

The Educational Challenges of Italian Migrant Learners in their Transition to Secondary Schools in Gozo: A Comparative Study

Annaliz Calleja

University of Malta

annaliz.calleja.08@um.edu.mt

Abstract: This paper draws on research which addresses a topic of interest in recent times, given the rise in the number of migrant learners in Maltese schools, especially those originating from Italy. First, it sheds light on the educational challenges that Italian migrant learners face in their transition to state schools in Gozo (such as language barriers, the loss of Italian, participation in class, books, homework, examinations, inclusion and parental involvement) taking account of the experiences of these learners themselves, their parents, and their teachers. Secondly, it examines the support strategies that are in place to facilitate these learners' move between two education systems, characterised by substantial differences. Thirdly, it explores similarities and differences between the Italian and the Maltese education systems to understand in what ways different education systems can favour or hinder the inclusion of these learners into local schools. This research continues to build on other local studies focusing on the inclusion of Italian migrant learners in Maltese schools (Basciera & Caruana, 2020; Caruana & Pace, 2021; Palazzo, 2020). The results confirm that Italian migrant learners are generally well included in local schools, more so if they started schooling in Malta at a young age. However, some parents claim that their children have experienced exclusion, especially at the beginning of their transition into local schools. While teachers in general do their best to support these learners and sometimes switch to Italian when necessary, they have limited time and leeway to make further adaptations, because of an exam-oriented pedagogy that they feel constrained to adopt.

Keywords: Migration; Italian Migrant Learners; Transition; Education; Language

Introduction

In the past few years, Malta has witnessed a great influx of immigrants, including Italians. This new wave of Italian emigration inevitably affects our islands' labour market, health, and education. Many migrants come with families with young children who start attending Maltese schools and face challenges of inclusion, among which are those attributed to becoming familiar with a new education system and the language of instruction used in class (Caruana & Pace, 2021), which in the case of the bilingual situation in Malta, means learning both English and Maltese.

According to the Eurydice report (2019), students from migrant backgrounds experience linguistic, pedagogical, and socio-emotional challenges at school, impacting their general well-being, learning, and development.

Local studies about the inclusion of European migrant learners in the Maltese education system are very limited. The few existing studies mainly focus on migrants of different nationalities rather than specific ones. For example, Bezzina (2017) claims that European migrant learners often face social, emotional, language, and cultural hurdles. Cassar and Attard Tonna (2018) investigated the influence of the language spoken at school on young migrant women when interacting with peers. Moreover, they delved into the power issues amongst them, based on their, and their educators', perspectives and claimed that migrant students in both schools faced challenges related to communication.

The main objective of this research is to investigate the transition of Italian migrant learners into Maltese secondary schools in Gozo, and the educational challenges these students face during their secondary cycle of education. Research is currently limited, especially concerning specific minority groups such as Italian migrant learners and their transition into Maltese schools (Basciera & Caruana, 2020; Caruana & Pace, 2021; Palazzo, 2020). This research gap, including my urgency to listen to the voices of these learners, and personal interest in the topic, have inspired me to carry out this study. The overarching research questions which shape my entire research study are:

1. What is the experience of Italian migrant learners in their transition to Maltese secondary schools in Gozo?
2. In the case of students who would have attended school in Italy prior to moving to Malta, to what extent is this transition influenced by similarities and differences between the Italian and Maltese education systems?

Literature Review

A Maltese *National Census of Population and Housing 2021 Report* issued by the National Statistics Office (NSO, 2023) reports that Malta's current population is 519,562 inhabitants. More than one in five residents is foreign, with 115,449 persons, or 22.2%, being non-Maltese citizens (NSO, 2023). While, historically, the British used to be the most significant foreign workforce in Malta, Italians today constitute Malta's largest foreign workforce community (Caruana & Pace, 2021). This coincides with the fact that the *Anagrafe Italiana Residenti all'Estero* (AIRE) reported a 3% increase in Italian nationals on the move. According to Fondazione Migrantes (2022), this mobility of people involves at least 180 countries, with Sicilians being the largest Italian community abroad.

For many Italians, Malta is an attractive host country due to its proximity and historically established commercial and economic relationships (Brincat, 2011). Moreover, Malta and Italy share the same cultural affinities, such as values, traditions, and the Roman Catholic faith.

More recently, Malta, as a receiving country, has become more popular because it represents an opportunity for non-English speakers to learn English. English is used ubiquitously and "has an important instrumental function, and offers social mobility as well as better work opportunities, locally and internationally" (Caruana & Santipolo, 2021, p. 143).

Italian Migrant Learners in Maltese Schools

A study conducted by Iorio (2019), on Italian migrants in Malta, indicates that 19% of Italian migrants in Malta are between 0-18 years of age, and mainly originating from Sicily. This indicates the strong presence of children of Italians in Malta attending compulsory schooling in Maltese schools at all stages, from kindergarten up to the post-secondary level (Baschiera & Caruana, 2020; Caruana & Pace, 2021).

Figures in the table below (Table 1.1) also indicate a significant increase (+16% between 2017 and 2019) in Italian migrant learners in Maltese schools. The numbers also include children having one parent of Italian origin. Between 2018-19 and 2019-20, 727 learners (around 65%) of the Italian children in Malta aged 3-5 or 5-11 were attending kindergarten and primary schools, implying that "most Italian students are young and that numbers could increase further in the future as they move to secondary schooling" (Baschiera & Caruana, 2020, p. 152).

School Sector	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
State (public) schools	628	758	802
Church schools	25	23	22
Independent (private) schools	275	273	232
TOTAL	928	1,054	1,056

Table 1.1. Italian Migrant Learners in Maltese Schools
(Source: Data provided by MEDE in Caruana & Pace, 2021, p. 148)

The Schooling Experience of Italian Migrant Learners in Malta

Caruana and Pace (2021) suggest that the inclusion of Italian migrant learners in Maltese schools is conditioned by levels of competence in Maltese and English. This can determine the active participation of these learners during lessons, including the lessons of Italian.

