

# EDUCATORS' CONSTRUCTIONS OF SOCIAL DIVERSITY

Malta as a case study

PhD Thesis  
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Louise Chircop



L-Università  
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# **Educators' constructions of social diversity: Malta as a case study**

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**MA CEMES, B.Ed. (Hons.), PGCE in the teaching of Ethics,  
Dip. In Applied Social Studies (Social Work)**

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# ABSTRACT

Louise Chircop

## **Educators' constructions of social diversity: Malta as a case study**

Schools, reflecting the social changes that are taking place in Maltese society, have become more multi-cultural, multi-faith and multi-ethnic. They receive students from all walks of life, whose different socio-economic status sometimes determines the schools they attend, or the classes in which they are placed. This study explores the yet largely uncharted waters of how Maltese educators construct social diversity and the implications of these constructions on their practices in schools as teachers and administrators.

The study draws on social constructionism as a theoretical framework. I argue that teachers' practices cannot be separated from the visions they have of social diversity and their positions towards it. Their constructions of, and attitudes towards social diversity cannot be taken out of the context in which these have been socialised, nurtured, and perhaps sustained or otherwise challenged. I applied an analytical framework which problematized educators' visions, positionings and practices in relation to social diversity. This framework provided the possibility of analysing educators' practices within the context in which they live. In-depth semi-structured interviews were held with 19 participants hailing from State, Church and Independent schools.

Educators' constructions of social diversity reflected their location as citizens of an island nation, with some of the participants seeking to preserve their visions and traditions of an imagined community while others looking outward and embracing change as something positive. They provided multiple constructions of Maltese society and social diversity, reflecting the geopolitics, history, religion and size of the island. Their practices in school reflected, or sometimes contrasted their convictions on issues of social diversity.

### **Keywords**

educators   social diversity   Malta   social constructions   classroom practices

# Dedication

To my family  
Nothing is more precious

Lil missieri  
L-eroj tiegħi

# Acknowledgements

My name is on the front page of this study, however it would not have been possible without those who surrounded me with advice, support, encouragement, love, chocolate and tea. All of the people mentioned below, played an integral part in my doctoral journey and they merit a special mention.

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# Glossary of Abbreviations

**CDA:** Critical Discourse Analysis

**CPD:** Continuing Professional Development

**EU:** European Union

**IDAHOT:** International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia

**JRS:** Jesuit Refugee Services

**LGBTIQ:** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex and Queer

**LSA:** Learning Support Assistant

**LSE:** Learning Support Educator

**MEP:** Member of the European Parliament

**MGRM:** Malta Gay Rights Movement

**MUT:** Malta Union of Teachers

**NCF:** National Curriculum Framework

**NGO:** Non-Governmental Organisation

**NMC:** National Minimum Curriculum

**ODZ:** Outside Development Zones

**PL:** Labour Party

**PN:** Nationalist Party

**PSCD:** Personal, social and career development

**SMT:** Senior Management Team

**TCN:** Third Country Nationals

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# Chapter 1

## My experience of schooling – positioning myself in the research study

This thesis is about how educators engage with diversity in the classroom, what they think of diversity and how they construct it. Their thoughts surrounding diversity are directly linked to the students' entitlement to an equitable education. This thesis has been long in coming – a study which I impart through my experiences at school, both as a student and then later as a teacher. My post graduate studies have also contributed to my enlightened awareness of diversity in the classroom. I came to realise many things as I grew older and became more knowledgeable about issues such as self-fulfilling prophecies, entitlement in education as well as social justice.

When I was a primary and secondary school student in the 1970s and early 1980s there were primarily two different kinds of schools: state schools which mostly hosted students from working class backgrounds and church schools, where some professionals and middle class parents chose to send their children. There were also two or three private schools for the moneyed elite. I attended state schools throughout my formal schooling. Until age thirteen I attended the local primary and then an area secondary school, where classes were streamed according to the students' perceived academic abilities.



It is only now, through hindsight, that I realise how educators and school administrators tended to have an image of how a student should be academically, socially, and physically. Those who fell within this imagined range of qualities were considered “insiders”. The “insiders” were usually those students who were academically successful, behaved well and whose parents were regarded as respectable members of society. The ‘Others’ were those students who, for some reason or another, fell outside the imagined margins of the range of desirable qualities. These perceptions of the ideal student then resulted in unjust practices, consciously and unconsciously, by educators and administrators. For instance, in the first secondary school I attended, which had a catchment area of a number of villages from the south of Malta, we had the opportunity to meet our guidance teachers to help us choose subjects that would be useful for a future job. These guidance teachers seemed to think that as we came from working class backgrounds it would be fitting that we did not veer too far away from “our roots”. Therefore we were always guided to choose careers such as nurses, but never doctors (considering the fact that at that time nursing did not require a university degree, unlike becoming a doctor). We were encouraged to study subjects that would help us get jobs as clerks or secretaries but it never occurred to these guidance teachers that we also had the ability to become managers. We were the lucky ones, the ones who were considered worthy of getting a good education; the ones who were perceived to be successful students. It is actually ironic that even the ‘good’ students were never encouraged to fulfil their potential – or rather, their full potential was never recognised. Those students who chose needlework and home economics were taken to visit factories and shown production lines as these subjects were perceived to be of a lesser status, chosen by students who scored low marks in exams and who were deemed neither ‘academically successful’ nor “academically promising”. Very often these were the students who moved on to trade schools only to be subsequently channelled to work in factories. Many of our parents worked at the dockyard,

held manual jobs, or were civil servants. While education for most parents was important, they thought that educators always knew best and thus relied on our educators' guidance and advice. Within this context, while my parents did not wish that my siblings and I worked in factories, they never dreamt that I would attend university. They thought that being a civil servant was a secure and ideal job. Thus, we never had anybody to help us overcome the boundaries set by the school.

At the end of my second year at secondary school the Junior Lyceum had just opened its doors. This was a sort of elite state school for those who passed an entry exam. There were only two Junior Lyceums, one for boys and one for girls with approximately 1,000 students in each. Students in this school were regarded as the cream of the crop. Even within this environment of students considered to be 'high achievers', those of us who seemed to be more promising than others were selected and streamed. Notwithstanding, even in such an environment I never heard the word 'university'. During the daily assembly we were all told how important it was to wear the school uniform and to tie our hair back, because when we finished school *the factories in which we would be working* would demand such behaviour and we had to start training ourselves from school to such rigorous discipline. Therefore, even in a school that had been created to host the most academically inclined students, the discourse did not change much. The difference between the school and the local area secondary was that the Junior Lyceum had students from all walks of life. For the first time in our lives, we shared desks with students whose parents were doctors, businessmen, and lawyers. They had already joined the school with the idea of making something of their lives, and we watched in awe as we observed their confidence and high self-esteem. Most of the students from state schools, on the other hand, felt a sense of inferiority, even though academically we were just as good. At the time, I did not recognise this difference between students coming from Church

schools and those coming from State schools as something instilled in us students by our respective schools.

Josanne Cassar (2011), a local commentator and freelance writer, captured this idea of one being superior if one attended a Church or private school in one of her blogs where she discussed whether attending a state, church or independent school influences future career aspirations. She wrote,

Another acquaintance described how it was drummed into her by the nuns at St Joseph's Sliema that "your parents love you very, very much for sending you to a church school", the implication being that parents who send their children to government schools did not really love them.

The blogger asked some Maltese personalities who are involved in NGOs, literary circles, theatre and business about their school experiences. In the same blog mentioned above, Astrid Vella (2011), an environmental activist who attended The Sacred Heart Convent, said,

The nuns always made it clear to us that we could be whatever we aspired to be . . . We were not taught secretarial skills, instead we had a debating society where we learnt to stand up for our convictions and practice public speaking.

Many of those who attended Church or Independent schools considered the school as influencing their career choices as opposed to those attending state schools. The latter usually had much less to say about their schools, although they did not speak negatively of their experiences. The anecdotes above, together with my experience at school, have led me to realize that the ethos of state schools, Church and independent schools are different in one way and similar in another. The ethos of schools is intrinsically different in the way they instill a sense of worth and purpose in their students which would guide them towards different

career paths. At the same time, the ethos of schools is inherently similar in maintaining the status quo in terms of social reproduction. Various studies about Maltese schools published in *Inside/Outside Schools* (Sultana, 1997) clearly demonstrate the reproductive capacity of schools. Rotin (1997), in her study about how schools channel their students to choose Trade Schools when they are not considered as academically successful writes, “we here have a process whereby working class kids are channeled through working class schools and on to working class jobs” (p. 281). Conversely, Church and private schools in Malta hold an ‘individual cachet’, “which it transmits in the form of a personality package that distinguishes students in life generally, and on the job market specifically” (Cilia & Borg, 1997, p. 239). These accounts show how schools, while operating on a different ethos, fail to acknowledge diversity. Firstly, the stratified system of schooling – state, church, private – selects students according to background characteristics. Secondly, schools promote different constructs about what the ideal student stands for. Moreover, one can safely say that while free education for all was seen as means to eradicate social inequalities, schools continue to operate as sites where these inequalities are perpetuated over time. Educators’ myopic views of diversity allow hegemonic culture to spread its roots and instill in the students that what happens in schools is ‘normal’. Apple (2004) contends that schools:

play a rather large part in distributing the kinds of normative and dispositional elements required to make this inequality seem natural. They teach a hidden curriculum that seems uniquely suited to maintain the ideological hegemony of the most powerful class in society. (p. 41)

Educators in schools, and policy makers on a larger scale, perpetuate the link between inequality and diversity. Students are considered worthy of an education only if they fit within the parameters set by policy makers and schools. These are the ‘insiders’ who succeed in

maintaining their role as 'ideal' students. The 'outsiders', on the other hand, are those who sit on the margins - the drop outs, the 'unsuccessful' who have no one to blame but themselves and the circumstances in which they live for being different.

When I first started teaching I was not even qualified and had never attended any courses on how to teach children. The head of school and the teachers considered the class I had to teach as 'a problem' because there was a boy who had physical disabilities coupled with learning difficulties and unruly behaviour (it was later discovered that he was being sexually abused by his father). The head of school and staff saw my arrival as an opportunity to 'dump' on me a class nobody wanted. Instead of entrusting the class to the best teacher the school administration chose an inexperienced teacher, and an unqualified one at that. The same thing happened the following year in a different school. I was given a class of children described as 'unmanageable', which had changed teachers about five times over two years.

The above experiences were not isolated, as it was common practice to assign new teachers the most challenging and demanding classes. Therefore, both students and young inexperienced educators were victimised. The teachers, many of whom might not have had any formal training and qualifications or else were newly qualified, had very little say as to which classes they were assigned. For instance, had I not accepted to teach the 'difficult' classes I would have been expected to leave, and another supply teacher would have found herself or himself in that same predicament. Not having the liberty to leave due to financial constraints placed unqualified young teachers in a position of powerlessness as they were not given the possibility to bargain like more senior teachers. Both students and educators were victimised, as if they deserved each other – the teacher due to the lack of formal qualifications or for being newly qualified and the students because of their behaviour or lack of academic achievement. Students and teachers straying from the path of the constructed idea of the

'ideal' challenged the 'normality' of school life. Those in power seemed to be more comfortable to mete out unfavourable treatment to the 'perpetrators' who dared to challenge the state of affairs due to their diversity.

The more time I spent in schools the more I noted an emergent pattern in teacher behaviour in relation to diversity. Many educators were more willing to teach the top streams. In activities where children were chosen to represent the school, it was usually those children who were academically 'good' that were chosen. Diversity, while celebrated on paper, was certainly frowned upon in practice. The term 'inclusive education' for example, is generally taken to mean allowing students with 'special' needs (i.e. disabilities) to attend mainstream schools. Notwithstanding, little thought is given to how these students experience daily school life, thus limiting inclusion to a mere physical presence in a mainstream setting. For instance, I distinctly remember a teacher who, during the rehearsals for the Christmas Concert, insisted that the role of the child with 'special' needs should be to stand behind the Christmas tree. Thus while the student would technically be on stage and 'participating' she would also be invisible. A more recent experience conveys a more subtle form of discrimination. Whenever the head of school organised an activity that required someone to take care of the sound system, or to take photographs, for example, she always asked a Learning Support Educator (LSE) to do the job, even though she had a student to care for and help during lessons. This implied that the head of school considered the education of children with disabilities as less important than the other children's. Even though I have witnessed and heard about many instances when children with disabilities were unfairly treated and regarded as second class citizens, I have also witnessed good practices especially when there is good teamwork between the teacher and the LSE, and particularly when the head of school is fully conscious of issues of equity, respect and acceptance with regard to children with disabilities.

Race and religion also challenge the notion of the 'ideal' student. In Malta, one is different if one is not white and Catholic. Celebrating diversity in such instances sometimes reinforces stereotypes such as when schools organise 'An African evening,' as if eating African food and listening to African music are what makes one African. There are times when educators 'use' children who are different to portray an image of inclusivity. In these cases they engage in tokenism. In these last few years, the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) started providing a school outreach programme. Goitom Yousef was an Eritrean Refugee. He is featured as the child refugee in the book *Kidane* (2012), written by Claire Azzopardi. Part of the outreach programme would find Goitom Yousef in schools, where with the help of this book he would narrate his experience as an asylum seeker, and explain to the students the reasons why people flee their country. The students are thus sensitised to the fears, traumas and needs of the refugees, but they also become aware of the strength, perseverance and resilience as Goitom does not depict asylum seekers simply as victims, but provides the students with a multi-dimensional picture of who they are. His criticism was that, while there were some educators who were genuinely interested and willing to review their ideas of asylum seekers, there were others who kept on repeating the usual discourse of them taking 'our' jobs; that the country cannot afford to host them and so on. The fact that they voiced these concerns in front of the students was discouraging as they kept reinforcing the ubiquitous discourse prevalent in the public sphere.

Maltese people are not strangers to migration. In fact, the Maltese emigrated in the thousands after World War II and some still choose to leave the islands, even though in much lesser numbers. Some migrants choose to return to Malta when they retire, while many visit the islands often. Since the early 2000s Malta has witnessed new waves of migration. The first groups to arrive were citizens of different African countries, who sought asylum in Malta. Since the mid-2000s, the majority of those immigrants accounted for originated from the European

Union, alongside migrant workers from all over the world. These migratory flows continue to impact Maltese society considerably, with some considering these migrants an asset and many regarding them as a threat. These migratory flows are characterised by considerable diversity. While some areas like St Paul's Bay are more likely to host immigrants, grocery shops that cater for diverse cuisines have sprouted around the island; immigrants have opened restaurants, beauty parlours and offer services such as housekeepers, nannies and carers for the elderly. Thus migratory flows into Malta are indicative of complex, hybrid processes and dynamics.

Schools in Malta have been particularly impacted by these migratory flows, particularly in terms of an increasing heterogeneity. Educators in Malta have been exceptionally exposed to these migratory flows as is reflected in their classrooms. They are also directly in contact with students coming from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds and students who live in a non-traditional family setup. Educators' reactions vary widely, according to context and type of school. For instance, I know of teachers, who refuse to use books that reflect a changing reality – books that address issues such as divorced parents and non-traditional families. Schools in Malta still teach the Catholic religion, even though there are, and increasingly so, students of different faiths. Recently some parents who were not Catholic expressed their concern that their children were going home and making the sign of the cross and reciting Catholic prayers. Thus they wished for their children to avoid assemblies, where prayers are recited. This of course made the news and when the President of the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) relayed parents' concerns over Facebook many teachers reacted by submitting derogatory comments. For example, one of those who were commenting said, "Mhux ser ikollhom iwaqqfu t-talba għal li jista' jkun? Jien l-iskola tgħallimt nitlob. Min ma jogħġbux iwarrab, ħa jagħmel post għal ħaddieħor" (They aren't going to stop the prayers by any chance are they? I learnt to pray at school. Whoever does not like it can shove off to make



space for someone else.) Another one said, “L-ironija hi li hafna mill-ġenituri li jgergru u li mingħalihom jafu jmexxu skola huma dawk li lanqas iridu (biex ma ngħidx ma jafux) irabbu lil uliedhom” (The irony is that many of the parents who grumble and who think they know how to run a school are those who do not want (not to say do not know how) to bring up their children.) It was interesting to note the contradictory positions of teachers, where on the one hand they tell parents to make space for others and take their children elsewhere because they dared criticise what was happening in schools and, at the same time, accusing parents of not knowing how to raise their children. Therefore parents are silenced even when they show concern and at the same time they are expected to participate in school activities.

The more time I spent in schools, and the more I read and learnt, I realised that some educators operate on a narrow notion of diversity. For instance, speaking to her staff, one head of school once stated that “We have to thank God that there is no diversity in our school”. For her diversity meant enrolling children that were neither Catholic nor white into the school. Paradoxically she did not consider two adopted Kenyan children as black (thus different) due to the fact that their adoptive parents were white Maltese. I have witnessed this position widely among teachers who maintain that non-white children of white parents are white. This narrow notion of diversity carries with it a double negative. It racialises children and prevents teachers from approaching each child as an individual.

What is perhaps more telling in the head of school’s statement cited above is that she builds her idea of ‘Malteseness’ on two criteria – religion and skin colour. She regards those who are neither Catholic nor ‘white’ as not belonging to the Maltese nation and thus regards citizenship as a question not of rights but of race. Another incident I recall is of a teacher’s reaction when an adopted African student in her class admitted that she did not like the Maltese national anthem. The teacher, narrating the incident in the staff room retorted,

“Tirringrazzja ‘l Alla li ġbarniha mill-Afrika” (She should thank God that we pulled her out of Africa), at the same time forgetting, or not being aware, that there have been calls for a change in the anthem due to the fact that it is a prayer, thus excluding those who are non-believers as well as due to language referring to colonisers. The implication of this teacher’s statement is that migrants should be forever grateful that Malta has welcomed them. They should therefore refrain from expressing their views and do not have a legitimate claim to state their mind.

The above-mentioned incident was not a one-off occurrence. Every year schools in Malta celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall. Once, during assembly, a head of school told the students that the demolition of the wall has led to the reunification of Germany, and walls do not separate people any more. I remember pointing out the walls in Palestine and Mexico, but she brushed off my comment, later claiming that Palestine does not exist anyway. This set me questioning the reasons behind such declarations, as if the lives of some human beings have more value than others. This was not a one-off incident, and even though discussing issues of identity was not a daily occurrence, I could very well understand that her construction of identity was always European and possibly Zionist.

My experience as a teacher in different primary schools has increased my awareness of issues related to diversity. Generally speaking, it seemed easier for educators to dismiss a child’s learning difficulty if he or she came from what the teacher perceived to be, as some stated, a “difficult/deprived background”; blaming a ‘broken family’ was certainly easier than blaming oneself or the system. There were various impressions of what an undesirable background could be: separated parents, single mothers, working mothers, a non-Catholic family, low income families, Muslims, a foreign child – especially if of Arab origin. Obviously every teacher had his or her own idea of who was considered as a desirable student to have

in class. These students enjoyed 'hidden' privileges while the 'Others' were sometimes denied even their right to an equitable education. I felt that educators, including myself at times, blamed the family environment or a child's disability for the child's lack of achievement, lack of social skills, inability to make friends and any other difficulties. Thus they justified their actions – or inaction to address the difficulties the child was encountering. The construction of diversity of students in deficit terms has, "inevitable, negative consequences for their longer term academic success" (May & Sleeter, 2010, p.3). Shields, Bishop and Mazawi (2005) refer to the common practice of linking school failure to one's affiliation with a minority as 'pathologizing', which is described as,

a process where perceived structural-functional, cultural, or epistemological deviation from an assumed normal state is ascribed to another group as a product of power relations, whereby the less powerful group is deemed to be abnormal in some way. Pathologizing is a mode of colonization used to govern, regulate, manage, marginalize or minoritise primarily through hegemonic discourse. (p. 120)

Therefore, action on the part of educators would not be forthcoming. Pathologising differences would make them feel that what students are encountering is beyond their responsibility to address. Teachers' pathologising attributed to children the reasons and causes of their own failure while exempting the teachers from any responsibility for their achievements. Pathologising also meant that teachers did not concern themselves with supporting the students but rather directing the students to 'experts' such as psychologists, social workers, and so on.

What concerned me most, and still does, is that a number of educators might be mostly unaware of the meanings and implications of the normalising aspect of such behaviour. It does not demonstrate that educators do not have knowledge of what diversity is. This

unawareness should be understood as perceiving the pathologising behaviour as normal, as part and parcel of how school life should be conducted. They do not find it unjust that a student is denied his or her 'right' to religious education because the child is not Catholic, for example. Some educators think that the school is right in demanding that parents buy expensive uniforms and it is no concern of theirs if the parents can barely make ends meet. I am sure that one cannot make sweeping statements about educators' attitudes towards difference as there are educators who are sensitive to these issues and try to act constructively. Over the course of my work in schools I realised that for some teachers diversity is construed as a significant challenge that requires expert intervention, thus preventing them from realising that they have 'the option to act otherwise' (Giddens, 1984, cited in Sultana, 1997, p.411).

How educators understand diversity and its relationship to citizenship is of utmost importance. Indeed, there have been instances where teachers who spoke out against injustices became marginalised by administrators and colleagues who used the 'majority' argument to justify their stand. A friend of mine who is a teacher volunteering with a migrant-focused NGO told me that she got tired of arguing with staff at her school about minority groups such as migrants and gays. Nowadays, when there is an argument in the staff room she either remains silent or else leaves the room. She said that arguing was a futile endeavour when no one was prepared to listen with an open mind. On the other hand, another teacher told me that she continues to drive her point home even if no one agrees with her. For this reason she is often branded as a 'radical' and sometimes 'crazy'. A teacher committed to migrant students is always assigned all the migrant students in her year group because, in the words of one head of school, "she knows how to deal with them". The teacher told me that while she does not mind, it is becoming exhausting to teach and reach all the students in her class when a good number of them need special attention and special work. No one seems to

appreciate how her workload has increased as she needs to prepare different kinds of work for so many children. She said that the head of school encouraged her to leave the class and work as a peripatetic teacher, as a protective measure from what the head of school termed as burnout. The school administration seems to regard 'the problem of migrant students' as solved as long as this teacher willingly and without complaints accepts these students in her class. The school administration's decision to gather all the migrant children of the year group and put them all in this teacher's class could stem from the fact that teachers would complain less about the difficulties they encounter when teaching these children. Simultaneously, the children would not be happy in a class where they know they are not wanted.

One must also be aware that sometimes educators, and here I am including school administrators, might not even realise or acknowledge the possibility that they can act differently. It is also possible that they are fully conscious of possible alternative actions but fear to challenge the status quo. One has to acknowledge that they are bound by various policies, either school based or national, and going against the grain might constitute too much of a struggle. One must also acknowledge that as a group, educators are largely not politically conscious. Certainly, I am not saying that no one is, but as a group, represented by the MUT, they rarely voice concerns regarding what happens locally or abroad, unless it directly affects the teaching profession. On the 9<sup>th</sup> March 2012, the MUT secretariat posted a petition to stop the execution of an Iranian teacher. Since then there were no more posts concerning support for other people or organisations. No condemnation or otherwise was issued when Israel bombed schools in Gaza during Operation Protective Edge in 2014, as if what happens outside our shores is of no importance. Neither had a statement been issued in support of the Mexican teachers protesting education reform (Bacon, 2016). As an organisation, the MUT never participates in Gay Pride or other manifestations that support equality and justice unless directly linked to schools or educators. Individually, educators

might be politically conscious, but there is no evidence of a collective will to manifest its concerns, and indeed anger, at injustices committed against others.

It is fair to note that such behaviour is not only endemic to MUT and its members. There is rarely a general outrage and rally for support when a person or a group suffers an injustice, or even when it is a cause for general concern, such as an environmental issue. Whenever protests are held (unless these are organised by political parties or unions) these are usually only attended by a handful of people. Therefore, going back to the argument about educators who do not take action, this inability or unwillingness to act could also stem from a culture of complacency.

These reflections draw light on the power struggles that exist within schools over the issue of diversity, and the schools' implication in exerting what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence. According to Bourdieu, schooling is the primary mechanism of symbolic violence. He says that, "symbolic violence is the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 167). This implies that in schools, those who have power commit acts of violence on others through the imposition of systems of symbols and meanings upon particular groups and these groups consider them as legitimate. This can take the form of cultural and social domination that no one seems to notice because it is part of normalised behaviours and thoughts and hence which many do not find the need to challenge. Educators exert symbolic violence through their verbal messages or non-verbal behaviour as the above examples show and by virtue of which features of difference become hierarchically positioned.

Symbolic violence is also exerted through the hidden curriculum. Apple (2004) writes with regard to the hidden curriculum that, "the forms of interaction in school life may serve as mechanisms for communicating normative and dispositional meanings to students"

(p. 54). Through the hidden curriculum, administrators, teachers and students recognise the kind of culture that is desirable within schools, the norms and values that they have to follow if they want to be included. Sometimes students cannot cope with these institutional expectations due to a multitude of reasons and thus they become marginalized or else they have to divest themselves of their identity in order to merge with the crowd.

Sometimes symbolic violence is substituted by a subtle element of violence when teachers who do not subscribe to a head of school's or policy makers' particular ideas. For instance, teachers can also be ostracised for using their democratic freedom to speak their minds, criticise decisions or challenge opinions, particularly when they talk about social diversity.

Social diversity also has implications in the ways schools are organised as institutions, as they are also implicated in social reproduction. They replicate divisions based on wealth, privilege and power as the testimonies above show. The privileged students are usually the ones whose parents have social standing. They are bound to get more attention and their needs are addressed much faster than those students who come from socio-economically disadvantaged and underprivileged backgrounds. I have encountered students with behavioural problems, whose needs were brushed off by administrators just because the parents were unable to understand the seriousness and complexity of their offspring's difficulties. In that sense educators make assumptions about the parents' skills of raising their children. A case in point is when two lesbian mothers started living together. As soon as the head of school got to know, she sent for the teachers and asked them to check if the students had any lunch, as if being a lesbian parent transformed one into an 'unfit' mother. Another head publicly stated, among other things, that parents of children in her school are more interested in their nails and hair than in the education of their children. With these statements

the head of school clearly shifted responsibility of students' achievement from the school to the domain of parents and the latter being seen deficient in some form or quality. Such occurrences are frequent and they happen in different kinds of schools.

As can be seen, the above examples convey resonance and accuracy with Bourdieu's claims that the educational system reproduces, "the structure of relationships and symbolic relationships between classes, by contributing to the reproduction of the distribution of cultural capital among these classes" (1977a, p. 487). At times, educators teaching in the various sectors of the education system assume that students possess certain qualities just because they attend particular schools. Bourdieu refers to this notion as '*habitus*' which is described as,

'the feel for the game', a 'practical sense' (*sense pratique*) that inclines agents to act and react in specific situations in a manner that is not always calculated and that is not simply a question of conscious obedience to rules. Rather it is a sense of dispositions which generates practices and perceptions (1977a, p.5).

Thus, teachers' perceptions of their students may also contribute to the latter's negative or positive self-perceptions which would certainly influence their academic achievement.

### **1.1. Significance of the study**

Capturing the above dynamics suggests that the way educators, both teachers and administrators, construct the notion of social diversity and how they position their students in relation to social diversity is crucial to unpack if we are to better understand how inequity works through schools. Other studies have focused on the ways that educators construct the ideal student and, in turn, the undesirable one. This study focuses on how educators construct



social diversity and how these constructions can create and foster a sense of belonging, or otherwise, in diverse students. A sense of belonging can be described thus:

Students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual. (Goodenow, 1993, p. 25)

Educators play a crucial role in creating a school environment which is welcoming, in which students feel safe and do not feel that they are strangers or unwanted. Therefore, educators' constructions of social diversity, and how these constructions impinge on their role in school, would show the extent to which schools are really a space where everyone can benefit, or a space that favours some social groups at the expense of others. Their constructions of social diversity are manifested in their behaviour towards different students and it influences both the recipient of the behaviour as well as the other students who are observers. Educators' perception of diversity in terms of who are the deserving members of society, and who are not, clearly influences their construction of the ideal students and the wider construction of society. Educators' perceptions of diversity are not formed in a vacuum, but are a product of the society in which teachers live. As Sultana (1997) reiterates, teachers cannot be neutral spectators, they are 'political animals' and, "their actions and non-actions will work in the interests – or against the interests – of the young people they are responsible for" (p. 410). Educators may reject or accept or try to negotiate the contradictions and tensions between their beliefs and those of the hegemonic structures within society. Whatever choices they make will surely impact on their constructions of notions of belonging. Their conceptions of belonging are framed within their experiences and their knowledge, as well as their disposition

to adapt to a social reality which is moving away from the traditional social categories tied to the concept of belonging such as race, class and nationality. Schools are not the only sites where teaching and learning takes place, therefore, that in itself does not make them educational. Schools provide an educational experience when they foster in their students a sense of belonging, a sense of well-being and a place where they feel safe and secure. Schools as sites of educational practices foster a climate of acceptance and respect for all students and educators play a primary role in nurturing such an environment.

I regard this study as a journey that began many years ago when I started school. The memories of my experience at school as a student, supply teacher, and qualified teacher have been enriched, redefined and even relived through a more critical lens. What I have been through and the actions which I later learned constituted symbolic violence upon students, have been instrumental for me to start questioning the issue of difference and how teachers and other educators' conceptions of normality versus difference play out in the classroom and school setting.

In the next chapter, I argue that educators do not operate in a vacuum and so their perceptions, ideas and thoughts are influenced by what goes on around them. Thus I explore the main factors that influence individuals in the way they construct social diversity. This study is of vital importance at a time when we are experiencing daily turmoil with regard to issues of diversity. One of the main roles of educators is to bring about inclusivity. However, this inclusivity is often limited to the educator's perceptions of what is considered as 'normal'. This perception of normality then automatically constructs the 'other'. Consequently, through actions, verbal communication as well as through the hidden curriculum, educators send messages to their students that define who is an accepted member of the community and who is not. Chapter 3 narrows the discussion to the Maltese context. The fourth chapter

addresses the methodology and research methods that will be applied for the research. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 present the data and analysis which was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The concluding chapter provides the reader with a synthesis of the dissertation.

# Chapter 2

## Constructions of Social Diversity, Schools and Educators

### 2.0. Introduction

People coming from different spheres of society, from scholars to politicians to educational institutions as well as laypersons, are participating in the intense debates on social diversity. These debates have arisen mostly as a result of the radical changes that many societies are experiencing. These changes are due to economic factors, migration, meteoritic technological development in media and ICT and international political decisions (Cantle, 2016). Such rapid and sometimes radical changes tear at the traditional values, beliefs and fibre of societies, especially when that which used to be perceived as morally wrong (although not necessarily so) starts to become acceptable. Moreover, societies which may have been perceived as homogenous in the past have seen those groups that had been concealed in the shadows for so long because of their difference make themselves visible, demanding rights and voice. Economic migration, people fleeing oppressive regimes and those seeking refuge away from their war ravaged countries, have also changed the demographics of most societies. Consequently, societies find themselves in a constant state of flux. It is an exciting time for those people who welcome change and see in it an opportunity for growth. It is also a time of uncertainty, because change brings forth insecurities as one's cocoon of tradition and safe social spaces are challenged by new ideas and new conceptions and constructions of

society. The changes that challenge the status quo of societies have brought about the emergence of political movements that are led by diverse groups which represent “practices, life-styles, views and ways of life that are different from, disapproved of, and in varying degrees discouraged by the dominant culture of the wider society” (Parekh, 2006, p. 1). These movements might not have anything in common other than their resistance to the homogenising and assimilationist thrust of the wider society, which portrayed only one way of life as being ‘good’ and ‘normal’, and thus marking them as ‘different’, ‘abnormal’ and ‘bad’. Their visibility is due to their wish, and indeed their demand, for the recognition and acceptance of their differences. These social groups are asserting that they too are valuable members of society and thus discrimination towards them should stop. Therefore, as societies continue to evolve into intensely more heterogeneous ones, our conceptions and constructions of difference continue to change.

The context in which this change happens is extremely important. The economic situation of the citizens, as well as the political climate, often expressed in policies for inclusion or exclusion, have a direct impact on how citizens engage with social difference (Letki, 2008; Ouseley, 2004). Local and global events also contribute to the fluidity of the conceptions and constructions of ‘difference’. The 9/11 events gave rise to increased negative visibility of Muslims (Abbas, 2004, p. 29, Akhtar, 2011). Muslims have increasingly become the object of public and media scrutiny in light of the acts perpetrated by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) (Lentini, 2015). According to the European Union, the war in Syria has created a ‘migration crisis’. This perception has seen the 28 members of the European Union unite in the decision to send Syrian and Iranian refugees, termed ‘migrants’, back to Turkey, amid criticism from individual Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) such as Ska Keller. The latter was the target of many hateful comments from those defending their political leaders, and who claimed that the leaders were working at keeping their countries safe from crime

and welfare scrounging by refugees (Keller, 2016). Firstly, the use of the word migrants instead of refugees does not acknowledge the fact that these people are fleeing for their lives, leaving everything behind in the hope of surviving a savage war. Secondly, 'migrant' conjured the image that those fleeing for their lives were in fact economic migrants and this discourse depicted refugees as criminals and abusers of welfare services. As can be seen, migration, LGBTIQ communities (Pennington and Knight, 2011), increasing poverty and homelessness are some of the issues that have contributed to the creation or re-creation of the 'other' (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson and Tagler, 2001) and thus of difference. Difference might not be single layered but there can be intersections where one is considered different for more than one reason or else different in some social constructs but similar to the hegemonic group in others.

In this study, I am interested in understanding how the experience of social change mediates educators' constructions of society, and social diversity. More specifically, I seek to examine how educators forge the boundaries of national collectivity within this context of change. In this thesis, I consider citizenship as 'belonging' rather than the legal status bestowed upon persons by the state. There are various reasons for this. Firstly, I believe that feelings of belonging foster a positive attitude towards the society in which we live. We are bound to participate actively in the democratic processes because we feel we are valued and equal members. Thus, we have voice and are able and more inclined to use it when the need arises.

Secondly there are persons and groups who might have the legal status of citizen, but are not deemed or perceived as equal in terms of legislation (e.g. gay persons who want to revert to IVF to have children). There are others who enjoy the status of citizen. The law grants them equal rights but in their everyday life they face discrimination and oppression due to their particular characteristics (e.g. persons with disabilities or Muslim women wearing the

hijab who find it difficult to enter the world of work). Simultaneously, one finds members of society who might not enjoy the legal status of 'citizen', but contribute to society through their work and their participation in everyday life (e.g. undocumented migrants, refugees). Thus, being a citizen, as described in law, does not necessarily and automatically translate into being an 'insider', a person who enjoys a sense of belonging. The ways in which educators construct the 'insiders' – those who they think fall within what they consider acceptable social boundaries – vary depending on the many facets of their personality and psyche. Constructions of difference are bound by personal experiences and narratives, beliefs, fears, political activism, participation in the public sphere: in other words, one constructs difference based on the conception of one's own identity.

A primary focus of this thesis is on the construction of social diversity: how it is forged by oneself and by others, and how the way in which we perceive the others as different depends on how we see ourselves. These social constructions and how they are understood by people stem from different ideological perspectives. These will be explored and analysed in depth and the theoretical framework for my writing is identified. Finally, I will look into schools, as sites where constructions of social diversity are produced through the curriculum, policies and practices. It is a fact that the challenges schools have to face today are unprecedented. There has never been a time in the history of schools where teachers were expected to teach such diverse groups of students in one class. Today's classrooms are made up of students with different abilities, coming from different cultures, having different faiths and who are of different gender and gender identities. Sometimes, children in schools do not share a similar socio-economic status as that of their peers; some live in poverty while others are well off. Teachers react differently to these challenges and it is important to explore how amid such a vibrant environment they construct their own ideas of social diversity.

## 2.1. Social constructions

Social constructions do not happen in a vacuum. They are the product of people's thinking. Various views abound as to how construction takes place and how it is done. Some constructionists regard knowledge, culture and language as well as discourse as possible means of social constructions (Elder-Vass, 2012; Hjelm, 2014). Among the various schools of thought surrounding social constructionism there are expansive tenets which are considered as common to all (Burr, 2003; Lock & Strong, 2010). The central features of human activity, according to social constructionists, regard meaning and understanding. Language makes sense to some, but is simply noise to those who do not understand it, thus providing different social experiences to people. In order to understand, and for words to mean anything, there must be social interaction, where the language is contextualised to create meaning. Meaning making takes place in various ways, which are inherently embedded in socio-cultural processes. They are specific to particular times and spaces. To illustrate, in the United States, corporal punishment in schools was still popular in the mid- or, in some cases, late – 20<sup>th</sup> century (Dupper & Montgomery Dingus, 2008). However, if a teacher were to hit a child or a student now, some parents would question this form of discipline. This is because our constructions of discipline have changed, as has our increase in knowledge about children's development as well as their rights.

Meanings of events and our way of understanding them depend on the situations in which they occur. The same action would have a different meaning depending on the context in which it happens. Take a hug at the airport; it could mean a moment of happiness as the person is returning or a moment of sadness as it is time to say goodbye. Also, while European practices determine the transition from child to adult when the person reaches a legally



defined age (18 years in many cases), others, such as the Masaii tribe consider the Emorata,<sup>1</sup> performed on boys anytime between the ages of 12-25, as determining the passage from boyhood to manhood. From an orientalist (Said, 1978) perspective it would be easy to dismiss the Masaii rites of passage as barbaric, savage and uncivilised. It is when one develops an understanding of their beliefs, culture and traditions, that judgement would be different.

For Burr (1995), language makes thought possible by constructing concepts, that is, language structures the way in which we experience the world. Through conversing with one another, we maintain, modify and reconstruct what Berger and Luckmann (1991) refer to as subjective reality, which means the experiences of our everyday life and how we understand them. Language is not neutral, the meaning that words have go far beyond the meanings provided in the dictionary. One of the definitions of the word 'teacher' given by *The Merriam-Webster* online dictionary is: one that teaches; *especially*: one whose occupation is to instruct<sup>2</sup>. However, we all know that teachers do much more than instruct; being a teacher is often considered a vocation, a teacher has to show care towards her students that goes beyond the subject she teaches. A teacher is considered to be a role model and thus must show that she has strong moral principles. The meaning of words is built in the vocabulary and through interaction. People participate in their construction by reproducing the language. Edvardsson, Tronvoll and Gruber (2010) contend that, "Language and dialogue are in themselves conducted through social interpretation and intersubjectivity" (p. 331).

Language use is also imbued with power (Hjelm, 2014; Miller, 2003). The meaning and significance of words can be transformed from innocuous to powerful according to the context in which they are uttered, and the status of the person who is speaking. Foucault (1995) sees

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<sup>1</sup> The Emorata is a rite of passage for boys which signifies the coming of age. After shaving their heads and being circumcised without anaesthetic, they are clothed in black for up to 8 months and if the boys endure the ritual they are considered warriors: <http://northafricanmasaitribe.weebly.com/rites-of-passage.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/teacher>

power as being exercised through knowledge, which is in turn dependent on power relations. He contends that through discourse, power and knowledge are joined and power is reified when we accept the reality with which we are presented without questioning it. A teacher telling a parent that her child cannot learn will impact the parent differently than if another parent had said so. The reason is that the teacher's status gives her more power to shape how the parent will think. Moreover, Hjelm (2014), considers discourse as central to constructions and the one which "best captures what is going on when something is said to be socially constructed" (p. 5). In this sense, discourse is to be understood as a social practice and that means that one must examine what is being done with what is said. Although sometimes the subject is reduced to a position in discourse, there are instances when subjects can alter the very same discourses that make them.

Another tenet shared by social constructionists is that people are instrumental in creating the discourse they use to define themselves. Our identity is constructed out of social practices and discourses in our culture and through our contributions to that discourse. Thus, according to Hjelm (2014), in contrast to essentialist views on identity, we are constantly and actively participating in producing and reproducing the world. We are not, 'born this way' but our identity is formed through social interactions in which we also participate. As Sarbin and Kitsuse (1995) reiterate:

central to constructionism is the premise that human beings are agents rather than passive organisms or disembodied intellects that process information. It is undeniable that human actors process information, but the processing is carried out in the context of cultural practices and purposes, not to mention beliefs and sacred stories. (p.2)

Therefore, social structures shape who we are and the society in which we live, but as we have agency the meanings which are created can be negotiated, sustained and modified (Schwandt, 2003).

Identities of particular interest for this study are those of educators who have to contend with a personal identity and a professional identity that is very often essentially determined in advance (Butler, 1993; Foucault, 1990). The following section examines the constructions of identity and how educators construct their identity and that of social groups which are different from theirs.

### **2.1.1. Educators' Identities – constructed from within and from without**

Who we are defines our place in the world and in the society in which we live. It is not a matter of nature, as much as it is of social constructs. That is, we are born privileged or oppressed, accepted or marginalised, through the incident of birth, rather than through any inherent qualities which make us 'different' when compared to other members of society. The environment in which we are born and live contributes to the shaping of our identity. I am not implying a traditional and deterministic view of identity, as human beings have agency to act and change. However, we are autonomous only to a certain extent as our thoughts and actions are never entirely independent of the environment in which we live, the people who are meaningful to us, the social and political dynamics that impact our lives and so on. As Wagner (2002) contends, "To presuppose autonomy entails the additional assumption of the capacity of human beings, in principle, to separate from the context of socialisation in which identity-formation occurs" (p. 46). This implies that psychical and sociohistorical conditions do not determine human actions entirely (Castoriadis, 1991, pp. 143-6), but condition our actions. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, "human action takes place always in a situation that confronts the actor and that the actor acts on the basis of *defining this situation* that

confronts him' [sic] (Blumer, 1997, p. 4; emphasis in original). We 'define the situation' and react to facts in terms of our knowledge and experiences and it is through this consciousness that we give our interpretation of facts. As reality is not merely a projection of our own imagination, we also gain new insights when we assimilate new information, and thus accommodate our thoughts to new experiences. In doing so, we reformulate our ideas and thoughts which might induce us to ask new questions leading to newer ideas (Rock, 2001).

Educators<sup>3</sup> experience a dichotomy in their constructions of identity – there is the personal identity and that of the teacher. One's personal identity is formed through the negotiation of meanings that matter within a social configuration (Wenger, 1998). The individual has different degrees of control over these meanings, some of which offer more possibility of negotiation than others. Personal identity allows for more opportunity of negotiation, unlike the professional identity of the educator. This is because there already exists discursive norms which construct the identity of the teacher and the teacher "cannot exist outside of the powers by which it is constituted; power which both forms and subordinates the subject" (Janzen, 2015, p. 121). The words educator and teacher conjure images in our minds of people, in the classroom, teaching, listening and caring, encouraging the students to excel and be successful. Therefore educators have to fit in within an identity that has been constructed for them and the negotiations that one can make are very limited, unless one wishes to engage in a discourse that aims to create a new construction of teacher identity.

Moreover, some teachers feel that their personal and professional identities are enmeshed together in a way that they cannot really distinguish between one and the other,

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<sup>3</sup> I will be using educator and teacher interchangeably, the reason being that for this study, all educators are or have been school teachers.

nor do they find the need to do so. They do not feel that anything in their personal life goes against the premise of the 'teacher identity'. On the other hand, some teachers might find it challenging to coalesce the professional and personal identity because of tensions and contradictions that exist between the two. As indicated above, we have multiple forms of identity (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011), which we operate in different contexts (Gee, 2001), depending on the external influences that we come across. In view of the fact that teacher identity is pre-constructed and individuals have to fit in within the set of pre-conceived notions of "how educators should interact – what they should think and talk about" (Shapiro, 2010, p. 616), there could be instances when educators find it difficult to reconcile their personal identity with their professional one. Banks (1996) contends that our ways of thinking, behaving and being are very much influenced by factors such as ethnicity, social class and language. Educators' own sociocultural identities, membership and attachment to the groups to which they belong shape their personal and family history (Motha, 2006; Villegas and Lucas, 2002). Indeed, Todd (2003) referring to Castoriadis, argues that "the nascent human subject is eminently pliable and is potentially fitted into any social order into which it happens to be born" (p. 19). As educators' professional identity cannot be separated and alienated from the personal one, there might be ambivalence in the way they feel about and regard those students considered as different. Students coming from social groups which are different from that of the teacher might be viewed by the latter as disrupting his or her coherency with the result that "the subject tumbles into uncertainty, its past strategies for living challenged by the very strangeness of difference itself" (Todd, 2003, p. 11).

It is challenging for social actors to separate themselves from who they are culturally, ethnically, in terms of their faith and habitus. This is because identity is not simply tied to a particular space, but also to language, for instance, which shapes our thoughts, and to feelings

which are borne from particular experiences (Buholtz & Hall, 2004). Straub (2002) in his discussion of identity claims that it:

might be socioculturally constituted; it is a culturally and socially specific mode of subjectivity formation, or in other words: it *provides* for the self- and world-relation of persons with a specific structure or form. Identity in each case is always just a provisional result of psychological acts in which thought, emotion and volition are inseparably combined, and which for its part is socially constituted or mediated ... (p. 62)

Epstein (1987) also regards identity as being formed through the socialisation process and contends that it is a:

socialized sense of individuality, an internal organisation of self-perception concerning one's relationship to social categories, that also incorporates views of the self perceived to be held by others. Identity is constituted rationally, through involvement with – and incorporation of- significant others and integration into communities. (p. 29)

Moreover, he argues that the ways in which we are perceived by others also determines how our identity develops. This stance is taken also by Balibar (2004) who contends that even though individuals construct their own identity:

she or he can only do it by accepting or rejecting the roles imposed on him or her in 'the framework of transferential relations that he or she must participate in, that is, by adopting the positive or negative identification they imply. (p. 26)

Therefore, our identity is directly tied not only to who we believe we are, but also to our position in the community and society in which we live. The rejection of certain identities is

the result of the power of the dominant groups in society whose homogenising forces try to construct society as a universal one, where particularities are considered as corrupting and fragmenting the unity that exists. In this way, undesirable identities are created and differences become accentuated. Wagner (2002) refers to how theories of difference, which aim to counteract the modernity-centred discourse on identity, “underline the will to dominate and the exclusion of otherness” (p. 46).

However, Todd (2003) argues that by coming into contact with the other, one’s identity develops and changes. Through these encounters we grow as persons, as our perspectives and ideal allow for our construction of the other to change, and changing ourselves in the process. Consequently, it is only possible for educators to teach if:

the self is open to the Other, to the face of the Other. Through such openness to what is exterior to the I, the I can become something different than, or beyond, what it was; in short, it can learn. (p. 20)

It is the responsibility of educators to learn about, and from, the students they teach. In becoming learners themselves, educators become aware of the violence committed towards the other in schools, through pedagogy and curricula, discrimination and marginalisation.

Identity is formed by individuals through group categorization and norms (Young, 1990); it is defined in relation to how individuals are identified by others. Others identify ‘us’ (and we identify them) in terms of social groups. Valentine and Skelton (2007) argue that an individual cannot just claim an identity but this has to be accepted by the wider community of practice.

I argue that educators’ beliefs about social diversity cannot be understood outside the multifaceted and dynamic process of identity formation, habitus acquisition, and the

discursive constructions that underpin the self. These beliefs stem from the way educators situate themselves in relation to their peers, colleagues, and to the range of student identities, as alterity. The other does not only mean the one who is marginalised or maligned, nor is it the one who mostly resembles us (Todd, 2003, p. 29). Rather, in Levinas' view, "the Other is what I myself am not" (Levinas, 1987, p. 83). Coming in contact with one whose very difference as an 'Other' "ruptures a sense of unified being" (Todd, 2003, p. 29) creates in educators a sense of fear, inadequacy and ignorance, pushing teachers to take a colour impaired approach to teaching (McIntyre, 1997; Valli, 1995). In practice this means that educators ignore the existing differences their students bring with them and teach 'neutrally, ignoring the fact that their own identity and beliefs might be obstructing the passage for their students' just entitlement to educational experiences.

Educators' identities are further influenced by what happens in the schools they teach, and by the policies and practices in which they are expected to participate. Stryker (2008), in his review of the value of George Herbert Mead's contributions to sociology, shows how the latter regarded social interaction as developing mind and self. According to Stryker, Mead considered the development of the self and the development of society as a cycle in which, "Society emerges out of interaction and shapes self, but self shapes interaction, playing back on society" (p. 17). Mead's idea contributed to the ways in which structural symbolic interactionists regard the development of identity. Stryker develops further Mead's theory and emphasises the importance of social structure, defined as "the pattern of regularities that characterise most human interaction" (1980, p. 65). These social structures, which are institutions, networks and communities keep society stable even in its constant state of flux. Stryker sees social structures as influencing our behaviour but they do not necessarily determine our actions. Thus structural symbolic interactionists contend that our identity is



shaped by the various groups, institutions, networks and communities present in society, as these influence who we become, due to our learning about and from them through the socialisation process. Stryker and Vryan (2003) argue that:

Social structures in general define boundaries, making it likely that those located within them will or will not have relations with particular kinds of others and interact with those others over particular kinds of issues with particular kinds of resources. Structures will also affect the likelihood that persons will or will not develop particular kinds of selves, learn particular kinds of motivations, and have particular symbolic resources for defining situations they enter. (p. 22)

It is clear then, that educators have to operate within constructions that are provided for them by others. Educators, whether employed by the state or private schools, have to abide by the rules, mission statement and the many policies that often include constructions of the 'other'. An example of this could be inclusion policies, multicultural policies, zero tolerance on bullying rules, or mission statements that construct the students as one single homogenous entity. Inclusion policies, for instance, tend to change due to the fact that constructions of inclusion, which are highly contested, tend to shift over time (Hardy and Woodstock, 2015). Vlachou (2004) suggests that one looks at the values, purposes and practices in large school settings as these direct us to the intentions, school structures, assessment practices and curricula and how these contribute to inclusion. These could be further contributing to the 'ghettoization' of students with special educational needs, through the constructions of students with a disability as portrayed in the policies and various practices and structures. Educators would already have constructions of disability and inclusion, based on the language and discourse they had been exposed to prior to coming into contact with these policies and practices. As

active agents, they create new structures or change the existing structure to accommodate this new situation.

The attitudes, beliefs and views of society educators hold are acquired and interpreted through their life experiences, that is to say that their identity is the product of the many interactions they have in the society in which they live. Their identity is dynamic, often influenced by internal factors such as emotion as well as external ones such as experiences at work or personal ones. Rodriguez and Polat (2012) argue that what one considers 'normal' as opposed to 'different' is grounded in ideological underpinnings and educators should employ critical self-reflection that makes visible the uncritical habit of mind, termed 'dyconsciousness' by King (1991) with which ideologies inform perceptions of Self and Other.

## **2.2. Social Diversity as addressed by four different schools of thought**

Social diversity is a term used to denote heterogeneity in society. As mentioned in Section 2.0., societies are becoming more and more socially diverse not only due to migration, but also due to particular groups of people 'coming out' to assert their identity and claim their place in society.

Before progressing any further, I would like to explain my choice of the term "diversity" rather than "difference". Difference is often seen as something negative, a problem which we need to solve and a difficulty that is best avoided. Social differences are considered a threat to social cohesion (Baldwin and Rozenberg, 2004) because a non-homogenous society is seen to erode the sense of solidarity and community (Goodhart, 2004). Thus, they need to be minimised or eliminated. On the other hand, the term diversity promotes the positive aspect of a diverse society. Diversity is regarded as an asset to be affirmed and valued (Thompson, 2011), an idea to which I subscribe. Living in a diverse society allows one to witness different social practices and this provides "living examples of differing shared

conceptions of the good life” (Lovett, 2010, p. 251). When I talk of social diversity, I do not see the dominant culture merely tolerating, accommodating, and appreciating the ‘other’ (Rees, 2003), but people who despite their differences stand on equal ground. For this reason, I have opted for using diversity.

Social diversity is socially constructed and its contours change over time and within and between contexts. These changes are pushed forward by academic disciplines, government initiatives as well as educational interest (Morrison, 2006). For example, there is currently a movement in some parts of the world to legalize civil unions between same sex couples. Some countries have already done so. Other countries are in the process of legitimizing relationships of gay persons. Thus, the discourse shifts from gay people as being ‘abnormal’ in some way to recognising them as worthy members of society who deserve to be equal before the laws of the country. While the language often relates to people who we regard as ‘different’ from us, or as ‘other’, the definition of diversity has moved from the narrow perspectives of gender and ethnicity, as could be found in the early equal opportunities legislation (Kosseck & Lobel, 1996), to many other visible demographic variables such as ethnicity, faith, gender, dis-ability, sexual orientation, culture and social class (Norton and Fox, 1997).

Social norms dictate what is considered as acceptable and what is not. These social norms are set by those who are most powerful in society and thus can engender discrimination (Knowles, 2011), especially when the difference in values, beliefs and attitudes of the diverse social groups are expected to be reconciled in one set of beliefs – usually of the dominant group. Indeed, Gutmann (1995) voices the concern that in education practices, a political liberal agenda, does not accommodate social diversity, but rather encourages the students to be autonomous and individualistic. Such an educational experience, encourages ‘sameness’

disguised as equality, and the mould the students have to fit into is that brought forward by the most powerful groups in society.

There are various schools of thought which address social diversity with the aim of having a socially just society. Their differences lie in how they configure the epistemic assumptions regarding the linkages between equality, equity, and social justice within a given context. The discussion that follows will outline four main schools of thought regarding the ways in which social diversity is negotiated – exclusion, assimilation, accommodation and politics of difference. The main arguments of these schools of thought will be followed by their implications when they are transferred to the educational realm.

### **2.2.1. Exclusion**

Exclusion works on the premise that there is, or should be, as little social diversity as possible within a society. Exclusion is often directed at minorities, in a bid to construct society as homogenous. History has provided us with ample examples of exclusion, which vary from ethnic cleansing such as the extermination of European Jews during the Second World War, and the forced displacement and mass killings that were carried out in the former Yugoslavia as well as Rwanda. Donald Trump promised to build a wall at the Mexican border and within a few days of taking office he signed an executive order, often referred to as the Muslim ban, temporarily blocking people from seven countries from entering the US on visas. According to a poll conducted by Chatham House, the majority of Europeans agree with the ban (Zalan, 2017). The European Union, in a bid to keep refugees (who are referred to as migrants) away, agreed to send them back to Turkey (“Migrant Crisis”, 2016). Moreover, when Malta was at the helm of the EU presidency, it proposed eight ways in which migrants could be kept out of Europe (Vella, 2017).

Exclusive practices, however, are not limited to keeping people out of a country. Social groups can be excluded from participating in the sharing of power. An obvious example is that of migrants, who enter a country without the necessary papers. These are considered 'metics' (Kymlicka and Norman, 2000, p. 21), a term borrowed by Walzer from ancient Greece (Kymlicka, 2004) to refer to immigrants who are not considered as permanent residents or future citizens because they have entered the country illegally. Although they have become long term residents they are nonetheless excluded from the "polis" (p. 6). Thus they:

face enormous obstacles to integration – legal, political, economic, social and psychological and so tend to exist at the margins of the larger society. Where such marginalised communities exist, the danger arises of the creation of a permanently disenfranchised, alienated and racially defined underclass. (Kymlicka, 2004, p. 21)

These are people who are excluded mainly because their status as undocumented migrants does not grant them rights which citizens enjoy. They often lack voice and thus cannot influence policy, unless someone speaks for them.

Exclusion also comes in the form of national homogenization (Kymlicka, 2013). This happened, for instance, with the indigenous people of Canada. The native people, whose lands were taken from them, were allowed to keep their culture only if they lived on reserves. Many of their children were taken away by the state and enrolled into the Indian Residential School System. These schools were operated by various Christian denominations and:

intended to delimit the social and cultural identity of indigenous children. By Christianising, civilizing, and then re-socializing these children, the Federal government hoped that these children, and subsequent generations, would contribute economically to a modernizing Canada. (Elias, Mignone, Hall, Hong, Hart & Sareen, 2012, p. 1561)

In order for these children to contribute to the state, their guardians tried to annihilate the Indian within them by erasing their traditional values, language and culture. This loss further isolated the children from their cultural and spiritual roots and disrupted the transmission of knowledge to subsequent generations. The state excluded the Indians on the basis of their cultural identity, and only those who could be re-socialised in the coloniser's culture were deemed acceptable contributors to society.

There are other forms of exclusion, which might not be as drastic, but just as harmful to those excluded and to society in general. Kymlicka (2013) lists a number of instances wherein states, by the application of particular policies, would be excluding particular social groups from the corridors of power. Exclusion, in such cases would not be overt as the state would not explicitly ban social groups from participating. However, it would imply that in order to participate, one must have particular characteristics. This happens, for instance, when a state adopts an official language, reflecting the language of the dominant group in a society with more than one ethnonational group. When official documentation, public services, the curriculum and higher education are only accessible in the language chosen by the state, those who are not familiar or confident with the language do not have the same access to services. It is also difficult for them to participate in the public sphere, in a language which is not their own and which is used to undermine their identity. This leads to discrimination and social exclusion and at times contributes to poverty and disadvantages in areas of health, education and employment (de Varennes & Kuzborska, 2012).

Boundaries of exclusion are not all alike. There are varying degrees of exclusion which are based on who the state wants to exclude and to what extent. Having a state religion is a case in point. Perhaps an example which would be at one end of the exclusionary continuum is the constitutional amendment that was passed in Pakistan in 1974. This constitutional

amendment declared the Ahmadiyya as heretics. Consequently, they were persecuted and constructed as deviant, suffering both symbolic and physical persecution (Qadir, 2015). Other states have an established religion, although other faiths are allowed to practice freely. However, legislation is highly influenced by the state religion. Ireland, for example, has very strict laws regarding abortion. Up until 2012, abortion was illegal. It was legalised only after Savita Halappanavar died of a septic miscarriage after she was denied an abortion at an Irish hospital. As the victim was Hindu, the husband questioned why they should live (and die) by someone else's beliefs (McDonald, 2013). The law was amended to allow abortion when the mother's life is in danger. If a woman has an abortion in England, due to the fact that the foetus has serious problems, she is excluded from accessing free bereavement counselling because she has not carried the child full term out of choice (Rothwell, 2016). Same-sex marriages, legislation in favour of transgender people, divorce laws may also be influenced when there is an established religion.

Exclusion can also be present when there is absence of a state religion. In extreme secularisation, those who wish to practice their religion might find it very difficult to live by the tenets of their faith if the state does not allow public displays of faith. This is amply examined in section 2.2.2., where the state expects assimilation if one does not wish to be socially excluded.

Schools can also operate on the notion of exclusion. Many argue that parents should be free to choose the schools their children are to attend. However, choice is only possible for parents who have the financial and social capital that makes it possible for them to choose. As Exley and Suissa (2013) argue, "private schools are a source of injustice within society, where socially advantaged pupils receive social and educational benefits but others are excluded, largely on the basis of social class and an inability to pay" (p. 345). Thus, while

private schools are technically open for everyone, only those with the right socio-economic capital would be realistically able to send their children there. Schools may also exclude students on the basis of faith, gender or disability.

However, schools can exclude students when the school ethos and curriculum do not take the diversity of student population into consideration. A school whose curriculum is imbued with a particular religious persuasion is bound to instil a sense of superiority in those who are of the same faith. Conversely, those who are non-believers, or follow a different religion, may be discriminated against (Verkuyten 2007). Donelson and Rogers (2004), maintain that schools operate on the notion that heteronormativity is 'normal' and other sexualities are deviant. This notion is maintained and reinforced both through the overt and hidden curriculum (Epstein et al., 2003; Epstein & Johnson, 1998). Racialisation and ethnicisation processes by teachers in schools also have important implications on how students are excluded (Zembylas, 2011).

Exclusion and exclusive practices are perhaps the harshest means of non-engagement in practices that allow for diversity to flourish. Many times such practices disregard social diversity in order to present a homogenous image of society. Assimilation, as Section 2.2.2 will show, presents another political philosophy of how societies engage in issues of social diversity.

### **2.2.2. Assimilation – a one size fits all philosophy**

The metaphor of the melting pot depicts one such means of managing social diversity. It gives the idea of togetherness, belonging, acceptance. It gives the idea of equality and justice, where everyone is in the same pot, enjoying the same rights. The melting pot gives the impression that people of all hues have come together, creating a community of unity and enjoying the fruits of this union. However, we all know that when we are cooking we do not



put equal amounts of all ingredients, and there is often a dominant taste that gives all the other ingredients the same tinge. Thus, transposing this metaphor on to society we would see that everyone is expected to follow the same mould, and there is only one way of being that is acceptable. In this sea of sameness, the melting pot philosophy creates a society where differences seem to be invisible to the state. As former Home Secretary Roy Jenkins (1970) had noted, it “would turn everybody out in a common mould, as one of a series of carbon copies of someone’s misplaced vision of the stereotyped Englishman”(p. 267).

