Maltese Primary Classrooms – Uncharted Territory. A Blueprint for Classroom Observation

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Abstract: Maltese primary classrooms are by and large uncharted territory. Very few Maltese researchers have taken the plunge to enter into primary classrooms, observe, and analyse the teaching that occurs there. Assuming that this lacuna is not due to a lack of interest in the subject matter, but rather to the methodological challenges such studies involve, this paper proposes a tried and tested framework for pedagology – the study of pedagogy. This framework was developed by Robin Alexander for his seminal study *Culture and Pedagogy*. It seeks to analyse: i) The *form* of the lesson; ii) The *frame* of lesson through the analysis of space, pupil organization, time, curriculum, routine, rule, and ritual; and iii) The *act* of the lesson through the analysis of tasks and activities given together with that of interactions and judgements made. Each component of this model is explained in some detail and ways how data can be presented is proposed.

Keywords: pedagogy, Malta, primary education, teaching

Researching pedagogy is not an easy task. This may be one of the reasons why there are not many published studies on pedagogy in Maltese classrooms. But what is certain is that, as a result, we know very little on what goes on in our primary classrooms. One could claim that, by and large, they are uncharted territory.

The aim of this paper is to present a tried and tested framework for pedagology – the study of pedagogy – and thus give a contribution in the filling of this lacuna.

The need to stipulate

The first necessity for any pedagologist is a clear and articulate understanding of pedagogy. Since the translation to English of Freire's seminal book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970, the use of the term *pedagogy* has spiralled exponentially.[1] However, its definition is still very much contested. This renders the work of pedagologists more complicated. One could argue that defining pedagogy is similar to catching lightning in a bottle. It thus requires us to be stipulative.

There is a whole spectrum of definitions and views of pedagogy. The study conducted by Thiessen *et al.* on the use of *pedagogy* in academic literature from 2008 to September 2012 shows a myriad of definitions.

> Some pedagogies seem related to, or derived from critical pedagogy… Some are connected to particular processes or qualities…or to causes and concerns… Still others are associated with particular groups in society… And others sometimes use the terms *teaching* and *instruction* as a synonym for pedagogy.[2]

Moreover, referring mainly to Freire and Bruner, Leach and Moon notice that 'those who talk and write most deeply about pedagogy also tend to avoid neat formulations summed up in a tidy phraseology'.[3] But, of course, some did put forward their definition.[4]

I prefer Alexander's definition of pedagogy. He distinguishes teaching from pedagogy: 'Teaching is an act while pedagogy is both act and discourse.' Elsewhere he is more specific and identifies discourse as 'the *ideas*, *values*, and collective *histories* which inform, shape, and explain *the act*'.[5] For him, even if these two are distinguishable, they are nonetheless 'inseparable' and 'interdependent'.[6]

1 P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, 1970)

2 Thiessen *et al.,* 'Perspectives on Pedagogy', *Curriculum Inquiry*, 43(1) (2013), 2–3.

3 J. Leach and B. Moon, *The Power of Pedagogy,* (London, 2008), 6.

4 P. Murphy, 'Defining Pedagogy' in P. Murphy and C.V. Gipps (eds.), *Equity in the Classroom: Towards Effective Pedagogy for Girls and Boys* (Paris, 1996); C. Watkins and P. Mortimore, 'Pedagogy: What do we know?' in P. Mortimore (ed.), *Understanding pedagogy and its impact on learning* (London, 1999); R.J. Alexander, 'Still no pedagogy? Principle, pragmatism and compliance in primary education', *Cambridge Journal of Education,* 34(1), (2004), 7–33; D. Hamilton, 'Blurred in translation: Reflections on pedagogy in public education', *Pedagogy, Culture & Society,* 17(1), (2009), 5–16; Thiessen *et al.* (2013).

5 R.J. Alexander, 'Culture, dialogue and learning: Notes on an emerging pedagogy', Keynote address, International Association for Cognitive Education and Psychology Conference, University of Durham (UK), 12 July 2005.

6 Id., 'Border Crossings: Towards a comparative pedagogy, *Comparative Education*, 37(4), (2001).

The reason for this preference is twofold. Firstly his definition of pedagogy has been adopted by a number of high-profile scholars.[7] Secondly, it underlines the link between the *act* of teaching to the *discourse* informing it. It therefore promotes the analysis of the act of teaching by superimposing it on the ideas, values, and collective histories which not only inform and shape it but also explain it. In other words it guides us in our analysis of teaching by studying it through a socio-historical lens.

