

## CONFERENCE REPORT

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### Teacher education research in the Mediterranean conference – A reflection

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#### Introduction

Freire (2001) often speaks of ‘unfinishedness’ – a sense of incompleteness that evokes a “permanent movement of search” (Freire, 2001 p.57). To tap this ‘unfinishedness, I started a new course of study, attended various talks and participated in a number of conferences. One of these conferences was organised by the Faculty of Education, University of Malta, entitled ‘*Teacher Education and Educational Research in the Mediterranean*’ held between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of June 2018. It was an engaging two-day conference which brought together educators, researchers and policy makers who discussed various education themes. I will start this article by introducing the chosen ten speakers who tackled those themes directly related to my dissertation. Then, I will identify five themes, discuss and reflect on them through the lens of various authors and the chosen speakers’ contribution.

To share my reflections, I was inspired by Freire’s (2014) concept of the transformative “*process of acting-and-thinking, speaking-and-writing*” (p.55). Through this reflective journal, I will utilise a critical lens to denote the pros and cons of each theme. I will refer to the policy ‘*Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools*’ (OECD, 2012) as *Education 2012* and the policy ‘*Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action towards Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Lifelong Learning for All*’ (UNESCO, 2015) as *Education 2030*.

## **The Speakers**

There were ten speakers who tackled some of the themes related to my dissertation. Carmel Borg (University of Malta) provided a passionate contribution and interesting reflection on social justice and teacher education, enticed by personal experience and by the literary work of Paulo Freire. Marilyn Cochran-Smith (Boston College, USA) spoke about the directions or 'turns' of teacher education reforms within her country. Student-teacher education was central to Tracey Connolly's (University College, Cork, Ireland) speech. Her love for this profession was evident throughout her contribution. D. W. Livingstone's (University of Toronto, Canada) contribution brought into perspective the challenges faced by teachers in their working environment and focused on teachers' continuous learning and job control. André Elias Mazawi (University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada) spoke animatedly about the broad historical context within educational research. I was intrigued by the informative contribution of Francois Mifsud (University of Malta) who linked inclusion, democracy, and religious education with subtle references to Paulo Freire's work.

Milosh Raykov (University of Malta) provided an engaging speech on the importance of teacher knowledge and lifelong learning. I found Yael Shalem and Steph Allias' (University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg) informative presentation compelling - it highlighted the importance of teacher knowledge in relation to teacher development and their work. Stefania Ulivieri Stiozzi (Università degli Studi Milano Bicocca, Italy) described enthusiastically her case study on teachers' reactions to students with behavioural problems and the importance of teamwork. Finally, I enjoyed Silvia Zanazzi's (Sapienza Università, Rome, Italy) well-organised contribution on inclusive education and her top-down and bottom-up inclusive cultures.

## **Theme identification and reflection**

As I flicked through my conference notes, I identified five themes directly related to my dissertation: equity and quality in education, inclusive education, social justice, teacher education, and teachers' challenging working conditions. I will discuss these themes, supporting my reflections with the contribution of the selected conference guest speakers and various authors.

## Equity and quality in education

Education was the central theme of this conference. Simons, Olssen & Peters (2009b) write that education must be defined within the “fields of learning and work” (p.37). So first, I will define education and then proceed to discuss equity and quality in education.

Dewey (1997) defines education as the means to provide children with the skills and the instructive materials needed for a responsible future life. Hence, education fosters the “expression and cultivation of individuality” (Dewey, 1997 p.18), the “learning through experience” (ibid p.18) and the “making the most of the opportunities” (ibid p.19) that eventually will lead to work. It is an education that liberates. Milani (2005) writes:

*“Quando avete buttato nel mondo d’oggi un ragazzo senza istruzione avete buttato in cielo un passerotto senza ali”* (p.13). [When you thrust a child without education in today’s world it is like throwing a sparrow in the sky without its wings.]

