

Teacher Education Matters: **transforming lives... transforming schools**

Christopher Bezzina and Sandro Caruana



L-Università
ta' Malta

Faculty of Education
1978-2018

Celebrating our Faculty's 40th Anniversary 1978-2018

Contents

Preface	IX
Acknowledgements	XI
Introduction	XIII
Contributors	XV

SECTION 1: Identity, Professionalization and tomorrow's teachers

Introduction to Section 1	2
Ronald Sultana, Adrian Gellel and Sandro Caruana	4
Initial Teacher Education in Malta: a long and winding road.	
Simone Galea	24
Teachers 'Becoming Woman'. Beyond the Competences Approach in Becoming a Teacher.	
Michelle Attard Tonna	34
Teacher Education in a Globalised Age.	
Lara Said	54
Professionalisation of the Local Early Years workforce: Why do we keep missing the boat?	
Deborah A. Chetcuti and Michael A. Buhagiar	73
Assessing the field placement in Initial Teacher Education: finding a balance between formative and summative assessment.	
Doreen Spiteri	88
Using corpus linguistics to analyse post lesson observation feedback.	
Victor Martinelli	103
Social background and literacy skills of entering teacher education candidates.	
Kenneth Wain	114
Competing Conceptions of the Educated Public.	

SECTION 2: Educational developments and the Role of the Faculty of Education

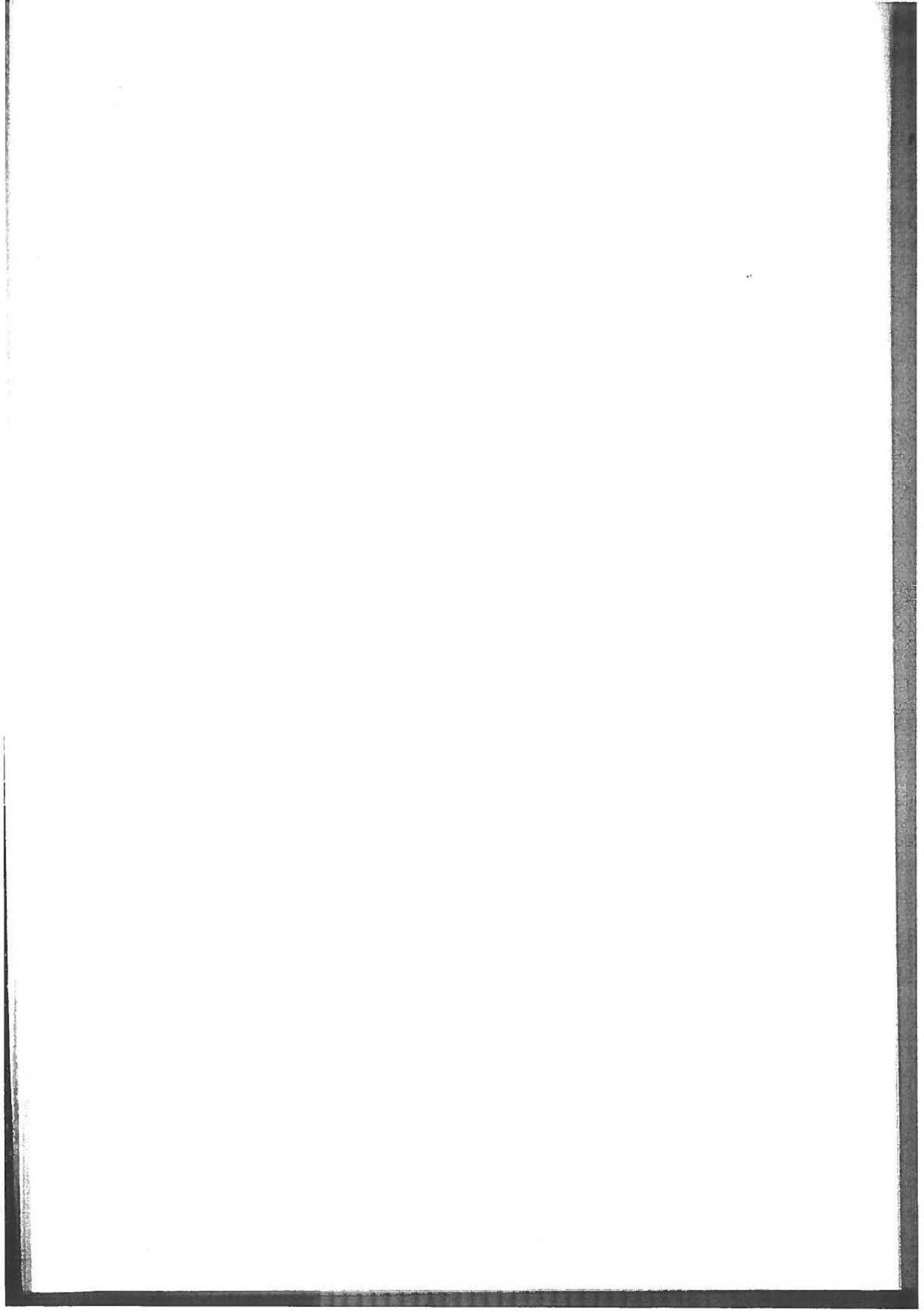
Introduction to Section 2	128
Paul Pace	130
Education for Sustainable Development: a conceptual and methodological evolution.	
Suzanne Gatt	141
Supporting Primary Science through Initial Teacher Training: A historical perspective.	
Sarah Pulé and Carmel Navarro	153
Reflections about Technology Teaching and Learning in Malta: Achievements, Challenges, Lessons Learnt by the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta.	
Patrick Camilleri	166
Schools, culture and the digital era. A case for change?	

SECTION 3: Leadership, teacher agency and Professional Learning

Introduction to Section 3	178
Christopher Bezzina	180
'The Road less Traveled': Professional Communities in Secondary Schools.	
Carl-Mario Sultana	190
Educating through Communities of Practice.	
James Calleja	200
Learning to Enact Reform Practices: Understanding teachers' work within contrasting learning contexts.	
Mark Farrugia	220
Teacher Agency in Professional Learning and Development.	
Rose Anne Cuschieri	248
The Power of Willpower - A study on the role and importance of willpower as perceived by Maltese Educational leaders.	
Alan Scerri	259
Catholic Schools: their identity and mission.	
Milosh Raykov	274
Current Trends and Promising Practices in Teacher Learning: A synthesis of findings from recent international surveys.	