Although the experience of Italian migrant learners is generally considered positive, adapting to the new educational system may affect participation and motivation, as reported by Baschiera and Caruana (2020) and Palazzo (2020). Moreover, while Italians cultivate a sense of pride towards their country and origins, data from previous research (Palazzo, 2020) show signs of distancing from their mother tongue.

The Loss/Maintenance of Italian

In the case of Italian migrant learners, the problem of maintaining their language could, apparently, be contained: Italian is the most popular foreign language in Maltese schools, and it is generally spoken widely in Malta despite a recent decline (Caruana & Pace, 2015). Due to Malta's proximity to Italy, there is easy access to Italian means of communication, which allows for the Italian community's contact with their language (Caruana & Pace, 2021), and most importantly the use of the Italian language at home between parents and siblings.

Palazzo's (2020) data provide insights into Italian language maintenance, indicating that although Italians are proud of their origins, all the participants chose not to study their mother tongue at school. Palazzo (2020) provides some examples of language attrition, where students use English words instead of their corresponding versions in Italian. Some examples are: *parents' evening, detention, locker, gym* and *timetable* and intra-sentential switching such as *quella di design e technology [l'insegnante] dà sempre...tipo detention. Solo perché magari ti scordi l'apron* [the teacher of Design and Technology always gives...detentions. Just because you do not bring the apron].

Based on local research (Palazzo, 2020), there are indications that Italians try to learn Maltese and English to adapt to our schooling system. The regular use of English may hinder the learning process and development, also affecting migrant learners' heritage language and unique identity. Language is difficult to maintain without intergenerational mother tongue transmission (Fishman, 1991, as cited in Romaine, 2006).

Language Barriers

English, as a *lingua franca*, is the main language used in multicultural and multilingual classrooms. Baschiera and Caruana (2020) conducted focus groups with Learning Support Educators (LSEs) about the inclusion of Italian migrant learners and indicated that "English is the preferred medium for Italian children to communicate with their schoolmates" (Baschiera & Caruana, 2020, p. 157).

The only exception is Sicilians who find lexical similarities between Sicilian and Maltese and show an interest in learning it. Caruana and Pace (2021) argue that "learning the language/s of the context in which they are immersed represents an important step for better inclusion" (p. 156). Palazzo (2020) recounted her struggles in her transition to Maltese schools because of linguistic difficulties, and she felt more included when she learned Maltese and English. Her research findings indicated that although Italians feel included in local schools, it is not easy for them to attain good proficiency levels in Maltese and English.

Baschiera and Caruana (2020) argue that "difficulties increase, especially in relation to learning the Maltese language, when children join primary schools, and more so when they are older" (p. 157). Caruana (2020) established that Italian migrant learners in Maltese schools refrain from participating and involving themselves actively during lessons due to the language barrier.

Italian migrant learners can follow lessons when they are held in English, but they find it very difficult when they are in Maltese, as expected (Baschiera & Caruana, 2020). Teachers code-switch in Maltese multilingual classes (Camilleri Grima, 2013), but “[c]ode-switching between Maltese and English does not enable them to follow lessons better, or to participate more actively” (Baschiera & Caruana, 2020, p. 155) because migrant learners fail to grasp the dynamics of it. As a result, teachers and LSEs who are competent in Italian sometimes act as linguistic mediators by switching to Italian when necessary to facilitate the inclusion of these learners in schools (Baschiera & Caruana, 2020; Caruana & Pace, 2021).

Socialisation

Caruana and Pace (2021) argue that “competence in the language/s of instruction is fundamental both for scholastic attainment and socialisation” (p. 156). Italian migrant learners mainly communicate in English with their peers because “[t]he Maltese language undoubtedly represents a challenge for these students, even insofar as their socialisation is concerned” (Baschiera & Caruana, 2020, p. 156). This generates a situation wherein Italian migrant learners spend out-of-class time, particularly during assemblies, breaks, or after-school hours with foreign students rather than with Maltese peers because local students often use Maltese for informal communication (Baschiera & Caruana, 2020). Caruana (2020) revealed that students in secondary schools often do not mix with their Maltese peers at school; they form groups between themselves or with other foreigners. Moreover, Baschiera and Caruana (2020) highlight that “[t]his community is also characterised by the maintenance of the mother tongue, especially among younger cohorts” (p. 158).

Tracking and Attainment

Caruana (2020) indicated that tracks (i.e. grouping students by ability) often characterise the Maltese education system. This is entirely different from the Italian approach, arguing that: “[t]he Maltese education system is quite competitive (peer pressure), even though today it is less selective and discriminatory than in the past” (p. 438). Baschiera and Caruana (2020) argue that in some cases, especially at the secondary level, due to “deficiencies related to language competence in Maltese and/or English, students of Italian nationality who achieved well in schooling in their country are placed in lower bands or sets in secondary schools” (p. 159). Their motivation is affected

negatively, and they face a situation where schooling does not develop their full potential. Camozzi (2020) recently analysed the impact of the German education system on second and third-generation Italian migrant learners in German schools. She indicated that the German streaming system directs Italian learners to vocational or 'special' schools, often because of poor attainment and insufficient proficiency in the German language: "[t]he children of migrants often end up in these schools, meaning that their language problems put them at a lasting disadvantage from a very early age" (Camozzi, 2020, p. 160).

