Problematising the Familiar

A Deconstruction of the *My Journey* Reform

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Abstract

This study undertakes a deconstruction of the *My Journey* reform—a school-based VET initiative which was introduced in Maltese secondary schools in the scholastic year 2019/2020. The reform welcomed nine new vocational subjects to the school curriculum, in an attempt to move away from a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and to diversify the options available to students for post-middle school study. Using Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach, key policy texts concerning the reform were critically analysed to inquire into the underlying rationales, presuppositions, and silences, that govern the initiative. It is argued that whereas the *My Journey* document occasionally adopts a humanistic discourse that recognises difference in students' needs and interests, policy discourse surrounding this development draws heavily from neoliberal modes of thought, and strongly foregrounds notions of employability, globalisation, and economic competitiveness. An analysis of the presuppositions and silences underlying the *My Journey* reform also suggests that this initiative is unworkable for many reasons; it disregards the effects that societal structures have upon freedom to choose, and undervalues the complexities of pedagogy, intelligence, and work. In addition, whereas schools may seem to be well-placed to provide work-based training, there are reasons to suggest that this is in fact a false assumption. The implications of these critical findings for future research into the *My Journey* reform are addressed in the concluding chapter.

Keywords:

Vocational Education, *My Journey,* Curriculum, WPR Approach, Neoliberalism.

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List of Abbreviations

CEDEFOP   European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

ITS   Institute of Tourism Studies

MATSEC   Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate Examinations Board

MCAST   Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology

NCF   National Curriculum Framework

OECD   The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

VET   Vocational Education and Training

WPR   *What's the Problem Represented to be?*

WTO   World Trade Organisation

Chapter One: Introduction

1.0 Background information

The *My Journey* initiative was officially implemented in Maltese state schools in the scholastic year 2019/2020. This reform welcomed the addition of nine home-grown vocational and applied subjects in the curriculum, designed by two local post-secondary vocational institutes, *MCAST* and *ITS*: agribusiness; engineering technology; information technology; media literacy; retail; health and social care; hospitality; fashion and textiles; and hairdressing and beauty. Students now have the option to select two of these subjects for post-middle school study alongside their core entitlement. In addition, whereas students previously followed one unified qualification route leading to the *Secondary Education Certificate (SEC)*, a diversified, tripartite route is now being offered with the provision of an additional *Secondary Education Applied Certificate (SEAC)* and the combined *SEAC/SEC* certificate.

This initiative impelled me to seek out key State documents to gain a clear and evaluative picture of what I considered to be quite a consequential change to the school curriculum. I was immediately struck by the absence of reflective and critical discussion surrounding the reform, however. The framing of policy discourse in the local context seemed to be rather absolute; it did not leave any room for contestation, and, as future educators, it appeared that we were made to accept a number of abstract simplifications as a given. In addition, although the issue of vocational education as a distinct provision to academic study is a contentious field which has been widely discussed in sociological literature especially, the *My Journey* reform—and the policy discourse surrounding it—was not given attention as a subject for critical analysis in the local context.

This gap in the literature spoke to my own sensitivity towards the way language wields power over its constituents, how certain ideologies often become normalised, and how we ourselves are shaped as subjects. As Lacan (1966) famously said, 'it is the world of words that creates the world of things' (p. 155), and this is also true for policy discourse. The State plays a privileged role here because, as Bacchi (2009) explains, 'their understandings 'stick'—their versions of 'problems' are formed or constituted in the legislation, reports, and technologies used to govern' (p. 33). Thus, it can also be said that rather than reacting to

'problems', the State indirectly plays a role in shaping 'problems' through their policies, and often, 'these versions of 'problems' take on lives of their own' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 34). For this reason, the analysis of State documents emerged as a useful and crucial means to problematise the *My Journey* reform, and to critically dissect the value of school-based VET as a solution to a number of identified 'problems'.

1.1 Focus of the study

According to Ball (1993), in order to escape the hegemonic knowledge effects which are perpetuated through policy, responses to policy must be 'creative' (p. 12). It follows that this study does not aim to solve the complex and contentious issue of school-based VET, but the contrary—it positions itself within a line of research which questions the representation of such issues through the deconstruction of policy texts. In this way, I aim to challenge the very notion of taken-for-granted policy 'problems' by teasing out and exposing problem representations, or 'problematisations'. Such an analysis will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the underlying rationales governing the *My Journey* reform?

2. On what presuppositions is this initiative based?

3. What are the 'silences'? What is being left out in this conceptualisation of school-based VET?

This form of inquiry gives us deeper insight into the governing practices and particular forms of rule that shape our thinking and being, especially since problem representations tend to simplify and reduce the complexity of social life (Osborne, 1997). In order to do this, I draw on Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach which is a valuable, problem questioning tool used to probe the discursive effects of policy proposals. The set of questions draw on Foucault's methods of discourse analysis, archaeology and genealogy, where the researcher 'traces the origins of concepts and the webs of power that created conditions for their emergence' (Rath & Mutch, 2014, p. 51). A valuable aspect of this analytic tool is the eventual turn toward the embodied and lived effects of the problem representations and their solutions.

At the same time, there is a well established body of work (Taylor, 1997; Fairclough, 2001; Lipman, 2004) that looks at how neoliberalism has been successful in permeating economic as well as educational discourses, and how approaches like human capital theory have 'succeeded in redefining education as job preparation,' (Down et al., 2016, p. 4) while

consequently marginalising social democratic discourses in policy agendas. As Giroux and many others argue, education has a significant role to play in promoting neoliberalism by producing a 'consumer-based notion of agency […] while simultaneously instrumentalising all forms of knowledge' (Giroux, 2013, p. 2). From this perspective, VET is often seen to be a central tenet of this neoliberal imperative. Therefore, in attending to the deconstruction of policy texts, this study also aims to explore if local VET discourse is driven by the 'master' neoliberal narrative that further perpetuates the academic-vocational divide in its insistence on preparing students 'for work', or if it transcends this old, social division by foregrounding democratic and humanistic values that place the learner at its core. This question will be foregrounded throughout my analysis.

1.2 Outline

Having given an overview of the events that influenced this study and the methodology to be adopted, the chapter that follows outlines the historical development of VET as a separate provision to academic study, and then draws on international literature to highlight the key themes that emerge in support of, and resistant to, school-based VET. Since Bacchi's WPR approach requires a careful exploration of key policy moments throughout Malta's history, and an appreciation of how current problem representations articulate with ideological, political, and economic change locally, reference to Maltese developments will be made in the analysis chapter.

Chapter Three delves into critical policy analysis as a research method. Different strands within this tradition, along with some background into Foucaldian methods of discourse analysis, will be discussed. The chapter then turns towards Bacchi's six WPR questions. Given the interdisciplinary nature of Bacchi's approach to policy analysis, the different objectives and strategies underlying each question will be discussed in detail.

Chapter Four is a combination of analysis and discussion, where Bacchi's WPR questions will be followed in succession. Apart from the *My Journey* document, I will also be including the *NCF* and the *Framework for Education Strategy* in my analysis to build a fuller picture of the problem representations that have been constructed by the State.

In the concluding chapter, I will bring all of the critical findings together in relation to the three research questions, as well as outline some suggestions for future research in the area of school-based VET.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

Secondary school systems offering VET programmes maintain a distinction between academic and vocational education. This transparent divide manifests itself both nominally—vocational and applied subjects and strands are clearly labelled as so—and in the way it has been conceptualised in educational discourse. Statements such as 'alternative learning methods', 'hands-on', and 'non-academic' attest to this dualism. School-based VET in the local context is simultaneously represented as 'equitable, inclusive, and comprehensive,' thus espousing social justice goals (*Cedefop*, 2017, p. 57). Having said so, scholars are divided between those who view school-based VET as appropriate for labour market preparation, as a means to boost the local economy, and also as an inclusive option for socially marginalised youth, and those who view it as 'tracking', and consequently, as a means of reproduction of social inequality across generations. My review aims to bring these arguments to light through the lens of three theoretical accounts—the economic, the social, and the epistemic—to help gain a clear, and critical, understanding of the goals and influences that arguably underlie the provision of school-based VET. This review will also work as a springboard for my own policy analysis in Chapter Four, where a number of these theoretical accounts will be drawn upon throughout.

2.1 VET: A historical overview

Prior to the process of industrialisation, more or less parallel, craft and trade-based vocational training methods prevailed over the centuries (Greinert, 2004). With the Industrial Revolution however came a historical growth in the provision of VET at the start of the 20th century. Consequently, these traditional training methods were replaced with a range of diverse and 'modern' education systems (Greinert, 2004), where various technical secondary schools were set up as parallel institutes to traditional, academic study. Despite differences in the delivery of these programmes, they shared an essentially practical and applied character of instruction, generally aimed at matching pupils with positions in the labour market. Benavot (1987) outlines three perspectives thought to account for this increased, global appeal for VET: meeting the demands for a skilled work-force; widening access for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds; and training learners to become committed and obedient workers.

By the mid 20th century, however, rising worldwide ideological beliefs pushed for systems of secondary schooling that guaranteed greater formal quality education for children coming from diverse economic backgrounds (Benavot, 1987). In addition, the shared ideology at the time stressed the delay of selection and tracking, and aimed to maximise future access to postsecondary education. In this light, more egalitarian and comprehensive reforms began to take priority over the 'limiting and uni-dimensional' vocational public schools, which were based on a limited understanding of individual capabilities, and arguably targeted working-class students (Benavot, 1987, p. 71). For this reason, vocational secondary schools began to be de-legitimated in school systems across the globe. According to Savage (2017), many saw this move towards a comprehensive school system as the end of historical 'tracking' of marginalised groups, and thus a victory for equality. On the other hand, others saw this move as being at odds with the needs of the economy, and unjust to those learners who had no intention of pursuing college after school (Savage, 2017).

A revived interest in VET soon returned among the national policy community. High rates of youth unemployment in particular gave rise to widespread distrust in national educational systems, with its liberal methods becoming highly challenged for being far removed from the needs of industry and insufficiently preparing young students for working life (Bates, 1984). Hitchcock (1973) describes how the humanities in particular began to be seen as a luxury; 'if taxpayers, parents and students themselves are going to have to pay more and more for education, they will increasingly demand benefits of measurable economic benefits' (p. 48). Moreover, the disconnect between schooling and the labour market was often blamed for depressed economic opportunity (Lauglo & Lillis, 1988).

This widespread global, ideological shift is commonly referred to in the literature (Avis, 1991; Pring, 1995; Ecclestone, 2010) as 'New Vocationalism'. Coffey (1989), writing in the UK, suggests that this new vocationalist agenda was prompted by the 'Great Debate' about the nature and purpose of public education in the late 1970s. It was seen as crucial that schools 'prepare the necessary climate and preparatory skills and knowledge,' both to make job opportunities more attractive to students and to help the country grow economically (Coffey, 1989, p. 358). In this way, schools were set to teach students the right

skills, attitudes and values needed for the economy, while simultaneously tackling issues of high youth unemployment during a time of economic crisis (Coffey, 1989).

In the US, the new vocationalist agenda was arguably prompted by the development of the landmark report, *A Nation at Risk* (1983). The report—a product of President Reagan's national commission in education—is widely regarded as having a consequential effect on the way American educational systems have developed (Grubb, 1996). This policy arena ran parallel to that of the UK, where the educational system was seen as failing to meet the national need for a competitive workforce. In the US in particular, this prompted a stronger focus on standardisation and efficiency and, according to Grubb (1996), 'the dominant rationale given for schooling…was the preparation of future workers' (p. 2). It was 'a rising tide of mediocrity' in schools which was considered to be the greatest threat to the county's future, and educational institutions were also blamed for a decline in competitiveness with the Japanese, the South Koreans, and the Germans (*A Nation at Risk*, 1983, p. 1). In short, the new vocationalist agenda viewed schools as having a central role to play in the market-driven imperative of increasing industrial performance and economic growth, and the provision of alternative, vocational pathways was one way of achieving this.

It is clear, then, that various attempts—inextricably linked to wider economic, political, ideological developments globally—have been made to vocationalise the school curriculum. Notwithstanding, we are once more witnessing a converging, global shift in thinking about the nature and purposes of schooling. The 21st century has seen a resurgence of international policy initiatives which seek to establish stronger links between education and the economy, and which equally involve extensive reforms to the school curriculum (Bathmaker, 2010). Indeed, the European Union's (1995) *White Paper on Education and Training: Towards the Learning Society* announced that 'bridges are being built between school and the business sector. These show that the ideological and cultural barriers which separated education and enterprise are breaking down' (p. 23). Concepts such as the 'learning society,' '21st century skills,' and the 'knowledge-based economy,' are now potent phrases which dominate policy discourse.

To this end, concerns about more complex school-to-work transitions, rising skills shortages, and an overall decline in global competitiveness, are among the most pivotal policy issues that have given rise to various VET reforms both at the secondary and

post-secondary level (Taylor et al., 1997; Ball, 1998). Moreover, school-based VET in particular is valued for widening and democratising curricular access for learners who lack the dispositions to further their educational trajectory (Atkins, 2010; Lopez-Fogues, 2012), and is often seen as an attractive option for providing useful skills to help young people find their way into meaningful work (Middleton et al., 1993). In particular, by aligning education more closely to the specific skills required by industry, the problem of local skill shortages may be reduced (Almeida et al., 2012). It is also widely argued that catering for disadvantaged youth through the provision of applied learning pedagogies can further engage and motivate them to stay in school (Billett, 1994).

This renewed interest in VET has also given rise to some very prominent retractors. Celebrated philosopher Nussbaum (2017) refers to the global trend of vocationalising schools as a 'silent' crisis, and treats it as a global attack on the liberal curriculum. Young (2013) argues that access to disciplinary knowledge which students do not acquire at home is an entitlement for all learners, and thus a social justice issue. Atkins (2010) contends that rhetoric surrounding school-based VET is merely 'smoke and mirrors' and forms the basis of a 'massive immorality' (p. 261). Moreover, Pring (1995) reminds us that worthwhile curricula are not chosen at particular points in time as a matter of chance; they are products of ongoing political struggles between agents, groups, and individuals. What is selected is, ultimately, determined by what is valued by society at a particular point in time.

These recurring arguments raise a number of questions; what factors hindered, yet sustained, school-based VET? Why is VET currently being given central attention in curriculum planning? How does this affect educational goals in the local context? Two distinct perspectives are generally thought to account for the precarious development of VET programmes throughout the decades; VET 'for the economy', and VET 'for social justice'.

2.2 VET for the economy

2.2.1 The current ideological landscape: A 21st century skills agenda

It is necessary to first clarify the current ideological landscape and place these questions within a generally shared, wide-spread educational policy movement. Zhao (2009), for instance, contends that 'we need to rethink what future citizens will need to know' (p. 147).

To him, the world of work has become more globalised, digitalised, interconnected, and collaborative, and under these circumstances, the skills demanded by employers are drastically changing (Zhao, 2009). In order to 'catch up' with these advancements, education systems must necessarily equip learners with a number of 21st century skills and competencies needed to succeed professionally in the Information Age. A central focus on these 21st century skills and competencies are highly visible in educational discourse, and curricular reform more specifically. In this light, a number of national commissions and nonprofit organisations, with the most notable being *P21 (Partnership for 21st Century Skills),* have compiled their own frameworks for assessing the crucial soft skills needed and valued by employers in the workplace, and ultimately, which young people need to succeed in the volatile labour market and navigate through unexpected challenges they may eventually face in an increasingly complex world. Four critical learning areas—*critical thinking, communication, collaboration,* and *creativity*—also known as the 'Four Cs', are generally shared among these organisations, and widely acknowledged within the educational sphere as essential attributes to be adopted both pedagogically and through curricular reform.