This is a crucial point for pedagology. Teaching, as any other human activity, cannot be studied in a vacuum, on its own. Even though classrooms are micro-cultures, marked with their own languages, ethos, and rule expectations, they are microcosms as well. The cultural baggage of teachers and their students is not left by the school gate or classroom door. In the classroom, culture and teaching (and learning) do not merely meet but become intertwined to such an extent that they become one: pedagogy. It is for this reason that, if we really want to acquire a deep understanding of the act of teaching we are observing, we need to view it with a cultural lens.

Of course, similarly to pedagogy, there is a whole spectrum of definitions for culture. So we need to be stipulative here as well. My understanding of culture is that it is 'a system of *inherited* conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men (sic) communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitude about life'.[8] In my *Malta+5* study, I sought to gather insights on the act of teaching through a historical lens.[9] But it can also be studied through the help of other lenses, like that of sociology.

Thus pedagology requires researchers to triangulate 'between' and 'within' methods, as explained by McFee.[10] We need to gather and record data from the field through observation notes, audio and/or video recordings, photographs, and interviews. But we also need to study education policies and curricula issued along the years and, depending

7 R. Dale, 'Pedagogy and cultural convergence' in H. Daniels, H. Lauder, and J. Porter (eds.), *Educational Theories, Cultures and Learning: A critical perspective* (New York, 2009), 27–38; A. Pollard, *Professionalism and pedagogy: A contemporary opportunity* (London, 2010).

8 C.J. Geertz, *The interpretation of Cultures: Selected essays* (New York, 1973), 89.

9 R. Peresso, 'Pedagogies in Primary Schooling', unpublished MA thesis (2013) https://www.academia.edu/11821959/Pedagogies_in_Primary_Schooling_An_International_Comparative_Study

10 G. McFee, 'Triangulation in Research: Two Confusions, *Education Research*, 34(3), (1992).

on the particular cultural lens one uses, any other pertinent documents and studies to inform and aid our analysis of the act of teaching.

A framework for studying teaching

The framework I am going to present is the one developed by Alexander for his *Five Cultures* study.[11] It is the culmination of Alexander's rich experience in observing lessons and in conducting research projects.[12] I am presenting this framework because it has received extremely good reviews by academics from all over the western world, but also because it is a framework I am very familiar with as I have adopted it for my own study in local classrooms.

The adoption of this model proved to be very helpful during classroom observations and analysis. It served the function of a railway track, in that it helped me stay on course, without wandering too far, and to remain focused on the objective of my research project, which was to gain insights into the pedagogical culture of primary teachers in Maltese state schools.

Taking the lead from Edmund Leach, Alexander's framework 'reduce[s] teaching to its barest essentials'.[13] It does it by first identifying two universal propositions of teaching and then expanding them further.

Universal proposition 1

- Teaching, in any setting, is the act of using method x to enable pupils to learn y.[14]

But 'method' needs to be further analysed into categories. So Alexander suggests that a teaching method combines '*tasks, activities, interactions*, and *judgements*'.[15] Moreover, the act of teaching inevitably needs a *frame* and *form*.[16]

11 R.J. Alexander, *Culture and Pedagogy: International Comparisons in Primary Education* (Oxford, 2001).
12 A. Little, 'Book symposium – Culture and Pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education, *Comparative Education*, 36(3), (2003).
13 E. Leach, 'Models', *New Society* (June 1964); Alexander, *Culture and Pedagogy*, 323.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 324.
16 Ibid.

Universal proposition 2

• Teaching has structure and form; it is situated in and governed by space, time and patterns of pupil organisation; and it is undertaken for a purpose.[17] This framework is depicted in the table below. It shows the connections between the frame, the form, and the act of teaching as identified by Alexander.

Frame	**Form**	**Act**
Space		Task
Pupil organization		Activity
Time	Lesson	
Curriculum		Interaction
Routine, rule, and ritual		Judgement

Table 1. A generic model for the analysis of teaching[18]

After this general overview of the framework, we now delve into each item in greater detail.

Space and pupil organization

Space or classroom ambience is important for pedagology because it reveals a lot in terms of the 'character and atmosphere of a place'. This can be studied through the consideration of pupils' tables and chairs, whiteboard, and textbooks – paraphernalia that can be found in every classroom. An analysis of how they are used sheds light on the norms, values, beliefs, and ideology underpinning the act of teaching.