SECTION 4: Impacting on Practice...
exploring curricula and pedagogical issues in educational contexts

Introduction to Section 4	284
Marie Therese Farrugia	288
From Policy to Practice: Giving Attention to Language in Primary Mathematics Education.	
Antoinette Camilleri Grima	302
Young Children Living Bilingually in Malta.	
Neal Sammut and Anne-Marie Bezzina	315
Grammatical Difficulties in Foreign Language Writing: The case of Maltese learners of French as Target Language.	
Sandro Caruana, Stefania Scaglione and Phyllisienne Vassallo Gauci	330
Multilingualism and the Inclusion of migrant learners in Maltese schools.	
Yosanne Vella	344
Strategies to learn about multiculturalism and diversity through Maltese history.	
Karl Attard	365
Holistic development of the child through Physical Education based on the ideals of Olympism.	
Suzanne Piscopo, Karen Mugliett and Lorraine Portelli	378
The role of Home Economics in educating for holistic wellbeing: A review of research and practice in Malta in recent years.	
George Cremona	395
The use of Multimodal pedagogical resources in educational contexts marked by social and economic disadvantage: A comparative analysis of Malta and Bataan.	
Charles Bonello	412
Using cognitive conflict to support Maltese student teachers' understanding of abstract science concepts – a case study.	
Raphael Vella	426
A Pedagogy of Dialogue: Curating and Artistic Education.	
Deborah Chetcuti, Ruth Falzon and Stephen Camilleri	433
'The Pebble in my Shoe': Dyslexic students and their views of examinations.	
Josette Farrugia	448
'Maltese teachers' experience of the implementation of inquiry-based learning in science.	



Section IV
**IMPACTING ON PRACTICE... EXPLORING CURRICULA
AND PEDAGOGICAL ISSUES IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS**

“The pebble in my shoe”: Dyslexic students and their views of examinations.

Deborah Chetcuti, Ruth Falzon and Stephen Camilleri

Abstract

This study narrates the views of six students with a profile of dyslexia regarding examinations. Following current trends in educational research, the study tried to give voice to the students themselves. In-depth interviews were carried out to find out what the students thought about examinations, the challenges they faced and how they thought examinations could be made ‘fairer.’ Results reported in this chapter suggest that dyslexic students experience real challenges when sitting for examinations due to their dyslexic profile; the time constraints of examinations and the stress and anxiety caused by their perceived inability to achieve at par with their peers. The students believed that these challenges hindered their performance in examinations. At the same time they hoped for a ‘fairer’ examinations system based on their involvement in the decision-making process that took into consideration their individual needs and well-being.

Keywords: dyslexia; high-stakes examinations; students’ views; “fairer” examinations.

Examinations at the end of secondary and post-secondary schooling are becoming increasingly more ‘high-stakes’ for students (Hopfenbeck, 2017). They provide students with the necessary qualifications for entry into further education or the world of work (Elwood, 2012) and therefore have a significant impact on students’ life chances and opportunities (Elwood, Hopfenbeck & Baird, 2017). Due to these ‘high-stakes’, examinations take over the life of students, influence their plans for the future, leave no time for extracurricular activities such as music and sport and leave them constantly under pressure to get good grades. Within such a context, doing well in examinations becomes the main goal of schooling (Elwood et al., 2017; Elwood, 2012).

If, based on this research, we acknowledge that examinations have an impact on all students’ lives, then we also need to recognise that “the effects of examinations may be magnified for those who enter the process already labouring under a disadvantage” (Gardner, Holmes & Leitch, 2009, p. 8). Students who enter the examinations race with such a disadvantage are students with a profile of dyslexia. Dyslexia is a complex condition that affects 10% of the student population (British Dyslexia Association (BDA), 2017) and research (Crisp, Johnson & Novacovic, 2012) suggests that dyslexic students experience greater challenges than non-dyslexic students when taking examinations. These challenges are usually associated with the general characteristics of the dyslexic profile that may lead to students having difficulties with reading fluency and accuracy, challenges with short term memory (ASM), and sequencing and organisation of ideas that all impact on the performance of students in examinations (see Bender, 2004; Lerner & Johns, 2011; Moats, 2001). What is problematic is that within the academic community there is

lack of scientific consensus about what dyslexia really is, how it can be identified and what can be done about it (Riddell & Weedon, 2006). As a result, not all examination boards and educators acknowledge the challenges faced by dyslexic students when sitting for examinations. Within the assessment community there is still the persistent notion that students with dyslexia face difficulties and challenges that are not very different from other students who have weak reading abilities or lower cognitive skills (Crisp et al., 2012).

This paper, therefore aims to draw attention to how students with a profile of dyslexia experience 'high-stakes' examinations. We chose to focus on students with a profile of dyslexia since as teachers, educators and parents we have often met students with dyslexia who shared with us the feelings of stress and anxiety they experience when sitting for examinations, the sense of frustration when they did not obtain the desired results and the overwhelming conviction that examinations were not treating them fairly. We therefore wanted to look at the experiences of these students as they ran the examinations race with 'a pebble in their shoe' (the dyslexia), the challenges they faced; and what they believed could make running the examinations race 'fairer'.

In line with the growing practice in educational research to include students' views about issues that directly affect them (Cook-Sather, 2006; Elwood, 2013), we wanted to look at examinations from the perspective of the students themselves. Like Elwood (2012) we believe that listening to the students narrating their personal experiences of examinations boards and policy makers identify key issues influencing examination practices and can be "immensely effective in bringing about significant changes to students' environment, learning and wellbeing" (p.105). We hope that in the context of the examinations arena, where the voice of the dyslexic student is significantly absent, the students' stories can provide insights and create a greater awareness about some of the challenges experienced by dyslexic students and influence discussion and policy-making about assessment practices that directly affected them and their life chances (Kirwan & Leather, 2011).

Defining Dyslexia

Traditionally, students with a profile of dyslexia are considered to be able children who have difficulties with reading and spelling (Crisp et al., 2006). The BDA (2017) defines dyslexia as:

a specific learning difficulty which mainly affects the development of literacy and language related skills. It is likely to be present at birth and to be life-long in its effects. It is characterized by difficulties with phonological processing, rapid naming, working memory, processing speed and the automatic development of skills that may not match up to an individual's other cognitive abilities" (para. 4).

This definition associates dyslexia with a discrepancy between the language skills of students and their general cognitive abilities. It also identifies some of the general characteristics associated with dyslexia.

While traditional definitions of dyslexia have focused on dyslexia as a learning difficulty with emphasis on what students lack in comparison to their peers, new research using neuro-imaging evidence shows that the dyslexic brain co-ordinates, receives and processes information differently (see Kirwan & Leather, 2011; Shaywitz, Lyon & Shaywitz, 2006). Current definitions of dyslexia therefore try to move beyond the difficulties and also describe a number of positive skills associated with dyslexia. These positive skills include "big-picture thinking, problem-solving and

lateral thinking abilities, an instinctive understanding of how things work, originality, creativity and exceptional visual spatial skills” (BDA, 2017, para. 4).