Although a number of national educational programmes have embraced the 21st century skills agenda, a common argument against it is that it is ultimately utilitarian; the focus has shifted from the importance of knowing towards the importance of doing, where the skills that students should demonstrate are becoming increasingly aligned with various standards and outcomes (Young, 2003; Allais, 2014). Scholars also argue that too heavy an emphasis on skills reflects a dangerous tendency for market-driven change. Savage (2017), for instance, refers to the 21st century skills agenda as the 'economisation of the curriculum' (p. 144). He argues that the rise of globalisation and technological progress has led many to believe that school systems are in urgent need to transform the traditional, discipline-based curriculum, which is portrayed as outdated and irrelevant to the needs of 21st century youth and 'not adequately preparing young people for a future workforce in which the jobs of today might no longer exist' (p. 159). Facilitating students to gain general forms of knowledge—or soft skills—is seen as more appropriate for participation in unpredictable economic contexts; 'At its heart, therefore, the 21st century agenda reflects a desire to create a particular type of citizen; one who is literate, numerate, flexible, creative and IT-

savvy, and who is ready to compete in the global knowledge economy' (Savage, 2017, p. 160).

2.2.2 The knowledge-economy

The wide-spread notion of the knowledge-based economy and the 'skills gap' narrative—two central justifications for the promotion of VET in school systems across the globe—have also been problematised by a number of scholars (Livingstone, 2012; Lauder et al., 2012; Jessop, 2012). They notably challenge the prevailing discourse about the knowledge economy and how it potentially magnifies the degree to which globalised nations can produce such volumes of high-skilled jobs (Taylor & Lehmann, 2002). To these scholars, there is in general a growing gap between the rising efforts of individuals to invest in their education and upgrade their skills, and on the other hand, the inability of national economies to cater for the growing demand for high-skilled work. Thus, to them, the reality of the knowledge economy is characterised by a rapid expansion of the global supply of skills that is not accompanied by the demand side (Brown et al., 2001).

Livingstone (2010), for instance, argues that the dominant tendency in reality is the reverse; 'the formal educational attainments and information learning efforts of the available labour force are outpacing job requirements. We have a learning society, but not yet a knowledge-based economy' (p. 236). His research suggests that there has only been a modest increase in the requirement of specialised knowledge, compared to a much larger rise in schooling and lifelong learning. This has resulted in an increasing number of highly qualified people who are unemployed or underemployed, where 'most experience decreasing marginal returns for their formal education' (Livingstone, 1999, p. 4).

Brown et al. (2011) also argue that there are declining opportunities for high-skilled graduates since the increase in digital technologies has enabled the routinisation of knowledge work. Moreover, work in technical industries is being increasingly off-shored to countries with available talent which can be done at cheaper rates. As a consequence of this imbalance and false promise of education and skills, societies will need to address the social discontent and issues arising from growing unemployment and underemployment among graduates (Brown et al., 2011). Livingstone (2012) recommends that efforts to address education-jobs imbalances should pay more attention to economic and job reforms, rather

than insisting on primarily educational solutions to economic problems. To these scholars, therefore, the solution lies in economic reform, not educational reform.

2.2.3 A human capital orthodoxy

Human capital theory has arguably emerged as the most influential economic framework in inciting a widespread belief of the knowledge economy. Under this economic model, investing in one's formal education is associated with better jobs, higher earnings for individuals, and increased societal wealth, thus 'stressing the value of peoples' learning capacities as a factor of economic productivity' (Almendarez, 2013, p. 22). This human capital orthodoxy not only dominates the international development agenda for VET currently, but has arguably been doing so since the extension of formal schooling and paralleled economic growth in the post-World War II period (Livingstone, 2009). In addition to this, governments with weak and underdeveloped economies generally believed that it was easier to change educational structures rather than economic ones, and thus, it was easier to legitimate themselves by showing that they were in fact addressing the nation's problems (Hall, 1989).

Under the human capital framework, vocational education practices are viewed as the appropriate action to be taken to effectively tie schooling to work, thus highlighting a linear belief in the relationship between education and the economy; effective schooling should positively affect economic performance. There is, however, existence of a voice about the doubtfulness of the straight relations between investing in education and economic prosperity. Aleman (2012) explains that in the past, a lack of evidence proving that VET had any effect on economic performance in the US strongly challenged this taken-for-granted assumption. These uncertainties still stand today. For instance, Lopez-Fogues (2012) explains how Hoeckel (2008) reported on the costs of VET programmes and contrasted them with their associated benefits as part of an OECD policy review. It was concluded, however, that such a link is difficult to establish since there are a number of complex factors which need to be considered, as well as difficulty in effectively forecasting national skills requirements. Lopez-Fogues (2012) argues that 'an eagerness for analytical proven causal relations between education and other outputs leads sometimes to worrying conclusions for all levels of education and especially for VET' (p. 563). Taylor and Lehmann (2003) go further to argue that although these policy changes may prepare students for

future occupations, 'the focus on the type of empowerment envisioned by progressive educators seems to be absent from policy debates' (p. 61). Nevertheless, governments continue to push for technical changes within the curriculum, and as a result of this, employers are being permitted greater control in a range of policy decisions (Gleeson & Keep, 2004).

2.2.4 Neoliberalism: The master narrative

The concept of human capital arguably falls within a much larger economic philosophy known as neoliberalism; Chomsky (2016) describes it as 'the defining political economic paradigm of our time' (p. 7). Thatcher, in the UK, and Reagan, in the US, have often been cited as key political proponents of this economic philosophy, highly inspired by the economic theories of Friedman (Allais, 2014) and free market capitalism. Moreover, Brenner et al. (2010) describe how during the 1980s, 'a repertoire of neoliberal policy templates began to circulate transnationally and to acquire the status of all-purpose, 'silver bullet' solutions to diverse regulatory problems and crisis tendencies' (p. 337). Notable economic reforms include market deregulation, state decentralisation, a dismantling of welfare programmes, and reduced political intervention in national economies.

It has also been argued that neoliberal policies often promise faster economic growth, and that as a nation gets wealthier and business investment thrives, the wealth will 'trickle down' to the working class through employment growth (Chomsky, 2016). There is, however, overwhelming evidence (Kotz, 2009; Piketty, 2014; Western & Baxter, 2016) that the reverse has in fact taken place; this dominant ideology has instead managed to shift wealth from subordinate classes to the upper ruling classes, and also from developing countries to richer ones, thus 'deepening inequalities of income, health and life chances within and between countries, on a scale not seen since before the Second World War' (Hall et al., 2014, p. 9).

Clarke (2005) makes the argument that 'the neoliberal model does not purport so much to describe the world as it is, but the world as it should be' (p. 58). In a similar vein, Foucault (2008) draws our attention to the influence of neoliberal modes of governance on individuals. Importantly, Foucault (2008) argues that this philosophy characterises individuals as economic beings, or 'homo economicus'; an essentially self-interested 'entrepreneur of himself' (p.226). In this view, individuals are constantly striving towards

'self-maximisation and self-capitalisation in competitive markets and social arrangements' (Savage, 2017, p, 150); thus, this inherently individualistic and competitive quality is perceived to be present in all aspects of our lives. To these scholars, neoliberalism has evolved into a 'common sense' hegemonic discourse which has permeated our thinking, while simultaneously having pervasive effects on political, economic, and educational practices.

This wide-spread influence of neoliberalism has been extensively theorised within the fields of critical policy studies and sociology of education (Van Dijk, 1984; Wodak, 1989; Fairclough, 1991). The most evident effect neoliberalism has had on education systems globally is the way in which schooling has been reimagined from an economic viewpoint, with Young (2008) adopting the term 'technical-instrumentalism' to describe these shifting trends. Allais (2014) succinctly describes the powerful hold this ideology has had in certain countries, and how changes in governance affected the way in which education has come to be perceived;

> 'the winding back of the welfare state in the Western world since the 1980s, and the drive to market liberalisation in poor countries—which has in most instances increased impoverishment—has led to education and training being seen as personal insurance against risk, in the sense that education leads to a job, which leads to a wage, which allows the individual to buy the welfare services previously provided by the state, and so as a replacement for welfare provision by the state' (p. 57).

A number of scholars (Young, 2003; Grubb & Lazerson, 2004; Livingstone, 2012; Allais, 2014) have also suggested that outcomes-based and competency-based frameworks taken up in Australia and in the UK are ultimately driven by this neoliberal imperative. These frameworks have succeeded in further structuring VET as training for industry and accrediting workplace competencies, thus gaining greater central control in the drawing up of curricula. Another widely referenced policy shift is the promotion of school choice in certain countries; these policies establish parents as clients in the educational 'market,' rather than viewing them all as citizens who 'are entitled to equal access to quality education in all schools' (Savage, 2017, p. 149).

Allais (2014) argues that what is especially distinct about educational policy agendas of the last few decades is the degree to which social, personal, and emotional goals have been subjugated for more economic goals; 'instead of considering education through disciplines such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, and so on,' education is now seen, 'as no more than something that can be acquired in one market place, and used for advantage in a different market-place' (p. 1). Avis (1991) extends this argument to VET reform, which is arguably set within the hegemony of neoliberalism; although social-democratic goals are often perpetuated through policy discourse, they have been reimagined in line with more economic goals, which ultimately push for the human capital required by a rapidly changing global workforce.

2.2.5 Globalisation and policy convergence

One must also consider that while national economies are becoming increasingly interconnected, VET policies are not only shaped by local actors, but also by global influences. Ball (2003) refers to the proliferation of neoliberal educational policies throughout the world as 'a policy epidemic' (p. 215), widely endorsed by organisations such as the *World Bank* and the *OECD*. Given that these are primarily economic organisations, many question and challenge their influence in the drawing up of educational policies. In addition, Moutsios' (2009) study on global policy making by the *World Bank*, the *OECD*, and the *WTO,* suggests that not only are we experiencing the 'transnationalisation' of educational policy making, but also 'the full submission of education to the pursuits of global economy' (p. 469). In a similar vein, Grubb and Lazerson (2004) refer to the 'education gospel' in the US; the overarching belief that education is responsible for important problems that society is currently facing, while also simultaneously regarded as the answer to long-standing, complex issues. This has led to what they call 'the dark side' of discussions regarding the purpose of schooling (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004, p. 301). If education is to play a key role in economic salvation, it is believed that it must urgently respond to the needs of the wider economy, not 'driven by what are believed to be the self-regarding interests of the academy or educationalists' (Allais, 2014, p. 8).

What is also at the heart of this debate is 'the complex issue of policy borrowing and policy lending,' which are of particular relevance to VET reforms that we see taking place across the world (Chakroun & Sicilia, 2010, p. 59). Chakroun and Sicilia (2010) contend that

'despite awareness of the need for wholesale transformation of education systems, and for that change to 'come from within'', reform of education generally, and of the VET sub-sector specifically, 'are more often than not driven, designed and funded by international donors' (p. 59). McGrath (2012) suggests that VET reform internationally over the past 15 years, particularly in developing countries, has been guided by what he refers to as a global 'TVET toolkit'—'packaged reform programmes which are guided by principles of policy borrowing and policy lending' (2012, p. 625). This toolkit includes systemic reforms focussed on giving employers more power in the drawing up of curricula, often through qualifications frameworks, quality assurance systems, outcomes-based and 'institutionally neutral' funding, and managed autonomy for public providers (McGrath, 2012, p. 625). These are amongst the many mechanisms adopted to create and support regulated markets in VET, and ultimately, to provide the global capital economy with a guaranteed supply of mobile, skilled workers.

2.3 VET for social justice

2.3.1 Alternative learning pathways

Apart from being seen as a system concerned with meeting economic demands, there is also a more humanistic argument to be made for implementing VET programmes in schools. Hargreaves (2011), for instance, argues that VET has long played an important role in providing alternative pathways to further both learning and job opportunities for disadvantaged or disengaged students. To Reuter (2014), VET is important to help raise students' self-esteem through the provision of work opportunities, while also supporting continuous professional and personal development. Moreover, Teese and Polesel (2003) argue that from an epistemic point of view, VET democratises access to the curriculum for socially marginalised youth, particularly those coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Since low-SES learners may be at an educational disadvantage due to discontinuities in the competencies and dispositions they bring to school, they may be in a better position to decode the knowledge base conveyed through vocational and applied subjects.

Blake (2007) similarly argues that applied learning pedagogies have proven to be effective in re-engaging young people, especially with the advent of mass secondary schooling, increased participation rates, and the diversification of learners' needs. Through the incorporation of theories such as experiential learning (Dewey, 1916), as well as

stressing authentic learning opportunities and 'hand-ons' work, students are better able to broaden their understanding and make strong connections to their local communities. Having said so, Blake (2007) highlights how this theory struggles to confront the traditional hand/mind, theory/practice dichotomy, and as a result, is often used as justification to differentiate students into marginalised learning tracks. Whereas applied pedagogies should be viewed as a system that benefits all learners, it is more often than not maintained as a limited intervention for 'at-risk' students.

2.3.2 Social and occupational stratification

At the same time, there exists a widely recognised notion that social and occupational stratification increases through the process of curricular tracking. With the separation of high-and low-type students, it is thus argued that tracking 'can counteract the equalising potential of vocational education' (Eichhorst et al, 2012, p.4). Similarly, Polesel (2008) asserts that rather than advancing social mobility, vocational education may in fact 'contribute to occupational and class stratification by substituting job training for education and tracking students into dead-end jobs' (Polesel, 2008, p. 616). She contends that within the field of education, myriad subtle hierarchies exist between different subjects and generally, at the bottom of these hierarchies are students who opt for the lowest levels of applied subjects. Ainsworth and Roscigno (2005) argue that the inequitable nature of such provisions are 'masked by a hollow achievement ideology that encourages students to pursue educational success as a precursor to getting a high paying job' (p. 280). It is therefore assumed that the promise of eventual job placement is a necessary strategy to motivate students.

Reproduction theories of education in particular have long highlighted reasons why working class students are commonly over-represented in vocational tracks, and why schools prepare students for occupations similar to those of their parents, thus reproducing and legitimising inequality (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). While students form aspirations and begin to weigh their options for future work or study, the people in their lives have a strong influence on their choice of curricular pathway (Ainsworth & Roscigno, 2005). In this light, if teachers and guidance counsellors channel disadvantaged youth towards vocational programmes, the 'non-academic' notion may become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Ainsworth & Roscigno, 2005). In addition, working class parents may not have the confidence to

challenge school-level decision making, especially since they may have been steered in a similar manner. Low income parents may also invest high levels of trust in the judgments of educators (Oakes, 1985) due to their lack of awareness about educational structures. For young people who are already structurally disadvantaged, this limited agency further confines them to a low-status, low-value educational route.

Moreover, it has been argued that educational systems work in favour of students and parents with dominant cultural capital, so middle class parents are in a better position to secure advantaged arrangements for their children; in this way, students coming from middle or upper class families are much less likely to follow a vocational stream (Ainsworth & Roscigno, 2005). These arguments resonate with research carried out locally by Sultana (1992), where the Maltese trade school population was found to be highly homogenous, and as a result, a lack of social class mixing reinforced social and occupational inequalities. The process of tracking students into differentiated pathways thus cannot be neutral; certain groups are more often steered towards vocational programmes, and such a process is 'reproductive of social class divisions' (Ball et al., 1999, p. 221).

