved. These are flanked by a macrosystem, which includes political and economic institutions, beliefs, behaviours and specific values of the social system as a whole (Striano et al., 2017). Therefore, the inclusion processes that occur within schools affect the other systems to which they are connected, as well as the wider social system, including the community and the locality.

## 2. Italian migrant learners within the Maltese educational system

The number of Italian children in Maltese schools has increased considerably over the past years: during the

sharpest rise of Italians who settled in Malta, i.e. between 2017 and 2019 (Caruana, 2022), a 16% increase of learners in Maltese schools was registered, taking the tally to over 1,000 children. By comparison, in the early Noughties, less than 100 Italian nationals attended Maltese schools. Today around 1,200 Italian learners attend schools and kindergartens in Malta: 70% of them are either in the primary (6-11 year-olds) or in the early years (3-6 year-olds) sectors. There are therefore also young children within the Maltese educational system who are second generation migrants, born in Malta of Italian parents/an Italian parent.

Much research on Italians who have settled in Malta has been carried out over the past years (e.g. Baschiera & Caruana, 2020; Palazzo, 2020; Caruana, 2020, 2022 & 2023; Caruana & Pace, 2021; Calleja, 2023). In these studies recent Italian migration on the island is discussed in the light of the huge influx of foreigners, which has led to considerable population growth (NSO, 2021). Maltese schools are becoming increasingly multilingual and multicultural and while this entails many benefits, it also presents challenges as teachers often face classrooms composed of students with highly diverse backgrounds and competences. Insofar as language use is concerned, research clearly shows that knowledge of English - one of the two main media of instruction in Malta, the other being Maltese (Panzavecchia & Little, 2020) - favours participation and may, consequently, lead to prompter and better inclusion. This language, in fact, is used by teachers in order to communicate and interact with students of different nationalities and it serves the purpose of a lingua franca in the classroom, besides being the language of assessment and of many textbooks used in schools. Italian nationals who therefore have at least a basic competence of it on entry into the Maltese educational system face less inclusion problems. Knowledge of Maltese, the national language, is generally very limited among foreign nationals, including Italians, and most adults are also not particularly inclined to learn it (Caruana, 2023). This represents a challenge for their inclusion, also because lack of knowledge of this language sometimes represents a barrier in order to understand better the local culture.

Besides knowledge of English, another major variable that affects inclusion is age: previously-cited research clearly indicates that while Italian young learners do not face many difficulties in order to be included in the Maltese educational system, young adolescents often find it harder to settle in. Baschiera & Caruana (2020) interviewed Learning Support Educators in kindergartens, primary and secondary sectors of the Maltese educational system and suggest that while inclusion occurs quite effectively when learners are young, more problems are encountered when they join classes in secondary school. These include bullying and segregation on the basis of nationality, both in the classroom and during break times. In some cases Italian nationals are placed in classes together with low-achieving students, as a result of a system which classifies learners on the basis of their academic abilities (Baschiera & Caruana, 2020; Caruana & Pace, 2021). This affects their attainment and socialisation negatively. Occasionally they have also been victims of racial slurs.

### 3. The Maltese educational system

The Maltese educational system is divided into three broad tiers, namely public schooling, church-run schooling and the private sector. While public and church-run schooling is free of charge, the private sector is fee-paying, with fees increasing as students get older. Whereas Italians with good financial means sometimes opt to send their children to private schools, others with a more modest income cannot afford to do so. Furthermore, the church-run sector is attended by few migrant learners, as access to it is based on a 'lottery' system carried out on entry (i.e. generally prior to entering the first primary class, at age 6). Consequently most migrant learners, including Italians, cluster in public schools. While these schools are mixed-ability, a tracking system is present at Secondary level (from 11 years-old onwards), generally based on learners' examination marks in core subjects, including Maths, English and Maltese (or Maltese as a Foreign language for non-nationals). As hinted earlier, some Italian students fall victim to this system as they are placed in lower ranks, often as a result of limited competence of English. These organisational structures render Malta's education highly selective, with a significant attainment gap between different learners, also determined by their socio-economic background. A consequence of this selective system is that some migrant learners find it difficult to reach attainment expectations, and this affects their inclusion, as occurs in other international contexts (Volante et al., 2019).