The Challenges Faced by Dyslexic Students in Examinations

Dyslexic students may experience a number of language difficulties that make written examinations much harder for them than for other students (Alexander-Passe, 2008; Crisp et al., 2012). These difficulties can include recognition of letters in the text, blurring of letters, letters seen as mirror images and a confusing combination of letters all of which make it more difficult to understand a text. In addition some might also have difficulty with ASM and motor skills (Crisp et al., 2012). The major consequences of the difficulties described are that when reading, dyslexics can add or omit words or read them incorrectly due to lack of reading fluency and automaticity (e.g. Hudson, Lane & Pullen, 2005; Lyon, Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2003; Hudson, et al., 2008). This can give a different meaning to the question being asked and it can affect the comprehension of a text. There could also be difficulties with vocabulary and spelling, with sequencing of ideas and writing answers that are clear, logical and concise.

Another factor that influences dyslexic students during examinations is the time factor. Examinations are usually held within specific time periods and the amount of time given by examiners for students to respond to test questions is very important for students (Elliot & Marquart, 2004). For dyslexic students time is crucial because they take longer to write, have to make more effort to understand questions and they may have developed slow and vigilant methods of working in order to try and reduce their mistakes (Carroll & Iles, 2006). Within the context of a timed examination, dyslexic students show lower levels of performance than in untimed testing conditions (Elliot & Marquart, 2004).

The performance of students in examinations is also influenced by emotional factors such as motivation and test anxiety (Stenlund, Eklof & Lyren, 2017). Research evidence suggests that students with dyslexia experience greater amounts of anxiety and stress related worries than other students sitting for high stakes examinations (eg. Antonelli et al., 2014; Carroll & Iles, 2006). The anxiety is often manifested by physiological characteristics such as shaking hands, worries and emotional reactions during the actual examination (Woods, Parkinson & Lewis, 2010) that could interfere with students’ optimal test performance (Stenlund et al., 2017). The anxiety related to high-stakes examinations is also related to dyslexic students’ belief that they are ‘stupid’ when compared to others (Glazzard, 2010); that they do not have control over their own successes and that no matter how much effort they make they will not be able to improve their results (Humphrey & Mullins, 2002).

The challenges experienced by dyslexic students in relation to examinations are not just perceived difficulties but they are real challenges that can have serious consequences. The language accessibility of dyslexic students with the added anxiety and stress created by the fixed timed conditions of examinations does hinder dyslexic students from showing their knowledge, understanding and skills (Crisp et al., 2012). Students with a profile of dyslexia run the examination race with a pebble in their shoe, and although they can and do make it to the finishing line, running the race is much harder (Chetcuti, Falzon & Camilleri, 2017). This is an issue of fairness to which we shall now turn.

Making Examinations ‘Fairer’ for Dyslexic Students

Since examinations play such an important role in the lives of students, there has been an increasing drive world-wide to try and raise the standards and quality of examinations to ensure

that they are as “efficient, reliable, valid and fair as possible for all test takers” (Elwood, 2013, p. 207). In practice, examination boards try to develop a ‘fairer’ system of examinations by trying to create an educational ‘level-playing field’. They try to do this by developing tests that are psychometrically reliable, valid, neutral and objective since within the taken-for-granted academic cultures of examination boards these procedural safeguards are equated with ‘fairness’ (McArthur, 2016).

What is problematic about this notion of fairness is that it does not factor in the social consequences of assessment practices (Stobart, 2005). As argued by McArthur (2016), “students line up at the same starting place and have a clearly defined and common finishing line – but all other factors are ignored in the name of fairness” (p. 9). In reality, the educational playing field in relation to examinations can never be equal or level for all students (Murphy & Elwood, 1998). Examinations are usually designed for students who fit a societal norm, can read and write, can understand what is expected from them by examiners and have been well prepared for examinations (Gardner et al., 2009). Students with a profile of dyslexia do not adapt well to the way in which examinations are currently designed and this one-size fits all system of examinations (Elwood & Lundy, 2010) is not in their best interests.

Examination boards have tried to address issues of fairness and equity in relation to students with a profile of dyslexia by providing dyslexic students sitting for examinations with access arrangements (also called accommodations). These access arrangements could include “changes to where the assessments are administered, how long students have to complete assessment tasks, the type of resources available to students during the testing, access to assistive technologies and the ways in which students choose to demonstrate their knowledge and skills (Scott, et.al, 2014, p. 55). Other adjustments include the use of a scribe to write responses, a prompter to help students concentrate, and a reader to read questions (Woods et al., 2010). There is conflicting evidence as to whether these access arrangements actually make a difference in student achievement. Some studies (Crisp et al., 2012) suggest that access arrangements make no difference in the actual achievement of students while other studies (Elliot & Marquart, 2004) indicate that access arrangements result in a more positive examination experience and can reduce test-anxiety.

Context and Background of the Study

The study was carried out within the context of the Maltese educational system, more specifically related to the two ‘high-stakes’ examinations at the end of secondary schooling. These examinations are developed locally, by the Matriculation and Secondary Education Examination (MATSEC) Board and include the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) examinations and those taken two years later at the end of post-secondary education, the Matriculation Certificate examinations. When introduced in 1992, the main philosophy behind the SEC and Matriculation examinations was to allow students to show what they “know, understand and are able to produce” (MATSEC Support Unit, 1992, p. 2). However, the examinations are also the main qualifications used for entry into post-secondary education, University and employment. This has resulted in a strong focus on academic and scholarly knowledge that may unintentionally create selectivity and put a number of students sitting for their SEC and Matriculation examinations at a disadvantage (Grima & Ventura, 2006).

With respect to students with ‘special educational needs’, including learning difficulties such as dyslexia, the policy of the MATSEC Board is to make the necessary examination access arrangements (EAA) to allow all candidates to show their competence. These EAA may include

extra time, a reader, a prompter or a scribe. They are granted depending on the severity of the condition and need to be supported by relevant attestations from professionals. The granting of EAA is still the subject of much debate within the MATSEC Board and among other stakeholders. Some stakeholders fear that granting EAA may inadvertently advantage students from middle class families whose parents can afford to obtain the necessary certification for their children and who are more aware of the provisions available. Others stakeholders mostly parents of dyslexic students complain that the Board is not generous enough with its provisions (Antonelli et al., 2014; Grima & Ventura, 2006).