Inclusion

Baschiera and Caruana (2020) suggest that inclusion is very problematic when Italian migrant learners transition to secondary schools where cases of bullying and segregation occur, but less problematic when Italian migrant learners are younger. Data analysed by Caruana (2020) showed that teachers were pleasantly surprised that Maltese students tried to interact with Italians in class, when inclusive practices were implemented, possibly implying that Maltese teachers are not used to this type of teaching.

Sometimes, Italian migrant learners have marked regional pronunciation, making it harder for Maltese students to understand them. This study shows that including Italian migrant learners may present problems, even in Italian lessons. Baschiera and Caruana (2020) point out that "[c]ultural and linguistic mediators, on the other hand, are still absent from the Maltese educational system and LSEs and teachers must often take on roles which could be assigned to these mediators" (p. 154).

Palazzo (2020) concluded that there have been improvements in the inclusion of Italian migrant learners in local schools and "Italian migrant learners have shown that their Maltese educational experience is positive, despite their difficulties, be it with teachers, students and school environment" (p. 88) (my translation). Teachers do their best to create an inclusive learning environment but only find support occasionally. Parents of Italian migrant learners are interested in their children's education, and despite language barriers, they offer moral and educational support. However, the parents in Palazzo's (2020) study assert that they sometimes feel excluded because of the language barrier since communication between them and the school is often in English. Hence, learning Maltese and English for inclusion psychologically affects Italian migrant learners and their parents. Given that the number of migrant learners

in Maltese schools has been rising steadily and classrooms have shifted from bilingual to multilingual, reforms and policies for the effective inclusion of migrant learners started being introduced recently (MEDE, 2019a; MEDE, 2019b). Some steps towards the inclusion of migrant learners have therefore been taken in Malta.

The Migrant Learners' Unit (MLU)

The MLU, established by MEDE in 2014, in line with the *Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools: Route to Quality Inclusion* (MEDE, 2019a), offers induction programmes for learners whose proficiency levels in Maltese and/or English are insufficient to follow mainstream lessons (Vassallo Gauci, 2017). There are two main options for this support, which include a pull-out system, where students are drawn out of their classroom to give them extra support to learn Maltese and/or English as needed in small groups. Alternatively, they can go to a school (hub) where induction classes are held for a maximum period of one scholastic year or until the students are proficient enough, in Maltese and/or English, to join mainstream classes, even though sometimes students are sent to mainstream classes earlier (Vassallo Gauci, 2017). Vassallo Gauci (2017) explains that proficiency in the language of instruction is a condition for the inclusion of migrant learners in schools and their educational attainment.

Both the induction hubs and the pull-out system can be quite controversial, and they are systems which may reap fruits at a practical level, but they are, by their very nature, not inclusive. Palazzo (2020) indicates that many Italian migrant learners who attend induction courses offered by the MLU still claim they find it challenging to be included in mainstream education, even though they are generally in favour of them. Palazzo (2020) argues that an intercultural education can be more inclusive, both for migrant learners, to teach them the language used at school, and also for their Maltese peers. This adds more value to the educational experience of all students because it helps them to get to know each other more. Caruana and Pace (2021) argue that “[w]hile the induction hubs provide a space for migrant learners to improve their competence of the context languages, adequate in-class support should also be provided and sustained” (p. 161).

Methodology

A qualitative research method was considered appropriate for this study. The research tools included semi-structured interviews and observations. Moreover, this research involved triangulation of data sources from Italian migrant learners, teachers, and parents within different contexts. Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2013) approach to thematic analysis as a qualitative method for data analysis was followed in this research project. Schools - the Gozo College Middle School and the Gozo College Secondary School - were selected after a preliminary exercise was conducted to investigate the number of Italian migrant students attending the state secondary schools in Gozo. A secondary school was chosen mainly because, as a secondary school teacher of Italian in Gozo myself, I could relate better to the context in which my subjects were carrying out their education. The state sector was then chosen over the church sector because most Italian migrant learners have been registered in state schools.

In my study, I included seven Italian migrant learners from the middle school and five Italian migrant learners from the secondary school. These included participants who have lived in Malta and Gozo for a different number of years, an important factor to examine experiences related to transition. The age of the students as well as the classes they attended varied. I also recruited six teachers and six parents for the interviews. The six teachers also participated in lesson observations. English, Maltese and Mathematics were chosen because English is an international language, Maltese is a foreign language for these learners and Mathematics is a non-linguistic subject. A total of twenty-four participants were interviewed and three languages were used: Maltese, English or Italian. All the participants were assigned a code to maintain anonymity. The interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed in the original language.

Research Findings

The Transition of Italian Migrant Learners into the Maltese Education System

Most Italian migrant learners participating in this research moved to the Maltese education system in the late primary years. This research indicates, as revealed in other studies (Baschiera & Caruana, 2020; Palazzo, 2020), that the time and age of students affected the transition process; the younger the students are when they transition into the Maltese education system, the better.

Although some students experienced bullying and language barriers in Maltese, many Italian migrant learners have made new friends, especially if they have lived in Gozo for a number of years. These relationships have helped them to transition positively into local schools. On their part, the teachers of English, Maltese and Mathematics think that cultural affinities between the Maltese and Italian students could help these learners transition smoothly into Maltese schools.

Some parents felt that their children were excluded in their transition into Maltese schools. For example, two parents gave important testimonies that highlight the challenges faced by students, parents and schools alike when moving to Maltese schools. One parent (comment 1), a Sicilian woman, claimed that her son became completely demotivated because the support of a Learning Support Educator (LSE) took too much time to arrive and her son as well as herself often felt humiliated. Another parent (comment 2) claimed that her daughter was denied the possibility to follow Maltese lessons, and she was even given a hard time sitting for the benchmark examinations.