So I believe that an equitable and quality education provides these ‘wings’. Cochran-Smith spoke about the importance of equity which underlies most educational reforms. Equity can be described as a process with a moral dimension which recognises and addresses the different aptitudes and needs. *Education 2030’s* approach reflects this kind of equity which promotes the liberation from social constraints. This kind of education includes “personalised learning at its heart, a system where every child matters, where careful attention is paid to individual learning styles, motivations, and needs” (Ministry of Education, Youth & Employment [MEYE], 2005 p.62). Hence, equity is not providing every student with the same education opportunity and method, that is, the ‘one size fits all’ model, but an education that caters for “different educational needs” (OECD, 2012 p.17). An equitable education encompasses physical, social, economic, emotional, gender, and ethnical needs (OECD, 2012). This reminds me of what Lorenzo Milani (2005) wrote:

*“Vuol dire mettere tutti in condizione di raggiungere, quando sono capaci, quella che è la naturale vocazione della loro persona”* (p.94). [It means placing everybody in that condition to reach, what they are capable of according their natural personal vocation.]

*Education 2012’s* definition of equity encompass fairness (i.e. the elimination of what hinders educational ability) and inclusion (the acquirement of the

basic skills) that will lead all citizens to be economically viable (Ainscow, 2016). Here, education is seen as the “practice to make society by making the child” (Popkewitz, 2009 p.535) which ties in with the concept of school effectiveness equating to academic achievement and resource allocation that lead to economic viability. Cochran-Smith described this as ‘thin equity’ which puts aside the critical perspective of education. This restrictive perspective is influenced by neoliberalism, an ideology that revolves around market and economic growth, individual responsibility, and accountability (Ball, 1998 & 2008; Van Heertum, 2009). As a result, equity becomes a measurable concept in terms of resiliency, resource allocation, and school effectiveness (*Education 2012*).

Resiliency can be defined as “the capacity to endure and succeed in adversity” (Snyder & Lopez, 2007 p.428) and education needs to equip both educands and educators with those skills necessary to cope with today’s educational challenges. The provision of resources can promote equity by enhancing school effectiveness which equates to higher academic achievement especially in areas where there are disadvantaged students (*Education 2012*). These are students who come from low socio-economic status (SES) families, where this status depends on the level of “education, wealth, income, and occupation of parents, number of children, or other aspects related to family structure” (Jackson, 2016 p.205). It was Carmel Borg who spoke about how schools, students, and their families can benefit if they are provided with equitable resources, that is, resources that respond to their particular needs.

When speaking of resources, one must not focus only on material or financial aids. Ulivieri Stiozzi referred to time as an important resource that needs to be taken into consideration even in policy-making. In her research, Ulivieri Stiozzi found that teachers have limited time to work in groups and to think together: this is vital for a collaborative teaching approach. Meanwhile, Shalem and Allias warned us that although resources can improve equity, one must keep in mind two important factors. First, resources can be a source of control over teacher’s creativity and a means to pass on ideologies that may go against the true nature of holistic education (since they may only promote the economic perspective). Second, resources are ineffective if teachers are not knowledgeable, not only in how to use them, but also in their knowledge repertoire about what and how they teach: an important aspect of quality education and school effectiveness.

Cochran-Smith considered quality education as the means to increase school effectiveness where teaching becomes an economic viability (a rather neoliberal view). On the same train of thought, *Education 2012* suggests that school effectiveness can be achieved by quality education through the pruning of irrelevant teaching practices and the introduction of new methods such as standardized tests. Sultana (2008) warns us that schools are “complex institutions embedded in an intricate web of relations” (p.14) and contexts. We must be aware that what works in one country may not yield satisfying results in another. Quality education should not obsess with accountability and performance but should focus on the development of self and others (Apple, 2009, Biesta, 2009). Statements such as “we want all children to succeed” (MEYE, 2005 p. xix) and every student is “entitled to a quality education experience” (Ministry of Education and Employment [MEE], 2012 p.32) are at the heart of quality education that offers different ways for students to improve their abilities, foster values, social commitment, and environmental sustainability (*Education 2030*).

Equitable and quality education must be in symbiosis with its social and cultural context of its learning community (Alexander, 2012). This type of education equips both educators and educands with all that is needed to face today’s challenging education practice. Seligman (2011) advises “...that schools could, without compromising either, teach both the skills of well-being and the skills of achievement” (p.78). This practice promotes school effectiveness and resilience within a holistic conception. Equity and quality education need to be practiced since only action can breathe life into inspiring words or else they remain mere illusions.