Methodology

The main aim of the research was to obtain an in-depth perspective of dyslexic students' views on examinations. We wanted to tap the stories and narratives (Goodson, 2013) of dyslexic students in order to try and understand how the students were constructing their own views of examinations. Students opted to participate in the study on a voluntary basis and an opt-in procedure of recruitment was employed. Following ethical clearance from our university, a letter was sent to the Malta Dyslexia Association (MDA) informing them about the study and its main aims and objectives. This letter was circulated amongst all the members of the association and six students agreed to participate in the study. Consent forms were sent out to all the students and their parents informing them about the study, ensuring confidentiality and the possibility of opting out of the study at any point. The main criterion used for accepting the students who volunteered was that they had been professionally identified as having a profile of dyslexia. The six participants were between 16 and 18 years old and their profile of dyslexia ranged from mild to severe. Anonymity was respected. Rachel, Sarah, Andrew, and Paul had just sat for their SEC examinations, whilst Mark and Alex had just taken their MATSEC examinations. They all came from different backgrounds with parents who worked in diverse areas ranging from health care to education to industry.

The research made use of audio-recorded, semi-structured open-ended interviews. Interviews were chosen as the method of data collection because we wanted to try and "make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). The interviews were carried out individually or in pairs depending on the preference of the participants. Two of the authors carried out the interviews so as to ensure a more authentic interpretation of the data. The face-to-face interaction (Fontana & Frey, 2005) allowed us to obtain data that was rich, trustworthy and authentic. The interviews were carried out in either the offices of the researchers or at the homes of the participants so as to ensure that they were at ease and in a safe and comfortable environment. Following Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011), the interview was based on a number of open-ended questions that were determined beforehand and developed into an interview schedule to ensure consistency. However, throughout the interview the students were encouraged to speak openly about the questions and any other topics they wanted to discuss.

The data from the interviews were transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach. The analytic process followed what Goodson (2013) describes as "drowning in the data" (p. 40). Like Goodson (2013) we read the data slowly and over and over again, marking the emergent themes on the pages of the transcripts. Eventually, some of the themes became saturated and this indicated that these were the most salient aspects of the data collected. These key themes were developed into a reflexive, multi-voiced narrative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The purpose was not to make any generalised statements about all students with a profile of dyslexia. Rather, through the data we wanted to present a bricolage of stories (Goodson, 2013) that provide clues and insights into students' experiences of examinations.

Running the Examinations Race with 'The Pebble in my Shoe': The Students' Views of Dyslexia And Examinations

The six students who participated in the study were very much aware of their learning difficulty. The dyslexia or 'the pebble in their shoe' was part and parcel of their everyday life. They described dyslexia as a learning difficulty mainly related to language:

Dyslexia is a learning disability, or rather a different way of thinking. Dyslexia is when a person has trouble processing the written or spoken word. It is primarily related to language but it might also affect the way in which you process things within a short period of time. (Mark)

This definition is similar to traditional definitions of dyslexia given in the literature (see Crisp et al., 2012). However, in line with current neurological research that indicates that dyslexia might be due to differences in the way in which the brain is organised (MacCullagh, 2014), the participants also suggested that dyslexia was a different way of thinking rather than a disability:

...your brain works differently from someone else...it's wired differently...if I'm not so good in spelling and writing...then I excel in other things like being creative...
(Alex)

Although aware of the difficulties associated with being dyslexic, the participants were also keen to focus on their strengths and "the positive skills" (BDA, 2017) associated with a profile of dyslexia:

I try to look at dyslexia from a positive side. I think that because of my dyslexia I can think out of the box. For example if you give someone a computer, they will probably just look at it...I see the inside of the computer and in my mind I have already visualised all the different things going on inside the computer. I have a different way of looking at things and that helps me to solve problems in a way that other teenagers do not even dream about. (Rachel)

Challenges Faced by Dyslexic Students

When the students were asked to define dyslexia, they tended to focus on the strengths and positive aspects of dyslexia rather than the difficulties associated with a dyslexic profile. However, when they were asked to give their views about examinations their perspective was less positive. They described examinations as dominating their lives and expressed their fear that examinations would limit their life chances and opportunities:

I used to be very worried because I used to think that how I perform in the exam is going to affect my whole life. If I don't manage to get the exams I won't be able to do what I really want to do...Sometimes you have opportunities but you cannot take them because you do not have the necessary qualifications. (Andrew)

They described a number of challenges that they faced due to having to run the examinations race with 'the pebble in their shoe'. For them examinations did not provide opportunities to showcase their strengths, created unnecessary stress and anxiety, and limited their true potential and future opportunities in life. Mark very eloquently described the challenges posed by examinations for students with a profile of dyslexia:

How can I ever achieve my full potential if the way in which exams are designed and structured with ridiculous time constraints act as a hindrance rather than a way to prove my worth? Must all the work, effort and struggle throughout a course of studies be valued on a single day? Should sitting for an examination create so much anxiety and nervousness? The problem that examiners fail to understand is that these negative experiences have repercussions. Self worth is destroyed along with self-respect and the notion that in life you get what you deserve. I wonder how many great minds were lost simply because the type of intelligence and ideas they had were not the ones the examiners wanted?

Mark's concerns are very realistic concerns and are all linked to fears expressed by students in other studies (see Elwood, 2013) that without the necessary qualifications associated with examinations, one's chances to be successful in life become very limited.

As we read through the student narratives it became clear that there were three major challenges that hindered dyslexic students from performing at their best during examinations. These were (1) language difficulties; (2) time constraints and (3) the stress and anxiety caused by the high stakes of the examinations.

Language Difficulties

The characteristics of dyslexia include difficulties with reading, spelling, sequencing of ideas and omitting or adding words when reading (Bender, 2004; Lerner & Johns, 2011). The participants described having difficulties with reading the questions and not understanding what the examiner was asking:

...I had a question and I could not understand what they wanted from it...the wording was really confusing...it's not that I didn't know the answer. I simply didn't know the examiner's expectations... (Sarah)

Another common difficulty associated with dyslexia is the incorrect reading of part of a question that may lead to giving the wrong answer. Alex described his disappointment at not getting a good mark, not because he did not know the answer but because he had not read the question correctly:

I had a test and after the teacher showed me the paper and I lost 20 marks because I didn't read the question properly. The question was 'not using this theory' and I read it 'using this theory'. What I wrote down was perfect and the teacher himself told me: 'the answer is perfect but I can't give you a single mark for what you wrote as you didn't answer the question asked'.