*1.[...] visto che il bambino è iperattivo, la colpa di chi era? Era sempre di mio figlio e una volta giustamente mi sentivo umiliata “***[nome] ha fatto questo, e ***[nome] fa questo”, sia io che lui ci sentivamo umiliati. (Parent 2.5)*

[...] since the child is hyperactive, whose fault was it? It was always my son’s and once I felt humiliated, “***[name] did this, and ***[name] does this”. Both me and him felt humiliated.

*2. Li ha avuti a *** [la scuola primaria che frequentava a Malta] per esempio. Gli esami non glieli volevano far fare perché [pausa] non è la prima ragazzina a cui capita perché poi ho parlato con altri genitori ovviamente, soprattutto con gli stranieri. Gli fanno saltare l’esame e poi quando vanno alla middle school li buttano nell’ultima classe ... diciamo quella dei somari. [...] [C]redo che invece scoraggi tantissimo un bambino e che si senta trattato come un idiota. Mia figlia, per esempio, grazie a Dio, ha un carattere molto forte e gli ha detto “a me non me ne frega niente, io gli esami li voglio fare lo stesso anche se per voi non sono [si ferma].” Quindi lei in realtà li ha fatti ma loro non li hanno valutati. (Parent 2.3)*

[She had them at *** [the primary school she attended in Malta] for example. They did not want her to sit for her exams and [pause] she is not the first migrant learner that this has happened to because then I spoke to other parents of course, especially with foreigners. They make them skip the exam

and then when they go to middle school, they place them in the last class ... let's say in the class of less-able students. [...] [I] think that this discourages a child a lot and that he/she feels treated like an idiot. My daughter, thanks be to God, she has a very strong character, and she told them "I do not give a damn, I want to sit for the exams anyway even if for you I am not [she stops]." So, she sat for the exams, but they did not correct them.]

Language Barriers and the Loss/Maintenance of Italian

Italian migrant learners have experienced the Maltese or English language barrier at some point in their transition and some are still struggling with Maltese. Two parents recall the experiences of their daughters at an induction hub in Malta. These parents view this service positively in terms of linguistic support, but they both assert that on a social level it was not easy for their children.

Other students attended private lessons to learn Maltese and English, especially in their first year of schooling in Gozo. Many Italian migrant learners in this research learned English quickly, and this is their main means of communication with their teachers and peers.

Teachers of English, Maltese and Mathematics prefer to use English with migrant learners. However, teachers switch to other languages, including Italian, when necessary. Although Italian migrant learners rarely speak Italian at school, many of them are fluent enough in English and some cope well in Maltese, and this has facilitated their transition.

The study yielded some examples of language attrition (comments 3, 4, 5 and 6). Students often fuse common English words in their interactions with other Italians. Some examples include "break", "head", "party", "strict", "kind", "bossy" and "syllabus". Other English words include "primary school", "secondary school", "foolscap", "past papers", "free lesson", "assignments" and "teacher", together with the name of subjects in English, even though there are corresponding forms in Italian, such as "Science", "Home Economics", "ICT", "History" or "Media".

3. *Io no. Faccio dance però a scuola durante il break, Monday, Tuesday e Wednesday. Andiamo lì, sai dove c'è l'ufficio della head, because tomorrow andiamo a ballare al party di Carnevale, ecco perché.* (Student 1.7)

[I do not. But I dance at school during the break, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. We go there, you know where the head's office is, because tomorrow we are going to dance at the Carnival party, that is why.]

4. *Sì. La matematica perché la maestra non mi piace perché è molto strict, cioè tipo delle volte si arrabbia.* (Student 2.7)

[Yes. Mathematics because I do not like the teacher because she is very strict, that is, she kind of gets angry sometimes.]

5. *Bossy. Tipo che non gli importa degli altri, gli importa solo di loro.* (Student 1.8)

[Bossy. Like that they do not care about others, they only care about themselves.]

6. *Io faccio Maltese for foreigners e io ormai so il syllabus a memoria.* (Student 2.8)

[I do Maltese for foreigners and by now I know the syllabus by heart.]

Participation in Class

Most Italian migrant learners participate and follow their lessons without difficulties. However, sometimes, difficulties related to Maltese or English as languages of instruction do occur, especially when teachers switch to Maltese in the presence of local students. When students have difficulties, most of them ask their teacher or their friends for help.

According to the teachers, the participation of Italian migrant learners is highly satisfactory. However, the study presents an interesting example of a student (comment 7) who claims that she finds it particularly difficult to understand Mathematics because the way it is taught in Maltese schools is different than it is taught in Italy. Fortunately, another Italian migrant learner happens to be in the same class. She often asks her classmate for help.

7. *Allora se parliamo di tutte le materie tranne la matematica, sì. Però se parliamo di matematica, ci sono alcuni metodi che io ho imparato in un altro modo in Italia tipo le divisioni. Qua le fanno in un altro modo, poi non riesco a capirle come si lavorano.* (Student 2.8)

[So, if we talk about all subjects except Mathematics, yes. But if we talk about Mathematics, there are some methods that I learned in another way in Italy such as divisions. Here, they do them in another way, and then I cannot understand how they are solved.]

Another important aspect that emerges from the study is that while Italians participate a lot, migrant learners of other nationalities do not as much. The latter end up picking on the Italians for participating too much in class, calling them “nerds”.

Character traits also play an important part in participation. One Italian migrant learner is very shy and she has trouble understanding both English and Maltese. She passively listens to the teacher without understanding: “[s]to zitta e ascolto tutte le parole a caso che dice la prof” [I remain silent and listen to all the random words that the teacher says] (Student 4.8) and she would never raise her hand and ask for help: “[m]acché, io alzare la mano? Mai nella mia vita. Mai l’ho fatto. Macché? Non è possibile. Non lo farei mai” [what, raise my hand? Never in my life. I never did that. What? It is not possible. I would never do that] (Student 4.8).