2.3.3 Powerful knowledge as an emancipatory tool

From an epistemic standpoint, scholars (Polesel, 2008) have also argued that VET further marginalises young people by limiting their education to the teaching of practical, low-level skills, rather than exposing them to the powerful, academic knowledge that is required to fully participate in our modern society. To this end, a number of scholars have drawn on Bernstein's (1999) work on the sociology of knowledge to highlight how curricula based on a limited view of market relevance takes on a problematic, horizontal nature. According to Bernstein (1999), abstract knowledge is a form of vertical discourse, while practical knowledge represents a horizontal discourse—'likely to be local, context dependent, tacit and specific' (Canning, 2012, p. 45). Moreover, the perceived lack of 'history' in relation to horizontal discourse as a social construction contributes to its marginal standing within the educational sphere (Bernstein, 1999).

Young (2008) argues that these knowledge structures represent the different forms of knowledge within the curriculum; 'the vertical forms of knowledge are theoretical, hierarchical, and transcendent, while the horizontal forms of knowledge are practical, context dependent, and imminent' (Canning, 2012, p. 46). Critical pedagogists such as

Gramsci saw access to the powerful and vertical forms of knowledge for working class children being hindered by what he viewed as 'the Fascist dilution of Dewey's progressive and pragmatic ideas' (Mayo, 2014, p 10). Learners coming to school with valued cultural capital were allowed more meaningful participation to this form of knowledge, whereas channeling disadvantaged students into vocational tracks would curtail the holistic education required for empowerment.

Further, Young (2008) contends that 'vocational programmes that rely on the standards-based approach deny learners access to the rules governing the production of knowledge by the scientific and professional communities' (p. 150). Vertical knowledge, to Young, is fundamental for partaking in 'society's conversation' (Young, 2008, p. 150). He thus calls for greater clarity about the type of knowledge underpinning VET programmes. This, he believes, is 'crucial to wider debates about more effective vocational education and any possibilities of a move towards parity of esteem with general education' (Young, 2008, p. 150).

Recent studies taken up by Nylund et al. (2016) in Sweden, and Wheelahan (2007) in Australia, provide us with an analysis of the type of knowledge imparted in VET programmes as opposed to general education programmes. Nylund et al.'s (2016) findings suggest that 'the knowledge offered through VET programmes is firmly rooted in the empirical, relating particularly to workplace practices' (p. 63). Their study found that few attempts were made to help students look beyond the limited context of the workplace by making disciplinary connections or putting learning in political, societal or other contexts. Learners were unable to critically analyse that which was expected to be carried out, and correct behaviour was central to the knowledge being imparted. They concluded that 'knowledge organised in vertical discourses such as content aiming at skills like source criticism or a scientific way of thinking is largely absent in VET programmes' (Nylund et al., 2016, p. 66). These general skills, particularly valued for their transferability to a wide range of contexts, are seen as the guiding principle of general education programmes (Young, 2008).

Wheelahan (2007) carried out a similar study by analysing the competency-based training model in school-based VET programmes. It was concluded that both the content and structure of the competency driven VET curriculum reinforced rigid class boundaries by limiting students' access to the 'unthinkable', abstract forms of knowledge. In this way,

while the competency-based program was found to focus on specific content and was heavily connected to workplace practices, it did not allow access the generative principles, or 'style of reasoning,' that underpin disciplinary structures of knowledge, making it impossible for students to 'transcend their particular context' (Wheelahan, 2007, p. 27). It is also important to acknowledge the long-standing effects this may have on students' individual agency; an educational programme lacking depth and complexity of knowledge may severely limit and reduce the students' control of knowledge in the future workplace.

A social justice strategy, according to Wheelahan (2007), must not be based on a limited focus of increasing access to education for disadvantaged youth; it must once again emphasise disciplinary knowledge as an important part of vocational qualifications. She goes on to argue that 'electricians need to think like mathematicians, and community development workers like sociologists. We need to value the depth and complexity of knowledge needed for vocational practice in the same we do for professional practice' (Wheelahan, 2007, p. 11). Nylund et al. (2016) also remind us that our practices are hardly ever divided into strictly academic or vocational forms; 'instead, most practices, from conducting research to taking care of an elderly person, involve both these discourses to differing degrees' (p. 5). In this view, vocational knowledge is not seen as inferior to academic knowledge, but rather, as complementary to a holistic education which all students are entitled to. This thinking is generally more in line with Dewey's theory of knowledge, which values both theory and application for a truly emancipatory education.

2.3.4 Dewey's democratic curriculum

Academic writers from the US offer us the most rewarding attempt at bridging the academic-vocational divide. Early 20th century America went through a general reform movement which felt disengaged with traditional schooling 'for being too bookish, unrelated to the real-life concerns of children, and out of touch with the technological developments that were taking place, but which were not reflected in the curriculum' (Sultana, 1992, p. 335). This resulted in what DeFalco (2016) refers to as two distinct models of vocational education; education for social efficiency, and education for democracy. Snedden, the education commissioner of Massachusetts, and Prosser, the first National Director of Vocational Education in the US, are commonly identified with the former model. These

prominent figures in the history of vocational education promoted a limited view of acquiring specific skills needed for direct use in the labour market.

Moreover, the predetermined social characteristics which young people brought to school determined what particular roles they were to fill in the labour market. Null (2004) maintains that the term 'social efficiency-social control' would be better suited for a model which unapologetically perpetuates social predestination. Within their social Darwinist point of view, the main focus of vocational education was to produce good workers; habits valued on the shop floor were to be imitated in the classroom, and students were unable to question or critically dissect this rigid, pre-established system. Nevertheless, this framework had a great appeal to policymakers and officials of the time, since it offered to solve a wide range of social problems of the early 20th century.

Dewey (1916) undoubtedly opposed this form of vocational education; he laments that 'the kind of vocational education in which I'm interested is not one which will 'adapt' workers to the existing industrial regime; I am not sufficiently in love with the regime for that' (1916, p. 42). In response to such prevalent dualisms, Dewey urged for a schooling system that represented newer social needs by simultaneously doing away with a system that could only strengthen class divisions. Dewey in fact strongly believed that the merging of vocational and technological studies with liberal education would serve to revitalise school learning and further empower students to understand and transform the society they live in. Dewey's democratic curriculum 'would prize freedom more than docility; initiative more than automatic skill; insight and understanding more than capacity to recite lessons or to execute tasks under the direction of others' (DeFalco, 2016, p. 59).

Moreover, as a philosophical pragmatist, Dewey differed from his contemporaries in his scepticism of purely abstract knowledge, where he argued that 'the separation of 'mind' from direct occupation with things throws emphasis on things at the expense of relations or connections' (Dewey, 1916, p. 150). To Dewey, the creation of alternative pathways and differentiated curricula would prevent students from 'viewing knowledge 'in the round,'' which would have 'a detrimental effect on their overall development as students and as human beings' (Hopkins, 2018, p, 437). Dewey's understanding of a democratic curriculum also has an emancipatory tendency with a strong focus on critical inquiry, which is in some sense similar to Freire's concept of 'conscientization'.

Looking back at these arguments, we must also position ourselves within the workings of a contemporary society. Vast socio-economic changes such as the decline in low-skilled factory work, the expansion of the service industry, and the role that technology has played in the creation of new occupations, have brought about a new set of skills which go far beyond the selective trade and manual work which Dewey makes reference to. Despite this, however, DeFalco (2016) argues that vocational education today, 'has not moved much closer to what Dewey envisioned. A badly conceived concept of 'learning for earning' is still very much on the top of the vocational education agenda, as it was when Dewey wrote about vocational education over a century ago' (p. 63). The type of vocational education referred to here can be described as a misconception of Dewey's vision, where vocational education is 'still caught between the two schools of thought' (DeFalco, 2016, p. 63), and modernised in the form of a school-based, dual-track system. Kincheloe (1999) similarly contends that VET developments in the US are 'much like the old vocationalism in their narrow view of work roles and worker knowledge' (p. 410). He proposes a 'democratic vocational education' which takes on an expanded and critical view of VET that challenges power relations and includes more attention to citizenship and empowerment.

2.4 Concluding Remarks

As my discussion has shown, VET policies—in their various forms—have received strong contestation for decades, both from a theoretical and an empirical standpoint. This suggests that the current VET policy agenda is far from new, and might best be described as 'familiar'—a repackaging of old solutions. Having said so, the discourse employed in the *My Journey* document is extremely powerful in how it promises to provide 'equitable learning pathways' tailored to the diverse needs and capabilities of students. Rather than taking these assertions as a given, however, my aim is to probe the underlying conceptual logics, rationales, and assumptions on which this policy is based, to better understand if the *My Journey* initiative falls within the global reworking of education as a 'market enhancing mechanism' (Savage, 2011, p. 34). By utilising Bacchi's (2009) critical framework, the researcher is also able to uncover what other concerns and issues have been silenced, which actors gain from these reforms and those that are harmed, while also helping to open up the potential for a more nuanced debate surrounding VET reform. The philosophical premise on

which Bacchi's approach is based, as well as its merits compared to other approaches to critical policy analysis, will be addressed in the following chapter.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.0 Introduction

As has been discussed, this study undertakes an analysis of educational policy discourse with a central focus on VET reform within the local context. Unlike more traditional approaches to policy analysis, I do not seek to analyse or assess the general effectiveness of VET policy; instead, I aim to challenge the very notion of taken-for-granted policy 'problems' by teasing out and exposing problem representations, or 'problematisations'. This will be accomplished by exploring how policy issues are constructed as problems, and by looking beyond the dominant narratives that may unwittingly suppress and complicate attempts at change.

The first section of this chapter begins by briefly contrasting traditional approaches to policy with more recent critical approaches, and how the latter is a particularly valuable tool in our 'discourse-saturated' social life (Luke, 2002, p. 99). I then lead into the theories of Foucault in relation to discourse, power/knowledge, and discursive effects on subjectivities, which together inform the theoretical premise for my analysis. Finally, I elaborate on Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach which is a valuable, problem questioning tool used to probe the discursive effects of policy proposals.

In order to do this, however, it is necessary to clarify the conceptual framework applied to this thesis. I adopt a post-structuralist perspective regarding the role of language, whereby theory and method are intertwined. This philosophical premise suggests that language 'is not merely a channel through which information about underlying mental states and behaviour or facts about the world are communicated'; it is more akin to a ''machine' that generates, and as a result constitutes, the social world' (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 9). In short, language is not merely a tool that describes our reality; it also plays an active role in constituting it and shaping our view of it.

The consequences for the field of policy which follows this post-structuralist interpretation of language are significant, as it helps to reveal the ideological and political nature of social policy and the principles on which it is centered. By utilising this critical framework to show that policy language 'not only depicts but also constructs the issues at hand', critical policy analysts may expose the 'central questions of truth and power' in policy (Fischer & Forester, 1993, p. 1).

3.1 Towards a critical framework

According to Diem at al. (2014), educational policy studies generally operate through a paradigm which involves 'timeworn assumptions, norms, and traditions, institutionalised and accepted by most researchers as the appropriate 'value-free' way to undertake educational policy research' (p. 1068). This traditional approach towards policy making and policy implementation entails a strong belief in linear processes and evidence-based, goal-driven projects that focus on problems outside of the policy process. It is seen as a neutral, scientific approach that can be planned, managed, and controlled, and which promotes productive and effective change to aim for optimal policy outcomes (Diem at al., 2014).

Within this framework, the social scientist or researcher would produce a body of knowledge that encompasses a number of 'factual explanations and causal connections' (Diem at al, 2014, p. 1071). Policy-makers may then use this information to develop policy proposals and decide on the best means of achieving certain predetermined goals. It is thus assumed that these strategies are indisputable and can be applied to most contexts, wholly disregarding the complex nature of policy arenas. In this way, failures in the application of new policies are conceived as technical problems, since problems are believed to be 'objectively definable and 'out there'' (Dery, 1984, p. xi).

This conventional approach is often characterised as theoretically limited since it is influenced by positivist understandings of knowledge and reality (Levinson et al., 2009). Since the 1980s, however, emerging theoretical understandings about the nature of knowledge and meaning problematised the conceptual tools associated with the traditional framework and prompted an increasing use of critical frameworks (McDonnell, 2009). Work by Apple (1982) in the US, and Ball (1990; 1993; 1994) in the UK, have been particularly influential in the way they problematised this approach, and consequently 'elucidated the role of power and ideology in the policy process' (Diem & Young, 2017, p. 3).

Critical policy analysts adopt a number of different theoretical lenses belonging to the critical theory paradigm, such as post-structuralism, postmodernism, and social constructionism. In addition, most studies taking on a critical approach focus on five overarching concerns: policy, its roots, and its development over time; comparing policy rhetoric to social realities; how knowledge, power, and resources, are distributed unequally;

how policies lead to stratification; how policies institutionalise inequality and privilege; and how individuals often react to policies (Diem et al, 2014). To this end, education policy scholars have now given increasing attention to the issues of justice, equity, as well as policy issues relating to minority and disadvantaged populations.

The role of language and discourse in the construction of social relations and shared realities has also been given wide attention (Goodwin, 2011). As Ball (1994) argues, 'the effect of policy is primarily discursive, it changes the possibilities we have for thinking 'otherwise'' (p. 23). Here, it is important to consider that policy issues may also be framed in ways that situate people as accountable for their own failures. This may distract attention from the underlying mechanisms that contribute to unequal outcomes, while simultaneously conditioning people to consent and accept them, even though this might go against their own interests (Goodwin, 2011). This notion has often been linked to neoliberalism, which according to Miller and Rose (1990), allows the State to govern 'at a distance' (p. 9)—rather than drawing up policies that directly influence the actions of society, governing is instead done covertly through the discursive construction of desirable behaviours and responsibility for one's actions.

Although discourse analytic techniques following this tradition are varied, it is argued that CDA has come to be the most dominant approach used within education policy, where a focus on linguistic analysis is central. Among the more well-known approaches are Fairclough's (2013) version of CDA, Van Dijk's (2001) socio-cognitive perspective, and Wodak's (2001) discourse-historical approach. According to these scholars, societal issues can be adequately traced through the study of language, since hegemony and control manifest themselves through linguistic processes. According to Fairclough (2001), such a focus on linguistic analysis is important in today's contemporary society since the use and framing of language has become central in a range of social processes, particularly with the emergence of travelling ideas such as the 'knowledge-based' economy. This has led to the 'technologisation of discourse' (Fairclough, 2001, p. 231), where language is increasingly shaped in accordance to economic, political, and institutional aims.

In contrast, a Foucauldian-informed discourse analysis has a different understanding of discourse compared to that of CDA, as it departs from the notion of 'policy-as-discourse' (Bacchi, 2000; Goodwin, 2011). Here, the focus is not on language use and how arguments

are shaped, but rather on the deep-seated logic that underpins governmental practice. Since the WPR approach draws heavily from Foucault's theories on the discursive production of power/knowledge, subjectivity, and the role of discourse in governance, the next section will briefly discuss these ideas in order to provide a theoretical rationale for my analysis and elaborate on the relationship between theory and methodology.