As described by Humphrey and Mullins (2002), this sense of disappointment was made even worse by teachers and examiners who often point out that a little extra care or re-reading the question would help. In reality, the solution is not so simple because, as Mark explained, reading a question incorrectly is not something that he does out of carelessness and no amount of reading and re-reading will allow him to identify his mistake:

I've experienced this in my exams where instead of reading one thing I read another thing completely different without noticing and then obviously the question or the essay will be out of point. I read the question countless times and check my work but it doesn't seem to help as I repeat the same mistake countless times...

Another very frustrating aspect of examinations for students with dyslexia is being penalised for spelling. Some examiners would argue that if you sit for a language examination, then knowing the correct spelling is fundamental. However, for students with dyslexia, spelling is an issue that they know will place them at a disadvantage even before they start the examination. Alex explained how with regard to spelling, his dyslexic profile or 'pebble in his shoe' was hindering him from running the examinations race at his full capacity:

In English... spelling is penalised and I always knew that I was starting out from 60 instead of 100 as the first 40 marks were always out as they are the marks for spelling...I was already starting at a disadvantage...The teacher used to tell me ...it's a very good essay and your writing is very creative.

Time Constraints

The participants also mentioned that time constraints hindered their performance in examinations. This is not an actual characteristic of dyslexia but as explained by Riddick (2000), dyslexic students take longer to prepare for examinations, and to read questions and write out answers. Therefore, time constraints are still a major challenge for dyslexic students, and as explained by Alex, dyslexic students take much longer to prepare for examinations:

I think that everyone has to go through examinations but with the dyslexia it used to take much longer for me...if I used to spend three hours on a subject someone else could possibly spend half the time. It's more time consuming...It takes much more time to read and so it takes much longer...

Furthermore, during the actual examinations the students felt that they were racing against time and this did not allow them to show all that they knew. For Andrew examinations were simply:

A race against time...you can't show what you really know because you have to write very fast and because I am writing very fast I end up writing the words badly... and I have no time to revise my work...

Mark further explained how when working out exam papers at home at his own pace he was calm and managed to work faster and more accurately. Knowing that he had a time limit created greater pressure that did not allow him to perform well:

...the added tension and stress of the exam and the mandatory time limit imposed made me take longer to work out questions and I never seemed to finish the exam paper...the time limit penalises people who are not capable of working as fast as others...

Stress and Anxiety

As argued by Stenlund et al. (2017), "emotional and motivational factors, such as test anxiety and test-taking motivation may also have an impact on test performance" (p. 5). The students in the current study, similar to students in other studies (e.g. Carroll & Iles, 2006; Woods, et al., 2010), described going through periods of great anxiety when sitting for examinations. They felt stressed prior to the examination, during the examination and after receiving their examination results.

Before they sit for examinations dyslexic students experience a large amount of stress and anxiety. This is caused by the belief that they are not in control of their own success (Humphrey &

Mullins, 2002) and that because of 'the pebble in their shoe' they will not make it to the finishing line. This leads to a sense of learned helplessness and low self-esteem that creates additional anxiety. As described by Alex:

I used to feel very badly about the fact that I knew that I deserved a B but I knew that I was going to get a C. That was something that bothered me...It used to make me feel down because I knew that the marks did not reflect my true potential. A pity but there was nothing I could do...

The participants also described a number of physiological responses directly related to anxiety as they sat for the actual examination. Alex described how in his first exam, "*I had a big migraine and the first half of the exam I hardly knew what I was doing...*" and Paul stated that he spent the whole examination, "*physically shaking...I could hardly keep the biro in my hand it was shaking so much.*" Rachel described the panic state she goes into before examinations:

I stay thinking...I'm not going to pass...I'm not going to pass...but then I try and calm myself...yet the thought that I am not going to pass does not go away...I eat a lot of chewing gum...but I am really pressured. I jump up and down and go running...I try to tire myself out because I spend two days not sleeping before the exams...I worry because although I know that I did all that I could...I still think that I am not going to pass.

Dyslexic students also undergo periods of extreme anxiety when they actually fail their examinations. They identify failure in examinations with a low sense of self worth and generalise this to every aspect of their life, seeing themselves as failures (Alexander-Passe, 2007):

...the examinations put me through a second depression...they led me to a very dark place...during the exams and a bit after when I failed all my examinations...the pure stress the pressure...the idea that I was never going to succeed in life because I couldn't get these marks...I couldn't face it...(Paul)

The stories of these participants suggest that the negative impact of examinations on dyslexic students is far more complex than what on the surface appears to be a quantitative judgement of ability. The social and emotional scars caused by an examination grade can have more far reaching consequences that determine the wellbeing of teens and their future aspirations. This places greater responsibility on examination boards to ensure the development of examinations that are 'fairer' for dyslexic students. As argued by Hopfenbeck (2017) researchers and practitioners need to try and find a balance between the "challenges of high-stakes testing and students' wellbeing" (p. 1).

Reaching the Finishing Line: Making Examinations 'Fairer' for Dyslexic Students

Ensuring fairness in examinations is an ongoing concern for examination boards and non-discrimination is one of the basic rights of each individual child (Elwood & Lundy, 2010). Fairness may be defined in many ways but in relation to assessment practices it means developing practices "that have the potential to reduce the effects of a variety of disadvantages that learners may experience" (Gardner et al., 2009, p. 3). Mark described some of these disadvantages:

...I think that the examinations board does not have a good knowledge and understanding of the challenges faced by dyslexic students. The board seems to

try and do its best to hinder dyslexic students. Why must an exam be purposefully designed in such a way that most people won't ever complete the paper? Why must exams focus on attempting to catch the students out on things they don't know rather than encouraging them to show off all that they have learnt?

This 'pebble in their shoe', makes reaching the finishing line more painful and difficult for dyslexic students when compared to students who do not have dyslexia. The differences amongst students and social influences need to be taken into consideration when considering fairness. As Stobart (2005) argues because of the differences amongst students at the starting point "we will never achieve fair assessment but we can make it fairer" (p. 285). As we talked with the students we wanted to obtain their views as to what they believed could make examinations 'fairer' for them. The participants associated making examinations 'fairer' with being given better Examination Access Arrangements (EAA). They felt very dependent on EAAs since they believed that these could remove some of the disadvantages they had because of their profile of dyslexia:

...I would argue that if I need to wear glasses I am allowed to wear them in the exam. This does not mean that I am being given an advantage over someone who does not need glasses. With dyslexics it's the same...if you give them help you are not giving them something extra but you are giving them what they need to start off at par with the others who are not dyslexic... (Andrew).