### **Inclusive education**

Equity and inclusion are the “cornerstone of a transformative education” (UNESCO, 2015 p. iv), promoting student development and social growth, whatever their abilities, SES, and cultural contexts are. Inclusive education is not just integration, “assimilation or accommodation” (Barton, 2003 p.12) but it enables “all students to participate in the life of mainstream institutions” (Spiteri et al., 2005 p.53) within a changed mentality and environment.

Inclusion is different from assimilation or integration. Assimilation is just accepting the fact that there are diverse students within the school building who have different beliefs, SES, educational, and emotional needs. Integration

implies providing equal opportunities for all students but still keeping diverse students separate (Bartolo et al., 2002). Yet true inclusion is a whole school experience where everyone belongs, a team effort, and a collaboration between educators and educands who are not only concerned with learning abilities (Bartolo et al. 2016). This education implies a change in the school environment and mentality (Bartolo et al., 2007) and is concerned with the “pursuit of equity, social justice, and non-discrimination” (Barton, 2003 p.22). Chapman et al. (2011) includes the provision for a hospitable environment (both physical access as well as emotional support) to stress that “inclusion means valuing everyone” (p.12). Francois Mifsud spoke of inclusion as the encounter and celebration with diversity as it translates itself into a democratic learning opportunity. This encounter with ‘otherness’ helps us to transform. Yet I ask: ‘Who should be included?’ UNESCO (2015) answers as such:

*“All people, irrespective of sex, age, race, colour, ethnicity, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property or birth, as well as persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples, and children and youth, especially those in vulnerable situations or other status...” (p.4).*

Mifsud described how a democratic educational setting is based on principles of equity, cultural awareness (through the encounter of the other, one learns about oneself), and freedom. He stressed that there is no pedagogy if there is no inclusion. Within such context, teaching is no longer knowledge transfer but a possibility to create knowledge, an encounter with the unfamiliar, and a desire to learn. This reminds me of Mason’s (2016) cultural pluralist approach which accepts the fact that people possess different ideas, relationships, languages, and symbolic forms. This cultural capital is similar to “constellations of interconnected aesthetic values linked to social status” (Jackson, 2016 p.204).

According to Freire (2014) cultural pluralism is not just a “simple juxtaposition of cultures” (p.146) but requires hard work and a belief in unity in diversity. Simons, Olssen & Peters (2009b) suggest that the educator needs to be familiar with the perceptions and behaviours of the students’ families and peer groups (i.e. habitus). The teacher needs “to understand how those persons do their reading of the world” (Freire, 2014, p.97). As the diversity of cultures are respected, the challenges, realities, and inequalities are revealed (Cribb & Gerwitz, 2009; Freire, 2014). For this reason, *Education 2012* recommends a “culturally responsive instruction” (OECD, 2012 p.140) that

considers all these factors. So inclusive education should be aware of prejudice that leads to discrimination and the problematization of people. So what kind of inclusive culture should one adopt?

Silvia Zanazzi spoke about a bottom-up inclusive culture which is preferred over a top-down one. The latter happens when the school management is effective in communicating to stakeholders (parents, teacher, students...) the importance of solidarity without modifying syllabi or decreasing the level of skills and competence of other students. Diversely, the bottom-up inclusive culture promotes support, professionalism, and motivation; stressing individualised learning activities that foster creativity and a variety of education opportunities. This kind of culture can be supported through proactive teachers, peer support groups, and motivated specialised teacher assistants who can meet the needs of all children. Ulivieri Stiozzi stated that often teachers take a defensive position to avoid the responsibility of including 'difficult' students, claiming that they lack the skills and time. Additionally, Mohd Ali et al. (2006) observe that teachers refrain from asking for guidance on inclusion, highlighting their "lack of teamwork" (p.39). I agree with Ulivieri Stiozzi who firmly accentuated the benefits of working together, sharing knowledge and experience, and believing we do not need to face alone the challenges of inclusive education.

Inclusive education can only function if teachers are trained to understand its implications and practice (Callus & Farrugia, 2013). Zanazzi encouraged teachers to collaborate and help each other so that the focus is not on the difficulty of inclusive education but rather on the celebration of diversity and social justice.

### **Social justice**

Education must support a "rights-based approach" (UNESCO, 2015 p.6). Giroux (2003) sustains that education links "social justice and economic democracy with human rights, the right to education, health, research, art, and work" (p.40). According to Mifsud, democracy is not just a form of government but a way of living a conjoint communicated experience that takes in consideration the actions and interests of others.