Books, Homework and Exams

In general, the Italian migrant learners and their parents like the books used in local schools because they do not have to pay for them. Some, like students 1.7 and 1.10 (comment 8) prefer the Italian system of buying textbooks.

8. Sì, ci sono delle differenze perché in Italia potevamo pure scrivere sui libri perché noi lì li compravamo ogni anno per un tot di soldi, però qua a Malta si ritornano i libri alla libreria della scuola ogni anno che finisci. (Student 1.10)

[Yes, there are differences because in Italy we could even write on books because we used to buy them every year for a certain amount of money, but here in Malta you return the books to the school library every year that you finish.]

Compared to Italy, homework here is generally less in quantity, and perceived as easier. Student 1.8 (comment 9) states that teachers in Italy give students homework for the summer holidays. She prefers this aspect of the Italian system to the Maltese because it allows one to practise and revise more. On the other hand, student 2.8 (comment 10) goes as far as claiming that in Italy she

used to have so much more to do that she did not even have time for leisure and sports activities.

9. *In Italia ti danno i compiti d'estate così tu comunque studi e secondo me è meglio perché poi ho molta difficoltà a recuperare.* (Student 1.8)

[In Italy they give you homework in the summer, so you study anyway and in my opinion, it is better because then I find it difficult to catch up.]

10. *[ride] Quando ero in Italia non è che me ne davano tanti, esageratamente tanti. [...] Quindi io poi che pratico tanto sport, che facevo due sport, era difficile. Infatti, io non riuscivo a parlare con i miei amici, io dovevo stare dentro a fare i compiti o palestra. Qua invece decisamente tantissimo di meno.* (Student 2.8)

[laughs] When I was in Italy, they did not give a lot, a real lot. [...] Then, since I practised two sports activities, it was difficult to manage. In fact, I could not talk to my friends, I had to stay inside to do homework or go to the gym. Whilst here, on the other hand, much less.]

Examinations are problematic, especially for Italian migrant learners who still have difficulties understanding the Maltese language. The participants (2.7, 1.8 and 1.9) who have learned both Maltese and English, and have lived in Malta and Gozo for a longer time, have no problems with exams in local schools, unlike others who have lived in Gozo for a shorter time. For example, students 1.7, 2.8, and 3.8 did not sit for the benchmark examinations because they were not proficient in Maltese and English. Student 2.8 (comment 11) had major difficulties with exams because these were in English and student 4.10 (comment 12) finds exams difficult, more so when in Maltese:

11. *Però l'anno scorso (Year 7) mi sono trovata molto in difficoltà perché ci sono vari tipi di insegnamento, non capivo tutto e ho trovato complicato fare gli esami in inglese soprattutto quello di matematica.* (Student 2.8)

[But last year (Year 7) I found it hard because there are various types of teaching, I did not understand everything and I found it difficult to sit for the exams in English, especially the Mathematics exam.]

12. *Un po' nervoso. Ho paura se sto sbagliando qualcosa, se magari l'ho capita male quella domanda, quindi ho paura di sbagliare, un po' di più in maltese.* (Student 4.10)

[A little nervous. I am afraid if I am making a mistake, if maybe I misunderstood that question, so I am afraid of making a mistake, a bit more in Maltese.]

Inclusion

In general, students have a positive view of the Maltese education system, as they like the school's environment and feel included, especially in the case of learners who left schooling in Italy when they were very young (Students 1.9, 1.10, 2.10). Some students (2.8 and 3.8) compared their school in Gozo with school in Italy, and claimed that local teachers are more helpful.

However, some students feel excluded or greatly demotivated. For example, student 4.8 (comment 13) feels excluded by her peers, student 3.10 (comment 14) does not like his school and the Maltese language, and student 4.10 (comment 15) was offended by racist comments to go back to his country or relating to 'mafia' because he is Sicilian:

13. Fare parte di questa scuola? Me lo sogno! Perché non ho amici, non faccio nulla di speciale in questa scuola. L'ambiente è bello ... (Student 4.8)

[Be part of this school? I dream about it! Because I have no friends, I do not do anything special in this school. The environment is beautiful ...]

14. Non mi sento di far parte, proprio non mi piace il maltese che si parla (Student 3.10)

[No, I do not feel like I belong, I just do not like the Maltese that is spoken]

15. Sì, ma anche all'inizio quando ero qua i primi 2 anni mi dicevano tipo "go back to your country" e diciamo che anche adesso da dove sono [pausa] siccome sono dalla Sicilia quindi mi dicono cose tipo "mafia" e queste cose qua. (Student 4.10)

[Yes, but even at the beginning when I was here the first 2 years, they told me like "go back to your country" and let's say that even now where am I from [pause] as I am from Sicily, so they tell me things like "mafia" and these things here.]

The teachers of English, Maltese, and Mathematics try to promote diversity and include migrant learners in class. They often offer individual assistance.

However, teachers claim that they have no leeway to change teaching methodologies for more inclusion because of time constraints and an exam-based system focusing on completing the syllabus. Teachers 1.1, 1.2 (comment 16) and 1.3 (comment 17) point out that there is not much time for adaptations. Teacher 1.3 claims that time and the syllabus do not allow her to make learning more fun.

16. I have no leeway to change because at the end of the day since we are exam-based I do not have much time to carry out adaptations and as an English language teacher we have 24 lessons a week. (Teacher 1.2)

17. Mhux l-ewwel darba li jkolli naqbeż il-logħob b'xi flashcards għax il-ħin ma jippermettix, imbagħad hemm is-sillabu kontrik. (Teacher 1.3)

[It is not the first time that I have to skip some games with flashcards because there is no time and then there is the syllabus against you.]