Kymlicka (2010) describes such states as privileging one particular identity, language, culture, literature, myths and religion among others. Those who do not belong to the privileged group have two choices – they can either assimilate by suppressing their identities, or else become excluded. Ovando (2008) defines assimilation as “a voluntary or involuntary process by which individuals or groups completely take on the traits of another culture, leaving their original cultural and linguistic identities behind” (“Assimilation” 43). There are people who wish, and do assimilate without encountering any personal difficulties, and there is nothing inherently wrong with that. However, others feel the pressure to assimilate but find it terribly difficult, or have no desire to do so. The melting pot philosophy eventually creates a society where there are, “multiple and deeply rooted forms of exclusion and subordination of minorities, often combining political marginalization, economic disadvantage, and cultural domination” (Kymlicka, 2010, p. 65). Therefore, in theory every citizen is equal but some social groups and individuals often feel marginalised because citizenship as conceived by the hegemonic groups is never universally fair and just. This assimilationist stance proposes a form of universal citizenship that is based on the assertion that all individuals are born free and equal. Considering that in an assimilationist policy, sameness and equality are interchangeable terms, the state is insensitive to the structural inequalities that bring about poverty or

discrimination, for instance and thus it seems to be oblivious of the limited possibilities of success some people may have.

The state also expects its citizens to respect the public/private divide – any qualities citizens may have that stray from the proposed conception of citizenship must be relegated to the private realm. Thus, there is the assumption of a neutral state – a state where laws and policies are free from the influence of particular ideologies and a cultureless citizenship is possible. Such a notion was brought forth by Kymlicka (1995). He explains that the state must treat all people as individuals with equal rights under the law. According to him, if the state creates a differentiated citizenship to the various groups in society, there would not be anything that unites society. However, the notion that identity markers such as culture and religion are best left to the private sphere, referred to as ‘benign neglect’ by Gagnon and Iacovino (2016), are nothing more than a way in which one ensures the preservation of the status quo in many nation-states, “which themselves exhibit varying degrees of adherence to the dictates of a dominant cultural group which has constructed the public sphere in its image” (Gagnon and Iacovino, 2016, p. 108). This claim to impartiality, is also highly criticised by Volpp (2007) and Young (1990) amongst others. They assert that such policies essentially encourage citizens to divest themselves of their identity and publicly assimilate in the hegemonic culture, transforming minority cultures in second class citizens and unequal participants in the public sphere. To manifest the impossibility of impartiality claims, one can give the example of Christmas celebrations. These are considered as universal cultural practices, when in fact they are Christian celebrations. An illustration of how the liberal, assimilationist state expects its citizens to renounce their identity in public is the much quoted ‘hijab’ incident in France. Muslims in France are expected to keep their Muslim identity private. Thus the state is expressly disallowing garments, that some feel compelled to wear because of their faith or

culture, from public buildings, in this case schools. In its defence the state quoted its tradition of *laicite'*, described by Benhabib (2002) as “ the public and manifest neutrality of the state toward all kinds of religious practices, institutionalised through a vigilant removal of sectarian religious symbols, icons, and items of clothing from official public spheres” (p. 96). The notion of neutrality, however, must be contested, as the public sphere, while presumed neutral is imbued with symbols of Christianity. Another recent incident happened in Italy when a Soile Lautsi complained that her children attended a public school in Northern Italy in which a crucifix could be found in every classroom. Education authorities considered it ‘normal’ practice to put crucifixes in classes, because Italy is largely a Catholic country. The normality of the act underlines the expectation of assimilation. Levisohn (2013) notes that, “From the perspective of a majority culture, education may be perceived as a beneficial instrument of minority cultural assimilation into the majority—beneficial because it will be helpful economically or culturally for the minority to become assimilated” (p. 54). Therefore, assimilation through education can be seen as the best way in which the state can benefit most. This was done in Australia, Canada and USA with aboriginal children, who until recent history, were taken away from their families to live in residential homes or with other families and learn to live by the standards of the coloniser’s culture and norms. Today, such practices are illegal and unacceptable but assimilation in education can still be promoted through the curriculum, policies and practices that promote one way of being as acceptable.

Under the guise of equality and fairness, ‘different’ identities are removed from the public spaces and while social diversity in itself is not considered as negative it is rendered invisible. Such nations are ‘melting pot’ democracies, where the individual has the liberty to be and believe what he or she desires as long as issues of culture, belief and being are relegated to the private sphere.

Schools are often 'melting pots' where assimilation practices encourage students to blend in with the majority culture while simultaneously discouraging them from retaining their native customs and beliefs. Moreover, various studies found that teachers who form part of the dominant group do not question their 'whiteness' in relation to students of other ethnicities. Machovcová (2017), claims that "we silence our ethnicity because our membership is from a racial point of view seen as unmarked" (p. 94). Cooks (2003) considers whiteness as the norm that we do not question, and we measure those different from us against it. Yoon (2012) found that teachers preferred to keep conversations 'safe', without addressing race and ethnicity. Inadvertently, they constructed a discursive mechanism that contributed to the intensification of inequalities by preferring the norms of the majority.

Without any doubt, acquisition of the host language is of tantamount importance for students, especially when it is the language of instruction. The problem lies with the insistence of schools of focusing solely on language and ignoring all other aspects which the school needs to address in order for the students to belong. Machovcová (2017), in her study of Czech teachers, found that while teachers were sympathetic to the plights of migrant students and did their utmost to help them settle in school, they still focused on the acquisition of the Czech language as if once they could communicate in Czech, all their other difficulties will magically be solved. She says that teachers espoused the normative view that, "the foreigner is supposed to adapt and reach out" (p. 96). Similarly, Ekiaka-Oblazamengo and Ekiaka-Nzai (2014) report that in the USA, language policies in schools are restrictive and encourage assimilations practices. Other researchers found that some teachers regard students who assimilate in a positive light, and view them as empowered (Dvir, Aloni & Harari, 2015). Teachers focused on teaching "students to succeed in learning the traditional curriculum in traditional classrooms and to be successful in the existing society" (Grant & Sleeter, 2006, p.

12). Thus, the migrant students' success was measured by how much they were able to transform themselves to be like the other students.

The school's curriculum and ethos, together with the ways in which teachers perceive diversity may also promote assimilation. Taking the Hong Kong education system as an example, Grossman and Yuen (2006) found that schooling was mostly monocultural. Moreover, teachers held an ethnocentric world view (Yuen, 2009), and thus they would provide experiences for their students that would reflect their own perspective of life. There are other practices which encourage assimilation. Presenting only one view, such as in religious belief or heteronormativity, would drive the message home that there is only one way of being. For instance, providing the students with images and discourse of families made up of man, woman and children, would reinforce heteronormativity (Hanlon, 2009). Furthermore, omitting topics or issues from the curriculum, such as Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ) content, would send the message that it is not desirable to form part of the said community or that it is deviant behaviour (Hanlon, 2009). The act of omission, according to Finnessy (2009) constructs a silence that "influences, informs and instructs" (p. 34). Consequently, students learn that being different from what is considered the norm is not beneficial. Assimilation, which at times is very similar to exclusion, can be an exercise of symbolic violence on students who do not fall within the desired ideals of the school and the teachers. Students are expected to transform themselves in order to fit in within the narrow boundaries of 'being' like all the others.

As has been amply illustrated, assimilation, especially when it is forced, can be very traumatic and may cause conflict within the persons experiencing it as well as within their communities. Perceived sameness may be the root of injustices, because particularities are not recognised and addressed. On the other hand, accommodation of diversity, as will be

discussed in Section 2.2.3. below, is another political theory which acknowledges differences within society and provides policies and practices to accommodate them.

### **2.2.3. – Accommodation – acknowledging differences**

Policies of accommodation concede that different social groups exist in society and individuals in these groups cannot simply divest of their identity once they emerge in public. The state recognises the different cultures<sup>4</sup> and legitimizes their presence through legislation that protects them from discrimination. Therefore, different communities, while living separately are considered capable of sharing power and valuing common citizenship. Thus, one might find Chinatown and Little Italy and many other communities living peacefully apart, with little if any conflicts, but also with little interaction between them. Many members of the community might not speak the host language but find solace in the support provided by their group. They do not find it necessary to invest their time to learn the language and thus interaction with other groups is even more unlikely. When members of different communities do not have necessary language skills to communicate outside their group they find it very difficult to actively participate in the public sphere. Besides, Gosine (2000) refers to Reitz and Sklar (1997) who found that “strong ethnic attachments may cause social marginality that often isolates individuals from information about mainstream job opportunities. The result of this is limited educational and occupational attainment on the part of members of such communities” (para. 8). The state, like in the case of liberal democracies, considers it the responsibility of the individual to integrate in mainstream society and does not shoulder the responsibility of marginalisation of members of these social groups.

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<sup>4</sup> Culture in this context is not solely bound by ethnicity or faith, it also refers to gender, sexual orientation, disability among others.

Canada can be considered as one such social and political context. Critics of Canadian multiculturalism consider such measures as those mentioned above as emphasising difference. Ley (2010) refers to Bissoondath's (1994) observation about Canadian multiculturalism and how, "multiculturalism contributed to the containment, marginalisation and ghettoisation of essentialised immigrant identities" (p. 195). In his study, Gosine (2000) found that even when respondents were university graduates, earnings of racialised groups were significantly less than the earnings of white Canadians. According to the author this is a "disturbing finding that reflects Canada's failure in its meritocratic promise that the acquisition of higher educational qualifications would be the great equalizer for traditionally disadvantaged groups" (para. 25). Clearly, laws banning discrimination on any grounds without engagement in politics of equal respect is not enough to instil a sense of justice. Wong (2008) in his review of multicultural literature points out that:

The current state of most multiculturalism policies, such as those in Canada, is what Hall (2000) describes as "pluralist multiculturalism," which entails enfranchising the differences among groups along cultural lines and also according different group rights to different communities within a communitarian political order. This is the kind of multiculturalism that the critics have called fragmented pluralism. (para. 34)

The state, in acknowledging differences and according different rights to minority groups inadvertently contributes to the essentialising of the 'other' and people's 'worth' is perceived according to the group they belong to. In the educational sphere, addressing students' diversity often refers to their ethnic, racial and cultural difference. These ethnic and cultural differences are usually reserved to non-whites, as if being white does not constitute a 'race' as well and thus need not be addressed. Secondly, by focusing on ethnicity/race and culture in the celebration of social diversity, schools would be conceiving of identity as static and

reinforcing ideas about separate identities (Candle, 2016). Modood and May (2001), criticised the ways in which people of different cultures are welcomed by encouraging their cultural practices in a superficial way. In schools this is manifest in the organisation of particular days when the students bring in food from their culture, wear the national costume and other similar activities which, Modood and May (2001) and Tronya (1993) call multiculturalism of the three S's: saris, samosas, and steelbands.

In the context of schools, accommodating practices in terms of diversity are often present. Muslim girls might be allowed to wear hijab and Sikh boys, the turban. Schools allow for dietary differences and are accessible to children with disabilities. The level of accommodation usually varies, depending on the school policies in place. It also depends on how educators view the accommodation of diverse students, as well as their ability to provide effective teaching. Teachers' beliefs and perspectives on the diverse facets of all the students in their classroom are fundamental for the wellbeing of the students (Ginsberg, 2005). This is due to the fact that educators, in their quest for accommodating students of diverse belief systems, abilities and orientations, have to determine what decisions to take and what to ignore, what types of interactions are valued (Pratt, 2005; Wiggins et al, 2007). These decisions are transmitted through their teaching and attitudes towards the student.

Teachers and students engage in different socio-cultural contexts, resulting in acquiring different perspectives and beliefs. Park and Judd (2005) argue that these differences are so ubiquitous that one cannot ignore them. Teachers pertaining to the dominant culture, and who are working in a context of accommodating practices, make it a point to include the students' cultural knowledge in the everyday school practices – from lesson planning to resources used (Hachfeld, Hahn, Schroeder, Anders, Stanat and Kunter, 2011; Kanu, 2007). The accommodation perspective allows for more empathy (Burkand and Knox, 2004).



Moreover, it leads to more acceptance of diversity (Wolsko, Park, Judd, and Wittenbrink, 2000). In class, this leads to an “open empathetic and student-oriented attitude” (Hachfeld et al, 2011, p. 987), which is imperative for positive teacher-student interactions.

Furthermore, teachers embracing this particular philosophy would acknowledge that they cannot ignore race, culture and ethnicity as treating everyone the same, or being neutral, do not transform into just education practices. Accommodating diverse students might signify moving those at the margins towards the centre. However, this does not necessarily imply that it demands “educational reconstruction and new ways of thinking” (Arnesen, Mietola, Lehelma, 2007, p. 99). Accommodation is more like having a guest visiting one’s home. While the host makes the guest as comfortable as possible, the guest knows it is not a place he or she can call home.

#### **2.2.4. Politics of difference**

Liberal political theory assumes that a homogenous public is desirable and possible. It fails to account for the diversity that exists and universalises the experiences of the dominant group and culture, as well as its establishment as the norm. Accommodation, on the other hand, does recognise and acknowledge the existence of minority cultures and allows for the manifestation of their practices. However, both these two models of multiculturalism fail to manage their social diversity in order to address injustice which stems from having a hegemonic majority imposing its mode of living. Marion Young’s vision of a just society is one that recognises culturally differentiated and group based politics. In her post-modern theory of democracy she proposes a politics of difference to address social injustices.

Young (1990) bases her theory on three main arguments. She contends that injustice is primarily caused by oppression and domination, rather than by distributive inequality. Many

minorities live in a society which oppresses them to different extents. Women in general live in a patriarchal society, where breaking glass ceilings is already difficult. If one is a black woman, then the difficulties multiply as happens when one is poor living in poverty. Young (1990) argues that, “all oppressed people suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts and feelings” (p. 40). In more specific terms, groups of people suffer different forms of oppression which Young divides into five categories: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. The kind of oppression Young refers to is structural, that is:

the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms – in short, the normal processes of everyday life. (p. 41)

The second argument put forth by Young is that in order to eliminate oppression, it is necessary to provide a political climate that welcomes difference. This is done by reforming, or doing away with altogether, those practices, processes and structures that sustain difference-blind, impartial, neutral, universal politics. Young (1990) calls for cultural politics that question the everyday symbols, practices, images, attitudes and habits that contribute to social domination and group oppression, even if done unintentionally.

She also calls for the inclusion of those social groups which are disadvantaged in decision making, without these groups having to give up their particularities in order to be able to participate. This democratic decision making ensures the condition for social justice. In order for this to be possible, society has to show commitment to meeting the basic needs of its members as otherwise their participation would not be possible.

Therefore, Young (1990) proposes the dismantling of structures of oppression and domination, which are not merely tied to distribution of resources. She argues that universal accessibility to public goods is not enough to ensure that people are treated justly. For instance, free education for all does not automatically translate into equality of access to educational institutions, equality of opportunity and equality of educational achievement. Inequality still persists because while equalising resources might give the impression that everyone has an equal chance of success, socially disadvantaged groups might still not have means to access quality education. As Eisenberg (2006) argues, “universal accessibility and policies which seek to treat all individuals precisely the same, do not address the sources of many forms of oppression and domination that are directly experienced by groups in every society” (p. 9). Certain violent acts that target particular groups of people, such as homophobia, or racial harassment, are sources of oppression that are not distributive. For instance, having a ‘colour-blind’ school policy does not address racial inequality in the classroom but worsens and perpetuates it (Wells, 2014). Such policies do not usually have interventions that support diversity, but usually intensify social and racial class segregation and inequality. Basing policies on meritocracy will not benefit those coming from socially and economically deprived families, as these students have neither the social, nor cultural capital required to succeed.

Schools work from the base of unacknowledged privilege. Curricula and policies are written by those who have access to and power to influence the political and educational sphere. Far from being neutral, curricula and policies are imbued with the perspectives of those who speak from their privileged position (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). These perspectives are presented as if they are the only legitimate ones and thus societal disadvantages are reinforced through the education system. Grant and Sleeter (2009) argue that, “Schools generally teach the young to revere rather than critique the nation’s political

and economic institutions, and to view society as fair and just, even with its flaws” (p. 260). Politics of difference can challenge this relationship of power between the dominant and oppressed groups. Educators can guide students to become aware of the relationships of power that exist in society. In this way they would be better able to understand and develop empathy and respect for each other. Through critical pedagogy students learn to question and be critical of the dominant worldview as presented in the curriculum (Freire, 1970). Giroux (1992), in his discussion of the crisis of literacy, insists that there should be an emphasis on teaching students how to govern, giving vital importance to diversity, equality and justice:

This emphasis entails organizing curricula in ways that enable students to make judgements about how society is historically and socially constructed, how existing social practices structure inequalities around racism, sexism and other forms of oppression. It also means helping students to learn to make judgements about what society might be, what is possible or desirable outside existing configurations of power, and why it is important to become not only subjects of discourse, but also agents of social change. (p. 8)

Educators who exercise their profession through a politics of difference paradigm question the narratives by which notions of ‘man’, ‘history’, ‘reason’ and ‘culture’ are projected in universalist European terms (Peters, 2005). In doing so they would be able to challenge the normative understanding of such terms. Such educators engage students in deconstruction of culture and media stereotypes and help them become conscious of how these stereotypes oppress those about whom they speak.

Furthermore, educators who approach diversity through politics of difference, promote a curriculum that breaks the mould of the notion of citizenship tied to one particular culture. Thus they create a class climate that welcomes difference. These educators empower

students by fostering in them the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to be critical of everyday symbols and practices which seem universal but actually dominate and marginalise those who are constructed as others.

The four schools of thought above illustrate different ways in which states in general, and schools in particular, can respond to the social diversity that is present in society and in schools. Constructions of the other are dependent on who is included and excluded through discourse, policies and legislation. There are times when laws convey acknowledgement and acceptance of diverse needs and particularities of social groups, but people's attitudes show intolerance and exclusion. Even when there are laws in place that safeguard minority groups, the outcome might not be the same for all groups. For example, while one cannot discriminate against people with disability when it comes to employment, this is anything but true in practice (Bjelland, Bruyère, von Schrader, Houtenville, Ruiz-Quintanilla and Webber, 2010). The same can be said of schooling systems. In Section 2.3. below, I shall analyse ways in which schools include and exclude, assimilate and accommodate their diverse populations. This will be done by engaging in discussions about educators' constructions of social diversity, and schooling systems, policies and practices and the role they play in the construction of the other.

### **2.3. Schooling systems, education policies and social diversity**

Schooling systems maintain a very ambivalent relationship with social diversity. Schools are spaces where homogeneity is often the norm. Sameness is often interchangeable with equality and equity. Students are considered 'cohorts' depending on age, subject choice, sometimes gender or faith among other groupings. When students are grouped, there is the assumption of sameness within the group. If students are grouped by age, for example, it is assumed that they are at the same stage of cognitive development. High stakes testing,

especially external to the school impacts what is taught and how it is taught. Thus many schools would be teaching for the test and the curriculum narrows its focus to meet the external targets set by the examiners. Amid this homogenization, schools may also engage in practices that acknowledge the social diversity amongst their students. They provide support for students with disabilities, some schools acknowledge cultural differences of their students and try to address them through activities and occasionally the curriculum.

The ambivalent relationship between schools and their constructions of social diversity will be further discussed in this section. Schools, as mini-societies – reflect life on the outside of the school gates, although they should be markers of change and pushers of progressive ideas. Educators' constructions of social diversity, as mentioned above, is a process that starts taking shape within the person's immediate community. As one grows older and has access to a wider range of people, opinions and resources, the constructions of social diversity that had started to take shape when young, are modified, refined and sometimes totally reshaped by new learning experiences. The following section is about educators and their constructions of social diversity. Consequently, schools are also sites which contribute to the constructions of social diversity, mostly due to their policies, especially the curriculum.

### **2.3.1. Educators' constructions of social diversity**

Educators are not impervious to the dynamics prevailing in constantly changing societies. Nor are they immune to the dominant discourses about differences that infiltrate the curriculum both overtly and subtly. As with the rest of the population, educators are not completely autonomous in the way they think and behave. Both individual and collective actions are shaped by the "currents of power surrounding cultural patterns, social locations, and education" (Bickmore, 2005, p. 3). When prevalent discourses become 'normal', 'natural', even 'common sense', values and practices can become absorbed and remain unchallenged

(Dunne, 2008). One must note, however, that these 'taken for granted' values shaped as they are by normalising discourse always benefit the powerful and oppress the 'other' as discourses are intimately linked to power and knowledge (Foucault, 1980). It is very difficult to think and act outside of such discourses once they become natural (St Pierre, 2000) because they shape our thinking and thus inform us on how to behave (Dunne, 2008).

In engaging social difference and diversity, educators, as political actors construct political theories about the Other's location within the broader society. This idea of the 'ideal' citizen as opposed to the 'different other' is transported to the classroom and teachers often categorize students according to the perceived qualities they think they possess or lack. These categories tend to map teachers' attitudes towards their students. These attitudes may also influence the academic achievement of the students because teachers tend to perceive the students who fall within the approved identity as better achievers than those on the margins. Gay (2010) explains that this happens because teachers "fail to recognise, understand, or appreciate the pervasive influence of culture on their own and their students' attitudes, values and behaviours" (p. 24). For instance, Solomon, Portelli, Daniel and Campbell (2005) claim that whiteness is constructed as being invisible and neutral in Canadian society. They found that educators "construct discourses that are often academically and emotionally debilitating to the 'racial other'" (p. 147). These constructions by educators are informed by a white, race-privileged position and educators are poised to reproduce the racial-order instead of challenging it. Even if educators employ critical analysis of situations, policies and practices, these analyses are shaped by the prevailing discourse in the public sphere as well media influence. Dominant discourses encode and reinforce power relations.

Educators' conceptions of what constitutes an ideal society influence their perceptions of who are those students regarded as desirable, and thus deserving of their attention and

support. Consequently, those students who for various reasons might not fall within educators' imaginary of how society is or should be are therefore not privileged enough to be considered as students worthy of time and attention.

Darder (2012) claims that teachers' expectations of their students play an integral role in the latter's academic success or failure. These expectations are based on various factors such as the social context "which incorporates the prevailing social attitudes associated with race, class structure, and the social, political and economic ideology" (p. 17). Other factors include pedagogical theories and conceptual frameworks, and educational structures and practices instilled during training programmes. A most important factor, claims the author, is the teachers' personal experiences related to race, education and peer socialisation. Moreover, the students' race, behaviour, class and even appearance also influenced teachers' expectations. Educators' epistemologies mediate approaches of teaching and learning (Brownlee, Syu, Mascadri, Cobb-Moore, Walker, Johansson, Boulton-Lewis, Gillian, & Ailwood, 2012). Their attitudes, beliefs and action drive classroom actions (Richardson, 1996). Therefore, amid talk of celebration of diversity, inclusion becomes part of a therapeutic discourse that offers a set of explanations about appropriate feelings that individuals ought to have and how they ought to respond to events (Ecclestone, 2004; 2007). Students who are 'abnormal' or 'different', that is, who do not fall within the 'normality' expected by the educational setting they inhabit, need to be rehabilitated so that they too form part of the 'normal'. As such, this is an antithesis of the concept of celebration of diversity and of inclusion as it privileges a particular way of being at the expense of others. Perhaps to counter those who do not fall within the parameters of conceived society and citizenry, educators partake in pathologizing practices that reinforce the normalising discourse in the setting in which they work. One form of pathologizing practice is deficit thinking and Shields, Bishop and Mazawi (2005) argue that when educators engage in "deficit thinking", which they describe as,



“Perceived structural, functional, cultural, or epistemological deviation from an assumed normal state is ascribed to another group as a product of power relationships, whereby the less powerful group is deemed to be abnormal in some way” (p. x).

Moreover, educational practices that normalise, categorise and label individuals as ‘different’ reinforce the notion that difference is essentially a negative attribute (Striker, 1997). Normalising discourse preserves the status quo because it is the students who are seen as being ‘defective’ or ‘abnormal’ rather than the alienating construction of the ‘ideal’ student.

As Pijl and Frissen (2009) argue, “the true criterion for successfully implementing a more inclusive system ultimately depends on what goes on in schools and classrooms” (p. 367). Ultimately the school ethos and teachers in classrooms make or break a policy. If schools and teachers choose to ignore calls for inclusivity, implementation of even the most inclusive policies will fail. The authors, writing about special needs education, claim that even when policymakers try to change daily practices in schools by appointing personnel such as Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), tying up the budget allocated to schools with the number of students as well as closing special schools, “these do not generally lead to a change in teachers’ attitude, self-confidence, knowledge and skills and, when forced upon the school, are therefore likely to initiate disconnection and enhance segregation” (p. 372). Educators take on such an attitude for a multitude of reasons. First among them is that they might not be sufficiently prepared for such a change. While they might not object to the presence of children with different needs in their class, they feel that they lack the necessary skills to create an inclusive classroom (Pijl and Frissen, 2009). The necessary support might not be forthcoming and this further exacerbates their anxiety. Thus, educators may choose the path of segregation as a coping strategy.

Archer and Francis (2005) have also commented that teachers may construct minority ethnic groups differently, for example South Asian girls might be regarded as oppressed and Muslim boys as fundamentalist low achievers. However, for them, all “representations assume an underpinning conceptualisation of homogeneous, tightly bounded ethnic 'culture(s)' that shape minority ethnic engagement with education” (p. 167). In their study, which focused on teachers’ constructions of British Chinese pupils, the authors found that, “while British Chinese girls are singled out by their (assumed) high achievement, they are still positioned as not quite the 'right' type of pupils (p. 177). Thus, even if they fall within all the right ‘criteria’ of the successful student, teachers problematised their academic success. It seems that unless students fall within the teachers’ strict idea of the ‘ideal’ student, students tend to find themselves constructed as ‘different’. Every construction of difference, even the ‘positive’ ones, tends to stigmatise and marginalise students, very often robbing them of their educational entitlement.

Within an educational institution, educators’ constructions of social diversity are further influenced by policies and curricula that reinforce or challenge these constructions. An assimilationist education policy might prove challenging to educators whose idea of social diversity is more inclusive. An assimilations policy would throw these educators in a dilemma – they find such policies oppressive and at the same time they would need to abide by the rules in order to keep their job. Thus, most probably they would have to negotiate and find a way to function within such a scenario. On the other hand, assimilationist policies could further encourage educators who support such practices, to ignore differences and justify their practices even though they alienate their students further.

### 2.3.2. Education Policies

School systems are shaped by policies that reflect the ideology of the government of the day. These policies ultimately confirm the construction of the citizen that is most desired by the state, defining the ideal from the 'different'. Democratic countries concur that education should be democratic and inclusive; it should provide equal opportunities for all students and there should not be any discrimination. Nevertheless, "what exactly this means can vary dramatically by one's national identity and cultural traditions, ideological stance, theoretical perspective, and academic discipline" (Perry, 2007, p. 423). There is a distinction between education policies that consider all students as being equal by treating them all in the same manner and policies that attempt at least to address issues of difference so that there is more equity.

The curriculum is an important tool by which social diversity in schools is or is not addressed. Nowadays it is a common occurrence to have a multiplicity of differences in schools, not only of the academic kind but also in terms of ability, ethnicity, race and religious beliefs. The curriculum is the means through which these differences are addressed. Borg and Mayo (2006) consider the curriculum as, "strongly connected with a process whereby different cultures are engaged in a contest for legitimacy" (p. 33). Thus the curriculum is strongly linked to power – those who are more powerful will have more say in the establishing of a curriculum to suit their means and their vision. Darder (2012) considers the curriculum as "the perpetuation of values and social relations that produce and legitimate the dominant worldview at the expense of a vast number of its citizens" (p. 19). Therefore, the curriculum is also a means through which the 'others' are created. This can be done both explicitly and implicitly. For instance, curricula that tie one particular religion or ethnicity to the notion of citizenship automatically exclude those who are of different faiths or ethnic groups. However,

an 'inclusive' curriculum that is blind to differences also marginalises those students who fall outside the "one size fits all" parameters of sameness. Therefore differences are ignored because policy makers believe that to assure equality all students must benefit from the same educational measures.

Others still, try to address these differences in ways that ignore the different identities students have and focus only on that which does not conform to the idea of the ideal citizen. For example, there might be a great focus on students who have not yet mastered literacy and in providing access to literacy plans and programmes for these students, the other facets of the students' educational development are ignored. Therefore, the programmes which are intended to improve the child's literacy skills would still impinge on the rights of the child for a holistic education. The child's failures or successes in other areas of schooling are only measured in comparison with his or her literacy achievement. Thus, difference is constructed as being a negative quality. Illiteracy should of course always be addressed and educators should ensure that their students achieve adequate levels of literacy. However, in addressing an aspect of a students' educational experience, one must not focus on one issue and carve a different other around it.

### **2.3.3. Schools – Comfortably numb to difference?**

Schools are also institutions in which diversity abounds and in which the other is constructed by those who form part of the school community. They are large public spheres in which democracy is encouraged but not always practiced. Democracy and democratic representation in schools depends mostly on the headship and his or her idea of how the school should be run and who should participate in decision making. Therefore, while policies and the curriculum itself might give clear guidelines as to how democracy in schools should be practiced, heads of schools often interpret what is written according to their own idea of

democracy. As happens in public spheres outside of schools, those in power are able to influence practices within schools. However, many times those who are mostly affected by decisions taken at school – the students – are the least consulted and encouraged to participate. The same happens with parents, often on the premise that as professionals ‘educators’ know better. Thus, the public sphere serves only as an empty space where a hegemonic culture prevails. Students must adhere, internalise, or assimilate to the popular culture that is prevalent. Failing to conform, they are sometimes marginalised by their peers and teachers. In their role of the powerful adult, educators contribute to the ‘creation’ of the ‘other’, just as society, through its rules and regulations defines who is an ‘acceptable’ citizen and who is not.

A school’s claim to democratic credentials could be the election of a school council consisting of parents and teachers as well as the election of a student council. The fact that parents, teachers and students voted is often considered as a gauge to ‘measure’ democracy in schools. There is nothing that measures the undemocratic practices that often alienate students, parents and even teachers. Merchant (1999) published a study about a school in a rural community she called Agriville, where the principal refused to acknowledge the different language needs of these students. He was adamant that the policies should not be altered to be more suitable to the needs of the new students. Merchant writes that: “His view of the schooling process required socialising the Mexican students to existing policies and practices rather than modify these policies and practices in response to the students’ presence in the community” (p. 155). This unwillingness to create more inclusive policies frustrated teachers because they felt they were unable to handle the situation where they could not communicate effectively with their students. Once their frustrations were ignored by the principal, they became complacent and returned to the usual instructional methods and ignored the students. The consequences were that “Several teachers described these students as ghosts

in their classroom, as did the Mexican students describe themselves, suggesting that, despite the teachers' best intentions, maintenance of traditional instructional policies and practices did, at times, render these students invisible" (p. 164).

This is certainly not an isolated case and many schools seem to build their ethos on one particular identity at the exclusion of all others. Angelides, Stylianou and Leigh (2004) describe how this Iranian immigrant girl living in Cyprus changed her Muslim name to a Greek one, ate pork and declared that she would never wear the headscarf. This girl, Anna, was prepared to negate her Iranian identity in order to be accepted by her schoolmates. The authors compare the girls' situation with that of some black children in England:

[The child's] birth and fortune, its past and its future, point to completely different and conflicting directions. [The child's] present is nothing more than an arena of struggle between the now and the future, without any assurance which one will win at the end. [The child] feels caught between two worlds and wishes to leave the one, but it cannot, nor would it let go; [the child] wishes to embrace the other world, but it is afraid that it can not do so and the other world will not accept it anyway. (Parelch, 1997, p.55 in Angelides et.al, 2000, p.310)

This quote gives a clear picture of the dilemmas children coming from a different culture than that 'approved' by the school must go through. They feel different in both worlds because the two environments are not inclusive and thus children have to make a choice which will leave repercussions on their social relationships as well as bring about emotional difficulties due to the difficult choices they have to make.

Schools that encourage assimilation rather than inclusion do so at the expense of ensuring an equitable, holistic educational experience. Assimilation does not make students

equal but makes some identities subordinate to others. It alienates and marginalises students, constructing them as ‘others’ whose identities are not valid within the school community.

## **2.4. Conclusion**

In this study, I approach educators as social actors who actively construct their own understandings of social diversity. They observe the social world they inhabit and they assimilate, act upon, discard, recreate or reconstruct the information to make it their own.

I deem such a study important because of the implications these constructions have on classroom practices (Dedeoglu and Lamme, 2010; Knopp and Smith, 2005) and how they impinge on the students’ educational entitlement. This study comes at a time when societies are becoming more and more diverse and thus discourse around social diversity is being constantly challenged. In the classroom, difference could be managed in various ways. Some teachers expect the ‘different’ students to ‘blend in’ with the rest of the class, others ignore their needs. Then there are those teachers who do their best to acknowledge and address the differences in a way that makes the students feel they belong to the class.

The way in which diversity is negotiated in the classroom is linked to school leadership and policies that impact teachers’ actions but also to the teacher’s role in constructing the different other in relation to his or her constructions of social diversity, and what it means to them to belong in society. Educators position themselves in relation to the schools of thought referred to above. How do educators position themselves in light of the practices that exclude particular groups of students? Which practices do they engage in that might expect some students to assimilate while simultaneously accommodating others? Why do educators operate a hybridity of exclusion, assimilation accommodation and politics of difference, and on what basis are the students Othered or accepted? This study is important because not

much research has yet been done in this regard, especially in Malta and literature is scarce both internationally and locally. Researching this dimension locally is of utmost importance due to the rapid social and political changes that are presently occurring, both within society as well as in schools. Thus, the study is topical and necessary at this time.

As I explain in the next chapter, in this dissertation, I argue that Malta offers an ideal context in which to explore how the different other is constructed by educators through ideologies and policies, the public sphere, and ultimately in schools and classrooms. The heated debates and controversies over national identity, and over issues of diversity, are increasingly coming to the fore in Malta due to migration, social and political activism as well as attempts to break from the hegemony of the Catholic Church. All this offers researchers a very pertinent context to examine how educators engage, navigate, negotiate, and construct questions of diversity in a society marked by the complex imbrications of history, memory, geography, culture, religion, and geopolitics.



# Chapter 3

## Educators and the construction of difference – the Maltese context

### 3.0. Introduction

The Maltese context offers a case in point to examine how educators construct Maltese identity, society and social difference. My interest in educators stems from the fact that as an educator myself, the way I constructed my idea of Maltese identity, society and the social diversity it incorporates, doubtlessly impacted on my teaching and relations with children and their parents. As the account below shows, Malta's history, the social transformation and the political and religious influences have forged images of Maltese society that are being continuously reinforced in some aspects and challenged in others.

As an island in the middle of the Mediterranean, Malta has made it more accessible to various rulers that occupied it through the course of its human history. This could also be considered as an early form of the globalisation process that left an impact on Maltese language, culture and worldviews. Until Independence in 1964, Malta was a British colony. The Maltese diaspora is widespread and according to Attard (1989) the Maltese moved to Gibraltar in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century others moved to North Africa and Corfu, Cyprus and as far away as Brazil. In the 1950s and 1960s there was mass migration mainly to Australia, USA, Canada and UK as many Maltese had to seek socio-economic

development outside Malta's borders (Agius, 2009). In the 1970s and early 1980s, Malta sought investment from both European companies as well as from North Africa and the Middle East. However, while the Maltese flourished economically, society was still generally insular, mostly due to the fact that living on an island is bound to foster an introverted perspective (Smith and Ebejer, 2012). Besides, the Maltese had only radio and TV (one local station and some Italian ones) and newspapers to tell them what was happening locally and around the world. Thus news was filtered depending on what the media owners or the state thought as important and beneficial for the people to know. The early 1990s brought about a great leap in telecommunication technology – the internet, cheaper and faster telephony – which facilitated cultural transactions worldwide. The proliferation of mass media made it possible to observe different lifestyles and worldviews and increased the possibility for emergent movements to engage with the public sphere (Falzon & Micallef, 2008).

Consequently, in the past two decades, Maltese society witnessed rapid changes which were also due to political factors, such as Malta's accession to the European Union in 2004. Moreover, many Maltese acquired more liberal views regarding social norms and no longer felt shackled by the dogma of the Catholic Church (Pace, 2012). The illusion of homogeneity that had permeated Maltese society was being slowly but steadily shattered as more minority groups started to make claims for equal rights. Increasing numbers of foreign people made their way to Malta, not as tourists (who were generally welcome), but as workers and asylum seekers (who were generally frowned upon). The new millennium seems to have been a true catalyst of change in Maltese society; immigration, demand for separation between Church and State, more civil rights with the introduction of divorce and civil union and later marriage between people of the same sex as well as adoption, and a Gender Identity, Gender Expression And Sex Characteristics Act have all left their mark on society. Moreover, the President of Malta has addressed the issue of the Catholic Religion as not being central to cultural activity

any more, and the government was set to launch an integration policy in 2015. All of these changes have made us re-examine and reconsider who we are – as a nation and as individuals. In order to do so, the ‘other’ is created and recreated depending on situations and circumstances. What follows is an analysis of how Maltese identity is constructed. It must be made clear that I am not implying that there is such a thing as a single identity to which all Maltese ascribe. Rather, I shall explore the different facets of what is popularly believed to constitute being Maltese and in the process I shall outline the identity markers that constitute the ‘other’, the outsider. The complexities of intersections of identity cannot be ignored, as one could ‘feel’ Maltese in some situations but is constructed as the ‘different other’ in discourses that may target a facet of one’s identity. For the sake of this study, I shall focus mostly on issues of gender and sexual orientation, ability/disability, migration, poverty and religion, certainly not exhaustive markers of identity but very important nonetheless.

### **3.1. Tensions of identity**

In order to provide a snapshot of the Maltese and how issues of identity are negotiated, this chapter cites a considerable amount of newspaper articles as well as material from mass and social media. It is not my intention to present this material as having foundation in any scientific studies. However, the articles, opinion pieces, images and links all contribute to how the media contributes to the constructions of Maltese society, identity and social diversity. A survey on what makes us Maltese carried out in 2013 by a local newspaper, MaltaToday (Debono, 2013), shows that the Maltese language is regarded a signifier of national unity, with culture, food and religion being the other defining aspects of Maltese identity. The Catholic religion as an identity marker is more prominent with those who are over 55 years old, and less than 10% of those under 34 think likewise. Surprisingly, 63% of those who participated in the survey accept the fact that Malta was populated by Muslims

from Sicily between the ninth and thirteenth century, as established by late historian Godfrey Wettinger (1986). An interesting observation is that citizenship as an identity marker was at eighth place out of ten. This survey provided an additional surprise – many participants were not averse to the idea of granting citizenship to children born to migrants once they completed their schooling. The public sphere has become replete with contributions by individuals and groups that either confirm or contradict the findings of this survey and it is within this context that one must envisage and understand how Maltese society – as an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) is constructed in the plurality of discourses by the above mentioned groups and individuals.

One’s ethnic origin is often considered as an identity marker which separates Maltese from ‘others’. Whiteness (as opposed to brown or black skinned) is very often constructed as a defining feature of being Maltese and thus of assumed citizenship and against which difference can be constructed. Baldacchino (2002) describes the Maltese as a “‘cosmopolitan and polyglot’ population reflecting the ‘ethnic and linguistics mixtures of Phoenician, Arab, Sicilian and British colonial influences (p. 195).” Apart from the fact that some Maltese would rather ignore the Arab influences on language, culture and ethnicity (see Chircop, 2008, p. 49 as an example), the issues of race and ethnicity had not featured strongly before the arrival of the first undocumented migrants and Malta’s accession within the European Union. The image of the Maltese as being ethnically homogenous was well captured by a Ghanaian man married to a Maltese woman on a Maltese TV programme<sup>5</sup> about immigrants. He said that he had been living legally in Malta for a long time. His children were born and bred in Malta, they speak perfect Maltese but are still referred to as ‘is-suwed’ (the black ones). In July, 2013 two bus drivers were victims of racist aggression (Chetcuti, 2013). One was Italian while the other was

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<sup>5</sup>AffariTaghna aired on One TV on Friday 21<sup>st</sup> January, 2011

a black female Maltese driver, who the passengers presumed was an undocumented migrant. The passengers used vulgar language and told her to go back to her country and to go back to Marsa (where an open centre for migrants is located). Similar incidents occur often, some making press headlines. This implies that, according to identity perception, one cannot be racially different and still be Maltese. One's skin colour is thus also considered to be synonymous with one's national identity. This in turn implies that unless one is 'white', one is not a Maltese citizen.

The colour of one's skin is not the only feature that seems to determine whether one is Maltese or not. Having a 'foreign' name and surname is bound to raise questions about one's citizenship. *iNewsMalta*, an online news portal, once reported an incident where a policeman, Tariq Sheikh, assisted in an incident between a Palestinian who was driving a car and a driver of another car (Pisani, 2012). Some commented that foreigners should not be allowed to join the police force. Admittedly, others who knew him personally spoke in defence of this constable. However, the fact that Mr Sheikh himself felt the need to write, "Why do people have a problem with my name? I was born in Malta and I am proud to be Maltese", shows that this is not a one off incident. Moreover, it is not only those who have Arab sounding surnames that face the brunt of on-line commentators. There are times when a person with a foreign surname criticises an aspect of Maltese society or culture, which very often is a justified comment. One immediately finds commentators telling these 'foreigners' to mind their own business or to go and solve their country's problems and other comments to this effect without realising that these people, apart from having a right to voice their views, might be Maltese citizens as well. Baldacchino and Wain (2013) argue that it is a challenge for the Maltese to re-define 'us' more broadly and to give a new meaning to the term:

“us Maltese” by substituting the old, ethnic meaning of the term “us” with one that identifies the “us” of a *common citizenship*, so that “we Maltese” is understood simply as “we citizens of Malta,” whoever we are, and nothing more, nor indeed, less than that. (p.158-159)

In what could be considered a move to the redefinition of “us Maltese” is another development in the political arena that brought Maltese Muslim citizens to the limelight. In the run up to the last general election (March 2013), both political parties embarked in wooing the Muslim community in order to garner their support. It must be noted that this was the first time ever that Muslims were acknowledged as citizens and members of Maltese society. On the eve of the 2013 general election, the government of the time signed an agreement with the Imam, Mohammed El Sadi where it allocated €300,000 yearly to Mariam Albatool School, the only school for Muslim children in Malta (“Muslim School”, 2013). After the election, the prime minister asked a Muslim man, to be one of his personal assistants. The prime minister himself admitted that he chose this person because of the skills he possessed and his religious affiliation did not bear any significance on this decision. This same person contested the election for the European Parliament but did not get elected. Perhaps it is still too early to determine whether the ‘courting’ of the Muslim community was a ruse to attract more votes or whether there was genuine interest in recognising the Muslim community and legitimising their presence. Still this decision contributed to the imaginary of a more inclusive Maltese society.

However, not everyone accepted the fact that there are Maltese citizens who are Muslims as well. For some it seems inconceivable that one can be both Maltese and Muslim. This could be seen clearly when recently Sara Ezabe, a young, Muslim, Law student, was nominated for the Queen’s Young Leaders Award, together with another young Maltese

woman. She was chosen to address Queen Elizabeth II during the Commonwealth Service at Westminster Abbey on the 14<sup>th</sup> of March, 2016. As the news appeared on online newspapers and websites, the comments started flowing in, most of them to claim that Sara is not even Maltese, that she should go back to her father's country ("Tfajla Maltija", 2016). In 2015, Sara, together with another Law student, Naomi Bugre, who is black and Maltese, organized an event entitled *RedefiningUs*, which aimed to make people ask what really makes a person Maltese (Dalli, 2015). These two young women are both Maltese, but fall outside the imagined realm of what constitutes being Maltese. Their 'coming out' has been met with people claiming that they are not Maltese citizens, that they are adopted and so on, since one cannot be Muslim, Black and Maltese. One must also acknowledge that these two women have support as well, both from their peers as well as from strangers. However, the anti-Islam, and anti-black 'activists' are very vociferous, much more than those who accept that one's political identity is not necessarily tied to colour or faith.

### **3.1.1. Neither European nor Arab**

It is only in recent history that the idea of a Maltese identity started taking root, because as an island that has been passed on from one coloniser to another until gaining independence from the British in 1964 and becoming a republic ten years later, Malta is a very young 'nation'. A significant period where one could say the Maltese questioned who they really were was during the language question which saw the pro-British pitted against the pro-Italian faction (Howe, 1987). Frenco (1994) reiterates that this clash of visions made it difficult for the Maltese to 'reach a consensus on self-identity' (p. 14). In the seventies, Dom Mintoff (Prime Minister 1971-1984) used to speak in Maltese when dealing with anyone from the Arab world because he wanted to convey the message to the Arab side that the linguistic element ties us to the Arab world and thus we should get preferential treatment (Zammit, 2012).

During the debates about Maltese identity prior to the accession of Malta in the European Union, chief ideologue Peter Serracino Inglott promoted the Mediterranean dimension. Conversely, Mifsud Bonnici (1989), who was Education Minister (1987-1994) spoke about the way the Maltese removed the excessive glottal and fricative articulations of particular phonemes from the language, clearly referring to the guttural sounds of the Arabic phonemes, “as if this was done consciously, a deliberate attempt to distance Malta from its Arab heritage in order to take on its European identity” (Chircop, 2010, p. 240). This insistence to depict the Maltese as European by the pro-EU lobby seems to ignore the fact that, “linguistically, culturally, genetically and even religiously, we had absorbed our so-called “adversaries” right into the core of our being’ (Sultana, 2009, p. 15). As can be seen there were two constructions of Maltese identity. The first one, brought forward by the Malta Labour Party led by Dom Mintoff was that Maltese identity is primarily a Mediterranean one, due to the unique geopolitical position of the island. The European one is only secondary (Cini, 2000). As much as Malta’s links with the rest of Europe are important, its relationship with the Arab states of the Mediterranean is also of utmost significance as Fenech (1988) reiterates. The alternate identity, pushed forward by the Nationalist Party was that Malta’s identity was a European, Christian Democratic one with the Mediterranean identity being secondary. When presenting the application for European membership to Italy’s Foreign Minister in Brussels on July 16, 1990, Guido de Marco, then Foreign Affairs Minister, told him that:

In Malta’s aspirations and vocation, we had always lived our European identity in a Mediterranean context. We wanted to focus more on the Mediterranean dimension of Europe. I said that as frontier people we are tied to our traditions but were also determined to live in friendship with our southern neighbours. (de Marco, 2007, p. 200)



Malta became a member of the European Union (EU) in 2004. The road to accession was a bumpy one as the major political parties could not agree whether it would be beneficial for Malta and the Maltese to become EU members (Cini, 2000). Apart from those who followed their political party blindly and thus voted for or against EU accession according to party directives, there were others who regarded accession as a step in the right direction for a healthy economy, but were very wary of the social upheaval accession would bring. It was as if people wanted to partake in the benefits without denting the presumed superior values of Maltese society. Mitchell (2002) captures this dilemma when he refers to the Maltese as 'ambivalent Europeans' due to their desire to form part of 'modern' Europe and simultaneously regarding Europe as "a threat to local integrity, 'tradition' and morality" (p.2). Thus the Maltese are seen as being ambivalently situated between 'modernity' (Europe) and the more traditional societies of the Mediterranean as writings of Boissevain (1965, 1977) show. Some ten years after Mitchell's publication one might get the impression that not much has changed and the ambivalence is still there. This ambiguity in the desire of becoming part of Europe and at the same time distancing oneself from the secularisation and liberal world view held by most of the member states can be seen in the illustrations that follow. It is undeniable that while the drive towards secularisation is strong and has a lot of public support, it is also seen as a threat, especially to various conservative groups. To counter the secularisation process, groups such as The Catholic Vote created a Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/177920242313732/>) to encourage Catholic voters to vote to parties and candidates who support the teachings of the Catholic Church. Similarly, The Gift of Life, a non-profit Organisation made a formal proposal to the Parliamentary Committee for Social Affairs on the 24th January 2005, to amend the Maltese Constitution on the matter of abortion. It wants the government to entrench an anti-abortion clause in the constitution, even though abortion is illegal in Malta and not on the agenda of any political party.

Malta's accession to the EU, meant among other things that a good number of Maltese were presented with new occupational opportunities. Those who were qualified went to work within the EU institutions. Besides, once Malta became part of the EU, it was easier for the Maltese to work in other EU member states. EU accession did not just give the Maltese the possibility to work in one of the member states. There has also been a regular influx of immigrant workers from EU states, which according to the November 2011 Census, make up 59% of the non-Maltese population. Since the turn of the century Malta also witnessed an influx of sub-Saharan migrants, many of them undocumented, who after a journey fraught with danger, crossed the Mediterranean on rickety boats to reach mainland Europe. Considering Malta's small geographic size and limited resources, it was inconceivable for many Maltese people that Malta would become a destination for immigrants. Malta is located at the southern edge of Europe, off the shores of North Africa. Thus the Mediterranean Sea route from the shores of Libya and Egypt to Malta, Italy, Cyprus and Greece is one of the main trajectories of migration flow from Africa to Europe. Between 2002 and 2011 Malta witnessed the arrival of around 13,000 undocumented migrants (Census of Population and Housing 2011, 2012). Most of the time migrants from sub-Saharan Africa arrive on the island without a passport and sometimes without any other documentation. According to the Maltese Immigration Act (1970) one needs the appropriate documentation to be allowed to land and remain on the Island (Art 9(1)) and those who do not have the necessary documents will be remanded in custody. They are housed in detention centres and even if undocumented migrants apply for protection their stay in detention may last up to 12 months (and up to 18 months if their claim has been rejected).

One must acknowledge the fact that migration has impacted the demography of Maltese society as the increase of 65.8% of non-Maltese residents over 2005, shows. The last census (2011) indicates a higher proportion of non-Maltese nationals reside in the Northern

Harbour (Birkirkara, Gżira, Ғal Qormi, Ғamrun, Msida, Pembroke, San Ġwann, Santa Venera, St Julian's, Swieqi, Ta' Xbiex, Tal-Pietà, Tas-Sliema), South Eastern (Birżebbuġa, Gudja, Ғal Għaxaq, Ғal Kirkop, Ғal Safi, Marsaskala, Marsaxlokk, Mqabba, Qrendi, Żejtun, Żurrieq) and Northern District (Ғal Għargħur, Mellieħa, Mġarr, Mosta, Naxxar, St Paul's Bay). A smaller percentage of non-Maltese residents live in the Southern Harbour District (Cospicua, Fgura, Floriana, Ғal Luqa, Ғaż-Żabbar, Kalkara, Marsa, Paola, Santa Luċija, Senglea, Ғal Tarxien, Valletta, Vittoriosa, Xgħajra). According to the Demographic Review of 2010, it was estimated that 8,201 persons immigrated to Malta. More than three fourths of the total number of immigrants originated from EU Member states while another 15% were returned migrants. The November 2011 Census indicates that 4.8% of the total population is non-Maltese, a 3% increase from 2005. The majority of immigrants – 59% - hail from EU Member states; 13% of the non-Maltese population is from Sub-Saharan Africa; 10% are European but not from within the EU; 8% Asian and 5% hail from North Africa. Some migrants settle in Malta for good. Others marry a Maltese spouse and eventually acquire Maltese citizenship. Others, and these are usually migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, regard Malta as a stepping stone either to mainland Europe or else, if granted refugee status, they are relocated to the United States and other countries who agree to accommodate refugees.

The influx of foreigners, especially those from Africa, was constructed as an immigration crisis (Mainwaring and Brigden, 2016). As a response to this perceived crisis, Malta saw the birth of the Far Right, first with Imperium Europa, then Alleanza Nazzjonali Repubblikana, and Azzjoni Nazzjonali (Falzon & Micallef, 2008). Social media made it possible for other groups to get organised. The groups “Daqshekk għall-Immigrazzjoni Illegali” (No more Illegal Immigration - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/377595985622234/>) and Għaqda Patrijotti Maltin (The Organisation of Maltese Patriots - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/374854512664893/>) claim to be against illegal

immigrants, against Islam and against integration because the Maltese are losing their identity. The latter, during a protest they organised in Valletta, claimed that Malta should have one religion and one identity as the poster below (Figure 1) shows:

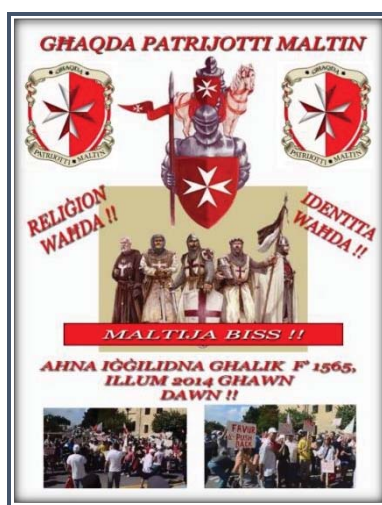


Figure 1: MALTIJA BISS!!(MALTESE ONLY!!)  
Source: Għaqda Patrijotti Maltin (2014)

This poster shows a picture of the Knights Templar (mistaken for the Knights Hospitaller) with “MALTESE ONLY!!” printed at the bottom of it. On the right side there is written “RELIGJON WAHDA!!” (ONE RELIGION!!) and on the left “IDENTITA WAHDA!!” (ONE IDENTITY!!). Beneath the picture of the Templars, there is “WE FOUGHT FOR YOU IN 1565, TODAY 2014 THERE ARE THESE”. The two photographs underneath the slogan show protestors during a protest organised by the Maltese Patriots in favour of a “push back” policy that would not allow immigrants arriving by boat to disembark. The Maltese cross and the use of the colour red, also found in the Maltese flag, are aimed at instilling a sense of patriotism.

It is ironic that on the poster there are pictures of the Knights Templar, mistaken for the Knights Hospitaller. Apart from the fact that this shows the protestors’ limited knowledge and understanding of Maltese history, they fail to realise that the Knights Hospitaller were foreigners, colonisers and never allowed a Maltese person to become a Knight. The poster says that ‘We’ (presumably the knights) fought for you in 1565 (during the great siege), a clear message against Islam. The Maltese Patriots depict themselves as modern day crusaders, fighting immigration and Islamic influence to protect Maltese identity.



Figure 2: *Reliġjon mhedded!* (Religion under threat)  
 Source: *Għaqda Patrijotti Maltin* (2015)

The poster was created to encourage people to sign a petition against integration. It shows three slogans “Reliġjon mhedded!” (Religion under threat), “Kultura mhedda!” (Culture under threat) and “Identità mhedda!” (Identity under threat). The writing in red claims that “Is there a need for Bloodshed for Malta to be Free once again?” The bottom line reads “It’s your choice!!” The imagery suggests that the Matlese have become slaves to the foreinger. The reference to religion being under threat alludes to the Muslim as being the main threat.

The broken shackles insinuate that people have the power to fight for their ‘freedom’.

The second poster (Figure 2) is a call to arms, claiming that there is a need for bloodshed in order that Malta belongs to the Maltese again because our culture, religion and identity are threatened. This group is assuming that there exists a single identity to which all Maltese ascribe.

Moreover, their anti-immigration stance, fuelled as it is by racism has often seen the Għaqda Patrijotti Maltin take to the streets in protest. They revel in Post-Truth politics, and tend to spread false information which is aimed at creating fear of and loathing towards migrants. Among various protests ‘to protect Maltese identity’, they organised a petition against what they are calling ‘forced integration’. Figure 3 below shows one of their posters, saying that there are 155,000 ‘barrani’ (foreigners – but if translated literally, means outsiders). While the number is totally made up, it might give the reader the impression that they are against and wish to exclude all non-Maltese. However, the poster depicted in Figure4,

gives a more clear indication of who their targets really are. They speak of ‘illegal immigrants’ – a term reserved exclusively for those Africans who arrived in Malta by boat seeking asylum.



Figure 3: ISSA DAQSHEKK. (ENOUGH IS ENOUGH)  
Source: Poster by Għaqda Patrijotti Maltin (2016)

The poster claims that there are “155,00 foreigners in Malta, ENOUGH IS ENOUGH”. It was put up during an activity organised by the Maltese Patriots, in which signatures were being collected to protest against forced immigration. The flag claims the space as belonging to the Maltese. “Enough is Enough” was a slogan which the General Workers Union used in 2005 to protest against the Nationalist government’s plan to increase taxes.

The appropriation of the slogan by the Maltese Patriots might have been done on purpose, so that people would find it familiar and be able to identify with it.



Figure 4: INTEGRATION?  
Source: Għaqda Patrijotti Maltin (2017)

This poster was aimed at ‘explaining’ the implications of integration, which according to the Maltese Patriots is another word for multiculturalism. The poster says that the EU is ordering Malta to grant citizenship to illegal immigrants who have been in Malta for five years. The poster further says that this implies that immigrants would have a right to employment, housing, social services, free health care and education, voting, family reunification and all the rights that “we” have. It ends with NO ... NO... NO!!!! All that is written on the poster is untrue, aimed at creating fear mostly in those who come from the working class. This is implied by the reference to employment, housing, social services and free health care and education, as immigrants would be competing for the same jobs and services as them.

It must be said that Għaqda Patrijotti Maltin has 13,000 members on its Facebook page, and has managed to mobilise people to assemble and protest against Muslims (Diacono, 2016) and against immigration (Diacono, 2014). Their efforts, and those of other far right leaning groups, have not gone unchallenged. Various Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) such as the Integra Foundation and Aditus, as well as members of the general public have consistently voiced their concerns regarding migrants and Muslims. St. Albert the Great College, a Catholic school founded by the Maltese Dominicans, opened its doors on Friday afternoon so that Muslims would have a place where to pray (Balzan, 2016). During a gathering in St. Paul's bay protesting at a site used for Muslim prayer, counter protesters went with their posters to show support to Muslims, as Figure 5 shows.



*Figure 5: Counter Protestor  
Source: Consiglio, I.M. (2016)*

Activist Erica Schembri is holding a poster which reads “Real patriots do not create division and hate among people”. This was in response to the protest (seen in the background) against Muslims praying in a grage in St Paul's Bay.



*Figure 6: NOBODY IS ILLEGAL. SOLIDARITY*  
*Source: MaltaToday 16.11.2016*

This protest was in response to the government's plan to remove the Temporary Humanitarian Protection - New (THP-n) status of migrants. Due to this decision, many migrants were detained indefinitely and NGOs staged protests in front of the detention centre where the migrants were being held.

NGOs organised solidarity walks in support of detained migrants and these were well attended (Diacono, 2017). *Homo Migratus* (Pisani, 2016) is being given the chance to be regarded as that: migrant or refugee who is looking for a better life, and has the right to do so. This is certainly not the discourse of politicians and the public in general, but one cannot say that the public is entirely silent or approving of the racist agendas of groups like the Għaqda Patrijotti Maltin. Thus, not everybody sees migrants and Muslims as a threat to Maltese identity. The RedefiningUs project mentioned on page 72, is also an example of activism in favour of diversity. Figure 7 below is a clear message of how one can be Maltese in many different ways, and not only as the ideals portrayed by the Għaqda Patrijotti Maltin.





Figure 7: #RedefiningUs participants

Source: Permission for the reproduction of the photo was granted by Sara Ezabe (third from left)

This photo shows four young Maltese women, at the launching of the #RedefiningUs Project which challenges the idea of a stereotypical Maltese identity. This photo represents the ethnic diversity among Maltese citizens and contrasts with Figure 1 above and its claims for one single identity, culture and religion.

### 3.1.2. The constitution and citizenship law

The concept of citizenship has evolved since the Maltese were British subjects. When Malta became independent, in 1964, the constitution combined the principles of *jus soli* and *jus sanguinis*, to confer citizenship to all persons who were born in Malta and were citizens of the United Kingdom and colonies before 21 September, 1964. However, this was only possible if at least one of the parents was also born in Malta (Buttigieg, 2009). Although as time went by, there were various changes to the citizenship law, major developments occurred in 1989, when Maltese emigrants and their children had the possibility to apply for dual citizenship. Besides, if a person lived in Malta for five years s/he had the possibility of acquiring citizenship by naturalization. As things stand today, a child who has at least one Maltese parent is considered as a Maltese citizen.

Late in 2013, the Labour government floated the idea of the citizenship scheme, whereby foreigners could acquire Maltese citizenship by paying €650,000. After harsh criticism the scheme was revamped and Legal Notice 450 of 2013 states that:

There is hereby established a programme, to be known as the "Individual Investor Programme of the Republic of Malta", which shall allow for the grant of citizenship by a certificate of naturalization to foreign individuals and their families who contribute to the economic development of Malta.