Social justice affirms the concept of inclusion by highlighting the "entitlement of all children to an education that attended to their particular needs" (Darmanin, 2013 p.42). Carmel Borg defined social justice as an emotional

attachment that promotes collegiality, diversity, and a language of critique. Unfortunately, according to Borg, the social justice agenda in the Maltese education system is still a private act and is not linked to the public or global reality. Shapiro (2016) writes: “Whatever is said about friendship, sharing, and caring in our schools and classrooms, the real effect of the curriculum is to teach the centrality of competition, and individualism in our social relations” (p.41). Curricula often verge towards the neoliberal view of managerialism and individualism. A social justice education offers an interrogation in teacher and student formation in relation to their socioeconomic reality.

Concurrently, Borg insisted that pedagogy needs to promote political agency, an ethical dialogue (that explores the effects of neoliberalism), and the reclamation of “a language of power” (Giroux, 2003 p.53). It must be a pedagogy that offers a language of possibility and critique (Giroux, 1997). The language of critique is a “discourse of freedom and social responsibility” (Giroux, 1997 p.222) that engages a responsible dialogue in favour of social rights. The language of possibility enables “risky thoughts, engages a project of hope” (Giroux, 1997 p.223) that promotes education for a just world. Hence critical pedagogy enables students and teachers to discuss their concerns respectfully as active citizens (Giroux, 1997). Borg stated that education needs to re-centre its social justice agenda since up till now it has just been an individual act.

Giroux (1997) believes that schools can be “webs of solidarity” (p.106) that encourage the active practice of social justice. Freire (1996) speaks of this praxis as a means to transform oneself in a historical-social person. Educators become “beings of praxis, therefore, also beings of transformation, of re-creation, and of reinvention” (Freire, 2007 p.17). Teachers break off from “commodified identities” (McLaren, 2001 p.122) associated with neoliberalism as they become aware of what manipulates education. After all education is the “vehicle for both individual and societal development, growth, and transformation” (Perry, 2009 p.428) which promotes democracy. Darmanin (1997) maintains that: “Education is the desire to get close to the life-experience of people/subjects, and to think of education as a project for liberation” (p.410). This reflection ties beautifully with Freire’s (2007) belief that teaching is a political act, supported through reflective practices, hope, and the sharing of power that ropes in various voices and identities.



A social justice agenda sustains teacher identity. Vulliamy (2004) writes that teacher identity is often built on the narrow perspective of “school effectiveness” (p.267) and students’ academic achievement. In my search, I discovered that hope has an “important role in the development of teacher identity” (Eren & Yeşilbursa, 2017 p.253) as it supports all the facets of teaching including classroom management and curriculum development. So how do hope, identity, and social justice relate to each other? Giroux (2003) answers this by stating that: “Hope is civic education made concrete in the translation of theory into practice, ethics into action, and compassion into social justice” (p.43). I believe this is the core of a pedagogy of hope (Freire, 2014). As teachers become “critically engaged political agents” (Giroux, 2003 p.62), they educate their hope and realise that politics is “a pedagogical and performative act” (*ibid* p.61) upon which they can reflect and intervene. I believe that our classrooms can become a loving, hopeful, and just spaces.

Giroux (2000) writes that: “Schools are an important indicator of the well-being of a democratic society” (p.83). As part of the community, schools can serve as the barometer of civic values, critical thinking, and the transformation of inequities (Giroux, 2000) but is not as effective in bringing change as the business, political, and media communities (unfortunately, these have a stronger impact on what happens in society and can provide the breeding ground for social injustice). On this note, Borg encouraged us to address all forms of discrimination and social oppression. This is the “public role of education” (Simons, Olssen & Peters, 2009a p.17) as it acclaims its political and cultural role in its endeavour for social justice. It is an education with “a moral and legal right” (Menashy, 2012 p.3) highlighting its intrinsic and instrumental value. Social justice education involves a language of race, gender, ability, and social class – a discovery of how we treat the self and the other. Freire (2004) speaks of this important discovery without which: “We would not be capable of being educated but simply of being trained” (p.108). A social justice education framework “acknowledges and respects individual differences” (MEE, 2012 p. 32). It is through this affirmation and celebration of differences, that is, a “social justice perspective” (Darmanin, 2013 p.42) that we can ensure the entitlement of inclusive education.