Most teachers believe that the school is inclusive towards migrant learners. A dissenting voice, teacher 1.1, asserts that while the school is inclusive, he believes that the Maltese education system is unfair because lack of information can give a different picture of migrant learners' abilities (comment 18):

18. Mela ... bħala skola iva hija inklussiva, però nħoss li bħala sistema edukattiva kultant ehm ... tikkastiga lil min jiġi minn barra għaliex peress li ma jkunx hemm biżżejjed knowledge dwar x'jafu l istudenti flok ma nassessjawhom qabel biex naraw x'jafu jew le, biex naraw f'liema livell ħa npoġġuhom, naqbd u npoġġuhom fl iktar livell baxx u dik sa ċertu punt naraha li hija ingusta. (Teacher 1.1)

[So...as a school yes it is inclusive, but I feel that as an educational system sometimes ehm...it punishes those who come from abroad since there is not enough knowledge about what the students know. Instead of assessing them first to see what they know or not, to verify at what level we should place them, we end up placing them at the lowest level and, to some extent, I think that it is unfair.]

Parent 2.1 (comment 19) has not seen any specific measures to help her children feel more included in Maltese schools. Speaking for other parents, this parent feels very excluded during meetings because, most of the time, everything is explained in Maltese, and important details are consequently often missed:

19. [...] *quando ci sono i meeting in presenza, noi stranieri e parlo anche per tanti altri genitori che hanno avuto la stessa lamentela, ci sentiamo molto esclusi, molto esclusi perché tutto viene spiegato in maltese sempre [pensa]. [...]. E la traduzione in inglese viene fatta in maniera molto veloce, semplice e rapida.* (Parent 2.1)

[...] when there are face-to-face meetings, we foreigners and I also speak for many other parents who have had the same complaint, we feel very excluded, very excluded because everything is explained in Maltese all the time [thinks]. [...] The translation into English is done very quickly, simply, and fast.]

Parent 2.3 (comment 20) does not believe the school is doing something special to include foreigners. She experienced a crisis when moving to Gozo because the new school initially did not accept her daughter because the mother had no ID card. As a result, her daughter missed 15 days of school. This parent found this situation somewhat ridiculous since her daughter had already attended a primary school in Malta and spoke English, after following an induction course.

20. [...] *e mi hanno proprio rifiutato la bambina finché sono arrivata addirittura a chiamare il Ministro perché l'ho trovato ridicolo dal momento in cui era una bambina che arrivava già da una scuola maltese che parla inglese, non aveva senso di esistere quel atteggiamento ed è rimasta a casa per 15 giorni. [...] Penso che, diciamo con gli stranieri per l'inclusione non facciamo assolutamente nulla.* (Parent 2.3)

[...] and they just refused the child, and I even had to call the Minister because I found it ridiculous since she was a child who already came from a Maltese school and who speaks English, so there was no point for that attitude, and she stayed at home for 15 days. [...] I think that they do absolutely nothing for the inclusion of foreigners.]

Parental Involvement

Teachers claim they do not have major difficulties when communicating with the parents of Italian migrant learners, as both English and Italian are used. According to all teachers interviewed, except for Maltese teacher 1.5 (comment 21), parental presence and participation in parents' day is satisfactory.

21. *Lanqas qatt jiġu l-parents tagħhom u ma nafx għalfejn.* (Teacher 1.5)

[Their parents never attend parents' day and I do not know why.]

Some parents contact each other when they have problems. However, Italian migrant learners sometimes lack support from their parents, as the latter cannot always help them when doing homework due to a lack of proficiency in English and Maltese.

Barriers to involvement do exist. While parent 2.4 attends parents' day, her husband does not participate due to the language barrier: “[s]olitamente io però sempre perché mio marito non sapendo bene l'inglese perché non tutti gli insegnanti parlano bene l'italiano quindi lui no” [usually I go because my husband does not know English because not all teachers speak Italian well, so he does not participate] (Parent 2.4). Parent 2.5 (comment 22) usually attends parents' day accompanied by her son, who translates for her. Also, she does not participate in other school activities because of work and language:

22. *Io delle volte non partecipo o per lavoro o perché mio marito è sempre fuori a Malta, [...], loro parlano tutto in inglese, io mi sento tipo che non devo disturbare, che qualcuno mi deve spiegare tutte le cose, allora cerco di evitare. Io non voglio cercare una persona per parlare con me.* (Parent 2.5)

[Sometimes I do not participate either because of work or because my husband is always away in Malta, [...], they speak English, and I do not have someone to explain things to me all the time. Thus, I try to avoid going. I do not want to find someone to translate for me.]

Parent 2.1 (comment 23) argues that migrant parents should be considered more like Maltese and Gozitan parents because she feels somewhat excluded and has noticed this in other migrant parents' discourse:

23. *Per me la principale è considerare i genitori stranieri come quelli maltesi, non dare priorità, questo noi viviamo, e l'ho notato dai discorsi di tanti genitori questo aspetto.* (Parent 2.1)

[For me the main thing is to consider migrant parents like the Maltese ones, not to give priority to locals, that is what we experience, and I have noticed this aspect from many other migrant parents' discourse.]

Discussion

The Transition of Italian Migrant Learners

This study confirms that although Italians feel included in local schools, they encounter specific challenges, as already documented by Baschiera and Caruana (2020), Caruana and Pace (2021) and Palazzo (2020). Italian migrant learners face language barriers in both Maltese and English that can affect participation in lessons, attainment, examinations, and socialisation. There are also some indications of difficulties in relation to the maintenance of the heritage language (Palazzo, 2020).

Research indicates that Italians are sometimes placed in lower tracks or bands because of language barriers (Caruana & Pace, 2021). Only one student out of twelve participants in this research was placed in a high-track class. This study throws further light on the fact that although the Maltese education system offers linguistic support, practices to value migrant learners' background, language and culture are almost absent in Maltese schools.