Thus anyone who has €1.15 million and satisfies the criteria as established in the Legal Notice can become a Maltese citizen. This scheme, which makes a commodity out of citizenship, would allow around 1,800 applicants and dependants to become citizens of Malta (Vella, 2014). Dubbed as the best passport programme in the world, this scheme has already raised over €1 billion since its inception ("Malta Passport Programme", 2015). It is interesting to note that this scheme implies that only those who have enough money to invest, to buy or rent property, and to buy stocks and bonds are considered as desirable and welcome to become Maltese citizens. In January 2017, Justice Minister Owen Bonnici, together with Parliamentary Secretary for sport Chris Agius, launched a consultation document on granting citizenship based on merit. Persons with exceptional talent in science, research, sport, art and culture, who have given an extraordinary service to the country or humanity would be granted citizenship if this is in the national interest (Pace, 2017). Little else has been heard about this proposal, so one still has to wait to find out how 'merit' is going to be assessed. Such a proposal excludes those whose life circumstances have prohibited them from having the possibility to excel. Thus, the state is not putting all those wishing to acquire citizenship through this scheme on an equal standing. This is due to the fact that not all migrants have the same capital and the same experiences and therefore they would not be able to demonstrate their exceptional abilities. A case in point could be an asylum seeker who has gone through the hazardous journey and all its perils. The traumatising experience might not allow him or her to display and prove they have talents that would make them 'worthwhile citizens'.

In Malta, citizenship legislation does not require one to be of Maltese descent or have particular ties with the island to be granted citizenship. Consequently, citizenship itself does not necessarily mean that one is accepted as forming part of the Maltese community. This can be observed through comments often read on comment boards where many assume that foreigners who marry Maltese do so just to acquire citizenship. Therefore, it takes more than the legal acquirement of citizenship to make one accepted as 'Maltese'. This was clearly illustrated very recently, when an investor moved his business from Germany to Malta, but had to leave less than a year later due to racist abuse he and his family had to endure. It is interesting to note that the businessman was black and was often told to go back to his country. On the other hand, his wife was white and did not encounter any racist abuse when she was on her own (Caruana, 2016).

### **3.1.3. A State Religion**

The Constitution of Malta, Chapter 1, Article 2 (1) states that the religion of Malta is the Roman Catholic Apostolic religion. Article 2 (2) states that the "authorities of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church have the duty and the right to teach which principles are right and which are wrong". It must be noted that the constitution also grants people the freedom to follow any religion they wish. However, having a state religion automatically attributes the people of Malta the Catholic label, even when it is not the case.

According to Montebello (2009) the Church "gave an identity to the Maltese people and no person in these islands could be called a true Maltese if s/he was not Catholic, or at least considered as one" (p. 109). However, internal and external factors brought about changes in the ways in which the public regarded the Church and this caused it the loss of the cultural supremacy it enjoyed. It must be noted though, that the hegemony of the Catholic Church is still pervasive. In the seventies there was a political drive to separate church and

state. Thus one saw the introduction of civil marriage (1975), the decriminalisation of homosexual acts (1973) and adultery (1972). However, with the rise of the Nationalist Party to power, the separation became less clear. For instance, since 1995, an agreement between the state and the Holy See states that when a marriage is celebrated in a Catholic Church, it is recognised and has the same effect as a civil marriage (Marriage Act, 1975, 21(1)). Moreover, before the Sexual Health Policy was launched, the Government thought it necessary to consult the Curia, amid criticism from various quarters.

One must note that statistically, the absolute majority of Maltese are Catholic as they are baptised. However only around half or less are practicing Catholics, i.e. attend mass on Sunday. I know many who are non-practicing and even atheists who baptise their children either because of tradition or else because once baptised their children would have a chance to attend a Church school. I also know a couple where the husband is Muslim but the wife is Catholic and they still brought up their child as Catholic (Chircop,2008). Monsignor Scicluna would be therefore correct in stating that Malta is a Roman Catholic island if he quotes statistics (“Malta shocks Pope Francis”, 2013). However, while statistics are fact, the truth is that many do not consider themselves Catholic any more, either because they converted to another religion, are atheists or else are not religious at all. Thus, while the Catholic Church is still ever present and powerful, the Catholic religion is no longer central to cultural activities and we must embrace cultural and religious diversity, as the President of Malta said in her Republic Day speech of 2014 (Dalli, 2014). Newspaper editorials called her speech unprecedented, as if she was not expected to address secularisation. An online petition requesting her removal was also circulated by members of the far right.

Another online petition started making the rounds in March, this time for the removal of the Archbishop of Malta, Charles Scicluna. This came about when he supported Imam El

Sadi when the latter requested that Islam be taught in state schools. The reaction of the public was mixed. Many were against the idea of introducing Islamic Studies for Muslim students in state schools. Many could not understand that Maltese Muslims exist, and thus their comments ranged from 'go back to your country' to 'they want to take over Malta' and everything in between. Others commented that religion should not be taught in schools but Ethics should be. Still others were in favour of Islamic studies to be taught together with other religions (Sansone, 2017).

While the Muslim community is often the target of negative commentary, the Hindu community, or as it is often referred to, the Indian community, is never in the spotlight. This community has been present in Malta since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Falzon, 2006), mainly through trade and business. It is virtually invisible in the public sphere, and those who still practice their faith do so in privacy. The only public manifestation of faith they engage in is during Holi, the festival of colours. They are referred to as the Maltese-Indian community (Festival of colours, 2017), a hyphenated identity, which in the Maltese context signifies belonging. One cannot but note that the Muslim community, although larger in number, has never been referred to as the Maltese-Muslim community.

As can be seen, constructing a 'Maltese' identity is certainly not an easy feat. Very often the Maltese construct the different other to define who they are not, or do not want to be. As we shall see in the next section (3.1.2.), the public sphere plays an important role in the construction of 'the other'.

#### **3.1.4. Contested identities**

Defining who we are is a complex and multifaceted issue, as this chapter attests. The same complexity can be attributed in the construction of 'the other' because a consensus on who should be the outsider can rarely be reached, if ever. These identities are shaped and

reshaped by the various discourses emanated from the public sphere by the various sections of society. This does not mean that everyone has the same power to influence the public sphere, or the public sphere is accessible to all.

The public sphere in Malta is dominated by three hegemonic groups – the Labour Party, the Nationalist Party and the Church, referred to as “the troika” by Baldacchino (2002, p. 199). The political parties control all the local newspapers with the exception of one or two; they also have one TV station and one radio station each. The Church, on the other hand, has two radio stations and until recently one weekly newspaper. It also has tens of chapels and churches where people are able to hear mass daily. The Church, unlike political parties, has the possibility to participate actively in schools, state hospitals and homes for the elderly. As Falzon and Micallef (2008) reiterate, “the public sphere and any civic expression within it is channelled through the discourse of these mammoth institutions, outside which all else is marginalized” (p. 399). The control these institutions have over the public sphere not only marginalises smaller and less powerful contributors but at times also contorts what they have to say.

Other groups such as the Malta Gay Rights Movement (MGRM), Moviment Graffiti, Malta Humanist Association and Flimkien ghal Ambjent Ahjar came into existence to counteract the hegemonic influence of these institutions. One can also add a number of other NGOs that work in the realms of migration, human rights, disability and poverty. Their aim was to raise awareness about issues that would otherwise remain invisible, as it was not in the interest of the ‘Troika’ to create discussion about topics that might dent their hegemony. In fact Taylor (1995) claims that alternate public spheres such as the ones mentioned above are ‘nested’ within and impact upon the ‘hegemonic’ (p. 22). On the other hand, Calhoun (1992) prefers to think of these public spheres not as alternate but a “field of discursive

connections” (p. 37) that allow one to understand the relationship between different public spheres in one society. These groups usually act as ‘guardians’ of the citizens, in the sense that through their activism the public becomes more conscious of any injustices that are committed or environmental harm that is occurring without people’s knowledge. It is interesting to note that such groups are sometimes scorned by the hegemonic groups in order to undermine their opinions and reduce the influence they might have on the public<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, while Habermas’ vision of the public sphere was one that should guarantee democratic representation, in reality these democratic principles are not adhered to because the strongest groups have greater possibility to manipulate public opinion.

It is within such a framework that one must understand how contributors to the Maltese public sphere construct ‘the different other’. The way political parties construct Maltese identity, and, in turn, difference, depends on the support from the public they think they will receive as well as on their political agendas. A case in point would be the othering of undocumented migrants. In the media, the arrival of ‘boat people’, *klandestini*, or illegal immigrants, as they were called, caused furore within the community as if a veritable invasion was taking place. As there seemed to be a general outcry against these migrants the Labour Party and the Nationalist Party did not dare to show any support for fear of losing the popular vote. Instead they bickered over who took the toughest stances against ‘illegal immigrants’. This attitude further exacerbated the public’s xenophobic attitudes and those bent on denigrating the migrants did not heed the Church’s appeal to be more charitable and welcoming. This could be due to various reasons: genuine fear and ignorance; holding Far

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<sup>6</sup> One could refer to these as an example: <http://daphnecaruanagalizia.com/2009/12/mrs-vella-throws-another-wobbly/>; (and see Beck, 2006).

Right beliefs; or loyalty to party which comes before loyalty to Church and the teaching of Christ.

The public sphere, dominated as it is by these three institutions leaves little space for the individual and marginalised social groups, especially those whose agenda clashes with that of the political parties, to participate actively and successfully in society. Indeed some marginalised groups such as the Muslim community seem to prefer to remain invisible and apart from some peripheral participation they remain totally left out of the debates in the public sphere. As an organised community, having its own school and a mosque this community has the practical means to participate as technically it has access. Therefore one has to ask why it refrains from participating when doing so would enhance democratic participation. What happened recently might be the primary signs that Islam in Malta is becoming more political. As Muslims have only one mosque in Paola, those living on the other side of the island found it difficult to go and pray there on Fridays. Thus they had makeshift places, like garages where they would congregate. These places were closed down and as they had nowhere to go, the Malta Muslim Council (founded 2012) encouraged them to go and pray in an open space in Msida (“Muslims Gather Again”, 2016). This was the first political act by part of the Muslim community, where they made their pleas public and they became visible. Once an alternative place was found – the Ministry for Education and Employment lent them the hall at the Ospizio, they again became silent. However, it is not only the Muslim community that is absent from the public sphere. Other minoritised groups such as undocumented migrants and the those living in poverty rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to participate. Usually others speak for them, as Galea (2008) so succinctly wrote with reference to undocumented migrants: “If one flips through past newspaper articles, it is the journalist who describes migrants, the photographer who presents them crammed in a boat or a bus ...” (p. 16). Being spoken for almost robs one of one’s ability to assert oneself, as if



others know more about what one has to say than the person or group concerned. It also impairs the democratic process that the public sphere is set to create. According to Nanz (2007):

In modern Western democracies the public sphere, mediating between political authority and the people, is an important source of legitimacy: it is the sphere, (analytically) distinct from both the state and the economic market, in which the collectivity of citizens can organize itself as the bearer of “public opinion” and thus exert a certain amount of influence over policies. (p. 11)

Those most vulnerable to marginalisation are excluded from participating in the public sphere, and in turn their invisibility increases their powerlessness and their chance to influence policies is minimal. Besides they cannot destroy the images of them being ‘the Other’ for two reasons. Firstly, the public sphere might literally not be accessible. For instance, undocumented migrants in detention have little access to the world outside the detention centre; the need for shelter and food supersedes the need of socio-economically disadvantaged groups to participate in the public sphere. Secondly, should they have the possibility of participating, their presence as a minority, might not have the clout of the stronger hegemonic group and thus their ‘difference’ might even become more enhanced.

However not all minoritised groups are ostracised from the public sphere. Some groups have a lot of visibility, are well represented and when compared to other peripheral groups, they are quite powerful. Two such groups are the LGBTIQ community and people with disabilities. Their power is both a result of lobbying and also because they have the support of political parties. One must however note that there is a difference between being granted rights that would make one equal to other citizens and actually being regarded as an equal. Legislation legitimises identities but that does not mean that these identities are accepted by

all members of society. Othering occurs when identities are not regarded as legitimate, when they are seen as disrupting the status quo of the imagined community.

Mass media contribute immensely towards accentuating differences between the perceived and acceptable identity of the Maltese and those who are not. In the realm of migration, a report published by The People for Change Foundation (2010), a foundation which works for a just, fair and inclusive society reviews the way that issues surrounding migration are portrayed in Maltese mass media. By and large the African migrant is depicted negatively, referring to the migrant as refugee, illegal immigrant, irregular immigrant, asylum seeker and others, without making any distinction between the meaning and status of each term. Also the most frequent portrayal of migrants in headlines concerned their arrival, relocation, escape from detention, being sent to jail and migrants as violent people (p. 33).

The Foundation reiterated that:

Portraying migrants in a negative light, speaking about them as numbers rather than people and confusing legal terminology surrounding migrants and migration serve to stigmatize migrants, diminishing their migrants' social worth and hindering their ability to achieve personhood (*personnage*) within Maltese society. (p. 53)

The European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (2013) encourages the Maltese authorities to inculcate in the media "the need to ensure that the material they publish does not contribute to creating an atmosphere of hostility and rejection towards members of any minority groups vulnerable to racism, including irregular migrants, asylum seekers and refugees" (p. 25). The way incidents or news about immigrants is reported tends to dehumanise them, a crime committed by one is seen as being the responsibility of all immigrants. Thus 'Othering' occurs because the rest of society thinks and feels that these people are too different from them, their norms and practices are alien to the host society

and thus they certainly cannot call Malta their home. The above mentioned examples of constructions of difference are neither exhaustive nor absolute.

African immigrants are often assumed to be all Muslims (Galea, 2009, p. 80). Therefore they find that their status carries with it a double negative – black and Muslim – which often translates in multiple disadvantages. Actually a third negative can also be considered – the assumption that every black person is an undocumented migrant (as the bus driver and the American businessman incidents above show).

Although immigration is often linked with African migrants, there are many other third country nationals as well as from within the EU, who come to Malta to seek employment (Cutajar, 2009). According to Cutajar (2009):

Each ethnic group is associated in commonsense knowledge with particular labour market niches – for example Italians and Chinese with catering, Russians with the entertainment industry, Polish with dockyard work, Philipinos with nursing and domestic work, Nigerians with football, and so on. (p. 248)

Apart from the stereotyping of migrants, as in the above example, it is interesting to note that migrants from within the EU, although much larger in number than from Sub-Saharan Africa, are depicted in a less negative light. For instance, the headline of The Times (January, 5, 2014) stated that ‘Romanians, Bulgarians filling jobs Maltese do not take’ (Cooke, 2014), indicating that these European workers are not *stealing* jobs from Maltese people but simply doing those jobs the Maltese do not want to do any more. Those commenting on the news article basically were divided into two groups. There were those who said that these foreigners are paid a pittance for long hours of work and thus it is justified that the Maltese opt out of these jobs. Indeed, they called for workers’ unions to investigate the abusive employers. Then, there were those who said that the Maltese preferred to take dole money

and other social assistance than to work. These comments are a stark contrast to those regarding African migrants who are often depicted as “stealing jobs” from the Maltese.

This obsession with immigration is incongruent with part of the Maltese identity itself, as there are thousands upon thousands of Maltese migrants in UK, USA, Australia and Canada and in many other countries. It is sufficient to point out that between 1948 and 1967 around 90,000 Maltese (30% of the population at that time) emigrated (Smith, 1981). I remember that until quite recently (until late 1970s and 1980s) a migrant relative coming to Malta for a visit was viewed as someone exotic, someone who had ‘made it’, someone who was better than us. However, once these migrants settled here, it seems that interest is lost and the hospitality they received when they came to Malta on holiday is forgotten (Sammut, 2004). For children of returned migrants, coming to Malta on holiday was fun, but settling on the Islands was nothing less than a culture shock. Some of the children of returned migrants refused to learn Maltese, mostly as an act of rebellion, and referred to the Gozitans as “close-minded” (p. 46) and “two-faced” (p. 47) and these students exhibited a sense of superiority towards their peers and also showed their mockery and contempt for everything and anything Maltese (Sammut, 2004).

Some Maltese often see themselves as superior kind of immigrants, as deserving to go and live abroad as the stanza from the following poem shows:

Issa ghandna limmigranti, dawk li nsejjhulhom illegali, Jippretendu jigu fostna w jiehdu kollox bhalek w bhali. W f'daqqa wahda issa smajna, li sahsitra jridhu l'vot, Jekk dan vera issa jigri, ibda fittex pajjiz il boghod [sic].	Now we have the immigrants, those we call illegal, They expect to come amongst us and enjoy the same rights as you and I. And suddenly we have now heard, that they even want to vote, If this happens for real, start looking for a country far away.
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From: Nithassar lil pajjizi (I pity my country) by Robert Henry Bugeja (2014)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/369496146412625/search/?query=robert>

The 'poet' is lamenting that after being a colony for so long Malta is now a colony of the EU. He is claiming that the Maltese are weak and apathetic and gullible because they do not think and let politicians lead them on without being critical of their actions. The above stanza deals with immigration. He calls migrants illegal, who come amongst us and expect to be treated like citizens, even expecting to be given the right to vote. He ends the poem with the words that if this happens, then it is time for the Maltese to look for another place to call home, far away from Maltese shores. The 'poet' implies that Maltese people have every right to seek a better life in another country, but this same right cannot be granted to others.

The migrant is not the only group that is constructed as the other, even though this particular group is often the focus of media attention. 2014 was a historical year for civil rights in Malta as the Civil Unions bill was passed through parliament giving gay couples the right to civil union and adoption. The Labour Party voted in favour of the bill while the Nationalist party voted against. The bill legitimized relationships between gay persons but they still find themselves being marginalised and located as other. Bishop Mario Grech asked those who were not living according to the Church's teachings (with obvious reference to gay couples) to excommunicate themselves. The then auxiliary bishop, Charles Scicluna, claimed that Catholic lawmakers had the moral duty to vote against the Civil Union Bill because "Granting the vote in favour of a law so harmful to the common good of society is a gravely immoral act" (Dalli, 2014). He then quoted the Pope's words in a letter penned in 2010, "It's an anthropological setback". Thus, the bishop is constructing gay couples and gay parents as inherently unnatural and immoral and at the same time encouraging a homophobic culture. In December 2014, MaltaToday published a report on a confidential Curia document which suggested that new terms of employment for Head of Church Schools and other staff such as counsellors and PSD teachers. These are expected to be practicing Catholics "whose life choices reflect a religious,

moral and ethical behaviour that is in accordance with the teaching of Christ as expressed by the Catholic Church . . .” (p. 18). Thus teachers who are gay, divorced, unmarried mothers, parents who resorted to IVF would not be eligible for employment, or else risk getting fired. The Malta Union of Teachers slammed this report calling it discriminatory and that it goes against employment laws. Later the Curia assured the Union that it would not be discriminating in favour or against teachers based on their private lives. This is not the first time that Church schools were accused of discrimination. In 2007 John Bencini, then president of the MUT, spoke about four incidents within a five year period where gay teachers in Church schools had to ask for the intervention of the union because they were about to lose their job because of their sexual orientation (Debono, 2007). In the same article it was stated that another teacher was also targeted because she had married a Muslim.

The construction of the other is sometimes done with good intentions which still label, stigmatise, compartmentalise, provide an untrue picture of a whole group of people and provides ideas of who is acceptable and who is not. A case in point is the othering of people with disabilities. In campaigns to raise awareness and funds for Dar tal-Providenza, a Church run cluster of homes for people with disabilities, the latter are often referred to as *angli* (angels), *imsieken* (unfortunate) and *anqas ixxurtjati* (less fortunate). On Boxing Day a televised programme called ‘l-Istrina’ which collects money for the Community Chest Fund constantly airs video clips of adults and children who are either sick with cancer or disabled. This evokes in the public a sense of pity and guilt and thus people tend to contribute to ‘help’ them but at the same time the language used marks the disabled as helpless. Every year the Peace Lab awards the John XXIII Kindness Award to a student who helps and befriends a peer who has a disability. Helping someone is in itself a commendable thing, but this award for specifically helping a child with disability constructs these same people as helpless and dependent on others. Compared to the opposition of the Civil Unions Bill, when the

Commission for Disabled People called for laws that protect this minority, there were no public outcries against them. The state did not meet any disapproval by the general public as ‘helping the disabled’ is regarded as the ‘good’ thing to do. Bartolo (2010) reiterates that, “the Maltese Catholic society has responded positively to the political emphasis on social welfare and empathy for persons with disability” (p. 142). This is not to say that in practice they enjoy equal rights – as accessibility, employment and education are still major hurdles they have to overcome – but in theory, at least, the Equal Opportunities (Persons with Disability) Act 2000 has put them on par with the rest of the citizens. The point is that even though disabled people’s rights have been endorsed by the Church, the discourse behind the argument for their acceptance is not that as citizens living in a democratic state, they should enjoy equal rights. Rather, in calling them ‘angels’ and that they are the ‘image of God’, it seems that the Church has conferred them a semi-spiritual status. Thus, denying them rights on the basis of their ‘difference’ would be tantamount to insulting God.

In contrast, people on welfare, the unemployed, single mothers and those living in poverty have had to bear the brunt of politicians’ vilification. Malta has had a strong welfare state, since the 1970s, when the then Malta Labour Party eradicated poverty by providing pensions, children’s allowance and a myriad of benefits for those who needed them. Parties in government were very wary of challenging the philosophy of the welfare state because that would mean less votes at the polls. Changes, such as having Children’s Allowance means tested, were few. Discourse regarding welfare benefits has started to change, ironically as the Labour Party is in government again. Those living in poverty are blamed for the situation they are in because they lack education (Gauci Cunningham, 2014), as if education on its own can overthrow a capitalist system that creates poverty, and as if getting an education is independent of the cultural and social background of the person. The Minister of Finance, Edward Scicluna, during a business breakfast held before the presentation of the budget,

insisted that the government will work hard to encourage people not to depend on social benefits (“Trid Tinbidel is-Sistema”, 2014). The reaction of Michael Grech, from the Gozitan Chamber of Commerce appealed to the government that it should reward those who work hard and not those who are lazy and do not want to work. Moreover, during a public consultation meeting with the Minister of Education, a head of school said that parents of children in her school are unfit parents, who are recipients of social benefits without being entitled to them and they spend them on tattoos, cigarettes and nail extensions instead of spending the money on the needs of their children (“Head of School”, 2014). Such discourse is assuming that those on benefits are the scroungeers against which the government must take action. A budget measure proposed for 2015 was that low income earners who had children would benefit from a supplement of €400 for each child and €200 from the fourth child onwards on condition that each child must have a school attendance rate of at least 95%. While the supplement would surely be beneficial and welcomed by the parents, tying it with the child’s attendance sends the message that only children from low income families play truant or are not sent to school, leading to more stigmatising and labelling. One can safely say that social, economic and political changes in society alter the perceptions of people and thus how they construct ‘the different other’. These constructions take place subtly and not so subtly through the discourse in the public sphere, the way in which the political class expresses its concerns, reports on newspapers, online commentary and social networking. It is often dominated by the same social groups who very often have every interest in constructing the ‘different other’ to suit their own agendas.



## **3.2. 'Them' in 'our' schools**

The social diversity present in Maltese society is reflected in schools where a diverse population of students is present. Suffice to say that one school boasts of hosting students from 32 different countries whereas 60% of the population of another school is not Maltese. Until quite recent times, Maltese schools were perceived as being quite homogenous. Classes were streamed, students with disabilities attended special schools and trade schools offered another option for those considered not to be academically inclined. Moreover, it was taken for granted that all students were Catholic and non-Maltese students were such a rarity, that they were nearly accorded celebrity status. Maltese schools witnessed rapid changes with the closing of trade schools, inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools and removal of streaming. Moreover, schools nowadays have students of different religions, and ethnicities. Due to these rapid changes, working in a school as an administrator or class teacher has become increasingly challenging.

### **3.2.1. Policies**

In the last twenty years or so, there has been a drive to include students with disabilities in mainstream schools. After Malta's accession into the European Union and with the arrival of undocumented migrants some schools have witnessed a significant increase in their non-Maltese student population, adding race, culture and religion to the 'new' differences schools have to contend with. Added to these 'new' experiences of difference are those that have been a constant in schools – gender, academic ability and social class. As yet there is only one report (Spiteri, Borg, Callus, Cauchi and Sciberras, 2005) which addresses the needs of students with disabilities. In its recommendations, the report states that:

Statements should state whether one-to-one learning support assistant is being given for academic or behavioural support, or both. Where it is for the former, students can

stay at school when the learning support assistant is absent. If there is behavioural support, decision on whether a child can stay on his/her own should be based on his/her needs. Refusal to accept a child when the learning support assistant is absent should be a last resort. (Spiteri et al., 2005, p. 41)

Thus, technically a child whose one-to-one Learning Support Educator (LSE) is absent should stay in school unless there are serious reasons. However, the practice is that these students are sent home if an on-call LSE is not available. The reason is that the law does not protect teachers and the School Management Team (SMT) if anything happens to the child and the parents decide to sue. As the Directorate for Educational Services has not yet found a solution to this problem, the students with disability who are assigned one-to-one assistance are being 'Othered' by the system itself as it denies them the right to education if their LSE is absent and a substitute is not found. Moreover, Bartolo (2010) claims that teachers often do not take responsibility of children with special needs, culminating in the fact that some are sent home if their LSE is absent.

In light of the increasing social diversity in Maltese schools, one must also note that as yet there are no specific policies that might guide educators on how to address diversity in schools and classrooms. Therefore schools are mostly left to their own devices and they implement their own policies, depending on what they *think* works best for their school. Calleja, Grech and Cauchi (2010) cite instances of what they termed as good practices in some schools where there is a considerable good number of non-Maltese students. These include using books that are representative of different cultures and races, saying non-denominational prayers during assembly and acknowledging celebrations of different religions. However, Both Calleja et al. (2010) and Bugeja and Mercieca (2012) report instances where schools encourage *foreign* parents to prepare traditional food during a multicultural

event. Bugeja and Mercieca (2012) also wrote that a Head in a school where they conducted their study said that the school invited parents of foreign students to school events (p. 37). While such instances might, at face value, show a celebration of diversity, they are more inclined to highlight the differences. It is normal practice that for school events all parents are invited, thus by explicitly inviting the foreign parents, the Head seems to feel that they are not automatic stakeholders.

The constant increase of foreign students into Maltese schools has become a grave concern to teachers and school administrators. Many of these students do not know how to communicate in English or Maltese and thus they are not be able to grasp what is being said during the lessons, which are usually delivered in either Maltese or English. In the primary school context, the Directorate of Educational services engaged Complementary Education teachers to teach English and Maltese to these students. In Secondary schools, the language barrier is even more pronounced as students have to deal with numerous subjects, many of which use particular jargon, such as the sciences. At first, students were being put in regular classes. They had to try and grasp what was going on, while teachers implemented provisions for the non-Maltese students on a voluntary basis (Micallef Cann, 2013, p. 115). She further notes that “there was no systematic way in which immigrant students were introduced into the local education system.” (p. 116). The MUT issued a directive on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November, 2013, which stated that:

The MUT is hereby directing all its members (SMTs and teachers) to refuse admission of these children after Friday 15<sup>th</sup> November until such time as the promised induction course is set up and these children are able to communicate with their teachers and with the rest of the class.

This directive went first and foremost against the students' right to education, but I did not see or hear one single comment about this fact on newspapers or other media. This directive imparts the message that these students do not form part of the class until they can communicate. Therefore teachers might feel that as long as the students are not able to communicate, they are not their responsibility.

As things presently stand, foreign students in primary schools who have no knowledge of Maltese and English and thus are unable to communicate affectively are sent to hubs, either in their own village or in one nearby. They are put in separate classes and not in mainstream, thus they are technically segregated, and taught Maltese and English for a year, or until they are proficient. Those in secondary schools do not 'benefit' from this service yet, although in some schools, they are grouped in the same class and provided with a watered-down curriculum. Interestingly, in the National Literacy Policy document (2014), only Third Country Nationals (TCNs) are mentioned, particularly 'irregular migrants' (p. 50). The document's wording seems to imply that the increase in non-Maltese students is due to irregular migrants who came to Malta with children. I find this strange, because statistics show that the majority of migrants in Malta are from within the EU, and the numbers of TCNs are certainly not 'irregular migrants'. Thus, the document chooses to other these children for some reason, which in the document is not listed. Going back to the argument of students joining classes without knowledge of the language of instruction, it is, admittedly, a thoroughly challenging situation fraught with difficulties. However, students are not to blame for the lack of planning by the Education Directorates. The situation is a gradual one, and thus the influx of foreign students could have been envisaged and planned for.

Another point I wish to raise is that generally teachers, SMT and the MUT have only spoken about the 'language problem'. It is almost as if they think that once language is

acquired all the difficulties would be solved. Indeed, for the teachers, life would be easier as there would not be any need to translate and it is assumed that the students would understand. No one has yet taken concrete action to address the uprootedness and culture shock the students go through.

### **3.2.2. School curricula and syllabi**

The National Minimum Curriculum (NMC), which was in force until 2012, encouraged the celebration of diversity, “Each school is endowed with a vast repertoire of skills, experiences and needs. This diversity, allied with the individual and social differences evident in the student population, enables and requires a pedagogy based on respect for and the celebration of difference” (1999, p. 30). The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (2012) dedicates Principle 2 to diversity:

The NCF acknowledges Malta’s growing cultural diversity, and values the history and traditions of its people. It acknowledges and respects individual differences of age, gender, sexual orientation, beliefs, personal development, socio-cultural background, geographical location and ethnicity. The NCF affirms that all children can learn, grow and experience success by:

- respecting diversity in all its forms.
- promoting an inclusive environment.
- ensuring policies and practices that address the individual and specific needs of the learners and learning community. (p. 50)

There are various other references to respect for diversity but then one does not find clear guidelines that would help educators in implementing what is proposed in the curriculum.

The Curriculum review committee (for the NCF) included various educators from State, Church and Independent Schools. However, there were no representatives from minority groups such as the Muslim Community and other religious denominations, MGRM, the Emigrants Commission, Jesuit Refugee Service to mention a few. While some of these groups may not be coming from education backgrounds, their contributions would have certainly enriched the discussion and provided a backdrop for a more inclusive multicultural curriculum. Indeed, the Malta Union of Teachers criticised the curriculum because, “The reality of cultural diversity has not been dealt with” and “The NCF does not define diversity and inclusion” (2011, p. 7).

The emphasis on the celebration of diversity is overshadowed by two aspects within the same curriculum. Throughout the curriculum one cannot but notice the influence of the Church. Indeed, the state is bound by a concordat with the Holy See signed on the 16<sup>th</sup> November, 1989, to provide religious education in the Catholic faith for students up to 16 years of age. There are yet no provisions for the teaching of religion to those who are not Catholic although the National Curriculum Framework mentions Ethics Education. Ethics education has been provided to those students who do not attend religion lessons since scholastic year 2014/2015 as a pilot project. While the Ethics Programme addresses an existing lacuna, the teaching of only one religion, a provision from which the majority of students will ‘benefit’ is an antithesis to deep democratic principles. Moreover, it casts non-Catholics as the different other. This difference might be marginal or critical to the student’s identity depending on the ethos of the school and the school’s management team and teacher’s ability and willingness to accept differences.

The introduction of Ethics has not brought about any significant change in the cultures of school where issues of religion and religious activities are concerned. The curriculum and

syllabi, as they presently stand, construct non-Catholics as outsiders, unrecognised, misrepresented, unacknowledged and sometimes unwelcome members of the school community. Apart from the overt curriculum implications, there are also implications on the hidden curriculum. In every classroom, one finds a crucifix hanging on the wall, rendering a public space as belonging to a particular faith, rather than as a space for everyone. While students of every faith are welcome in state schools, the crucifix sends a clear message that the space is neither neutral nor open for everybody. The manifest presence of symbols from the dominant culture conveys “who defines the norms of the local context, reminding those who do not share the dominant culture that they are not mainstream” (Bilewicz & Klebaniuk, 2013, p. 11), rendering non-Catholic students and parents as outsiders. The school, as a public space, should not be marked and appropriated by particular groups, even if they are the dominant groups. Many schools have taken to organising ‘Prayer Spaces’ – which is an initiative that is promoted by the Spiritual Development Unit within the Catholic Education Secretariat. This further alienates students who are of a different faith. Some schools have chapels, or spaces where Mass and other religious activities are conducted. These religious symbols in public spaces are not simply identity markers, but as Bilewicz and Klebaniuk (2013) reiterate, they are status-defining actions that create a hierarchy between the in-group – the Catholics and the out-group – all those who do not form part of the Catholic community. Moreover, schools in their quest to be democratic spaces should not operate on a shallow notion of democracy, where the majority sets the agenda, but strive to instil a sense of belonging in all the students who form part of that community.

Another aspect I consider important, but is missing from the NCF is the provision of teaching English and Maltese as foreign languages. As already mentioned, foreign students who come to Malta and have no basic knowledge of Malta’s official languages are pulled out of class for two hours daily to have instruction in basic Maltese and English. However, once in

class, they are expected to sit for exams that are aimed at native speakers. At the time of writing there is one pull out centre at Pembroke where foreign students with no knowledge of English and Maltese are pulled out of class (and school) for two hours daily. Three more centres are planned so that they can accommodate students from different areas and Colleges.

The syllabi for various year groups are also peppered with reference to the catholic Religion. For instance, the Year 4 syllabus for social studies requires students to learn about two Maltese personalities considered as patriots who both happen to be priests. This gives little opportunity to the non-Catholic students to identify with historical or contemporary figures who they would consider as representative of their faith and culture.

The syllabi themselves reflect a Eurocentric and at times monocultural worldview. For instance, there are various references to the Maltese *fešta*, to other traditional feasts, such as *Santa Maria* and *San Girgor* – all religious feasts. However, there is no reference to any religious or cultural festivals that pertain to other cultures present in Malta such as Diwali, Eid and Hanukah, to mention but a few. If ever these are mentioned or discussed, this is done solely at the discretion of the teachers. The new Form one social studies syllabus (Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education, 2012) also lacks representation of all social groups; for the topic People and Cultures, teachers are given various internet links as part of their resource pack; two pertain to the Malta Scouts and Malta Guides, four to football/sports clubs and three are links to Catholic organisations. Links to websites of other social groups such as MGRM, Moviment Graffiti and others that might provide students with a different depiction of culture and society are not even suggested. Therefore it would be up to the teacher to include them during lessons. Moreover, in the Personal, Social and Career Development syllabus (Camilleri, Hamilton and Gravina, 2014), students are taught about issues such as



abortion only from a pro-life point of view, reflecting the teachings of the Church. The few teachers who also provide the pro-choice argument, mostly based on moral and ethical choices, have never been sanctioned by the school administration, possibly because neither parents nor children complained. The argument for the pro-life stance is that since abortion is illegal in Malta, teachers should not present it to the students as a possible option. As can be clearly seen, the highly visible Catholic influences in the curriculum and syllabi, which portray the Maltese identity as inherently Catholic does not allow Malta to be reconceptualised as culturally and ethnically diverse (Darmanin, 2013). Such practices sustain inequality of respect and recognition described by Lynch and Baker (2005) as, “a general silence or invisibility that is often accompanied by devaluation or condemnation, a systematic bias in the syllabi and organizational practices of schools” (p. 143).

The curriculum is also an exercise in a Eurocentric ‘cultural hegemony’ (Chircop, 2008, p. 75; Borg and Mayo, 2006, p. 36). There is a marked difference between the ways in which the European and the Arab world are presented. For instance the Arab influence on the development of Maltese identity is never mentioned as opposed to the development of a European identity. Besides, while the curriculum maintains that the “Euro-Mediterranean dimension must be strengthened at all levels of the educational system” (p. 21), educators claim that it is only the European dimension that is given importance (Chircop, 2008). Thus, celebrations of diversity are taken to mean acknowledging European values and identities as being legitimate while according other identities an inferior status. This is undoubtedly a reflection of the discourse in the public sphere, where prevalence is given to all that is European. Students who have non-European heritage, albeit being Maltese citizens, find themselves unrepresented and unacknowledged. Their seeming invisibility tends to marginalise them as their identities are not accorded the same value as their European counterparts.

A case in point is the newly designed Syllabus for the first year of secondary school. Two of the history syllabus units deal with the Roman and Ottoman Empires. The title of the first one is *The Roman Eagle spreads its wings* giving the impression of greatness and power. Conversely, Arab rule is titled *Under the rule of the crescent* implying oppression and discontent. Moreover, one of the resources that are recommended for use by teachers is *Grajjiet Malta*, a history book, written by a priest, which is extremely biased against Arabs and Arab rule.

Therefore while the NCF purports an image of acceptance of diversity and recognition of difference, in practice this process is still in its infancy. Besides, the curriculum proposes but the school disposes; the curriculum might serve as a tool that constructs differences but it is ultimately the schools that have to accept and reinforce these differences or construct a more democratic and socially just environment for their students.

### **3.2.3. Schools - constructing the different other through celebrations of diversity?**

Social diversity varies in its intensity across Maltese schools. For instance, some schools might admit more immigrants than others due to their location; in other areas poverty might be present on a larger scale than other areas where student might come from a more affluent background. There is higher representation of the working class in state schools, while middle and upper classes opt for independent schooling for their children. So, while policies would be uniform for all schools, their interpretation by different schools varies due to the specific needs of schools as well as due to the school ethos and how it constructs the different other. Consequently, the construction of difference inside schools is an everyday occurrence, albeit this construction of 'the different other' might differ from one school to the other. Students are 'different' for a myriad of reasons ranging from race, religion and culture to disability. Sometimes children with learning difficulties, who have 'unsupportive' and

uncooperative parents might be marginalised because some educators think that if children are unsupported at home, one cannot expect them to succeed academically.

Even though differences are brought to the limelight with positive intentions, the result would still be that of stigmatising and essentialising the student's identity. A case in point is the appointment of a Muslim student representative as head girl, in a state secondary school. This was the first time a school found it newsworthy to ask a newspaper to report about the election of the head girl, the only reason being the religious difference between the girl and her peers (Abela Mercieca, 2011). The newspaper spoke of the leadership qualities of the girl, as if normally being Muslim precludes one from having these qualities. It spoke about how the girl integrated with the rest of her peers, implying firstly that practicing a different religion usually marginalises one. Secondly, the fact that the girl holds Maltese citizenship and has attended Maltese schools all her life did not seem to bear on the fact that the girl did not need to integrate because she had always formed part of that group.

Moreover, in their report about ethnic minorities in schools, Calleja, Grech and Cauchi (2010) wrote about good practices in schools with regard to ethnic minorities. It is interesting to note that the three schools mentioned have a significant number of students who are either foreigners and/or are of different faiths. It seems that schools where difference is not 'visible' do not find it necessary to sensitise the students and themselves as educators to different forms of difference.

### **3.3. Conclusion**

This study focuses on how educators construct Maltese society and social diversity. The aim is to find who they consider as forming part of the community. These would be the 'desirables', the 'in-group' regarded as legitimately belonging to their constructions of the Maltese community. Consequently, the 'Other' is also identified. It is of utmost importance to

find out how these constructions are negotiated, who or what influences educators to conceive society and social diversity as they do. Conceptions of difference are influenced by many factors which either could be intrinsic such as their personal beliefs and philosophies or extrinsic such as the discourse generated in the public sphere, the curriculum and the syllabus, school policies, class population and support they receive.

Educators' constructions of social diversity are rooted in the influence of discourses emanating from the public sphere, in globalising factors and the media and in the way the state legitimizes certain social groups to the detriment of others. Some constructions of difference stem from educators' notions of the students as citizens and their educational entitlement. Other constructions of difference happen because educators do not have the necessary support. Consequently they might feel overwhelmed with the workload or their inability to address these differences, such as inability to communicate with the student, either because of language barriers or disability. This dissertation aims to understand how teachers construct society and social diversity and how they apply a multifaceted configuration of the theories discussed in Chapter 2. Practices of exclusion, assimilation, accommodation and politics of difference are not exclusive of each other and this dissertation will provide a snapshot of how the participants of this study negotiate these categories through their visions, positions and practices as the research questions below attest:

### **Visions**

What are educators' visions of Maltese society? How do educators perceive Maltese society in terms of its constituent groups and what stands for Maltese identity? My main interest is to get a glimpse of which significant qualities educators regard as necessary for one to be considered Maltese and thus a (desirable) member of society.

## **Positionings**

How do educators position themselves in relation to Maltese society? How do they position themselves in terms of their social identity, that is, in terms of their gender, social class, geographical location, ability/disability, and ethnicity? How do educators position themselves in terms of their political engagement? How do they position themselves in terms of conceptions of plurality and diversity?

## **Practices**

How do educators construct the different other in their schools and classes in terms of interaction with their students, such as

- a) The adoption of teaching style and pedagogic materials used;
- b) In how they make students participate, that is, whether the classroom climate is inclusive or exclusive;
- c) In terms of disciplining students
- d) In terms of the class culture they promote. What do they do to create an inclusive and socially just classroom culture?

In order to explore these questions I will be conducting empirical research with educators in secondary schools. Chapter 4 will give a detailed account of the methodology and research methods that will be used to gather the necessary data for this study.

# Chapter 4

## Research methodology and methods

### 4.0. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to define the methodology adopted to undertake this research. It explains the philosophical underpinnings and assumptions that shape this study and argues for the appropriateness of a qualitative approach. The chapter also defines the methods that have been adopted in order to construct, collect and develop particular kinds of knowledge about educational phenomena.

This chapter is divided into ten sections. Section 4.1. considers the methodological implications, while issues regarding access to participants and those about the power relations between me as the interviewer and the participants are addressed in Sections 4.2. and 4.3. respectively. Reflexivity is discussed in Section 4.4. and matters concerning data collection are examined in Section 4.5. Section 4.6. addresses the issue of choice of participants. Transcription and translation of data are aspects of this study that are addressed in Section 4.7. Data analysis is the topic of Section 4.8., in which critical discourse analysis and its various approaches are discussed. Ethical considerations are reviewed in Section 4.9. The final section, Section 4.10., explores the strategies that have been chosen to enhance the quality of the research in terms of reliability, validity and triangulation. A short conclusion will wrap up the chapter.

#### **4.1. Qualitative research methods informed by Critical Theory**

This study is about how educators' construct social diversity and society through discourse. As the researcher, I draw on methods that provide insights into educators' discursive practices. I am concerned with social inequalities, the nature of power, culture as well as human agency. The nature of the study calls for qualitative research methods to be applied. Moreover, these methods are informed by Critical Theory.

Qualitative research methods examine social relationships and assumptions and how they structure people's ways of thinking, talking and being in the world. They inquire about the influence of race, class and gender and the ways in which power relations strive to ameliorate interests of particular groups to the detriment of others (Merriam, 2002). Critical qualitative research affirms its commitment to social justice (Denzin, Lincoln & Giardina, 2006) in the way it questions established social orders, dominating practices, ideologies and institutions. It applies interpretive research in order to understand the micro-practices of everyday life (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 1).

Qualitative methods are anchored in interpretative paradigm assumptions, whose basic principles include resistance to the 'naturalisation' of the social world; relevance of the life-world concept (a life-world contains those experiences, phenomena, and objects that are salient to the acting individual (Lopez, 2007)); transition from observation to understanding and from the external to the internal point of view; and a recognition of double hermeneutics (the study of how people understand their world and how that understanding shapes their practices) (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2009). Therefore, critical qualitative research is concerned with both the content and the context in which discourse takes shape. Morawski (1997) reiterates that one cannot separate any social, cultural, psychological or pedagogical enquiry

from the context in which it takes place, the language used to describe it and the historical situatedness in which the study is being conducted.

Critical qualitative research is inductive, building concepts and theories from details encouraging researchers to explore rival structures and alternative explanations (Stake, 1995). Qualitative research is descriptive and detailed, favouring natural language (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Carspecken (1996) reiterates that critical epistemology focuses on the communicative experience and involves the exchange of understandings “To construct a sound critical epistemology, then, we must understand holistic modes of human experience and their relationships to communicative structures” (p. 19). According to Comstock (1982) critical qualitative research regards society as a human construction (p. 371) and people are active subjects in the construction of society. Thus in conducting research, dialogue with the participants would be more appropriate than observation as it would engage participants in a process of self-understanding and collective self-formation (p. 372). Cheek (2004) asserts that “Discourses are the scaffolds of discursive frameworks, which order reality in a certain way” (p. 1142). They acknowledge certain ways of thinking about reality while excluding others, consequently encouraging some kinds of knowledge production and inhibiting others. Ball (1990) reiterates that in this way discourse determines who can speak, when and with what authority. It also defines who cannot speak at all.

According to Kinchloe and McLaren (1994) a researcher applying critical theory accepts a number of basic assumptions listed below:

- All thought is essentially mediated by historically and socially constituted power relations.
- Facts are directly linked and cannot be separated from the domain of values and are influenced by some form of ideological inscription.



- The relationship between concept and object and signifier and signified is never stable or fixed. It is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption.
- Language is crucial to the formation of subjectivity.
- Certain groups in society are privileged over others. (p. 139-140)

These basic assumptions, therefore guide my research. My ideology and my values enter intrinsically into the methods, interpretations, and epistemology of the research. These issues will be addressed later in Section 4.4. which speaks of reflexivity.

My choice of critical theory as the method of analysis was driven by the fact that critical theory is context driven. Indeed, Budd (2008) states that critical theory relies on the fact that people are historical agents, they participate in action as well as being subject to action. For this reason, the analysis of historical situatedness is an important methodological component. Budd reiterates that, “The historical analysis generally focuses on societal action and the impact of large-scale policies and decisions on the behaviour of individuals in society” (p. 176). Moreover, one cannot separate the enquiry from the socially and culturally constructed interpretations of its meanings by the participants and myself as the researcher. For the above reasons, this study must acknowledge that the various ongoing debates in the Maltese public sphere, such as LGBTIQ rights – particularly civil union and adoption; the Catholic church’s influence on the state and the separation between Church and State; immigration – legal and clandestine; racism and Islamophobia; the proposed integration policy and the reactions to it; the National Curriculum Framework and the changes it implies; the school ethos as well as the educators’ personal beliefs, are bound to shape educators’ vision of reality and thus the ways in which they construct society and social diversity. The relationship between the educators’ ideas and beliefs about social diversity and the schools in which they work, the support they

may or may not receive, as well as the general public discourse about society and social diversity contribute to how particular voices express themselves. I believe that one cannot understand these voices without considering the broader context in which they are embedded. My aim is to attempt to identify the manners in which educators construct society and social diversity and how these constructions are reflected in practices in educational settings. I will attempt to accomplish this by trying to understand the research situation and build concepts through the details provided during the interviews. For this study, the language used is also extremely important because it expresses the cultural and social constructions educators have internalised.

Thus, educators' verbalisations of their views regarding society and social diversity form an integral part of this research. Through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), I would be investing in shared ways of making sense of particular issues concerning the way in which 'difference' is discursively organised, and the contexts in which it is discursively deployed (Hepburn, 1997). Moreover, van Dijk (1994) calls for discourse analysis to focus on "social power, power abuse, dominance and inequality . . . as they are enacted, sustained, legitimated or challenged by text and talk" (pp. 435-6). Educators are in a position of power vis-à-vis their students, but they are also subordinates of a hierarchical organisation that encourages them to conform to institutional beliefs as enacted in the national curriculum, as well as beliefs that society holds as 'mainstream'.

## **4.2. Gaining access**

I am aware that gaining access to educational settings such as schools cannot be considered as a right. As suggested by Bell (1991), official permission from the authorities concerned (Research and Development Department within the Ministry for Education and Employment and the University Ethics Committee) were sought very early on in the study.

Once permission was granted I contacted the MUT so that the union would send an e-mail to all its members who teach in secondary schools, explaining briefly the nature of the study and also asking for volunteers who would be willing to be interviewed. The process was repeated with a number of social groups in the community such as The Scouts Association of Malta, Malta Gay Rights Movement, Malta Humanist Association, Zminijietna – Voice of the Left, Żgħażaġħ Haddiema Nsara, Integra Foundation, the Nationalist and Labour parities, Alternattiva Demokratika (the Green Party) and others. Through such means of gaining access, I thought I would be able to see if educators' role in the community had any bearing on the way in which they construct difference. Those who wished to participate were to contact me via e-mail. In this way there was no breach of data protection as I would only know the e-mail addresses of those willing to participate in the research. I had envisaged that once initial contact was made, I would provide feedback about myself and explain the aims of the project in more detail without giving too much detail that may prejudice the result of the investigation (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p. 57).

The MUT mailshot was sent twice to members and posted on the union's Facebook page. Some of the social movements I contacted did not reply, others replied and said they would send the email to their members. The secretary of the Nationalist Party called me to enquire about the research and the Labour Party suggested three persons who I could contact. However, response was very poor. Through all these efforts only one person contacted me to participate in the study. I then posted on various pages on Facebook which are hosted by or created for educators, and still, only one other person came forward to participate. For this reason I had to resort to snowball sampling (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). Through this method I recruited four other participants. To recruit the remaining participants I asked friends to contact educators they knew and ask them whether they wished to participate in my study. In the end I had 19 participants, 11 females and 8 males. Most were teachers, two were heads

of school, and two were assistant heads. The participants came from State, Church and Independent schools.

Once the participants were contacted, we negotiated the locations where interviews could be conducted. It was ultimately the participants' choice as I wanted them to feel comfortable and at ease throughout the interview. Interviews were conducted at my home, at the Open Access Area at the University of Malta, at cafeterias, in schools and some participants invited me to their homes.

After gaining access, it was my prerogative to establish trustworthiness that is based on the notion of reciprocity. In order to get rich and descriptive data during the course of the interviews they conduct, researchers are encouraged to attend to reciprocity, as this may help to gain access to particular settings. According to Harrison, MacGibbon and Morton (2001), "Through judicious use of self-disclosure, interviews become conversations and richer data is possible" (p. 323). While a certain amount of self-disclosure on the part of the researcher is necessary, reciprocity should fit within the constraints of the research and ethics, as well as within the framework of maintaining one's role as a researcher. In the course of my data collection, there were two particular participants who seemed to think that particular replies to my questions were racist, or at least, not what I was expecting, (it could be that they read my facial expression or body language), and thus they tried to gain my approval or support by asking me rhetorical questions like "What if it were your daughter . . ." or "What if they were your neighbours . . .". I felt that answering these questions in any way would further jeopardise that part of the interview, because had I answered the questions in any way, I would have biased the participants' contributions.

After the interviews were transcribed, I sent them back to the participants so that they could examine them, add any details or delete parts which they thought should not be

included in the study. I also added some more questions which I needed to ask once I went over the transcripts again and analysed them. The answers would then allow me to analyse the transcripts in more depth as I would have clearer ideas of what the participants meant to convey in their answers. The benefits of such actions are twofold: the participants have the opportunity to check if what they said and what they meant have been interpreted correctly and this process increases the trustworthiness of the study (Neuman, 2000). I am indebted to the participants for sharing their experiences and reflections throughout the research process. Therefore on the completion of the dissertation I shall provide feedback on the research results as this is also a form of recognition and gratitude to the research participants for participating in the study.

### **4.3. Power relations**

In every instance of dialogue, power is being negotiated (Tinggaard, 2008). Researchers are often considered to work from a position of power because it is presumed that they control the purpose and questions in an interview (Brenner, 2006). This is often the case in qualitative interviews especially when research is conducted on those less powerful in society. According to Baarts (2009), “qualitative researchers are inevitably involved in a *de facto* partisan relationship with ‘the underdog’, meaning those with fewer scientifically or socially endorsed resources” (p. 423). Thus researchers are ultimately the powerful party throughout the whole process – from making contact with the participants, during the interview, to analysing and interpreting the data and publishing the findings. The ethical researcher should take into account the cultural context of the research as well as respect the integrity of the participants (Brinkman & Kvale, 2005).

The researcher’s act of understanding and categorising others is implicitly one of control and power (Winter, 2000). Moreover, the researcher’s interpretation and

representation of the data is influenced by who the researcher is, the gender, race, age, social class and thus these interpretations are never impartial and objective. For this reason it is imperative that the researcher makes a conscious attempt to identify how and what social understandings have been produced in the process of the research (Riley, Schouten & Cahill, 2003). In this way reflexive action enables a process of self-awareness that makes power dynamics visible.

It must be noted that claims of power are contested by some scholars because they claim that when researchers interview elites, policy makers and public figures, they do not always have the liberty to conduct unstructured interviews due to, for example, the busy schedules of the interviewees (Brenner, 2006). Conversely, Corbin and Morse (2003), claim that when conducting semi-structured interviews, the researcher may be in a dominant position because she or he determines the structure and agenda of the interview through the questions asked. On the other hand the participant can control the amount of information provided, and so s/he is not powerless either. Additionally, the researcher may invite the participant to become a collaborator in the research, a co-author when transcripts and analysis are sent back to the participant for further feedback. Ultimately, however, it is the researcher who takes control over the research (Kvale and Brinkman, 2008).

#### **4.4. Using reflexivity as an ethical consideration and to enhance rigour**

The researcher, the method and the data are reflexively interconnected and interdependent (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003) and thus I allowed an ethical research iteration to lead my process and way of thinking. Moreover, as I involved Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), reflexivity had to feature highly on the agenda (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Indeed, Rogers et al. (2005) reiterate that educational researchers are often familiar with educational settings because they are members or had been members (as educators, parents or students)

of the school communities that they are studying. For this reason they have internalised cultural models that include beliefs, assumptions and values within these contexts (Gee, 1999). Researchers are also as hegemonised as the rest of society because their field of knowledge and understanding is structured by a limited exposure to competing definitions of the socio-political world (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). Consequently Macbeth (2001) recommends that researchers take on a reflexive stance for constructing descriptions that are free of gendered, cultural and racial hegemonies. Thus reflexivity is an important tool for showing one's awareness of the problematic of doing research. Reflexivity encourages the researcher to critically evaluate the research process so that better and less distorted research accounts are produced (Punch, 2009). Therefore there is a call for more scrutiny, reflection and critical analysis of the data, the researcher, the participants as well as the context. St. Pierre (1997), thus, resituates ethics as the responsibility of the researcher as well as the readers and states, "we might consider why we read and respond in the ways we do. This process is about theorizing our lives, examining the frames with which we read the world, and moving toward an ongoing validity of responses" (p. 186). She also affirms that as researchers acknowledge and are reflexive about the shifting boundaries of their subjectivities, they "will find that much else begins to shift as well" (p. 178). Reflexivity must be an ongoing process, where the researcher's role does not stop in reporting facts of the research but actively constructs and inquires how those interpretations came about (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Pillow (2003) draws on feminist theory to further the discussion on ethics and reflexivity. Feminist researchers clamour for the need to consider a more ethical way of doing research, a method that poses reflexive questions such as:

- How can one be a non-exploitative researcher?
- How does one produce research that is useful and empowering?

- How does one make research linked with political action?
- How would the research practices be different if researchers were reflective at each step of the research process? (p. 178).

There are various instances for reflexivity to work throughout the research process. As the researcher, I focused on developing reciprocity with my research participants and through listening, asking for elaboration and explanation as well as allowing the participants to ask questions for clarification. In this way I felt that I was equalizing the research relationship. I was doing research *with* instead of *on* the participants. Thus reflexivity is used to deconstruct the author's authority in the process.

Reflexivity is also perceived as a way to ensure rigour. In order to become aware of potential influences, I needed to reflect critically on how knowledge is constructed throughout the research process. While in this sense, the aim of being reflexive is to improve the reliability of the research and acknowledging the limitations of the knowledge produced, the reflexive research process also involves a process of critical scrutiny that does not stop at the research methods and data but includes the researcher, the participants and the research context.

Consequently, as a reflexive researcher I became alert to ethical issues due to the fact that I became sensitive to the numerous ethical concerns which arise during the research process. In this way I found it easier to anticipate possible ethical problems.

This research is written in a reflexive manner and therefore contains autoethnographic elements (Holloway and Biley, 2011). Totally objective research does not exist as researchers cannot exclude themselves from the whole research process. They write themselves into the research (Walshaw, 2009) and reflexivity is "a deconstructive exercise for locating the intersections of author, other, text, and world" (Macbeth, 2001, p. 35). As the researcher, I attempted to strike a balance between including the self and focusing on the perspectives of the research participants.



My identity becomes relevant to discourse analytic research. The first chapter of this study situated me, my personal interests and political beliefs and thus one will be in a better position to understand the reasons behind the selection of this particular topic. Besides, my biography and experiences as a student and teacher have given me particular insights, sometimes utterly biased or subjective, on issues of social diversity and how educators negotiate this diversity in their personal realm as well as in a public sphere such as the school. Through reflexive practices such as introspection, reflection and empathy I minimised the influences of my judgement as I analysed the data.

#### **4.5. Data collection**

This section discusses the tools that will be used to collect data. Tools for data collection are closely linked to the orientation of the problem, and thus to the research questions. One must choose the tools that would be affective in answering the research questions (Heck, 2006), as different tools are needed to obtain different data that is reliable as well as useful. (Toma, 2006). According to Heck (2006), various methods can be used to address a research question. The choice of the method of data collection should be made after one considers the strengths and limitations of each approach in light of the purposes of the research.

##### **4.5.1. Semi-structured interviews**

This project adopts the semi-structured interview as a research instrument. I have considered other potentially appropriate data collection methods but these have been narrowed down to interviews because of the potential of the interview to address the social reality I wished to capture through this study. Interviewing is considered as a useful method to access one's attitudes and values as these may not be observable, and many times they

cannot be addressed in questionnaires. Interviews that are intensive and detailed are a basic mode of inquiry to find how people make sense of their experiences through their narratives (Seidman, 2006; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008).

Interviews empower participants as they are the focus of the interviewer's attention. Participants are able to voice their concerns and share perspectives when otherwise they would have remained silent and unheard. Interviews are considered as an interchange of views between two people, which generate knowledge. They "enable participants to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view" (Cohen & Manion, 2007, p. 349). Through interviews, participants also engage in a process of self-reflection (Curato, 2012). During the interviews, some of the participants did engage in such a process. As I probed and prompted, there were participants who explained that they had never considered the issue in question in that particular way and showed that they needed time to think about it. In fact, one particular participant, after talking about poverty during the interview, messaged me back a day later to tell me that she had thought hard about what she said, and that she wished to revise her position on the topic. However, Brinkman (2007) argues that interviews should not only allow participants to articulate their opinions and preferences but the interviewer should also ask participants to justify their views. Therefore, confronting questions need to be asked "to press respondents to articulate the bases of their judgement and initiate public conversations on societal values" (Curato, 2012, p. 571). Since social diversity is such a sensitive topic, there were times when the questions I asked had to be challenging. I did not always feel comfortable doing this, especially when one of the participants was a friend of mine. Another participant was somewhat aggressive in his responses. I found the language used and tone of voice disturbing. He was so sure about his views that asking questions that challenged his worldview

proved utterly useless most of the time. However, the majority of the participants were quite responsive to such questioning, which led them to rethink and re-evaluate their replies. This does not mean that they changed their position but that they considered other possible alternatives when faced with a challenging idea.

A semi-structured interview requires planning, structure and purpose (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 2005) and therefore cannot be regarded as merely a conversation. Moreover, the researcher is the one who guides and controls the situation. Kvale and Brinkmann (2008) define semi-structured interviews as “an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena” (p. 3). Thus open-ended questions need to be posed to give both the interviewer and interviewee the opportunity to explore and elaborate on the theme of the interview. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to build on responses received from participants. It encourages ‘ramblings’ and ‘going off at a tangent’ because this gives insight into what the interviewee sees as relevant. The interviewer can ask new questions to follow up interviewees’ replies. Therefore while the core questions may be the same there is variation in supplementary questions to be able to better explore the themes that are under study. Semi-structured interviews tend to be rich in data and flexible, responding to the direction the participants take the interview. The first interview was the most difficult to conduct. At that moment she was the first and only participant, and she was a person I knew. Therefore, I had a particular image and idea of her which at times was shattered due to her responses. Considering that my body language tends to give away my thoughts and feelings, I found it increasingly difficult to probe and explore further, without showing my shock and disappointment at her answers. The other interviews were with participants I had never met, or I was slightly acquainted with, and thus I could act more freely without fear of jeopardising

my rapport with them. This does not mean that I did not follow the ethical standards that are expected, but I did not feel uncomfortable when probing and prompting the participants.

A digital voice recorder was used during the interviews so that I would be able to focus on the conversation and would also have a complete record of the participants' words. The recordings, however, fail to capture visual non-verbal messages such as facial expressions and thus are also selective. Transcriptions further contribute to transformation of data as they are interpretive constructions (Kvale, 1996). For this reason field notes were kept so that details could be captured more accurately.

Field notes aid the researcher to keep track of what she hears, observes and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study. They are a personal log in helping the researcher to visualise how the research plan has been affected by the data collected as well as to remain aware of how she has been influenced by the data (Bogden & Biklen, 2003). Field notes are of two kinds: descriptive, where the researcher records observation in the most objective way possible and reflective where the focus is on feelings, speculation, problems encountered or perceived, hunches, impressions and prejudices (Bogden & Biklen, 2003). During the interviews themselves I found it difficult to concentrate on what the participants were saying and taking notes at the same time. Firstly, the interviews were quite intense and I could not be distracted by the task of note taking. Secondly, I did not wish to miss important cues that would make it necessary to prompt or prod the participant for further explanations. Therefore, what I did was that once I arrived home, I wrote a short paragraph describing the space in which the interview took place and how the participant seemed to be feeling. I wrote about the impressions I had of the participant as he or she had answered the questions. For example, there were times when I felt that the participant was exaggerating in his answer, in order to drive a point home, to convince me that he was right.