Although most Italian students are placed in mainstream classes in public schools, some of them are referred by their schools to receive 'induction' support. This normally occurs when learners, irrespective of their age, have limited competence in both English and Maltese and are therefore placed in an 'induction hub', sometimes prior to mainstreaming. Despite their controversial nature, not least because of the segregation created between learners who are directed towards these provisions and others who are not, and between nationals and non-nationals, parents view them positively (Palazzo, 2020; Caruana, 2023).

### 4. Methodology

This study is therefore carried out against this backdrop: the substantial increase of Italian learners in Malta, the difficulties they sometimes face and, most importantly, their holistic inclusion in an educational system which is different to the Italian one and which may present challenges of both an academic and a socialisation nature. Our reflections are based on the understanding that in order to fully profit from one's education, learners are engaged in an amalgam of experiences, relationships, activities and initiatives. So as to investigate how these features act in combination, we use the ICF, namely the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (WHO, 2001/2002), as a reference point against which we articulate our contribution. More specifically, to investigate how these factors act in unison, facilitating the inclusive process on some occasions and creating obstacles to it in others, we adopt a biopsychosocial per-

spective inspired by the anthropological model ICF-CY (WHO, 2007), the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF).

On the basis of this perspective, every learners' activities and performance are to be analysed and understood in consideration of the multiple dimension of his/her situation, both internally and/or externally to him/her. The relationship between contextual functions and activities, personal competences and social involvement of all learners, either as facilitating means or as barriers, is a process which is at the centre of the biopsychosocial perspective (Ianes et al, 2021). Planning and implementing inclusion for Italian learners also implies improving inclusion levels within the whole schooling context, to the benefit of all learners.

To implement inclusion significantly it is necessary to be aware of the contextual factors that affect all migrant learners in Malta, including Italians, so as to operate on different ecosystems, exploiting their potential to act collaboratively and in synergy, both across and within them.

Data were collected via a semi-structured interview that we based on the above features as these were used to investigate how environmental (relationships, culture, physical spaces etc.) and personal factors (education, social background, psychological dimensions which constitute the basis of self-esteem, identity, motivation etc.) facilitate, or hinder, inclusion. The multi-dimensionality of this model was deemed suitable to investigate the complex contextual factors that Italian learners in Malta experience. We then used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006 & 2013) in order to organise and classify the responses obtained and in Section 5 we present our salient findings. A total of ten Italians (4 males and 6 females) currently residing in Malta agreed to be interviewed after we issued a call for participation via a closed, social-media group of Italians in Malta. They were purposely selected on the grounds that their children currently attend different secondary schools (11-16 years old), covering all three sectors of the Maltese educational system (Section 2). Some of their characteristics, together with a numerical code for each participant, are summarised in Table 1 below:

Code	Age	Sex	Duration of stay in Malta in years
01	50	M	8
02	40	M	9
03	44	F	3
04	34	F	2
05	51	M	5
06	38	F	15
07	34	F	8
08	49	F	4
09	43	M	11
10	42	M	31

Table 1. Parents/Guardians who participated in the study

Each interview lasted around 30 minutes and was carried out in the presence of both researchers. Data were then transcribed and analysed.

Having parents/guardians as interviewees represents a novelty in relation to research on Italian migration in Malta and also sheds light on some issues related to inclusion and parental involvement in the local educational system. The secondary sector, rather than primary, was chosen as it is reportedly (Baschiera & Caruana, 2020) the one where more problematic situations regarding inclusion are encountered.