3.2 A Foucauldian dimension

Foucault (1972) adopts the term 'discourse' to denote 'ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations' (Weedon, 1987, p. 33). His work contains a strong historical dimension as he views the logic produced by discourse, and thus certain ways of seeing and being in the world, as being related to the broader épistémè of the historical period in which it arises.

In his earlier archaeological work, Foucault (1972) traces how some discourses have gained the status of 'truth' through a set of rules which determine what can be communicated. At the same time, he identifies how other competing discourses come to be marginalised, while simultaneously bringing our attention to their contested nature and offering ways in which dominant power structures can be resisted. These dominant discourses 'enable and delimit fields of knowledge and inquiry' and control 'what can be said, thought, and done within those fields' (Luke, 1996, p. 3). Thus, discourse hides both its capacity to delimit understanding, as well as its political and ideological intentions. Through its reiteration in society, discourse normalises and homogenises the process of 'naturalisation' (Fairclough, 1989). Critical policy analysts following the theories of Foucault seek to probe and defamiliarise these conceptual underpinnings, and to reveal the ways in which dominant discourses subjugate and exclude other possible realities.

Foucault's (1984) later genealogical work emphasises how discourses are produced by effects of power relations within a social order. In this view, power should not be understood as something which is always knowingly possessed, whose sole function is repression. Instead, it circulates in a web which disseminates throughout the whole social body, and is always bound up with knowledge; it simultaneously makes use of knowledge and reproduces knowledge to put forth its intentions. Moreover, by identifying specific points in history where realities are given authority in certain domains, Foucault (1984) shows us that under scrutiny, these realities are contingent and subject to change. The goal,

therefore, is to upset assumptions about the linear and natural evolution of systems of thought.

Another important aspect of Foucault's work is the suggestion that discourses go beyond what can be thought and said. They 'constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern' (Weedon, 1987, p. 108). In this view, discourse is material in effect, producing what Foucault calls 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention' (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). In this way, power and knowledge bound up together create certain discourses that are internalised by individuals, and effectively guide them through self-disciplinary practices. As discussed earlier, the critical policy tradition following these ideas conceive policy as a form of discourse which has the power to shape the subjectivity of individuals. Ball (1993), for instance, asserts that 'we are the subjectivities, the voices, the knowledge, the power relations that a discourse constructs and allows' (p. 14). Within the field of education, Foucault's work had therefore provided scholars with an additional theoretical lens to better understand how students, teachers, and other school actors are unknowingly constructed by different relations of discourse, power, and knowledge.

Most importantly, Foucault's theories and analytic strategies provide researchers with a useful toolkit to demystify dominant ideologies. Although it is argued that discourse can limit what is thought and said, there is still a possibility for 'discursive reconstruction' (Bacchi, 2000, p. 50). In insisting that discursive fields are 'plural and contradictory' due to unequal power struggles (Bacchi, 2000, p. 50), interdisciplinary techniques of analysis can be employed to investigate ways in which texts construct representations of the world.

3.3 Bacchi's '*What's the Problem Represented to be*?' (WPR) approach

Broadly situated in the post-structuralist paradigm, Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach takes a policy-as-discourse perspective in order to examine the discursive aspects of policy. The framework is built around a set of questions that Bacchi has specifically designed as a practical methodological tool to examine policy texts. Moreover, it draws on a number of key concepts in relation to language and discourse which I have explored throughout this chapter, such as power struggles and relations, the discursive effects of 'truth' and 'knowledge,' and the discursive production of subjectivity. In addition, the researcher is

encouraged to challenge the conceptual underpinnings of the problem representations, and to seek ways in which it could be reexamined and rethought.

3.3.1 The WPR Questions

Here, I consider each question and highlight the specific objectives and strategies used to analyse the set of policy texts as discourse. This discussion will be followed by a tabular summary of Bacchi's WPR approach, as well as an exploration of the policy texts which will be considered throughout my analysis.

3.3.1.1 Question 1: What's the 'problem' represented to be in the policy?

The aim behind the first question is to uncover the implied problem representations within the selected policy texts. This requires the researcher to work backwards from what is proposed as a change and to see how this 'constitutes a problem' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 3). Moreover, Bacchi (2009) suggests repeating this step since alternative problem representations might also be nested within one another.

3.3.1.2 Question 2: What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?

This question is an exercise in Foucauldian archaeology. 'Presuppositions' or 'assumptions' refer to the underlying conceptual logics which lead to a shared, taken-for-granted understanding of the 'problem', often the result of 'deep-seated cultural values' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 5). It is through a shared conceptual logic that these problems become intelligible and are subconsciously taken as common-sense. As with Foucault (1973), this limits what can be thought about. Moreover, this section requires the researcher to engage in discourse analysis by identifying and examining the *binaries, key concepts* and *categories* operating within the policy. The analyst must also take into account whether patterns of 'styles of problematisation' are embedded within the policy, their imbalances, and if these patterns are also common across other policies (Bacchi, 2009, p. 6). This may illustrate the kind of thinking that lies behind particular styles of governing—political 'rationalities', or 'modes of governance' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 6).

3.3.1.3 Question 3: How has this representation of the 'problem' come
about?

This question entails a genealogical investigation into the specific mechanisms that have contributed to the development of the problem representations, and how they came to assume dominance. By identifying contesting claims for truth within a specific historical context, the analyst may upset the taken-for-granted status of problem representations, and highlight 'the spaces for challenge and change' (Bacchi, 2012, p. 23).

3.3.1.4 Question 4: What is left unproblematic in this problem
representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about
differently?

This question takes on a more critical approach by problematising the 'problematisations on offer' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 12). Here, the analyst must consider ways in which certain perspectives are silenced, and identify other concerns which fail to be problematised. Discourse analysis is useful here in highlighting 'limitations or inadequacies in the way the 'problem' is being represented' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 13). The use of *binaries*, for instance, draws attention to how complex issues are simplified, resulting in the possible misrepresentation of such issues. Moreover, a genealogical analysis may also assist here, since silences can be identified when looking at which representations gain 'institutional endorsement' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 14). This could also be done through cross-cultural and cross-national comparisons by showing that alternative problem representations do exist, thus allowing the analyst to identify 'specific institutional and cultural contexts and, hence, that problem representations are contingent' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 14).

3.3.1.5 Question 5: What effects are produced by this representation
of the 'problem'?

This question represents a crucial part of the methodology. We are reminded that discourse goes beyond ways of knowing; it also has 'material consequences' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 2). It draws attention to the aspects of a problem representation which have 'deleterious effects' for certain groups, and how others may benefit (Bacchi, 2009, p. 15). Moreover, this question is proactive in the way it opens up considerations to the long-range impact of policies. Bacchi (2009, p. 16-17) accounts for three different effects here:

I. **_Discursive effects_:** Looking at how policy discourse may encourage or silence certain possibilities for thought, and what effects this may have on people;

II. **_Subjectification effects_:** This refers to the discursive constitution of subjectivity. In other words, it is suggested that policies produce certain kinds of subject positions and social relationships, thus having consequential effects on the way we go about our lives. This question also attends to what Foucault (1982, p. 777) calls 'dividing practices'—ways in which policies 'set groups of people in opposition to each other' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 16-17). In this way, minorities may be stigmatised when they are deemed to lack the characteristics and behaviours of the majority, while the majority unconsciously partakes in self-disciplinary measures. Moreover, the analyst is also encouraged to probe any 'attributions of responsibility' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 17);

III. **_Lived Effects_:** This refers to 'effects in the real' (Foucault, 1978, p. 55) by looking at how problem representations directly impact people's lives. This highlights a valuable aspect of the WPR approach since other forms of discourse analysis do not tend to consider the embodied and lived effects of policy.

> *3.3.1.6 Question Six: How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended (6a)? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced (6b)?*

Here, the analyst is encouraged to uncover the practices and processes which have allowed for the domination and legitimation of certain problematisations. This includes identifying the individuals, agencies, institutions, and also the role of the media in disseminating and sustaining these problem representations. Having said so, Bacchi (2009) also encourages a more integrated WPR approach where necessary, rather than strictly following the questions in a systematic way. For this reason, the identification of individuals and agencies will be included in the genealogy subsection of the analysis. In relation to question 6b, the analyst is encouraged to disrupt dominant discourses, especially those which are harmful, by conjuring counter-discourses. This can be done by 'mobilising competing discourses or reframing the 'problem'' (Goodwin, 2011, p. 173).

Table 3.1: Summary of Bacchi's WPR Approach		
Question	**Why?**	**How?**
1. What's the problem represented to be?	To uncover the implied problem representation(s) within the selected policy texts.	➜ Working backwards from what is proposed as a change.
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the problem?	To identify the underlying conceptual logics which lead to a shared, taken-for-granted understanding of the 'problem'.	➜ Foucauldian archeology. ➜ Discourse analysis techniques; *binaries, key concepts*, and *key categories.*
3. How has this representation of the problem come about?	To investigate the specific mechanisms that have contributed to the development of the problem representation(s), and how it came to assume dominance.	➜ Foucauldian genealogical analysis.
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?	To consider ways in which certain perspectives are silenced, and to identify other concerns which fail to be problematised.	➜ Genealogical analysis. ➜ Cross-cultural/cross-national comparisons.
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the problem?	To explore discursive effects, subjectification effects, and lived effects.	➜ Discourse-analysis techniques; identification of subject positions, dividing practices, and attributions of responsibility. ➜ Considering the impact of problem representations on people's lives.
6. How/where is this representation of the problem produced,disseminated and defended? How could it be question, disputed and disrupted?	To uncover the practices and processes which have allowed for the domination of certain problematisation(s), and to consider counter-discourses.	➜ Identifying individuals, agencies and institutions. ➜ Considering the role of the media. ➜ 'Mobilising competing discourses or reframing the 'problem''(Goodwin, 2011, p. 173).

Adapted from Bacchi, C. (2009). *Analysing policy: What's the problem represented to be?* Pearson Education.

3.4 Concluding remarks

This chapter has outlined the interdisciplinary nature of Bacchi's (2009) approach to policy analysis; it explicitly employs a notion of 'policy-as-discourse' which acknowledges that policies have constitutive effects, and also draws on a number of Foucault's ideas to highlight the powerful, yet contingent, nature of problem representations. In addition, a focus on problem 'representations' also implies that the exercise of analysis is subjective and open to the researcher's interpretation. This is of course a central premise of the approach, however such an interpretative dimension also requires a firm understanding of the problems and their solutions in order to be productive. In this way, deconstructing policies may require data gathering from a wide range of sources; policy proposals cannot be effectively analysed in isolation from related texts, government reports, and wider educational reforms. Thus, whereas the *My Journey* document is a central text that specifically addresses VET in Maltese secondary schools, the *NCF* and the *Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024* must also be necessarily considered to build up a broader picture of the problem representations constructed by the State. In this way, 'the multifarious and overlapping nature of governmental rationalities' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 100) may be addressed.

Chapter Four: Analysis & Discussion

4.0 Introduction

My review of the literature served as a means to uncover wider debates in relation to the VET sub-sector, such as current global policy trends in regards to neoliberalism and the dominance of human capital theory, and the social and epistemic inequalities that often emerge as a result of a divisive, dual-track system. Dewey's (1916) concept of a democratic curriculum was also discussed in order to shed light on long-standing and powerful arguments which aim to transcend the hand/mind divide. According to Dewey (1916), a narrow conception of vocational education 'for work', rather than an emancipatory concern with vocational education 'about work,' does nothing more than further perpetuate the power relations which legitimise and reproduce social divisions. At a time when neoliberal policies tend to 'reinforce the academic-vocational binary, rather than transcend it' (Corbett & Ackerson, 2019, p. 468), it is therefore crucial to ensure that discourses surrounding VET move beyond a functional instrumentalist account of the field solely for job preparation.

These insights offer a theoretical basis on which to ground my analysis, particularly with respect to identifying the government rationales that guide local VET reform. As has been discussed in the introductory chapter, a central question guiding this study is the extent to which the *My Journey* initiative exhibits a level of convergence with international educational policies, or if its origins lie in a humanistic rationale that places the learner at its core. Moreover, this chapter also aims to probe into the conceptual logic on which the reform is based, to expose the 'silences' in the problem representations, and to examine the shaping and constitutive effects these discourses may have on students.

I will begin by identifying and describing two overarching problem representations in the *My Journey* document, which are further elucidated by frequent reference to both the *NCF* and *Framework for Education Strategy*. After the two problem representations have been clearly identified by reference to policy extracts, I will then move on to analyse them in light of WPR questions 2–6, arguing throughout that these problem representations operate in mutually reinforcing ways. I conclude by demonstrating how the problematic and contradictory logic on which much institutional endorsement is based can also open up

room for contestation, and allows us to reimagine what VET may look like from a social justice perspective.

4.1 What's the problem represented to be?

This first WPR question tackles the most 'basic proposition' in the policy, and the forms of 'commonsense' contained within it (Bacchi, 2009, p. 3). As Bacchi explains, however, the exercise of outlining problem representations within a policy is not necessarily a simple task, because policies are often complex and contradictory, whereas problem representations often overlap or are 'nested' within one another. Consistent with this, I have identified two core problem representations in my analysis which have been outlined below. Here, I have 'worked backwards' from the stated goal and solution in order to uncover any implicit issues which may be more challenging to identify;

Table 4.1: Problem Representations	
Solution	**Problem Representation**
Develop pathway-based approach to curricular provision.	➔ Current one-size-fits-all system does not cater for learners' needs, aspirations, and 'learning styles'. Here, it is also implied that *the diversification of learners' needs is a problem which requires addressing.* ➔ Current one-size-fits-all system does not teach the skills needed in today's globalised world. Here, it is also implied that *learners themselves do not have the appropriate skills and talent for present and future jobs.*

The most discursively central problem representation can be derived from the title of the reform document itself—*My Journey: Achieving through Different Paths*. On a surface level, what is being problematised here is the current curricular provision, which does not meet the 'educational needs of students with different learning styles and aspirations' (*My Journey*, 2016, p. 2). The terms 'learning styles,' 'aspirations', and 'needs' are extremely widespread throughout the document, and the provision of alternative pathways is framed within a developmental rationale;

'The intended inclusive and comprehensive equitable quality learning programmes for the compulsory secondary schooling structure is driven both by the values of inclusion, social justice, equity and diversity, and the four main targets of the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024' (*My Journey*, 2016, p. 2).

In addition, the current 'one-size-fits-all' system is often referred to as 'traditional' and 'academic', which, according to the document, 'marginalises learners who struggle and are deemed to have failed the current provision of general education curriculum' (*My Journey*, 2016, p. 4). What is evident about the document, especially in comparison to policies developed in other Anglosphere education systems, is that students and teachers are at no point explicitly framed as 'problems to be solved' (Atkins, 2010, p. 257). Rather, the document points towards deficiencies within the system itself, more specifically in the curriculum. The high rate of early school leavers is also represented as a problem resulting from a lack of choice and successful transition pathways within the schooling system; it is because of the current narrow provision of subjects that these students' 'full potential may not be fully developed' (*My Journey*, 2016, p. 4).

It can be argued, then, that VET and applied subjects have been introduced to the senior secondary curriculum 'to diversify the learning opportunities available' (*My Journey,* 2016, p. 6). Thus the intention is to 'enrich the learning experience of students of varying learning needs and interests, particularly those who benefit most from a strong 'practical' orientation in their learning' (*My Journey,* 2016, p. 6), promoting a stance that may lean towards an intrinsically 'progressive' view of education, in line with concerns for social justice and the nature of civil society. Although there is mention of improving the academic track through alternative assessment measures, overwhelming focus is put on strengthening the curriculum by introducing vocational and applied strands.