Andrew's suggestion reflects the concept of 'compensatory justice' (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2003) that tries to create a 'level playing field' for all students. The main problem with EAAs is that they are not given to all dyslexic students automatically. In some cases, in spite of professional and expert advice, students are denied the EAAs. This left the students feeling very frustrated by the fact that they were not receiving the support that would help them run the examinations race at a 'level-playing field'. Paul described this disappointment:

I needed a reader and a scribe and I went to a psychologist to prove that I needed this help...but I was still denied the help needed...I was gutted and I was honestly and genuinely scared. I knew for a fact that I wasn't going to do as well as I could have done...it worried me and I was right to be worried because it affected my grades...If I had been given the concessions I deserved I would have been less nervous before the exam...

One of the main reasons that students are not granted EAAs is the fear that these may advantage dyslexic students over other students (Grima & Ventura, 2006). The arguments put forward by Andrew and Paul indicate that this is not the case, but the EAAs mainly give dyslexic students the support they need to start the examination race with a positive attitude. This is emphasised by Mark, who in line with research carried out by Elliot and Marquart (2004) suggests that EAAs can reduce examination anxiety:

Obviously it is hard to say whether my grade would change or not. If I had extra time my level of anxiety would probably have been less and even if I did not use that extra time, it being there at the back of my mind that I had that extra 15 minutes helped calm me down a lot (Mark).

When thinking of suggestions that would make examinations fairer for them, the students mentioned compensatory measures that they thought would help them achieve better. These

included a better presentation of the paper with *“a larger font on the examination paper”* (Sarah); oral examinations so that they *“would be able to explain much better than when trying to write things down”* (Alex); extra time *“so that I don’t have to leave any questions out”* (Andrew); use of computers *“if I did not have a computer the examiner would not have been able to read my answers”* (Rachel); more marks for coursework as this *“reflects the work and effort you would have put in throughout the whole year”* (Mark); a better examination environment *“in a nicer location and if possible in your own school”* (Paul).

The participants envisaged a ‘fairer’ examinations system as one that provided them with opportunities to compensate for having to run the examinations race with a pebble in their shoe. Although they critiqued the examinations system, they still used the language of examiners and educators who look at ‘fairness’ through the psychometric lens of reliability and validity. Sarah managed to think outside the box and asked to be listened to and for greater participation in the decision-making process regarding examinations. Likewise, Elwood et al. (2015) suggest that students *“have important contributions to make”* (p. 34) to help us better understand what makes assessment ‘fairer’ for students with a profile of dyslexia. In Sarah’s words:

I would change the system. It would be hard but I think that someday it will happen. I would see more what the students want. I never met the people at the exam board...I don’t know who they are but if you knew these people you could go and talk to them and tell them what you think...if they knew what I was thinking they could make examinations more friendly...I am not talking about just dyslexia friendly but young people friendly...

Discussion and Reflections

The collective voices of the dyslexic students in this study revealed several issues about the impact of examinations on the lives of students with a profile of dyslexia. Although the study was based on the views of six participants and cannot be generalised to all students with a profile of dyslexia, the experiences narrated in this study provide a number of insights that can be used positively by examination boards and educators to make ‘high-stakes’ examinations ‘fairer’ for dyslexic students. The major implication of the students’ narratives is that dyslexic students do experience real difficulties in examinations associated with their dyslexia that does not allow them to perform at par with their peers. These challenges that, as described by the students themselves, are mainly related to language difficulties in reading examination questions, spelling, ASM, sequencing of ideas and having to perform within rigid time constraints, do not allow the dyslexic students to perform at their best and show what they know and can do.

The participants of the study believe that the traditional written examinations that form what McArthur (2016) describes as the cultural paradigm of current examination procedures do not show who they really are. In their definitions of dyslexia, the students focused on their positive skills, their creativity, their ability to think outside of the box and to problem solve. However, these positive characteristics are not assessed within the ‘one-size-fits-all’ examination system (Elwood, 2012). In the students’ view, examinations assess only the ‘cultural capital’ that is considered of value (Klenowski, 2009) and places them at a disadvantage. The major worry is that this disadvantage will influence life chances and opportunities and as argued by Glazzard (2010), *“until the education system begins to recognise and celebrate success in a range of areas, learners with dyslexia will continue to be classified and marked out as failures”* (p. 68).

What is also very evident in the students’ narratives is that as pointed out by Stenlund et al. (2017)

“the test may measure more than the test developers intended (i.e. not only the proficiency of the test-taker but also how he or she manages to cope with the situation as such” (p. 4). The students in the study repeatedly state that the feelings of frustration, anxiety, anger and low self-esteem, interfere with their performance on examinations. Unfortunately, examination boards seem to be more pre-occupied with maintaining examination rigour associated with reliability and validity and are reluctant to recognise the emotional impact that examinations have on dyslexic students (Kirwan and Leather, 2011). Like Hopfenbeck (2017) the students call for ‘fairer’ examination systems and a better balance between the challenges of high-stakes testing and their personal well-being.

As we listened to the students’ views of what they believed would make examinations ‘fairer’ for them, we realised that the students equated ‘fairness’ with ‘equality’. Their view of ‘fairness’ was highly dependent on a compensatory model of social justice (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2003) that allocated resources and opportunities in order to try and remedy the disadvantages they experienced. Participants in fact believed that ‘fairness’ could be attained through the provision of Examination Access Arrangements such as extra time, a scribe or a reader and that this would help them to perform better in examinations. Drawing on sociocultural theories that view learning as not neutral (Elwood & Murphy, 2015) we would critique this approach and argue that it is “naïve given our understanding of the very different sociocultural experiences of students” (Klenowski, 2009, p. 83). Like Stobart (2005,) we would argue that, “fairness is fundamentally a sociocultural, rather than a technical issue” (p. 275). With respect to dyslexic students this redefinition of ‘fairness’ implies that examinations should as stated by Sarah look to the needs of the students and include “the valued knowledge and skills” (Klenowski, 2009, p. 8) that reflects their learning and understanding rather than trying to fit them into the norm.

These students’ narratives present key messages for examination boards, educators and policy makers. The students presented strong ideas that change is needed in the current form of examination systems, in order to “ensure that all students have improved opportunities to demonstrate their learning” (Scott et al., 2014, p. 67). Like Scott et al. (2014), we would argue that broad-based transformation of the examination system requires substantial:

...effort and resources to be put into effect. Nevertheless there are many minor changes and adjustments that could be easily implemented and these would have a significant impact on the learning success and achievement of children who experience challenges.” (p. 63)

Some of these minor changes were suggested by the students themselves and included simple adjustments such as changing the colour of the examination paper, using a larger font, including oral and practical examinations together with written examinations, allowing the use of technology such as computers and having the examinations in a familiar setting such as the students’ own school. These adjustments would minimise some of the discomfort of having to run the examinations race with ‘the pebble in their shoe’, would not put extra strain on human and financial resources of examinations boards and, above all, would not taint the objective of the examination.