Through our research we addressed these two main objectives:

1. How do parents/guardians of Italian migrant learners perceive inclusion within the Maltese educational system, especially in secondary schools, and how does this reflect their own child's/children's inclusion (or exclusion) in Maltese schools?
2. Which are the main personal and environmental factors which contribute to Italian migrant learners' inclusion, and which factors hinder it?

We hereby present our data, through which we address the above-mentioned issues, accompanied by excerpts from our interviews. The data, collected in Italian, are translated into English and presented in our results.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Personal factors

Our interviewees link inclusion (or the lack of it) to their children's personal factors. There is a body of research which links personality factors to active classroom participation, which could be conducive to inclusion, although results are far from conclusive (see, for example, the numerous studies referred to in Dagmara et al., 2014 and in Murphy et al. 2017). In relation to personal factors, we noticed that some of our interviewees who have children who are siblings who attend Maltese schools compare one to the other, and attribute the reason for their successful or problematic inclusion to them underlining, for example, their adaptability, sociability and entrepreneurship:

Of my children, the one who arrived when he was 13 did not have any difficulties, in fact he has many friends. The one who got here when he was 6 had more difficulties to make friends, because he was already more settled in Italy. He found it difficult to socialise even because of his shyness. (Interviewee 05).

My youngest son made friends more quickly than my other two children, but maybe this depends on his more open character. (Interviewee 08).

My daughter (11 years old) is hyper-sociable, her difficulties are not with her peers but with teachers, she always feels insecure when facing an authoritarian approach that presupposes blind obedience. (Interviewee 07).

The above interviewee was particularly critical about the Maltese educational system and she

claimed that she encountered an authoritarian approach from teachers which left very limited space for learners to express themselves freely, thereby curbing her daughter's outgoing trait.

Another interviewee linked her son's successful inclusion, and consequent good academic achievement, to his socialisation skills with other migrant learners. According to this parent he was fortunate to be placed in a class with children of 14 different nationalities:

He was very lucky, because in Year 10 he was placed in a multicultural class with 18 learners of 14 different nationalities [...] my son integrates very easily and he likes this intercultural aspect very much. (Interviewee 03).

Yet another interviewee, whose case is rather particular, both because he was the only participant in this research who has been in Malta for several years and also because he is married to a Maltese and has three children born in Malta, links his successful inclusion to his resilience – another important personality factor – but also to his participation in sports. This participant is the only one who could provide insights both in relation to his own inclusion and to that of his own children, and the information he provided is based on his dual role: as a former student and now as a parent. When he moved to Malta, several years ago, he was the only Italian national in his school and had no knowledge of either English or Maltese, but sports enhanced his inclusion:

On the first day of school I knew nothing and nobody, I knew neither language, in a new school where everything was new. I was lucky [...] to play football [...] and I scored 4 goals so everybody wanted to know who was this Italian who scored 4, but it was pure luck. From then my inclusive process began very rapidly and I became one of them. Without football it would have taken longer. (Interviewee 10).

Other interviewees stress the importance of extra-curricular activities for inclusion, especially those held after school hours. These include, for example, sports as well as acting and dancing classes. Nevertheless, negative experiences are mentioned too although, sometimes linked to a lack of entrepreneurship. As stated by the interviewee below, these are not necessarily tied to nationality but to competitiveness, an aspect also related to personality factors:

When we enrolled him to play football, often, before training, he would be left alone. But this happens among Maltese children too [...] I think a lot depends on his character. If he were more enterprising he would be called up. (Interviewee 05).

As expected, our data confirm that knowledge of English, in particular, is especially important for inclusion. In fact, our interviewees provide evidence of better inclusion when learners have a degree of competence in this language of instruction prior to arrival or when, as attested in some cases, Italian migrants strive to improve their communicative competences,

both before arrival to Malta and while they are attending school on the island.