Another time, my gut feeling was that the participant was not saying the truth, mostly because I had read the exact example on social media some time before, and even then, I had my doubts on the veracity of the story.

Interviews are interactions in which the interviewer takes an active role. Thus they are not neutral elicitations of psychological states (Rapley, 2004; Silverman, 2004; Mann, 2011). For this reason one must keep in mind that whatever analytical stance one might take on the data, “an awareness *and analysis of interviewers’ talk* in producing both the form and content of the interview should become a central concern for *all researchers* when analysing interview data” (Ripley, 2001, p. 305; italics in original). The interviewer takes a stance, which could be an expression of an attitude, evaluation, or judgement as the speaker’s own point of view (Englebretson, 2007; Jaffe, 2009). According to DuBois (2007) stance taking is recognised as an act that is performed by one subject in relation to another, that is, it is done in response to what the interviewer/ interviewee says or asks: “Stance is a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimensions of the sociocultural field” (p. 163). Different kinds of questions call for different kinds of responses and thus interviewer talk should also be analysed in detail.

Interviews, thus, should be regarded as finely co-ordinated interactional work where the talk of both speakers is important to produce the interview (Rapley, 2001; DeFina & Perrino, 2011; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Researchers agree that during an interview:

- The interviewer and interviewee construct meanings together;
- The interviewer’s input during the interview cannot be ignored as s/he is also a participant in the interaction between her/him and the interviewee.

- Turn taking gives the participants in the interview direction of what the aims and conventions of the genre (of the interview) to be (Lampropoulou & Meyers, 2013).

Therefore, the speaker positions herself or himself in relation to both the topic that is being discussed as well as the person to whom he is speaking. Once a stance is taken, the speaker is responsible and has to account for it. One must also note that stances might not necessarily be words; intonation, code-switching, and non-verbal communication also account for expression and meaning making.

It must be also noted that interviewees' replies are not simply constrained to what the interviewer says. They have the possibility and ability for "transforming the projected response, challenging the terms or the agenda, in every day conversation and also . . . in interviews" (Lampropoulou & Meyers, 2013, para. 4). Therefore, the interviewee is not simply a passive participant who answers the questions, but has the agency to change the interviewer's agenda in the way in which he or she chooses to answer.

I chose one to one semi-structured interviews as means of gathering data because of the sensitive nature of the questions. Firstly it is an issue of intimacy. Malta's size and population density makes it very probable that people coming from the education sector would either be acquainted with each other or have friends in common. Therefore focus groups, for instance, would have been daunting for educators as they might not wish to voice their opinions in front of other colleagues, due to the sensitivity of the topic. The interview could be conducted in a more comfortable environment, and although I am aware that sometimes their answers might not be outright truthful, there is more space for frankness.

Another reason for choosing interviews is that during the interview, participants had the opportunity to challenge my agenda as well as ask questions back. While observations would have also provided me with important and pertinent data, educators would not have had the

opportunity to challenge my perceptions and understanding of what I observe. In an institution where many educators feel that they are always in the public eye, interviews give them the opportunity to explain, expand and justify or rethink their positions without being harshly and sometimes unjustly criticised. This does not mean that I would not challenge their answers to my questions, but I would do so without being judgemental or unjust as my aim was to better understand their constructions of social difference.

#### **4.5.2. Conducting the interviews**

Interviews require careful preparation if they are to reach their aims. In order to conduct effective and fruitful interviews, the interview questions must be theoretically informed. It is of utmost importance that pilot interviews be conducted. The pilot interview helps the researcher determine whether there are any flaws in the wording of the questions, limitations or other weaknesses in the interview design that might impede the development of the interview (Turner, 2010). Thus the pilot interview can guide the researcher to make the necessary revisions before the actual interviews take place. Certain arrangements have to be attended to, such as seeking to secure permission to visit schools if interviews are going to take place there, contacting participants, and scheduling and rescheduling interviews when necessary. The researcher has to take into account the time needed to transcribe the recordings of the interviews before moving on to the next one.

The interviews were conducted face to face, as this gave me the opportunity to collect and observe both verbal and non-verbal data (Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004). Moreover, according to deLeeuw and van der Zouwen, (1988) interviews conducted in person lead to better quality of data. In face to face interviews, I had the opportunity to ask for clarification on any point that was not clear. Conversely, the participants were able to ask for the rephrasing of the question to check if they had understood it well.

There were times when the participants seemed to be uncomfortable with the questions. This could have happened for a multitude of reasons, for instance, because they felt that their answer was not what I wished to hear, or else when their answer was directly opposed to the ethos of the school. It also happened when they voiced criticism towards the government, always claiming that whatever they had to say applied to both political parties. It is for such reasons, apart from others mentioned above that interviewing was the best means for me to collect data. Apart from what the participants said and the words they used, I could identify nuances in their replies, hesitations and other emotions that made the information they provided much richer. Thus, my analysis does not contain and depend only on the word but also on non-verbals.

#### **4.6. Choice of participants**

Qualitative research is concerned with meanings people give to situations and thus the focus of the research is on describing, understanding and clarifying human experience. Therefore the goal of data collection is to get the deepest possible understanding of the setting which is being studied. This requires the researcher to identify participants who provide information about the setting under research. As Polkinghorne (2005) attests:

Such selections are purposeful and sought out; the selection should not be random or left to chance. The concern is not how much data were gathered or from how many sources but whether the data that were collected are sufficiently rich to bring refinement and clarity to understanding an experience. (p. 140)

The participants selected do not fulfil any representative requirement of statistical inference. They were chosen because the findings in this study will hopefully provide an enriched understanding of the constructions of the educator with regard to society and social diversity (Polkinghorne, 2005; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, B. F., 2006).



I decided to conduct interviews with secondary school educators. The term 'educators' includes both teachers and school administrators as it is believed that while teachers are the ones who have most contact with students, the administrators, especially the heads of schools have immense power and thus their beliefs and opinions about 'the ideal student' and the different 'other' are bound to inform the school ethos and policies, especially in schools that are not democratic communities.

Secondary schools are also a conscious choice I have made. There is a significant difference between the way teachers relate to and bond with their students in primary and secondary schools. In primary schools the students spend all day with one teacher who, apart from being an educator, seems to literally take on the role of a parent, especially when s/he teaches very young children (Nias, 1999, p. 55). On the other hand, teachers in secondary schools have at most 45 minutes of contact time with each class daily, or weekly depending on the subject taught. This does not leave enough time for the teachers and their students to bond as happens in the primary (Hargreaves, 2000). Moreover, students are regarded as independent, old enough to take care of themselves and most importantly, they have started to prepare themselves for the world of work (as is witnessed from the subjects they have to choose in Form 1 and Form 3). Secondary school students are thus seen as being more politically active participants in society. Moreover, the different contexts provided by the primary and secondary schools would have provided data which would have been too different to manage and analyse effectively.

#### **4.7. Transcription and translation**

Transcription of interviews involves a transformation process. It is a technique that transforms ephemeral events onto paper for the purpose of extensive analysis (Duranti, 1997). This transformation from the spoken to the written word is considered a multi-layered

process which transforms data in form and function (Lambert, 1997; Nida, 1982). According to Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) the researcher makes various decisions and choices during the transcription stage and thus influences the analysis and interpretations. Thus transcriptions are interpretative constructions (Kvale, 1996; Tilley & Powick, 2002). Consequently, researchers find the concept of being faithful to the original challenging because of their understanding that meaning is situated and the power of interpretation is fundamental to meaning making (Ross, 2010).

I transcribed the interviews in their entirety because “Every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness” (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 236). A complete interview would provide a better context for discourse analysis. To make sure that what has been transcribed faithfully represents what the participants said, I referred the transcripts back to them so that they can check and agree with or modify the transcripts to reflect what they had said. I also added further questions for parts which needed clarification and which many of the participants answered.

As the study is written in English and interviews were conducted mostly in Maltese, it was necessary to translate some sections of the interviews into English, for the benefit of non-Maltese readers. Like transcription, translation, is not a neutral act and thus one must be aware that “total translation that would provide a perfect replica of the original” (Kearney, 2007, p. 151) is an illusion. Researchers must be ultra-careful not to subsume alien meaning into the participants’ speech. For this reason, I analysed the original text and not the translated one. Additionally, the translated text, together with the analysis, was sent to the participants for their feedback. The original and translated texts are presented side by side, with the Maltese text on the left, to give it priority and prominence (Ochs, 2000, p. 170-171) and the English translation on the right. This ensures transparency and potentially opens the text to challenges and suggestions of alternative versions (Nikander, 2008, p. 229). It must be noted

that some of the participants code-switched between Maltese and English. The transcriptions were done verbatim, so parts of the original versions might contain words, phrases or entire sentences which are in English. Two participants chose to speak entirely in English and thus their quotes are presented in English only.

#### **4.8. Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis is a complex process due to the large volumes of data that is collected. Qualitative data can be analysed and presented in many different ways. Data analysis is determined by both the research objectives and multiple readings and interpretations of the raw data. It involves justifying and explaining data; that is, making sense of the data in terms of how the participants define the situation, noting themes, categories, patterns and regularities (Cohen, Manion et al., 2011). The primary mode of analysis is the development of categories from the raw data into a framework that captures key themes and processes considered to be important by the researcher.

The aim of data analysis is to add knowledge. It is not my role, as researcher, to pass judgement on the participants and their contributions. This study aims to discover how educators construct society and social diversity but I did not attempt to provide definite answers. Rather my analysis provides a reading of the many possible dimensions the data is able to present (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992).

As I analysed the data I transformed it into my own interpretation. Thus, as Cohen, Manion et al. (2011) attest, in qualitative data analyses, interpretation and analysis are combined and concurrent. Once ideas about the finding are developed, the researcher refers to the literature as well as to broader concerns and concepts (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992).

#### 4.8.1. Critical discourse analysis

I am interested in CDA as means of analysing the data I gathered through interviews because educators consciously and perhaps unconsciously create and disseminate discourse according to their idea of who those members worthy of forming part of the citizenry are. Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000) reiterate that education is regarded as a major area for the reproduction of social relations, including representation and identity formation. It is also regarded as a site that provides possibilities of change. According to Foucault (1995), discourses not only show what is happening, they evaluate it, justify it and ascribe purpose to it. Consequently “these aspects of representation become far more important than the representation of the social practice itself” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 6). Educators partake in this reproduction and/or change it when addressing their students, when they are discussing among themselves and also publicly in blogs or posts in social media. Analysing their discourse would also give an indication of the factors that influence their words and actions. Such factors could include union directives, circulars from the education directorate, politicians’ speeches and so on.

CDA was used to analyse the data, as this research tradition enabled me to access the ontological and epistemological assumptions behind this study. CDA is primarily interested in the discourse dimensions of power abuse and the injustice and inequalities that result from it. According to Wodak (1995), the purpose of CDA is to analyse the structural relationships of power, dominance, control and discrimination as they manifest themselves in language. She further specifies that CDA “studies real, and often extended, instances of social interaction which take (partially) linguistic form. The critical approach is distinctive in its view of: (a) the relationship between language and society, and (b) the relationship between analysis and the practices analysed” (Wodak, 1997, p. 173). Taylor (2001) contends that in this research

tradition, attention is drawn to the way language is used, what it is used for and the social context in which it is used. Speech is never simply sentences that are disembodied from context (Habermas, 1970), but its meaning derives from the contexts in which it is said. CDA describes, interprets and explains the way in which discourse constructs, becomes constructed by, represents and becomes represented by the social world (Fairclough, 1992; Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui and O'Garro Joseph, 2005).

The focus of CDA is on how language mediates relationships of power in social interactions, institutions and bodies of knowledge (Bourdieu, 1977b; Foucault, 1972; Gee, 1999). Discourse is shaped by these situations, institutions and social structures which in turn shape them. According to Gee (2004), critical approaches to discourse analysis “treat social practices in terms of their implications for things like status, solidarity, distribution of social goods and power” (p. 33). Fairclough and Wodak (1997) consider discourse as being:

socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it.  
(p.258)

Discourse gives rise to issues of power because it is socially consequential. Discursive practices help to produce or reproduce unequal power relations through ways in which they represent things and position people. According to van Dijk (1993), in order to study and critique social inequalities one must focus on the role discourse plays in the production and reproduction of dominance. He defines domination as “the exercise of social power by elites, institutions or groups, that results in social inequality, including political, cultural, class, ethnic, racial and

gender inequality” (pp. 249-250). Foucault regards power as a normalising force and asserts that power is a productive phenomenon. The state might not impose direct repressive tactics, but uses discourse to control individuals through invisible mechanisms of normalisation.

As an educational researcher, CDA provides me with means of making sense of the ways in which people derive meaning from educational contexts. It will not provide absolute answers to specific ‘problems’, but it will enable me and the participants to understand the conditions behind the ways in which educators construct society and social diversity. As their behaviour and meanings are socially situated and socially interpreted (Cohen, Manion et al., 2011), CDA will attempt to provide a ‘reading’ and a deconstruction of the concepts, belief systems, social values and assumptions of educators as they construct the ‘different other’.

CDA engages in descriptive analysis as it analyses the language used, as well as explaining it within the context, drawing on social theories. The research questions, the research design and the context influence the choices on methods of linguistic analysis and theories. There are various approaches to CDA. These methodological and analytical approaches are informed by theoretical conceptualisation of Habermas, Foucault, Bourdieu, Giddens and Luhmann (KhosraviNik, 2010). The Foucauldian approach inspires epistemological and discourse theory levels, while Habermas influences general social theory, discourse theory and micro-sociological interaction theory. One of the approaches that is applied to CDA is *discourse-historical analysis* (Wodak, 2001). The discourse-historical approach investigates topics and texts that are historical, political or organisational so that as much information as possible is gathered about historical sources and social and political fields in which discursive events are embedded. Among the characteristics of this particular approach one finds that it is interdisciplinary and problem oriented, rather than focused on specific linguistic items. Both the theory and methodology are eclectic and integrated in a way

that aid understanding. The discourse-historical approach necessitates constant movement between theory and empirical data. The interpretation of discourses and texts requires that the researcher analyses and integrates the historical context into the interpretation. Wodak reiterates that in order to try and understand the dilemmas, fragmentation, the multiple identities in a non-homogenous society and challenges of globalisation and neo-liberalism, one needs to relate and explain “the relationships between various ‘symptoms’ which we can study in a more hermeneutic and interpretive way” (p. 64). To this aim she endorses Mouzelis’ (1995) idea of ‘conceptual pragmatism’. This pragmatic approach to theory “would not seek to provide a catalogue of context-less propositions and generalisations, but rather to relate questions of theory formation and conceptualisation closely to the specific problems that are to be investigated” (Wodak, 2001, p. 64). In this way, researchers would be addressing the question of what conceptual tools are relevant and should be used to tackle a problem in a particular context.

The *socio-cognitive approach* to CDA, on the other hand, focuses on the importance of cognition in the critical analysis of discourse, communication and interaction (van Dijk, 2009). This approach draws on the findings from social psychology and cognitive science. According to van Dijk (2009) this is a multidisciplinary approach focusing on the idea that the relations between mind, discursive interaction and society are mental and social phenomena. Thus, the combined cognitive and social dimensions define the context of discourse. The discourse-cognition-society triangle implies that throughout all levels of analysis there is a relationship between context models, discourse structures and social structures. Here, ‘society’ is considered:

as a complex configuration of situational structures at the local level (participants and their identities, roles and relationships engaging in spatiotemporally and institutionally

situated, goal direction interaction), on the one hand, and societal structures (organisations, groups, classes, etc. and their properties and – e.g. power – relations) on the other hand. (van Dijk, 2009, p. 66)

One must note that the discourse-cognition-society triangle does not imply that discourse and cognition are outside society. Humans, as language users, are members of communities and groups and thus are an inherent part of society. Language users represent, reproduce, interpret and change social structures from within the same social structures they inhabit.

Van Dijk bases this theory on the assumption that cognitive models and schemata (superstructures) produce and receive text. These can be either collective or individual ideologies. These cognitive schemata “are the missing link between text and society and between discourse and social structures” (Langer, 1998, p. 17). Thus the link between personal and social cognition negotiates discourse and social structures. These cognitive schemata are manifest in media texts and as discourse semantics is close to theories of the social mind and mental schemata (Langer, 1998) it is possible that:

the structural forms and the overall meaning of a news text are not arbitrary, but as a result of social and professional routines of journalists in institutional settings, on the one hand, and an important condition for the effective cognitive processing of news texts by both journalists and readers, on the other hand. (van Dijk, 1985, p. 70)

It is therefore clear that there is a ‘chain of events’, so to speak, that create and transform discourse from ‘fact’ to ‘truth’ as is understood by speaker, listener or reader. This transformation is possible, or rather, inevitable, due to the different cognitive processes of those participating in the discourse.



Fairclough (2003), in the *dialectical-relational approach (DRA)* to CDA, contends that the link that exists between different social practices (political, cultural, economic and others) produces social life. Social practices can be regarded as a “means of controlling the selection of certain structural possibilities and the exclusion of others and the retention of those selections over time, in particular areas of social life” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 23-24). According to DRA, every one of these practices has different forms of meaning-making, which Fairclough calls semiosis, through visual images, body language and language. CDA is thus the analysis of the dialectical relationships between semiosis and other elements of social practice (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). While a practice can be a permanent way in which one acts socially as defined by its position within a structured network of practices, it is also “a domain of social action and interaction which both reproduces structures and has the potential to transform them” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 122). This approach to CDA oscillates between the perspective of structure and the perspective of action, that is, between a focus on orders of discourse and a focus on the productive semiotic work which goes on in particular texts and interactions (ibid.). The elements of the order of discourse within the context of DRA are discourses, genres and styles which control linguistic variability in certain areas of life by selecting certain possibilities defined by language and excluding others. Moreover, once one moves from the abstract structures to more concrete examples, language becomes progressively difficult to separate from social elements. DRA focuses on social conflict in the Marxian tradition and attempts to identify its linguistic manifestations in discourses (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). It also draws upon the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1985), which explores how language is used in social contexts to achieve particular goals. SFL looks at the discourses we produce (whether spoken or written), and the contexts of the production of these texts.

The final approach that I shall discuss is the *Social Actors Approach (SAA)* as developed by Theo van Leeuwen (1996). This approach lends itself well to the analysis of discourse when

representation of actors is looked at from a social standpoint. Van Leeuwen asserts that meanings exist in society and language is the tool that produces meanings while simultaneously redefining them (KhosraviNik, 2010), that is, it is the culture that makes meaning rather than the language (van Leeuwen, 1996). Van Leeuwen argues that the pan-semiotic categories that capture the principal way social actors are represented show that, “a given culture . . . has not only its own specific array of ways of representing the social world, but also its own specific ways of mapping the different semiotics on to this array” (p. 34).

The SAA focuses on a practical framework of socio-semantic categories which can be used for critical discourse analysis. The construction of texts suppresses social actors and shape the role assigned to them. This is done through the ways social actors are included or excluded, in order to suit the interest and purposes of the author or speaker vis-à-vis the readers for whom they are aimed. The discourse of exclusion is an important aspect of CDA. While exclusion is generally taken to refer to those who are ‘invisible’, there are times that exclusion occurs because it suits the interests of those who are excluded. Patterns of exclusion could also be class related, as van Leeuwen’s example of children’s stories shows (2008, p. 29). Van Leeuwen also identifies other means of exclusion – those of suppression where the social actor is not mentioned, and backgrounding, which means that the social actor is mentioned in the text but not in relation to a given activity. An important question raised is whether suppression is done on purpose, to avoid undue attention on particular social actors, or whether it has been assumed that the reader already knows who the social actor is.

The way in which social actors are represented – as passive or active – identifies those represented as ‘agents’ and those who are the ‘patient’ with respect to the given action. Activation/Passivation is done either for the benefit or loss of the social actor/s involved. Other categories are genericisation and specification. These categories, according to Bourdieu

(1986) are linked to social class. Van Leeuwen cites Bernstein (2003) who has argued that “ ‘elaborated codes’ give access to ‘universalistic orders of meaning’, while restricted codes give access to ‘pluralistic orders of meaning,’ and access to these codes is class determined (2008, p. 35).

Another category identified by van Leeuwen is assimilation/individualisation, which is of significant importance to CDA considering the fact that individuality is so valued in many spheres as well as the importance of conformity in others. Once again, whether persons are assimilated or individualised often depends on the social class they form part of. As an example, van Leeuwen cites the tendency for middle class newspapers to individualise elite groups and assimilate ordinary people. Conversely, working class newspapers tend to individualise working class people. He also distinguishes two major kinds of assimilation; aggregation, which treats groups of participants as statistics, and collectivisation, often accomplished by the use of a mass noun or a noun denoting a group of people (2008, p. 37).

Social actors can also be represented in groups through association and disassociation. Association refers to groups of social actors who are not labelled in the text. Disassociation occurs when those who had previously been associated are then referred to as part of a collective. Social actors can also be nominated, i.e. referred to by their unique identity or else categorised, which means that they are referred to in terms of the functions and identities they share with others. It is interesting to note that very often, those nominated by middle-class newspapers are often high status people, as opposed to what happens in working class newspapers, where often ordinary people are nominated.

Functionalisation and identification are another two types of categorizations identified by van Leeuwen. The former occurs when social actors are referred to by their occupation or role. There are occasions when social actors are defined in terms of what they are. There can

be three types of identification. Classification refers to the way in which social actors are referred to in terms of major categories such as gender, age, ethnicity and so on. Relational identification positions social actors according to their personal kinship or work relations and one finds words such as 'grandma' and 'colleague' in such texts. Finally, physical identification represents social actors in terms of their physical characteristics, and temporarily provides them with a unique identity. However, this type of identification might be done on purpose so that the reader focuses on the characteristics in order to classify or functionalise social actors.

Social actors can also be impersonalised, that is, they are referred to by nouns that do not include the semantic feature 'human' (2008, p. 46). Thus one often reads of migrants being a 'burden' or a 'problem' for instance.

The final category de Leeuwen identifies is overdetermination, which in turn is divided in four different categories which are inversion, symbolisation, connotation and distillation. Social actors are overdetermined when they are represented as participating in more than one social practice.

Considering the possible effects of discourse on how educators construct social diversity, this study aims to investigate which factors contribute to the inclusion/exclusion binary in educators' discourse about social diversity. That is to say, this study identifies the principal ways through which students are represented in educators' discourse. I drew on the work of van Leeuwen (1996, 2008) because this framework in CDA provides analytical tools that capture the principal ways in which social diversity is represented and constructed in language. I looked for ways in which educators represent social diversity in Malta through analysing educators' visions of Maltese society, how they position themselves in terms of their identity and their practices in schools and classrooms.

#### 4.8.2. Visual analyses

After the all the interviews were conducted, I asked the participants to provide pictures, or preferably photos they took themselves, of the locations they mentioned when we were talking about the backdrops they would choose for photographs, and those they would not choose. Of all the participants, three replied. I included two of them in Chapter 6, but since the third photograph included the participant, I could not use it due to the need to protect his anonymity. Another participant did not provide me with her photos, but led me to a link online. The other photographs, many of which are mine, and some I found online, are as near representations as possible of the participants' descriptions of places and spaces.

The aim of including the photographs is twofold. Firstly, I wanted to visualise the spaces for the benefit of the reader who is not acquainted with the island and the spaces mentioned by the participants. The images are important because they present the visual dimension of the participants' meaning and sentiment and the reader would be in a more favourable position to appreciate the feelings evoked if she has a reference point.

Secondly, the images proved to be an important resource for me, when I started to engage with the texts in order to analyse the participants' contributions. When I was analysing the transcripts, I constantly referred to the images, and the visual representation of the participants' locations, helped me to make a more comprehensive interpretation. However, I do not consider the exercise as one of visual ethnography, since the participants did not have access to the photographs during the interview, and thus they were not eliciting feelings and thoughts from the images.

## **4.9. Ethical considerations**

Qualitative research is concerned with how people construct meaning as they interact with the world around them (Merriam, 2002; Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002). Thus, irrespective of the method used for data collection, it is essential for the researcher to delve into the social lives of other human beings in order to gain more understanding of the participant's world. Ethical issues are therefore of utmost importance when conducting research. Ethics in qualitative research are concerned with good practices in the aims of the research, choice of participants, methods of data collection and reporting. It is of primary importance that the dignity of the participants is respected throughout the project (Benatar & Singer, 2000, p. 824). The British Educational Researchers Association (2004) states that:

Educational researchers should operate within an ethic of respect for any persons involved directly or indirectly in the research they are undertaking, regardless of age, sex, race, religion, political beliefs and lifestyle or any other significant difference between such persons and the researcher themselves or other participants in the research. (p. 6)

Throughout this study I was particularly vigilant in respecting the participants and took all necessary measures to ensure that the research is ethically conducted, guided by the measures stated below.

### **4.9.1. Minimising risks to participants**

Considering the nature of the research and the data and analysis that might be imparted I needed to ensure that participants did not suffer any trauma, either during data collection or once the study is published. Every researcher must weigh the potential benefits that might be derived from the research against the potential harm that could be inflicted on

the participants (Berg,2004, p. 48). Thus, there is an ethical dilemma which sees the researchers as having to strike a balance between the participant's rights and values that potentially might threaten the research and his or her study in pursuit of truth (Cohen & Manion, 2007, p. 51). Such a situation is exceptionally true in a small, densely populated island like Malta, where proximity makes anonymity difficult at times. According to Orb, Eisenhauer and Wynaden (2000), "If researchers are maintaining the principle of beneficence, overseeing the potential consequences of revealing participants' identities is a moral obligation" (p. 95). Therefore I had to ensure that the participants were not exposed to unnecessary risks.

Consequently, following the principle of beneficence I had to be conscious of the potential harm or loss that participants might encounter in the future (Bates, 2004). Considering the context mentioned above, I made sure that direct quotes and description of situations within schools by the participants were camouflaged in a way that make the participants unidentifiable. There were instances where I felt that the data is significantly important to build my argument. In such cases the participants concerned were consulted. The material was used only if the participants were made aware of the risks involved and they agreed that it could be used.

Closely linked to issues of risk and harm is the concern with anonymity and confidentiality, as participants might fear that if they are identified they might suffer repercussions. With regards to anonymity and confidentiality, Grinyer (2002) cites Barnes'(1979) rule of thumb, which implies that data should be presented in such a way that while the participants remain anonymous to the public, they can recognise themselves in the data provided. Seidman (2006) considers confidentiality as inconsistent with the purpose of research as the researcher usually wishes to make the experience of the participants accessible to others (p. 70). Therefore he claims that confidentiality is kept to the extent that

the person remains anonymous. In this study I gave participants pseudonyms to ensure that they cannot be identified. Moreover, wherever it was felt that certain data could direct the reader to particular schools or participants, it was only used when the participants themselves gave their consent. However, due to the particularities of one of the schools mentioned, I chose not to use the data, since I felt that it would harm the school and the participants if this was made public.

The principle of informed consent was applied because this “promotes and respects the right of self-determination and places some of the responsibility on the participant should anything go wrong in the research” (Cohen and Manion, 2006, p. 52). Kvale (1996) considers informed consent as striking a balance in the information that is given to the participant, which should not be too scant, but also not excessively profuse. However, the information about the project should be adequate in helping the participants understand what the research involves as this is the only way in which they can weigh the risks or benefits that are associated with participating and thus decide whether to participate or decline. In this way their autonomy is protected (Howe & Moses, 1999). This principle of informed consent arises from the participants’ right to freedom and self-determination and thus they have the right to refuse to take part in the study or else withdraw once the research has begun. This research study involves interviews and thus special considerations had to be made due to the personal relationship that is often established during the course of the interviews, which sometimes take an unpredictable direction as they evolve. For this reason, there was ongoing consultation between the participants and myself so that I would be supported and guided in making ethical decisions through the course of the study (Brenner, 2006, p. 361).

It is important that the research participants are given adequate time in which they can decide whether to participate in the study or not. Asking participants to sign a consent



form would increase the likelihood that participants understand what participation will entail as well as what their rights are in relation to participation, confidentiality and anonymity (Wiles, Heath, Crow & Charles, 2005). Signed consent forms safeguard both the researcher and the participants. The researcher is protected from any future accusations the participants may make. Conversely the participants are protected if the researcher breaches the agreement signed. Participants in my study were asked to sign a detailed consent form, explaining the nature of the study, what was expected of them and what they would expect from me as the researcher. They were also aware that they could withdraw from the study without any explanation, and if that were the case, all the data they had provided would be destroyed.

#### **4.10. Authenticity and Truthfulness**

Research needs to be conducted meticulously and conscientiously if it is to be taken seriously. A lack of rigour in the way research is conducted would render it worthless. Consequently authenticity and truthfulness are considered of prime importance in qualitative research. The concept of authenticity rather than the positivist notion of validity would perhaps be a more fitting term when one discusses qualitative research. In qualitative research, one must therefore engage in the narrative presented by questioning, probing and criticizing it. Such a rigorous approach would render the study trustworthy.

As qualitative research is based on subjective, interpretive and contextual data, the canons of rigour that apply to quantitative research are not applicable. Considering the contrasting difference between quantitative and naturalistic research, Sterbacka (2001), Maxwell (1992) and Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest that the purpose of qualitative research is to generate understanding of what is under study. The reason is that qualitative researchers cannot separate themselves from their research and thus complete objectivity is never

possible. Objectivity in qualitative research is in fact a greatly contested concept. Some claim that for a study to be valid there has to be separation of thinking from feeling. However Harding (1995) contends that if the claim of pure objectivity is applied, it would only benefit those in power. The reason behind such an argument is that if objectivity is taken to mean as operating from a 'neutral' stance, there would be moral detachment. In effect, taking on a neutral position would only mean that ultimately one is siding with the powerful or the oppressor as one is not acknowledging the struggles that the oppressed are experiencing. It must be said that neutrality and total objectivity do not exist as all knowledge originates from somewhere (Harding 2004). Therefore, this perceived neutrality does not produce objective and valid research but contributes to normalising procedures, as Harding (1992) amply explains when she writes that objectivism:

defends and legitimates the institutions and practices through which the distortions and their often exploitative consequences are generated. It certifies as value-neutral, normal, natural, and therefore not political at all the policies and practices through which powerful groups can gain the information and explanations that they need to advance their priorities. (p. 337)

In social research, taking on a neutral stance implies that the researcher is complying and abetting the production of distorted research. Consequently, when one abandons neutrality when pursuing the objectivity ideal, one is left with fairness, honesty and an important kind of detachment (Harding, 1992). This detachment does not imply indifference but requires the researcher to distance herself from her own perceptions and convictions in order to be able to imagine how the world appears in another's eyes, to develop "a view of the world in which one's own self stands not at the centre, but appears merely as one object among many" (Haskell, 1990, p. 132).

Thus, Harding (1992) argues for the pursuit of strong objectivity. She contends that standpoint approaches maximise objectivity because they involve a strong demand for ongoing reflection and self-critique. Strong objectivity encompasses a sense of completeness and a lack of distortion. Such an enquiry would include all standpoints and thus it would reveal different aspects of truth. Kukla (2006) argues that we can identify and perceive certain aspects of reality only if we are socially located and therefore contextual factors such as race and gender are recognised as sources of justification for knowledge claims.

As the researcher who acknowledges the importance of a stronger conception of objectivity, I was constantly in a high state of self-awareness in order to recognise how my thoughts and feelings were influencing me or were being influenced by the data I was collecting. As an educator myself, I have experienced school life, had to contend with and mediate school and national education policies, and in general lived many of the same experiences that other educators have gone through. This is not to say that all educators read school life as I do, but I can consider myself an 'insider'. I am conscious of the pressures educators are under and the bureaucracy that sometimes hinders their operations. As a teacher myself, I have learnt to listen to the whole story and not to take things at face value. I also know of the challenges educators face in view of lack of support and sometimes lack of discipline manifested by both educators and students. However, as a researcher, and at present not occupying a teaching post, I am also able to look at educators from the 'outside'. In the few years that I have not been teaching, but kept contact with schools through school visits, I have often observed the way educators react to news about changes occurring within the education system. As these changes, such as the introduction of co-education in secondary schools, do not have any direct effect on my work, I am able to take a detached stance. This does not mean that I am insensitive to how these changes will impact educators' scholastic lives, but I am able to look at the situation from different standpoints. This dual perspective

leaves me well placed to recognise the underlying assumptions educators may have of society and social diversity. Simultaneously, my profession as an educator provides me with a critical frame of reference derived from my own experiences within schools, school policies and practices and the discourse emanating from both the educational field as well as from the public sphere in general. Such a process demands that I, as the researcher apply reflexivity in order to make this study more authentic.

Besides the issues pertaining to truthfulness there are other means that a researcher needs to be aware of so that the study is considered authentic. Maxwell (1992) suggests five categories that should be applied to judge the validity of qualitative research. Descriptive validity refers to the accuracy, or credibility (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Walsh, 2003) of what the participant has said. Therefore, the researcher's transcription of interviews must be accurate, including any change in tone, hesitations, reluctance to answer and any other non-verbal elements that would enrich and inform the data. The reason is that non-verbals, for instance, could change the entire meaning of what has been said. Descriptive validity is the fundamental part on which all other forms of validity are built and Glaser and Strauss (1967) state that unless an accurate account of the data is provided, all else would be irrelevant. Credibility features highly in the way data is interpreted, as the researcher must capture and interpret participants' words and actions, looking for clues in transcripts and body language. Another category is theoretical validity. The theories generated from the interpretation and analysis developed of the study must fit the data if the study is to be considered credible and defensible (Thomson, 2011). While generalizability is considered important to render a study credible, the nature of qualitative research makes generalizability problematic. Qualitative research is concerned with people in particular contexts and therefore findings might be only applicable to similar groups (Auerbach & Silverman, 2003, Wainwright, 1997). Some doubt that generalization can ever be achieved (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Falk and Guenther (2007)

contest these positions and claim that generalisability is possible partly because of the replicability of the findings across several populations. The authors consider a study generalisable if, when using the same methods on other populations the researcher obtains the same findings. Generalisability is also possible on the basis of theory building. The authors illustrate how if patterns of behaviour are observed across multiple and potentially contrasting research objects, conclusions may be drawn about factors that contribute to those patterns—that is, how and why the behaviour occurs. Finally, Maxwell mentions evaluative validity which draws on the assessment of the evaluations drawn by the researcher. To ensure validity Aguinaldo (2004) suggests that a crucial question for every study would be “What is it valid for?”, thus implying that validity is the process of interrogation, which necessitates multiple readings of the function of the study.

In qualitative research, credibility is seen as a matter of degree rather than as absolute. According to Cohen, Manion et al. (2007) honesty, depth, richness and scope of data as well as the choice of participants and the extent of triangulation all contribute to credibility.

Truthfulness is a concept used to evaluate quality in qualitative studies (Golafshani, 2003). Truthfulness implies dependability and consistency. The nature of qualitative research calls for different criteria to measure truthfulness than those in quantitative research. Thus credibility, neutrality, consistency and transferability are applied. Reliability can be regarded as the consonance between what the researcher records as data and what actually occurs in the natural setting that is under research. Therefore the higher the degree of accuracy and comprehensions of coverage the more reliable the study is (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). However this does not imply that the study, if replicated, will yield the same results. Different researchers might interpret findings differently, due to the fact that reality is multi-layered and thus different versions of reality may co-exist without denting the reliability of a study.

Some researchers also insist that the trustworthiness of qualitative research should be evaluated against criteria that are more consistent with the philosophical stance and aims of the study (Fossey et al., 2002). The aims of qualitative research are to give voice to research participants and ‘illuminate the subjective meaning, actions and context of those researched’ (Popay, Rogers & Williams, 1998, p. 345). Therefore the authenticity of the perspectives of the research participants and their interpretations are central in qualitative research.

In order to render this study authentic and trustworthy, I ensured that appropriate steps were taken throughout the project. The researcher is the key instrument of the research project and as such cannot distance herself from personal concerns, experiences and understanding of what goes on in the research. Thus I consider myself as being part of the researched world and thus cannot be objective because “nature as-the-object-of-human-knowledge never comes to us “naked”; it comes to us only as already constituted in social thought” (Harding, 1991, p. 147). Thus I employed critical examination of my own and the participants’ perspectives as these are uncovered through this study.

#### **4.10.1. Triangulation**

Ensuring authenticity in qualitative research refers to whether findings in the study are ‘true’, that is, whether the research findings accurately reflect the situation. Authenticity also entails that research findings are supported by evidence (Gurion, Diehl & McDonald, n.d). Qualitative researchers analyse research questions from multiple perspectives to check and establish validity. Cohen, Manion et al. (2011) explain that through triangulation the researcher tries to explain the richness and complexity of human behaviour more fully. This is done by studying it from more than one standpoint.

Qualitative research is usually conducted using a small number of participants, who provide different perspectives of their experiences. Through comparing and contrasting these diverse perspectives, researchers are able to notice the common themes that appear across the sources and to recognise variations in how the experience appears. According to Polkinghorne (2005), multiple participants also serve as a sort of triangulation on the experience, as the researcher locates its core meaning by approaching it through different accounts:

Triangulation does not serve to verify a particular account but to allow the researcher to move beyond a single view of the experience. The use of multiple participants serves to deepen understanding of the investigated experience: it is not for the purpose of making claims about the distribution of the experience in a population. (p. 140)

Thus, triangulation of data sources allows for comparison and convergence of perspectives to identify corroborating and dissenting accounts and to examine as many aspects of the research issue as possible (Fossey, Harvey, et al., 2002).

In this study triangulation occurs through questioning during interviews. Educators were asked about topics through multiple entry points, where I asked similar yet differently worded questions. In this way the researcher would be able to find if there are any discrepancies between answers. The first question would be of a general nature such as: “What is your opinion about the present detention policy for undocumented migrants?” Further questions would focus on the more particular such as: “Has the presence of undocumented migrants in schools changed the way schools function – such as assemblies, celebrations, school ethos and curriculum? Finally a more personal question would be asked: “What is your opinion on the inclusion of migrants in class? Has it affected your planning, delivery and assessment methods? How? Why?”

#### **4.11. Conclusion**

This study seeks to understand how educators construct Maltese society and social diversity in the way they do. Consequently, I have followed a constructivist and interpretative approach grounded in critical discourse and critical discourse analyses. This project centres round the meanings and interpretations that are elicited through interviews with the participants. I am interested in the unique and particular understanding of each individual case. The concern with external social influences that affect and influence educators, and thus contribute to the way in which they construct the 'ideal' and the 'undesirable', influenced the choice of methods that were used in order to collect, analyse and interpret the data.



# Findings

# Chapter 5

## Educators' visions of Maltese society

### 5.0. Maltese society observed through a kaleidoscope

*Kaleidoscope:  
a tube that has mirrors and loose pieces of coloured glass or plastic inside at one end  
so that you see many different patterns when you turn the tube while looking in  
through the other end.*

(Source: Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

This chapter examines educators' visions of Maltese society and what stands for Maltese identity, in order to provide a contextual framework within which educators' positioning and practices could be understood. Moreover, to be able to understand educators' constructions of social diversity, it is fundamental that first one understands how educators construct Maltese society, as this provides the context in which their understandings of social diversity coalesce.

Educators' constructions of Maltese society varied significantly, with a notable distinction among the participants, created by their intellectual engagement with discourses that are floated in the public sphere. Interestingly, all of the participants were vocal on environmental matters, with some being active in environmental NGOs. A small number of educators were reflective in their arguments and provided well-argued comments about pertinent social issues. In contrast, others remained entrenched around 'common sense' knowledge; that is, knowledge which might not be theoretically or factually correct, but is

considered legitimate because it is widespread. Examples of such common sense knowledge are “The Maltese are Catholic” or “Streaming is beneficial for all students”. The educators’ replies to my questions were also influenced by how politically engaged they were. Some educators I interviewed were affiliated to political parties from the left or centre-left of the political spectrum. Others were politically active, promoting social issues such as LGBTIQ rights, but their activism was independent of political parties. These two groups of educators were the ones who usually shied away from common sense knowledge. They were the ones who mainly raised questions related to social justice, equity and democracy in Maltese society in a well-articulated manner. Only one participant was a member of a far-right, anti-immigration and Islamophobic group. None of the other educators had any ties with centre right or right wing parties. Some of the educators interviewed tended to echo right wing discourses on issues such as migration and poverty. Others raised issues that were more aligned with the position of the Church in Malta, rather than reflecting those of a secular society. Some educators were also involved in religious activities or were members of band clubs. A few, on the other hand, were not at all active in any social groups. Some of the participants were religious, others were atheist, agnostic or non-practicing Catholics. Almost all were either married or in relationships, while a few were single. Two participants were cohabitating. One participant was a parent of a child with a learning disability, another was the parent of a gay child, and two participants were lesbians. One of the participants was a returned migrant. A few participants had lived and worked abroad for a period of time. A number of participants were forceful in their beliefs, while others were more inclined towards dialogue and revision of their views if necessary.

Educators’ ideas of Maltese society resonate therefore with the metaphor of a kaleidoscope. Just as the same coloured glass inside it can create so many different patterns, so do the same aspects of Maltese society carry different meanings to the educators in this

study. Their portrayal of contemporary Maltese society was interspersed with a range of metaphors drawn from psychology, biology and mythology. These different standpoints, rooted as they are in the various histories and experiences of each of the participants provided a variety of constructions of the society in which they live. They further suggested that educators – at least those I spoke with – do not represent a homogenous public. Rather, as the data shows, they reflect competing locations according to social class, gender and sexual orientation, ideology, and cultural background, to name but a few intersections.

Many participants painted an unflattering picture of the Maltese society in which they live. This coincides very much with the negative descriptors the Maltese participants in Sammut's (2015) comparative study about Maltese self-stereotypes in Malta and Australia used to describe themselves mainly: loud, short-tempered, nosey, lazy, chavvy, arrogant, racist and close-minded (p. 2). Simultaneously some chose to paint a quaint picture of the Maltese and their idiosyncrasies, sometimes looking wistfully at the past, as if it were perfect and ideal. The tensions created between the insularity of an island nation, looking inwards towards itself and the pluralist society it is becoming, are evident throughout this study. Some of the educators considered the shift from Maltese society as mono-cultural to one which is multi-cultural as positive, an opportunity to modernise and learn from those arriving on Maltese shores, both figuratively as ideas brought forward through social media, and literally as migrants and refugees. However, others regarded the change as a threat to the stability of identity as well as population that they have always known.

In what follows, I offer an analysis of the various visions of Maltese society, as articulated by the teachers I interviewed. I locate these constructions over the different backdrops associated with the educators' life and upbringing.

## 5.1. The environment as a consensual platform

Educators' constructions of Maltese society varied considerably on political and ethical matters, but not on the environment. There was a consensus regarding environmental issues, which contrasted deeply with how educators addressed human affairs, on which they differed widely. There was a marked distinction in educators' positions between the realm of nature, which was largely apolitical, and the realm of the social, where educators' positions became more widely distributed from left to right of the political spectrum. With regard to environmental matters, all participants showed disgust at the constant construction that is taking place and destruction of landmark buildings to make way for soulless apartment blocks. Moreover, educators commented on the noise pollution and the people's total disregard for cleanliness outside their homes. Some went on to say that this lack of care for nature, is sometimes transferred on to the disregard of rules that are necessary for a society to function well. The environmental concerns of the participants were illustrated in comments such as "ugly buildings", "Bugibba coast", "a built up locality like Sliema" (post mibni ħafna b'hal Tas-Sliema ), "Sliema, full of apartments and flats, and cranes" (Tas-Sliema, mimli appartamenti u krejnijiet), mainly due to the fact that "construction has destroyed everywhere" (il-kostruzzjoni qerdet kull m'hawn), "dirt of the Maltese" (ħmieġ tal-Maltin), "pollution everywhere" (pollution kullimkien). These resonate with Cini's (2014) findings in her study concerning secondary school teachers' knowledge, attitudes and behaviour towards the environment where they too showed concern for the overly built environment, "the crazy situation of the building industry, the disfiguring of towns, villages, the coast-line, the lack of seriousness to protect our natural historical heritage" (Cini, 2014, p. 79), noise pollution, dumping and various other acts that cause environmental damage.

The apolitical nature of the environment, contrasted sharply with the highly contested and highly political issues which the educators mentioned. Educators have strikingly different views of Maltese society, what being Maltese means, and who belongs or could belong to Maltese society. These constructions are a reflection of what they are passionate about, of where their interests lie, and of the issues that arouse strong reactions in them.

## 5.2. A divided Maltese society

It is no secret that the Maltese are generally divided on many issues. This division often locates people on one side or another – one is either Labour or Nationalist, a supporter of Beland or Zejtun Band Club<sup>7</sup>, Catholic or (automatically) anti-Catholic, either because they have a different faith or else they criticise the Catholic Church, liberal or conservative, pro-life or pro-choice, *ħamallu* or *tal-pepè*<sup>8</sup>, supporters of the Italian or English football team (Boissevain, 1965; Mitchell, 2002). There is no end to the list, as labels are bandied on major issues and even on the minor ones. These labels are used to essentialise those who sport them but more than that, they depict a society whose primary characteristic is this division. It is very difficult to try and move away from either side, as the Green Party, Alternattiva Demokratika, knows so well. This division is strongest in the political sphere, where criticizing one party automatically renders one a supporter of the other party. Therefore, one's thoughts and actions can be conditioned by one's concern regarding how these may be interpreted and how one would be positioned on one side or another. For the purpose of my study, this observation is important on two counts. Firstly, as citizens, many educators, participate in these constructions through their support for party politics, band clubs as well as their contributions

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<sup>7</sup> Beland Band Club and Zejtun Band Club are used as an example. In almost every village and town one finds rival band clubs and rival feasts of different saints and sometimes the same saint.

<sup>8</sup> The most precise translation to *ħamallu*, would be *chav*, which the Cambridge online dictionary defines as “an insulting word for someone, usually a young person, whose way of dressing, speaking, and behaving is thought to show their lack of education and low social class”. *Tal-pepè* refers to people of the upper classes, who use English instead of Maltese as a sign of their social standing and privilege.

to the divisive discourse that permeates most national and local issues. Certainly, not all educators fall within this description, as some of the participants attest. Nevertheless the smallness of the island, its density and proximity to family, friends and neighbours, at times make it difficult to think outside the set parameters of 'us' and 'them'. Therefore, alterity is constructed primarily from within Maltese society, a remnant of colonialism "which seriously affected the attitude of Maltese toward fellow Maltese" (Frendo, 1977, p. 22).

With regard to the group of educators I interviewed, reference to the political divisions among the Maltese figured prominently. Very often, these divisions reflected entrenched ideological rifts, as well as the political allegiances of the family. Party politics take centre stage in many discussions and even in the most innocuous of situations. Some of the educators compared entrenched political divisions to a form of "unconsciousness" and "inability to think in a critical manner". This is mostly due to the fact that party supporters rarely, if ever, question their leader's actions and statements. David, a social studies teacher, captures people's adulation of their party leader and this inability to think for themselves in this way:

F'din l-istampa jiġifieri, "Viva Joseph!  
Viva Xmun!" Għall-qdusija flimkien,  
u m'aħniex kapaċi naħsbu b'moħħna  
jiġifieri . . .

In this picture, "Hail Joseph! Hail  
Simon<sup>9</sup>!" Together for sainthood,  
and we are not able to think for  
ourselves . . .

David uses the metaphor of the patron saint to illustrate the kind of adulation that is reserved for party leaders among the Maltese. Every town and village in Malta has a patron saint, sometimes two. The residents participate in an annual celebration to commemorate the saint, spanning over at least one week. There are secular festivities, in terms of fireworks and band marches which take place around the localities. The liturgical celebrations are conducted mostly inside the church. It is an established practice in Malta, that during the village feasts, the saints' statues are taken on a procession around the streets of the villages and before

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph (Muscat) is the leader of the Labour Party and Simon (Busuttil – referred to as Xmun in the Maltese quote) is the former leader of the Nationalist Party.

these go back in their niche, they are left on the church's parvis for some time. The crowd stands in front of the statue clapping and chanting what is referred to as confetti. Referencing this entrenched cultural practice, David emphasises the extent of the veneration and sacrality of patron saints that is transposed on to the party leaders (Boissevain, 1965), whom the Maltese idealise, without holding them accountable. David wants to drive home the lack of critical analysis shown by the majority of Maltese, illustrated by the chanting of "Viva Joseph" and "Viva Simon" as a form of hailing the political leaders, underscoring uncritical collective thinking which holds many Maltese prisoners and further polarises them. David's criticism of Maltese society resonates with Cini's paper *A Divided Nation: Polarisation and the Two-Party System in Malta* (2002), wherein she emphasises the "highly polarized" electorate where the vast majority "identify themselves with one or the other of the two main parties" (p. 11). This extreme polarization is further supported by Claudine, also a social studies teacher, who describes the Maltese as being very political. However, she says:

The only politics they know is blue and red. They're either red or blue, they don't see any in between and the people are very, I don't know, they are very strict on being either blue or red and that's it. I would draw them one on either side, probably a red group and a blue group antagonistic towards each other. (Original in English)

She further adds that:

it affects all society, everything, because even if you are talking about workers' rights and you are talking about trade unionism ... the union is also affiliated, or people think that it is affiliated, to political parties, and they will only join their particular union affiliated to the political party and they will only follow directives according to who is in government, which is stupid. They are not fighting for their rights, really. (Original in English)



Claudine's account is critical of the way members of Maltese society allow their blinkered political lenses to dictate which union to join, even if this means that the union will not automatically safeguard their rights and privileges. Claudine speaks of the primacy of tradition, which makes it difficult for many Maltese to support a different party than that traditionally supported by the family and thus to break rank and challenge the hegemonic thinking. She claims that many Maltese accept ideas passively, giving political groups their consent and thus the power to control their (the people's) actions. The hegemony of the political parties and the divisive stance they adopt gives them leverage to weaken the workers and their unions, ensuring they preserve their privileged position. Therefore, she sees the division in Maltese society as benefitting only the privileged groups – the political class. Claudine is ultimately giving a similar account as Vercellono's study of Sliema residents who he considers as being, effective "prisoners" of their political affiliation, and ... social, cultural and historical factors contribute to an inflexible unwillingness to entertain discourse of other political parties who may better support their interests" (2009, p. iv).

Claudine constructs Maltese society, with its obsession about party politics and unwavering loyalties, as a society which is not able to think and reflect. Gramsci's concept of hegemony cannot be more evident than in such narrations. The ruling class have made it their mission that the nation remains divided, feeding on the consent granted by their respective supporters.

What I find interesting is that while many of the educators criticised Maltese society for the division that has been created within it due to party politics, they did not challenge it but contributed to its continuation. As I mentioned above, party allegiance is strong, and as Hirczy (1995) comments, "Partisanship in this polarized polity is so pervasive, ingrained ... that preference patterns are known by street" (p. 258). In such a context, educators were very

careful not to give any indication of their allegiances to me, a stranger. Moreover, they were rigorous in criticizing both major parties in equal manner. This, I presume, could be for two reasons: a) they fear that if they criticize one party, I might think that they support the other one; b) attributing equal dozes of criticism to both parties would somehow render the educators 'neutral' commentators. A case in point would be Sandra, an English teacher, who, in the course of the interview had also mentioned the divisions in Maltese society, and the way in which Maltese people usually take one side or the other. She told me about the frustrations teachers felt, brought on by reform fatigue and the never ending changes that they had to endure – colleges, removal of streaming, introduction of setting and co-education among others. She said that these changes are due to the fact that politicians want to leave their mark, quickly adding that both political parties do this. Sandra is conscious that her criticism of policies introduced by the Labour party in government, might induce me to think that she supports the Nationalist party. Therefore, in order not to appear to be taking sides and be branded either a Nationalist or Labour supporter, she takes on a position of neutrality, which does not induce educators to challenge and change the status quo, but rather reinforce it with their inertia.

Ruth, a Maths teacher, illustrates the reluctance of teachers to address the political divide, ingrained as it is in the Maltese psyche. She blames the scarcity of critical education and argues that most of the Maltese are unable to discuss politics in an objective manner.

According to her:

lanqas konna nitgħallmu Malta minn  
xiex għaddiet, qisna ma eżistejniex . . .  
kien tabù li ssemmi lil Mintoff, per  
eżempju . . .

we weren't taught what Malta had  
gone through, as if we never  
existed ... mentioning Mintoff<sup>10</sup>, for  
example, was taboo . . .

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<sup>10</sup> Dom Mintoff (1916-2012), Labour Party Leader (1948-1984)

Therefore, even the education system itself, through the curriculum, contributes to the construction of division which, at times, educators feel that they are bound to perpetuate, either because they fear the repercussions that would ensue if they had to engage in a critical discussion about these constructions or else because they prefer the 'safety' of not challenging the status quo. Ruth starts with a significant observation – that at school the Maltese were taught the history of others, while never being present as a nation, thus being constructed as spectators rather than participants. It was the history which the colonisers wanted the Maltese to learn. Although the curriculum is designed by Maltese stakeholders, the vestiges of colonialism are still present. This particular teacher mentions Dom Mintoff (Prime Minister 1955-1958, 1971-1984), a controversial figure in Maltese politics, as an example of how the country cannot even come to terms with its history due to the division that persists. While Ruth reproaches the dearth of critical analysis of Maltese history as presented to the students, her reflections also seem to point out that educators have accepted this omission without much ado. Ruth's quote above can be considered a self-critical comment on the role of teachers in such matters.

It must be said that those participants working in a Church school showed that they do try to challenge this divisive construction of Maltese society. For instance, even during the Divorce (2011) and Spring Hunting (2015) referenda, these educators organised debates for the students to encourage them to think critically and look at situations through different viewpoints. There could be various reasons behind the stance taken by these educators. Certainly, the Rector of the religious order the school belongs to, does not place any restrictions on educators. However, it is surely to the educators' credit that they chose to take the risk and create a school culture that is not afraid to question and debate, even on controversial issues. Thus, while some educators avoid challenging the divisiveness of partisan

politics, others regard it as an opportunity for learning and instilling the habit of critical thought in their students.

### 5.3. Mediating social change

In their constructions of Maltese society, educators focused heavily on issues of social change in Malta, regarding social change from two focal points: either as a threat to Maltese society and tradition or as a breath of fresh air, which is removing the stifling, conservative ideas and providing a more progressive shift in thought. The radical conditions of change, especially, but not only, in terms of new constructs of family and a more secular society have confused some of the educators and caused them anxiety and despair, as they lacked the ability to find adequate language to express the feelings aroused by these changes.

One participant captures the struggle of negotiating between ‘old’ and ‘new’ ways of thinking. Nadia forms part of the Senior Management Team (SMT) of a school. Although her specialisation was in the Sciences, she was trained in areas of psycho-social services as well. Nadia had the opportunity to work within education systems outside of Malta. Prior to her present placement, she ventured outside the teaching realm to work within the Student Services Directorate, with students who were facing a particular challenge<sup>11</sup>. Her vast and diversified experiences have given her the possibility of looking at Malta from afar; hence her eloquence in the description of Maltese society, for which she applies a metaphor from mythology:

Ruma kellhom alla, bieb l’hawn u bieb l’hemm. Jiena xi kultant narani qisna dal-bieb antik li kien alla Janus ngħidlu jien. Il-bieb għall-konservattizmu, “Leli ta’ Ħaż-Żgħir, ngħidlu jien, dik id-djuqizza. U fl-istess ħin għandna bieb li jixtieq jiftaħ għal affarijiet godda. U l-Malti

Rome had a god, a door on this side and a door on the other side. Sometimes I regard us like this old door, which was the god Janus. The door to conservatism, sort of “Leli ta’ Ħaż-Żgħir”<sup>12</sup>, that narrow mindedness. And simultaneously we have a door that wishes to open to

<sup>11</sup> I cannot mention the exact job she had to protect her identity.

<sup>12</sup> A revolutionary psychological novel that, through its protagonist, Leli, challenges the moral and political basis of Maltese society at the turn of the century.

qiegħed fin-nofs; bejn għandu t-tradizzjonijiet tiegħu li huma *strong* ħafna u li jixtieq iżommmhom u l-kultura li trabbejna fiha, u bejn *he's enticed with these new realities*. U għandna nies li qegħdin kollha fuq bieb wieħed, u għandna nies li qegħdin fuq bieb ieħor, u għandna ċorma nies li qegħdin fin-nofs, li qegħdin jippruvaw jifhmu l-ġdid u jintegrawh ma' their reality, ma' *their way of learning* . . . Jiena naħseb qegħdin hemm aħna . . .

new things. And the Maltese are in the middle; we're between our own traditions, which are very strong and which we wish to keep, and the culture in which we were brought up, and then we're enticed with these new realities. And we have people who are all on one door, people who are on the other door, and then a group of people who are in the middle, who are trying to understand the new and integrate it with their reality, with their way of learning . . . I think that is where we are . . .

Nadia's description illustrates a struggle, which goes beyond the 'us and them' discourse of other participants. The division is not absent, as depicted by those sitting on the doors of conservatism and liberalism, but she does not talk of divisive political blocks or band clubs. The split she describes is one of struggle between the old and the new, between past and present. Nadia speaks of the divisive nature of Maltese society in terms of culture and change. This division is particularly visible in the realm of civil and women's rights. Malta has become a leading country within the European Union in terms of civil liberties, as can be witnessed by the repealing of blasphemy law, the reform in censorship law and the new marriage bill, which legalises same sex marriage (not only civil union). The new laws break away from the imaginary of a 'Catholic nation'. Coming in rapid succession, these changes have instigated those deemed more conservative to insist on tradition as a response to the anxieties brought about by the threats of change (Boissevain, 1992). Harwood (2015) points out that the struggles between liberalism and the conservative ideals within Maltese society could be vividly felt during the divorce and the Civil Union issues. Labour party politicians framed the debates within questions of civil liberties, rather than questions of morality, amidst vociferous protests from the conservative camp, where most of the time little distinction was made between the teachings of the Church and what civil liberties should entail. Nadia's metaphor

of Maltese society is a perfect illustration of Mitchell's (2002) description of the Maltese. He says that the ambivalence and anxiety shown by the Maltese were common manifestations of modernity and in his book these were "reflected in the idea of Europe, which was seen as both a promise and a threat - a promise of increased security, affluence, democracy, modernity, but a threat to family, morality, community and tradition" (p. 242). Moreover, Mitchell claims that, "This ambivalence – and consequent anxiety about present and future – are particularly acute at the edges of Europe, in marginal places such as Malta", further adding that the dilemmas of European integration are "morally charged dilemmas which go to the heart of what people regard as their identities, their cultures and their traditions" (p. 242). These moral dilemmas are given life in Nadia's depiction of Leli, a young man who longed for freedom and emancipation in a society that thrived on superstition and held strong traditional beliefs that impeded people from maturing intellectually. Leli's progressive ideas conflict with those of society and its institutions, amongst them, the Church. The book exposes Leli's struggle to be his own person, without allowing society's rules to dominate his life. In Nadia's quote, Leli personifies the struggle of those who wish to break away from the narrow mindedness of some sections of society and how difficult it is to challenge established and powerful institutions such as the Church.

In contrast, Fabienne, a social studies and sociology teacher, constructs Maltese society as "frivolous" and "unconscious". For her, the struggle between the traditional and modern is one in which in their quest for material acquisitions the Maltese have lost sight of respectful behaviour, tenderness and being in touch with what really matters. The drive towards an individualistic culture, has brought about a change in their behaviour towards others. Simultaneously, though:

Qisna ċertu affarijiet ġejna super  
moderni u f'ċertu affarijiet  
superficcjali . . . imma *deep down* fil-

As if in certain aspects we have  
become super modern and in certain  
aspects superficial . . . but deep

qalba u fil-ħsieb bqajna super tradizzjonali. Qisna nħarsu lejn l-Ewropej u ngħidu għax għandhom dawn il-karozzi u kull ħames snin ibidluhom, mela ejja ħa nagħmel bħalhom . . . imma meta it *comes deep down to the values they are still very much, you know, traditional.*

down, in the depths of our heart and thoughts, we have remained super traditional. It's as if we look towards the Europeans and say that because they change their car every five years, we should do the same . . . but when it comes deep down to the values, they are still very much, you know, traditional.