In the long term however, the students believe that there needs to be a complete transformation of the examination system in order to ensure ‘fairness’ and their well-being. Sarah suggested that this can be done by involving the students themselves in the decision making process about examinations and putting the individual needs of students at the heart of all assessment practices.

This is a shift to “a participatory justice” (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2003) that is based on the concepts of human rights and extends to children’s rights and providing students with the “opportunities to participate meaningfully throughout the decision making processes” (Elwood & Lundy, 2010, p. 346). Therefore, supporting Sarah’s recommendation, like Elwood (2013) we would argue that the key message for examination boards is that they should “actively support and embed the consultation and participation of young people’s views” (p. 108) in any decision making about examinations. This is a shift in current views of assessment from “something that is being done to students to something that is being done with and for the students” (Klenowski, 2009, p. 89).

Conclusions

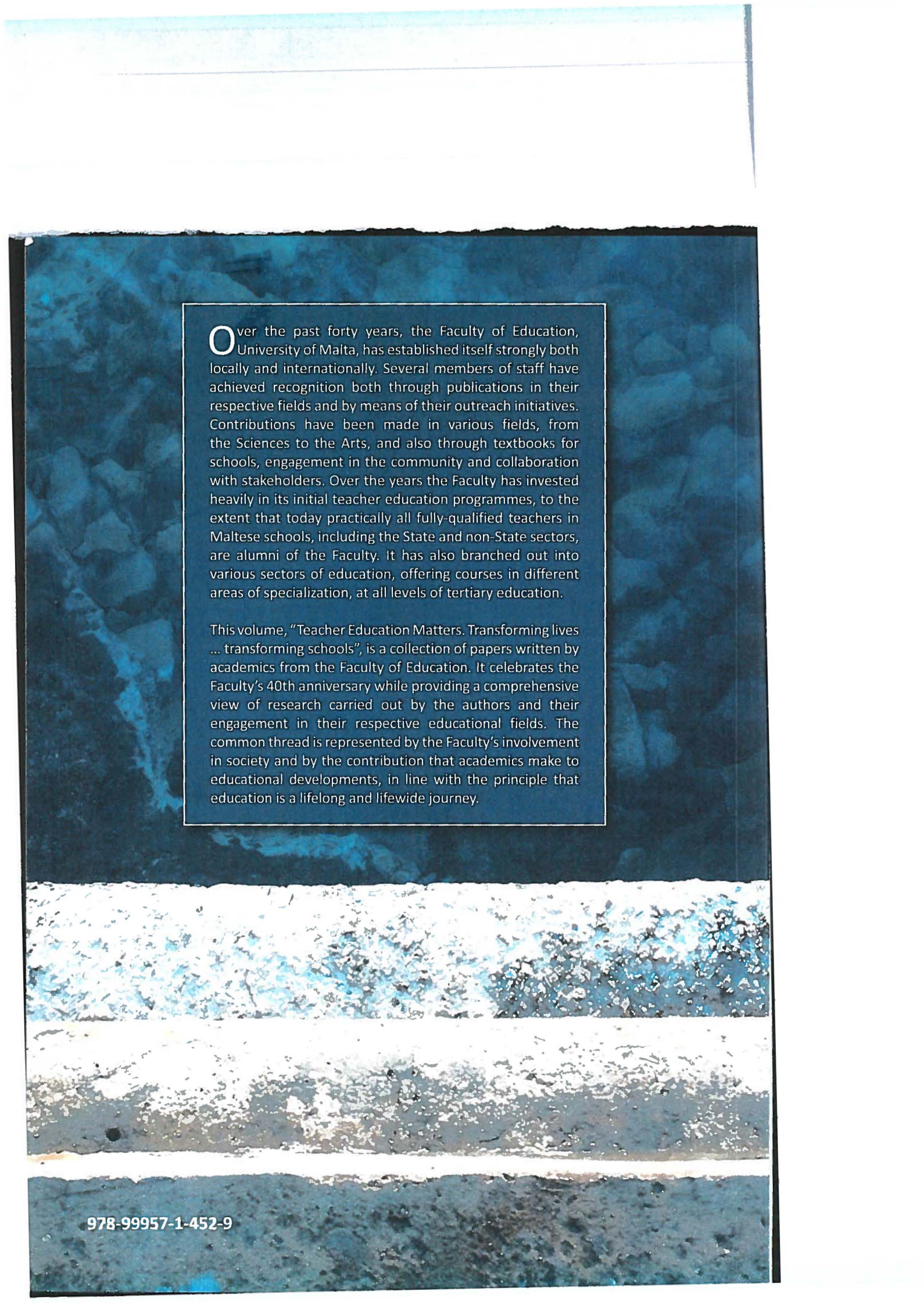
This research study contributes to the emerging literature regarding students’ views about examinations more specifically in relation to students with a profile of dyslexia. The experiences of Rachel, Sarah, Andrew, Paul, Mark and Alex are a window into the challenges they faced as they ran the examinations race with ‘the pebble in their shoe’. They shared their frustrations, anxieties and hopes for a ‘fairer’ examinations system. We hope that examiners, educators and policy makers will hear their voices and initiate more informed dialogue and planned engagement with dyslexic students to allow them to be successful in the examinations race with or without the pebble in their shoe.

REFERENCES

- Alexander-Passe, N. (2008). The sources and manifestations of stress amongst school-aged dyslexics, compared with sibling controls. *Dyslexia*, 14(4), 291-313.
- Antonelli, L., Bilocca, S., Borg, D., Borg, S., Boxall, M., Briffa, L., Debono, C., Falzon, R., Farrugia, V., Gatt, L., Formosa, M., Mifsud, D., Mizzi, K., Scurfield, L., Sucrfield, M., & Vella, G.L. (2014). Drama, Performance Ethnography, and Self-Esteem: Listening to Youngsters With Dyslexia and Their Parents. *SAGE Open*, 4(2), 1-15.
- Bender, W. N. (2004). *Learning disabilities: Characteristics, identification, and teaching strategies*. Allyn & Bacon.
- British Dyslexia Association. (2017). Retrieved from <http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/educator/what-are-specific-learning-difficulties#Dyslexia>.
- Carroll, J.M., & Iles, J.E. (2006). An assessment of anxiety levels in dyslexic students in higher education. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 76, 651-662.
- Chetcuti, D., Falzon, R., & Camilleri, S. (2017). *A pebble in my shoe: teenagers’ experiences of dyslexia and examinations*. Malta: Authors.
- Cook-Sather, A. (2006). Sound, Presence, and Power: ‘Student Voice in Educational Research and Reform. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 36(4), 359-390.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2011). *Research Methods in Education*. New York: Routledge.
- Cribb, A., & Gerwitz, S. (2003). Towards a sociology of just practices: an analysis of plural conceptions of justice. In C. Vincent (ed.). *Social Justice in Education* (pp. 15-29). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Crisp, V., Johnson, M., & Novacovic, N. (2012). The effects of features of examination questions on the performance of students with dyslexia. *British Educational Research Journal*, 38(5), 813-839.
- Denzin, N.K., & Lincoln, Y.S. (2005). Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research. In N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds.). *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 1 -20). Los Angeles: Sage.