As Bacchi (2009) argues, however, alternative problem representations might also be 'nested' within one another. Although not explicitly stated, the diversification of student needs—especially in terms of 'low achievers', learners 'at-risk-of-poverty', and those with a 'low socio-economic status' (*My Journey*, 2016, p. 4)—is the central issue being addressed here. Rather than VET being offered as a solution to engage 'all learners,' it is more so framed as a solution directed towards certain groups of students.

In addition, the *My Journey* document highlights the need to address social problems and teach the correct employability skills to aid in curtailing skills shortages in the economy:

'Whilst upholding the centrality of the individual and the developmental approach, the three learning domains and learning programmes should address problems related to skills deficit, unemployment, underemployment both a horizontal and vertical mismatch between their educational attainment and their progression after secondary schooling' (*My Journey*, 2016, p. 5).

This emphasis on economic issues reflects the discourse employed in the *Framework for Education Strategy*, where the important task of keeping up with economic globalisation and rapid change is manifest:

'In today's globalised world, the pace of educational change is not determined only at a national level. If we do not keep up with what is happening in the rest of the world, we will be putting our *nation at risk* and the future of our people will be jeopardised if we allow other nations to overtake us and if we do not catch up with other nations who are ahead of us because of the skills and talents of their people' (*Framework for Education Strategy*, 2014, p. 2).

Such risk discourse—with its nationalistc and exclusive undertones—is highly effective in stimulating a sense of obligation and responsibility in its citizens in a society where globalisation is inevitable. We also have here the familiar narrative of 'a nation at risk', where the Maltese educational system is posited as a crucial means to 'catch up' with global competition. In this way, the intrinsic nature of learning is being increasingly subjugated to its extrinsic value for the economy. With this comes a renewed emphasis on vocational education as an alternative learning track, which is clearly encapsulated in the following extract:

'The biggest constraint on our economic growth and prosperity is our *inability to equitably provide alternative learning tracks* that are relevant and of high quality' (*Framework for Education Strategy*, 2014, p. 6).

The focus on the *My Journey* reform in this instance is on 'relevance' to the workplace measured by the 'impact' of learning on national, economic outcomes, rather than equipping students with the knowledge they need to partake in society's conversation more broadly. Moreover, rather than being described as a desirable social good in itself, changes to curricular provision are seen as the only way to compete in the global marketplace. We cannot ignore the sheer overstatement here; that the biggest constraint on our ability to grow as a nation is our narrow 'academic' curriculum which does not effectively prepare students for the labour market. It is further implied that economic growth is an obligation which rests in the hands of schools, and more so in the hands of learners who provide the human capital required to succeed as a nation.

Although the *My Journey* document has been published by the *Ministry of Education and Employment,* we begin to see a contradictory rationale; it both borrows from a humanistic understanding which aims to cater for 'difference', while also employing a technicist discourse where concepts such as competitiveness, globalisation, and employability, are frequently posited as key driving forces behind the reform. Moreover, one cannot help but notice the attempt made to align 'education' and 'employment' more closely in the Ministry's portofolio name, and how this differs significantly from the name adopted prior to 1992—*Ministry of Education, Culture and Environment*. This further highlights how the link between education and the labour market has not only become more pronounced, but is almost presented as an indisputable truth-claim by the State.

4.2 What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the problem?

My discussion will begin with a focus on the first problem representation—*the current one-size-fits-all system does not cater for learners' needs, aspirations, and 'learning styles'*. In addition, whereas the aim of this question is to uncover implicit assumptions which are lodged within the problem representations, WPR question 4 will turn towards critically analysing them.

The key problem being represented here is that there are simply not enough 'good subjects' on offer to cater for the learning styles, needs, and aspirations of our learners. However, the provision of 'variety' and 'choice' also presumes that learners are rational choosers that have full agency over their academic and occupational choices. One could argue that this discourse reflects a belief in equality of opportunity, where 'opportunity' is evidenced by personal satisfaction, rather than by merit or ability.

The key assumption, then, is that learners will be tracked according to their aspirations and perceived 'learning styles'. Such a choice may work on the grounds that they motivate; after all, there is much research which supports the claim that relevant subject matter and pedagogy motivates young learners (Hayes et al., 2006). It has also been found that the traditional curriculum often leads to lower engagement, especially when the experiences of working-class students are not recognised or drawn upon (Bleazby, 2015). In such a conceptualisation, the offer of alternative pathways is done in a way to maintain an engaging, motivating, and empowering schooling experience.

It is thus understandable why the State might do this in the interests of including relevant knowledge in the curriculum, and also in a way that recognises and values 'difference'. This is also made clear in the way the academic curriculum is being critiqued for marginalising learners due to subject matter which does not match their needs. The State's analysis, therefore, is that a curriculum which offers greater choice and flexibility will retain a higher proportion of learners in schools and help them progress to post-secondary education or work. It is also assumed that to cater for such 'difference,' relevant knowledge can be offered under the tripartite label of academic, vocational, or applied provision. This assumption is not surprising, since it has long been documented that school actors tend to assume that educational tracking increases student achievement, and that students will be better catered for if they learn alongside peers with similar capabilities and interests (Oakes, 1985).

In terms of the second problem representation—*the current one-size-fits-all system does not teach the skills needed in today's globalised world*—the issue once more lies in the inadequacy of our schooling system to ensure smooth school-to-work transitions since it is perceived to be so insulated from the world of work. Schools will therefore let the economy and wider Maltese society down if they fail to teach the appropriate workplace values and

enterprising virtues, while simultaneously letting learners down by not effectively preparing them for the world of work. One could also argue that economic benefits of the 'hidden curriculum' (Jackson, 1968) are being largely ignored in the way schools are presented as having weak links to the economy. In addition, it is also assumed that schools are able to successfully teach the specific work skills that are required in future job placements through the provision of vocational tracks.

Although not explicitly stated, there is an implied 'deficit' understanding of young people and youth employment here. Rather than highlighting inadequacies within the labour market itself, the problem is instead represented as a lack of skills or enterprising values on the students' end, and as a result, more responsibility is being put on the student in terms of labour market readiness. As many commentators have noted (Savelsberg & Giles, 2008), policy proposals which aim to restructure curriculum this way are driven both by a 'responsibilisation' agenda and the influence of market imperatives, thus embodying an instrumentalist philosophy that lies at the heart of neoliberal modes of thought.

4.3 How has this problem representation come about?

As my discussion has shown, policy discourses in relation to VET represent two key solutions—that the provision of alternative pathways in year 9 will motivate and cater for a diverse range of needs, aspirations, and learning styles, and that these pathways will also effectively prepare learners—especially early school leavers and those who are generally disengaged with 'traditional' subjects—for the world of work. Foucault's method of genealogy provides a useful 'toolkit' to open up these discourses to critical scrutiny. By tracing the way certain ways of thinking have emerged, how and why such rationales were endorsed, and by whom, it becomes possible to see that such truth-producing systems are tied to their historical contexts, and are ultimately contingent. In this way, it is also possible to identify that policy discourses and practices could have emerged in different ways. A genealogy thus impels us to ask a number of questions in this respect; what makes it possible for the State to endorse vocational and applied pathways as a solution to these problems? What understandings of 'equity'—a key term often employed in the *My Journey* document—are assumed to advance such a provision? Why is it that the State cannot think otherwise? Where do these understandings come from? And, importantly, has this understanding of 'equity' been contested in the past?

I would also argue that such a task is essential because of the contested nature of terms such as 'equity', 'equality', and 'social justice'. According to Espinoza (2008), this terminology is often employed by policymakers in order to account for the way resources are allocated throughout the educational system, however within the policies themselves, the fundamental meaning of these words are hardly ever unpacked or dealt with in a critical or theoretical manner. The *My Journey* document, for instance, seems to suggest that 'equity' and 'learning pathways' go hand in hand in its recurrent use of the term 'equitable learning pathways'. However, this may also be the case of a 'conflicting ethical framework' (Codd, 1993, p. 75). Codd (1993) argues that, on the one hand, 'equity' represents a 'redistribution of benefits by limiting choice (welfare for all)' (p. 82), whereas 'choice'—a distinct effect of the provision of 'alternative pathways'—is assumed by a belief in 'market-liberal utilitarianism' (p. 83).

One can also find evidence of this lack of clarity in the *NCF*. The consultation process gave rise to a number of concerns which were brought up by stakeholders. It was argued, for instance, that the education of the child should not be made subservient to the needs of the economy: 'values, social justice, respect for diversity, increasing knowledge and ensuring that fewer persons opt out of the compulsory education Cycle are as important as the economic dimensions that the Curriculum is to address' (*NCF*, 2012, p. 6). As a result of this, the Working Group recognised the need to explicitly clarify their stance on social justice and provided an overview of the concept in the 'aims' section of the final document. However, this definition fell short of any philosophical insight, where inequality was referenced in terms of school 'de-motivators', thus evading any attempt to engage with complex social, pedagogical, or ethical concerns. As it stands, therefore, equity is seen to be achieved by widening access to the curriculum by providing divided and specialised pathways, however this conceptualisation of 'equity' has been contested in the past within the local policy community. It is thus an important exercise to trace this understanding of 'equity' and how it came to be institutionalised by looking at key policy moments throughout Malta's history.

The notion of 'equity'—currently understood as the provision of a relevant, yet divisive, curriculum—can be traced back to the setting up of trade schools under the Labour government in 1972. These new schools were set up as distinct institutions for post-middle school instruction, where 75% of the curriculum focussed on work-specific training, and the

remaining 25% on general, academic study. Sultana's (1992) comprehensive study of Maltese trade schools gives us important insight into the various—and often competing—rationales and societal influences which underpinned this distinct provision. In addition, this socio-economic and historical context provides us with a broader understanding of why vocational training—and not an alternative approach—was adopted as a means to cater for student diversity, and why this institutionalised belief continues to shape current practices.

From an economic standpoint, Malta's political independence from the British in 1964 set the stage for a number of changes in our economy as it strove to become self-reliant, namely 'the development of economic independence, the diversification of a hitherto fortress economy, and the concomitant target of creating enough jobs to absorb all workers in the British Defence Sector' (Sultana, 1995, p. 200). In this view, the opening of trade schools was seen as an adequate response to the industrial expansion that Malta aimed for. At the same time, these schools also promised to deliver practical curricular topics that would motivate and retain 'disengaged, ' 'problematic', and 'non-academic' students at school.

Although this educational reform was prompted by a socialist government, whose egalitarian ideology aimed to emancipate the Maltese working class population:

'the diluted curricula, untrained teaching staff, the lack of resources, and above all, the setting up of vocational schools as a separate space, all led, as has been shown in other contexts (Sultana 1991b, 1992a), to the provision of not simply a different, but of an inferior kind of education to an overwhelmingly working class student population' (Sultana, 1995, p. 211).

This traditional dual-stream provision worked to perpetuate social class divisions and led to the occupational and social stratification of disadvantaged youth; thus, the main features of a divided and divisive, 'alternative' pathway, came to be established in mass secondary schools. While the practical/theoretical divide is a deeply and philosophically entrenched concept which has been with us for centuries, this division continued to be institutionalised and perpetuated in an economy and school structure that was based on the

separation of mental and manual labour, and on a separation of students as being either good with their 'heads' or 'hands'.

The release of Malta's first *National Minimum Curriculum* in 1989 under a Nationalist government continued to perpetuate this division, and this prompted a number of reactions from local scholars (Wain, 1991; Darmanin, 1993; Borg et al., 1995). Borg et al. (1995), for instance, argued that the 'hidden ideology' underpinning the document was an instrumentalist one, largely due to the fact that 'secondary schools, incorporating the trade schools, are the training site for the backbone of the Maltese waged and unwaged, "productive" labour force' (p. 345). The authors go on to argue that these conditions were 'integral to the meritocratic ideal, since stratification is both a result of and the basis on which meritocracy finds its rationalisation' (Borg et al, 1995, p. 346). Such a meritocratic ideology is inextricably linked to a 'politics of absence,' which disregards structural factors and simultaneously subverts any genuine claims to equality of opportunity and outcome, be it occupational, social, or educational.

These wide-spread concerns led to the setting up of a Consultative Committee in 1994 to seek out ways to improve the Maltese educational system. The final report—*Tomorrow's Schools: developing effective learning cultures* (Wain et al., 1995)—was drawn up by a number of education and curriculum experts who, according to Borg & Mayo (2001), had 'an ethical commitment to traditionally subordinated groups' (p. 68). What was especially significant about this document was its focus on 'equity' and 'entitlement', and its aim to move educational discourse 'away from students (and parents) and their 'failures', as was often found in the arguments for streaming and selection, to pedagogy, curriculum and the teaching-learning encounter' (Darmanin, 2002, p. 283), thus highlighting an explicit move towards concerns with child-centred progressivism and equality of outcome.

Even more significant is the report's focus on affirmative action and catering for difference through a 'multiple-delivery system,' while at the same urging to dismantle the practice of channeling and streaming students (Wain et al., 1995, p. 9). Among the many proposals put forward, those related most closely to the curriculum were the introduction of 'programmes of learning which link hand and mind for all pupils such as craft, design and technology and other technical options' (p. 21), the implementation of 'a common curriculum (no options or tracks) right through secondary school with specialisation

postponed until the later, post-secondary stage' (p. 46), and finding 'the appropriate pedagogical tools' to respond to the diverse need of learners (p. 20). Importantly, it was suggested that learners who were deemed to be most 'at-risk' would receive the largest share of both material and human resources. In this way, whereas curricular 'choice' would be limited to students' core entitlement, this would be done in a way to promote a fairer distribution of benefits to those who were most disadvantaged.

Following a long process of review and consultation, teachers, parents, and even the Secretariat for Catholic Education and Culture expressed their concern with regards to the comprehensivisation and democratisation of secondary schools (Borg & Mayo, 2001). Borg & Mayo (2001) argue that State's backtracking of these central suggestions indicated that 'while intellectuals with an ethical commitment to subaltern groups were adequately represented at the decision making level (the Steering Committee), there was a lack of similar intellectuals strategically placed at different sites within the public sphere' (p. 80). These conflicting priorities thus highlight how educational reform is not a 'neutral', linear process, but rather a site of struggle between various interest groups and political agendas. This often results in the continued subordination of disadvantaged groups within the educational system, especially when they are not suitably represented at all levels of educational and political decision-making.

In the early 2000s, investment in vocational education and training shifted to the post-secondary level with the setting up of *MCAST*, however, a renewed interest in secondary vocational education was prompted by Malta's EU membership in 2003, which brought about the subsequent formation of the *Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF)* and its referencing to the *European Qualifications Framework (EQF)* in 2009 (*NCFHE*, 2016). Here, we are reminded that Young (2003) points towards an inherent tension in qualifications frameworks between 'the aim for more market-oriented education systems and the aim for more equal and democratic education systems' (Young, 2003, p. 226). Moreover, as discussed in my review, qualification frameworks are often established to create regulated VET markets to facilitate mobility within the global capital economy, therefore such seemingly 'evidence-based' shifts in policy also require scrutiny.