Practising a social justice education requires courage: this implies being open to new ideas and being a gift to others. Freire (2005) encourages us to educate our fears, face challenges, and difficulties by “not allowing that fear to persuade us to quit” (p.50).

## Teacher education

The application of inclusive quality education entails the teachers' ability and knowledge to translate it in their daily practices and their training. Connolly sustained that teacher education has revolved around an economy-oriented policy that has restricted collegiality, dialogue or collaboration. According to Cochran-Smith this kind of teacher education reflected an individualist equity, supported by policies that only focus on accountability resulting in the corruption of teacher education. Through her speech, Cochran-Smith examined teacher training through six 'turns' or directions: global, policy, accountability, university, practice, and critical.

Cochran-Smith explained how global knowledge economy gave rise to the global turn in teacher education. Within this "powerful engine for economic growth and vitality" (Torres & Van Heertum, 2009 p.154) knowledge loses its emancipatory aspect and is transformed to a "cultural and informational interchange" i.e. an object of economic power (Vulliamy, 2004 p.264). This "information revolution" (Alexander, 2000 p.69) threatens inclusive equitable education by increasing marginalisation of those seen as incapable to contribute towards economic growth (Pongratz, 2009; Ball, 2008). Education's social purpose is side-lined (Ball, 2008) by the notion of education as a "human capital investment" (Simons, Olssen & Peters, 2009b p.37). Lifelong learning becomes a "corporatist agenda" (Pongratz, 2009 p.407), characterised by "rates-of-return analysis" (Robertson, 2009 p.243) focusing on learning about everything but not "learning for a living and living together" (Seddon, 2009 p.273). Learning and teaching become instrumentalised, sacrificed in the name of economy. Within this neoliberal framework, teachers are valued for their economic viability. Their training becomes a "retail commodity" (Ball, 2009b p.85). Borg reacted to this by insisting that teaching is not a technical act but it involves a moral, ethical, political, and an ideological perspective. This should be reflected in education policies that tackle teacher training.

Cochran-Smith's second turn tackled policies on teacher education and initial training. Policies are "space of stories" (Seddon, 2009 p.263) delineating "whatever governments choose to do or not to do" (Young, 2016 p.285). According to Nudzor (2009) policies are aimed at satisfying the needs, aspirations, and hopes of the community. Policies bring change to improve the "'architecture" (Dale, 2009 p.370) of educational systems by determining what is feasible and what is not. Cochran-Smith believes that teacher training

can be improved by getting the right education policy but she did not elaborate. It is Franklin (2005) who proposes what the right education policy should include, that is, “the need for teachers to develop a classroom ethos that promotes a genuine love for learning, a commitment for social justice, and a classroom practice that actively encourages authentic inquiry” (p.251). This proposal does not include performativity as this often equates to academic achievement. Milani (2005) is horrified when achievement is reduced to marks:

*“Però mi fate venire un brivido di freddo nella schiena a pensare che possiate parlare degli uomini come se fossero dei numeri”* (p.95). [So the thought that you could speak of persons as if they were numbers sends shivers down my spine.]

Ball (2009a) regards performativity as the “ugly sister” (p.671) of reform, with its judgmental, controlling “system of terror” (Ball, 2008 p.49). This statement resonates with the ‘new public management’ (NPM) ideology, originating from the market sector and has penetrated “political reform and cultural re-engineering” (Ball, 2008 p.47) of even the education sector. It pushes both educator and educand to be obsessed with performance scores, quality, choice, and competition. Upon reflection, educational achievement should encompass “social, emotional, and creative development” (Black-Hawkins, Florian & Rouse, 2007 p.25). It is not just a matter of performance or accountability.