Fabienne highlights two particular points in the struggle of the Maltese and their ambivalent relationship with what being European entails. It is a struggle of attitudes and behaviours that locate the Maltese as Mediterranean rather than as European. The Maltese people have embraced modernity but their behaviour and thinking are firmly grounded in a Maltese habitus of being. Fabienne's words have captured the idea of Janus in a totally different way from Nadia. She describes how the Maltese operate in the public sphere, how they wish to emulate the 'European' by aiming for a similar way of life. However, the Maltese are finding challenges on how to relate to being European as intimately they still prefer the traditional practices. Thus for Fabienne, Janus, represents the long-established behaviour of general indiscipline and disregard for rules, the noise the Maltese generate and the chaotic atmosphere in which they live. All this contrasts with the Maltese people's constructions of a European way of living and behaving. While Fabienne feels she does not belong in such an environment and would leave should an opportunity arise, Marlene described the cacophony of people and noise almost quaintly, as if it is a natural part of being Maltese. Marlene, in fact, ponders on the Mediterranean identity, claiming that the climate and the population density make it impossible for the Maltese not to be noisy as they live outside most time of the year. Fabienne and Marlene provide an illustration of the conflict between being Mediterranean and being European. Their colonial past has taught the Maltese to regard anything south of mainland Europe as being uncouth, backwards and almost wild. Consequently, the Maltese perceive Europeans as superior, which in turn reflects their society's inferiority complex and

dissociation from the Mediterranean (Chircop, 2008). Culturally and physically, the Maltese are significantly similar to their Mediterranean and Northern African counterparts and as they are looking towards and emulating the Europeans, the Maltese are finding it impossible to shake off the colonial roots of their identity. An additional point Fabienne draws out is how the character and mindset of the Maltese are ingrained in tradition and conservatism, which belie their pro-European position.

Steve, a former biology teacher and member of a Church SMT, describes Maltese society as both insular and outward looking. He does not see any contradiction in his definition, but regards it as a state of fact. He described Maltese society as a 'porous cell', whose outside membrane simultaneously contains it, but allows both inward and outward movement. He argues that as a small island state, Malta, through its geographical location, projects a sense of "claustrophobia" and "protection", as well as a sense of isolation that cannot be ignored. At the same time, globalisation has made it impossible for the Maltese to remain as isolated and inward looking as before. The size of the island makes it more susceptible to outside influences, but within its walls, a lot of change goes on instigated by internal activity. Thus, Steve sees Maltese society as fluid, whose internal movements can at times influence what happens outside of it, but its size and location allow for greater 'foreign' stimuli to affect it. Steve sees the inside – outside dichotomy, as expressed through the metaphor of the cell – as something to be expected, and in itself, it is not problematic.

Steve equates a biological entity – the cell, with a political entity – Maltese society, drawing on his subject of expertise to provide a picture of Maltese society that is dynamic, where forces change society from within and from without. He regards the dynamism as 'beautiful' because one does not have any clear indication of a final result. As I understood, Steve, unlike other participants, regards the Maltese as constructing their own change and not looking outward and copying others.



### 5.3.1. Cultural Catholicism and Maltese identity

The Catholic religion, like party politics, is another taxonomy of Maltese identity and affiliation, and one cannot operate outside of it. All educators mentioned religion, most of them according to its hegemonic status. The ways in which educators spoke of the Catholic religion and its rituals show that these practices are ingrained in their constructions of society. Being Maltese translated automatically to one being Catholic and if one is not Catholic, then one is considered different, an outsider. Indeed, Frank observes that “We use it [Catholic religion] to distinguish the ‘us’ from the ‘them’”<sup>13</sup>. This is a particularly significant observation on Frank’s part, as religion is often used by some Maltese, social groups, and even educators to sanction discrimination and cultural racism.

Gary, a geography teacher, feels that a Catholic identity constitutes a more deserving status. In the course of our interview, Gary detracts from the question asked about prayers in the classroom and expresses disagreement on the removal of the cross from classes.

Ma naqbel xejn! Hadd ma jindaħalli x’nagħmel fl-iskejjel tagħna. Jiena meta mort sifirt f’postijiet differenti, qatt ma qgħadt nindaħal jekk il-*customs* tagħhom, jekk per eżempju, immur il-Libja hija xi ħaġa, irrid inneħhi ż-żarbun fil-knisja neħhih, mhux problema. Imma ma nippretendix li inti ġejt hawnhekk u għandna r-religjon tagħna, tgħid hekk irrid ineħhi biex haddieħor ma nweggġu b’xejn!

I do not agree at all! No one should interfere with what I do in our schools. When I travelled abroad, in different countries, I never interfered with their customs, if for example, I go to Libya, it’s something that I have to remove my shoes in their church, I’ll remove it no problem. But I do not expect that you came here and we have our own religion, and you say that that is what you want, to remove so that I won’t hurt the other one<sup>14</sup>.

Gary starts with suppression – his words “no one” are a clear reference to Muslims, given how he continues. He equates being a tourist with being a resident or citizen, whereas

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<sup>13</sup> “Nużawha biex niddistingwu l-‘aħna’ mill-‘huma’...”

<sup>14</sup> It must be said that to date there have not been any requests for the removal of the cross from classrooms or any other public place

the contexts are totally different. A tourist cannot claim the same rights as a citizen of a country and thus Gary implies that Muslims, should not expect to enjoy the same rights as Catholics. Words such as “interfere” (jindaħalli) further emphasise his belief that Muslims are outsiders, given that their opinion is regarded as an intrusion. He considers the Catholic religion as “ours” and by using the possessive he locates non-Catholics and Muslims particularly, as marginal to the collective Maltese identity. Moreover by depicting all Maltese people as one homogenous group in terms of religious belief, he confirms another participant’s observation that the Catholic religion is considered as part of the cultural identity of the Maltese.

Gary’s attitude towards the presence of students of different faiths in schools, echoes that of other educators and contrasts sharply with that of Lorenzo Milani who emphasised that education institutions should be devoid of religious symbols if they are to attract students of different political persuasions (Mayo, 2007). It is also significantly different from Catholic educators in Quebec who agreed to remove their religious clothing, including habits and veil, to make schools more attuned to secular values (McDonough, Maxwell & Waddington, 2015).

Religious diversity in Maltese society is a cause for concern to many educators. David, a regular Church goer and also an active participant in the religious aspect of the village feast, regarded the church (as in building) as one of the main features of his chosen backdrop. In Maltese towns and villages the church always has a central position. In David’s description though, it was being pushed out of the picture by skyscrapers and flats, which now occupy the skyline. He is an environmentalist and is quite concerned by the fact that excessive construction is destroying the Maltese landscape. However, the imagery of the buildings sending the church to the background also signifies that the Church is losing its privileged position. David voiced this apprehension which I understood as being provoked by Islam’s increased presence in Maltese society. I could feel he was perturbed by the increase of

Muslims in Malta, because, while he did not admit to it point blank, he referred to them constantly throughout the interview. He mentioned his neighbour's noisy Iftar and Eid celebrations; how they allegedly want to impose what parents give their children for their school lunch (no ham sandwiches); how Muslim men gather in the village squares and how they look at young girls and women. His comments about Muslims are always given a negative slant. He seems unable to conceptualise a Maltese society in which it is possible for Muslims and Christians to live together, where Muslims' right to belong is not being constantly questioned.

Consequently, it is ironic that David perceives the position a number of Maltese take with regard to religion as idiosyncratic. To illustrate he narrates an incident involving his uncle, which according to him is imprinted in his memory:

Darba kienu ġew tal-Ġeħova u daħħalhom id-dar għax ma kienx jaf li huma tal-Ġeħova u beda jitkellem magħhom. Offriellhom x'jixorbu imbagħad qalulu li huma tal-Ġeħova, u nfaqa' jidgħi. Id-dagħa li smajtu jidgħi dakinhar . . . "Oħorguli 'l barra għax ħa ġġbuli saħta fuq din id-dar." Imbagħad ovvjament naqra kliem tipiku Malti. Għaliex qed insemmilek dan? Għax tirrealizza li fis-soċjetà Maltija, qed jidgħi, qed joffendi r-religjon tiegħu għax ma jridx nies oħrajn b'religjonijiet differenti.

Once Jehovah's Witnesses came knocking and he invited them in, because he was not aware that they were Jehovah's, and he started talking with them. He offered them something to drink and then they told him that they are Jehovah's Witnesses, and he burst forth into a barrage of blasphemies. The cursing I witnessed that day ... "Get out because you're going to bring a curse upon this house." And then some typical Maltese vocabulary. Why am I mentioning this? Because you realise that in Maltese society, he's swearing, he's offending his own religion because he does not want other people of different religions.

David individualises the Jehovah's Witnesses, a religious group that frequently proselytise by going around neighbourhoods. The Church has, in the past, distributed yellow stickers that people stuck to their doors, which said that Jehovah's Witnesses and other sects should not knock. This episode demonstrates the siege mentality of some of the Maltese, who fear and

despise those who are in some way or another different from them. David describes his uncle's hostility, intolerance and disrespect to those of different faith, fearing them without actually understanding what they stand for. He leaves no space for dialogue, but shuts them off completely both literally and figuratively. David's anecdote about his uncle further illustrates David's turmoil regarding different religions which are competing for space in society. As an outsider in his uncle's story, he can see the incongruence of his uncle's actions. On the contrary, he is unable to recognise how similar his attitude towards Muslims is. He feels threatened by their presence but is also aware that his attitude is in conflict with all that he is supposed to teach through social studies.

The majority of the participants depicted the Maltese as one homogenous group in terms of religious belief, positioning those who are not Catholics as "foreigners". While Fabienne, a social studies teacher, acknowledges this depiction, she objects to the homogenising discourse of those who claim that the Maltese are all Catholic. Discussing the presence of the Church in the educational institution where she works, her displeasure is evident:

Mela tajjeb, taf kif ħafna jargumentaw, imma Malta mhix kattolika? Le! Jiddisjaċini, Malta kienet kattolika żmien ilu. Illum il-gurnata hawn ħafna religjonijiet and *it is pointless trying to ignore them ...*

Well, you know how many argue, but isn't Malta Catholic? No! I'm sorry, Malta was Catholic years ago. Nowadays there are many religions, and it is pointless trying to ignore them . . .

Fabienne, an atheist as well, challenges the idea of religious homogeneity, which many Maltese "ignore". She seems to be calling for a more just representation of Maltese society. When diversity is not acknowledged the diverse groups are unable to express their needs and their freedoms (Young, 1990). In the case of religious diversity in Malta, while the freedom of worship exists, public expression is frowned upon, as seen in Chapter 3, thus inhibiting the non-dominant religious groups from manifesting their beliefs like Catholics do.

### 5.3.2. New constructions of the family

The family was by far the institution which concerned the participants most. David lamented the changes that Maltese society is experiencing and their effect on the family. His focus is on the 'death' of the extended family and the flourishing of small, nuclear ones. His concern is the rise of individualism, as he explains how when he was a young boy his extended family all lived in the same neighbourhood – something which modern families do not experience any more. David considers this change as a sign that Maltese life as he has come to know it is coming to an end (bdiet tispicċa l-ħajja Maltija). However, there is something else that is of concern to David. He criticised the recent law, recognising gay couples as families, claiming that:

Kultant inħoss li biex inkunu *within inverted commas, open*, biex inkunu *avant garde*, qabel pajjiżi oħra, u biex inkunu qed naċċettaw gruppi oħrajn, qegħdin noħolqu pseudo realtà għal ċertu persuni li kapaċi mhumix dak il-mod. Jien ma nafx, ma nafx kif ħa nispejegaha, imma kultant inħoss li dik hi s-sitwazzjoni Maltija bħalissa.

Sometimes I feel that to be, within inverted commas, open, to be *avant garde*, before other countries, and to accept other groups, we are creating a pseudo-reality for a type of people, who maybe are not of that type. I don't know, I don't know how to explain it, but sometimes I feel that that is how the Maltese situation is at the moment.

David is talking about an indeterminate group of people who, given the context in which the interview was held, is very clearly the gay community. In his evasiveness and avoidance to name the group he is talking about, he is perhaps sending the message that he does not want to acknowledge them. His restraint also might be an indication that naming the social group he is referring to would be tantamount to giving them legitimacy. Clearly David is very confused about this new phenomenon. He does not seem to have the vocabulary to describe new constructions of the family groups, as indicated by his, "I don't know. I don't know how to explain it". David, thus finds himself in a contradictory predicament – he cannot explain the changes taking place, but as a social studies teacher, he has to teach about them.

David further observed that in accepting new family formations, and not just same sex parents, Maltese society is undermining the traditional conception of marriage between a man and a woman.

Dak li darba kien normali tipo, raġel u mara miżżewġin bit-tfal, illum jekk inti raġel u mara miżżewweġ bit-tfal iħarsu lejki bħala qed tagħmel xi ħaġa ħażina, li sar *unacceptable* f'certu skejjel li jkollok tfal hekk jiġifieri. Immaġina li hija aċċettabbli li, li fi klassi ikollok tifel wieħed li qed jiġi bullied għax il-parents tiegħu għadhom flimkien

What was once considered as normal, a married man and woman with children, nowadays, if you are a man and a woman, married with children, it is as if you are doing something wrong. This has become unacceptable in some schools, that you have children like this. Imagine that it is acceptable that in class you have a boy who is being bullied because his parents are still together.

David considers it an affront towards those who are not gay or lesbian, to entertain the idea that a family can be anything but man, woman and children and seems to think that civil unions<sup>15</sup> somehow alter the reality of those who are not gay. He does not regard civil unions as the right of gay and lesbian people and actually feels that, due to civil unions, the status and privilege of the traditional family is somehow jeopardised. David regards civil unions as a dent to the hegemonic, heteronormative constructions of the family, and does not see the advancement in equal rights for gay and lesbian citizens as a change towards a better society. What I find particularly interesting is how he manages to construct children of heterosexual couples as victims of bullying, when in reality Kosciw and Diaz (2008) found that children of LGB parents are more prone to being bullied because of their family construct. Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen and Brewaey (2002) found that while incidence of bullying does not distinguish between children of heterosexual parents and those of homosexual ones, family related teasing was only found among children of same sex parents. David later says that children are urging their parents to separate so that they are not ridiculed at school. Such

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<sup>15</sup> At the time the interview was held, the Marriage Equality Act had not yet been approved by parliament, only civil union.

hyperbolic statements show that David is finding difficulty in conceptualising new family constructs and thus he does not know how to react when faced with such situations in class . He seems fearful of change that disrupts his conceptions of 'normality' where family constructs are concerned.

Maltese society and the social changes within it were symbolised by Paul as "a sinking ship" (vapour qed jegħreq) due to what he perceives as loss of tradition and values. More precisely he blames secularisation and less control from the Church. In his vision of Maltese society, he mainly focused on the family, admitting that he has the family as an institution at heart. His idea of the family is the traditional one of mother, father and children, which in his own words is "the backbone" (is-sinsla) of society. For him, any other family construct outside the perceived norm contributes to the disintegration of society. He explains,

per eżempju, ħa nieħdu ara familja stabbli, għandek l-omm, il-missier u t-tfal. L-omm u l-missier jaħdmu, dedikati għat-tfal, jagħtu l-ħin tagħhom għat-tfal, jagħtuhom ċerta valuri jista' jkunu reliġjużi, jista' ma jkunux reliġjużi. Dawk it-tfal wisq probabbli ħa jkunu ċittadini tajbin għada pitgħada. Jekk nieħdu familja oħra fejn il-missier *abandonship*, l-omm hija *single mother* trid tara kif ħa tlaħħaq magħhom dat-tfal . . . jista' jkun li pereżempju, jiena qed nisma' li l-Qorti illum il-ġlieda mhux min ħa jirbaħ it-tfal, min ħa jeħles mit-tfal . . . Allura t-tfal imsieken lil min ħa jaraw? Jew lin-nanniet, jew go istitut, jew il-partner tal-*mummy* jew il-partner tad-*daddy* . . . u nemmen li ma jistgħux jagħtuhom dak il-100%, allura awtomatikament it-tfal x'ħin jiġu hawn [l-iskola], ħa juru r-ribelljoni tagħhom. Heqq ma jistgħux ikunu, kif naqbad ngħid,

for example, let's take a stable family, you have the mother, the father and the children. The mother and the father work, committed to the children, they dedicate their time to the children, they instil certain values, that could be religious, or not. Most probably, these children would be good citizens in the near future. If we take another family where the father has abandoned ship, the mother is a single mother who has to figure out how to cope with the children . . . it could be, for example, this is what has reached my ears, that in court today the fight is not who will get custody of the children, but who is going to get rid of them . . . So who will these poor children see? Either the grandparents, or they'll find themselves in a children's home, or mummy's partner, or daddy's partner . . . and I believe that they cannot give them that 100%, therefore automatically once the children come here [at school], they

erm . . . , b'ċerta valuri ta' m'habba, ta' rispett, ta' solidarjetà, għax dawn l-anqas huma stess ma għandhom ċerta affarijiet imsieken. Heqq u l-każijiet qed jiżdiedu b'mod allarmanti jiġifieri.

will be rebellious. Well, they cannot be, how shall I put it, erm . . . , with certain values of love, of respect, of solidarity, because, poor things, they do not even have certain things. And the cases are increasing in an alarming manner.

The tensions between what the interviewees consider as the traditional and the modern ways of life was quite evident when the participants spoke about family structures. It was quite clear that for all those educators who mentioned the family, it was only a mother-father-children construction that was “the norm”, as Diane, another participant, said. Not only that, but educators seem to paint a picture of opposites where a mum and dad meant a stable and well to do family, while single parents and gay parents were considered a problem and often dysfunctional.

Paul presents a rather interesting illustration of the lack of tools, in terms of adequate vocabulary and knowledge that he has as a professional educator. Similarly to David, he cannot articulate what he thinks and what he feels and displays an inability to cope with change. His comments are a reflection of his struggle in reconceptualising what constitute families. He paints a bleak picture of families. However, the picture he portrays is more of a stereotyped, sweeping statement than a realistic illustration. He associates the traditional family with sound values that will automatically transform the children within it into exemplary citizens. On the other hand, those children whose parents have separated or have other partners will effectively become troubled and troublesome. The relational identification he employs, ‘mummy’s partner’ and ‘daddy’s partner’, give the impression that the parents are more interested in their partners than their children. Single parents are not dedicated to their children as opposed to married ones. Paul assumes that growing in a different kind of family than his imagined ideal one, would render the children value-less, perhaps due to their parents not living up to his ideals. He is thus pathologising the families, marking them at risk



and stigmatising both parents and children (Nelson, 2006; Swadener, 2010; Usdansky, 2009; Zartler, 2014). He further elaborates on the 'sinking ship' metaphor by explaining that these situations were not present 40 and 50 years ago and:

nemmen li din ħa tkun il-problema ta' għada aktar mil-lum jiġifieri. Huwa fatt tara l-*mummy* iddurlek *gay* jew *lesbian* pereżempju, ħeqq it-tifla x'jibqa' minnha? Jew tara l-papa' jdur gay, x'jibqa' minnu t-tifel? ... Imbagħad ma naħsibx li jkun lest li jitgħallem is-sugġetti akkademiċi. Imbagħad ħafna *bullying*.

I believe that this is going to be tomorrow's problem more than it is today's. It is a fact, you see your mother turning gay or lesbian, for example, how do you think the girl feels? Or you see dad turning gay, how do you think the boy feels? ... Then I do not think that he would be willing to learn the academic subjects. Then a lot of bullying.

He identified and classified parents by their sexual orientation, as if one's sexual orientation is the only defining and determining factor that eclipses one's identity. Moreover, he seems to think that a parent's sexual orientation necessarily affects children's achievement. This participant also paints a caricature of the way one's identity exists by giving the impression that parents 'turn' gay at a whim and that this is a common occurrence and that there is a deficit in being gay. He normalises bullying as an automatic consequence of having gay parents, by the use of suppression, where the bully is not mentioned at all. According to him, students are so traumatised by their parents' sexual orientation that they cannot focus during lessons. He blames the parents for not keeping the family together and for the bullying on their children, and the students for not learning, but he never mentions his role as an educator in all this. Additionally, Paul constructs families which diverge from his ideal as different and thus as deficient (Gorski, 2010; Hughes, 2010). Furthermore, he ignores the role of education in contributing to the formation of citizens and takes a rather fatalistic stance, in claiming that once students experience trauma, they cannot learn and that values are only learnt from home, a comment echoed by Sandra, another participant and challenged by Steve.

Paul is projecting his own confusion on parents and children on two issues: the challenge to understand complex sexuality, and similar to David, the difficulties he encounters to reconceive of new family structures. These two educators present a sense of loss, of what was previously known and now is no longer, because of the social transformations that are taking place. It is evident that there is a lack of responsiveness in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to engage in training that would enable educators to develop a better understanding of social change.

In their constructions of Maltese society, educators expressed differing understandings of what constitutes the society in which they live. They draw on their area of expertise, to come up with metaphors and imagery to drive home their conceptions of Maltese society. Educators speak of the intensive social changes that are happening in Maltese society. Their understandings and interpretations of these changes, however, lead them to interpret the consequences differently. In their constructions of Maltese society, they regard the Maltese as not always able to reconcile new modes of living with their habitus. Consequently, these rapid developments, in habits and legislation, could be seen on the one hand as further contributing to the divides between Maltese, while on the other hand these could be seen as presenting alternative views.

While educators are in agreement of the fact that Maltese society is experiencing change, they differ on the emphasis they put on the nature of that change. As discussed in Chapter 3, Maltese society has changed demographically, with the influx of migrants. Due to the developments in civil rights legislation the institution of the family has also gone through upheavals as many couples are seeking to live together instead of (or before) getting married; couples are more inclined to separate or divorce if the marriage does not work out, and then form another family. Over all, social norms have lost the stifling expectations of the past, influenced particularly by mass and social media (Paul, Singh and John, 2013; Strasburger,

1995). Educators participating in this study have constructed this social change in different and at times contrasting ways, which reflect their personal experiences, their prejudices, fears, hopes and philosophies.

#### **5.4. A racialized and stratified Maltese identity**

The assumption of a homogenous Maltese identity, as some educators like Silvana, Marlene and Nadia put forth, is challenged by many of the other participants. Steve is critical of those who claim that the Maltese share a common identity.

huwa komdu li ngħidu li speċi  
l-omoġenità, taf kif? . . . u li qisu  
kulhadd l-istess, kulhadd miexi fuq  
l-istess *wavelength*, u għandna  
għanijiet komuni, *mission statement*  
wieħed, taf kif? . . . l-istess  
interpretazzjoni, l-istess fehma.  
*Bullshit!*

it is comforting to say that  
homogeneity, you know? . . . as if  
everybody is the same, everyone is  
on the same wavelength, and that  
we have common aims, one mission  
statement, you know? . . . the same  
interpretation, the same opinion.  
Bullshit!

As can be seen, he considers the idea of an imagined homogeneity as absurd and moves away from it by acknowledging that, as an island, insularity might lead the Maltese to believe that they are all the same. However, educators strongly believe that Maltese society is comprised of the 'Maltese race' and the different other as well as the haves and the have nots.

##### **5.4.1. A contested 'whiteness'**

The ambivalence of living on the fringe of Europe (Mitchell, 2002), wanting to be European but being culturally Mediterranean and North African to an extent has composed a Maltese identity that is ambiguous, locating neither here nor there. This desire to be European (Chircop, 2008, 2010) could be the result of a colonial mentality, because as Said (1979) writes in *Orientalism*, the coloniser, referred to as 'hegemonic power' persuaded the colonised that 'the idea of a European identity was a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures' (p. 7). Thus, the tensions between a European and a Mediterranean

identity often conflate with a North African one. Ruth captures this tension in her use of physical attributes as means of identification and attests:

Għax jien ma nistax nifhem kif  
bniedem Malti . . . I mean, jekk  
tara xagħarna, l-maġġoranza  
tal-Maltin kif inhu fir-realtà?  
Nokkli, kemxejn imur fuq  
frizzy, qed tifhem? Jekk tara l-  
karnaġġjon tagħna huwa  
normalment skur, l-għajnejn  
ħafna minnhom huma skuri.  
Jiġifieri aħna Mediterranji  
Nord-Afrikani, il-lingwa tagħna  
hi semitika. Meta nsiefer  
jaħsbuni Lebaniza, jaħsbuni  
Marokkina . . . Qatt ma  
jaħsbuni, per eżempju, mill-  
Ingilterra jew mill-  
Ġermanja. Allura jien ma nistax  
nifhem kif il-Maltin jistgħu  
jassoċjaw ma' dawn il-  
WASPs [White Anglo Saxon  
Protestants]. . .

Because I cannot understand  
how a Maltese person . . . I  
mean, if you look at our hair,  
how is it for the majority of the  
Maltese? Curly, verging on the  
frizzy, you see? If you look at  
our skin colour, normally it is a  
little dark, most eyes are dark.  
We are Mediterranean North  
African, our language is  
Semitic. When I go abroad,  
people think I'm Lebanese,  
they think I'm Moroccan . . . No  
one ever thought I'm from  
England or Germany for  
example. So I cannot  
understand how the Maltese  
can associate themselves with  
these WASPs [White Anglo  
Saxon Protestants]. . .

The perceived superior European identity, has encouraged the Maltese to claim a national-European identity (Abela, 2005-6). Frenzo (1994) also argues that the Maltese have always felt 'European' to some extent. This contrasts with Sultana (2009) who paints a different picture of the Maltese who are 'linguistically, culturally, genetically and even religiously' (p. 15) too similar to Arabs to deny these roots. Ruth embodies this ambiguity as she considers herself Mediterranean/North African, when many assert that the Maltese are European. In another part of the interview, she said that once she was at a youth meeting in the north of England and she was the only 'black' person there, further reinforcing the image of difference when compared to WASPs.

Malta's geographical location has been the main contributor to an ethnically diverse population that inhabits the island. Some of the participants agree wholeheartedly and as Maria said,

Wara kollox missirijietna,  
ħadd minnhom ma kien Malti  
pur. Lanqas jeżisti Malti pur.

After all, our forefathers, none of  
them was a pure Maltese. A pure  
Maltese does not exist.

Such knowledge does not stop the Maltese from contesting this part of their identity. There are some who, like Marlene, think that there are particular characteristics that identify one as Maltese. She considers someone as being Maltese by "having the same characteristics as you" (għandhom l-istess karatteristiċi bħalek). This declaration in itself is vague, reflecting Marlene's inability to identify particular characteristics that make one Maltese. David is much more specific. He described a student in these exact terms:

Fil-klassi kellna tifla sewda, Għarbija,  
Musulmana. Jiġifieri kellha kollox,  
tipika mhix Maltija . . .

In class we had a black girl, an Arab,  
Muslim. I mean, she had everything,  
typically not Maltese . . .

He proceeds by the negative, indicating through the overdetermined physical identification he employed to describe the girl that she is not what the Maltese are. He constructs the Maltese as being essentially white, not Muslim (presumably Catholic), and certainly not like an 'Arab'. David essentialises both Arabs and Maltese in his description of the student, as he seems to think that there is one way of being Maltese, and another way of being Arab, and such characteristics are cast in stone. David's ideas are widespread in Maltese society and this can be witnessed every day. In schools, SMT and teachers presume that Ethics lessons are for migrants because they are not Catholic; on social media one sees many comments which locate a black person as essentially a migrant or refugee. It seems that the 'outsider' is always depicted as opposite to what and how the Maltese are assumed to be.

Ruth contests David's assertion and points out to the diversity that exists among the Maltese themselves. She spoke about mixed marriages, which are becoming more frequent in Malta and how migration has created a more multi-faceted society. She further explains,

Nara xi ħadd iswed jitkellem bil-Malti, nieħu pjaċir, itini dak il-pjaċir għax ngħid mela Malta fl-aħħar, m'għandhiex bilfors trid tkun ġilda bajda ... qed nittama li Malta qiegħda tinbidel, għax imbagħad x'inhi s-soċjetà? X'inhu Malti? Malti dak li twieled hawn? Malti huwa dak li żżewweġ ma' mara u ilu jgħix hawn għaxar snin, għoxrin sena? Malti huwa dak li jgħix Tas-Sliema, u titkellem bil-Malti u jibqa' ċcassat? Malti huwa dak li titkellem miegħu u anqas tifhem kelma, għax ikellmek bl-lxukkajr?

I see a black person and he speaks in Maltese, it really pleases me, because I think that finally in Malta one must not be white skinned ... I'm hoping that Malta is changing, because after all what is society? What is Maltese? Is the Maltese that person who was born here? Is the Maltese the person who married a Maltese woman and has been living here ten, twenty years? Is the Maltese the person from Tas-Sliema, and you speak to him in Maltese and he just stands there, staring at you? Is the Maltese that person with whom you hold a conversation and you won't understand a word of what he says because he speaks to you in Xlukkajr (Marsaxlokk dialect)?

In contrast with the other educators, Ruth does not consider the changes in society as threatening, but as positive and healthy. That is why she is pleased to hear black persons speaking in Maltese. This leads her to question what entails for one to be Maltese. The overdetermined physical identification of the 'black man' does not represent a random choice of words. She chose the image of a black man, because black men are generally taken to be African immigrants, referred to in the vernacular as 'illegals', a misnomer which constructs them as outsiders and certainly not part of the citizenry. Thus, she is challenging the stereotypical notion that being a Maltese citizen requires one to be 'white'. While the demographic change prompts her to question the idea of Maltese citizenship, she also puts the question to those who take it for granted – the Maltese themselves. The black man speaking Maltese is juxtaposed with the upper-class person from Sliema, who can neither

utter, nor understand Maltese as the native language. Ruth also includes a person from Marsaxlokk who not only speaks Maltese but speaks in a dialect which not everyone might be able to understand. She locates the English speaking Maltese in the North and the 'Xlukkajr' in the South, further diversifying the possibilities of what being Maltese could mean. The locations chosen symbolise the different social classes, also identified by the language spoken in each case. Thus, for Ruth, being Maltese is not tied to particular qualities or characteristics but to a myriad of possibilities. Her acceptance of social change could stem from her experience of being 'other' when living abroad, the realisation that the 'Maltese' are not a homogenous group and diversity is amply present even among the Maltese themselves.

While the participants could not find common ground for what it means to 'be Maltese', constructing the migrants as the different Other was quite effortless. Sandra explained that the Maltese are quite "suspicious" of everybody who is a stranger, who does not "have roots". As did several participants, when Gary was asked to say how he would draw Maltese society, his picture contained only Maltese people, even though throughout the interview he mentioned migrants often. The suppression of migrants is an indication of how he does not consider them to be members of society. Moreover he placed migrants reaching our shores in different categories according to stereotypical identifiers, mainly race, ethnicity and country of origin. For instance, Gary constructs migrants living in Malta as either 'super rich', that is, who are mostly from 'the north' and who would most probably be of 'fair' complexion or the African migrants who are definitely poor and obviously black. These two categories of migrants have impacted society due to their particular behaviour. He claims that they have become part and parcel of society, but while the 'white, rich, northern' migrants have contributed positively, by buying property worth thousands, the African migrants "have transformed properties into dumps" (ġabu l-postijiet żibel). He also claims that the 'white' migrants do not put pressure on our resources, as they do not live here all year long and when

they are here they integrate with the community. Moreover they employ people to take care of their property, to clean and do the gardening. On the other hand, the African migrants stay here all year long and fail to integrate, apart from being a burden on society. Therefore, here we have an educator who places the value of migrants on their economic capital. Gary's gratefulness at the 'white' migrants' generous sharing of their wealth with the Maltese can be considered an indication of a colonial mentality, especially when his views of the white migrant are juxtaposed with his impression of the African one. He does not acknowledge how much the African migrants contribute to society and the economy all the time and that due to the 'white, northern migrants', rents have shot up astronomically, and thus many Maltese (and other migrants) cannot afford to rent, which is creating a situation where their pay checks go towards the rent, rendering them working poor.

A small number of participants perceived the influx of migrants as a threat to Maltese identity. Silvana explained her reluctance at accepting migrants in Malta. She said,

Ejja ngħidu jidhol xi ħadd  
għol-parlament . . . u jgħid, "Festi ma  
rridx nagħmel aktar."

Let's say someone is elected in  
parliament . . . and says, "I don't  
want any more feasts."

She pointed out that feasts are part and parcel of what distinguishes the Maltese from others. The activation of the migrant as someone who has agency reveals Silvana's fear that migrants might one day have the possibility of attaining the same power as the Maltese. Moreover, the implication of her words is that they would use their power to destroy Maltese culture. She cannot yet envisage the migrant as forming part of Maltese society and sharing the same space without being intrinsically against what Maltese society represents. At the same, Silvana said that she would not mind if there were public celebrations of the Chinese New Year or Ramadan, as this would help the Maltese learn from other cultures. However, recognition of



diversity should not go deeper than this so that “our [Maltese] culture remains Malta’s main one” (il-kultura tagħna tibqa’ l-*main* ta’ Malta).

Silvana’s position contrasts sharply with Frank’s, who considers any definition of Maltese society as one which is imagined and fails to capture all the complexities that exist within it. Silvana speaks of Malta as if it is free from outside influences, again contrasting Steve’s interpretation of Maltese society. She says,

Nixtieq li Malta tibqa’ Malta, mhux  
bħal Melbourne, hija multicultural.

I wish that Malta remains Malta, not  
like Melbourne, which is  
multicultural.

Her idea of culture is that it is static, it does not change as it is influenced by time and events. It is for this reason that she joined the Għaqda Patrijotti Maltin, to protect Maltese identity and oppose ‘forced integration’. However, Silvana is at the same time fascinated by other cultures, as her travels attest. She does not seem to see the irony of her actions in not accepting a multicultural environment. Her idea that Malta should remain Malta is in itself ambiguous, because as the participants have already demonstrated, there is not a singular construction of Maltese society and what being Maltese signifies. Silvana’s uncertainty and confusion in relation to the pluralism in Maltese society induce her to be simultaneously protective of Maltese culture, while still curious to see what other cultures have to offer.

#### **5.4.2. The dominant and the undesirables – a socially stratified Maltese society**

The ambivalence expressed by teachers regarding Maltese identity and society touch on matters of faith and race. Social class is another category which featured in educators’ constructions of Maltese identity. On issues of poverty and social class teachers positioned themselves in two constructs. There were those who pathologised those living in poverty and who politicised the choices made by working class people, attributing them as being done consciously and systematically. The other group of teachers looked at the structural aspects

that create those who are socio-economically disadvantaged, looking through the lens of social justice. Michael, a school leader and one of the political party activists, described Maltese society as being made up of different layers:

Is-saff t'isfel, minkejja kull progress, meta ngħid t'isfel jiġifieri dawk li huma l-aktar żvantaġġati, dawk li huma forsi ġejjin minn problemi ta' faqar, għax il-faqar – hemm faqar intellettuali, hemm faqar materjali... Hemm faxxa, qed ngħidu 22%, li hija faxxa li tinkwetani jiġifieri. Wieħed irid jibqa' jaħdem; ma jridx jaqta' qalbu u rridu nkunu pożittivi wkoll... Imma jien naħseb li jekk ikollok il-ħeġġa, nemmen li illum il-ġurnata għandna politiċi li għandhom il-ħeġġa u li jindirizzaw għax inti tista' issue tħalliha tkarkar. Jekk tħalliha tkarkar dik bħal meta jkollok problemi soċjali li ma tindirizzahomx, imbagħad tirrealizza li minnhom twieldu problemi soċjali ġodda.

The lower layer, albeit every progress, when I say the lower I mean the most disadvantaged, those who perhaps are coming from problems of poverty, because poverty – there is intellectual and material . . . There is a layer of people, around 22%, which is a very alarming layer, which worries me. One has to continue working; never give up and we have to be positive as well . . . But I think that if you have the will, and I believe that nowadays we have politicians who have the will and address it, because you can let the issue drag on. If you let it drag on, it's like when you have social problems which you ignore, new social problems are born.

Although Michael begins with mentioning different layers, he only speaks of one. This differentiation highlights his concerns regarding poverty and the social problems that are linked to the issue. He does not pathologise and impersonalise those living in poverty; in fact he refers to the most disadvantaged of society as 'those who are coming from problems of poverty' not 'the poor', indicating that the problem is not the person but the situation s/he is in. For Michael marginalising the poor would only create more social problems. He acknowledges that structures and policies outside of the situations of those who are living in poverty need to be addressed in order for the latter to break the poverty cycle.

Interestingly, two other participants also referred to social class, similarly taking a social justice perspective. I asked them to locate themselves in public space which they like and they chose Bormla and Birgu, which, together with Isla, are collectively referred to as The

Three Cities or Cottonera. Until a few years ago, cheap housing attracted low-income population to the Three Cities. However, the area is becoming gentrified and property prices are on the rise. Frank explained this choice of landscape:

Hemm ċertu storja marbuta mal-Moviment tal-Ħaddiema . . . hu ambjent mhux *straight forward*, b'hal meta noqogħdu npingu landscapes tal-Imdina u kollox sabiħ. Hemm ħafna tensjonijiet . . . jista' jkun li l-borgeżija kollox qed tieġu *over*. Jiġifieri fl-isfera pubblika qed tieġu *over*. Jiġifieri t-tastes, jekk għandek tastes ma jaqblux ma' tal-isfera pubblika, ma' tal-borgeżija, tiġi ħamallu, ħa ngħid hekk. Jiġifieri sa ċertu punt, is-sabiħ ta' Bormla aktar forsi minn oħrajn, hija aktar li għadha pjuttost 'selvaġġa' (f'sens tajjeb). F'das-sens, li hemm nies għadhom fil-klassi tal-ħaddiema jew underclass, u allura tarahom, għadhom ma ħbewhomx tajjeb biżżejjed.

There is a particular history which has to do with the Worker's Movement . . . it is an environment which is not straight forward, like when we paint landscapes of Mdina and everything is beautiful. There are a lot of tensions . . . it could be that the bourgeoisie is taking over everything. I mean in the public sphere, it is taking over. I mean, tastes, if your tastes are not similar to those of the public sphere, the bourgeoisie, you are a *chav*, so to speak. Therefore, to an extent, the beauty of Bormla, perhaps more than others, is that it is still somewhat 'savage' (in a good sense). In this sense, that there are people who are still working class or underclass, and you see them, they have not yet hidden them well enough.

Frank's first reason for choosing Bormla as an expression of identity was because this city saw the birth of the Workers' Movement. He gives recognition and acknowledgement to the working class people in this particular area, an area which has been stigmatised due to social issues that have resulted in social exclusion. He refers to the 'savage' atmosphere, or the feel of the place, because the inhabitants are raw and crude and have not acquired the habitus of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie has defined these people as 'chavs', because they have not acquired the tastes of the middle class, irrespective of the fact that they have neither the social, nor the economic and cultural capital to do so. Thus Frank links the social class struggle with the Three Cities. This struggle is visible and tangible, as from a single spot, looking

towards Birgu, one sees luxury yachts and simultaneously one can see clothes hanging out from tiny balconies in Isla.

A significant concern that Frank brought up is the power of the middle class in the public sphere and how those who do not conform to the ideals of the powerful are located as the powerless 'other'. These people rarely have a voice, as explained by Steve, who compared Maltese society to a cell which is full of different colours, and different voices:

Ma rridx nagħti l-impressjoni li kull kulur għandu l-istess saħħa, bl-ebda mod jġififieri. Anzi nifhem li hemm kuluri li huma aktar b'saħħithom minn oħrajn li allura l-hue li jagħtu taċ-ċellola jaf ikun skewed lejn naħa partikolari. Heqq, jekk inti thares lejn id-diskors dominanti li jingħad, diskors dominanti huwa dominanti għax jappartjeni għall-grupp ta' nies, ma jappartjenix għal oħrajn. Huwa dominanti għax jidher dak, għax hemm il-poter ta' dawk fuq oħrajn, taf kif. Jġififieri ma rridx intiha l-impressjoni li taf kif, again, forsi l-mudell fundamentalista li jagħti l-idea li qisu għandek pressure groups differenti, qisu l-impressjoni li kulhadd għandu l-istess tip ta' vuċi, ta' poter . . . Għax assolutament mhux il-każ, mhux il-każ. Erm, il-kulur li tiegħu imbagħad b'mod ġenerali u kif tidher huwa l-kulur dominanti. Issa l-kulur dominanti huwa ta' min huwa dominanti fis-soċjetà .

I do not want to give the impression that every colour has the same power, in no way. Indeed, I understand that there are colours which are more powerful than others, so that the hue they give to the cell is skewed towards a particular side. Well, if you look at the dominant discourse that is said, dominant discourse is dominant because it belongs to a group of people, it does not belong to others. It is dominant because it looks that way, because there is the power of those on others, you know. I mean, I do not want to give the impression, you know, again, perhaps the fundamentalist model that gives the impression that you have different pressure groups, which give the impression that everyone has the same type of voice, of power . . . because it is absolutely not the case. Ehm, the colour that it overtakes, in a general way, and which is seen is the dominant colour. And the dominant colour belongs to those who are dominant in society.

Steve also refers to power and domination in the public sphere. He concedes that there could be many voices in the public sphere, as technically, not one citizen is banned from participating, giving one the impression of a flourishing democracy. Who actually participates, and whose voice is given due attention, is another matter altogether. One has easier access

to the public sphere if one is empowered academically, financially and politically, if one forms part of the hegemony. Sometimes, the public sphere is so monopolised by the 'elite few' – be they individuals, social groups or the media – that people refrain from participating because they are aware that it is futile to participate when your contributions are ignored. Consequently, as Fraser (1990) contends, while there might be consensus among all stakeholders about the public sphere, the way in which this consensus is reached might give the impression of being democratic when it is not. Mansbridge (1990) argues that:

the transformation of 'I' into 'we' brought about through political deliberation can easily mask subtle forms of control. Even the language people use as they reason together usually favours one way of seeing things and discourages others. Subordinate groups sometimes cannot find the right voice or words to express their thoughts, and when they do, they discover they are not heard. [They] are silenced, encouraged to keep their wants inchoate, and heard to say 'yes' when what they have said is 'no'. (p. 127)

Consequently, as Frank said earlier, the 'underclass' are defined by those whose voice is stronger and decisions are taken in their name, even when they do not partake in the decision making process. Steve identifies those who have leverage in the public sphere as people who have economic power, men, straight persons and able-bodied. Simultaneously, he concedes that one cannot be deterministic, and thus acknowledges the sense of agency that pressure groups and social movements display in promoting alternative discourses to the dominant ones in society. Steve illustrates the internal ambiguities within Maltese society, situating them at the level of social class. Unlike Gary and Mark (below), he takes an anti-essentialist position and regards the lower social classes as oppressed by the hegemonic classes who construct the meaning of being Maltese to their benefit. He also speaks of internal divisions, amidst the divisive political discourse emanating from the two dominant parties. These

divisions, created by social groups and social movements, create a counter discourse to the hegemonic thrust of the PL/PN duopoly.

Michael's vision of Maltese society as being made up of different strata is shared by other participants. However, their interpretation of the strata is totally opposed to Michael's. Mark, an atheist secondary school teacher, for instance, envisions Maltese society in three tiers:

Għandek erbgħa minn nies biss, hekk li jmexxu 'l Malta, diretturi u kuntratturi u dawn in-nies li qegħdin ipixxu fuq ta' taħthom. Imbagħad għandek in-nies tan-nofs li qegħdin jaħdmu kollhom għaraq; li qed jaħdmu biex jippruvaw jaqilgħu lira. Imbagħad għandek in-nies ta' taħt li qed jieħdu l-frott minn fuq li m'hu qed jagħmlu xejn.

There are a handful of people who have taken hold of Malta, directors and contractors and these are pissing on those beneath them. Then there are the ones in the middle tier who are working tirelessly; who are working to try and make some money. Then you have those at the bottom, who are reaping fruit without having done any work.

Mark's position contrasts sharply with Michael's worried concern about how economic inequality impacts those on the poverty line. Reflecting his own class position, Mark depicts the middle class as almost a victim, toiling at work for the benefit of those who either evade taxes or else those who allegedly usurp the hard earned money the middle class pay in taxes. Gary is of the same opinion with regard to those living in poverty. These three educators consent that Maltese society is host to the 'have' and 'have nots', however, Gary and Mark seem to put the blame on those who are socio-economically disadvantaged for the precarious situation they are in. During their interviews they often mentioned how children and their parents were not the least interested in education, with the result that they ended up without any qualifications, often rendering them unemployable, and thus dependent on welfare handouts. They seem to think that schools have little, if any, responsibility towards these students. Simultaneously, Mark acknowledges that schools push forth a middle class agenda, which students in the school that he teaches find alien to their habitus, as do their parents.

Thus, on the one hand Mark blames those living in poverty for not trying to ameliorate their social position through education, and on the other hand, he acknowledges that schools further alienate them due to incongruence between the students' social class and the school's pedagogic and curricular positions.

In considering these people as "leeches", Mark and Gary construct them as undesirable members of society, even though they are Maltese citizens. This contrasts with Mark's view that a "professor" who has studied (and who, according to him, does not cheat in his taxes) has earned his right for a huge paycheck. Gary and Mark repeat the myth that the lower social classes and the those living in poverty are in dire situations out of choice. They do not take into account the different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that sustain successful people. On the other hand, Michael, acknowledges that economic structures and policies, among other issues, need to be addressed if the cycle of poverty and welfare dependence is to be broken. He puts the onus on the state to rectify the unjust practices that eventually keep most welfare recipients on the poverty line.

Stratification has different dimensions as Ruth's testimony shows. She amply illustrates how social class differences are not just economic, but they are touched by linguistic and cultural differences. Some of the participants, perhaps inadvertently, also referred to social class. However, they provided different contexts, which were the classroom and the catchment area of their school. They offered alternative constructions of the lower social classes. Paul, a public school teacher often constructed social class divisions in terms of social problems:

Aktar mhu għaddej iż-żmien Ғal Qadim<sup>16</sup> qed jinbidel f'żona li l-problemi soċjali qed jiżdiedu sostanzjalment, speċjalment problemi ta' ġenituri/kuranti bla

The more time passes [the town of] Ғal Qadim is changing into a zone wherein social problems are substantially on the increase, especially problems of unemployed

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<sup>16</sup> Fictitious name of town

xogħol, separazzjonijiet, użura, drogi u logħob tal-azzard. Dan kollu jirrifletti fuq it-tfal li jiġu l-iskejjel tagħna.

parents/guardians, separations, usury, drugs and gambling. All this reflects on the students who come to us.

One can certainly understand this teacher's concern about how students are affected by the impact of social woes that befall them and their families. However, the teacher engages in a discourse of doom and hopelessness, which is also a discourse that permeates the broader society. Such a discourse displays a power/knowledge dynamic that constructs the working class people inhabiting this area, as social problems. Similarly, other teachers participated in such discourse. Gary associates his students with:

Dwiefer . . . imbarazz, ħmieġ, etc. Straight and plain. Jekk huma lebsin nista' ngħid lebsin ħwejjegħ ħa jaqgħu minn fuqhom . . . imsielet ma kullimkien, tattoos. Tfal! Kieku npengihom bit-tfal jiġifieri. Bil-Malti l-kelma eżatta ħa npoġġiha naqra eżatt, jibilgħu l-flus minn fuqna, minn fuq it-taxxi tagħna, għax ma jridux jaħdmu.

Nails . . . trash, dirt, etc. Straight and plain. If they are dressed, I can say they are wearing clothes that are falling off them . . . earrings everywhere, tattoos. Children! I would draw them with children. In blunt terms, I'm going to use the exact word, they grab money off our backs, from our taxes, because they do not want to work.

Gary constructs the marginalised communities to which his students belong as being in a state of wilderness and savagery. He does not seem to see any worth in the social group of students he teaches, seen in the impersonalisation and abstract way in which he refers to them – nails, dirt, trash, tattoos, earrings – implying bad taste and bad aesthetics. He pathologises the students, constructing them as having something inherently wrong for not living up to his ideal of what and how students should be. He literally depicts them as good-for-nothings, students without dreams and ambitions. His words, in fact, are often replicated by many of the commentators on online news media, who always depict those on benefits, especially single mothers as scroungers. Gary and some of the other teachers leave out important elements from their constructions of these students. Unlike Michael they do not problematise state



social, economic and education policies which have failed to address those for whom educational institutions are not working. In Gary's mind, these students behave in accordance to their cultural dispositions, which make them more inclined to be dependent on welfare and be antisocial. Sandra also expresses the same feelings when she speaks of some of her students. One of the students had asked her what she has to do to go on benefits. Sandra told me:

Digá' kriminali dawn ... 'qas temmen ta! Dawn it-tfal ta' xi fifteen digá' qed, qed jaħsbu kif ħa jfottu s-sistema.

They are already criminals ... unbelievable! These 15-year-old kids are already thinking of how to screw the system.

Like Sandra, in his deterministic description of the students, Gary constructs the students and their families as "deemed to exhibit pathological dispositions towards two key social responsibilities: the need and obligation to engage in paid employment, and the need and obligation to provide a stable, nuclear family environment in which children can be raised" (Hayward & Yar, 2006, p. 11). According to Gary, students have a third obligation – that of being presentable to society, without shocking anyone with their appearance. This is essentially the same description attributed to children and parents by Paul as well.

Diane, another participant, seems to share his views, as she divides Maltese society in two – those who live a 'normal' family life, and the chavs, who have a souped up car (karozza minn dawn l-armati) and don't care about anything. Gary's descriptions of the students and Diane's image of the non-desirables, provide an embodied dimension of building the internal other, the Maltese who forms part of a subculture frowned upon by the dominant groups in society. These are the Maltese who are citizens, but are seen as outsiders, who are of little worth due to their low social position.

Another point to note is the language used by Gary as compared to that used by Frank, above. In terms of social class, they are speaking about the same group. The difference lies in

the construction of the group. It seems that Frank understands how social and economic structures construct the underclass, while Gary considers their choices and tastes of the lower class as 'conscious' choices, as if they had other roads to travel, which they rejected and have thus chosen the 'chav life'. His depiction of the students, confirms that Gary considers that students as not having the cultural capital to be part of society. Nevertheless, in other parts of the interview he does say that he tells the students that they can be different if they choose to because "there is a lot of help and means" (hawn ħafna għajjnuna u anke mezzi), thus confirming his belief that the life they live is a conscious choice.

## **5.5. Concluding comments**

Although not representative of the whole teacher community, educators depicted Maltese society as complex and diverse. The participants painted a picture in words that showed many different constructions of Malta. The only issue on which all educators were in agreement was the environment, possibly because its destruction touched upon their lives directly; it was a clear and straightforward issue most of the time. The same cannot be said where societal issues were concerned. Engaging with social diversity requires knowledge and the ability to take on a critical stance; it requires one to be open to new ideas, to empathise and at times unlearn and relearn, especially those essentialist ideas of who people are and how they behave. It requires a reading of society that challenges everyday common sense knowledge. Participants did not construct social diversity within Maltese society in a similar manner. Consequently, they provided accounts which at times were contradictory and contrasting, attesting to the complexity of a society which is in full transformation.

Educators spoke of societal changes in norms, in demography, in religious allegiance and in ways of thinking and being. The fact that Maltese society is being transformed from a predominantly monocultural and mono-ethnic society dominated by the Catholic Church, into

a pluralistic society enjoying more civil liberties, has created a sense of apprehension and loss in some of the participants. The educators who displayed feelings of apprehension and loss were those who tended to be more inclined towards the preservation of traditions and a more conservative way of life. For them, social diversity was a threat to the familiar and depicted as if social change would erase Maltese identity.

The participants constructed Maltese society as replete with diversity. Significantly, this diversity was drawn out primarily from within the Maltese community itself. This observation is rendered more meaningful, considering the impression of homogeneity as stated above. The participants construct the idea of being Maltese according to their own cultural baggage and experiences, as well as their disposition to diversity. Indeed, the different other is often a construct based on educators' ideas of who they are, consequently rendering as outsiders those who challenge their constructions of Maltese identity. The findings indicate that since educators' constructions of Maltese society differ, so do their constructions of the other, whether the other is Maltese or not. A clear example is how the constructions of the people hailing from the lower strata of society, often referred to in the vernacular as "ħamalli" (chavs) are understood by educators like Gary, in contrast to educators like Frank. As can be seen a similar notion of diversity takes on different meanings depending on how educators engage with it. Moreover, Fabienne pointed out that there is a hierarchy in the process of othering, where, for example, someone who is gay speaks against refugees. Fabienne is critical of those who are hyper-marginalised social groups themselves, but still appropriate hegemonic discourse instead of supporting other minorities in claiming their rights. Indeed, the different other is often a construct based on educators' ideas of who they are, consequently rendering as outsiders those who challenge their constructions of Maltese identity. That is, in order to protect what they construe as their identity, they persist in othering others.

Educators speak of a society which has become heterogeneous in a relatively short span of time, and some of them seem to be unable to accept and understand these sudden changes. For this reason, they see issues such as single parent households, same sex parents or reconstituted families as signs of declining values, of a society that is losing its moral compass. As a result, these families are positioned as other, since they do not fall within the imagined norm of some of the educators. The ways in which educators pathologise these families, including the children, indicate their uneasiness when facing such situations, because they do not have the language to articulate and make sense of the changes that are taking place.

This behaviour is not limited to different constructs of family, but is also transposed to other areas of social diversity. Many expressed uncertainty as to how they are to make sense of a changing society. They could not find the words to express their deepest feelings about learning to live in a society which does not see the Church as the beacon of guidance any more. Thus, in their confusion they turned on Muslims and marked them as a threat to religion and Maltese identity. On the other hand, other educators saw the Church as the threat to their identity, and considered its hegemony as the reason for their own othering. Unable to understand that migration was an effect of globalisation, some of the educators identified migrants as trespassers, whose presence endangered Maltese culture and tradition. On the other hand, other educators did not consider them as other, but rather expressed the possibility of living together.

A primary reading of the data would give one the impression that educators are describing Maltese society as a society which is experiencing a crisis of identity provoked by the radical changes that it is going through. A deeper reading would show, how many educators, although not all, have difficulty in articulating and in making sense of these

changes. They are finding it difficult to assimilate these new constructions into their schema of how Maltese society should be organised. The more difficulty they encounter, the easier it would be to regard social diversity in a negative light, as something to fear rather than to embrace. In the next chapter I will analyse how educators position themselves and their students within Maltese society, which will provide another perspective on how educators construct social diversity.

# Chapter 6

## Educators' positionings in Maltese society

### 6.0. Introduction

This data chapter speaks of the multifaceted dimensions of space in which educators locate themselves and their students. Educators' perceptions of social diversity are shaped by the multiplicity of contexts to which they belong. This chapter, thus, explores how educators position themselves in relation to Maltese society, and how their social identity, which incorporates social, structural and cultural contexts and roles, relates to conceptions of plurality and diversity. Taking into account educators' intersectionalities, the aim of the chapter is also about understanding how teachers locate themselves in terms of their political engagement. In order to reach this aim, I asked the participants to identify backdrops in front of which they would choose to be photographed, and another one they would definitely not choose. I also asked them to choose a backdrop for their students' photograph. An additional question was whether they were active in any social groups, as this would possibly be an indication of their political and social engagement, and thus bear on the particular spaces they set for themselves and their students. It must be noted that although the participants knew that this thesis was about social diversity, these questions were asked early during the interview, when we had not discussed issues pertaining to diversity. I felt that if I had asked

these questions at a later stage of the interview, when social diversity issues were addressed, educators might feel inclined to reply in ways that would not reflect their true feelings, but rather they would say things they thought or assumed I wanted to hear. For this reason, some of the replies given seem to be totally disconnected from the subject under study. This disconnection could also be interpreted as a sign of detachment of the participants from issues they deem pertaining to the other. Very few of the participants referred to social diversity directly; nevertheless their replies in positioning themselves and their students reflected their beliefs regarding different aspects of this diversity.

### **6.1. The multifaceted dimensions of space**

I asked educators to situate themselves in geographical, cultural and social spaces, which carry their personal definition of what it means to 'be Maltese'. It was not only the physical space that interested me, but more so the symbolic meanings attached to the locations which they chose. As people have an attachment to their land and culture, they attribute meaning to these spaces which become part of their identity. For this reason I felt that the questions chosen were a good means to capture the meaning educators give to spaces, and the deeper meanings that illustrate how they position themselves in the overlapping and intertwined contexts of intersectional identities. Some of the chosen spaces, alongside commentary about the chosen locations, belied the participants' declared political and social engagement, even to the extent of dissociating themselves from the human, social and environmental tragedies that are taking place. Other spaces chosen by the participants were a reflection of their social or environmental commitment. Participants positioned themselves against backdrops which represented either their passions, their hobbies or else were a reflection of their inner self. The backdrops they chose comprised of natural beauty, historical places and Maltese traditions. Albeit, similar, these spaces were interpreted

differently by the participants. In contrast, the non-desirable backdrops, which were nearly all the same: images of urbanisation and destruction of the natural landscape. These provided a more direct message about educators' concerns about the environment.

### 6.1.1. Geographic spaces – locations of dissociation, identity and political engagement



*Figure 8: Rough Seas, Qbajjar, Gozo*  
*Source: Author's collection (2017)*

Rocky sea shores and beaches are common in Malta. Unlike sandy beaches, where the sea and sand seem to gently merge, this picture depicts a more violent relationship between the sea and the rocks. The latter break the waves, prohibiting them from going on shore. This picture elicits an imagery of separation of territory, and reminds one of the plight of immigrants, who after crossing the Mediterranean, they reach land, to find that the separation persists in the “us” and “them” mentality of the islanders.



*Figure 9: Sun and sea, Għajn Tuffieħa, Malta*  
*Source: Author's Collection (2016)*

In contrast with Figure 8, this scene draws out the tranquillity of the moment, depicted in the calm sea and sunset. It can be considered romantic imagery, almost picture perfect. The location however, is well known for the dangerous undercurrents, and thus this imagery lulls one into a false sense of security.

A number of the participants positioned themselves against the backdrop of the sea, although it held a different meaning for each of them. Considering the size of the island and the role the sea plays in the lives of Maltese people, this comes as no surprise. The sea represented recreation for some, an identity marker for others. Michael, active within a



political party and in a leadership position in an independent school, chose the sea because it relaxes him (*jagħtik mistrieħ*) even in winter, when he does not swim. He considers living on an island as an advantage (*vantaġġ kbir*), which he makes the most of as he swims and goes fishing. The imagery he provides (but cannot be used due to data protection) is similar to Figure 8. The sea is choppy, at times producing quite large waves that are broken on the rocks producing a foamy rush of water. It is a sea in which it is dangerous to swim, and yet it still instils a sense of calm and peace within Michael. It is a sea which for him does not generate any negative meanings. For Michael, the sea does not spell any controversy but is a space of recreation. This is an intriguing position when one takes into consideration that the Mediterranean is often referred to in the media as a watery grave, because it is associated with so many deaths of migrants crossing it from Africa into Europe. Given the fact that Michael is so politically active, the absence of reference to this phenomenon is even more striking.

Nadia initially chose the sea as a metaphor for her moods, describing herself as a “tranquil person” who loses her temper and gets distraught. Unlike Michael, for Nadia the rough seas do not provide a stimulus for relaxation, but just as swimming in a rough sea could be a battle for survival, Nadia sees herself battling through the daily struggles at work, as the quote below demonstrates:

Niġġieled ħafna speċjalment fejn  
jidħlu inġustizzji, anke hawnhekk . . .  
nara tifla abbużata mhux qed  
nagħmel *referral* u nieqaf. Irrid nara  
li dar-*referral* jasal; li jsir kollox.

I fight a lot especially where  
injustices are concerned. Even here  
... if I see an abused girl, I don't make  
a referral and that's it. I want to  
make sure that the referral has been  
noted; that everything is taken care  
of.

Nadia locates her quest for justice, symbolised by the rough seas, in the school and refers to her considerable agency when it comes to taking care of the students. Throughout her

interview, I did sense Nadia's heightened awareness of social justice issues. I, however, felt that she was at times selective in her advocacy. Her focus on justice is subjective, as she excludes other disadvantaged groups, such as students who have a disability, from her understanding of inclusion. Her conception of justice is affected by some of the factors identified by Törnblum (1992), such as the characteristics of the actors, the social relationship she has with the students and the socio-cultural and historical context which has formed her vision regarding students with a disability.

Michael and Nadia showed dissociation from other human, social and environmental issues associated with the sea. The sea is synonymous with the Maltese islands and is indeed a major contributor to the growth of the Maltese economy due to the tourists it attracts. Lately, it has also been the cause of major uproar due to fish-farms being put very near the shores, resulting in the destruction of marine life underneath, as well as causing many bathers to refrain from swimming due to the fatty sludge that is sometimes released when cages are cleaned. Apart from the environmental damage fish-farms cause, their consequences have been transformed into a social issue. The sea has fallen victim to capitalist greed, and those who suffer the repercussions most are those who cannot afford to spend days by the pool, either because they do not have one, or else they do not have the capital to pay for a family visit to one of the hotel pools, where one can pay for a day's stay. Various beach concessions and illegally placed deckchairs and umbrellas on public beaches have also contributed to the dwindling of rights of those who wish to enjoy a day by the sea without incurring extra expenses. Thus, the sea and the beaches have been turned from public spaces to private enterprises, to the detriment of the general public. However, none of these social issues were captured by the participants.