In addition to the setting up of the *MQF*, Malta has also taken into consideration important EU policy-related documents—such as the *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*

- A European Reference Framework, the *Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training*, and *Europe 2020*—in the drawing up of VET policies. Further, school-based VET programmes have been highly monitored by EU agency *Cedefop*, whereas *The European Regional Development Fund* contributed EUR 3 million to the *My Journey* project. The European discourse has also affected national VET reform through the continuous monitoring against European benchmarks with the involvement of civil servants. Given these changes, it is pertinent to consider local VET reform from the point of view of a Member State, especially since there is a growing body of research that points towards the 'neoliberal turn' in EU educational policy.

In this vein, Sultana (1995) argues that 'the EU is facilitating a convergence of policy-making in response to economic challenges, and at the same time actively promoting a human resource development approach to boost the competitiveness of Europe's business' (p. 125). Indeed, *Cedefop* stresses (2017) that 'European wide economic hardship has been a catalyst for change in vocational education and training' (p. 1), and as a result, 'with rising high youth unemployment, member states have sped up VET system reforms' (p. 1). In addition, Maltese VET policies have been set up to 'strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness' within the EU (*Cedefop,* 2017, p. 1).

Many argue that this policy convergence throughout the EU has been done in order to seek unity and promote joint orientations like the Lisbon goals, where competition with the USA and Japan is often posited as a key driving force (Leney, 2004). Although European integration has been traditionally associated with areas such as employment and the economy, The Lisbon goals for 2010 set forth a new agenda for European education systems as an area of maximum priority, and progressive reform was planned to be achieved through a number of new policy initiatives and investment in educational systems throughout the EU. The Lisbon Strategy boldly asserted that, this way, the EU would 'become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' (Lisbon European Council, 2000).

The framing of educational policy in terms of EU competitiveness has not gone unchallenged, however. According to Leney (2004), the EU tries to powerfully advance a human capital agenda to equip the European economy with the skilled workforce

needed—real or imagined. The neoliberal turn of EU policy discourse has also been pointed out by a number of researchers (Walters & Haahr, 2005; Mitchell, 2006; Fairclough et al., 2008). Krzyżanowski (2016), for instance, studied how supranational regulatory discourse progresses by time and finds its way into national governance; it is becoming 'increasingly dominated by market-driven and economic framings of languages,' supported by 'overt references to Lisbon as the major ontological and ideological frame' (p. 316). In this way, the Lisbon Strategy is seen as a key tool for pushing forward a neoliberal agenda throughout the EU.

We thus begin to see some resonance with Sultana's (1992) analysis of the competing goals underpinning the trade school project; while the discourse surrounding VET makes reference to the needs, aspirations, and learning styles of students (which are increasingly couched in terms of early school leavers, at-risk students, and the local skills gap), this also has to be linked to wider economic goals such as national competitiveness, EU benchmarks, and developing the human capital needed to succeed in the knowledge-economy. As Ball (1990) argues, whereas this relationship between education and the economy within policy discourse is not new, the nature of the discourse has become modernised by stressing changes in the production process and contemporary workplace organisations.

It was also shown that a competing vision for equity and entitlement existed within our educational discourse which went beyond technical changes within the curriculum and advocated the unification of 'hand' and 'mind' in secondary schools. Here, equity was conceptualised in terms of outcomes, and positive discrimination was seen as a necessary task to further social justice goals. As the EU fell in line in terms of VET policy however, concepts such as 'equity' have become increasingly blurred within policy discourse as they travel between global and national borders, and any claims to social justice seem to be limited to retaining students at schools and widening access to the labour market. With this in mind, the scope of the coming sections will be to further problematise that which seems to be 'familiar'—in other words, to better understand why it has become natural to think about school-based VET and equity as interrelated concepts. This will be done by looking beyond the historical context which gave rise to this understanding, focussing instead on opening up taken-for-granted assumptions and truths to scrutiny.

4.4 What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?

On a more transparent level, it is important to first clarify that although this tripartite curricular provision underlies a notion of equality of opportunity, future learning trajectories are not equal; the applied learning certificate closes off options to attend general higher-secondary institutions, and limits participation to two local vocational and training institutions—*MCAST* and *ITS.*

There are, of course, a number of silences which are implicit and require further inquiry. To begin with, opportunity has been conceptualised in terms of access and learner attributes. As I will argue, such a narrow concept of opportunity does not lead to truly equitable learning. Francis et al. (2017) make a relevant point here—that 'entitlement to material that engages and motivates students has frequently been positioned as a liberal distraction from the priority of delivering positive outcomes', which may be reflective of 'insufficient ambition for working-class students' (p. 8). Moreover, although a more diversified subject choice is on offer, we must also acknowledge that this leads to a differentiated school leaving certificate, narrowly defined by deep-seated assumptions about three 'types of mind' in terms of different knowledges and learner identities. Such an approach to VET also operates an instrumental and technical rationality which assumes that students make decisions in a systematic and linear way, and disregards deeply embedded structural inequalities which have long been acknowledged to affect students' sense of agency and control. Moreover, as I will argue, responsibility for these crucial decisions are being increasingly attributed to learners in the way policy discourses are shaped. These silences will be further problematised under the following headings: Choice and Decision-making; The Academic-Vocational Divide; Skills and an Employer-driven Discourse; and lastly, Change and Uncertainty.

4.4.1 Choice and decision-making

Hodkinson & Sparkes (1997) argue that while literature from the sociological tradition has long highlighted that differentiated pathways are socially-structured, 'policy-making operates on assumptions of individual freedom to choose' (p. 31). In essence, this understanding highlights a strong belief in free will and rational choice (Elster, 1986), where human beings are thought to strive for the best possible outcomes by objectively weighing

their options in terms of potential costs and benefits. This is evidenced in the fact that in the *My Journey* document, there is no mention of the actual decision-making process of learners, thus highlighting that this is assumed to be a linear, technical, and rational process. This unproblematic viewpoint is succinctly outlined by Bennett et al. (1992), as quoted in Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997):

'We assume that, knowing their capacities and other personal characteristics, individuals form an estimate of expected earnings resulting from each education, training and labour market option, and, taking into account their taste for each, choose the stream which offers the greatest net utility' (p. 13).

Work informed by Bourdieu (1984), on the other hand, has foregrounded the notion that social class, gender, and ethnicity, are key societal structures which significantly shape attitudes and perceptions among individuals. In addition, Gambetta's (1987) rational choice theory considers both structure and agency in regards to educational decisions confronting young people. This framework posits that there are two major forces pushing and pulling students towards their choices; where 'push' factors include past failures or achievements, along with the student's social, gender, or racial identity, whereas 'pull' factors are those that attract the student towards the choices they make, such as future and occupational aspirations. Learnt failure also has a part to play here, since this may strongly influence students' self-perceived ability. Rotin (1997) applied this framework to the Maltese context to better understand girls' decision-making processes when they were faced with the important decision to either follow a general education stream, or a vocational track at a Trade School. The results portrayed an extremely complex interplay of both push and pull factors. The girls were, very early in their schooling, labelled as incompetent and instinctively placed at the bottom of the mind/hand hierarchy, thus locking them into a 'counter-school' culture and pushing them to believe that Trade Schools were their only option. They were simultaneously 'pulled' towards the same direction due to future aspirations, learnt failure, and jobs offered to them while still at school. It was found that the 'practical' orientation of vocational schools 'also coincided with their own deeply-held convictions of what was appropriate for a woman to do' (Rotin, 1997, p. 289) so their

preferences were further shaped by the 'domestic' nature of many of these subjects. In a similar vein, Stables & Stables' (1995) study compared the career aspirations of teenage girls at age 14 and 16, and found that their choices were less marked by gender divisions in later years, thus highlighting the problematic nature of early specialisation both in terms of gender and social class.

In addition, a long line of research addressing the issue of social and occupational segregation was discussed in my review, as well as middle-class students' and parents' ability to better negotiate such a choice. By extension, Atkins and Flint's (2015) qualitative study has shown that students opting for more vocationally orientated programmes such as Construction and Beauty Therapy had much less potential for agency in their decision-making processes compared to the peers interviewed in the more 'traditional' programmes, largely due to their social class and gender positioning. From a psychological perspective, it has also been suggested that future-time orientation may be lower for members with working-class backgrounds due to them having 'less power, control, and determination regarding their fate,' (Koenig et al., 1981, p. 124) and for this reason, students may perceive subject choice in terms of immediate rewards offered through direct entry into the labour market, rather than delaying gratification for long-term awards such as seeking a professional career or furthering one's studies.

One might argue that VET policies built around models of instrumental or technical rationality erroneously presume that all students have equal capacity and resources to make an educated, logical, and unconstrained career choice from a wide range of options. These are far from simple choices as implied by policy discourse, and may be better characterised as 'pragmatic decisions' made within 'limited horizons for action' (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 2006, p. 39). The government neither addresses these concerns, nor the scholarly and public debate surrounding school-based VET reform, thus suggesting that addressing marginalisation through the provision of alternative pathways is rhetorical rather than evidence-based. In defending these systems, we might refer to a 'meritocratic' conception of educational justice, however rather than a hierarchical structure, which is based on students' academic performance, placement lies in attributes of learners themselves. It can be argued, then, that current VET provision fails to confront what Lynch (2001) refers to as 'the hierarchical relations of dominance and subordinancy' (p. 407).

What is also left unproblematic here is the issue with student interest in relation to the subjects they are expected to choose; student interest is indeed central to the *My Journey* initiative if VET is posited as a solution to meet students' 'aspirations'. Having said so, it has been shown that subject interest can be highly volatile in middle school (James & Smith, 1985), whereas studies (Stables & Stables, 1995) also point towards dissatisfaction of students taking up vocational programmes, since they were not properly advised or guided throughout their decision-making process. Moreover, Miller (1983) brings our attention to the role of 'happenstance' in career choice, as opposed to expected decision-making models that bear little resemblance to labour market transitions, thus shedding light on the problematic nature of subjects which teach highly specific, work-place skills. Roberts (1981), in his analysis of career decision-making, contends that 'occupational choice' in the youth labour market should be thought of as 'opportunity structure' instead, which is strongly influenced by contemporary workplace organisation and employment, government regulation, and social class. This can be further applied to our thinking about VET; are we really catering for students' needs and aspirations through the provision of work-based learning, or are we instead further limiting their educational and occupational futures by offering an illusion of 'choice'?

Here, it is important to consider that *Cedefop*'s (2017) publication, *Vocational education and training in Malta*, clarifies that the decision about subject offer in year 9 reflects 'industry priorities and labour market needs' (p. 24), thus further defining—and limiting—the way in which learners may think about future opportunities in the labour market. Taking this into account, although the *My Journey* reform may highlight a more progressive skills-led educational thinking where the curriculum is 'tailored' to students' interests and aspirations, it is more clearly 'tailored' to the State's drive for human capital. One might say that a 'utilitarian vision is easier to sell politically than a romantic one' (Labaree, p. 181), and whereas many strive to promote a richer educational experience for their students, VET reforms will continue to have a wide appeal with students, teachers, businesses, and, according to Grubb & Lazerson (2005), even more so with governments that aim to persuade that they are indeed addressing the country's social and economic problems.

One could argue that in order to better understand how 'choices' are made, there needs to be an increased focus on the careful documentation and interpretation of the subjective construction of meaning facing young learners. Although investigation of this nature calls for qualitative methods of inquiry, such research may need to go beyond the participants' 'articulable sense of agency and control', as this may not properly outline the tacit knowledge and 'horizons for action' that affect students' choices; thus, careful consideration needs to be taken to probe into the 'structurally-based social practices' of students (Morrison, 2008, p. 359). Moreover, if schools are offering more choice to learners, especially of the kind that may have far-reaching ramifications on their learning and occupational trajectories, then we arguably need to better prepare learners for this choice. For this reason, schools may need to approach this decision-making process as an educational aim in itself; possibly by including students in creative, democratic school-level processes, or by giving increased attention to decision-making in subject learning outcomes.

Such a view also has significant implications for the provision of career guidance in secondary schools. According to Hooley & Sultana (2016), the career guidance field is currently dominated by the discipline of 'mainstream psychology' (p. 6). Their paper suggests, however, that Young's (2014) work on oppression may prove to be a useful analytic lense in which to take seriously the struggle for social justice. Such an intervention acknowledges the complex structural inequalities that can limit individuals' choices, especially at a time when neoliberal philosophy has emerged as a prevalent force within the educational sphere. Thus, it is pertinent that career guidance aims to work in 'socially transformative and emancipatory rather than reproductive and oppressive ways' (Hooley & Sultana, 2016, p. 3).

4.4.2 The academic-vocational divide

One could argue that students' decision-making processes are further constrained by what the State assumes to be an adequate way to respond to their diverse needs—the provision of vocational programmes as separate to academic study. Here, it is argued that 'parity of esteem' has been achieved through the possibility of certification at MQF levels 1, 2, and 3, so that all subjects have equal weighting and may be referenced to the *European Qualifications Framework (EQF)*. However, an underlying prejudice fails to be problematised;

the academic-vocational divide is a discourse deeply ingrained in institutional divisions, and can be best described as a false dichotomy.

Scholars have outlined various reasons as to why policy-makers resort to dividing curricula this way. Taylor (1993) contends that the academic-vocational divide can be traced back to Plato's philosophy of education and the division between everyday and theoretical knowledge. Young (1993) argues that the academic-vocational binary also finds its genesis in an economy which separates mental and manual labour, leading to what he refers to as 'divisive specialisation' (p. 205). In this way, vocational tracks became legitimised by educational institutions and worked as a covert sorting mechanism to direct working class students towards working class jobs. Moreover, given the growing diversity of student backgrounds with the rise of mass secondary education, dividing the curriculum this way was seen as an adequate response to cater for individual 'differences' (Oakes, 1985, p. 15). The divisive academic-vocational binary is therefore not a recent phenomenon, and has existed long before the emergence of neoliberal policy trends.

The unstable nature of this dichotomy is most clearly evidenced in the blurring of distinctions between academic and vocational knowledge in contemporary workplace practices. The rise of modern technology and changing labour structures require all learners to be literate and communicate effectively (European Commission, 2016b), whereas Young (2006) similarly contends that 'while all jobs require context-specific knowledge, many jobs also require knowledge involving theoretical ideas shared by a community of specialists' located within the academic disciplines' (p. 115). Wheelahan (2007) and Nylund (2017) have similarly brought our attention to the overlapping nature of academic and vocational knowledge and learning; academic study is practical in many cases (practising a foreign language for communicative purposes, or mathematics for practical applications, for instance), and is often chosen with a specific career goal in mind. It is therefore a misleading tendency to define the 'practical' and the 'theoretical' in opposition to each other.

Moreover, emerging pedagogical theories suggest that general academic learning could be more motivating and effective with the use of practical applications. As social constructivist theories have shown us (Vygotsky, 1978), the most effective development can take place at the confluence of the two, where students are simultaneously learning, doing, and reflecting. This misconception may thus divert focus from the importance of actively

engaging learners in all subjects—especially the 'academic' ones—with the help of relevant and practical examples to ground their learning. Moreover, this divide tends to depict 'academic learning' as a homogenous process which follows a transmission model of teaching, when in fact, pedagogy is a complex and fluid process which is closely linked to the professional judgement of teachers and their unique understanding of their learners and the context in which they teach in. It has also been argued that whereas working-class children generally revert to practical reasoning to make sense of their surroundings (Luria, 1976), this does not mean that they cannot partake in abstract reasoning; it is through the application of productive pedagogies that the diverse needs of all children can be met.