As Cochran-Smith discussed the premises of the accountability turn on teacher education, I realised that she was holding initial teacher trainers accountable for the effectiveness of their graduates in promoting student achievement – a rather neoliberal take. Biesta (2009) considers accountability as an “antidemocratic strategy that redefines all significant relationships in economic terms” (p.656). Even Vidovich (2009) speaks of the “policy pandemic of educational accountability” (p.562) pointing out how governments and markets influence teacher training, even at university level, with all their rhetoric of accountability and appraisal (Vidovich, 2009; Holmwood, 2014). To counteract this imposition, Cochran-Smith invited universities to provide training programmes that prepare teachers as researchers. She argued that during the university turn, training programmes were too theoretical and lacked a practice-based experience. Connolly built upon Cochran-Smith’s argument stating that there was the need of a professional dialogue between universities and the selected host schools’

community. Connolly believed that learning to teach must be deeply rooted in relationships and professional dialogue. This interaction provides a structural support for student teachers who can observe good professional practice, as they participate in classroom responsibility and non-teaching activities such as engaging with parents and co-professionals. I agree with her reasoning that learning to teach is deeply rooted in relationships and that teamwork encourage the sharing of knowledge and practice.

For the practice turn, Cochran-Smith suggested practice-research-based training to help teachers interpret and generate knowledge through experience. Freire (2001) believes that teachers need to practice a learning-research cycle that processes knowledge through practice, reflection and action, resulting in wisdom and hope. Teachers must have a “political, ethical, and professional responsibility” (Freire, 2005 p.32) for their education formation in combination with “authentic inquiry” (Franklin, 2005 p.251) to promote “a genuine love for learning” (*ibid* p.251). Milosh Raykov insisted that proactive learning must be supported by research and practice. He found that few teachers continue to educate themselves, often choosing passive forms of learning such as seminars. Raykov suggested that teachers need to be enticed by programmes that focus on their needs and interests to reduce their cynical rationalisation on training (Halpin, 2001).

Cochran-Smith’s final turn had a critical perspective that focuses on equity within teacher training. This programme equips teachers with a sense of reflection (Novak et al., 2014) and a commitment to continue learning and providing for equitable education. Csikszentmihalyi (2002) sustains that persons who keep on learning “have strong ties and commitments to other people and to the environment in which they live” (p.10). So this training prepares teachers for the political, cultural and economic challenges in their profession. Cochran-Smith believes that teacher education must encompass a strong equity perspective, which is critical and resists discrimination, poverty, and inequality. By enhancing teacher’s quality of education, teachers are prepared to be committed in staying in challenging schools and in promoting student equity.

Carmel Borg added that teacher formation needs to incorporate a transformative component that helps the educator to engage collectively with the world, to challenge coherence in research and action within an ideological perspective. This reminds me of what Giroux (1997) wrote: “As

transformative intellectuals, teachers need to make clear the nature of the appeals to authority they are using to legitimate their pedagogical practices” (p.105). Giroux (1997) sustains that the teacher needs to have clear political and moral teaching perspectives which do not waver, to stand up to all kinds of oppression, promote social justice, and active political action. According to Borg, teacher education needs to equip educators with those skills that combat the sense of helplessness by the providing a pedagogy of hope that sustains collective engagement of students, colleagues, community, and beyond.

Teacher education is at the core of education. Borg said that “We need to understand what is happening in education with what is happening outside” and teacher training should reflect this situation. Similarly, Cochran-Smith commented that “What teachers know and do influence the achievement of students”, revealing the important relation between teacher’s knowledge and skills and how and what students learn. Teaching is not an ‘easy’ job as it requires continuous learning to be able to face the current challenges of education.

### **Teachers’ challenging working conditions**

While teaching can be a satisfying profession, it is not a “merely a feel-good process” (Freire, 2005 p.6) but it is riddled with challenges. Educators need to reflect and act upon these challenges together with the school community. Support is necessary for the provision of an equitable inclusive education.

In his research, Livingstone found that a heavy workload; limited participation in decision-making, increased competition, and the decreased control over the job were amongst the top challenges of the teaching profession. Apple (2001) comments that teachers have not gained “increased autonomy and professionalism, but intensification” (p.416), sacrificing important values such as “collaboration and solidarity” (Bartolo et al. 2007, p.5). Teachers transform from “professionals into labourers who serve their time and little else” (Curwin, 1992 p.30) as they experience loneliness and “anxiety about what is being, or might be” (Havel, 1992 p.53). Allais and Shalem evidenced this with their research where they found that teachers were reduced to “pedagogic technicians” (Ball, 2009a p.672). Such practice deskilled the teachers and reduced their self-esteem. Kelchetermans (2009) believes that self-esteem empowers and motivates the “proper teacher” (p.715) who is knowledgeable in both theory and practice. Both Livingstone

and Borg agreed that teacher helplessness can be overcome by hope and support.