Another matter closely tied to the sea is migration. Years after mass migration by many Maltese, who left by boat to Australia, Canada and the United States, the tables were turned, and boats started arriving in Malta, this time with people mostly from Sub-Saharan Africa. The sea which had offered hope for those Maltese who had risked the little they had, was again a protagonist. This time, the sea landed migrants on a mostly unknown land, which held them captive for months on end. The boats ceased to arrive after an agreement, of which the contents are not publicly known, was reached between Malta's and Italy's prime ministers. Consequently, the Mediterranean keeps the land 'clean' either because these migrants lose their lives or else because they are not allowed to disembark on the island. As can be seen, the sea is neither innocent, nor neutral. It has its own narratives, and these have the ability to foster feelings of joy, pain, fear, and anger in those who live on the island.

These participants refrained from mentioning any of the issues, exhibiting detachment from a reality that might not impact their lives directly. In Michael's case, however, another reason for his dissociation might be that he is conditioned to rationalise his political party's stance, with its reluctance to accept sub-Saharan migrants. Alternatively, he could genuinely think that the policies adopted are the right ones. Thus he does not see the incongruity of associating the sea with relaxation and fun, without at least acknowledging other environmental and human concerns.

Sandra opted for the sea and sun (Figure 9) as a backdrop because for her it is synonymous with Malta. She is a returned migrant, who settled back in Malta when she was about ten years old. She said:

Il-baħar ... xi ħaġa *calming* imma tipikament Maltija, forsi xi bandiera fid-distanza, *just to make it more Maltese. Sun and sea. Jien meta naħseb f'Malta dik li naħseb, sun and sea, dejjem, għax jien niġi minn post*

The sea ... something calming but typically Maltese, perhaps a flag in the distance, just to make it more Maltese. Sun and sea. When I think of Malta, that is what comes to mind, sun and sea, always, because I come

fejn ma tantx kien hemm dawn  
l-affarijiet.

from a place where there was not  
much of these things.

Apart from the cliché of sun and sea, she adds the Maltese flag. For her, the flag symbolises patriotism (simbolu nazzjonali li jirrapreżenta l-pajjiż u l-patrijottizmu). The sea and the sun, which bring to mind warm, carefree summer days, contrast with, and hide, Sandra's deeper seated feelings of being a stranger in her homeland. Sandra insists on including the sun and the sea, noting that they were scarce in her country of birth. It seems that she wants to detach herself from her place of origin, not so much for the climate, but because Malta is the place she now calls home. During the course of the interview, she mentioned how difficult she had found it to be accepted, and how due to her status of returned migrant, given away by her accent, people regarded her as "outsider" (barranija). Therefore, I believe that her need to include the flag as a backdrop might be to prove to herself and to others that she is now 'one of them'. In her quest for belonging she dissociates from the sea as a space of displacement for those who do not belong: the migrants. I find it quite a contradictory position; being a returned migrant herself, she laments that others consider her as an outsider, but she also uses the same argument vis-à-vis other migrants, who do not have her privilege of being 'Maltese'. In other parts of the interview she commented that "we're so small, and we do not have the resources" (*we're so small* u m'għandniex ir-rizorsi) to host the African migrants, suddenly turning the tables on EU citizens who are migrating to Malta, claiming that "they have taken over" (original in English). It is interesting how her 'I' becomes 'we', given that she was the one to position herself as the stranger. Here, her use of the pronoun 'we' seems to seek a collective validation for thoughts regarding migration, as if they were not just her own. In speaking their language, she feels she can consolidate her Maltese identity. Moreover, I sense that Sandra seems to think that if there are fewer migrants, public opinion towards

them might not be so unfavourable and thus her position as a returned migrant would be perceived in a less negative light.

Sandra thinks that her migrant status renders her an ‘outsider’, but as Fabienne, who identifies as atheist and lesbian amply illustrates, even other Maltese citizens are sometimes excluded. Fabienne considers Maltese society dogmatic, where diverse social groups are not accepted as full members of society. She is aware that while legislation supports minority rights, in practice there are still hurdles that hinder acceptance and belonging. Fabienne goes as far as declaring that “I do not feel I belong here. I look forward to the day I leave” (Jien inħossni mhux posti hawn. Iğri nitlaq!). She questions citizenship ideals not on issues that are tangible such as language, but on other more covert attitudes which discriminate against those deemed different, rendering them alien and unloved. Fabienne, albeit being a Maltese citizen, born and bred on the island, still feels that she does not belong. Thus, these are two educators whose ‘diversity’ positions them on the margins, with one of them struggling to belong, and the other giving up on any idea of belonging.

Joseph, like Sandra, opted for sun and sea as a backdrop for his photo, but instead of adding the Maltese flag, he included the Maltese *dgħajsa* (water taxi) and the Qur’an. He explained his choices by saying:

Illum il-ġurnata, naħseb, sew bid-  
dħul ta’ Malta fl-Unjoni Ewropea u  
sew b’diversi *changes* oħrajn,  
naħseb illi hemm lok ta’ tibdil  
fil-*perceptions* tan-nies. Bqajna  
nżommu l-identità Maltija, però fl-  
istess ħin ma nistgħux inneħhu, *we*  
*cannot deny* illi dħalna fl-Unjoni  
Ewropea, *we are influenced by*  
*European cultures*. Malta qiegħda  
bejn l-Ewropa ġeografikament, u  
bejn il-pajjiżi Għarab. Jigifieri  
fl-istess ħin irridu nagħtu kas  
l-influwenza tal-pajjiżi Għarab, kif

Nowadays, I think, both due to  
Malta’s accession to the European  
Union and to other changes, there is  
the possibility for a change in  
people’s perceptions. We have kept  
the Maltese identity, but at the same  
time we cannot deny that we are  
part of the European Union, and we  
are influenced by European cultures.  
Malta is geographically between  
Europe and Arab countries,  
Therefore, we have to take note of  
the influence of Arab countries, as

ukoll il-kunċett ta' *migration*  
importanti ħafna.

well as the concept of migration,  
which is very important.

Joseph's positioning of himself as 'in-between' Europe and North Africa, is a reflection of how Maltese society is constructed by some of the participants, as seen in Chapter 5. Although he does not associate the sea with the migrants' crossings, he acknowledges that migration impacts society. Joseph does not see Maltese identity as being threatened by European and Arab cultures, but he shows understanding that when cultures meet they mutually influence each other, resulting in a hybrid culture (Burke, 2009). However, "we have to take note of the influence of Arab countries" hints at the resistance of the Maltese towards acknowledging the impact Arab culture has had on them. Joseph's positioning stems from the context in which he works, which is often proof of the hybridity that is mentioned above. His positioning is also indicative of both his academic and professional background. He is a member of various international academic organisations that focus on multicultural education. Joseph is also the only one among the participants whose reference to migration is positive, showing his sensitivity towards a society that is changing and the role he plays in it as an educator in a school which is replete with cultural diversity. What I find particularly interesting is that Michael and Joseph work in the same school, with its particular features,<sup>17</sup> both of them chose the sea as background, but the way in which they position themselves is totally different.

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<sup>17</sup> Mentioning the particularities of the school in which Joseph and Michael work, would break the anonymity clause.



Figure 10: Spinola Bay, St. Julians, Malta

Source: [www.alamy.com](http://www.alamy.com)(n.d.)

The picture shows many traditional *kajjik* (small fishing boats) which are scattered around the bay, proving how popular it used to be with fishermen. Some of the small boathouses along the shore, in which the boats used to be stored for the winter, have now been transformed into restaurants. At the far end, one can see blocks of flats, which by time, took over the whole area, rendering it busy and heavy with traffic.



Figure 11: St. Thomas Bay, Marsascula, Malta

Source: [www.beachesinmalta.com](http://www.beachesinmalta.com) (n.d.)

St. Thomas Bay is one of the most popular beaches in the South of the island, and in summer, it is usually heavily populated with people from Zejtun and Marsascula. In the background one can see a shanty town, which was built illegally over time. The small buildings serve as summer houses for people who mostly hail from Zejtun and nearby areas. Since this is a working class area, one does not find beach concessions, where one pays for staying inside a private beach area.

Ruth mentions two backdrops: St Julian's and St Thomas Bay.<sup>18</sup> Both are sea side villages, the first one in the north of Malta, the other in the south. She provides an alternative context for her choice:

Bdejt b'San Ġiljan għax għaliya San Tumas huwa s-San Ġiljan tal-antik kif niftakru jien, tletin sena ilu. Allura dik tassoċjaha ħafna mal-antik. Barra minn hekk, jien sa dan l-aħħar

I started with St Julian's because for me, St Thomas Bay is the St Julian's of the past, as I remember it thirty years ago. Therefore I associate it with the past. Moreover, up until

<sup>18</sup> St Thomas Bay is located within the confines of Marsascula (Wied il-Għajn in Maltese).

sentejn, tlieta ilu, lanqas qatt ma kont immur lejn Wied il-Għajn u lejn is-*south* ta' Malta. Imma dan l-aħħar tbiddilt u tbiddu l-ħbieb tiegħi.

these last two or three years, I never went to Marsascala and the south of Malta. But I have recently changed, and so has my circle of friends.

Ruth's two backdrops are synonymous with who she had been and who she has become, thus like Sandra and Joseph, the sea represents an 'identity space', a location that speaks about who she is. The two seaside villages are usually perceived to be inhabited by people of different social classes – generally middle class in the north to those of a lower socio-economic status in the south. The transition she experienced, brought about by many personal issues drove her to abandon her snobbishness and prejudices (kont nippretendiha u kelli xi preġudizzji). Ruth claimed that she had been a superficial person, worried about her image and how others saw her. Her preference for the south of Malta seems to be symbolic, as Marsascala reminds Ruth of St. Julian's of the past, of her childhood and perhaps, in view of what she says above, it takes her back to a time when she lived a simpler life, which reflected her roots and was true to who she really was. She feels that a backdrop of St Thomas Bay, signifies her lifestyle change, to be more true to herself and her principles, driven by her interest in politics and social justice issues.

Ruth's positioning in the south, within a working class community is consistent with her choice of a non-desirable backdrop. She claims that she would definitely disregard the possibility of taking a photo in front of what she refers to as WASPs ("White Anglo-Saxon People" [sic]):

għax dawk veru ma nirrelatax magħhom . . . WASP ikun bniedem abjad, li forsi l-ġenituri tiegħu, l-antenati tiegħu jaħsbu li huma bojod . . . middle class, normalment ikunu kattoliċi, dawk in-nies veru ma nassoċjjax ruħi magħhom . . . xi backdrop tagħhom warajja jkunu

because I do not relate to them . . . WASP is a white person, perhaps one's parents, one's ancestors thought they were white . . . middle class, normally they would be catholic, these are people I really do not identify with... their backdrop behind me, they would be all flexing their muscles.



kollha tipo qegħdin joħorġu  
l-muskoli.

What she says here is practically a continuation of what she had replied to the first question of choice of backdrop as well as her vision of Maltese society. Ruth depicts her interpretation of WASP as being white, Catholic and fake and superficial, symbolised in the flexing of the muscles. For Ruth, such people belong to her past, when she shared some characteristics, mainly the fake and superficial, with them. She also qualifies 'white' as being those 'who think they are white', a very clear gibe at those Maltese who do not acknowledge the roots of their identity. Just as she chose St Thomas Bay over St Julian's, she now further emphasises her preference for the working class by explicitly saying that she does not belong to an environment where WASPs are present. Although Ruth's status as an educator concedes her certain prestige, and Weberian class theory positions her as a white collar worker, she still prefers to locate herself within the working class. This could be due to her family's humble roots, as well as how she sees herself in terms of social and cultural capital.



*Figure 12: Id-Dwejra, Gozo*  
*Source: Mark (participant) (2014)*

One cannot help but contrast the majestic cliffs with the tiny illegally built summer houses. These are an intrusion on the picturesque scenery. There is a clash in the aesthetic between the perfection created by nature and the seemingly haphazard buildings, which have claimed the space as their own.

Mark chose Dwejra, a landmark for the Gozitan island due to natural rock formations that were referred to as 'It-Tieqa' (the Azure Window), which collapsed on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, 2017 after severe storms. The main reason he chose this location is because it,

taffaxxinani bħala dehra u anke tant hemm biodiversità u tant hemm *geological structures* partikolari.

fascinates me by the way it looks and there is so much biodiversity and so many particular geological structures.

Mark is active in the school's EkoSkola<sup>19</sup> project, and he is also a Biology teacher. The reasons he gives for the backdrop he chooses point towards his role as a teacher as well as his interest in environmental issues. During the interview he also said that he took the students to Dwejra every year and this further pushes towards the idea that Mark's professional identity overlaps with his personal one. He wishes to instil in his students a love both for the subject he teaches as well as for the environment. What I find intriguing is how Mark did not bring up the issue of the illegal buildings, visible in the photo. They should have been of serious concern, considering the geological importance and biodiversity of the area. The location chosen, where nature and human impact live side by side, indicates an ambiguity in Mark's position, who spoke so vociferously against the building industry. He is perhaps resigned to the fact that he can do nothing; that as a private citizen, he is no match to the culture of impunity that pervades the illegal boathouse sector.



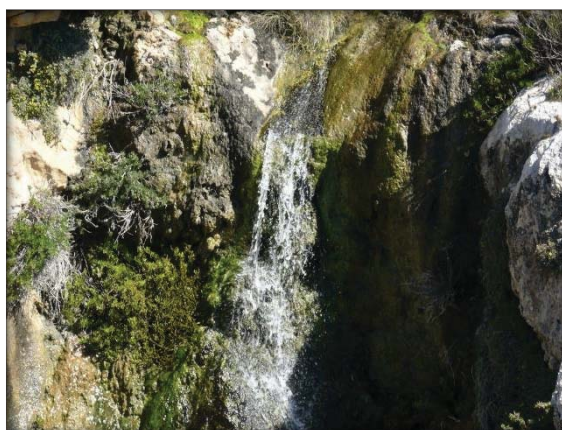
*Figure 13: Countyside, Lunzjata, Rabat, Malta  
Source: Author's collection (2017)*

This is one of the few areas which are still mostly untouched by developers. Farmers still work on the fields and one could walk in the valley, and meet very few people, something of a rarity in the most densely populated country in Europe. As one walks along the pathways, one is able to see pieces of furniture or domestic construction waste scattered around, which blemishes the otherwise peaceful surroundings.

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<sup>19</sup> EkoSkola is a project which schools can participate in voluntarily. The project aims at empowering students in sustainable decision making and action.

A few educators chose the countryside or the natural environment as a backdrop. Two of the participants' reasons for choosing such a backdrop were "because it is nice" (Claudine) and because it instils a sense of "serenity" and "peacefulness" (Gladys). Maria chose the natural environment because it is so scarce (*għax neqsin minnhom*). Just like Michael, these participants did not engage in the social and political discourse that surrounds the Maltese countryside. They did not mention the controversies that surround the 'peaceful' and 'serene' pockets of countryside; issues such as illegal hunting and poaching, construction works in Outside Development Zones (ODZ), the constant dumping of domestic and construction waste in the countryside, the lack of water which makes crops very expensive, sometimes prohibitive to the average earning family, and the impact on agriculture as more Maltese opt to buy imported fruit and vegetables, which are cheaper. Similarly to some of the educators who chose the sea, these educators provide a sanitised illustration of their chosen backdrop, bereft of the political, social and environmental concerns that should inform their pedagogical practices.



*Figure 14: Waterfall, Miġra l-Ferħa, Malta*

*Source: Leslie Vella (n.d.)*

Considering how scarce and precious water is in Malta, it is truly a sight to behold to see a waterfall, small as it may be. Since the area is not easily accessible, it has remained mostly untouched by human activity.

There were educators whose chosen backdrop reflected their passion and active engagement in issues pertaining to the environment. Gary, a geography teacher, chose a

*waterfall* sabiħa ħafna Miġra l-Ferħa, għandek *drop* ta' ħames sulari. Għandi ritratti magħha . . . Warajha m'hemmx siġra imma sabiħ ħafna, speċjalment fix-xitwa tkun sabiħa.

very beautiful waterfall at Miġra l-Ferħa, there's a five storey drop. I have a photograph with it . . . There aren't any trees behind it but it's very beautiful, in winter it is especially beautiful.

Gary locates himself at a space of particular beauty and uniqueness, since that is the only waterfall that exists on the island. Moreover, its location, although accessible, is mostly frequented by trekkers or those practicing rock climbing, making it somewhat exclusive. Taking into perspective the way in which he positioned his students, and how he expresses his ideas about Other in Maltese society, I see Gary as considering himself as more entitled than those who have not reached his 'ideals' of being Maltese and being a student. Miġra l-Ferħa is also devoid of buildings, making it one of the few open spaces which are yet not inhabited and despoiled by human presence. Therefore, Gary confirms his environmental commitment and his dislike and anger towards indiscriminate construction, as expressed during the interview.

In direct contrast to Gary, Diane chose:

Xeba' bini, għax bl-ammont ta' bini li hawn hawn Malta, ma tantx naħseb li xi veduta tkun qed turi r-realtà ta' Malta.

A mass of buildings, as with the amount of buildings that there are in Malta, I don't really think that any view would show Malta's reality.

Diane cannot even envisage a serene or naturally beautiful landmark due to the excessive construction going on. For Diane, it seems that by considering a natural landmark, one would be in denial of reality. Diane expresses a sense of frustration and helplessness as she locates herself in front of buildings, showing how powerless (or indifferent) the citizen is when confronted with the strong construction lobby. Thus, Diane's most pressing concern seems to be, the effect of human action upon the environment. Nevertheless, she seems to be reluctant to show her concern publicly by participating in actions that would bring environmental issues

to the forefront. She is not a member of any environmental NGOs or any other environment watchdog, even though a number of them are quite vocal in the public sphere.

Gary's and Diane's anger toward the dearth of concern for the environment was felt by several of the participants, who rejected backdrops of the hyper urbanisation of Sliema and other places around Malta. The primary sites out of bounds for the participants were the "ugly buildings", "Buġibba coast", "post mibni ħafna b'hal Tas-Sliema" (a built up locality like Sliema), "Sliema, full of apartments and flats, and cranes" mainly due to the fact that "il-kostruzzjoni qerdet kull m'hawn" (construction has destroyed everywhere). However, it is not only the uglification of the country that bothers some of the participants. Fabienne points out two issues that are tied to indiscriminate construction. She says:

Ġewni f'moħħi dawn il-ħafna flats li telgħu, ħafna minnhom huma gabubi u telgħu b'mod random għall-aħħar. M'hemmx pjanar, allura ċertu faċċati li qabel kienu verament sbieħ . . . Naraha li Malta qisu kien hemm tradizzjoni kbira li nħobbu ħafna lil Malta, ħafna, ħafna, ħafna, ħafna, imma mbagħad meta niġu biex nieħdu ħsiebha jew meta tiġi biex tieħu ħsieb l-arkitettura jew il-*heritage*, fhimt? Dawn l-affarijiet qishom għadhom ma daħlux fil-ħsieb ta' dak li jkun, li isma', il-faċċata għandha storja wkoll.

What comes to mind is those many flats that are mushrooming, many of them tiny, and that have been built in a totally random manner. There is no planning, so the facades that were beautiful . . . As I see it, in Malta there was this huge tradition of loving Malta, lots, lots, lots, lots, but then when it comes to caring for it, or when it comes to taking care of its architecture or heritage... do you understand? It's as if these things have not yet crossed one's mind that, listen, that façade has a history as well.



*Figure 15: Tower Road, Sliema, Malta.  
Top photo, before development (1950s) and bottom photo after development (1990s)  
Source: Alex Zammit (2018)*

The photograph above shows the symmetrically built Victorian townhouses, which were replaced by high rise apartments. Thus, from an aesthetically pleasing stretch of road, Tower Road, Sliema has been transformed into a huge mass of concrete and stone, with no aesthetic value. It is a monument to human greed.

When Fabienne speaks of facades, she is referring to houses, like those in Sliema, which had particular architecture (Leone Ganado, 2016) and which are being demolished to build flats instead. She comments on the irony of how many Maltese claim to love their country but then do not give due consideration to architectural heritage. The above photo shows how the symmetry of the old houses was destroyed to build apartments. There are also social implications tied to these ‘modern’ blocks of flats. She refers to them as ‘gabubi’ and later on ‘kerrejja’. The latter term was given to those tenement blocks where a family lived in a room or two, there was only one communal toilet and no bathroom. Fabienne does not imply that the new flats are built without bathrooms or with one room only. She is referring, however, to the size of the apartment and the rooms, which are usually very small. For this reason, she says that:

M’añniex nirrealizzaw li l-ispazji, kif qed jinħolqu, kemm jaffettwaw ir-relazzjonijiet tal-Maltin, kulhadd f’xulxin.

We are not realising how much these spaces that are being created affect the relationships of the Maltese, everybody on top of each other.

Fabienne is concerned that the increase in population density due to indiscriminate building of such apartments affects social relations between neighbours as a result of the inevitable proximity. A word I feel carries a lot of meaning in the context is “tal-Maltin”, specifying that the population density problem is not due to migration, but to the greed of the Maltese who make so much money out of such developments. Further on, she reiterates that these “kerrejja” are often sold as “luxury flats”, indicating that there has been a rebranding of such buildings which used to accommodate people of low socio-economic status. Nowadays, an apartment, even a small one, costs an exorbitant sum which many cannot afford. Thus she is critical of how discourse has changed perceptions of housing options in general: what used to be seen as accommodation for those who lack financial means (in terms of size of dwelling) is now being marketed as homes fit for the middle-class and upper middle-class group. This has led to a housing crisis, as those on low income can neither afford to buy nor rent a place in which to live decently. Moreover, Carmen, a teacher of Maltese in an independent school, further explains that these flats are altering the identity of the Maltese since they have no character. Marlene describes them as “bla karattru” (soul less) and belie the colourful character of the Maltese. The uniformity of the flats renders the inhabitants anonymous, especially when compared to the period townhouses.



*Figure 16: Riviera Hotel, Marfa, Malta*

*Source: MaltaToday, 04.02.2017*

The Riviera Hotel stands alone commanding sea views from one side and countryviews from the other. Its landscaped land contrast the rocky surroundings. It is isolated, located at the Northern part of the island, as if being out of the public eye would make one forget that it is built on public land.

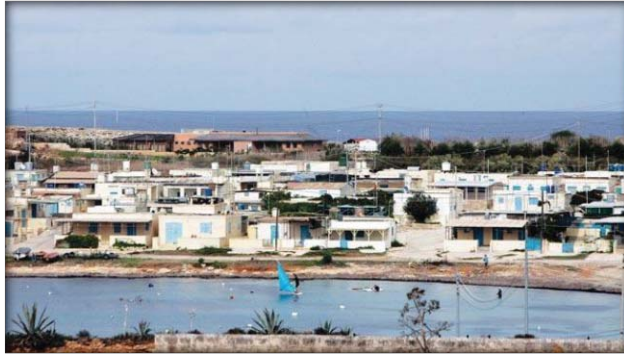


Figure 17: Armier Boathouses, Armier, Malta

Source: *The Times*, 05.01.2012

These boathouses occupy a large land mass. They have been randomly built, resulting in a maze of dwellings that resemble an impenetrable slum. The owners of the boathouses too have usurped public land for private benefit.

Steve accentuates Fabienne's arguments and develops the argument against overdevelopment further. Thus he would not opt to take a photo in front of:

Pereżempju il-boat houses tal-Armier jew erm jew xi bini, għax ovvjament il-boat houses tal-Armier hemm konnotazzjoni soċjo-ekonomika, issa ovvjament mhumiex l-uniċi *culprits*. Anqas irrid nieħu *backdrop* tar-Riviera Hotel jew ta' Montekristo; dik żgur pereżempju. Fhimt, għax naħseb imur kontra s-sens ta' *community living* jiġifieri; komunità bl-*ups and downs* tagħha, bil-kontradizzjonijiet kollha tagħha. Però fl-istess ħin imbagħad hemm, irid ikun sens ta' rispettt reċiproku u s-sens ta' rispettt lejn l-ispazju *to the other* u dawn l-eżempji li semmejtlek huma l-kontra; li jiena akkwistajt biċċa art għalija *which goes counter* għal dak li huwa komunitarju.

For example, the boat houses<sup>20</sup> at Armier, or ehm some building, because obviously, there is the socio-economic connotation around, the Armier boat houses, and obviously they are not the sole culprits. I would not opt for the Riviera Hotel or Montekristo<sup>21</sup>; that's for sure, for example. Do you understand, because I think it goes against the sense of community living; a community with its ups and downs and all its contradictions. At the same time, there needs to be a sense of reciprocal respect and a sense of respect towards the allowing space to the other, and these examples I have just mentioned are the opposite; that I have acquired a piece of land for myself, which goes counter to that which is communitarian.

<sup>20</sup> The Armier boat houses were built illegally on public land and are used in summer by their owners, who come from working class backgrounds.

<sup>21</sup> Both Riviera Hotel and Montekristo belong to a building magnate, and parts of them are built illegally on public land.



Steve's Marxist ideology is evident. His concern, apart from the damage that is being caused to the environment, is how illegal developments impinge on the rights of the community who are deprived of these spaces. His reflections illustrate the selfishness of those who steal the land, as this erodes the sense of community and the common good, which should be enjoyed by everyone, and not the select few. However, he makes a distinction between the Armier boathouses and Montekristo Estates and Riviera Hotel (same owner). He does not condone the boathouses, but recognises that at the time these were built, those who occupied them came from the working class, and this would have been their only possibility of recreation during summer, due to their limited income. On the contrary, the other two developments are the result of private enterprise, driven by the capitalist market, which denies the public free access for private gain. Figures 15 and 16 show how different the constructions are, reflecting those who stay in them. The hotel is large and beautifully landscaped; the boathouses constitute a shanty town. However, both sites have held successive governments to ransom, one by sheer economic capital and the others by the power of their vote.

Other non-desirable backdrops linked to the environment were the Magħtab landfill, random dumping sites all over the island and littering, which is endemic. Gary calls these "dnubiet tal-Maltin kollha" (sins of all Maltese), holding everybody responsible for the total disregard for the environment.

### **6.1.2. Historical spaces of exclusion and acceptance**

There were educators who opted for historical locations around Malta. These were in Valletta, a UNESCO World Heritage site, Mdina which is on the tentative list, as well as the Three Cities, whose fortifications appear on the tentative list as well. The backdrops chosen might be very similar, but educators positioned themselves differently in front of them. Three

participants chose spaces within the Three Cities, providing different reasons for their choice of backdrop.



Figure 18: Fort St. Angelo, Birgu, Malta

Source: *The Times*, 07.10.2015

A majestic view welcomes one when looking at Fort St Angelo, from the Upper Barrakka Gardens. The Fort and bastions embody all that is powerful, impenetrable and strong. The bastions seem to rise from the sea and have withstood the tests of time and of war, since the Three Cities were heavily bombarded during World War II.

Silvana spoke of the sense of pride she feels when talking about Fort St Angelo:

Għaliġa xi ħaġa ovvja, għax il-post fejn trabbejt, l-aktar li nħobb. U meta gie li noqgħod naqra l-istorja ta' Malta u hekk, tara l-Port il-Kbir, eżempju, titla' l-Barrakka hekk u tħares lejha, lejha Sant' Anġlu u hekk, jiena nħossni *proud*.

For me it's obvious, because it is the place where I was brought up, the place I love most. And when I sometimes read the history of Malta, and you see the Grand Harbour, you go to Barracca [Gardens] and you look towards it, towards St Angelo, I feel proud.

Silvana, a member of the far right group Għaqda Patrijotti Maltin, identifies with the fortifications situated in Birgu, as well and the Grand Harbour. Her pride stems from the role the fortifications played in Maltese history, mainly that of keeping outsiders away from the island. She also does not seem to realise that the pride she feels for the wars won against outsiders happened due to the island being colonised. Consequently, the wars fought during different periods were a direct result of colonisation, that is, the permanent settlement on the island of non-Maltese rulers. Moreover, the culture she fiercely protects is the product and constant reminder of the 'foreign' influence on the islands for many years. I find it therefore

ironic that during the course of the interview, Silvana mentioned foreign people in Malta quite often and even expressed her fear of the Maltese becoming “outnumbered” by foreigners. The Birgu backdrop, with its seemingly impenetrable bastions, provides the insularity Silvana feels she needs to symbolically protect Maltese society from the influx of migrants.

Silvana’s angst about the social change that has transformed Malta into a multi-cultural society can be seen in the choice of backdrop in front of which she would not pose. Silvana actually mentions two spaces – the new parliament, and Pjazza Teatru Rjal, both located at the entrance of Valletta. The parliament was designed by the famous Renzo Piano. It has received its share of criticism, mainly due to the fact that such a modern building clashes with the baroque architecture of the capital city. It is adjacent to Pjazza Teatru Rjal, an opera house that was destroyed during World War II and has now been restored as an open air theatre. Silvana’s reason for not choosing this location as a backdrop was “because it is ugly” (għax ikrah) and because the restored theatre does not do justice to how it was in its original state. When one compares all her replies regarding her views of Maltese society, the backdrops she would choose and those that she would not, as well as the backdrop she would choose for her students, one can easily see how consistent she is. Her concern is always the history and culture of the Maltese islands, and how these will be influenced by present situations. It is almost as if she fears change, especially change that would impact Maltese culture; change which is after all inevitable. Silvana was adamant that Maltese culture and traditions have to be protected and her main concern throughout the interview was that migrants would influence Maltese traditions and culture and these would be lost. Silvana seems to be worried about the changes taking place in Maltese society due to the effects of globalisation, and especially due to migration, which she perceives as having threatened her security of the known and familiar. Kinnvall (2004) suggests that, “As individuals feel vulnerable and experience existential anxiety, it is not uncommon for them to wish to reaffirm

a threatened self-identity. Any collective identity that can provide such security is a potential pole of attraction” (p. 742). These feelings of vulnerability could have incited her to join the far-right group, which now has metamorphosed in a political party.

Carmen and Marlene chose the bastions and Mdina respectively, citing similar reasons.

Carmen stated that:

It means like, that we have a rich history, like, like Malta has, although we are so small, it's such a small island, it has, it's so rich history, so different nationalities have ruled, have wanted to be here, have left, have left their mark in our island, and that's why our land is much, so our land reflects a lot of our history. (Original in English)

Carmen and Marlene opted for backdrops very similar to Silvana's but their interpretation is different. They acknowledge that Malta's culture and traditions are a result of hundreds of years of colonisation by various empires. All of them have left their mark on Maltese culture, language, traditions, and architecture. Consequently, both feel that the Maltese are a product of all these elements. Carmen, feels a certain pride that Malta has such rich history and culture, but she does not feel the need to be protective and exclusive. For Marlene and Carmen, the bastions do not represent locations of defence against 'outsiders', but are places which symbolise the possibility of different cultures (“nationalities”) existing together. Their position resonates with their general comments throughout the interview, where they acknowledge that a multi-cultural society is inevitable and we have to learn to live with others just as we had “experiences of different cultures” (esperjenzi ta' kulturi differenti – Marlene), in the past.

As opposed to Carmen and Marlene, Frank regards Mdina, as an artificial and overused cliché. According to him, such images provide idyllic backgrounds which betray the tensions and the conflicts that one becomes conscious of only when one is immersed in the texture of

a place. Therefore, even historical landmarks hold different meanings to educators. Frank's choice of The Three Cities, with all the political connotations as suggested in Chapter 5 shows he has a strong political consciousness, grounded both in history (he is a history graduate) as well as in his social activism.



*Figure 19: Cottonera Marina, Malta  
Source: Frank (participant)(2017)*

At the foreground of this photo one can get a glimpse of the Cottonera Marina, located in Birgu has contributed to the gentrification of the area. Houses and apartments which used to be rented very cheaply, have been turned into boutique hotels or luxury apartments. Others have been sold or rented out at higher prices, attracting upmarket visitors. The background is L-Isla, dominated by the Church at the top of the hill, surrounded by buildings, which are slowly being turned into luxurious spaces, commanding hefty rents and selling prices.

Frank positions himself on the left of the political spectrum and this can be observed when he speaks of certain social problems that exist in Cottonera. He recognises that the problems the inhabitants of these three cities have are created by social structures and government policies (*il-problemi soċjali li hemm ħafna drabi huma maħluqin mis-sistema*). Therefore he does not pathologise the residents as many other members of Maltese society do. The photo Frank provides shows the Cottonera Marina at the fore, and Birgu at the back. It is an image that shows how the Three Cities are becoming gentrified, a marina instead of the Drydocks; buildings which previously housed the socio-economically disadvantaged and those on the fringe of society are now being bought and turned into luxurious places, boutique hotels and rental places, slowly pushing the working class tenants out and further emphasising how the system itself creates social problems by slowly displacing a tight knit community.

Frank's and Steve's positioning in favour of the socio-economically disadvantaged and the working class can be seen to be as a result of their political engagement. Steve is active in a political party while both of them belong to an informal think tank, where discussions on social issues as well as social theories take place.

Steve was another educator who chose Birgu as a backdrop for his photograph but his reasons differ from Carmen's and Marlene's and contrast with those of Silvana. He considers the walls surrounding Birgu as offering a sense of community and a support system for the inhabitants of this town. Simultaneously, he considers:

Is-sabiñ li tiskopri x'hemm hemm barra . . . Jiġifieri qisu b'hal meta tkun ġo borma. Immaġina qiegħed ġo borma, taf kif, nista' nikkuntenta bil-*warmth* tal-kaboċċi li hemm madwari, imma fl-istess ħin jinteressani nkun naf x'hemm *beyond*.

The beauty of discovering what is outside . . . I mean, like when one is in a pot. Imagine being in a pot, you know, I could be happy with the warmth of the cabbages that are around me, but at the same time I am interested in what is beyond.

Unlike Silvana, Steve does not wish that the walls protect him from what is outside of them. On the contrary, it is he who seeks to learn and does not find the idea of going outside the walled city as threatening at all. Therefore, while acknowledging the positive influences that the walled city provides – “a sense of community” – he does not exclude the possibilities and the desire of encountering those who are outside. Consequently, while Silvana is anti-immigration Steve takes on the opposite position, as he mentions in other instances in his interview. Steve speaks figuratively about discovering what is outside the bastion walls, but his practices as a member of the leadership team of his school amply illustrate his agency in creating situations that require encounters with the other.

To further emphasise his openness to change, he uses the entrance to Valletta as a metaphor to explain the need to reconsider Maltese society.



Figure 20: Old Valletta gate (1853) (left) New Valletta entrance (2013) (right)

Source: Ian Waugh (n.d.)

The photo on the left shows the Valletta gate at the time when Malta was a British colony. The gate projects an image of a confined space, where one has barely enough space to move freely. The new Valletta entrance on the right provides a stark contrast, as it does not have a gate but a wide entrance. One could interpret the first photo as symbolising the constraints imposed on Maltese by the British during their stay on the Island. The new Valletta entrance symbolises the freedom of being the leader of one's own destiny.

Jista' jkun li għalhekk jogħgobni wkoll il-proġett tad-daħla tal-belt. L-idea ta' *walled city* hija kontradittorja u forsi għalhekk togħgobni, għax minn banda tagħti sens ta' protezzjoni, imma fl-istess ħin iġġibek in se tas-sens ta' iżolament li timbuttak 'il barra. U l-istess anka Bieb il-Belt, jogħgobni minn dak il-lat, jġifieiri . . . ġie rispettati is-sens ta' *walled city*, taf kif, u l-fortifikazzjoni, imma fl-istess ħin tar il-bieb. Allura inti ftaħt dimensjoni speċi, il-ftuħ huwa ta' dak li huwa barra jidħol ġewwa u li huwa ġewwa jrid joħroġ barra.

Perhaps that is why I like the City Gate project. The idea of a walled city is contradictory and it could be the reason why I like it, because on one hand it gives a sense of protection, but at the same time it makes you aware of a sense of isolation, that pushes you away. And I like City Gate for the same reason . . . the sense of a walled city was respected, you know, and the fortifications, but at the same time we did away with the Gate. Thus you open another dimension, sort of, the openness that what is on the outside comes in and what is in has to go out.

Steve compares the former City Gate which was the entrance to Valletta, to the new one. The capital city is surrounded by bastions, and in the past, a gate could be closed to protect those within the city walls. The claustrophobia projected by the old gate was done away with when the new entrance was built on the design of Renzo Piano. Steve uses the metaphor of the City Gate, which transformed Valletta from a self-contained city to a more exposed one to capture the changes that are happening in Maltese society. He regards them as inevitable and desirable. The walls and the gate gave a sense of protection, but they also isolated those within them; the city without a gate has led to more openness and also risk. Steve sees the openness as an opportunity to exchange ideas, to grow as a nation and he also considers the possibility of this small nation state to influence those outside its shores. Consequently, Steve

positions himself as progressive, someone who is not afraid of change, even if it brings about uncertainty. He regards Maltese identity as being shaped by what the Maltese see and observe when they take a look outside their imaginary 'walls' which, according to some, give them a unique identity that should remain untouched, an idea which Steve vehemently refutes. For Steve, ideas of homogeneity are removed when external influences are interpreted and appropriated (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225), a process which is necessary for a society to thrive.

### 6.1.3. Cultural spaces as fora that assert identity



*Figure 21: Brass band on a stand*  
*Source: kullhadd.com (2016)*

This is the stand used during St. Philip's feast in Zebbug, Malta. The musicians in uniform and the decorated stand convey the message that the village feast is a serious affair, which requires pomp and circumstance.



*Figure 22: Statue of Our Lady of Grace, Zabbar, a titular feast*  
*Source: Michelle Attard Tonna (2015)*

After 200 years, this statue of Our Lady of Grace was professionally restored in 2011. Many people visit the Zabbar sanctuary to pray in front of this statue. On the day of the feast, the statue is carried by men around the village in a procession. One cannot help but notice the richness of the detail in the statue, conveying the devotion of people towards what it represents.



David's and Paul's choices are entrenched in Maltese tradition and culture. David chose the statue of the village feast and the Church, pertaining to where he lived as a child, while Paul chose a Maltese feast, particularly "a brass band on a stand<sup>22</sup>" (*banda fuq planċier*). Both of them are active in the *fešta* circles, David as a member of a confraternity and Paul as a musician with a band club. Paul feels that the village feast is "something that pertains to the Maltese" (*xi ħaġa tal-Maltin*). This last comment denotes a certain exclusivity and possessiveness, denoting that Paul considers the *fešta* as inherent to the Maltese way of life and intrinsic to his identity. Therefore, his sense of belonging, as Maltese, is entrenched in tradition as could be amply witnessed throughout the interview. Simultaneously, David articulated this excellently when he replied that the village church and the statue (implying the cult) influenced him:

Fil-mod kif naħsibha, ċertu ideat tradizzjonali, l-importanza tal-fešta, huma mwaħħda fija.

In the way I think, certain traditional ideas, the importance of the feast, are all part of who I am.

David admits that tradition is still very strong in him, as he illustrated when he spoke about Maltese society, and how the Maltese lifestyle is changing (p. 171). These two educators share this particular aspect of their identity, that is, the religiosity and feast-related traditions. Throughout the interview, they demonstrate that religion is important for them. However, when it comes to religious diversity, their engagement is different. Paul generally shows more openness, while David is more wary, especially of Muslims. David, like Silvana, experiences what Kinvall (2004) describes as vulnerability and threats to self-identity. The reasons they feel this way are different; while Silvana feels that culture is threatened due to influx of migrants, David thinks that Catholicism is at risk due to the presence of Muslims. Such instances are

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<sup>22</sup> During village feasts, different band clubs build temporary stands on which their brass band would be able to give concerts during feast days.

indications of the complexity of teachers' intersectionalities, and capture how positionings are mediated by their beliefs and fears, among other things.

Paul further explains that the village feasts, which he loves, are also tied to social class. According to him, the most enthusiastic and dedicated contributors to the organisation of the village feasts are found "at the south of Malta ... and then in Gozo" (in-naħa t'isfel ta' Malta ... imbagħad f'Għawdex"). The south and Gozo are more rural, more parochial and the village core is usually alive with activity, with band clubs contributing in part to the life of the place. Paul, whose university education locates him as middle class, also sees himself as forming part of a group that is traditionally working class. In fact, he also mentions that professional people (lawyers and doctors) usually vie for posts in the committees of band clubs, as a stepping stone for a political career. Therefore, Paul considers himself as a 'foot soldier' in terms of his role in village feasts.



*Figure 23: St Paul's Anglican Cathedral (left) and Our Lady of Mount Carmel Basilica (right)*  
*Source: Author's collection (2017)*

These two places of worship rise out of the buildings, indicating their presence. The Cathedral's slim steeple provides a contrasting architectural form to the imposing dome of the Basilica. It is almost as if symbolically, the Catholic religion is asserting its dominating presence.

Fabienne's backdrop is very particular. She envisions taking a picture in front of the scene of Valletta as viewed from Ta' Xbiex. Her reasons are:

Togħgobni kif fil-fatt tidher li taħsibha mill-bogħod li l-knisja kattolika u l-katedral Anglikan hekk hu jidhru li mill-bogħod qisha knisja waħda imma fil-verità m'humix. U apparti hekk interessanti wkoll kif waħda għandha s-salib itwal mill-oħra, simbolu ta' isma' l-kattoliċizmu Malta huwa iżjed b'saħħtu, tipo. Allura naraha ironika u fl-istess ħin togħgobni x-xena.

I like the fact that from afar one might think that the catholic church and the Anglican cathedral are one church, when in reality they are not. And apart from that, it is interesting how one of them has a cross which is longer than the other, a symbol that listen, Catholicism in Malta is stronger, sort of. Therefore, I see it as ironic and at the same time I like the scene.

Fabienne sees the Catholic and Anglican churches as competing for space and visibility, just like other faiths try to carve a space within a hegemonised Catholic community, symbolised by the bigger cross. The Church often gives the impression that it is the nation's moral guide, and often quotes the numbers of those baptised to legitimise its hegemony. The photo shows the Catholic Church, (with the large dome), which occupies a more central and commanding presence, while the Anglican Cathedral is more peripheral to the scene. It is a picture which implies an inclusion-exclusion paradox, which is intrinsic to Maltese society. The paradox lies in the tolerance of social diversity, in this case religious beliefs, but in the reluctance to actually accept those of different faiths. The backdrop that Fabienne chose reflects her positioning vis-à-vis two particular characteristics – her atheism and her sexual orientation, which can be juxtaposed with the Cathedral to reflect the struggle for recognition and empowerment, a struggle which she is very familiar with, being an active member of an LGBTIQ NGO. Considering that Malta has become one of the top European countries where LGBTIQ rights are concerned, the paradox Fabienne expresses is the one that she still does not feel she belongs, just like the Anglican cathedral, it has its place, it is recognised but it is still peripheral to life within the neighbourhood and the city.

## 6.2. Positioning the Students

Educators' positioning of their students within Maltese society was very much in line with the ways in which they constructed Maltese society. The school they worked in influenced the positioning of their students. The students were seen as a homogeneous group by most of the educators and hence their positioning did not take into account the students' diverse identities. Some teachers positioned their students according to the latter's perceived socio-economic status, while others regarded their students as the link between the past and the future. Other educators chose the same backdrop they had chosen for themselves, perhaps an indication of their wish that their students should assimilate and become like them, or else they considered the students as their equal. In contrast, there were also educators who could not assign a backdrop, citing the students' individuality.

### 6.2.1. Open spaces



*Figure 24: Wied tal-Għejun, Gozo*

*Source: Author's collection*

By Maltese standards, this landscape is impressive. It is between Xagħra and Nadur, in Gozo and it is a vast space which is still green and unspoilt.

Open spaces and nature backdrops for students' photos were mentioned by about one fifth of the interviewed teachers. Amid all the teachers' environmental concerns, it would seem that this was their way of showing that they had hope that future generations would show a more caring attitude towards the natural environment. Paul chose a background with

trees. While he is at a loss when it comes to dealing with social change, as suggested in Chapter 5, his pedagogical approach when it comes to a more applied setting is apparent. He explains that his choice fell on trees because the school is participating in the LEAF project (Learning about forests) and they are planting a number of trees to try and instil in the students a responsibility towards the environment (niprova nrawwem fit-tfal kemm jista' jkun niehdu h'sieb l-ambjent). Consequently Paul sees his students as active citizens who can be agents of change.

His views contrast with those of Sandra who thinks that the students:

Moħħhom biss fid-drittijiet tagħhom u meta jidhlu għar-responsabbiltajiet tagħhom, dmirijiet ma jeżistux . . . u nimmaġinahom f'*backdrop* hekk jixxalaw kollha hemm, ħdejn il-baħar. Kieku jistgħu jagħmlu hekk kuljum jagħmluha, tipo m'għandhomx *aim* jew *goal* jew xi ħaġa aktar . . . nimmaġinahom koċċ *beach balls* hekk fuq il-baħar.

All they think about are their rights and when it comes to responsibilities, their duties are non-existent . . . and I imagine them in that backdrop, having fun, all of them there on the beach. If they could, they would do that every day, without any aim or goal or a wish for something more, sort of . . . I imagine them, with many beach balls on the beach.

Sandra believes that all the students are just interested in is having fun and do not care about their education at all. Sandra essentialises the students, according them all the same qualities and unlike Paul, she does not see them as possessing the ability or desire to become active citizens. On the contrary, she considers them as good for nothing; students who do not have any goals in life. While Paul does his utmost, through the LEAF project to instil a sense of responsibility in the students, Sandra does not take any part in extra-curricular activities, where she could work closer with the students and be a role model. It is ironic that she had chosen a similar backdrop for herself as a space of belonging and now she is using the space as a symbol of exclusion, because she perceives her students as not being responsible and diligent enough.

Mizieb, Buskett and the open space behind the school were the locations Fabienne chose for her students' backdrop, because these are the places where there is a little bit of greenery and space. She claims that young children and young people are not accustomed to these open spaces because:

Telgħu f'ambjent fejn *is-social networking* tagħhom huwa kollox fuq websites . . .

They have been brought up in an environment where social networking happens on websites . . .

Many students are not aware that places like Mizieb exist, unless they live in the vicinity and Fabienne is very concerned about the students' lack of knowledge, given the fact that the island is so small. She compares her youth, when social networking happened by actually going out of the house, to today's, where it has become more impersonal. She concedes that another reason that students are not knowledgeable about natural open spaces is due to how the education system works. At school, students work for the mark as that is seen as most important. If something is not in the syllabus, no one would touch it – the teacher because she does not have time, and the students because it would not be included in the exam paper. Therefore, instead of learning for learning's sake, they work for a mark and then forget everything. So with these backdrops, Fabienne wishes to place the students away from a utilitarian education into a more wholesome one, which educates the mind and the heart.

Carmen chose a valley near the school as a backdrop for the students. The independent school Carmen teaches in was built on pristine land, amid various objections by environmentalists. Sending one's children to this school requires one to be considerably well off and as expected, the school is very exclusive due to the excessive fees parents have to pay. Therefore, placing the students in such an environment is a further symbol of the privileges these students enjoy. Gary, on the other hand, places his students in a totally unprivileged

position of “ħmieġ” and “imbarazz”, as I amply elaborated in the previous section (p. 193).

However, he makes a distinction between different students.

Skont x'tip ta' student għandek; fis-sens jekk għandi studenti li kelli sentejn ilu, tajbin, mod, l-istudenti li ġie li kelli, litteralment qisek qed titkellem mal-ħajt sfond *completely* differenti.

It depends on what type of students you have; in the sense that if I have the students I had two years ago, good one, I'd choose a certain backdrop, with students I sometimes had, it's like you are literally speaking to the walls, it would be a completely different backdrop.

According to Gary, students' worth and position depend on how academically inclined they are (it-tajbin). He qualified “good” as:

Student ta' edukazzjoni tajba (mhux bilfors akkademika). L-importanti li tista' tafdahom, iġibulek rispettt u huma maturi.

Having a good education (not necessarily academic)”. The important thing is that you can trust them, they respect you and are mature.

He claims that the academic background is not important, but throughout the interview he classified the students in two distinct groups: those who were willing to learn and those who were not. Therefore, I think that how engaged the students were in class and how well they fared at school was important for Gary to decide where to place them. For those who were ‘good’ students he would choose “money, because they are interested in their career, a settled family as well” (flus, għax moħħhom fil-karriera, settled family ukoll). There is a distinctive difference in how Gary locates the students. He places those who he regards as not doing well at school, as leeches of welfare, as opposed to those who are career driven and thus are well off. The former are seen to “have kids”, as if it is a random and thoughtless act which does not make them a family, as opposed to those who are “settled”. The ‘ideal’ students will have a family, a career and make lots of money; the others will simply become a problem to society. He positions the students according to the socio-economic status he thinks

they will aspire for and attain, which is most probably informed by their present status and behaviour at school. He does not seem to perceive how his expectations of the students would impinge on his practices and how, by pathologising the students who are challenging to teach, he contributes to a self-fulfilling prophecy that sets these students on the path to failure.

Gladys opted for the metaphor of an open road, where the students are “at the beginning of the road, and in front, there is a straight, empty road” (fil-bidu tat-triq, u wara għandek triq dritta, vojta). The road is empty because students have to walk that road on their own; “they are their own future”. She also adds arrows to show the directions the children take. What strikes me is her reference to the empty road, as if the students start their journey without any baggage, and their home and school experiences have no bearing on their success. She believes that teachers and parents guide the students to choose the right directions. She acknowledges the diverse needs, abilities and inclinations of students when she says that everyone takes the path that makes one feel fulfilled. She goes on to explain that sometimes students do not find the necessary support:

Sfortunatament mhux kulhadd għandu l-opportunità jew jitwieled go familja, nistgħu ngħidu hekk, illi ħa jmexxuhom biex, jimbuttawhom biex jilħqu *the end of the road*. Anzi ħafna drabi insibu min jaqbadhom mill-flokk u jgħebbidhom lura.

Unfortunately not everyone has the opportunity, or is born in a family, for example, that will guide them, will push them to reach the end of the road. On the contrary, many times they find themselves being pulled backwards.

Although Gladys was referring to the parents, who pull their children back, she explicitly said that most of the time parents do not obstruct their children’s success on purpose, but rather because they do not know any better. She also did not essentialise parents, saying that sometimes, the parents’ educational background has no bearing on the success of the children, because some parents, aware of the disadvantages they suffered because of their lack of education, want their children to be better than them. Others, who are professionals,



might be busy and have no time for their children. As can be seen, even though she claims that children “are their own future”, she also claims that they are dependent on others to fulfil their potential. The empty road gives the impression that they have to walk on their own, with their social, economic and cultural baggage as support. She does, in fact, mention, the role the teacher plays, and insists that she always tries her best to guide the students. However, the emphasis was on the parents. There seems to be contradiction in her words. First, she says that students need support from others to succeed. She then says that they are their own future, thus considering them responsible for their success or failure. Gladys does not seem so convinced that she, as an educator, also bears responsibility for the success of her students.

A small village would have been the ideal backdrop for Nadia’s students. She refers to two particular religious feasts – Good Friday and Easter - as occasions in which the Maltese typically meet and in which she would imagine her students. She also mentions the sense of community that is usually found in small villages where people know everybody’s business and gossip about it but ultimately, their kind heartedness trumps all differences. Nadia’s picture postcard description of Maltese society is parochial and inward looking. It belies the dynamic cosmopolitan society that Malta has become. The mentioning of two feasts of significant importance in the Catholic religion connotes an identity that is intrinsically connected to a particular culture and faith, even though as a society we are becoming more secular and thus less dependent on the Church for moral guidance (Ellul, 2014). Nevertheless, the Maltese are constructed at least as cultural Catholics. Consequently, she may not regard non-Maltese and non-Catholics as intrinsically belonging due to their differences. This does not necessarily mean that Nadia does not welcome these social groups, but rather, she does not regard them as forming part of the ‘inner circle’ that makes one Maltese. I could sense this throughout the interview, with comments like “I think that if the teacher says a prayer she is not doing anything wrong because the majority are Catholic” (Jien nañseb jekk it-teacher

tgħid talba ma tagħmel xejn ħazin għax il-magħgoranza xorta huma Catholic). It seems Nadia acknowledges that non-Catholics have a place in Maltese society. At the same time, she seems to downplay questions of equity in terms of recognition and representation. In assigning Catholic students special entitlement based on their faith, she positions non-Catholics at a disadvantage, which marginalises them due to their religious identity.

### 6.2.2. The school as an enclosed space of belonging

A good number of the participants chose locations within the school grounds for the students' backdrop. Diane and Mark chose the classroom, with the latter remarking that he would have the backdrop with students sitting at their desks, with their feet in chains. They both said that realistically, they cannot imagine them otherwise. Mark gave quite an intriguing interpretation to his backdrop. He said that they are in chains because:

Ma jagħtux ħafna valur l-edukazzjoni  
. . . għalihom qegħdin hemm fuq  
sigġu, marbutin bil-ktajjen.

They do not value education much ...  
for them, they are chained to the  
chair.

Mark seems to blame the students for their unenthusiastic reception of lessons and school in general but simultaneously concedes that he imagines the students to be “frustrated” due to the fact that what they are taught is not meaningful to the students. He said that he would prefer to imagine them at Buskett, “full of mud, looking at frogs” (“kollha tajn jaraw xi żring”). Mark wishes to make teaching more relevant, in order to engage the students, because it is only then that they start learning. Diane's thoughts follow the same pattern as Mark. She shows her exasperation because she cannot even take the students out in the school grounds, as the head of school worries that parents might call and he would not be able to locate the students. She says flexibility does not exist, and students are locked in class “u aħna magħhom” (“and we are as well”). Thus she speaks of the symbolic violence exerted on students and teachers alike by school authorities and the regulations they create for the

smooth administrative running of the school. In the process they forget the need for students to explore and for teachers to be creative so that teaching and learning happen.

Joseph and Maria work in the same school and both position their students against a backdrop that is inherent to their faith and culture. Joseph said:

Żgur irid ikun hemm taħlita ta' xi ħaġa Maltija u ta' xi ħaġa [mhux Maltija mill-kultura tal-istudenti], għaliex it-tfal tagħna, ħafna minnhom huma ta' *background* parzjalment Malti u parzjalment [kultura oħra]. Jiġifieri żgur li kont ninkludi l-arma Maltija u xi ħaġa illi tgħaqqad il-pajjiżi [ta' kultura simili]. Jiġifieri *most likely* jkun il-[ktieb sagru] għax dak żgur jgħaqqad il-pajjiżi [ta' kultura simili]. U jista' jkun ukoll xi *background* ta' xi [post tat-talb] per eżempju għax ovvjament tirrappreżenta r-religjon u li hija waħda mill-*strongholds* . . . *actually* hawnhekk fl-iskola nħossuha ħafna, li jekk hemm xi ħaġa li tgħaqqad hija r-religjon . . . għax kulħadd ġej minn kulturi differenti u jekk trid titkellem fuq xi ħaġa safe, tajjeb li titkellem fuq ir-religjon. Jiġifieri *I would choose* il-[ktieb sagru] u l-bibbja per eżempju, dgħajsa Maltija jew [post tat-talb].

It would definitely be a mix of something Maltese and something [from the students' non-Maltese culture], because our children, most of them are of a partially Maltese and partially [other culture] background. For sure I would have included the Maltese coat of arms and something that unites countries [sharing a similar culture]. That means that most likely it would be the [holy book], because that unites countries [of a similar culture] for sure. And it could be a background of a [place of prayer] for example, because it obviously represents religion which is one of the strongholds . . . actually here, in the school, we are very aware of this, that if there is something that unites it is religion . . . because everyone is coming from different cultures and if you want to speak of a safe subject, it would be good to talk of religion. Therefore I would choose the [holy book] and the bible, for example, Maltese dgħajsa or [place of prayer].

Joseph chose a background for the students which is very similar to the one he chose for himself, signifying that he positions himself and the students as equals. The only difference is that for the students he chose symbols of their religion. His insistence on both Maltese symbols and those pertaining to the students' faith signify his belief that these students belong to Maltese society, even if their faith is different from that of the majority. Maria, though, locates the students as followers of a particular religion, and choosing their place of prayer as

a background because it symbolises “their culture”, locates them as primarily not Maltese. She essentialises the students, identifying their faith as the pivot of their identity. Locating them within their prayer space further emphasises Maria’s belief that the students primarily identify with their religion and not as Maltese. This contrasts with Chircop’s (2008) findings, where parents insisted that their children are Maltese who happen to have a different faith than the majority of the population. Thus, they do not subscribe to the hyphenated identity accorded to them by Joseph and Maria. Both these educators consider the school a ‘safe place’ for their students, as the school instils in them a sense of identity, whereas other schools would suppress it.

David and Marlene chose historical sites<sup>23</sup> or architectural features in their schools as backdrops. They referred to the old part of the school because it forms part of the students’ identity, and more than that:

Ngħaqquad il-lat Malti antik mal-  
 ... għax fl-aħħar mill-aħħar dawn  
 għandhom il-valuri li ġejjin mill-*area*  
 . . . valuri ta’ post li qisu, beda jeżisti  
 wara l-gwerra għax Belt il-*Hidma*<sup>24</sup>  
 ta’ wara l-gwerra mhix il-Belt  
 il-*Hidma* ta’ qabel il-gwerra.

I would be combining the ancient Maltese perspective with ... because at the end of the day, these have the values that emerged from this area ... values of a place that started to exist after the War, because Belt il-*Hidma* of after the war is not Belt il-*Hidma* prior to the war. (David)

Thus they place their students as bridges between past and future. David and Marlene consider it essential that students must know who they are by being aware of “the roots of the generations that came before” (l-għeruq tal-*generazzjonijiet* li *ġew* qabel - Marlene). Historical sites do not only provide a sense of pride, but also a sense of continuation. These two teachers show faith and hope in their students, as opposed to Gary and Sandra, even

<sup>23</sup> I did not mention the exact parts of the schools the teachers identified, as then the school and possibly the teachers would not remain anonymous.

<sup>24</sup> Fictitious name of town.

though their students, particularly David's, are from low socio-economic and sometimes deprived backgrounds. Moreover, David further emphasises the importance for the students to be conscious of their roots and of the roots of the town they live in, due to the changes that occurred over time. After WWII, Belt il-Ħidma was transformed from a bourgeois town to a town which hosted those living in poverty. It became a town replete with social problems and people who lived there were stigmatised. David wants his students to be aware of the history of the place, so that they would not be defined by its present state.

### 6.2.3. No backdrop

Ruth and Steve were the only two participants who could not provide a backdrop for their students. Steve argues:

Naħseb li nkun qed nippatronizzahom kieku ngħid irrid neħodhom b'*backdrop* partikolari, għax nibza' li l-focus ikun il-*backdrop* u mhux huma... U meta niġi biex nieħu r-ritratt tat-tfal nogħxa fil-*close ups*, jiġifieri nkun nixtieq li ritratt jimtela' bit-tfal infushom . . . Naħseb li s-sabiħ tagħhom, għax [huma] mhux jien, u jekk nitfagħhom f'dak li hu jien jispiċċaw jien. Jien nixtieq li *backdrop* u l-*foreground* ikunu huma u mhux dak illi huwa tiegħi.

I think I would be patronising them if I say I want to take a photo with a particular backdrop, because I'm afraid that the focus would be the backdrop not them... And I just love to take close up pictures of children, I mean I would like to fill the photo with the kids themselves . . . That's the beauty of it , because it is them, not me, and if I put them in that which I am, they end up like me. I would like that the backdrop and foreground are the children, and not that which represents me.

Steve shows a sense of respect towards the students and their uniqueness. He does not wish to take their photo in front of a background of his choice because that would mean that first and foremost he would be imposing his ideas and values on his students and secondly the students would become one body, their identity essentialised. On the contrary, he prefers to take close-up photos, where features are clear, thus preserving their identity and recognising their diversity. Ruth too felt that her student's characters are so different that it would be

difficult to find a backdrop that would represent everyone. These two educators go against the grain of an education system that caters for the masses and homogenises, and refuse to treat their students as if they were a whole body with a single identity. Throughout the interview, both educators constantly pointed out, without any prompting, instances when they spoke of the students as individuals, whose needs and circumstances differed from their peers'. Thus, they felt that their mode of instruction, their discipline strategies and their interactions with their students had to reflect their individuality and uniqueness.

### **6.3. Concluding comments**

The symbolic meanings educators attached to the space they chose as backdrop for their, and their students' photo, give an indication of their, and their students', positioning in Maltese society. They also provide another perspective from which to view their construction of social diversity. This chapter illustrates the complexity of the educators' identities and the diversity in the positioning of this professional grouping.

Educators invoked images of different sites and spaces around the Maltese islands, and although some chose similar sites or imagery, these took on different meanings through the interpretation they gave. The participants extended symbolic meanings to cultural, geographical and social spaces wherein they located themselves as Maltese. There were instances where albeit their similar positioning, this was often mediated by undercurrents that are produced by other roles the participants have in society, as well as by their beliefs about particularities of social diversity.