This false dichotomy is also linked to another misconception; that learners can be divided into either the 'academic', or 'vocational', category. A report published in 2016 by *Cedefop*, titled *Malta: Mismatch priority occupation*s, clearly illustrates this deeply ingrained fallacy. In setting out to identify which occupations are in shortage or surplus in Malta, the report concludes by suggesting that:

'VET needs to be introduced at a lower level of the educational system to cater for those *who prefer learning by doing (rather than learning from books)*. It is recommended that more trade and vocational courses are re-introduced at the secondary level, which would encourage more students to remain in school and learn a useful trade' (*Cedefop*, 2016).

The academic-vocational divide is a thus deep-seated cultural issue which does not only affect the drawing up of curricula; it also entails a belief about inherent difference in intelligence. In this vein, although the *My Journey* document makes reference to heterogeneity and students' multiple intelligences, it is assumed that offering a tripartite curriculum effectively responds to this difference. This reflects the fundamental view that the capacities of learners are so varied that the curriculum must—for practical and administrative reasons—attend to this difference by offering students a very different schooling experience. However, as Oakes (1985; 1992) argues, 'educational theory and research has yet to identify particular individual differences that seem to require specific and separate instructional treatments' (p. 11).

It is clear that students must be engaged in meaningful learning, and that their funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005) and unique backgrounds must be drawn upon and respected; however, 'practical' strengths do not necessarily translate to 'work-based' learning, and 'academic' strengths should not obstruct the importance of grounded and practical applications. Such policy discourse undervalues the complexities of what the mind can do in education and work, and as Rose (2008) argues, 'given the distinctions we make between the academic and the vocational, difference quickly devolves to deficiency' (p. 41). It may thus be the case that VET reform is implicitly driven by assumptions of cognitive limitation which may 'shrink our curricular imagination' (p. 41). For this reason, cultural assumptions about hand and mind, theory and practice, and academic and vocational learning, need to be persistently challenged in order to make schools more democratic. As Saunders and Chrisman (2011) argue, 'perhaps most critically, policymakers, educators, and students must believe that given the right environment, all students can master complex academic and technical concepts' (p. 21).

4.4.3 Skills and an employer-driven discourse

The logic that justifies work preparation as a means to the end of economic stability is extremely dominant in the *My Journey* document. Alternative reasons to work other than economic gain have not been alluded to, and as many scholars have noted, this utilitarian framing as a way to justify alternative pathways does nothing more than perpetuate the academic-vocational tension and hierarchical binaries (Taylor, 2015). In addition, the discourse of globalisation contains numerous contradictions, silences, and taken-for-granted assumptions which, as I will argue, are typical of a neoliberal ideology which aims to frame social justice and economic progress as compatible policy goals. One of these contradictions manifests itself in the ever so present 'skills' narrative, framed as a necessary provision for a fast changing global economy.

The *NCF*, for instance, has been conceptualised as 'a response to the changing demands of individuals and society, rapid changes in our education system driven by globalisation, ICT development, competition, shift of traditional values and new paradigms' (*NCF*, 2012, p. iii). The document goes on to describe the introduction of the *My Journey* reform in secondary schools as imminent because 'in a competitive economy, new *skills* are required for new jobs so that people move towards better job quality and working

conditions' (*NCF*, 2012, p. 13). The rationale here is that introducing VET in the curriculum will equip learners with the skills needed to keep up with these rapidly changing societal and labour demands, clearly falling in line with global educational reforms that highlight the urgent need for students to adapt to new contexts.

The key term 'skills' is widely used throughout the *My Journey* document to justify developing job-ready workers, however at the same time, the term itself is poorly defined. It is thus necessary to unpack the concept of 'skills' more specifically to understand where a significant contradiction fails to be problematised. 'Transversal', 'transferable,' or 'soft skills' on the one hand, refer to highly generalised skills such as 'creativity' or 'communication.' 'Hard skills,' on the other, refer to the teaching of technical, job-specific skills which are easily measurable, and closely mimic activities which would be required in the workplace (Lauglo & Lillis, 1998). Such skills would be notably prevalent in VET subjects which are job-orientated in nature. However, a closer analysis will reveal that it is the transversal, general skills which are highly valued in helping students prepare for present and future jobs and to adapt to new contexts.

In an attempt to improve the governance of skills anticipation and labour forecasting due to local skills shortages in various industries—and, ultimately, to gain a better understanding of the skills employees are lacking in the workplace—Malta recently embarked on a number of projects. A *National Skills Council* was set up in 2016 by the *Ministry of Education and Employment* (comprising mostly representatives coming from industry and vocational training sectors) whose task was to 'recommend policy changes to the government that would reduce these gaps and prepare the labour force with the right skills, to meet the future challenges' (*National Skills Council*, 2020). During the same year, the *National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE), Jobsplus*, and *Malta Enterprise (ME)* collaborated on a *National Employee Skills Gap Survey,* with one of its main aims being to '*provide important feedback to education providers on the knowledge, skills and competences required in different sectors of the economy in order to evaluate the relevance of their study programmes to the labour market*' (*NCFHE*, 2016, p. 2*)*. Here, the skills considered to be most important by employers were oral communication skills, team-working skills, problem-solving skills, customer handling skills, and English language skills (*NCFHE*, 2016, p. 95). The report goes on to state that:

'A lack in transversal skills appears to be considered by employers as a cause to limit the proficiency of employees. To some extent, this also means that proficiency is not necessarily linked to qualifications, as the skills required are of a generic rather than a specific nature' (p. 95).

The section is concluded by highlighting the need to 'integrate those skills, notably ethics, teamwork and communication skills, in curricula so as to give them due attention in preparation for life after completion of studies' (*NCFHE*, 2016, p. 95). These developments make us question if these highly promoted transferable skills—which may seem to be intrinsically worthwhile and valuable at first glance—are more likely an attempt to prepare the post-Fordist worker for conditions in contemporary employment settings, more often acting as a prerequisite for a job.

In addition, such emphasis on these general skills naturally leads us to ask; does the provision of school-based VET reflect what has been conceived to be the needs of a 21st century citizen, heavily rhetoricised as flexibility and transferability? Should one not argue that the balance should be increasingly on these broad transferable skills, even more so for learners that are structurally disadvantaged? This policy discourse is thus contradictory on its own terms and clearly works against a 'high skills' strategy. According to Ball (1999), such discrepancies in policy discourse are typical of a system which embody 'an inherited, and ultimately self-defeating, impoverished view of learning' (p. 200). Despite the rhetoric concerning the Maltese VET system, then, it continues to bear traces of an old conception of workplace organisation and skills.

The *My Journey* reform also presumes that schools can effectively teach the work-specific skills required by employers. However, Grubb and Lazerson (2005) make the point that once preparation for work has been separated from work itself, a number of problems arise: competencies taught at school may not be required on the job itself; schools may not be able to teach the highly specific skills required; employers' needs are diverse, sometimes contradictory, and constantly changing, and thus should not dictate the curriculum; and school-leavers may fail to find—or seek—employment related to their vocational education and training. Another common argument (Taylor, 2002; Grubb &

Lazerson, 2005; Allais, 2014;) is that employers may find an opportunity in shifting costs of training their workforce from their own budgets to the education system. In a similar vein, it has often been noted in the literature that the value of technical, work-specific skills gained in VET quickly diminishes in face of rapid technological progress (Hanushek et al., 2017), which may also result in increased investment costs of lifelong learning at later stages. These silences may thus also have long lasting effects on students' future learning and occupational trajectories—and as I have previously argued, these crucial decisions will be made at a time when learners may not be cognitively prepared to fully understand the intricacies of the labour market, which is especially the case for disadvantaged youth.

One could argue that helping learners transition into employment—especially those who are socially disadvantaged—should help with broader goals like social inclusion. However, while the inclusion of industry voices may better adapt students to existing workplaces, this should not be done in a way that subordinates the goal of education to schooling for the sake of employability and capital enhancement, especially when competences of students are directly matched to the needs of employers in order to promote growth. This is most evident in the highly technocratic discourse used in both international and local VET policy, where the type of empowerment and emancipatory knowledge envisioned by progressive educators such as Dewey (1916) seem to be highly absent from these debates.

4.4.4 Change and uncertainty

Thus far, we have argued that local VET discourse contains a number of silences: students' decision-making process is a complex interplay between structure and agency, rather than a rational, linear process; the academic-vocational divide is a deep-seated notion based on a limited understanding of intelligence, pedagogy, and work; and lastly, that the skills narrative contains a number of contradictions which may have long lasting effects on students' future learning and occupational trajectories. Here, we turn towards the notion of change and uncertainty—a rhetoric which finds its genesis in a neoliberal rationale that aims to shift the responsibility of one's welfare onto the individual.

Savelsburg (2010) argues that while a focus on skills in the educational setting may help prepare students for the organisational structure of the contemporary workplace, it also prepares them for an unpredictable working life. Indeed, the characteristics of the

responsible, successful, and adaptable learner are very prominent in the *My Journey* document, which states that;

> 'Global education reforms stress the need for students to learn to adapt to and challenge new contexts, to acquire more transferable skills to avoid skills obsolescence, and to develop a socially just consciousness as a way of being' (*My Journey*, 2016, p. 4).

Such discourse is also evident in the *NCF. The NCF* states that one of its three main aims for the secondary cycle is for learners to 'sustain their chances in the changing world of employment' (p. 33). Here, it is posited that learners need to be 'flexible in adapting to new technologies and ensuing skills,' and 'understand how to use personal, national, and global resources in order to maximise their economic value, provide stability and autonomy' (p. 59). They must also be equipped 'to anticipate, initiate, and deal with change,' and have the ability 'to readily embrace mobility and exchange' (p. 59). Central to this discourse is the 'hegemonic consensus on the inevitability of it all', which suggests that our educational institutions must inevitably adapt to the challenges of a constantly evolving, competitive world (Mulderrig, 2003, p. 118).

What is also evident in these extracts is what Fairclough (2003) refers to as the 'neoliberal discourse of economic change, which represents "globalisation" as a fact which demands "adjustments" and "reforms" to enhance "efficiency and adaptability" in order to compete' (Fairclough as cited in Taylor, 2004, p. 441). In a context of increasing social policy convergence across Europe, the State has a significant role to play in portraying the *My Journey* reform as both necessary for Malta's economic sustainability, and more so in the absolute interest of everyone concerned. Even though scholars such as Livingstone (1999) provide us with evidence about overqualification and the under-utilisation of skills, neoliberalism effectively employs 'shock doctrines' (Klein, 2008) such as these to portray VET as the only way out of challenging economic circumstances.

Nóvoa (2002) similarly brings our attention to the 'planetspeak' discourse of the experts that transcends national borders in the formulation and justification of European educational policies. While having no clear meaning or origin, they are nevertheless

taken-for-granted 'truths,' and this seemingly neutral discourse leads to an 'illusion of a single course for educational issues' (Nóvoa, 2002, p.134). Indeed, there seems to be no attempt to unpack these concepts or delve into the more purposeful aims of education. We must therefore be mindful that concepts such as 'globalisation', 'skills', and the 'knowledge economy', are in reality complex and ever evolving issues, which have been condensed into overarching simplifications and may not reflect our reality. Nevertheless, such concepts effectively work as 'hegemonic imaginaries' or 'dominant frames' in which local VET reform finds its justification, and will continue to be retained through 'normalisation and institutionalisation' (Jessop, 2010, p. 3) through the efforts of the State.

4.5 What effects are produced by this representation of the problem?

This question impels us to examine the effects that may result from these problem representations, in order to shed light on how some social groups may benefit at the expense of others (Bacchi, 2009). Each effect will be analysed with a predominant focus on learner identities, and how these are consequently shaped by policy discourses.

4.5.1 Discursive effects

An analysis of the *My Journey* reform has uncovered neoliberal modes of thought which, as has been discussed in my review, brings about a deep conditioning of the human psyche, what Foucault (1984) refers to as 'responsibilisation' and what Scharff (2016), among others, calls the formation of 'entrepreneurial subjectivity'.

Further, Garsten and Jacobsson (2003) contend that there has been a 'shift from a systematic view of the labour market to a focus on the individuals and their qualities' (p. 2). Indeed, the *Framework for Education Strategy* is very clear that employment is constituted as an issue located in the learners themselves: 'at the moment half of our jobs are being taken up by people coming from overseas, either because our people lack the right skills or because they refuse to work in the jobs available' (p. 6). For this reason, we must ensure that 'our young people acquire the necessary *skills* and *strong work ethic* to enable them to take up the jobs created' (p. 6). However, many scholars have suggested that it is the labour market which primarily determines employability (Brown et al., 2003), and that such a conceptualisation fails to recognise that skills can be better defined as a social construct (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Smetherham, 2004). Employers value skills in different ways, and also reward workers in conjunction with educational paths followed (such as the prestige of

the course taken, or the type of school attended) as well as cultural, gender, and social identity markers.

A selection of longitudinal, qualitative studies have explored the various effects that a discourse which disregards the structural constraints upon choice can have on learners' sense of identity. Moreau & Leathwood's (2007) study of VET graduates in the UK, for instance, found that when discussing the various issues that could either hinder or facilitate entry into the labour market, 'graduates put a great deal of emphasis on their individual aptitudes and skills, thereby reflecting rather than challenging current policy discourses of employability' (p. 310). In this way, these students did not identify personal aspects—such as gender or ethnicity—as having any influence over their employment. Their inability to question or critically dissect larger social and economic inequalities thus reinforced a notion of individual responsibility for their work transitions. Moreau & Leathwood (2007) conclude by saying that 'not only do they have fewer opportunities within the labour market, but they are also likely to blame themselves for any failure to succeed' (p. 320).

Of course, this argument could also be extended to the provision of VET in secondary school. If these alternative pathways do not apply a critical, emancipatory (Habermas, 1971) framework to help students reflect on the structural bases of inequalities and labour structures, then students may come to believe that they themselves are to blame for unsuccessful school-to-work transitions. This is especially true as the government shifts the duty of decision making about curricular pathways and labour transitions onto students and their parents, while simultaneously promoting a discourse that is replete with unachievable promises of upward mobility.

4.5.2 Subjectification effects

Here, I argue that two subject positions may be created as a result of the two problem representations underlying the *My Journey* document; neoliberal subjects brought about by a narrow view of education, and 'dividing-practices' (Bacchi, 2009) perpetuated by the hierarchical academic-vocational divide.

Pantea's (2019) qualitative study explored the effects that an educational discourse centred around employability has on the way students view their social world, and more specifically, how they come to think about the nature and purpose of schooling. Students attending a variety of VET programmes were interviewed, and it was found they were

unable to look beyond the 'learning for earning' ideal; they thus internalised 'the potent rhetoric that sees liberal and vocational education and either/or choices, 'marketable entities' promising to deliver swift employability' (p. 137). In this way, VET learners' subjectivities were shaped by the neoliberal positioning of citizens as active consumers and entrepreneurial subjects.

One could also argue that the discursive construction of subjectivity is a key effect of the academic-vocational divide, and may also be an effect resulting from different hierarchies of alternative pathways, with the 'applied' stream being at the bottom of such provision. Butler (1997) maintains that adherence to 'normative categories' plays a critical role in constructing identities, where individuals aim for social recognition within these categories, and, indeed, for 'social existence' (Brockmann & Laurie, 2016, p. 3). Applying Butler's work to a vocational programme in the UK, Brockmann & Laurie (2016) found that learners' identities were extensively shaped by the power of discourse that presents the 'academic' and the 'vocational' as opposing concepts.