- Elliot, S.N., & Marquart, A.M. (2004). Extended time as a testing accommodation: Its effects and perceived consequences. *Exceptional Children*, 70, 349-367.
- Elwood, J. (2012). Qualifications, examinations and assessment: views and perspectives of students in the 14-19 phase on policy and practice. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 42(4), 497-512.
- Elwood, J. (2013). The role(s) of student voice in 14-19 education policy reform: reflections on consultation and participation. *London Review of Education*, 11(2), 97-111.
- Elwood, J., Hopfenbeck, T., & Baird, J. (2017). Predictability in high-stakes examinations: students' perspectives on a perennial assessment dilemma. *Research Papers in Education*, 32(1), 1-17.
- Elwood, J., & Lundy, L. (2010). Revisioning assessment through a children's rights approach: implications for policy, process and practice. *Research Papers in Education*, 25(3), 335-353.
- Elwood, J., & Murphy, P. (2015). Assessment as cultural scripts: a sociocultural theoretical lens on assessment practice and products. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, 22(2), 182-192.
- Fontana, A., & Frey, J.H. (2005). The interview: From neutral stance to political involvement. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed., pp. 695-727). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gardner, J., Holmes, B., & Leitch, R. (2009). *Assessment and Social Justice: a Futurelab literature review, Report 16*. Bristol: Futurelab.
- Glazzard, J. (2010). The impact of dyslexia on pupils' self-esteem. *Support for Learning*, 25(2), 63-69.
- Grima, G., & Ventura, F. (2006). Auditing a national system of examinations: issues of selectivity in the Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) examination in Malta. *International Studies in Education*, 16(3), 207-221.
- Goodson, I. (2013). *Developing Narrative Theory: Life Histories and Personal Representation*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Hopfenbeck, T.N. (2017). Balancing the challenges of high-stakes testing, accountability and students' well-being. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, 24(1), 1-3.
- Hudson, R. F., Lane, H. B., & Pullen, P. C. (2005). Reading fluency assessment and instruction: What, why, and how? *The Reading Teacher*, 58(8), 702-714.
- Hudson, R. F., Pullen, P. C., Lane, H. B., & Torgesen, J. K. (2008). The complex nature of reading fluency: A multidimensional view. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 25(1), 4-32.
- Humphrey, N., & Mullins, P.M. (2002). Personal constructs and attribution for academic success and failure in dyslexia. *British Journal of Special Education*, 29(4), 196-203.
- Kirwan, B., & Leather, C. (2011). Students' voices: a report of the student view of dyslexia study skills tuition. *Support for Learning*, 26(1), 33-41.
- Klenowski, V. (2009). Australian indigenous students: addressing equity issues in assessment. *Teaching Education*, 20(1), 77-93.
- Lyon, G. R., Shaywitz, S. E., & Shaywitz, B. A. (2003). A definition of dyslexia. *Annals of dyslexia*, 53(1), 1-14.
- Lerner, J. W., & Johns, B. (2011). *Learning disabilities and related mild disabilities*. Cengage Learning.
- MacCullagh, L. (2014). Participation and experiences of students with dyslexia in higher education: a literature review with an Australian focus. *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, 19(2), 93-111.
- Matsec Support Unit (1992). *SEC Examination from 1994: The New Format*. Malta: MATSEC Support Unit.
- McArthur, J. (2016). Assessment for social justice: the role of assessment in achieving social justice. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 41(7), 967-981.

- Moats, L. C. (2001). When older kids can't read. *Educational Leadership*, 58(6), 36-40.
- Murphy, P., & Elwood, J. (1998). Gendered learning outside and inside school: influences on achievement. In D. Epstein, J. Elwood, V. Hey & J. Maw (eds.). *Failing Boys? Issues in Gender and Achievement* (pp. 162-182). Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Riddell, S., & Weedon, E. (2006). What counts as reasonable adjustment? Dyslexic students and the concept of fair assessment. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 16(1), 57-73.
- Riddick, B. (2000). An examination of the relationship between labelling and stigmatisation with special reference to dyslexia. *Disability & Society*, 15(4), 653-667.
- Scott, S., Webber, C.F., Lupart, J.L., Aitken, N., & Scott, D.E. (2014). Fair and equitable assessment practices for all students. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 21(1), 52-70.
- Shaywitz, B. A., Lyon, G. R., & Shaywitz, S. E. (2006). The role of functional magnetic resonance imaging in understanding reading and dyslexia. *Developmental neuropsychology*, 30(1), 613-632.
- Stenlund, T., Eklof, H., & Lyren, P.E. (2017). Group differences in test-taking behavior: An example from a high-stakes testing program. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 24(1), 4-20
- Stobart, G. (2005). Fairness in Multicultural Assessment Systems. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 12(3), 275-287.
- Woods, K., Parkinson, G., & Lewis, S. (2010). Investigating access to educational assessment for students with disabilities. *School Psychology International*, 31(1), 21-41.



Over the past forty years, the Faculty of Education, University of Malta, has established itself strongly both locally and internationally. Several members of staff have achieved recognition both through publications in their respective fields and by means of their outreach initiatives. Contributions have been made in various fields, from the Sciences to the Arts, and also through textbooks for schools, engagement in the community and collaboration with stakeholders. Over the years the Faculty has invested heavily in its initial teacher education programmes, to the extent that today practically all fully-qualified teachers in Maltese schools, including the State and non-State sectors, are alumni of the Faculty. It has also branched out into various sectors of education, offering courses in different areas of specialization, at all levels of tertiary education.

This volume, "Teacher Education Matters. Transforming lives ... transforming schools", is a collection of papers written by academics from the Faculty of Education. It celebrates the Faculty's 40th anniversary while providing a comprehensive view of research carried out by the authors and their engagement in their respective educational fields. The common thread is represented by the Faculty's involvement in society and by the contribution that academics make to educational developments, in line with the principle that education is a lifelong and lifewide journey.