For instance, students' seating arranged in rows or u-shaped is an indication of a pedagogy governed by a collective ideology, while group work seating or a classroom arranged in learning stations evidences a more individualistic ideology. Pedagologists should look deeper though, as incongruence between seating arrangement and the ideology underpinning teaching taking place inside that classroom is not uncommon.[19]

17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 325.
19 M. Galton *et al., Inside the Primary Classroom: 20 Years On* (London, 1999); Alexander,

Lesson structure

A lesson can have three parts: introduction, development, and conclusion. Yet, while most have an introduction and development, not all have a conclusion.[20]

Lesson introductions can be *procedural* (involving a sequence of technical detail), *instructional* (involving teaching), or a mixture of both. The same applies to conclusions though, in this case, when instructional they are very often *recapitulatory* in nature.

The central part of the lesson, on the other hand, can be either *unitary* or *episodic*. It is unitary when it involves a single task. In this case it can be either *closed* – 'when the learning task must be completed before the lesson can move to its next or final stage' – or *open-ended* – when 'the next stage can start whenever the teacher feels it is appropriate to do so'.[21] When episodic, it involves a sequence of several tasks. These can be either *self-contained*, so 'the lesson … [can be] halted at any time, to be resumed the following day or week', or *linked*.[22] While both self-contained and linked tasks can be *cumulative*, the former can also be *reiterative*, while the latter can also be *developmental*.[23]

A bird's-eye-view of classrooms and lessons is important and insightful. But, if we want to really understand pedagogy, we need to closer at the parts of which the lesson is made of. We can start by discussing the analysis the tasks given.

Tasks

Building on the work of Bennet *et al.* on learning, tasks can be classified as done with intention of *accretion*, *restructuring*, *enrichment*, *practice*, and *revision* of knowledge.[24] In essence, this typology makes a distinction between *propositional* (knowing that) and *procedural* (knowing how) knowledge.

Culture and Pedagogy; Peresso.

20 Alexander, *Culture and Pedagogy*; Peresso.

21 Alexander, *Culture and Pedagogy*, 304.

22 Ibid., 300- 1.

23 Ibid.

24 S.N. Bennet *et al.*, *The Quality of Pupil Learning Experiences* (Hove, 1984).

Patricia Alexander *et al.*, on the other hand, discerned the difference between *procedural*, *conceptual*, and *metacognitive* knowledge[25] where procedural is seen as a catch-all for both the acquisition of information and understanding of how such information can be used. On the other hand, understanding of conceptual knowledge is seen as the knowledge of ideas and of principles of definition and classification. Metacognitive knowledge is defined as the knowledge of one's own cognitive process.

Finally Edwards and Mercer distinguish between *principled* and *ritual* knowledge.[26] In specific terms the teaching and learning of rules, formulae, and patterns is *ritual* when students are only taught how to apply them, while it is *principled* when a deeper understanding of the underlying principles is sought. It is important to note, however, that although these two levels of understanding are distinct – ritual leads to replication, principled to understanding and application. It is important to stress that they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they can be complementary, as the former can lead to the latter.

Indeed, the empirical data gathered in *Malta+5* shows that most teachers aim to lead their pupils to a principled understanding of the concepts covered in class. The differences lie in the methods by which teachers seek to achieve such understanding. Maltese teachers seek to attain it by building on a solid base of ritual understanding, but others, like the English and Michigan teachers studied by Alexander evidently start working immediately on the attainment of principled understanding.[27]

Activities

But tasks need to be accompanied by activities:

> … the learning activity is the task's practical counterpart, or the means through which the teacher intends the child to make the required conceptual advance from what was learned previously to what must be learned now.[28]

25 P. Alexander *et al.*, 'Coming to terms: how researchers in learning and literacy talk about knowledge, *Review of Educational Research*, 61(3) (1991).

26 D. Edwards and N. Mercer, *Common knowledge: the development of understanding in the classroom* (London, 1987).

27 Alexander, *Culture and Pedagogy.*

28 Ibid., 351.

In *Malta+5* there were various activities which the Maltese teachers required their pupils to do. The most common were: answering questions, listening/looking, talking to the class, working from the interactive whiteboard, working from a textbook, writing on the interactive whiteboard, and writing at their desk. Then there were less common activities: drawing/painting, playing games, reading to the class, using task-specific apparatus, and working from worksheets. Finally there were activities whose frequency of observation was very low: moving for task purposes, self- and peer-assessment, collaborating in pairs, or in groups, talking as class/chanting, talking to their teacher.

Judgements

Two important judgements made by teachers are with regard to two notions that, although distinct from each other, are also closely interrelated: differentiation and assessment.