Although knowing English leads to several advantages where inclusion is concerned, this is especially the case in classes in which other foreigners are present. In these situations, Italian learners are seemingly more inclined to participate in class. An interviewee, for example, recounts an experience of her son who felt excluded when he was the only non-Maltese in his class—locals, in fact, often communicate informally in Maltese, their mother tongue (L1)—although most of them have a good knowledge of English:

In that class there were only Maltese nationals and they did not learn Maltese language for foreigners, and he found himself in a very bad situation. (Interviewee 03).

This situation is challenging as many of our interviewees state that both they themselves and their children do not have any inclination to learn Maltese. This could represent a problem for inclusion, as exemplified through the following statements:

Maltese is a thorn in her side and she has no interest in it. Having attended international schools, she never spoke Maltese. This year, at her school, Maltese is spoken more and she's having many difficulties. Although she takes repetition classes, her level is still basic. (Interviewee 07).

Learning the two context languages is linked to personal factors as our interviewees maintain that Italian learners who are more enterprising and willing to interact with their peers are better disposed to be included in extra-curricular activities. The opposite holds true in cases of learners who encounter more difficulties to communicate and to learn English and Maltese—linguistic issues are vast and complex and besides being linked to personality factors their importance for effective inclusion bears weight on environmental factors, as we will outline in the following section.

## 5.2 Environmental factors

The environmental factors identified in this section are linked to the context in which learners are immersed and our interviewees explain that they affect the inclusion of their children. Some mention networks of friends, while expressing their desire to establish friendships with Maltese nationals, also to feel better included in the local society. There are limitations, in this sense, when free time is spent exclusively with other Italians, with whom interactions obviously occur in the mother tongue:

Our friendships, when we go out, are mainly Italian, but once in every 3/4 times we meet Maltese people because we like to open our horizons. (Interviewee 05).

An informant outlines the difficulties related to inclusion between Maltese nationals and other foreigners, and also points out how socially most Italians mix

among themselves and with other foreigners, thereby limiting access to Maltese culture and way-of-life:

From a social point of view we Italians here are many and we are not really integrated with the Maltese. We are integrated among ourselves and with other foreigners. Maybe the Maltese would like it if we were better disposed towards their language and culture [...] we Italians are also very critical towards Malta. (Interviewee 04).

The final part of the above quote underlines some difficulties that Italians face in relation to their social inclusion with the Maltese. In this respect, however, it is necessary to point out that family and friendship ties between Maltese nationals are generally very close-knit and long-established. Such social networks are, more often than not, almost impenetrable.

Another relevant feature in relation to inclusion is the school environment which, in many ways, reflects the previously-mentioned factors regarding networks of friends: if foreign students are placed in schools with learners of many different nationalities, their inclusion is generally quite plain-sailing. On the other hand, if the presence of migrant learners is sparse, their inclusion may be more difficult. As stated earlier, they may be bullied or segregated from the Maltese, also because of stereotyping.

On the basis of what my friends who have children in public schools tell me, the experience in primary schools, attended mostly by international students, is very positive. If, on the other hand [...] they attend a public school with a few foreigners [...] they may experience bullying. (Interviewee 01).

(The inclusion of my daughter) was easier because in her first year in Malta she attended a class in which almost all learners were foreign [...]. She never had a conflictual relationship with Maltese children, but it's also true that groups composed of only foreign students were formed. (Interviewee 02).

In the last year there were only Maltese and (my son) would tell me that he was always alone and would not speak to anyone. (Then) he moved to a class with foreigners and he felt fine because he spoke English [...]. It is difficult to create inclusion, not because of the teachers, but because of the students [...] Small groups are created on the basis of nationality. (Interviewee 08).

As noted through the above observations, the experience of migrant learners at school is often in a state of flux: in some cases, changes to the school and/or class environments determines whether they are more included or whether, on the other hand, they are segregated from other peers. Some cases, in which local learners offer support and help, are also reported:

My luck was that on the first day of school my bench-mate was a lovely person, he explained how things work, how I should dress, he explained how school transport works [...]

things that now seem insignificant, but for somebody who knew nothing they were all very important. (Interviewee 10).