Empirical data from this research suggest that the transition of Italian migrant learners to schools in Gozo was difficult in the first few months, for learners who had attended a substantial number of years of schooling in Italy. Initially, students were anxious, primarily because of possible language barriers, making new friends, and also because of differences between the two educational systems. This is also confirmed by their parents, who recall situations of stress at the beginning of the transition.

Some learners recall episodes of bullying in their transition to local schools, as reported by Palazzo (2020). These learners carry a deficiency label, sometimes linked to a lack of Maltese language proficiency or a different pronunciation of Maltese and/or English (Cassar & Attard Tonna, 2018).

The teachers in this research postulate that the transition of Italian migrant learners is easier compared to non-Italians, such as Arabs or Asians, because they outlined similarities in culture, language, and character. They also assert that the younger the students are, the more easily and quickly they adapt to the system because they can learn languages more quickly.

Language Barriers

Data from this study show that Italians prefer using English rather than Maltese and that they hardly ever use Italian at school. Many Italians struggle to communicate in Maltese, even though a Sicilian student observed similarities between Italian and Maltese, and is interested in learning it, as also reported in Baschiera and Caruana (2020) regarding other Sicilian students.

Many student participants of this research arrived in their late primary cycle of education and were immediately placed in the mainstream classes because there were no induction hubs in Gozo. This research shows that while, as expected, Italian migrant learners had no knowledge of Maltese, those who lacked proficiency in English struggled to follow lessons, especially in the first few months of their transition.

The transition phase became easier when these learners could communicate in English and cope with Maltese, confirming the findings reported by Baschiera and Caruana (2020) and Palazzo (2020). However, many students still struggle with Maltese, and this hinders their inclusion. Induction courses are offered to newly arrived students to facilitate their learning of Maltese and English (Vassallo Gauci, 2017), but this is not always plain sailing. As reported in some parents' interviews, the induction hubs are quite controversial because, although they address the student's specific needs, students are veered away from the mainstream, confirming data reported by Palazzo (2020).

Participation in Class

Italian migrant learners generally follow and understand all lessons without major difficulties. Their participation in English, Maltese for foreigners (MFL), and Mathematics lessons is highly satisfactory according to their teachers because they are motivated to learn. This research confirms Baschiera and Caruana's (2020) observation that students participate actively when lessons are held in English but encounter difficulties when Maltese is used.

There are some instances where students are reluctant to participate because they lack motivation (Caruana & Pace, 2021). In some cases, they do not ask their teachers for further explanation. Learners with more resilient characters participate actively in lessons despite language limitations and being placed in low-track classes, indicating that sometimes character traits make a difference.

Non-Italian migrant learners seem less motivated to learn Maltese and sometimes offend Italians, calling them “nerds” or “losers”, also affecting them socially and emotionally. Italian migrant learners participate actively during lessons, more so when they are proficient in Maltese and English. Those learners with language difficulties in Maltese and English who lack support generally become demotivated, negatively affecting their learning.

Socialisation

From the interviews with teachers, it transpired that most Italian migrant learners have outgoing and friendly characters. As a result, most of these learners have succeeded in making new friendships. Friends helped them in their transition to overcome problems, giving them moral support, which perhaps was absent from home or their teachers.

Italian migrant learners stick together, confirming observations made by Baschiera and Caruana (2020) and Caruana and Pace (2021). Some teachers believe that this could be a positive coping strategy.

Socialisation issues intersect with language proficiency and perceived ability to influence the nature of the friendships developed with others. Students who are proficient in Maltese, having attended local schools for a substantial number of years, and are placed in middle or top classes, have more Maltese friends. On the basis of the patterns witnessed, I posit that if these learners are in the higher track and highly proficient in Maltese and/or English, they are more likely to have local friends. Conversely, students in the lower band, and lacking proficiency in Maltese, are more likely to have foreign friends and/or friends from their own country.

The Maintenance of Italian

Similar to Palazzo’s (2020) study, this study unveiled examples of language attrition. Migrant learners are constantly being reminded by some teachers and school staff to speak English. This could imply that some teachers in local schools do not favour multilingualism. This is also possibly because they are not familiar with notions related to multiculturalism and multilingualism, as well as how to use these to encourage better inclusion.

Books, Homework and Exams

Italian migrant learners and their parents like the books used in local schools because they are simpler than those they had used in Italy, and are provided free of charge. Italian migrant learners stereotyped schooling in Gozo as easy and not challenging enough. This implies that teachers in Maltese schools may have low expectations of these students due to their lack of proficiency in Maltese and English and their class ranking.

Most Italian migrant parents would like more homework and testing because they are used to more formative assessments in Italy, including written and oral skills.

One parent claims that her daughters are neither developing a general cultural base, as they would have done in Italy, nor developing studying skills. This indicates the limited teaching strategies directed to problem-solving or to 'learning how to learn', in line with Baschiera and Caruana's (2020) observation.

Examinations in Italy are generally less high-stakes than those held locally because importance is given to formative assessment. Some Italian migrant learners who arrived in their late primary years declared they were exempted from the benchmark examinations. In some cases, these experiences can be perceived as acts of discrimination by some migrant learners, but in reality they may underline the difficulties that schools face when dealing with such situations. There are indications that Italian migrant learners who used to do well at school in Italy end up in low-track classes (Caruana & Pace, 2021).

Inclusion

Despite some difficulties encountered in their transition, the general feeling of the Italian migrant learners and their parents on the Maltese education system is generally positive, confirming previous research (Palazzo, 2020). These learners have friends, they like the school's environment and feel included. However, several Italian migrant parents cannot think of any specific measures that the school or the system adopted to include their children at school, except for the teaching of MFL. Local families do not mix with migrant families at school and in the community, even when migrants may speak Maltese, creating a boundary between them, as also reported in local research (Palazzo, 2020).