> Differentiation is the process of identifying differences in children as a basis for making decisions about where, what and how they should be taught. Assessment carries on from where differentiation leaves off: it judges how and what children have learned. However, there is also a feedback loop from assessment because it also provides the evidential basis for differentiation.[29]

Starting from differentiation, there are five criteria on which it can take place in class: *age*, *ability*, *special needs*, *behaviour*, and *gender*. Certain aspects of these criteria are determined by policy-makers. However, teachers are not mere automatons and, unless operating in a very strict centralized system, are generally free to apply policies according to their own ideology, values and practical constraints.

There are then six forms and contexts of differentiation which need to be studied. Pupils can be differentiated by subject – through either setting or streaming. They can be also differentiated by *task*, *activity*, *seating or grouping*, *time and attention*, or by *outcome*. Most of these forms and contexts can be further divided into sub-groupings, as indicated in the figure below.

29 Ibid., 356.

Assessment

As already indicated, assessment feeds differentiation but is also a distinct judgement every teacher makes. When it comes to assessment during lessons, teachers have to decide on three main notions: *form, agency*, and *criteria*.

Assessment can take the form of oral or written. The former can be either public or private, while the latter is generally private. It can be carried out by the teacher, the pupil herself (self-assessment), or other pupils (peer assessment). While with regards to criteria, it can be somewhere on a continuum of a strongly cognitive emphasis at one end and a strongly affective/social emphasis at the other hand, and on a continuum of convergence/precision versus divergence/creativity.

Routines, rules, and rituals

It has already been underlined that classes are a window on the society they are situated in. But it has also been stressed they are also micro-cultures in their own right. As such, *routines* develop, which the pupils and their teacher get accustomed to. *Rules* are established, as well as *rituals* through which teachers and teaching convey messages and values.

A *routine* is a procedure that becomes custom through habit and use. A *rule* is an order which can be imposed by the leader, in this case the teacher, or can be established after an exercise of wider consultation and possibly consensus, but a rule must always be obeyed. If it is not, sanctions will be invoked. A *ritual*, on the other hand, signifies a prescribed and established ceremony. These three are distinct from each other but can also be intertwined. For instance, once rules are accepted and adhered to without the need of any reminding, they verge into routines but, as soon as routines or rituals need to be enforced, they shift towards being rules again. Moreover, when rules are soft, they also verge on routines. Furthermore, for rituals and routines to be established, rules have to be invoked. That is why it is suggested that these three notions be tackled together.

For a thorough study of rules, rituals, and routines (RRRs), we need to differentiate between various categories. Synthesizing from his *Five*

Cultures data and the research done by Wragg, Alexander identifies five categories.[30] They are: temporal, procedural, behavioural, interactive, linguistic, and curricular.

Temporal RRRs deal with time in terms of class timetables, the structure of the school year, week, and day and the temporal structure of lessons. *Procedural* RRRs deal mainly with how children should conduct themselves in relation to classroom space, equipment, and materials and to the tasks and activities set. *Behavioural* RRRs are concerned with pupils' conduct. *Interactive* RRRs are mainly concerned with turn taking. *Linguistic* RRRs govern the content of classroom interaction, as opposed to its social dynamics. *Curricular* RRRs set the conceptual boundaries and requirements for the subjects taught and learned.

Interactions

The analysis of the three Rs involves studying the manner they are manifested through teacher-pupil interactions. But there is more to analyse and consider when studying interactions that occur in the classroom. We can study *interaction participants, utterance length, interaction mode*, and *interaction and lesson stage.* We will tackle each one of them in some detail. But it is important to note beforehand that, while the study of the parts of the lesson discussed so far involved the employment of a qualitative methodology, the study of interactions requires the researcher painstakingly to count and time the various types of interactions. Thus a more quantitative approach is required.

Generally speaking, in the classroom, teachers and pupils are the only possible *interaction participants.* However, the presence of a teacher and a number of pupils allows a number of different combinations. We can divide them into two main groups: those involving the teacher and pupils and those between pupils only. The former can be divided into three further categories: teacher and class (T–C); teacher and group (T–G); and teacher and individual (T–I). Those between pupils can also be divided into three categories on similar lines: individual and class (I–C); individual and group (I–G); and individual and another individual (I–I). The table below is one way how the data of interaction participants can be presented. Each box can be filled by using a frequency scale of 0 to 5.