Our data reveal that teachers and other educators sometimes facilitate inclusion processes, while on other occasions they are somewhat more hesitant to do so. This is normally because they experience the heterogenous composition of their classes with worry and disorientation—this also supports findings of previous studies (see *Section 2*) in which educators express their lack of preparation to deal with these situations as well as lack of support, both from the school administration and from education authorities. As evidenced from the quotes below, our informants' experience of this varies greatly:

I find that her teachers are very professional and, by and large, inclined to love their work, something that in Italy we have somewhat lost. (Interviewee 02).

Even (my son) had the same experience of an authoritarian educational style. With respect to Italy my impression is that here there is a sort of army-style monkeying: I am above, and you are below and do not know things [...] inclusion and dialogue are mentioned, but dialogue does not exist. (Interviewee 07).

The fear that one's son or daughter would not be included in his/her new socio-cultural context determines Italian parents'/guardians' educational choices, either on arrival or prior to it. These choices are also determined by the means at their disposal: for example, as explained in *Section 3*, financial means play an important part as some parents may opt for schooling in the private sector, which comes at a considerable cost, as opposed to public schooling which is provided free of charge. In the former parents/guardians feel more entitled to determine educational choices, as in the case of asking to place their child in a class in which there are no other Italians.

We asked openly not to place her in a class with other Italians. In some ways we helped inclusion [...] We made this choice to avoid that she'd stay in a group on the basis of her language, that there would be ghettoization within ghettoization, grouping within grouping. (Interviewee 09).

Others chose a school where English was used almost exclusively as a language of instruction and in cases in which moving to Malta was planned well in advance, some participants chose to complete a schooling cycle (e.g. primary schooling) in Italy and supported learning English through private tuition. This was also the case of parents of very young children and, as a result of it, English has now become their dominant language, at the expense of their L1; others chose schools attended by many migrant learners to avoid segregation between locals and their children.

A matter that emerges clearly from many of our interviews is the pride that parents feel when their children's competence in English improves, even though our interviewees all state that they are proud of their

Italian identity. They admit, however, that their children, especially those who are young and/or moved to Malta at a young age, feel that their identity is "somewhere in between Italy and Malta".

Some parents, despite being university graduates (also in *Lettere*, Arts/Humanities), do not correct their children when they make errors while speaking in Italian and are more concerned about the development of their competences of English. This, again, is mainly determined because they perceive English as the principal linguistic medium through which inclusion can be achieved more rapidly and successfully. Consequently, they are also not particularly inclined to support their children to learn more about Italy's culture, with the exception of culinary traditions and some other essential elements which allow them to keep contact with their relatives in Italy.

Her level of English is better than that of Italian [...] I try to correct her, but she's not good at writing. I did not teach her about Italian literature, I just gave her some notions. (Interviewee 02).

They know the Italian cities that we visited. But geographically they do not know where the Alps and Apennines are situated, but they know where Etna is found [...] As for literature, their knowledge is practically zero. As for gastronomy, they are experts. (When they make mistakes) my husband does not correct them, because he says that anyway we can understand what they are saying. (Interviewee 06).

Parents' critique of the Maltese educational system is a recurrent theme (see also the earlier quote of Interviewee 07): they mention the curriculum which falls below their expectations; difficult examinations which are held too often; the competences of some educators; the fear of not completing the set syllabus on time. Reference is also made to the fact that assessment is almost exclusively based on written homework, classwork and tests. These create results-driven, selective educational settings which are not conducive to inclusion, aggravated by the limited space dedicated to the Humanities and the few opportunities for learners to reflect critically, to debate and discuss. On the other hand, our interviewees appreciate teachers' preparation and professionalism, especially in relation to their use of English.