The participants who had strong views on equity and social justice were more likely to take positions which reflected their political activism. They showed the ability to deconstruct particular situations in order to identify the root cause of the problems rather than position themselves against the marginalised group. For example, although quite a few educators

chose Birgu as a backdrop, the symbolic meanings they gave to the location, illustrated their different and contrasting positionings. Two of the participants considered themselves members of a diverse community and did not hesitate to acknowledge and embrace diversity both in terms of migration as well as in terms of social class. The other teacher saw the bastions as protecting her from the challenges brought about by migration. To this aim she even joined a far-right group. However, similar to Frank and Steve, she is proud of her working class roots. As can be seen, even in their positions, the intersectionalities of the teachers' identities are evident.

Some educators' positioning belied their claims of being political or social activists, providing an ambiguous disconnection between what they said they stood for in terms of activism and the position they chose, symbolised in the backdrop. They seemed to be unconsciously selective in their activism, supporting the socio-economically disadvantaged but not the migrants, against hyper development and destruction of ODZ but then still not problematising the countryside they chose for backdrop. There was always an interplay between inclusion and exclusion in terms of identity markers such as social class, ethnicity, faith, citizenship and sexual orientation. Exclusion did not comprise a blanket othering of the diverse characteristics of members of society, but it was a selective exclusion, aimed at particular groups, depending on educators' perceptions of the other. This could be evidenced when for instance Nadia elicited images of the rough sea as a metaphor of her struggles to provide the just educational entitlement her students deserved. Conversely, in positioning her students she chose a particularly exclusive setting, thus positioning her Maltese Catholic students as more privileged than others. Other educators, such as Gary, positioned themselves as privileged and through their positioning and that of the students, they engaged in discourses of inclusion and exclusion. Such positioning emphasises their limitation in

awareness of social issues, and the implications of unjust representation of those they consider undesirable.

The ambivalence demonstrated by the second group of educators morphed into detachment with the third group. There was an evident passion by educators aimed at environmental issues, with a few of them including the repercussions hyper-urbanisation has on society. This passion was scarcer where social and human issues were concerned. This gives one the impression that educators are more willing to take a position against that which affects them directly, rather than position themselves in favour of human issues which are neither popular nor directly beneficial for them. Consequently, some educators remain insensitive and perhaps unaware of the injustice committed against those on the margins of society. These educators positioned themselves in spaces that can be considered 'neutral' in that they are devoid of the human element. I find the detachment of this group bewildering due to the fact that ignoring, or not being conscious of the injustices occurring in that location, belie the political role that teaching should have. In positioning themselves as spectators, enjoying the view without 'seeing' renders these educators as the antithesis to the role of teachers as agents of change and seekers of justice.

Two of the participants positioned themselves as marginalised due to their perceived difference. They gave strikingly different symbolic locations to illustrate these differences. Sandra's location, the beach, was a metaphor for blending in, while Fabienne's was the Anglican Cathedral, symbolising her difference. During the interviews, these two teachers took different perspectives on social diversity, and through their positioning they chose to live their exclusion differently. Sandra strove to assimilate, and at the same time construct her students as outsiders. The other chose to acknowledge the exclusion, without compromising her identity.



The next chapter presents the data analysis about these educators' practices. What educators do in class and in school are informed by their constructions of Maltese society, and how they position themselves and their students. Their actions, are however, curtailed or encouraged by the ethos of the school, school and national education policies, as well as education provisions present in their particular contexts.

# Chapter 7

## Educators' practices in socially diverse schools and classrooms

### 7.0. Introduction

Research has shown that teachers bring their values and beliefs into the classroom and these impact their teaching practices and everyday encounters with students (Chircop, 2017; Merryfield, 1998; Ross, Cornett, & McCutcheon, 1992; Subedi, 2007). This chapter examines another aspect of educators' constructions of social diversity, this time through their practices in school and class. This chapter explores the rhetoric they engage in with regard to their practices in classrooms and schools. Educators' constructions of social diversity take on a new meaning once they encounter this diversity within the classroom. There were educators whose constructions of social diversity changed once this was discussed within the school context. Whilst they were accepting of diversity in society at large, inside the classroom they were more reluctant to engage in discourses of inclusion. Others were more consistent in their beliefs, indicating that they were conversant in different methodologies by which they could reach their students, or at least they made every effort to do so. On the other hand there were those who did not feel responsible for those who fell outside their 'ideal' conception of student, and thus life in the classroom and school was conducted as if the students were a

homogenous group. Social diversity in the classroom also challenged their beliefs about Others, and at times made them question the ethical nature of their position regarding diversity. Educators' practices were also influenced by their openness towards socially diverse students and what Garmon (2010) lists as self-awareness and self-reflectiveness. He regards these two abilities as important and that educators need them when working in a setting in which diversity abounds. In this regard, Gay and Kirkland (2003) note that, "teachers knowing who they are as people, understanding the contexts in which they teach, and questioning their knowledge and assumptions are as important as the mastery of techniques for instructional effectiveness" (p. 181). The participants in my study were open to varying degrees, sometimes depending on the type of social diversity at issue. Some were both self-reflective and self-aware, acknowledging their prejudices for example, and employing critical arguments. Others were much less self-reflective, regarding any arising challenge as something extraneous to their role and practices.

Some educators seemed to see their role as static, and were reluctant to, or resisted, changes in pedagogical approaches that reflected the diverse student population. This resistance stemmed from multifarious reasons, such as reform fatigue and inadequate or non-existent continuous professional development that is directed at the exceedingly dynamic classroom situation. Moreover, many educators did not consider self-initiated learning as a possibility.

The first part of this chapter engages with the ways in which the participants see themselves as educators. The second section focuses on their practices.

### **7.1. Being an educator in a context of diversity**

The interviews demonstrate that all the educators see themselves as good teachers or members of the SMT, citing qualities such as "upbeat", "strict", "patient" and "a role model".

Some also mentioned what they needed to improve, such as “time management”. They said that they try to use different teaching methods and resources to engage their students and make their lessons interesting. It was evident that the participants were content in their chosen profession, except for one, Ruth. She was unhappy because the institution in which she worked insisted on constant “surveillance” of teachers and students and thus she felt she was not trusted. Carmen also expressed some discontent, due to the fact that her school focuses solely on academic credentials. Apart from these general indications of how educators see themselves, when they elaborated on how they think and feel about being a teacher, their conceptualisations differed, although the ‘caring’ concept was always present. The participants’ responses were very similar to the findings of the study by Äärelä, Määttä and Uusiautti (2016). For instance, Marlene said,

Jiena nħossni li mat-tfal li huma *motivated to learn* inħossni li jiena *teacher* tajba anke jekk huma jkunu batuti akkademikament, infatti fl-O’Level kelli studenti li jien kont qed naħseb li huma m’ħumiex sa jgħaddu u għaddew . . . *and I was so happy*. Però bħala *teacher* għadni s’issa ma sibtx mod kif nimmotivahom - *to get students on board*. Dawk li ma jridux jafu, għadni ma nafx kif inħegġiġhom u f’dak is-sens ma nħossnix li jiena *teacher* tajba.

I feel that with those children who are motivated to learn, I feel I am a good teacher, even if they are academically weak. In fact, I had students who I thought were going to fail their O’Level and they passed ... and I was so happy. However, as a teacher I have not yet found means to motivate – to get students on board. I have not yet found means to instil enthusiasm in those students who do not really want to know and in that sense I do not feel I am a good teacher.

As can be seen, Marlene identifies the students as “it-tfal<sup>25</sup>” (the children), a term which displays the affection she has for her students. She shows a sense of contentment with those students who show engagement during her lessons and shows concern for those students who seem unwilling to cooperate in class. However, she does not blame and pathologise

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<sup>25</sup> “It-tfal” can be considered the equivalent of “my kids”, a term many teachers use to refer to their students.

them. On the contrary, she feels it is her responsibility to inspire students and encourage them to learn, and in this respect she feels she is failing. She questions her practices and acknowledges her limitations through exercises of self-reflection. To address these limitations she admits that she attends courses and conferences, which are self-financed. At a later stage of the interview, she said that those students who really show no intention of cooperating with the teachers and school authorities, should be sent to a boot camp. To be fair, she was talking about those students who cause trouble, never do their work and are regular absentees. It seems that her frustration makes her feel at a loss, unable to cope with the idea that these are students who she does not seem to be able to connect with and teach.

Many of the participants were keen on giving the students voice. Claudine and Gary claimed that in the classroom they were not only teachers but learners as well because they did learn a lot from the students, in Gary's words, "even the weakest ones". Thus, they acknowledge that even those who fall outside the realm of the ideal student, have the possibility and ability to contribute towards their and others' learning. Paul, on the other hand said that he:

Niprova nisma' aktar milli ngħid . . .  
nagħti vuċi lill-istudenti . . . ninzel  
għal-livell tagħhom.

I try to listen more than I speak . . . I  
give the students voice . . . I go down  
to their level.

Paul uses different strategies to connect with the students. He recognises the importance of being present in the students' lives not just during the lesson but throughout the day. In fact, he conducts various extra-curricular activities and he says that it is at these informal meetings that the students usually open up about their struggles. David claims to "teach students not subjects", thus his primary interest is also the well-being of the students, rather than on the completion of the syllabi. These are examples of educators who see their role as going beyond the teaching of a subject and the attainment of good grades. They prioritise opportunities for

students to be heard. However in David's case, I was given the impression that he felt that since most of the students come from a 'deprived' background (revealed during the interview), there was no need to focus on the syllabus, further limiting the students' possibility of acquiring a recognised qualification.

Sandra, on the other hand, spoke about democracy in the classroom, and how she allows space for students' voice:

Niprova nuża metodi ġodda u niprova nbiddel l-affarijiet, niprova nisma' anki l-opinjoni tat-tfal, niprova nħalli daqsxejn demokrazija. Jiena nħobb l-idea li inti *you know* tieġu daqsxejn l-opinjoni ta'kulħadd u imbagħad naraw x'inhil-maġġoranza ,jimxu minn hemm *you know?*

I try to use new methods and I try to change things, I try to listen to the children's opinions and leave a little democracy. I like the idea, you know, you listen to everyone's views and then we see what the majority says and we take it from there, you know?

To give students voice Sandra uses a voting system, or something similar, for decisions that are taken in class. She goes with whatever the majority votes and this shows that she operates on a shallow notion of democracy. Moreover, she is reinforcing this notion of democracy with the students she teaches, and if they do not encounter other teachers who may show them other forms of democratic participation, they would remain with the impression that democracy is tantamount to the tyranny of the majority.

Frank was the only teacher who described how he saw himself as an educator in different terms. He claimed that education is a political act, further elaborating:

B'edukazzjoni politika nifhem li hi azzjoni li tistudja f'liema ambjenti, f'liema kuntesti qed isseħħ u min huma l-persuni li qed taħdem magħhom . . . minn fejn ġejjin u x'qed iġibu magħhom. Barra minn hekk l-edukatur irid jifhem kif jaħdem il-poter u kif l-edukazzjoni tista' tkun strument ta' oppressjoni u ta'

With education as political I understand that it is an action that is aware of the environment and context in which it is happening, and who are the persons one is working with . . . where they come from and what they bring with them. Besides that, the educator has to understand how power works and how

ħolqien ta' kunsens (consent kif użata minn Gramsci) u allura jeħtieġ li l-ħin kollu jagħmel deconstruction tas-sitwazzjonijiet li qed jipparteċipa fihom. Hu u jagħmel dawn il-kunsiderazzjonijiet l-għalliem għandu joħlom x'bidliet soċjali jemmen li għandhom iseħħu, x'kunflitti għandhom jiġu miġġielda u jagħmel kontinwament għażla preferenzjali lejn il-fqar.

education could be an instrument of oppression and of creation of consent (consent as used by Gramsci). And therefore he needs to constantly deconstruct situations in which he is participating. As he is taking all these into consideration, the teacher has to dream of the social changes that should be happening, which conflicts should be challenged and continuously makes a preferential choice in favour of the poor.

Frank's left wing thinking is very evident as he speaks about what it means for him to be a teacher. A teacher should be someone who is conscious of the forces that influence education policy and practices, and thus has the ability to provide a counter discourse to the dominant one. He does not separate school life and 'lessons' from life outside school, because what happens outside has a direct bearing on school practices. Therefore, as a teacher who does not wish to see his students dominated by the hegemonic discourses he participates in a constant struggle for social justice.

The participants who form part of leadership teams in their respective schools spoke of the importance of keeping abreast of what is happening, both in the education sphere as well as in their school. The administrative workload has not allowed them to keep on teaching, something which they desired. According to Steve:

Il-kuntatt mat-tfal għalija huwa importanti wkoll. Naħseb I *keep on track* anke tal-iżviluppi fil-qasam edukattiv, taf kif anke fil-pedagoġija. U *you practice what you preach*, erm tista' taqşam anke d-diffikultajiet li jkollok anke mal-istaff tiegħek, taf kif, għax qed tħammeġ idejk speċi ta, taf kif? Jiġifieri hekk ittik laqta interessanti.

Contact with the children is important as well. I think I keep on track, even in developments in the educational sphere, you know, even in pedagogy. And you practice what you preach, ehm, you can share your difficulties with your staff, you know, because you are at grassroots, you know? It gives you an interesting perspective.

Steve considers himself a 'hands-on' administrator, who feels the need to keep on teaching even though it is not strictly his role any more. He believes that through the process of praxis, he can come to understand his teachers' and students' challenges, putting himself in a better position to identify practices which reflect the situations present in his school. As a school leader, he sees himself as a role-model, not as someone other teachers look up to, but someone who is prepared to "iħammeġ idejh" (literally dirty his hands, contextually, work at the grass roots) in order to be able to understand teachers and students better.

Nadia also speaks of constant reading and learning in order to keep abreast of developments in the educational sphere, in the social world and in technology, and a need to be "attuned to the children that are in front of you" (*attuned* ħafna mat-tfal li jkollok quddiemek) as the "baggage" that they bring with them is great. Therefore, in order to be au courant and develop professionally, "you have to go to books", implying that learning and training should be ongoing. Although Nadia considers herself to be up to date with developments in the educational sphere, she later admits that she is at a loss on what actions to take with regard to children with disabilities. This admission came about in a different context, as can be seen in the section below. However, it shows the discrepancy in the construction of 'students' with whom she feels the need to keep "attuned". Children with disabilities do not fall within the spectrum of students about whom she needs to learn more, possibly due to the fact that she perceives children with disabilities (especially those who are on the autism spectrum) as not having much possibility of being academically successful and find it difficult to interact with others socially.

An interesting point that can be made from these responses, is that educators, apart from Marlene, spoke of students as one body, without making any distinctions among them. Thus, when they were speaking about how they saw themselves as educators, many were



thinking of their performance in a class where diversity was not an issue. I came to this conclusion because once issues of social diversity were introduced, many of their replies negated the conception of the 'good teacher' in the ways in which they described themselves. The next section will further illustrate how the socially diverse environment in which they work bears upon their practices, which in turn construct students as 'different' and Other.

## **7.2. Practices**

In this section, which positions these educators as practitioners, one can note how their ideas about social diversity in schools exhibited more shared similarities, especially when they spoke about the challenges they encounter and the ways in which they addressed them. It must be said that educators' practices were often shaped and informed by school policies, MUT directives, and directions or lack of them from the Directorates for Education. Moreover, not many educators showed agency and willingness to adapt their practices to the new realities of their classrooms and schools.

### **7.2.1. Practices of exclusion**

In the majority of instances, when educators spoke about their practices vis-à-vis socially different groups, they engaged in discourses of exclusion that informed their practices. The impression they gave is that they could not, or would not, adapt their teaching methods to meet the needs of all the students in their classes. Generally, students who did not comply with the educators' notion of the ideal student, did not seem to have a place in the educators' classrooms and schools. On the one hand, they seemed to believe that separate classes and schools would be of more benefit for the students and their diverse needs. On the other hand, it was also evident that they were unable, and at times unwilling, to take up the challenges offered by classroom diversity.

### 7.2.1.1. Mixed ability classes

Educators spoke about the challenging task of teaching students of diverse abilities in the same classroom. Most of the teachers had been used to teaching streamed classes, perceiving students in the class as homogenous. Now that they had to teach in a more complex environment, they seemed to be at a loss. The participants who mentioned the 'low' ability of the students as challenging described these students as apathetic, "they don't want to do anything" (ma jridu jagħmlu xejn). Similar to the findings of Brown (2008) and Georgiou (2008) they attribute failure and the absence of engagement and interest to what happens in class to the students. At the time the interviews took place, the catchment areas for colleges had been changed. One of the implications for such a decision was that those educators who had been used to having students from particular areas, described as students 'willing to learn', had to contend with teaching students coming from lower-socio-economic and cultural strata, who would not cooperate so readily with their teachers. Claudine expressed this experience:

We were spoiled, we had very, very high grade students, very interested achievers and then it was like getting slapped. (Original in English)

Teaching students of diverse abilities is certainly a challenge. However Claudine constructs it as an act of violence on the teachers. This is due to the fact that from teaching those students who the system considered most academically willing and able, they ended up teaching students falling within a diverse range of abilities and quite often showing a resistance to life at school. Claudine does not consider arguing from another perspective – that of the act of symbolic violence on the students who had been constructed by the education system as unwilling learners and at times unteachable too. Claudine's attitude towards students perceived as being less able contrasts with her stance in face of injustices. Claudine is a very

vocal social activist, who protests against the Israeli occupation of Palestine, against racism and advocates in favour of LGBTIQ rights. It seems that when social diversity is very close to home, in this case, at the place of work, it requires a stronger commitment from educators and thus diversity is perceived as undesirable, with the only possible solution being that of exclusion. Claudine illustrates this clearly:

For me the first mistake we had done was closing down trade schools. For me trade schools are useful. Not everyone can be an academic in a country. We need good tradespeople. And we could have educated them anyway but also taught them pride in a particular trade they are interested in. And having specialised schools which are going to cater for special needs, arts, drama, sports, whatever, is much more healthy than putting everyone in the same college system. Also, having the good academic schools which we had before like even if you don't want to call them Junior Lyceum, but I think that was working out better. (Original in English)

This participant echoes what most of the others conveyed during the interview – that teaching streamed classes, if not segregated students, is way better. The reasons given were that those 'not willing to learn' would not disrupt the others, that the 'high flyers' won't be held back by the weaker students. The educators who preferred streamed classes gave little thought to how ability grouping negatively impacts students cognitively, behaviourally, emotionally and socially (Ireson & Hallam, 2009; Marsh, 2006). It seems that these educators constructed students depending on how the students' diversity negatively impacted their life as teachers or school administrators.

Nadia describes how her school was transformed from a secondary school<sup>26</sup> to a middle school, so teachers had to come to terms with teaching younger students apart from the fact that:

Issa ħa nitkellem onestament, għallmu [l-għalliema] tfal li qatt m'għaddew, *failing students, so their frame of work u of mind* hija differenti minn bħali għadni ġejja minn *Junior Lyceum*.

I'm going to be honest, they [the teachers] taught students who had never passed, failing students, so their frame of work and of mind is different than mine, who has come from a Junior Lyceum.

Nadia is very clear in her description of the challenges that she, as a member of the SMT, faces. Teachers have to alter their “frame of mind” and of practice because now they are no longer teaching “failing students”. Such a statement shows the injustice of a segregated education system, where it is accepted that teachers of students who are considered failures, provide an inferior educational experience. Nadia's matter of fact manner confirms the normalisation of this practice. Consequently, she now has to find ways to induce teachers to become more competent in teaching students who “want to learn” (li jridu). She is also concerned because:

għandna *parents* persistenti, għandna *parents* preżenti. Fejn qabel il-*parents' day* kienet tkun għal xi wħud, kellna *ninety per cent of, of parents*; fejn qabel kont tidħol fil-klassi u tagħmel x'tagħmel dan ħa jinsewh! Hawnhekk issa għandna tfal li jekk ma ttihomx il-*homework* ħa ċemplulek il-*parents*, jekk il-*lesson* forsi ma kintix *top notch* iridu jaraw għaliex ma kintix *top notch*.

we have parents who are persistent, parents who are present. Where in the past few used to come for parents' day, [now] we had ninety per cent of parents; where in the past one used to enter a classroom and whatever one does, it is going to be forgotten! Here, now we have children whose parents will call if they are not given homework, if the lesson perhaps wasn't top notch, they want to know why it wasn't top notch.

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<sup>26</sup> Prior to the 2011, state schools operated on a three-tier system. An exam was held at the end of the primary cycle. Those who passed attended a Junior Lyceum, those who failed attended an area secondary school. Those who got very low grades attended Opportunity centres. This practice was abolished with the introduction of the College system, where all students were taught in the same school.

Clearly Nadia considers the active participation of parents in the education of their children as the reason for which teachers must be constantly on their toes. While it is perhaps accepted that teachers provide sub-standard lessons to students who they consider unable to learn, and where parental presence is absent, things have to change when parents are 'demanding' a good educational experience for their children. The activation and functionalisation of 'parents' shows how these are regarded as the reason for teachers' improved engagement with students. The quote above illustrates the injustice present in schools, where student success or failure becomes self-fulfilling prophecy, depending on the teachers' perceptions of the ability of their students and the amount of pressure parents put on the school.

In contrast to Nadia, Gladys and Diane found that when parents were not interested in their children's education, this made it more difficult for them to teach. Diane said that this caused discipline problems because even when the students are sent to the Head's office, nothing happens since parents "couldn't care less". Therefore the presence or absence of parents always presents a challenging experience for teachers and impacts on their practices. Some students are constructed as problematic, both due to their behaviour and to the fact that their parents do not seem to care. The implication is that in the teachers' minds, if parents cared, the students' behaviour would automatically improve. Consequently they do not see themselves and their practices as imperative in engaging the interest of the student.

As opposed to the educators above, Steve argues that labels such as 'gifted', 'low achiever' and 'high achiever', need to be deconstructed. He continues:

*Issa iċ-challenge tagħna hija dejjem li nkunu aware minn dawn it-tip ta' market-driven messages because I do believe that the bottom line ta' ħafna mill-messaġġi li nirċievu huma, they are economically driven, taf kif. Economically qed ngħid how the economy works u l-ideologija*

Consequently our challenge is always that we are aware of these type of market-driven messages, because I do believe that the bottom line of many of the messages we receive are economically driven, you know. By economically I mean how the economy works and the ideology

tal-ekonomija *and we see through them; we'll provide a counter discourse.* Issa biex nagħmluha ħafna drabi dik tinvolvi - u din hija *ċ-challenge* li l-ħin kollu naħdmu fuqha - tinvolvi li niċċelingjaw lilna nfusna; il-preġudizzji tagħna, il-mod kif tlajna aħna; il-mod kif drajna aħna. Erm ix-xogħol li rridu nagħmlu mhuiwex neċessarjament biss mat-tfal imma x-xogħol irid jibda l-ewwel u qabel kollox magħna nfusna.

of the economy, and we see through them; we'll provide a counter discourse. To actually do that, many times it involves – and this is the challenge we must continuously work upon – challenging ourselves, our prejudices, the way in which we have been brought up, what we are used to. Ehm, the work we must do is not necessarily only with the children but first and foremost, we must start with ourselves.

Apart from the fact that Steve is self-aware, he is also conversant with theories and these inform his beliefs and practices as an educator and school administrator. Unlike many of the participants, he does not focus solely on the results of actions and decisions that are taken, but goes back to the rationale behind them. For this reason he is able to call out injustices, instead of blaming the students. That is why he encourages educators to engage in the deconstruction of labels or beliefs, so that they would be in a better position to understand the underlying assumptions and consequences. As a result there would be the possibility of a change in perspective, an acknowledgement of the injustices which such labels impart, and a shift to more inclusive practices. The activation of the social actors further confirms that Steve sees the profession as dynamic, as having agency and power to change and it does not need to depend on the actions of others to improve.

Maria recognises the injustice of streamed classes, as exemplified in her story about a student of hers, who seemed to need help, but had not been stated. However, he was a marvellous storyteller, full of imagination and impressive vocabulary. Therefore, Maria is in two minds; on the one hand she can recognise the potential of 'different' students, constructed by the education system as unpromising, or problematic due to the low marks they obtain in exams, or due to their non-conformist behaviour. These students would usually be the ones who disrupt the class or do not pay attention, thus exasperating their teacher and

their peers. In a streamed system, such students would probably inhabit the lower streams. On the other hand, Maria is aware that the student, despite his 'need for help', is very creative – a quality the education system does not give importance to. Therefore, his strengths are not recognised as worthy and only his weaknesses are the focus and concern of the system. Consequently, Maria seems to be in conflict between the option to have segregated classes according to perceived ability and a more inclusive classroom environment. I would say that, given that most educators who are presently in teaching positions have experienced the streaming system, and having learnt that teaching such classes is perceived as being less challenging, they opt for such a system, rather than move out of their comfort zones to explore more just possibilities. Thus, the idea of the other as the student who does not do well in class, could also be a construction of the educator, heavily supported by an education system that has operated the practice of streaming for years. Moreover, when the NCF (2012) was published, and consequently streaming was abolished, there was an uproar from educators and parents, all calling for streaming to be re-introduced. As a result, grouping by month of birth was introduced for Kindergarten to Year 4 classes and banding on the basis of standardised results in Maths, English and Maltese in Years 5 and 6. In middle schools students were set according to subject choice and marks obtained in the benchmark exams.

The majority of participants engaged in the normative discourse of high flyers and low achievers and underlined the difficulty of teaching these students in the same class. Despite her misgivings, Maria said that when students are taught in a mixed ability class:

Tkun qed tnaqqas mill-entitlement imma jekk l-ikbar problema fil-klassi tkun *class management*, aħjar tara kif tagħmel u twassal lit-tfal biex jagħmlu *Paper B* tal-*O'Level* milli għandek klassi li għandek emm... taħlita sħiħa u dawk li huma kapaċi għal *Paper A* minħabba l-*class management* jew nuqqas tiegħu, minħabba l-istorbju li forsi, li jaqilgħu

You would be reducing their entitlement, but if the primary problem is class management, it is better if you see what you can do so these children can sit for Paper B rather than you have a whole mix in the classroom, and those who are able to sit for Paper A, due to class management or lack of it, due to the noise that perhaps naughty children,

t-tfal għax ikun hemm minnhom li jkunu mqarbin ukoll barra li jkunu batuti, dawk tneħħilhom l-entitlement li jagħmlu Paper A li għalija hija skandlu!

apart from being slow learners, generate, you would be removing their entitlement to sit for Paper A, which is scandalous!

Maria's quote is what most of the participants more or less stated. Their concern was mostly reserved for those termed 'high achievers', passivised in Maria's quote to show them as if they are the oppressed group. Her suppression of the students in general is also indicative of the teacher's concern with certification, which supersedes the benefits that can be reaped from teaching and learning in a mixed ability setting. David, who throughout the interview genuinely showed that he cared for the students claimed that:

Isma', lit-tfal m'aħniex nippreparawhom, isma', ejja, ikkompeti ħalli tmur tajjeb! Meta neħhejna l-streaming u neħhejna l-banding kellna sitwazzjonijiet fejn fil-klassi jkollok tfal bravi ħafna u tfal ma jafux jaqraw u jiktbu. Fil-primarja kienet tinħass ħafna, b'dak it-tip ta' klassijiet, min qed ibati l-aktar? Mhux dawk li huma kapaċi jaqraw u jiktbu għax il-ħin kollu jtuhom tfal li mhumiex kapaċi biex jieħdu ħsieb?

Listen, we are not preparing [children]. Come on, compete so that you will do well! When we removed streaming and we removed banding we had situations where in the classroom you'd have very high achievers and children who cannot read and write. This was badly felt in primary. Who is suffering most in these type of classes? Isn't it those who are able to read and write because they would be constantly given weak children to take care of?

David, supports policies of exclusion because he feels that mixed ability classes are unjust on those students who tend to do very well. He objects because the 'good' students are asked by the teacher to tutor those who have not yet grasped what is being taught. From his statement it appears that just like Maria, in his desire to achieve results, David is in favour of streaming, a system which ostracises those deemed as low achievers. His statement above implies that peer tutoring disrupts the learning of the 'high achievers' rather than focusing on the sense of care that is instilled in students when they look out for each other. Later he said that "we have to prepare children for failure" because society will not keep giving them



chances. His reference to competition and the fact that the education system has to prepare certain students for failure and presumably others for success, continues to reinforce the neo-liberal agenda Steve referred to earlier. Gary agrees with David and in order to justify his position, he refers to Durkheim and says that criminals are part of society, and just like society needs them, we need those students who fail. It is significant that many of those in favour of streaming spoke of how it is easier for the teacher to cope with students in a streamed class, as if these students are homogenous who all learn and think in the same way.

Not all educators were in favour of streaming. Carmen's concern with streaming stems from her experiences with students who are weak in the Maltese language. Her school has created a system where students are grouped according to skill in a particular aspect of language, such as grammar or expression. However, she said that even if the student acquires a particular skill, such as reading, it would be difficult for him or her to join a more advanced group because the latter would have already covered parts of the syllabus which the student would have missed. She sees this as an injustice as streaming students is literally not allowing them mobility to more advanced streams. Frank stated outright that streaming is exclusionary, whereas Fabienne elaborates that, in a streamed system, the students:

Digà ma jridux jafu iżjed; digà ddejqu bis-sistema speċjalment jekk is-sistema llabeljathom li m'humiex tfal bravi . . . Ma naħsibx li hija xi ħaġa tajba. *Once* li jkollhom it-timbru jibqgħu bih. *Self-fulfilling prophecy.*

Do not really want to know; they are already fed up with the system especially if it has labelled them as students who are not intelligent . . . I do not think that it is a good thing. Once they have a label, it remains. *Self-fulfilling prophecy.*

Fabienne takes the perspective of the students othered by the system, conscious of the inequities of streaming for those placed in lower streams. This participant was perhaps one of the few who were consistent in the way they saw unjust practices and inclusivity in society

and in schools and did not allow her personal biases to overshadow her vision. In fact she had insisted that one cannot be in favour of one socially diverse group and oppress another.

### 7.2.1.2. Exclusion based on faith

Since Maltese schools operate on a Catholic ethos, religious activities in schools are taken as a matter of fact. Non-Catholic students have two choices, either participate or opt out. In schools where Ethics is offered, students attend these lessons instead of Catholic religious education (CRE). During other religious activities, they are either attended to by the Ethics teacher, or if the subject is not yet offered, students are sent near the Head's office or the library. In one school a teacher (not a participant) took it upon herself to organise activities for these students. The majority of teachers found nothing amiss with such an arrangement. The students were to a certain extent accommodated, but since school practices are imbued with religious references, they are mostly expected to assimilate. In fact, Mark said that if the students are atheist, they still had to attend Mass. Some of the schools which provided Prayer Spaces<sup>27</sup>, reserved them solely for Catholic students, further excluding students from other faiths. Gladys, a Religion teacher considered prayer spaces for Muslims as unnecessary because:

Ha ngħidlek għax għandhom jirrispettaw il-kultura li qegħdin jgħixu fiha huma. Huma għandhom l-ispazju tagħhom id-dar, għandhom il-moskea, għandhom *whatever*, jistgħu jagħmlu kollox, jekk iridu.

they have to respect the culture in which they are living. They have their own spaces at home, they have the mosque, they have whatever, they can do everything if they want.

Gladys considers Maltese culture as singular and hegemonic, and those who wish to be different must do so in private. From her statement it appears that Muslims are considered as having a different culture altogether, which should not be visible and present at school. Thus,

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<sup>27</sup> Prayer Spaces in Schools - MALTA is an initiative promoted by the Spiritual Development Unit within the Catholic Education Secretariat.

even open expressions of faith should be confined to the home and the mosque. Later, she cites the Constitution as providing legitimacy for her stance, further reinforced by her idea that Muslims cannot be Maltese, as shown in the first line of the quote. She considers them as different, pertaining to a different culture due to their faith. The activation of Muslims (“they” – “huma”) puts the responsibility of respecting society and finding places to pray on them. She does not consider her role as educator as vital in providing students with a space where equity, in terms of recognition and acceptance, is considered as essential for a student’s wholesome learning experience. Gladys was not solitary in exhibiting such an attitude and it was mostly the atheist participants who saw the injustice in such practices, perhaps due to the fact that it was a very familiar experience. As a matter of fact, Mark considered the religious presence in schools as an imposition of the dominant culture (qed timponi l-kultura tiegħek).

### **7.2.1.3. Migrant students**

Migrants were regarded as a problem, in terms of their language difficulties, culture and faith. Their lack of ability to speak and understand Maltese or English and the dearth of support for the migrants themselves as well as the teachers and the schools has created a situation where exclusion is seen as the only solution. In fact, many of the participants were of the opinion that migrants should be required to learn English before being allowed in classes. Therefore, most of them agreed with the position taken by the MUT which directed teachers not to accept migrant students in their classes unless they knew Maltese or English. Furthermore, Claudine suggests that:

they should be taken out and being provided with an alternative program until they can fit in because this is wasting the student’s life. It’s not fair 13 year olds, 14 year

olds in the peak of their education and they're coming to a different country and being a lost cause. (Original in English)

Claudine's reaction echoes the views of most of the participants. The students do not know the language so they cannot learn. Like Nadia, in the case of students with disability, the only solution Claudine sees is that students are withdrawn from school or class and provided with a separate programme. Joseph, while acknowledging that such a practice is tantamount to exclusion said that:

Jien naħseb illi t-tfal għandhom, veru tmur kontra prinċipji tal-*inclusion*, però it-tfal għandhom ikollhom kors bażiku ta' *English*, għax hemm kwistjoni ta' *inclusion* imbagħad. Kif jista' tifel ikun inkluz jekk m'hemmx lingwa illi hija *embracing*?

I think that children should, it's true it goes against the principles of inclusion, but children should have a course in basic English, because there is the issue of inclusion. How can a child be included if there is not a language which is embracing?

Just like Claudine, he sees it essential that students know basic English if they are to follow and understand lessons. In fact, in the school where he works, migrants have to attend a basic English course, taught at the school, before being transferred to mainstream classes. It is evident that there is not enough support for migrant students and teachers, and this might be one reason why teachers are so reluctant to have migrant students in their class. According to the Language Policy Profile (2015) only some of the learners are provided with instruction in Maltese as a second language, while others are placed in a Core Competence Support Programme, which usually target students who are in secondary school but have not yet mastered basic literacy and numeracy skills. Moreover, the National Literacy Strategy (2014) refers to asylum seekers and there is no mention of any particular strategy to address the needs of all migrant students. Nevertheless, there are participants who still attempt to be inclusive and they said that lessons are delivered in Maltese and sometimes they code switch for the benefit of non-Maltese students, if these understand English. Marlene said she

provided translation of notes, but in actual fact teachers are not obliged to do that. Frank sums up the situation, especially the MUT directive when he argues that it is important that students have knowledge of the language used in schools, and since the system has not yet offered any alternative practices, it would be unjust for the students to remain in class without understanding one word of what is being said. Considering how important language is for integration, it is a must that students learn English both for academic as well as social purposes. His bone of contention is the MUT directive:

Li d-direttiva hija li ma taċċettax lil xi ħadd jekk ma jirkellimx ċertu lingwa . . . Ħafna mill-immigranti jkunu diġà għaddew minn ħafna esperjenzi fejn ma ġewx aċċettati, jiġifieri li terġa tagħmel *again* dik, naraha li hija vjolenza fuqhom... Jiġifieri jiena li nixtieq hu li, cioè li nara l-possibilità hija li jkun hemm *agreement*, fis-sens... aktar ċarezza, minn min qed jieħu d-deċiżjonijiet għal xiex qed jagħmel ċertu affarijiet . . . U m'għandniex għalfejn niġu f'din is-sitwazzjoni ta' emm, kif taqbad tgħid? Li qed nieħdu dal-miżuri speċi biex niproteġu t-*teachers*, għax fl-aħħar mill-aħħar it-*teachers* huma l-aktar nies komdi fis-sitwazzjoni. Jiġifieri jekk tqabbel it-*teachers* ma' tfal immigranti, l-aktar nies dgħajfa huma l-immigranti mhux it-*teachers*. Allura nagħzel l-aktar nies li huma oppressi, jiġifieri l-għażla tiegħi preferenzjali hija għalihom. M'għandniex għalfejn nimxu *teachers* kontra immigranti hux.

That the directive instructs that one does not accept somebody if one does not speak a certain language . . . Most of the immigrants would already have had many experiences in which they had not been accepted, and to do it again, that I see it as an act of violence upon them ... I mean, what I would like is, that is, I see a possibility of an agreement, in the sense that there is more transparency by those who are taking decisions, why they are doing certain things . . . And we do not have to come to a situation like this, how shall I put it? That we are taking measures to protect teachers, because at the end of the day, teachers are the most comfortable individuals in this situation. That is, if you compare teacher with immigrants, the immigrants are the weakest and not the teachers. Therefore, my preference would be to support the most oppressed, my choice would be for the migrants. There is no need to put teachers against migrants.

Frank criticises the Directorates for Education who are ultimately responsible for the situation. Over the years, their inaction and inadequate provisions for migrants have led teachers to consider migrants as an additional burden. Frank does not see the Union's directive as just on

migrant students, who have found themselves in a situation which is not of their making. The union's directive further portrays migrant students as outsiders, and reinforces educators' perceptions of these students as *personae non gratae*, whose presence in class is undesirable. Frank's last few sentences illustrate just how the system oppresses those students who are not the 'norm'. These migrant students are constructed by the education system as burdens, and treated as such by schools. Ultimately the teachers are the ones who are expected to teach them, when they have neither the language nor the necessary expertise to do so.

Steve's view on migrant students is in direct contrast with that of many of the participants. He explains that the school does its utmost to be as diverse as possible, because it has to reflect the diversity in society. He does not speak of language difficulties when he narrates of the time when the school enrolled a student, identified as a Syrian refugee, half way through Year 11. He said:

Le għamlet *a profound effect*, taf kif, jġifieri u tinnormalizzaha. Jġifieri filwaqt li tinnormalizza, ħa nispegaha wkoll, nikkwalifikaha, mhux tinnormalizza fis-sens li taħbi l-iżvantagġ għax dak imbagħad naħseb ikun ta' ingustizzja għal min ikun qed isofri dak l-iżvantagġ imma li speċi *what's the big deal* li nkunu kollha flimkien.

No, it left a profound effect, you know, it normalises it. That means, that as it normalises, let me explain, normalises not in the sense that it hides the disadvantages, because then I think that would be an injustice for those who are suffering from this disadvantage, but sort of, what's the big deal that we are all together.

Steve, seeks the positive side of admitting a refugee child in a crucial year for the students, as they would be sitting for their Secondary Education Certificate exams (SEC). A new student in a class always creates curiosity and this would have surely distracted the students. However, he saw the grander scale of things, and considered this as an experience that would present the school with the ideal opportunity to teach empathy and solidarity, values which go beyond the academic certification the students might achieve. Moreover, he wanted to normalise the experience – not to overlook the disadvantages that this refugee child surely had, but to make

diversity seem a natural thing, as something we experienced all the time. Steve is the only school leader who spoke in favour of inclusive practices, as the others saw exclusion and assimilation as an inevitable result of the limitations of the students.

#### 7.2.1.4. Students who have a disability

During the course of the interviews, students with a disability were rarely mentioned, apart from Gladys, whose child has a learning disability. The primary reason could be that since students with a disability benefit from the services of a Learning Support Educator, teachers do not regard them as their responsibility (Mallia, 2017). Gary, who had experience in teaching in a school for children with severe disabilities, claims that mainstream schools do not have the necessary resources to cater for these students. Moreover, providing specialised resources would be considered too costly. Consequently, he considers specialised schools as the only viable option for children with severe disabilities, unless they are “Downs” who are of “high capability”. Nadia, describing challenging situations where children with disabilities or learning difficulties are concerned, proposed a segregated environment where experts in the disability the children have can look after them:

Fejn jidhlu dawn it-tip ta' tfal, għandna bżonn ikollna *mainstream schools* imma *adjacent* magħha jkun hemm emm . . . jkollna *centres* żgħar, biex anke tkun *wing* mill-iskola fejn dawn it-tfal, dawn it-tfal awtistici, *religion, social, geography they are too hard because they are too abstract*. Mela inti daww il-lessons, ħriġthom minn hemm għandek sapporti m'hemmhekk, jien dawn se jkunu magħhom għax jifhmu fl-awtizmu, jifhmu fid-Downs, jifhmu fil- . . . ma nafx, f'kull kundizzjoni li għandna, u min hu hekk, u min hekk, u min hu... Għax sirna qisna Mater Dei... iktar, nitkellem fuq mard milli nitkellem fuq tfal . . . Kemm qed

Where these type of children are concerned, we need to have mainstream schools but adjacent to them there are . . . we have small centres, even if it is a wing from the school premises, where these children, these autistic children, are withdrawn from lessons like religion, social [studies], geography, they are too hard because they are too abstract. So you withdraw them from those lessons, you have support from there. These are going to care for them because they are knowledgeable about autism, about Downs. They are knowledgeable about . . . I don't know, in every condition that we have . . . Because

ninkludhom fir-realtà . . . Għax qagħad bilqiegħda fil-klassi u għandu l-LSA tkompli miegħu, dak l-*inclusion*?

it's as if we have become Mater Dei [hospital] . . . I speak more of illnesses than about the children . . . How much are we including them in reality? . . . Just because he sat in class and has an LSA to help him out, is that inclusion?

Nadia individualizes a group of students “dawn it-tfal” and separates them from the rest of the students, and then she further classifies them as autistic and Downs in order to emphasise how different they are from the rest. She provides two reasons for this: they need ‘medical’ care, hence her reference to Mater Dei Hospital, and they are unable to understand certain subjects. Besides the fact that she chooses the medical model of disability to define the students, it is very evident that she does not have the necessary knowledge and skill to provide an inclusive school environment, further accentuated by her comment that children who are autistic cannot understand geography and other lessons, indicating a lack of understanding of the condition. I find this surprising, considering the fact that she previously said that she likes to read to keep herself updated. Therefore, the fact that she does not read about students with a disability could be an indication that she does not regard them as important enough, further confirming her politics of exclusion.

Nadia’s question at the end is almost rhetorical, illustrating the fatalistic approach taken, where excluding students is seen as the only solution and thus she engages in normalising exclusionary practices. Her ideas are contrary to Gladys’, whose conceptions of disability and inclusion are framed within her reality as a mother who has a child with disability.

### **7.2.2. Assimilative and accommodating practices**

As has been amply illustrated, educators are expected to teach in an ‘inclusive’ setting, which often translates in a class where diverse students are present. Educators have not had



much pre-service training or continuing professional development in the field of social differences, as often training is tied to content and methodology of the subject they teach. Moreover, many educators do not have the time, energy or inclination to learn about the multifarious aspects of teaching a diverse cohort of students. Thus they opt for assimilative practices, very often without being aware of the implications such practices carry. Accommodation of diverse needs is also present, albeit very superficial.

### 7.2.2.1. Assimilation of Culturally diverse students

Educators' teaching abilities were put to test in a multicultural classroom environment, as Gary and Sandra mentioned. Admitting that he has had very little teaching experience in a multi-cultural setting, Gary explained that he has learned about the problems encountered by teachers teaching these classes from his friends who teach at St. Paul's Bay. He reiterated that teachers say that they have considerable problems:

Studenti jġġieldu bejniethom, *plus* li għandek, jien naf go klassi ħames tipi ta' lingwi, t-*teacher* liema naħa ser imur? Liema lingwa ħa jsegwi? Kulturi differenti, jien naf, kultant per eżempju ġieli niċċajta! Illum noqgħod aktar attent. Mhux niċċajta bil-knisja. Il-kelma eżatta per eżempju, sejħilhom reliġjon. Illum ġol-klassijiet per eżempju jkollok żewġ Musulmani. Jien meta jgħidilhom ċajta ngħidha b'Alla, bil-budda u noqgħod niċċajta magħhom b'Mawmettu etc għaliex u l-hindu ħalli żgur ikun ilqatt ir-reliġjonijiet kollha! U din *just a joke*! Imma d-differenza hi li m'għadniex bħal qabel Maltin biss! Il-kulturi qeghdin iġibu ħafna affarijiet.

Students fighting among themselves, plus that in a class you have, I don't know, five different languages. Which way is the teacher supposed to go? Different cultures, you know, sometimes for example I joke [with the students]! Nowadays I am more careful. I don't make jokes about the Church. The correct word is religion. Nowadays, in classes you have, for example, two Muslims. When I tell them a joke, I mention God, Buddha, and I joke with them about Mawmettu<sup>28</sup> etc. because – and Hindu so as to make sure I mention all religions! And this is just a joke! But the difference is that we are not like we were in the past, Maltese only! Cultures are bringing many things.

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<sup>28</sup> The term "Mawmettu" is the corruption of the Italian Moameddo, and is considered a derogatory term by Maltese Muslims.

Gary mentions various difficulties, many of which he has not encountered, but are all related to the same theme: migrants and cultures. He feels at a loss and seems to fear the day when he is confronted with a multi-cultural classroom. There is a certain element of incoherence in the way he goes from one topic to the other, as if they are one and the same thing. It is almost as if he is panicking even thinking about this kind of diversity in the classroom, clearly demonstrating that he does not have the skills required to teach in such a diverse setting. Gary's expression of fear and panic are comparable with the findings of Ford & Quinn (2010) and He & Copper (2009), which indicate that teachers tend to express fear and anxiety when they have to work with communities significantly different from their own.

In the above account, Gary only classifies Muslims, showing that he feels uncomfortable mostly when he has Muslims in class. Gary's concern is not only pedagogical but it is more a question of attitude, of how one should behave, what one should say and how (as amplified in the 'joke' example), which underscores the absence of cultural competence. At the end he speaks of Maltese students, as if they are a homogenous group, when in his vision of Maltese society he was vociferous in his description of undesirable students.

Educators demonstrated various uncertainties when dealing with both student behaviour and issues of diversity. Prior to the quote below, Gladys had been explaining what a Religion lesson about marriage includes and then continued:

... u naħseb l-istudenti għad għandna għalfejn nippreżentawlihom id-diversità bħala problema, għax ħafna mit-tfal, per eżempju dawn refuġjati, ilhom magħhom mill-primarja, kibru magħhom, sewwa? Li jikklexxjaw, u dik naraha jiena, u għbidt l-attenzjoni ukoll, li kellna incident ta' Sirjan, kif kont qed ngħidlek, mar mess oħt wieħed, l-ieħor qallu għax aħna m'aħniex pajjiżek. Li jiena għedtlu isma',

... and I think that we still have enough reason to present diversity to the students as a problem, because many of the children, the refugees for example, they have been with them since primary, they have grown up with them, ok? They clash, and I see that, and I drew the attention of a Syrian, as I had told you, he went and touched one's sister, and he told him, because we are not your country. I told him,

I-abbuż jew jekk kien hemm abbuż, seta' ġie minn wieħed Malti. Sewwa? Jigifieri però emm il-lingwaġġ li uża s-Sirjan qisu tefa' l-ġebbla fuq saqajh, ħallik forsi mid-dar, qed jiġi mtella' b'dak il-mod. Irridu noqogħdu attenti li d-diversità ma jfarrkuhiex min għandu bżonn id-diversità.

listen, abuse, or if there was abuse, could have come from a Maltese boy. Ok? I mean, however, ehm, the language the Syrian used, sort of incriminated him, let alone that perhaps at home he is being brought up that way. We need to mindful that, quite frankly, diversity isn't destroyed by those who need it.

This quote highlights two important points. Firstly, Gladys lost an educational moment when she did not address the issue of abuse. One of her roles in the school is that of a guidance teacher and yet the relevance of the action to life at school and outside, did not seem to register in her mind. She did not regard the incident as critical, in terms of abuse and violence towards women. Thus, instead of teaching the children that abuse is never acceptable, whoever does it, irrespective of whether the person is Maltese or Syrian, she chose to direct her attention to perceived cultural differences, the second issue. From speaking about marriage, Gladys abruptly changes the subject, defining diversity as a problem. She considers diversity as something that (certain) others need, rather than a positive element within Maltese society. Therefore, according to her, migrants, represented by the Syrian boy, are to acquire modes of behaviour which are culturally and socially accepted locally, if they wish to be included. This is the issue of power Frank alluded to during the interview, where the dominant culture does not feel the need to change and accommodate others. This inequality results in "stigmatisation, prejudice, discrimination and pressures on the less powerful groups to assimilate," (Linnehad & Konrad, 1999, p. 399-400). However it is intriguing in the way she understands diversity. In her construction of social diversity, she draws a distinction between different social groups, in this case, migrants and people with disability. The latter are considered insiders, constructed by Gladys as such due to her son forming part of this group. She acknowledges that people with disabilities have different abilities and needs and thus policies and practices should show recognition of this diversity. Conversely, refugees, or

perhaps Syrians or Muslims, are not a desirable social group and thus diversity is constructed as a problem because some people might have different norms than the Maltese. They are only accepted if they assimilate.

Claudine also thinks that non-Maltese students have to assimilate:

I think if they are living with the rest of the students in Malta and they are coming to a Maltese state school, they have to do their best to fit in, otherwise they're going to be outsiders. (Original in English)

The responsibility to 'fit in' seems to fall entirely on the non-Maltese students, which Hickey (2015) considers to be an act of violence on them. From her statement it appears that she does not consider the role the school and the teacher should play in assuring the well-being of the students, both socially and academically. Moreover, the school is not seen as a space in which the foundations for an inclusive society are laid. On the contrary, by expecting the students to assimilate, the school perpetuates the discourse and actions of the wider society. The stance of those teachers who insist on assimilative practices contrasts sharply with Postman's and Weingartner's (1969) position that education should be a subversive practice that "should contain a potential for social change, rather than simply be a mechanism of reproduction of social oppression" (Vranješević, 2014, p. 473).

Claudine's attitude towards migrant students contrasts with the stance she takes when she speaks of LGBTIQ students. Claudine expressed herself in this way when she spoke of gay students:

tell him to stand by what he believes in and to try and encourage the student to be sure of himself and to say that he is proud of what he is and face up to his bullies if possible, you know, at least get the backing of the school. (Original in English)

This participant's identity as a lesbian helps her to empathise with the gay student as opposed to what happens with the migrant students. Claudine's identity as a person and as a teacher is not challenged by the presence of the gay student; she feels at ease in discussing with him the possibilities of asserting himself. It could be that she is at ease because she is not 'teaching' (as in teaching a subject) per se, but acting as a mentor. Therefore her professional identity remains intact, unquestioned as she is confident in guiding the student. Moreover, she advocates for the school's support for the gay student, but not for the migrant students, further contributing to her construction of migrants as outsiders. Claudine feels threatened by the migrant students because she does not know how to teach them. She is expected to include them in her lessons when she does not have the necessary pedagogical tools and resources to do so.

While language directly challenges teachers' abilities to do their work, faith and culture do not, and thus it was apparent that some teachers did not feel the need to address them. Thus, most of the participants' discourse was generally based on assimilative practices, with occasional accommodation – such as Muslim girls being allowed to wear the hijab. All those who mentioned the hijab found no objection to students wearing it, except for David. He provided a somewhat confusing argument:

Imma imbagħad noqogħdu attenti  
jigifieri dik aċċettajtha b'xagħarha  
mgħotti, jekk bgħatt it-tifla tiegħi  
minflok *hairband* sewda, *hairband*  
bajda, mintix se tħalliha tidħol  
fil-klassi għax *hairband* bajda? Speċi  
ta', isma', qegħdin taparsi naċċettaw  
ħafna I-persuni differenti  
mill-kultura Maltija, u qegħdin nitilfu  
ħafna elementi mill-kultura Maltija.

But then we have to be careful,  
because we accepted that one with  
her covered hair, if I send my  
daughter in a white hairband instead  
of a black one, will you allow her in  
class? Sort of, listen, we pretend we  
are accepting many people whose  
culture is different from the Maltese  
one and we are losing a lot of  
elements of Maltese culture.

David refers to the Muslim girl as 'dik' (that one), which in Maltese is regarded to be a term that is disrespectful and almost shows disdain. His indetermination of the subject, further implies that he would rather not have her in class, even though when asked about this, his reply was that he treats her the same as other students. He does not say that he disagrees with the hijab, but asserts that schools cannot operate on two weights and two measures – allowing the headscarf but then students have to abide by the dress code. This implies that the headscarf is a transgression that goes against the uniform rules, when it is the norm that the hijab has to match the school uniform. He includes a relational identification that others the Muslim girl who is played up against a Maltese non-Muslim, personified by his daughter. He seems to imply that Muslim students have more rights than Maltese ones. His reference to culture is the crux of the whole argument; he cannot accept the hijab in school as he feels that Maltese culture is threatened. David seems to be constantly preoccupied with the presence of Muslims in Maltese society and in schools, indicating the unease he feels towards them. This preoccupation could stem from seeing them as directly competing for space in society and thus a threat to Malta's religious identity.

#### **7.2.2.2. Co-education and sexual orientation**

Co-education has brought up gender issues that educators have constructed in a negative light. Admittedly, educators were already overwhelmed by the shift from streamed schools and classes to teaching students who are in settings or bandings according to abilities. The change to co-education at such a time contributed to the sense of frustration educators must have been going through, especially when one considers that they did not have adequate training on how to teach co-ed classes. Their concern was not with the teaching itself, but with issues of discipline. For instance, Gary, who was by far the most vocal among participants regarding co-education, said that by Year 9:

hija l-agħar ta' student speċjalment  
tfajliet fis-sens il-*hormones* jibdw  
jinbidlu, x'ser jiġri? Kif ħa  
nikkontrollawhom?

is the worst year for the student,  
especially for the young girls, in the  
sense that hormones start to  
change, what's going to happen?  
How are we going to control them?

Gary transforms natural biological and psychological changes of the female students into a gender issue, by sexualising the girls. Girls become subjected social actors, who undergoing a hormonal change, are deemed by Gary as unmanageable. He has taught in all-girls schools and so this experience of teaching Year 9 girls is not new. However, it is only now that boys will be present in school that he sees the need to control the girls' sexuality, as if otherwise they will corrupt the boys in their class. Through his idea of control, Gary wishes to create an environment where girls are expected to behave in a manner that does not perturb the boys in any way, further reinforcing the idea that women are the ones who should control their sexuality.

Contrary to Gary, Steve does not embrace assimilative practices. His views diverge completely from those of Gary. Steve thinks that co-education would be beneficial to the boys in the school in which he works. He said co-education would challenge gender stereotypes:

għax nixtiequ niffurmaw nies, taf kif,  
illi s-sens ta' rispettu u s-sens ta'  
ugwaljanza bejn is-sessi ma tkunx  
*just a buzz word*, taf kif.

because we wish to form people, you  
know, whose sense of respect and  
sense of equality between the sexes  
would not be just a buzz word, you  
know.

Steve considers a co-educational setting as means where students can learn all about respect and equality and it can also help them to "mediate" how masculinity is defined and embodied by the boys. While Gary's concern is with control, Steve is more interested in equipping the students with awareness and skills that would enhance gender equality.

Assimilative practices could also be observed where sexual orientation was concerned. Schools project a heteronormative narrative and gay, lesbian and transgender students are

frowned upon. As a rule, the participants did not show antagonism towards gay and lesbian students as long as these did not challenge the norm; that is, as long as they were not open about their sexuality. In that case they were seen by some of the participants as a threat. Paul narrates how one student managed to “turn a whole class into homosexuals”. He further added that he understood that young students experiment but “for my daughter/son to change sexual orientation because of the culture that is being disseminated in class, there I worry and get angry”. Without going into the veracity of the above statement, it is evident that Paul is uncomfortable with the idea of having gay students in class. Just like David did with Muslims, Paul mentions his children, and this relational identification further shows that he feels there is something inherently wrong with homosexuality – so much so that he feels worried if his children were to identify as such. Similarly to issues of cultural diversity, participants did not give much thought to sexual orientation and they did not feel that their practices had to change. For instance, Mark found nothing wrong in telling jokes about gay people, “as that does not constitute discriminating against them”. Fabienne, on the other hand, finds it unacceptable that teachers joke about sexual orientation as this reinforces their prejudices, which according to her are very present in schools. She recalled an incident when as a social studies teacher she was teaching about gender and included sexual orientation. She had booklets about gay youth coming out as gay and their parents’ reactions, which she distributed to the students, aware that two of them were gay. These books were provided by MGRM. Once the head of school learned of this activity, she requested Fabienne to collect the books, something which the latter did not do. The attitude of the head of school implies that some educators are ill equipped to handle situations that deviate from what they consider as the norm. Instead of enabling and empowering the students (Lynch & Baker, 2005), the head of school chose to suppress them, an act which sent a troubling message to those students who were on the LGBTIQ spectrum. Fabienne, on the other hand, was subversive by refuting



to abide by the head of school's request, giving priority to the students' wellbeing. One can safely say that Fabienne was one of the few teachers who took risks, and did her utmost to shatter stereotypes, be inclusive in her practice, not just for gay and lesbian students but also for all those who were in her class and school.

### **7.3. Support structures that inform practice**

Educators play an important role in promoting schools as communities of learning, where they create a positive classroom environment. In order to do so, however, they need support from within the school as well as from the Directorates. Nearly all the participants mentioned that they did have enough support from the SMT, when any problem arose. What I found particularly intriguing was the fact that many mentioned psychologists, social workers, counsellors, guidance teachers and the Learning Support Zone<sup>29</sup>. Without any doubt these members of staff offer invaluable service. However, I got the impression that whenever students show behaviour that is not desirable by the teacher; these are referred to other professionals. This criticism is not aimed at underestimating or discrediting the value of such professionals in an educational setting, but these practices show that Meadmore's (1998) comment from 20 years ago regarding the referral of students is still very relevant today:

Instances where a child is disruptive or where they are not learning successfully demand attention from the 'experts' who range from medical practitioners, psychiatrists, psychologists, resource teachers and class teachers to the children's parents. Expert treatment is 'successful' if some kind of reason can be found for the child's poor behaviour or learning problems. (p. 1)

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<sup>29</sup> The Learning Support Zones (LSZ) are classes which students considered 'difficult' or 'at risk' attend. The aims of these LSZ are for teachers managing these zones to work with students to address behavioural problems. They also work to improve the students' level of numeracy and literacy. These classes are held during school hours so students would have to miss other lessons to attend the LSZ.

Tait (2001) argues that when this happens differences are pathologised. The existing support structures are therefore also means of constructing differences as bad, and as such need to be fixed. Therefore, on the one hand we have support structures, in shape of professionals in the field of psychology and medicine, for example, who identify and give a label to a student. This label then entitles the student to services, such as an LSE. Therefore, in theory the label which identifies the student as different is a practice which ensures equity in terms of access to education. In practice, the label constructs the students as deficient in some way or another.

Educators' understanding and purpose of support diverge in terms of agency versus dependence. While Steve acknowledged that he and his school sometimes required some sort of support, he claims that "a sense of agency is important" and that "you can seek to do things" implying that one cannot depend only on the support available but try and find solutions on one's own as well. To illustrate, he further adds:

Imma jiena nħares lejha b'dan il-mod – jġifieri jkollna ħafna *psychologists' reports* hawn tat-tfal, ok . . . nieħu l-*feedback* tiegħu issa x'nagħmel lanqas irridu lilu jgħidli. *Sorry* jista` jtini erba' *tips* napprezzahom però fl-aħħar mill-aħħar l-*onus* għandu jkun tiegħi; jiena qed naħdem mat-tifel direttament – *I have to see what works*. Infittex jien; issa mdawrin b'elf haġa; *LSAs, teachers, Head of School* – jien naqbad ktieb, naqbad l-internet infittex *and I see what works*. Elf haġa ma jaħdmux nippruvawhom u ma jaħdmux u issib dik it-tnejn, tlieta jaħdmu. *Fine*, ejja mmexxu fuq dawk. Kif jista` jkun ikolli *psychologist* li jġi jgħidli x'jista` jaħdem ma tifel meta anqas biss jafu ħlief dik in-nofs siegħa li jkun rah?

But I look at this this way – I mean we do have many psychologists' reports of children. Fine . . . I take his feedback, but then I do not want him to tell me what to do with it. I'm sorry, he can give me some tips, and I'd appreciate them, but at the end of the day, the onus should be on me. I am working with the boy directly – I have to see what works. I'll look things up – we are surrounded with a thousand things – *LSAs, teachers, Head of School* – I'll grab a book, I'll look things up on the internet and see what works. A thousand things won't work, we'll try them but they won't work, and then you'll come across two or three that work. Fine, let's work on them. How can a psychologist tell me what works with a boy when he does not

know him apart from that half hour  
that he had seen him?