For Freire (2007, 2014) hope is a central theme in education as it supports the continuous search for consciousness and improvement. In fact, he states that “To me, without hope there is no way we can even start thinking about education” (Freire, 2007 p.87). Hope is multifaceted: it is a state of mind, an inspiration (Havel, 1990), a competence, a strength, self-confidence (Seligman, 2002) and a struggle for social justice (Giroux, 2003). Only through dialogue and support can hope be achieved (Freire, 1996). Borg defined dialogue as a viable pedagogical tool that needs to be authentic i.e. the person retains a sense of authority whilst openly listening to others. Shapiro (2016) writes that teachers are frustrated by “the lack of opportunities for dialogue, critical reflection, and meaningful learning in the classroom” (p.45). On this topic Prof. Mazawi spoke of how the world of words makes the world of things. So dialogue and hope inspire a “revolutionary action [that] is really human, empathetic, loving, communicative, and humble, in order to be liberating” (Freire, 1996 p.152). Giroux (1997) proposes a “language of transformation and hope” (p.227) to overcome the challenges of today’s educational situation. I realise the importance of hope and dialogue, where the ‘word’ is such a powerful construct as illustrated by Milani (2005): “La parola è la chiave fatata che apre ogni porta” (p.19). [The word is the enchanted key that opens every door.]

Another important element is support which can take various forms. Livingstone, Borg and Ulivieri Stiozzi suggested that teachers need to be recognised as truly professionals (Curwin, 1992), provided with benefits such as just wages and control over their work (Goodman, 2002). They need time to be “critical and reflective professionals who are supported to engage with contemporary theory and practice in order to update and improve their pedagogies” (MEE, 2012 p.44). Olssen (2009) states that teachers, like doctors, lawyers, and other professions should not have their practices dictated by others except by their peers. Borg urged teachers to work collectively, to support and trust each other, to share ideas (Chapman et al., 2011), burdens, and practices (Lampert et. al., 2012). Freire (2014) recommends a collaboration built on “dialectical solidarity” (p.96). Connell et al. (1983) adds that “teachers cannot do it all alone” (p.207) but they need the support of the whole school, the parents, and the community (Werts et al. 2013; Levin, 1998). Teachers cannot be held solely responsible for the development of its community

members (as often depicted in the media). Education is a collective responsibility of all community practitioners: it takes a whole village to raise a child.

Challenges will always be there – that is a fact which cannot be denied. I realised (from what I heard during this conference and from the readings that supported this work) that as teachers, we need to have hope and courage to reflect and act pro-actively together to improve the current challenging situation.

### **Afterthought**

As I sit here, writing my last reflections, I realise that I have learnt so much from this conference. Besides gaining knowledge on various topics, I understood the value of a good presentation that enriches both mind and soul (i.e. encouraging reflection and action). Finally I realised the benefits of researchers meeting together to share their information in a formal (during presentation) and informal way (during breaks).

A well delivered presentation conveys a clear message that takes root in the audience's mind. It needs a relevant title accompanied with an introduction that maps the flow of the presentation. I learnt that language must be simple but not simplistic, keeping in mind that there might be persons in the audience who are not familiar with particular concepts. I appreciated the use of real life examples, video materials, and slides that included short phrases. Similarly, I enjoyed those speakers who were enthusiastic, convinced of their work and who provided an organised presentation with enough time for questions. It is not easy to compress years of research within a thirty minute- or one hour-slot. Finally, I realised that providing eye-contact with the audience, rather than racing through prepared notes, helped me to connect with the speaker and the delivered message.

A conference brings researchers and audiences together, offering a fertile ground for the dissemination of knowledge, practice, and further research. This experience was an opportunity for discussion, reflection, and collaboration with some of the contributors, whether formally (during a session) or informally (during breaks, the organised activity, and meal). I confess that I reaped so many benefits thanks to the current course of study that had equipped me with the tools to reflect upon the complex themes set

out by this conference, along with a sense of empowerment that helped me engage in discussion with such great scholars.

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