Compared to Italy, the educational system has huge differences [...] the positives surely regard languages. The unjustifiable shortcomings regards the lack of space for subjects like History, Geography, Literature. (Interviewee 02).

(My son) always says that in Malta it's much simpler [...] Throughout the year they study much less than in Italy, but the exams are difficult [...] He says that here they are pragmatic and concrete. They teach you for the labour market. (Interviewee 03).

The children are full of tension (because of exams). They are tense because the marks they obtain will determine the class (in which

they are placed). (As a teacher) here I found myself immersed in the syllabus and I apply this mentality of having to finish everything on time. This anxiety also comes from parents. I always thought that in Malta there is little space to work on oral production, on argumentation. (Interviewee 06).

### 5.3 Summary of results

As explained in Section 3, our semi-structured interviews were based on a combination of a biopsychosocial model and an ecological approach, in which perceptions on inclusion in schools are seen in the light of a complex, dynamic system which involves the community: parents/guardians, learners, educators, policy-makers etc.

The models we used for our research addressed personal factors and environmental factors and, on the basis of our objectives, the results of our interviews reveal that parents/guardians of Italian migrant learners perceive inclusion within the Maltese educational system as somewhat problematic: although the performance of many Italian students is generally satisfactory from an academic point of view, their socialisation largely depends on their interactions with co-nationals and with other foreigners. These are often more problematic with Maltese nationals and, in worst-case scenarios, segregation occurs too.

On a more positive note, parents/guardians report that they support is available, although access to it may sometimes not be forthcoming. Our findings confirm that inclusion is heavily linked to competence in English and that parents/guardians make a huge effort to ensure that their children become fluent in this language, even if this may mean side-lining their mother tongue. Maltese, on the other hand, is considered much less important and this may prove to be a challenge in relation to interactions and socialisation with locals.

Parents/guardians affirm that their child's personal qualities — especially adaptability, entrepreneurship and socialisation skills— are key to inclusion. These are also important because they lead to better involvement in extra-curricular activities. Nevertheless, some problematic issues are mentioned too, especially in cases when children are marginalised during such activities, often because communicative difficulties affect their engagement.

The environmental factors which affect inclusion are often linked to networks of friends and to the school environment. In the latter educational choices, also determined by parents/guardians' financial means, may play an important role as parents/guardians with better income have more choice in relation to the school and/or class in which their child is placed, especially because they can opt for private education. As expected, teachers play a central role in their school and/or class, and the difficulties they encounter when facing heterogenous, multicultural classes may render them less inclined to adopting inclusive practices.

Italian parents/guardians compare this to their own experiences in Italy and are critical of some aspects of Maltese education, namely the few opportu-

nities for discussion and debate, the limited space dedicated to the Humanities (with the exception of language teaching and learning) and the constant pre-occupation of having to ensure that subject-content syllabi are covered. Some deem that these are counterproductive to inclusion.

### 6. Discussion and conclusion

Booth & Ainscow (2014) claim that inclusion in educational contexts is fully achievable if three dimensions are acted upon: these are the cultural, political and educational practices' dimensions. The analysis that we conducted out in the Maltese context shows that there is yet a long road ahead in order to achieve inclusion as outlined through these dimensions. Many of the reflections that our interviewees provided underline the criticality of the role of teachers in these processes, as they can either value difference or (sometimes unknowingly) reinforce negative and discriminatory experiences. Inclusion requires educators who collaborate with the intent of offering pluralistic and rich common grounds, through the daily practice of democracy and equity. This could help learners with different socio-cultural backgrounds feel welcome and treated with respect, in educational settings which strive to modify discriminatory attitudes, beliefs and stereotypes.

Before producing policies and implementing them in practice, the inclusive process requires that teachers themselves create and share a culture (values and convictions) on which inclusion is based (Fiorucci, 2019). This culture, as a humanising instrument, would nurture the value of every person, within a society which is characterised by difference, in the appreciation of physical, social, cultural and religious diversity (Moliterni, 2016).