Similar to the findings outlined in Archer & Yamashita's (2003) study, the students that they interviewed constructed a 'practical' learner identity in opposition to academic learning, whereby they maintained that academic work was 'not for them', that they were 'not good at reading and writing' and 'much better at hands-on work' (Brockmann & Laurie, 2016, p. 7). This practical identity was further perpetuated through school-processes such as the structure of the vocational curriculum and interactions with teachers and peers. However, rather than the students being naturally 'practical' learners themselves, the interviews found that the students' inability to keep up with academic work, or rather with the work valued by their schools, automatically constituted them as 'non-academic'. Consequently, 'the stereotypical theory-rejecting vocational learner became a self-fulfilling prophecy' (Brockmann & Laurie, 2016, p. 13). These findings resonate with the working-class lads in Willis's landmark study *Learning to Labour* (Willis, 1977) where their participation in manual labour was seen as a form of counter-cultural expression rooted in a deep class-cultural antagonism. However at the time, one can assume that Willis' lads could still rely to some degree on a labour market with a reasonable number of unskilled and low-skilled employment opportunities, whereas such opportunities are becoming

increasingly unstable in a post-industrial society. Such acts of resistance may therefore have detrimental effects on students' life chances.

Lastly, Jonsson & Beach (2015) carried out research in a Swedish upper-secondary school, and drew on social identity and self-categorisation theory to argue that identity formation is heavily based on group membership and in-group/out-group perceptions. Their study focussed on the academic programme students' views of themselves in relation to those of students attending vocational programmes. It was found that in the case of the former group, self-perceived cognitive abilities were positioned against those attending vocational programmes, where they were described as 'lazy, rebel, substance abusers', 'driven by primitive describes rather than cultivated values,' and who saw no value or worth in academic education (p. 12). Such 'hierarchy-legitimising myths' (Stangor, 2000, p. 259) may thus continue to perpetuate oppressive beliefs, processes, and structures, which have clear effects on students' subject positions and sense of identity. When adopted by policy as a 'neutral' discourse which is subsequently reinforced in a school system, these dividing practices may misdirect efforts to address deeply ingrained structural inequalities. It is for this reason that educationalists and policy-makers should challenge, rather than reinforce, the practical/theoretical myth, by instead focussing on efforts which engage students in complex and creative reasoning.

4.5.3 Lived effects

The lived effects of the *My Journey* document which clearly perpetuates the academic-vocational divide may also be considered in terms of educational and occupational trajectories. There exists a wealth of studies that suggest long-term costs for students involved in vocational education and training. VET may significantly limit opportunities for attracting higher positions within the labour market, and also significantly reduces the chances of continuing one's studies (Arum & Shavit, 1995). It is further suggested that countries where the decision is made earlier for tracking students into general or vocational streams tend to perform worse in social mobility, whereas countries that prolong their comprehensive, untracked schooling system reduce educational inequality (Pfeffer, 2008). This is especially clear in the case of Finland which, among the OECD countries, were the first to turn towards comprehensive schooling in the 1970s, delaying vocational tracks to the upper secondary stage (age 16) (Schleicher, 2018). This suggests that increased social

mobility can be achieved by delaying the decision to offer educational tracks to the latest point possible.

The provision of vocational education in certain contexts has also been found to have negative effects on the cognitive development of students. Rasmusson et al. (2019) carried out a long-term study which compared the cognitive foundation skills (recognised by the OECD as 'Numeracy,' 'Literacy' and 'Problem Solving') of two separate groups of students—each following either an apprentice VET programme or more academic VET programme. The most researched of these skills is literacy, namely 'the ability to understand, evaluate, use and engage with written texts to participate in society, achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential' (OECD, 2013a, p. 61). The results showed a higher literacy performance for students following the academic VET programme compared to the rigid apprenticeship VET system. Rasmusson et al. (2019) suggest that the academically inclined VET programme exposed students to more cognitively challenging subjects, and thus conclude with a cautionary remark; there is 'a price to pay in long-term diminished literacy returns to education for the labour market benefits of apprentice VET systems' (Rasmusson et al., 2019, p. 1006).

4.6 How could the problem representation be questioned, disputed and disrupted?
The last WPR question—*How could the problem representation be questioned, disputed and disrupted?*—compels us to reimagine the purpose of vocational education. This is an important task, as I believe that true vocationalism goes beyond preparation for work; it also has a transformative nature in terms of the personal and social value it can offer. Here, I will draw on a number of researchers that have attempted to disrupt and challenge the neoliberal, human capital discourse that currently pervades educational policy. McGrath (2012) in particular argues that the success of this rise in interest in VET can only be met if we 'reimagine the purpose' of vocational education (McGrath, 2012, p. 36). He goes further to suggest that such a conceptualisation finds its purpose in developmental paradigms that 'supersede the 'productivist' frameworks in which VET is currently located' (p. 37).

In light of this urgent necessity to 'reimagine' the theoretical underpinnings of vocational education, McGrath (2012), amongst others (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2016), draw on the Capability Approach to develop a framework for theorising education policy from a social justice perspective. This approach is closely associated with Indian economist and

philosopher Sen (1999), where it has mostly notably influenced the development of the human development index (HDI) as a substitute to ranking countries according to GDP per capita. In this sense, it has prompted a shift away from thinking about societal well-being in terms of economic growth and national income, and instead shifts our attention to the quality of life of citizens. More specifically, this quality of life can be measured in terms of Sen's key concepts—'functionings' and 'capability'. Walker (2006), as quoted in McGrath (2012), defines these terms as the following:

> 'A capability is a potential functioning; the list of functionings is endless. It might include doings and beings such as being well nourished, having shelter and access to clean water, being mobile, being well-educated, having paid work, being safe, being respected, taking part in discussions with your peers, and so on. The difference between a capability and functioning is like one between an opportunity to achieve and the actual achievement, between potential and outcome' (p. 8).

In order to start assessing how people may advance in terms of capability, the functionings that matter for the good life must first be determined. McGrath (2012) believes that philosophers and social scientists can provide useful insight here, however, it is the people concerned that must be given central importance in evaluating what they value the most. Sen (1999) contends that this can be achieved through a public choice exercise, which would require 'both public reasoning and democratic procedures of decision-making' (McGrath, 2012, p. 39).

While Sen (1999) does not explicitly link the Capability Approach to educational policy, it has nonetheless given researchers insight into the possibility of thinking about VET beyond neoliberal, human capital frameworks, thus opening up possibilities anchored in a more humanistic perspective that places students at the heart of educational deliberations. In particular, McGrath (2012) explains that this approach 'stresses the empowering nature of VET alongside the technical aspect, with significant curricular and pedagogic implications' (p. 39). Drawing on suggestions put forward by McGrath (2012), practical purposes for the provision of VET using the Capability Approach may include the following:

- 'for cultural purposes, as in learning Chinese calligraphy;

- for leisure purposes, such as learning woodworking for personal fulfillment rather than trade;

- for communicative purposes, as in ''third age'' learning of how to use email to keep in touch with dispersed families;

- for caring purposes, such as developing skills to care for people living with AIDS;

- for non-commercial purposes;

- for spiritual development purposes, as in learning to improve one's ability to communicate religious ideas to one's children;

- and for community development purposes, such as building skills to facilitate community projects' (p. 45).

We can thus begin to appreciate the usefulness of this change in perspective, which considers a variety of learning purposes that may be valuable to students and that ultimately go beyond the capability to work. Staying true to Sen's (1992) belief in valuing decision-making in terms of the individual, McGrath (2012) goes on to explain that 'a key insight of the capabilities approach, however, is that such lists should simply be illustrative, as it is for individuals to identify the learnings-for-lives that are of value to them' (p. 45). Walker (2006) similarly stresses the importance of including a number of relevant stakeholders in these deliberations, such as learners, educationalists, and professional bodies.

Moreover, Powell (2012) agrees with Cook-Sather's (2002) assertion that there is 'something fundamentally amiss about building and rebuilding an entire system without consulting at any point those it is ostensibly designed to serve' (p. 3). Her research highlights the importance of student voice in gaining a better understanding of how VET has 'expanded their capability to choose and aspire' (p. 3). Powell (2012) thus provides us with a springboard to better reflect on the real, alternative possibilities for vocational learning from the perspective of students themselves.

This emerging literature draws our attention to the way in which a wider focus on agency and well-being can help construct the notion of 'learning for life' (McGrath, 2016). However, commentators have noted that 'to operationalise an alternative approach …

which is what the capability approach is—is not a modest task, nor is it very nearly accomplished' (Alkire, 2005, p. 130). Nevertheless, it may be an interesting and timely task for local stakeholders to shift the frame and utilise a developmental approach in the drawing up of VET policies.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

5.0 Main findings

My analysis has outlined two key problem representations which the State aims to tackle through VET reform; better catering for the needs and aspirations of learners, and equipping learners with the skills needed in a fast changing, globalised world. Both have been conceptualised in terms of curricular diversity, more specifically by offering learners a choice of three distinct pathways to follow in year 9. However, as my analysis has shown, the solution to these problem representations are unworkable for many reasons. In the following section, these limitations will be highlighted with reference to the research questions that guided this study.

5.0.1 Rationales

My analysis of the *My Journey* initiative has produced a number of findings to suggest that the overarching rationale underlying VET draws on neoliberal modes of thought. Notions such as employability, globalisation, and economic competitiveness—simply presented as self-evident phenomena—sit uncomfortably with the State's commitment to support marginalised youth through the provision of alternative pathways. Such 'planetspeak' discourse creates a form of shared understanding that makes it challenging to see otherwise, and this coupled with an absence of ethical and humanistic dimensions ignores deep structural asymmetries of power both within educational institutions and in the wider society. Thus, although the *My Journey* document occasionally adopts a humanistic discourse that recognises difference in needs and capabilities, policy discourse surrounding these developments are in general overwhelmed by a productivist view of VET. In this light, catering for difference through curricular re-engagement does not look beyond preparing learners for employment in predetermined occupational roles; yet, as McGrath (2011) argues, 'this is not a true reflection of what it means to be human' (p. 5).

5.0.2 Presuppositions & silences

A number of presuppositions and assumptions have emerged, and further probing into such logic has shed light on the limitation of school-based VET in order to achieve these goals: the provision of a tripartite pathway is built on a failed understanding that undervalues the complexities of pedagogy, intelligence, and work; offering a curriculum built on the

academic-vocational duality undervalues the effects that societal structures have upon freedom to choose; and whereas schools may seem to be well-placed to provide work-based training, there is a wealth of research that suggests that this is in fact a false assumption, and that such technical skills may have very low currency in today's contemporary workplace. Thus, these assumptions are limited both in terms of their practical and theoretical efficacy, and more importantly, such narrow attempts to motivate learners may unwittingly contribute to greater injustices.

Moreover, concepts such as 'equity' and 'inclusion,' while prominent throughout the *My Journey* document, do not look beyond the student's ability to meet the needs of the economy and the wider European market. This sits in stark contrast with the notion of equity identified in the *Tomorrow's Schools* report, where it was expressed that the linking of 'hand' and 'mind' throughout the curriculum would do more to further social justice goals and provide students with the entitlement of a quality education. To this end, not only does this contemporary utilitarian discourse further perpetuate the academic-vocational divide in terms of knowledge hierarchies and social and occupational stratification; it also represents an archaic mental/manual binary that falsely separates knowing and doing, and which may result in the creation of divisive subjectivities and the reinforced notion of individual responsibility for students' school-to-work transitions.

5.1 Limitations

Jessop (2012) reminds us that the mass media are also 'crucial intermediaries in mobilising elite and/or popular support behind competing imaginaries' (p. 61). The media has certainly played a very active role in disseminating and supporting the reform as a self-evident solution to the problem representations of student motivation and skills shortages. This study, however, does not consider media coverage of the *My Journey* reform in any detail due to the word limit of a Postgraduate dissertation; such an important consideration warrants closer attention than space allows.

It has also been argued that critical policy approaches are heavily dependent on the researcher's interpretation, whereas it may also be implied that no other interpretations are valid (Widdowsen, 1995). However, Bacchi (2009) explains that the WPR approach explicitly adopts a normative, emancipatory framework, because of the way problem representations necessarily harm some groups while benefiting others. It is only through this understanding

that researchers may question the deep-seated, conceptual logic which is embedded in policy discourse. In Foucault's words:

> 'A critique does not consist in saying that things aren't good the way they are. It consists in seeing on just what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established and unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based' (Foucault, 1994, p. 456).

Moreover, Bacchi (2009) explains that the WPR approach does not aim 'to identify some extra-discursive reality', but rather aims to 'develop strategic interventions' (p. 45). Thus, this study understands that an alternative critical analysis of the *My Journey* reform may produce very different findings, however this is not only acknowledged, but more so encouraged.

5.2 Implications for further study

Prior to the launch of the official *My Journey* reform, the *MATSEC Support Unit* published two separate reports (2015; 2016) outlining the benefits and challenges of the SEC vocational pilot project. Data was collected from focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires involving teachers and SMT members. Candidate attainment in the different SEC vocational subjects was outlined, and correlational data highlighting subject trends according to school sector and gender was also collected. No further reports have been published to weigh the benefits or challenges of the official initiative, however. Having said so, the reports relating to the pilot project were very limited in terms of the data collected, and more importantly, a lack of theoretical or critical underpinning to support the findings did not look beyond that which could be observed and measured.

This study aimed to break away from the positivistic research paradigm outlined in the above report, by instead analysing the reform through a critical lens. It aimed to uncover ways in which those who are at an educational disadvantage —and are so often underrepresented in policy deliberations—may be further marginalised through curricular reform that subjugates the ethical dimensions of a valuable, quality education. Challenging dominant discourses and uncovering the political and economic goals surrounding VET reform is indeed an important exercise, however, I can only hope that this study serves to

lay the foundation for further inquiry into the nature of the *My Journey* initiative. Here, I offer a number of suggestions drawn from the key issues explored throughout this study. Although the list is not exhaustive, it could nevertheless serve as a springboard to open up critical debate around the reform:

I. Outlining clear participation trends based on socioeconomic background, gender, ethnicity, and other identity markers;

II. Determining the long-term impact of alternative pathways in terms of education, perceived value, school-to-work transitions, and enhanced entry to occupations later in life;

III. Assessing the core principles that guide the selection and organisation of knowledge in VET and applied pathways using Bernstein's theory of pedagogic codes;

IV. Examining the effects of structure and agency on students' freedom to choose;

V. Lastly, inquiry into school-level processes will indicate if students are in fact being channelled towards vocational and applied streams, or if they self-select due to their self-perceived academic abilities. Such a study may also shed light on the way discourses contribute to the construction of learner identities and dividing practices.

From a personal standpoint, such a critical approach has value beyond research itself; it also helps to better appreciate one's role as an educator, and impels us to increasingly return to the moral and ethical questions that lie at the heart of education. Most importantly, it reminds us that a quality education is not simply a privileged possession of the few; each child is capable of drawing on their intellectual capacities and practical competencies to both interpet, and transform, the society they live in. It is up to the adults in their lives to ensure that their educational journey is one which they have reason to value.

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