Through the example he gives, one can see how Steve does not depend solely on the advice of professionals, but also seeks solutions himself. His attitude contrasts sharply with that of Nadia, who insists that it is not enough that those providing support listen to the teachers and SMT talk, they have to provide strategies to cope with the difficulties encountered by the SMT and staff. Thus, she does not see herself as an agent, unless support is not forthcoming, and when that happens “I’ll fix things up myself” (imbagħad inħawwad jien). The term she uses “inħawwad”, literally translates into “muddle”, indicating that her actions would be by trial and error. Fabienne, like Steve, also felt that teachers should try to be pro-active but admitted that:

L-għalliema jintefgħulhom ħafna  
affarijiet fuq ħoġorhom u ma  
jingħatawx *l-skills to cope with  
them.*

Teachers have a lot of things thrown  
at them and are not given the skills  
to cope with them.

Only Sandra was fatalistic in her approach to support, claiming that no one had support, neither the SMT, nor the teachers or students and really there was nothing one could do. I felt that such a mindset contributed to Sandra’s rationalising when she did not take action, making it seem useless to take action if nothing was going to happen afterwards.

### **7.3.1. Continuing Professional Development in the field of social diversity**

Considering their expressions of unease regarding the diverse student population, which induced them to opt for practices of exclusion and assimilation, I had expected the teachers to voice their concern regarding the dearth of training that exists in this area. For instance, teaching students with a disability and teaching migrant students who have no knowledge of the languages that are used for teaching, were barely mentioned. Their limited

cultural competence did not seem to be an issue either and none of the educators mentioned any need for training or education in these areas. This could be an indication of how teachers are not particularly disturbed with the lack of achievement and the inaccessibility to a just entitlement for students who fall outside their conception of 'ideal', such as migrant students and students with disability.

In contrast, educators expressed their anger at not being well prepared for the transition to a college system. Gary mentioned the co-ed and the abolishing of streaming, and how teachers were not trained in order to be able to adjust to the new systems. Therefore, there seems to be a pattern where changes in the system are not relayed properly to teachers and SMT (See Darmanin, 2012 as an example). In view of what educators said above regarding streaming and mixed ability classes, one can now understand from where their reluctance at teaching such classes originates.

### **7.3.2. Policy**

While school populations and social diversity within them are constantly increasing, to date the Directorate has not yet written a policy, specific for the pluralist environments of schools, and schools have not designed a policy specific to their own needs. The majority of participants were not particularly concerned that no such policy exists, and Paul does not regard it as a problem since "there are few foreigners" (hemm ftit barranin), thus conceptualising such a policy as benefitting only the foreigners. The absence of policy has resulted in teachers and the SMT taking ad hoc decisions, not necessarily beneficial to the students, even if unintentionally. Moreover, the majority of the participants showed lack of awareness, knowledge and skills when asked about specific strands of social diversity present in schools, resulting in practices that assimilated or excluded students considered outside the norm. Since they did not have the theoretical baggage, they did not move beyond the

dominant discourses framing cultural differences (Leeman & Ledux, 2005). The few educators who were more sensitive to the social diversity around them addressed the needs of all the students the best they could, considering the limitations of the environment in which they worked.

### 7.3.2.1. Education for diversity (NCF)

I asked the participants to identify whose role it was to implement the cross curricular theme Education for Diversity as required by the NCF. Many of the participants thought it was the role of particular teachers, such as the Personal, Social, and Career Development, Social Studies and language teachers to teach about diversity. They did not regard consciousness of diversity as being inherent to every lesson all teachers prepared and had to be reflected in their behaviour, school policies and practices, that is, the ethos of the school. Others, like Fabienne, Sandra and Ruth, Steve, Frank, Michael and Joseph considered everyone as being responsible, with Ruth claiming that:

Jien naħseb li la qiegħed fl-NCF huwa r-rwol tat-*teacher*, però llum fil-klassi għandek *teacher*, LSAs, għandek *co-ordinators*, jġifieri hemm ħafna *roles* differenti u nemmen li kulħadd għandu r-responsabbiltà ... u fil-fatt għandek anke l-*cleaners*. Hemm affarijiet li anke huma jstgħu jimplementawhom, jġifieri mhux se ngħid biċċa xogħol tat-*teachers* biss.

I think that since it is in the NCF, it is the role of the teacher, but nowadays in the class there is the teacher, LSAs, you have co-ordinators, I mean there are many different roles and I believe that everyone is responsible ... actually even the cleaners. There are things that even they can implement, therefore I won't say it is solely the teachers' role.

Although Ruth identifies the teacher first, by including everyone who works in a school, Ruth sees Education for Diversity as a theme everyone should be immersed in, rather than the tokenist approach of Claudine, who mentioned "German day" and similar days organised by the language teachers where "they will do activities and food and try and promote it in the whole school or something like that." (Original in English) "Something like that" appears to

imply that Claudine is not sure what Education for Diversity entails. Moreover, her idea that it is some sort of celebration “German day” makes one think that she does not see Education for diversity as being a cross curricular theme but a one off activity. Claudine’s comment, echoed by other participants, further implies that diversity “is treated as an isolated issue and separated from class activities” and thus considered as “an individual problem” which the student has to make an effort to solve (Coronel & Gómez-Hurtado, 2015). What strikes me most is how the participants’ descriptions of themselves as teachers – teaching the student not the subject, being there for the student and so on – do not seem to apply for students who are not Maltese, or at least assimilated in the culture of the school. Moreover, there were teachers who blamed the overloaded syllabi for overlooking the Education for diversity. Paul hinted at “barriers in teachers’ minds” (*barriers li għandhom f’moħħhom*). Citing syllabi is clearly an indication that some educators are not actually aware of what education for diversity entails, as it does not imply doing any extra lessons, as these teachers fear. Perhaps Paul has touched upon a more pressing issue – the reluctance of educators to come to terms with, and address, their prejudices and fears of the other.

Two of the participants applied their understanding of education for diversity to practice by organising activities for the students, that might be one-offs, but were meant to impact the students’ understanding of who they are as well and increasing their knowledge of the Other. Steve explained an exercise in which the boys in his school participated:

Waħda mill-attivitajiet li għamilna, pereżempju mal-kbar it-tema kienet; ‘Aħna patrijotti Maltin’ u ovvjament kienet biex ninstigawhom, taf kif, niggieža... parti minnha kienet il-video tal-*placards*, u jibdew ħerġin il-kontradizzjonjiet, ta’ dak li jkun

One of the activities which we did, for example with the older ones the theme was ‘We are Maltese patriots’<sup>30</sup> and obviously it was intended to instigate them, you know ... part of it was the video of the placards, and one could see the

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<sup>30</sup> A direct reference to the Ghaqda Patrijotti Maltin, the far-right political group mentioned already in Chapter 3.

hemm, ta dak li qed jgħidu, li hemm miktub fuq il-placards ... Waħda mill-eżercizzji li għamilna pereżempju kienet li qbadna dizżjunarju ta` Mario Cassar, l-etimoloġija tal-kunjomijiet, u t-tfal fittxu, il-kunjom tagħhom minn fejn hu ġej u t-tfal jibdew jindunaw li *there is no such* thing bħala Malti.

contradictions, of what is there, of what they are saying, of what is written on the placards ... One of the exercises was, for example, that we took Mario Cassar's dictionary about the etymology of surnames, and the students searched for the origins of their surname and they realised that there is no such thing as being Maltese.

Steve and his teachers give the students the possibility to explore their identity, to deconstruct myths propagated by the far-right Patrijotti Maltin and in turn, move away from racist discourse. Steve's students have to follow the same syllabi like all the other students and sit for the same exams but this does not keep Steve from encouraging students to engage in these activities. In contrast, Fabienne, who is a teacher, and organises activities for the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOT), a Human Library and activities to commemorate the Nakba, is often met with restrictions by the school administration as well as other school staff. She said that this attitude is very disheartening, but she has not given up. On the contrary, she is trying to rope in more teachers so that together they would be able to organise more activities that would bring issues of social diversity to the forefront.

#### **7.4. Concluding comments**

The aim of this chapter was to delve into details about educators' practices in a context of social diversity. Practices were mediated by their beliefs, school and national policies and other restrictions and enabling situations within their educational institution. As illustrated by the data, the monocultural, mono-religious, heteronormative and ableist environment of most schools, allows space for mostly exclusionary and assimilationist practices with a few exceptions. Few teachers spoke of accommodating students, and then only in terms of the

wearing of the hijab, which would be a school policy and not an individual teacher's decision. Only one teacher translated material into English, while others resorted to code switching during the explanation of their lessons. One must note that translating material into English is not required of teachers, and they do it out of their own good will. Similarly, mid-year exam papers of subjects taught in Maltese are only required in that language. Those teachers who translate these papers are remunerated, but it is not expected of them as the teachers' union insists that translations are not part of their duties. Therefore, the union condones this exclusionary practice in support of teachers' rights. Consequently, educators might not see the marginalisation of migrant students who are not proficient in Maltese as inherently wrong, since they have the support of their union, which is not challenged by the education authorities.

Discourses of exclusion were normalised through policies at school and Directorate level. However, save for four, the other teachers did not question the practices that marginalised socially diverse students. The participants' reactions to their exclusionary or marginalising practices leads me to believe that they are not proficient in applying pedagogies that bring about a more inclusive environment, and some even admitted that they did not know what to do. Moreover, there were participants whose replies were almost inciting, giving away their prejudice towards non-desirable students.

The context in which the educators work allows for little space in which a politics of difference approach can be applied. From the data presented, one can see that schools are often sites in which marginalisation of the different other is normalised to the extent that teachers who challenge this perspective, as Fabienne did, are considered subversive. Nevertheless, a few educators did their utmost to acknowledge social diversity and engaged their students in discourse about it through the activities they organised. These were the



exceptions and were usually the ones whose description of themselves was affirmed by their practices. These were the educators who deviated from the 'norm' due to their position as 'different', or due to their leftist thinking. They were the most sensitive towards the students' diverse needs and sought ways in which best to address them within the limitations of the institutions in which they worked. These were the educators who demonstrated self-awareness and who engaged in self-reflection (Garmon, 2010) which sustained their proactive stance, since they took action even when the institution in which they worked did not expect them to do so.

There were instances where there was a stark contrast between educators' conceptions of themselves and their practices. The data indicates that when educators were describing themselves in their role as teachers, they were envisaging students who fell within their imagined ideal, seeing the students as a homogenous body and excluding those deemed different. The excluded groups included all those students who for some reason or another constituted a challenge to the ability of the teachers to teach effectively. It was only when more direct questions regarding their practices were asked that the discrepancies start to emerge. "Upbeat" and "democratic" teachers did not remain so, when they had migrant students in class, or students whom they constructed as being unwilling to learn.

Some of the participants showed a certain detachment from their students and were selective about who to include. The detachment translated into practices which implied that those students who strayed from the educators' vision of 'ideal' were not worthy of their teaching. Thus, they dissociated themselves from the social, emotive and educational repercussions their attitude towards these students would have. As they considered only particular groups of students as worthy of learning, they refrained from engaging in issues tied to the social diversity embodied by their students. Educators considered the different

students as extraneous, grouping them simply as those who were unwilling, or could not learn due to language difficulties or their social circumstances. Detachment was observed, for instance, when teachers showed their lack of knowledge about their school's policies and aspects of the NCF about diversity. This implies disinterest in, and disconnection from, issues which they live every school day. The teachers did not consider the students who were not considered as 'ideal' as their responsibility, pathologising them and their families in the process. The findings in this chapter echo Wissink and Haan (2013), who argue that teachers may attribute the low performance of their students to cognitive ability or insufficient effort. Very often the reasons behind such constructions are that teachers are prejudiced or they do not have the necessary experience and competence to work in a socially diverse environment. Only a small number of participants showed that they made any particular effort to address the difficulties which stemmed from the particularities of the students' situations. Many claimed that they did not know what they had to do, that they did not have adequate training to address the needs of all the students in their class. While the dearth of training when dealing with social diversity in classrooms and schools is evident, only one teacher claimed to have sought training on her own initiative. Such a finding, further enhances the possibility that the educators in this study did not regard students they deemed 'different' as entitled to a quality education.

The data shows that there is a gap between educators' rhetoric and their practices. This discord stems from multiple reasons, primarily the dearth of continuing professional development in the field of social diversity. Considering that educators had to contend with so many changes in a span of a few years, (from a three tier system to a college system, from streaming to setting, from teaching same sex students to co-education, from teaching a perceived monocultural cohort to one which is multicultural), it would have been humanly impossible to keep up with all the developments without a strong support base, even in terms

of retraining. This was not forthcoming. Training was mostly provided in terms of pedagogic issues tied to the subject teachers taught, but not on social ones, further implying that socially diverse students seemed to be shunned and ignored, and seen as not forming part of the school community even by those who organised CPD courses.

School and national policies also influenced educators and their practices. Since the only direction the Education Directorates offered regarding socially diverse students was often that of exclusion (streaming, setting, banding, hubs for migrant students, Alternative Learning Programmes, LSZ and so on), educators either did not see these practices as unjust and inequitable, or else felt that they did not have enough agency to act in opposition to them. Also, excluding socially diverse students seemed to be the only possible solution due to the syllabi overload, as well as not being skilled enough to work in the new realities of diverse classrooms and schools.

Discourse about socially diverse students was often framed in 'us' and 'them' jargon, illustrating an element of power in how diversity is constructed and the discourse that encourages educators think of it in such a way. Educators do not question the dominant culture, which places those who fall within its range of acceptable qualities as belonging while those deemed different as being on the 'outskirts'. Understanding and living diversity in the context of schools can only be accomplished once educators understand the constructions of 'us' and of those deemed 'Other'. Britzman (2003) and McWilliams (1994) contend that pre-service teachers need to examine their own constructs of identity and how their own ethnicity, socio-economic status and linguistic practices have shaped their sense of self. In problematising assumptions concerning their own concept of self, they would then be less liable to "cling to prior knowledge and belief about other people" (Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000, p. 33). Howard (2006) while speaking to white educators affirmed that:

We cannot fully and fruitfully engage in meaningful dialogue across the differences of race and culture without doing the work of personal transformation . . . We cannot help our students overcome the negative repercussions of past and present racial dominance if we have not unravelled the remnants of dominance that still linger in our minds, hearts, and habits . . . [T]here will be no meaningful movement toward social justice and real educational reform until there has been a significant transformation in the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of White Americans. (p. 6)

There is the need for the deconstruction of labels as these simply essentialise the students' identity. The stakeholders within educational institutions need space to grow, both in practical terms as well as in intellectual thought.

# Chapter 8

## Conclusion

### 8.0. Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to explore the yet largely uncharted waters of how Maltese educators construct social diversity and the implications of these constructions on their practices in schools as teachers and administrators. The study draws on social constructionism as a theoretical framework. I argue that teachers' practices in schools and in classrooms cannot be separated from the visions they have of social diversity, their positions towards it and from their own identity constructions. Their constructions of, and attitudes towards social diversity should be understood in relation to the context in which teachers live and work, and in which they have been socialised and nurtured. One reason for opting to focus the study on the Maltese context is that until a relatively short time ago, Maltese society was considered a homogenous one, where diverse social groups, albeit present, kept a low profile, rendering themselves invisible. The rise of identity politics occurred quite recently, the sole movers at the time being people with disability. It is only as recent as 2001, that MGRM was established, to support, and speak up for the rights of LGBTIQ communities. Muslims, the largest minority faith group in Malta, were put in the limelight when political parties wooed them prior to the general election of 2008. In the last ten years, Maltese society has seen the introduction of divorce, an amendment to the Marriage Act, which gave same sex couples the right to marry

and adopt children. A new bill presented on the 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2018 proposes access to IVF for same-sex couples and single women, voluntary surrogacy and embryo freezing and adoption. The Women's Rights Foundation, after succeeding in making emergency contraception available, is now calling for the legalisation of abortion, an issue which has never been seriously debated before. Moreover, due to a strong economy, people from within the EU as well as TCNs are making their way to Malta to find work, thus turning the perception of a mono-cultural Malta into a multi-cultural one. As a result, these are tumultuous times for Maltese society, more so, since the Catholic Church has been slowly losing its moral hold on the Maltese, with the latest survey showing that less than 40% of the population attend Mass regularly on Sunday (Pace Ross, 2018). Nevertheless, 93.9% of the Maltese identify as Catholic (Sansone, 2018). Maltese people contested, accepted and welcomed the changes or seemed to be lost because they could not reframe their thinking to fit in this new reality.

Schools are not isolated from and impervious to what happens in Maltese society. The social changes and social diversity outside, permeate schools and classes. Educators have lived these experiences, which have impinged on their personal beliefs. Thus, they position themselves in relation to the different others in society depending on their world view and their personal beliefs. Consequently, I argue that one cannot separate educators' beliefs about, and construction of social diversity from their practices in schools and classrooms.

This final chapter provides a synthesis and discussion which are laid out in the following sections. Section 8.1. addresses the findings and analysis, while section 8.2. revisits the larger issues in literature with reference to the findings of this study. In section 8.3. I discuss the implications of this study for policy, professional development and pre-service teacher training. Finally, section 8.4 lays out the limitations of the study, suggestions for further research, and concluding comments.

## 8.1. Drawing the lines of demarcation

The first research question aimed to understand educators' visions of social diversity within Maltese society. I asked educators to imagine drawing a picture representing Maltese society, and then to describe it. Their replies depicted a Maltese society undergoing radical and often overwhelming social changes. Among these changes educators captured the decline of the hegemony of the Catholic Church and the resultant rise in civil rights. For a number of educators, more civil rights (in terms of divorce and marriage laws) meant a loss of values, especially where new constructs of the family were concerned. Moreover, Malta's demographic landscape changed from a fairly homogenised one to a multi-cultural community. These changes were deemed welcome by some educators, but a cause for angst for many. The ways in which educators perceive this social change has implications on their constructions of diversity. This, in turn, influences their dispositions towards students in their class who they consider different. Thus, this is the first significant contribution of the study, since it is the first study that documents educators' work and thoughts on radical social change. Studies about social change in Malta exist (Briguglio and Brown, 2016; Cassar and Cutajar, 2004, Cutajar and Cassar, 2009; Sultana and Baldacchino, 1994), but none of them address educators, even though they are the ones who mediate social change in the classroom. This study has highlighted the importance of understanding how teachers conceive the context in which they live and work. Maltese educators are not disconnected from the political and social realm and thus are a living embodiment of the tensions radical change creates. Moreover, students are also living in this society which is going through a transformation, and thus they also bring this change with them into the classroom as migrants, students of diverse faiths and cultures, as children coming from alternative family structures than the nuclear family that had been the norm for so long.

Within this context of sweeping social change, educators identified various social groups whose difference was attributed to their faith, migrant status, skin colour, sexual orientation and social class. Disability was not mentioned in the educators' visions of Maltese society, though some did refer to it in their positioning and practices. On the overall, differences challenge educators' value system and worldviews. The different Other is perceived by educators as "that which disrupts its coherency, the subject tumbles into uncertainty, its past strategies for living challenged by the very strangeness of difference itself" (Todd, 2003, p.11). Educators felt that the social changes were making the different other more visible, shattering their myths of sameness in an essentialised Maltese identity. Their reactions to the other were thus of confusion, because they did not know what to say and do; of fear, because they felt threatened by their presence; of curiosity, as they were interested in what the other had to offer. Perhaps as a result of the social upheaval and ensuing confusion, educators spoke of some of those they identified as other, as if they did not deserve to form part of Maltese society, because they did not live up to their expectations in terms of prestige and reputability. For instance, black immigrants were regarded as polluting the place where they live; Muslims were seen as not being eligible to voice their views and "interfere" with local norms; the socio-economically disadvantaged and working class were blamed for their predicament and also considered unworthy due to how they choose to present themselves. Butler (2015), argues that when the others are not given due recognition because of their difference, they are being "regulated in such a way that only certain kinds of beings can appear as recognisable subjects" (p.35). Applying her argument to educators' constructions of social diversity, their claim that the others' presence is not desirable due to their difference, denies the due recognition, and further marginalises them, because they can only be participants in society if they embody the norms of the hegemonic group. Their desire for the other to become similar to them, might be due to the resultant



incoherence Todd speaks of, and which could be detected throughout Chapter 5, where some of the educators seemed to be overwhelmed by the social changes that are taking place in Maltese society, so much so that they were at odds to find the necessary language that would enable them to articulate what they were thinking and feeling. A case in point would be the way in which some of the participants engaged with issues of sexuality and sexual orientation. They were troubled with the same sex family construct, more recently legitimised through legislation. This new scenario confounded them, and they seemed to be at a loss as to how to traverse through this new situation and assimilate it in their schema of the family. This finding resonates with that of Grech (2017) where in his study he wrote that one teacher, who had two children but was not married was told by the SMT to say that she was married if the children asked her, as if two children living with their parents, albeit that latter not being married, cannot be considered as a family. He further added, “The same participant then expressed her doubts with regards to all SMT members allowing for teachers to discuss their identity [with their pupils] if coming from an LGBT+ community” (p. 51). Such instances indicate that some educators need to have the opportunity to engage in conversations that address their fears and their difficulties in understanding and negotiating through the impact of a changing society. A further point which is of significance is how educators identified the other, from within the Maltese themselves first and foremost. This finding challenges the normative construction of Maltese as being homogenous, and in turn illustrates the fear of loss of identity some of the educators expressed.

The findings also show that educators’ dispositions towards diversity are central in understanding how they subsequently view it in classroom. Garmon (2005) claims that student teachers enter the course with different dispositions toward diversity, shaped by different prior experiences. Therefore, it is not surprising that teachers react differently to difference. For instance, if one takes educators’ othering of the working class, one would

distinguish the contrasting attitude of Frank and Steve to those of Mark and Gary, and still Paul. The former two, informed as they were by left wing politics, deconstructed the neo-liberal discourse surrounding issues of social class. In contrast, Mark and Gary endorsed these discourses, pathologising the working class as “lazy” and “leeches”, which is very similar to the conceptualisation of some pre-service teachers in Allard and Santoro’s (2006) study. In this study, there were teachers who considered those on welfare as ‘bludgers’ (p.123), or their working class students’ experiences as ‘lacking’ when compared to theirs (p.124). Paul provided yet another construction of those coming from the lower socio-economic stata, as people who manifest social problems. The difference in the conceptualisation of the working class is only one example among the many which one finds in Chapter 5.

Similarly, migrants were regarded as a threat to Maltese identity by some educators, and therefore the latter deemed it inappropriate for migrants to be part of the Maltese community. However, educators made distinctions between rich migrants hailing from northern Europe and those from Sub-Saharan, Middle East and North Africa, who, similar to the Maltese lower social classes, were regarded as a burden, besides considering their culture and being inherently different from the Maltese one. This was also observed by Grima (2016) who quoted a public official as saying that irregular migrants share apartments because in their countries they are accustomed to living in a tribe, instead of attributing the fact that migrants share apartments due to the astronomical rent they are charged. More significantly, some identified skin colour as a distinction of difference, while simultaneously being contradicted by Ruth, who rejoiced on hearing a black person speak Maltese, considering it an indication of belonging and a possibility of constructing an alternate Maltese identity that transcends the colour of the skin. Educators assigned different value to the racial groups they mentioned, providing group members with either enhanced legitimacy or else reduced social status due to the symbolic meaning they carry (Lewis, 2003).

The Catholic religion was another identity marker which, according to educators, separates the Maltese from the non-Maltese. Educators accorded the status of outsiders to those who were not Catholic, or more accurately, those who were Muslim. The reason for singling out Muslims could be due to the fact that they are the largest and most visible religious minority. Indeed, Muslims, are always seen as being foreigners (Arabs), as if they cannot conceptualise the possibility of a Maltese Muslim. For most of the educators, religion was more of a cultural issue than faith. This resonates with Vassallo's (2016) claim that despite the decline in church attendance, and the changing attitude of the Maltese towards the Church's teachings, the village feasts continue to grow because they act as an opportunity to reconnect with the community of friends and acquaintances.

Educators' constructions of social diversity cannot be taken out of the context in which educators' worldviews are shaped, the ways in which they engage with difference, their fears and their understanding of the world around them. Consequently these constructions are intensely diverse. It is significant that educators' constructions of social diversity are not consensual, but constantly contested by other educators. They attempted to establish who belongs to Maltese society along racial, linguistic, religious, cultural and social class lines, but the lines of demarcation were constantly being redrawn by other educators.

The second question of the study explored the interplay between various constructions of space (e.g., geographic space, national space, sociocultural space) and how they inform educators' notion of diversity. I asked the participants to choose specific backdrops in Malta in front of which they would take a photo. The spaces had to represent aspects which for them represented 'Malteseness'. Thus, in this section, space became the epistemology by which educators explained themselves. The participants chose historical,

natural and cultural spaces which were symbolic representations of how they related to territorial space.

The location chosen by educators, held a multiplicity of trajectories, which they illustrated through their explanations for the choice of the place. In their study about gender positioning, Adams and Harré (2001) argue that when individuals engage in discursive practices, they position themselves and others in particular ways. Educators positioned themselves both through the spaces they chose and more so, through the discursive reconstruction of these spaces. For most of the educators, the backdrops they chose represented a static, apolitical space. With few exceptions, they considered space deeply grounded in the local. Many of their backdrops represent clichéd images, stuck at a particular point in time. This space usually represented some nostalgic and idealistic imaginary of Maltese identity. Educators' representations of space often went contrary to Massey's (2005) claims that space has to be recognised "as the product of interrelations, as constituted through interactions, from the immensely global to the intimately tiny" (p.9). To illustrate, the sea was considered as an extension of the island, and only one participant saw it as a link with others through migration.

There were instances when educators chose similar backdrops. The sameness of the backdrop, however, contrasted with the diverse meanings these held for the educators. This indicates that spaces do not have single identities, thus implying that space "is a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made" (Massey, 2005, p.9). Thus, space is always under construction. For example, some educators positioned themselves in front of the bastions, but they gave a different interpretation to their positioning; while some regarded it as a space which figuratively keeps them safe from the other, it was also regarded as symbol

of the presence of Malta's diverse cultures due to the different rulers of the island. It was also considered a space in which one feels at home, but simultaneously needs to allow outside influences so that it regenerates. Alternately, this space was also tied to the working class. Thus, educators positioned themselves differently in the same space, regarding it as exclusionary or inclusive in relation to the foreigner, but also considering it a space which symbolised the activism of the working class.

I find it significant that Steve and Frank placed themselves as middle class within the backdrop of the bastions, while also acknowledging their working class roots. They showed more political engagement, in that they were more conscious of the impact of economic and social forces on the working class and the ways in which their habitus is derided by those who are privileged. This could be due to their lived experience in an area which politicians and lay people alike constructed as 'deprived'. Throughout the interviews, educators mentioned this particular area a number of times, especially when referring to students attending schools there. However only the above mentioned educators problematised this construction; the others took it as a state of fact. Educators who engaged in deconstructing the discourse behind the so called deprived area had a baggage of literature that informed their positioning, quoting Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony to support their ideas. As a result, these educators not only positioned themselves but were also critical and analytical when it came to positioning others. They were conscious of the power geometries at play in their chosen space. The space had been constructed by those groups who had more power, as a confined space for those living in poverty and marginalised of society. This same group is now gentrifying the space, implying its freedom to have the power to move freely, as opposed to the marginalised, whose movement to a more affordable location is dictated by the powerful.

Steve and Frank's positioning contrasts with those, who similarly positioned themselves as middle class, and then spoke of the working class in a manner that constructed it as "savage" and uncouth, one teacher even compared his students with "trash", and ignoring the fact that educators were privileged due to their middle class status and consequently different forms of capital. Evidently, educators' positioning in this case was informed by their knowledge, understanding and interpretation of how socio-economic forces impact one's place in society.

A number of other educators located themselves as middle class, through the use of English during the interview. One must note that English and Maltese are Malta's official languages, with Maltese being the national one. The majority speak in Maltese. Those who are Maltese and use English are perceived to be from the higher social classes. Thus, through the use of language, they position themselves as different, in terms of prestige and privilege. Others positioned themselves as middle class through the ways in which they spoke about social class and poverty and their habitus. Mark's positioning as middle class was through his own declaration, echoing Ball (2003) that schools were spaces that valued middle class cultural capital rather than those who came from a working class background. His awareness, however, did not seem to bring about a deeper reflection concerning the consequences of the mismatched capital between the students and their teachers.

Few educators positioned themselves and the students in the same space, implying that they consider them to be equals. Others did not position the students at all, arguing that their students are individuals, and choosing a backdrop for them would be tantamount to essentialising them. A striking finding was that in the positioning of the students, almost all the educators considered their students as homogenous, as indicated by the backdrops chosen for them. The spaces chosen defined the students but there was an incongruence

between the diversity within the students as elicited from the educators themselves and the perceived homogeneity, as indicated by the essentialising spaces in which the educators positioned the students. This has several implications, since such a stance implies that educators operate a one size fits all system in classes and in schools. First, the perception of homogeneity makes educators impervious to the differences that exist within the student body. Thus, their pedagogy would not reflect the needs of all students. Secondly, in culturally diverse classrooms, educators would be challenged in terms of engaging modes of representation and recognition that would be inclusive. Thirdly, for most teachers, school diversity will not be perceived as such, and assimilationist or exclusionary stance would stand to prevail.

There were teachers, who like Mark, positioned their students as alien to the system, but their strategies for coping did not include questioning the operation of the school. Rather, the students were considered the problem, even when the participants spoke in good faith and were committed to the wellbeing of the students in their care. This gives rise to the hypothesis that educators are conscious of the difficulties some students have to adjust to the education system. Some realise that it is the system itself that alienates the students, others locate the symptoms as being within the students and not the system which positions them as outsiders. In both scenarios, educators do not seem to be able to point out what exactly needs to be addressed.

Educators' privileged position seems to make them unaware of the implications of hegemonic curricula and school practices, where those students who do not fall within the imagined 'ideal' are relegated to invisible status. As a result, educators do not take any action or suggest alternatives that would make schooling meaningful to those students who do not fall within the realm of the 'ideal' - the working class, the migrants, those with a disability,

those labelled as low achievers. There is no end to the list, as it is individual educators who create the different other in class. It is possible that educators do not take action in the face of this injustice because they do not have the possibility of engaging in a critical reading of the situation first and foremost. Consequently, the possibilities to action are minimal and often go against contemporary literature that focuses on socially just educational experiences, as can be seen with the number of 'specialised' schools, centres and classes that are opening. One can then speculate that those who dissociated themselves from the human element in the positioning of themselves might have done so because engaging with the other in meaningful ways is a challenge they feel requires discursive tools which they do not yet have. To mitigate the problem these educators pass on the responsibility to another professional or guardian or the students themselves, constructing them *as the problem*. Thus, through pathologising practices (Shields, Bishop and Mazawi, 2005), educators absolve themselves (even if not maliciously) of any academic, social and personal failures the students experience. A further possible explanation is that their position of neutrality is taken only in the face of the human element. Educators were very vocal and critical in environmental issues. The environment may be considered a safe space in which to criticise and complain and protest without the need to interact and engage with the other on an emotive and social level.

The final research question (Chapter 7) focused on educators' practices in relation to diversity. My interest was to understand how educators negotiated their stance on social diversities, and their positioning together with that of their students, when these were translated into practices. I felt that this was an important question to explore. Unlike the world outside of school, where educators, to an extent, have the possibility and choice to participate in, or detach themselves from directly engaging with socially diverse people, school and classroom contexts do not offer such a possibility. It is therefore important to see if, and how educators respect and honour the social reality and experiences of the diverse students, who



fall outside what they consider the norm. A number of questions were asked to reach this aim. The questions, while complementary, addressed different diversities and touched on topics such as disability, migration and same-sex relations. Others were directly about the curriculum, school policies and practices. Various insights can be gathered from this chapter, some of which bridge over from the previous one. Educators were asked to describe themselves as teacher first. Then a deeper understanding of their practices was elicited through questions which touched upon differences.

The analysis shows that, generally speaking, educators considered themselves to be caring, respectful and in tune with their students' needs. However, an in-depth analysis shows that most educators did not always consider the different student as part of the classroom. In such cases they consider the different other to lie beyond their direct responsibility. For this reason, their descriptions of themselves only applied when students were perceived to be homogenous, or else when they did not constitute a challenge to their teaching methods. The ways in which educators constructed social diversity in Maltese society in Chapter 5 and how they constructed it in schools showed both similarities and differences. When educators spoke about their Maltese students, they spoke mostly about three kinds of students: those who "did not want to do anything", those of perceived low ability, and those who they considered as promising, and who ticked all the 'ideal student' boxes. Other differences, such as sexual orientation and disability were marginal in their conversations. Considering the fact that most non-Catholic students are Muslims, these were often grouped with non-Maltese students. The scenario changed once educators spoke of heterogeneous classes, which for most educators, this often meant that there were Maltese and foreign students in the same class. In these instances the Maltese became one homogenous cohort, the other being the migrant and Muslim students. Other possible differences between students were not considered, thus negating the possibility of exploring intersectionalities of student identities and how these

impact on teaching and learning. Some teachers considered language as the barrier that prevented them from reaching out to the migrant, as if the Maltese students were automatically understanding since they were proficient in the use of Maltese or English. It was only when Maltese students were compared to their Maltese peers that they were regarded as being either “willing to learn” or “disruptive” and “did not want to learn”. Migrant students were constructed as unable to learn due to language barriers, and the only possibility they saw, was segregating the migrant students, at least until they learned the language of instruction. None of the educators mentioned the emotional wellbeing of migrant students, who have been uprooted from a life they knew, separated from family and friends to live in place about which they knew very little. Moreover, in most of the educators, similar to the findings of Zembylas (2010), in his study concerning Greek-Cypriot teachers' constructions of Turkish speaking children's identities, I could capture a lack of concern with the level of attainment of these migrant students, and those who did show consideration to the matter, seemed to be at a loss as to how they should address the issue.

These observations thus have a two-tier dimension: there are different levels of alterity, very similar to what Fabienne describes in Chapter 5. The first one is how a Maltese cohort of students is constructed on its own, and then when juxtaposed with migrant students. Educators' constructions of Maltese students position the students in different strata, incidentally reflecting their constructions of Maltese society. At the bottom one finds “the students who don't want to learn” and then there are those who are “willing”. The former cohort is considered as such due to lack of co-operation in class, their disruptive behaviour and their parent's unwillingness or inability to collaborate with the teachers. Both students and parents are spoken of in deficit terms, and only one teacher questioned her practices in their regard. None of the teachers who mentioned these students questioned the link between social class, forms of capital and education attainment, putting the blame entirely

on the students and parents. The other students were considered as model students, and fitted perfectly within educators' constructions of the 'ideal' student. In terms of parental involvement, parents were considered "demanding" when they queried about school issues.

When compared to migrant students, on the other hand, Maltese students were seen as one homogenous group, and the deficit transferred on to the migrants, who also were considered as homogenous, albeit they hail from all around the world. Interestingly enough, migrant parents were not mentioned once. This further supports my thesis that migrant students are often not considered as part of the school community in terms of belonging, and thus contact with their parents is not sought.

The second observation illustrates the challenges teachers' encounter regarding how to direct their practices in a socially diverse classroom environment. This holds especially when it comes to issues related to students' just entitlement to an inclusive education with equal opportunities for learning. Very few educators questioned their pedagogical approaches and practices. Many seemed to think that they should keep on teaching in the same way as they did when the three-tier system of secondary education was still in place and before the migrant population in schools became significant.<sup>31</sup> They found it difficult to comprehend how LGBTIQ friendly legislation should impact their practices and considered it unthinkable to address the student population in anything but a through a hegemonised Catholic outlook. I am not implying that teachers chose to behave in this way on purpose, but clearly most were at a loss on how to create a school and classroom climate which was respectful towards diversity, not rhetorically but in practice.

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<sup>31</sup> Before the college system was introduced, students in their sixth year of primary had to sit for an 11+ exam. Those who passed used to go to Junior Lyceums, those who failed attended area secondary schools and those whose marks were very low attended the opportunity centres.

Interestingly educators who found no objection to diversity outside of school seemed to be against it once this diversity was transferred to their classroom. Thus, you would have educators vocal about migrant rights and active within an NGO which, among other things, supports sub-Saharan migrants, who then would not want a migrant student in class. Alternately, a teacher who found the presence of Muslims threatening, did not hesitate to state that once a Muslim child is in his class, she would be treated the same as any other student. Perhaps it is this 'sameness' which needs to be problematised. In treating all students the same, they would be assimilating some and excluding others. The 'sameness' educators speak of is often the one size fits all pedagogy, where teaching is aimed at the mainstream learner, who happens to be the one whose identity is privileged over the others.

One must keep in mind that resistance to change could be due to the fact that educators had little or no support from the Directorate to be able to make their way through the myriad of changes taking place every year. They were often left to their own devices, and these rendered educators exhausted, burnt out and at times disinterested because of the fatigue of the constant challenges they had to face. Moreover, it was clear that most of the educators seemed to be at a loss as to how they were to address diversity in class. This was manifest in discourses and practices of exclusion, which go against even the spirit of the NCF. Their practices reflected the ad hoc decisions taken by the Directorates, the MUT and school administration, which often demonstrated the desire to reach quick fix solutions, rather than to provide well thought out plans of actions, whose objectives might take more time to see fruition. Such decisions resulted in legitimising actions and practices that go against principles of inclusion and social justice. The situation is further exacerbated because many of the educators do not have the necessary philosophical, sociological and pedagogical knowledge that would enable them to deconstruct and critically analyse the proposed actions by the authorities. Therefore, they cannot show resistance to exclusive ideas and actions, and neither

can they provide alternatives to address the situations as they arise. From the educators interviewed, only three were fully aware of the implications of present policies, and two of them engaged in critical pedagogy to sensitise and empower themselves and their students.

The Directorate did not seem to provide adequate in-service training, which would encourage educators to take issues of social diversity seriously enough to warrant them to question the aims and politics behind the decisions taken. In 2016, the Institute for Education offered 105 in-service training courses between July and September (Institute for Education, 2016). Of these, seven courses addressed different disabilities, two courses were about LGBTIQ issues, one was about forced migration and one about migrant education. Only two of these courses required compulsory attendance, one about autism and challenging behaviour, which was aimed at helping educators gain understanding, skills and knowledge about different aspects of autism. The other was about migrant education. It was a one day course (4 hours) aimed mostly at teachers who were teaching in the Migrant Unit<sup>32</sup>, and its aims were to:

- Update teachers on broad issues in migrant education
- Discuss the situation in Malta
- Provide an opportunity for teachers to discuss their own experiences during the past one/two years. (p.127)

The aims of and the time allotted for the training indicate that it was more of a stock taking exercise than training as such. In 2017, out of 91 courses offered, one was about supporting students with ADHD and the other was about intercultural competences. These courses did not require compulsory attendance. Most courses offered during the in-service training

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<sup>32</sup> The Migrant Unit provides migrants students who have low proficiency in English and Maltese with an alternate educational experience in hubs within mainstream schools. In these hubs, students are taught basic Maltese and English and a few other subjects. To date, the Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes has not published the curriculum for migrant students who attend these hubs follow.

sessions addressed subjects currently taught in schools. Educators did, in fact, claim that most of the in-service training is tied to the subjects they teach. This demonstrates how utilitarian and one track training can be. Certainly, new techniques on how to teach a subject are important, but these cannot be disconnected from, or used to replace training that encourages educators to face their fears of diversity. Educators showed little concern and understanding of the implications of exclusive and assimilative practices and how these affect not only the other, but all the students. While policies and directives are bound to influence educators and their practices, from my experience in schools, as well as from the data gathered for this study, I surmise that as agents, it is partly out of choice that educators choose to remain unacquainted with pedagogies and practices that operate on a politics of difference. This could be elicited from their responses about diversity policies in schools and questions regarding the NCF. Educators seemed to think that being knowledgeable about issues of diversity, policies and practices is not important. Therefore, educators' lack of positive response toward diversity could be the result of personal indifference.

Those educators who reported engaging in critical pedagogical practices are the same educators who throughout this study were the most critical in their analysis. Their emphasis was on the pursuit of justice, whether in relation to social diversity, or in positioning and their practices. These educators also tended to pursue further education. They were exposed to literature that discussed social, political and economic issues in Maltese society. They could then link how issues of social justice are tied to issues about diversity. With their baggage of knowledge, these educators could engage in critical pedagogical practices, as could be seen in the case of Steve and Frank and the exercise of the deconstruction of 'being Maltese' with their students, and how Fabienne, resisted the pressures of the school administration to collect literature handed out by MGRM.

## 8.2. Social diversity, justice and education – Implications of the findings

From the analysis elicited in the course of this study, it was evident that many of the educators interviewed held a diverse range of understandings of what it means to be Maltese in a context that has witnessed a radical change in demography and social structures. This finding is similar to that of Jones (2000) which explores beliefs about Australian identity, although the cohort which participated is different. When one compares the constructions of Maltese identity in Chapter 3 and those by educators, it is also clear that many are influenced by what they hear in the public sphere. However, few acknowledged and articulated the notion that, discourses in the public sphere, and which they reproduced - such as those referring to social class, educational achievement and migration - are created to reinforce particular images, which influence and produce particular knowledge “that fulfils certain political and ideological purposes and to exert, maintain or resist power” (Kubota, 2004, p.22). Consequently, they did not problematize how power functions through discourse and how it normalises injustice. Evidence to that effect was found in their views on mixed ability classrooms, and migrants, for example. Thus, educators explored very little of the inter-related contexts which cause inequality, mainly, the socio-economic, the political, the affective and the socio-cultural. This was the rule, rather than the exception as the instances of injurious speech, openly racist comments and displays of minimalist tolerance attest.

Educators, with the exception of a few, were selective in who, in their views, deserved to belong in Maltese society and in schools, and they did not seem to question the implications on the notion of justice, their views had. What is even more significant, is that they essentialised and stereotyped the many different others they created, leaving little possibility for a counter-narrative that could challenge their perceptions. Moreover, they took an assimilationist stance in most instances, further engaging in oppression of the groups which

they considered as different. This position in favour of assimilation, puts those who are unassimilated at a disadvantage, unless they are prepared to take on an identity which is acceptable to the hegemonic group. Moreover, “placing a normative value on homogeneity ... gives members of the dominant groups reason to adopt a stance of self-righteous intractability” (Young, 1990, p. 179). The clearest example that can be elicited from this study is the issue of the Catholic religion as a state religion, and how educators used it in society in general, as well as in schools, to suppress any form of religious difference and marginalise those of other faiths.

Young (1990) refers to the educators’ oppressive stance towards social differences as structural oppression. She observes that the roots of structural oppression “are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules, and the collective consequences of following those rules” (p.179). Educators in this study were mostly uncritical of social practices, and rather than questioning their legitimacy in a society that is in transformation, they clung to their narratives, as a form of permanence amid the instability caused by change. This change brings about the need for educators to shift their paradigms. For this reason, hooks (1994), calls for “training sites where teachers have the opportunity to express those concerns while also learning to create ways to approach the multicultural classroom and curriculum” (p. 36). Thus, hooks indicates that training in new methodologies is important, but it is also vital that educators have opportunities and space in which to voice their fears without being judged. Otherwise, training would be just a mechanical procedure, and there is a good chance that it would not reach its ultimate aim.

One must note that the fear and resistance to change did not happen only on an individual scale, but also on a collective one, especially within schools, where transgressive discourse, which goes against established norms, is often nipped in the bud. hooks (1994)



criticises such a stance. She argues that schools and classrooms cannot be considered communities unless individuals take a genuine interest in one another, acknowledging each other's presence and voice. hooks claims that recognition of and acknowledgement of one's presence must be demonstrated through pedagogical practices, something which most of the participant educators did not even see as being their role. Educators' positioning as Maltese and middle class did not seem to enable them to consider their students' alternative worldview. Consequently, they found it difficult to envisage providing an educational experience which engaged their students. This could be due to the fact that:

Their view from the centre of the hegemonic culture often leaves them unable to see how those outside the dominant discourses may be marginalised through curricula, pedagogy and assessment practices that do not take into account different kinds of knowledge, or different approaches to learning or different values and beliefs. (Allard and Santoro, 2006, p. 117)

Indeed, as amply evident in Chapter 7, many educators could not envisage the possibility of an alternate way of teaching. They operate a difference blind agenda, for a variety of reasons, among which would be their limited awareness of what constitutes a culturally responsive curriculum and environment. Others, as Chapter 7 illustrated, do not see it as their role to respond to the social diversity in their class. Some teachers, see the socially diverse student as an addendum to the class, not a part of the class. Thus, they do not feel obliged to promote a welcoming environment, to which all students belong. One must keep in mind that secondary school teachers, sometimes see a class as little as once a week, which further alienates them from the need to engage in different teaching approaches. It could also be a possibility, that some educators feel that they do not need to be responsive to the social diversity within the class, due to the fact that school administration and the Directorate do

not show too much concern about the lack of attainment of those considered other. Whatever the reason, educators' behaviour denotes symbolic violence on their students, which is further exacerbated because it is legitimised, in the sense that it is tolerated by the Directorate. Moreover, policies and union directives further normalise assimilationist and exclusionary practices, thus reinforcing the ideas among educators in schools and society that these practices are acceptable. Therefore, it comes to no surprise that two of the three educators who were able to deconstruct and analyse belonged to the same educational institution. This implies that the ethos of institutions influence educators' thinking and actions, and consequently educators have the possibility of challenging the status quo, and engage in progressive pedagogic practices.

Exclusionary and assimilationist practices oppress students because their differences are neither respected nor recognised. Respect and recognition are considered by Lynch and Baker (2005) as being necessary dimensions for equality. Almost always the contrary happens in schools as the dominant group, in this case, the Maltese Catholic one, projects its experiences as if they represented everyone. In the process, those who do not subscribe to this identity are marked as other (Young, 1090), remaining unrecognised and marginalised. In this study this could be seen when teachers spoke of gay and lesbian students and same sex families, who apart from marginalisation they were also pathologised.

These are not conditions in which justice thrives. Indeed, once marginalised, socially diverse groups are rarely allowed to participate as equals in social life. As Fraser (2007) notes, "overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on par with others, as full partners in social interaction" (p.27). In order to reach this aim, Keddie (2012) suggests that to empower students to be able to participate, educators need to know who the students are and then act on the knowledge they have to

nurture their intellect and make learning contextualised within the framework of who they are; that is, “it is about recognising how students are differently positioned in terms of their equity needs and on providing differential support to address these needs” (p.264). Keddie’s comment reflects bell hooks’ (1994) description of her experience in school, where teachers “enacted a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance ... to ensure that we would fulfil our intellectual destiny” (p.2). The attitude of the teachers interviewed towards the othered students contrasts sharply with hooks’ and Keddie’s ideals. One might deduce that these educators’ notions of justice need to be challenged in order to expose them to discourses that emphasize the importance of justice in education. Keddie recognises that engaging with and understanding the complexities of recognition and provision is a daunting task for educators, especially for those teachers who consider it a duty to provide an equitable and just education for the marginalised students. A stumbling block is that schools and teachers do not share a common understanding of what justice in education is supposed to mean, as was evident in educators’ discussions about streaming and banding. For this reason, negotiating through discourses of justice is bound to cause antagonism.

The analysis also showed that social diversity represents “a problem” for some educators. The difficulties arise from various issues, such as prejudices they may have. These could be instigated by the educators’ ignorance of historical, social and political events that occurred and whose repercussions are still felt today, such as the migration from Africa towards Europe. Another reason is that most educators do not think critically enough to deconstruct discourses present in the public sphere. Consequently, they perpetuate dominant discourses that oppress those who are socially diverse. Those educators who do challenge this state of affairs, are often regarded by their peers and senior management team as trouble makers, thus, like the students for whom they speak, they become undesirable themselves.

### **8.3. Implications for policy, professional development and pre-service teacher training**

In view of the findings and analysis this part of the concluding chapter comprises a number of suggestions aimed at policy makers, pre-service teacher educators and continuing professional development for teachers and SMT.

#### **8.3.1. Policy**

This study is not about policy, however the findings suggest that the absence of policies, on Directorate, College and school levels, that *specifically* address social diversity leaves educators in a quandary. Consequently, there is a pressing need for the development of a policy that addresses social diversity in educational institutions. Since SMTs, teachers and LSEs do not have any guiding principles on how issues of social diversity are to be addressed, their modes of action often reflect a quick fix solution to a pressing difficulty, rather than a well thought out code of behaviour and action that ensures all students' entitlement and acceptance in schools.

Similar policies in Europe and beyond have tried to address the existing social diversity within their societies. They mostly address cultural diversity and are a response to migration (Sikorskaya, 2017). However, I would propose a more comprehensive policy, which addresses different facets of diversity, with the aim of providing administrative staff, teachers and students a framework within which social diversities in schools are addressed. The policy could address lacunae present in the 'Respect for All' Framework (2014) and include specific directions on what constitutes inclusive schools and practices. To this aim, it must give definitions of terms such as Islamophobia, homophobia, sexism, racism, injurious speech and so on and provide a platform that allows those who have experienced or come across such injustices to seek redress. Moreover, in recognition of the socially diverse groups, representatives should be directly involved in the discussion and drafting of the policy, to ensure fair representation and recognition.

A complimentary policy would be an updated Language Policy for Maltese and English, which reflects and addresses the needs of all students within the state school system in a uniform manner. Teacher training in TEFL (Teaching English as foreign language), as well as TMFL (teaching Maltese as a foreign language), should be across the board as in this way teachers would be skilled in explaining and giving out notes even in subjects which are not languages. Apart from providing guidelines to educators, the language policy should seek to provide adequate support to both students and teachers.

### **8.3.2. Continuing Professional Development**

It is evident from the study that educators are finding engaging with social diversity in schools stressful, since they feel that they are ill equipped to teach in an environment which is constantly challenging their skills. The participants have never attended training sessions that address teaching in such diverse contexts. As Marlene said, during professional development sessions, teachers usually focus on the subject they are teaching, especially when training is compulsory. Therefore, since educators do not have enough awareness and knowledge, they feel incompetent when working with socially diverse students, hence their pathologising practices. Another reason for their reluctance and inability to engage in teaching in a socially diverse context is that since no serious training is provided (and sought), educators develop intercultural practices as they go along. Since they do not have the theoretical baggage, they rarely move beyond the dominant discourses that frame social diversity. Thus, first and foremost, I aim to share a report of this study with the participants. I consider the act of disclosing the findings to the participants as an act of acknowledgement for their valuable contribution. However, disseminating the findings is also a form of public pedagogy, and the participants may find themselves in a better position to understand the world and transform it.

In addition, I suggest professional training which would enable teachers to meet the demands of a diverse class and ensure that they are conversant with teaching strategies that provide for the entitlement of all students in their care. However, training should not focus solely on technical and behavioural aspects of teaching. According to Tanti Rigos (2016), for the most part, teachers:

do not seem to be interested in engaging with informed discussions on ideas and beliefs on the broader understanding of education that are not immediately related to classroom practice and lesson delivery. This implies that the philosophical and sociological components in teacher training courses that aspire to incite political activism and teacher authenticity are immediately shed within the profession. (p.1)

Such an attitude was evidently true as many of the participants' responses showed. Therefore, further professional development that targets the intellectual growth of educators would be beneficial. As educators would be more exposed to sociological and philosophical theories they would become more conscious of the political implications of their actions and hopefully strive to create a more equitable educational experience for their students.

Intercultural competence is also an indispensable skill someone working in schools should acquire. Such skills help people understand each other better, and are vital for educators to help them decipher their students' behaviour. Therefore, Professional Development sessions, led by professionals in the field, could be held during the scholastic year. The more competent educators feel, the more empowered they are, and in turn, as students feel understood and valued, the greater opportunities for learning are.

### **8.3.3. Pre-service teacher training**

The present Masters in Teaching and Learning (MTL) course offered at the University of Malta by the Faculty of Education, aimed at prospective teachers, provides ample opportunity for student-teachers to delve into and explore matters of social diversity. In tandem with these lectures, the Faculty of Education would do well to provide students with sensitivity training by providing learning opportunities in which they meet and speak with people who are considered to be socially diverse. Thus they would be able to see the human who is behind the label society gives them. Moreover, students should be made aware of the privileged position they hold and how this may influence their outlook on those considered socially deprived or socially different. Again, cross-cultural competence training is a must for those who embark on a teacher programme.

### **8.3.4. Community Outreach**

A school community where every member is respected and valued does not create itself automatically; one needs to consciously come to terms with one's ingrained ideas and beliefs about those considered different. It is therefore imperative that educators work with parents/guardians to reach this goal. It is suggested that educators and parents/guardians organise meetings on professional and social level where they can learn *together* how to address challenges and explore possible solutions that arise from living in a socially diverse school community. These would also be ideal occasions where staff and parents get to know each other without engaging in power struggles that usually take place when parents visit schools. For these meetings to be organised, a group of parents and educators could plan a programme for a number of sessions and involve NGOs and other significant persons in the field of social diversity. I think that it is significantly important that both educators and parents participate in the organisation of such activities, first of all so that there would be ownership.

If there is a partnership between these two stakeholders, the message would be that these meetings are being organised because educators and parents need to learn about one another in order to try and understand each other better.

#### **8.4. Limitations, further research and conclusion of this research**

This study focused on how educators engage in discourses that construct different social groups as Others. In order to reach this aim, there were various delimitations I had to set so that the study would not be impossibly large to manage. The cohort targeted by the study was secondary school educators. I did not open recruitment for early childhood and primary educators because then the contexts in which they work would be too diverse for certain conclusions to be drawn. Another conscious decision I made was to conduct semi-structured interviews. This method of data gathering provided me with invaluable information about the participants' engagement with social diversity. There were other methods which I could have used in conjunction with interviews, such as observations, to address the third research question about practices. These would have enriched the study and provided me with first hand data about educators' practices. However, given the difficulty I had with recruiting the participants, including the observer element might have been even more daunting for prospective participants. By choosing to focus on a particular research question – educators' constructions of social diversity – I chose not to focus on other pertinent questions which also pertain to social diversity within the educational realm. The social constructionist framework which I applied is also a delimiting factor as it informed the methods of analysis I used.

There are also a number of limitations. The exploratory nature of this study does not allow for the findings to be generalised. Since the research was conducted with nineteen educators, it is not possible to say that their constructions of social diversity can translate



across the whole educator population. Educators situated in other contexts, who have lived different experiences could very well construct social diversity differently. Nevertheless, the findings and proposals put forward can make a useful contribution to the field, more so since this study has pioneered into an area previously unexplored. This study helps to convey the ideas educators have about social diversity and how these inform their practices, which have up to now been neglected. It also puts policies on school and national level under scrutiny since they also impact on educators' constructions of socially diverse students and the practices they undertake in schools.

This thesis has brought to the fore the complexity of educators' understanding of Maltese society and social diversity. The diverse views and constructions demand that action is taken to bring together different stakeholders who are qualified and equipped to contribute towards creating learning spaces where parents, educators, students and NGOs can work together. Hence, educators would have the opportunity to develop and enhance their professional understanding, both in terms of teaching techniques as well as in terms of the social and political contexts in which they teach and live. Such a possibility would also sensitize them to the circumstances and baggage their students carry with them, and thus be able to provide a just educational entitlement for *all* the students.

Although the scope of the study has its limitations, the findings can make a useful contribution to the area of educators' identities and their views on social diversity. Readers can learn from the unique contributions in terms of visions, positioning and practices of educators presented in this thesis, particularly since research in this area is yet very limited. This study also emphasises the need to understand how educators' experiences and understandings of social diversity as well as the education system, impinge on their practices. The outcomes of this study highlight the need for more research in the realms of social

diversity in Maltese schools that focuses on educators, students and parents. The changing landscape of society and schools requires research that focuses on individual aspects of social diversity such as heteronormativity and homophobia, the implications of having one recognised religion on students' and parents' experiences of schooling, migrants' experiences in schools, as well as how educators engage with others in class. The possibilities are endless and most necessary if we are committed to providing a quality education that attests to the just entitlement for all the students.

The analysis presented and discussed indicates that there is a wide continuum that represents educators' acceptance of students and their contexts at one end, and rejection at the other. Some educators might seem unsympathetic to the plight of those students who they regard as 'outsiders', and thus unwilling to adapt to the new contexts in which they teach. However, those educators who fall within this description, often vocalised their fear of change and the feelings of ineptitude where dealing with social diversity in school is concerned. These feelings could very well serve as a catalyst for change, especially when other educators are given the opportunity to act as beacons and show their colleagues the ways in which they can become more professional in their attitude and proficient in their craft.

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# Appendix

Research questions	Interview questions	Comments
<p><b><u>Practices</u></b> How do educators construct the different other in their school class in terms of their interaction with students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) In the adoption of teaching style, books and texts chosen as well as the choice of other pedagogic material</li> <li>b) In how they make students participate, i.e. is the class inclusive or exclusive;</li> <li>c) In terms of disciplining students.</li> <li>d) What kind of class culture do they promote? What do they do to provide a learning environment and a class culture that is inclusive, devoid of racism and xenophobia and intolerance and socially just?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Teaching style, pedagogic material</b> (I would introduce myself , where I teach etc and then invite the participant to share with me some information about his/her teaching experience)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you see yourself as a teacher? Have you always seen yourself in this way?</li> <li>• What are the main challenges in your class ? (disciplinary, academic)</li> <li>• How much do you think the support you get in teaching is adequate?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Prompts for examples</b> Can you illustrate..... Can you give an example.... Can you show ...</p> <p><b>Prompts for clarification</b> What did you do about.... How did you feel.... What did you think ..... When do you ..... Who does ..... What meanings does it have for you? What kind of .....</p> <p><b>Prompts for reasons</b> Why do you think that happens? Why do you think they do that? Why do you feel ..... Can you describe why you did that?</p> <p><b>Prompts to understand how the participant reads the social world</b></p>
<p><b><u>Positionings</u></b> How do educators position themselves in relation to Maltese society? How do they position themselves in terms of their social identity, that is, in terms of their gender, social class, geographical location, ability/disability, and ethnicity?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you had to be photographed over the backdrop of a Maltese landscape, which backdrop would you opt for?</li> <li>• If you had to be photographed over the backdrop of a Maltese landscape, which backdrop would you <b>never</b> opt for?</li> <li>• Imagine that you had to take a photograph of all the students in your class/school, which backdrop</li> </ul>	<p>What did they do? Why do you think they acted this way? Do you feel comfortable with what they did?</p>

<p>How do educators position themselves in terms of their political engagement? How do they position themselves in terms of conceptions of plurality and diversity?</p>	<p>of the Maltese islands would you choose?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you tell me something about the group you are part of? What brought you into the group?</li> <li>• You are a member of a group which might not have a direct connection to formal education. Have the group's ethos and agenda influenced in any way your practices as an educator? Have they influenced your views on education?</li> <li>• Are there any particular policy documents/stands/directives issued by your group that you particularly endorse?</li> <li>• Do you form part of other groups?</li> <li>• Would you consider leaving this group and joining another?</li> <li>• What do you think other members of society think about you?</li> </ul>	
<p><b><u>Visions</u></b></p> <p>What are educators' visions of Maltese society? How do educators perceive Maltese society in terms of its constituent groups and what stands for Maltese identity?</p> <p>My main interest is to get a glimpse of which significant qualities educators regard as necessary for one to be considered Maltese and thus a (desirable) member of society.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you had the chance to paint a picture that would represent Maltese society how would you paint it? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In that picture, what stands out as representative of Maltese society?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	

<p><b><u>Practices</u></b></p>	<p><b><u>The School</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the school you currently work in have spaces for cultural and religious diversity?</li> <li>• Does the school have safe spaces in case of someone being bullied?</li> <li>• What happens if someone comes and seeks support (e.g. is being bullied, is a victim of racism, comes out as gay)? Is there any particular procedure that is followed by the staff?</li> <li>• Does your school require teachers to say a prayer in class? What kind of prayer? What do you do? How do you feel about it?)</li> </ul> <p><b>Providing an inclusive learning environment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How satisfied are you with the National Curriculum Framework?</li> <li>• The NCF refers to an Ethics Education Programme (EEP) as part of the entitlement of students. What is your opinion on the introduction of Ethics Education?</li> <li>• The NCF also abolished streaming, only to have banding introduced later on. What do you think about this?</li> <li>• The NCF establishes that one of the cross curricular themes to be Education for Diversity. What do you think Education for Diversity implies? Whose role is it to educate the students for diversity?</li> <li>• Recently the Malta Union of Teachers issued a directive to teachers not to accept foreign students who are unable to communicate in either English</li> </ul>	<p>What kind of spaces? How do you feel about this? If they don't have such spaces, how do you feel about it? What do you do about it? How would you feel if a student came up to you and told you that s/he is being bullied/a victim of racism/is gay and wished to come out? What would you do?</p>
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	<p>or Maltese? What are your views on this issue?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A 2012 study, prepared for members of the European Parliament in the civil liberties committee, claims a negative attitude towards homosexuality can be found in relation to teachers and schools, even in countries where the general attitude is more positive. It said that schools, including Maltese schools, do not provide information about homosexuality, or if it does this information is biased and incorrect. How do you feel about the findings of this study?</li></ul>	
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