Some parents/guardians hint at the sense of disorientation and at difficulties that educators encounter in multicultural contexts. This is especially relevant to the Maltese context, which has become increasingly multilingual and multi-ethnic over a very short span of time, with a large concentration of persons of different backgrounds in a very limited geographical space. In order to guarantee quality inclusive pedagogies it is necessary to address both initial teacher education and continuing professional development, so as to produce transformative (Mezirow, 2003) rather than informative learning.

Actions geared towards the inclusion of migrant learners, with their difficulties, cannot be borne and driven only by educators: they call for the recognition of the duties that we all have towards others and to develop a significant response to positively promote all civil rights. Acting on the aforementioned cultural dimension, beyond the school context, within the family and the community, implies acquiring an ethno-relative perspective, through which one recognises different modalities of one's reality, even within one's own culture (Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Bennett & Castiglioni, 2004). Progressively welcoming cultural differences, which are at the basis of the evolution of humanity, requires a real transformation: an affective-cognitive decentralisation of the self, to give space to the other and enrich oneself as a result of this (Piaget,

1993); becoming closer to otherness, by abandoning one's ethnocentric condition, thereby embracing different visions of the world.

As explained in our results (Section 5), Italian parents/guardians often describe Maltese schools as competitive, with an exam-oriented approach to learning. The pressures to cover an extensive, content-based school syllabus is conducive to traditional teaching approaches which pose a challenge for the inclusion of their children. Schools which are more inclusive (Striano et al., 2017) strive to understand the various individual situations of their learners through a complex biopsychosocial anthropology and through the fundamental role played by contextual multiple factors, with a global and multidimensional viewpoint, as per ICF principles. In an inclusive school climate, learners, including Italian migrant learners in Malta, can be involved constructively, thereby nourishing their motivation and exploiting their full potential. To do so, Maltese schools must build better bridges with families, enhance participation and communication, and strengthen their co-responsibility in the formation of their children. This would underline the complementarity of schools and families, to be attained via reciprocal communication, exchange, confrontation, collaboration and co-construction. A practical example of this would be helping Italian parents/guardians to better understand that while developing competence in English is indeed important, other languages are essential too — proficiency in Maltese should therefore be encouraged, also by exposing adults and children to the multiple opportunities to learn this language, while maintenance of the L1 (and also of any regional or local varieties) is fundamental because it is a vehicle through which Italian learners will continue to express their identity.

Inclusion implies welcoming learners and making each one of them feel part of the context they are in, through a humanising process that takes account of both the personal and social dimensions, rights and duties, locally and globally, present and past. This would be projected towards a future which is even more inclusive (Moliterni, 2016). For this transformation to occur it is necessary to act on a political dimension, embracing inclusive perspectives from an eco-systemic educational point of view (Canevaro et al., 2011). It is also essential to adopt policies which have civil values as a reference point, together with equity and reciprocal respect, to be adopted in different contexts, first and foremost the educational ones, in order to transform them (Bocci, 2019). They would also have to address the actions of educational authorities and teachers by referring to inclusive education and its fundamental intents (Giroux, 2001; Armstrong et al., 2011; Ainscow et al., 2006; Slee, 2011).

Inclusive policies can favour a propulsive thrust and promote change to render scholastic contexts more effective and agentive (Ellerani, 2016; Alessandrini, 2019), thereby creating conditions for all those who are involved in it to act inclusively and, therefore, to express and develop their capabilities.

Our contribution adds another piece to the complex jigsaw puzzle of the experiences of Italian learners in Malta, especially because it views inclusion from parents'/guardians' perspective. Its limitations are due to its case-study nature, related to the con-

tained number of participants whose views cannot be generalised. Nevertheless, our findings are pertinent to further explore matters related to Italian migrant learners in other contexts too, offering opportunities for comparative research.

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