30 E.C. Wragg, *Primary Teaching Skills* (London, 1993); Alexander, *Culture and Pedagogy*.

	Interactions involving both teachers and pupils			*Interactions involving pupils only*		
	T-C	T-G	T-I	I-C	I-G	I-I
Class 1						
Class 2						
Class 3						

Table 2 Balance of interactions in primary school lessons

5 = most of the interactions observed
4 = around two-thirds to three-quarters of the interactions observed
3 = about half of the interaction observed
2 = around one quarter or one-third of the interactions observed
1 = a small proportion of the interactions observed
0 = no such interactions observed

It is important to underline that in *Malta+5* T-C interactions represented the teacher's direct instruction to the whole class and also to individual pupils within the context of whole-class teaching. This decision was taken because, whenever the latter occurred, the interaction was always public and teachers expected the other pupils to listen attentively to what was being said. T-I interactions, on the other hand, represent interactions with individuals in the context of either monitoring or extended individual attention.

Utterance length – the length of time a person speaks before he stops or is interrupted – can be presented in the table below.

	Utterance length in seconds			
	Teachers		Pupils	
	Range	Mean	Range	Mean
Class 1				
Class 2				
Class 2				

Table 3 Teacher and pupil utterance length

There are four main types of *interaction modes* one can expect to find in a classroom. These are: *instruction*, *monitoring*, *routine*, and

discipline. The frequency of every mode can be presented in a table like the one underneath. Data can be presented on a frequency scale, say 0–4.

	Instruction	*Monitoring*	*Routine*	*Discipline*	*Other*
Class 1					
Class 2					
Class 2					

Table 4. Balance of teachers' different interaction purposes in primary classrooms

Very often the nature of interaction changes as the lesson progresses from start to finish. It is therefore very pertinent to analyse *interactions and lesson stage*. Each lesson should be divided into the different stages that make the whole and then it should be analysed in detail on every dimension outlined above.

Lesson stage	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*Average*
Interaction							
	T–C						
	T–G						
	T–I						
	I–C						
	I–G/I						
	I–T						
Teacher-interaction	Task						
	Routine						
	Discipline						
	Admin						
	Other						

Table 5. The changing pattern of interaction during a lesson

Time

There are four main notions related to time which we can focus on. These are: *lesson length, time on task,* and *pace*.

The analysis of *lesson length* can include answering important questions such as: Who determines it? Does lesson length differ by subject and/or topic? Why does this happen?

The inclusion of *time on task* is important for an investigation on time in the classroom as Bennet's study showed that 'the relationship between time and learning is strong and consistent'.[31] One needs to look deeper however, as the relationship between learning and time is not a simple causal one. As Wragg indicates, we need to consider 'time assigned to a subject', 'time actually spent on task', 'time spent on a worthwhile task', and 'time spent on task with some degree of success'.[32] We therefore need to look deep into how pupils spend their time in class.

Finally, we can study *pace.* This we can do by considering the following aspects:

- Organizational pace – the speed at which lesson preparations, introductions, transitions, and conclusions are handled.
- Task pace – The speed at which learning tasks and their contingent activities are undertaken.
- Interactive pace – the pace of teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil exchanges, and contingent factors such as maintaining focus and the handling of cues and turns.
- Cognitive or semantic pace – the speed at which conceptual ground is covered in classroom interaction or the ratio of new material to old and of task demand to task outcome.
- Learning pace – how fast pupils actually learn.[33]

31 S.N. Bennett, 'Managing time', in C. Desforges (ed.), *An Introduction to Teaching* (Oxford, 1995), 279.
32 Wragg, 25.
33 R.J. Alexander, Culture and Pedagogy, 424.

Conclusion

This framework has enabled me to gather insights and shed light on pedagogy in Maltese primary schools. There is not enough space, nor is it the scope of this paper to outline the findings of my *Malta+5* study. However, if I were to condense it in one sentence I would say that it is predominantly teacher-centred, is solidly underpinned by segmented-collectivism, and is one that encourages uniformity at all levels. But it is not complete, nor could it ever be. To use an Indian tale, I sought to feel as many parts of the elephant as I possibly could, but the elephant is truly enormous. No blind man alone can ever describe it fully. However, the combined effort of a sufficient number of blind persons can give us a much clearer picture.

It is therefore hoped that more academics bite the methodological bullet and study pedagogy in Maltese primary schools. As, if we are to improve teaching (and learning) we must first have a clear understanding of the values, historic continuities and ideology underpinning contemporary practice. Only then will we be in a position to come up with effective and sustainable policies and strategies that enable us to give our pupils a more meaningful education, one that is indeed relevant to the realities of the century we are living in.

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