Lack of proficiency in English and Maltese limits parental involvement in their children's education. Some parents testified how often their children felt excluded by the Maltese education system because of a difficult transition. This indicates the difficulties that the schools encounter when these learners join mainstream education.

On their part, teachers are inclined to inclusive practices in class, indicating that they value the potential of migrant learners, including Italians. However, most teachers have never heard of language mediation and translanguaging concepts. This suggests that they need more training to provide migrant learners with innovative teaching methods that address their inclusion. Teachers often rightly question and sometimes oppose decisions that are imposed on them by policymakers, especially when these are not explained to them a priori or when they are the result of top-down policy-making.

In the Gozitan context, most teachers in this research affirm that migrant learners would need more language support in Maltese and English through induction hubs that are available for students arriving in their secondary cycle of education, not just in their primary cycle. Some teachers also assert that there should be more support in the school, especially in teaching English to foreigners, just like in the case of MFL classes.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Italian migrant learners and their parents appreciate the Maltese education system because it provides free education and resources in state schools. Nevertheless, some of these learners experienced language-related issues, with academic and social repercussions that require more financial and organisational efforts (Caruana et al., 2019) to provide equity and quality of education for all (NCF, 2012).

The study reinforces the well-known empirical fact that an education system that affirms students' identities and cultures empowers students to learn more effectively. This indicates the need for an 'additive' model of language education wherein foreign students are encouraged to learn, appreciate, and value their L1, while also developing further their competence in Maltese and English. By integrating new pedagogical strategies in teaching and learning such as language mediation and/or translanguaging, coupled with the provision of more support in class through linguistic/cultural mediators, the Maltese education system can improve the schooling experience of all migrant

learners, including Italians. Greater home-school links may engage parents more in their children's education. This would translate into a fairer educational experience, with a social justice agenda informed by collectivity, democratic participation, and authentic dialogue (Borg, 2022) between all stakeholders.

References

- Baschiera, B., & Caruana, S. (2020). When migrant learners are Italian: perceptions of learning support educators on the inclusion of Italians in Maltese schools. *Italian Journal of Educational Research*, 25, 151–164. <https://doi.org/10.7346/SIRD-022020-P151>
- Bezzina, C. (2017). Camouflaged or visible: A comparative study in the Integration of EU Migrant Adolescents within the Maltese Formal and Informal Education. *The Educator: A Journal of Educational Matters*, 4, 37–52.
- Borg, C. (2022). Social Justice and Education: A Way Forward for Malta. *Institute for the Public Service (IPS) Journal*, 4, 10–19. <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/110817>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*. SAGE Publications.
- Brincat, J. M. (2011). *Maltese and other languages*. Midsea Books.
- Camilleri Grima, A. (2013). A Select Review of Bilingualism in Education in Malta. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 16(5), 553–569. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2012.716813>
- Camozzi, I. (2020). The descendants of Italian migrants in Germany. Integration and discrimination at school. *Mondi Migranti*, 3, 153–172. <https://doi.org/10.3280/MM2020-003009>
- Caruana, S. (2020). L'inclusione degli italiani nella società nelle scuole maltesi. *Italiano LinguaDue*, 12(2), 431–442. <https://doi.org/10.13130/2037-3597/15089>
- Caruana, S., & Pace, M. (2021). Italian nationals in Maltese schools: a case of 'so near but yet so far'? *Malta Review of Educational Research*, 15(2), 145–162. <https://www.mreronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/MRER-152-2-Sandro-Caruana-and-Mario-Pace.pdf>
- Caruana, S., & Santipolo, M. (2021). In touch with reality or wishful thinking? Reflections on language policies and planning in multilingual contexts. In M.P. D'Angelo & M. Ožbot (Eds.), *Lingue, testi e discorsi: Studi in onore di Paola Desideri* (pp. 135–154). Franco Cesati Editore.
- Caruana, S., Scaglione, S., & Vassallo Gauci, P. (2019). Multilingualism and the inclusion of migrant learners in Maltese schools. In C. Bezzina & S. Caruana (Eds.), *Teacher Education Matters: transforming lives ... transforming schools* (pp. 330–343). Faculty of Education, University of Malta.

- Cassar, J., & Attard Tonna, M. (2018). They Forget That I'm There: Migrant Students Traversing Language Barriers at School. *IAFOR Journal of Language Learning*, 4(1), 7–23. <https://doi.org/10.22492/ijll.4.1.01>
- European Commission. (2019). *Integrating Students from Migrant Backgrounds into Schools in Europe: National Policies and Measures*. Eurydice, Publications Office of the European Union.
- Fondazione Migrantes. (2022). *Rapporto Italiani nel Mondo 2022*. Sintesi, Tau Editrice.
- Iorio, M. (2019). Scenari migratori nell'era della crisi economica: gli italiani a Malta. In F. Salvatori, *L'apporto della Geografia tra rivoluzioni e riforme*. (pp. 2011–2018). A.Ge.I. -Roma.
- Jobsplus. (2022). *Foreign Nationals Employment Trends: All Foreign Nationals employed in Malta and Gozo*. Jobsplus. <https://jobsplus.gov.mt/resources/publication-statistics-mt-mt-en-gb/labour-market-information/foreigners-data#title3.1>
- Ministry for Education and Employment, (MEDE). (2012). *A National Curriculum Framework for All*. Salesian Press. MEDE.
- Ministry for Education and Employment, (MEDE). (2019a). *A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools: Route to Quality Inclusion*. MEDE.
- Ministry for Education and Employment, (MEDE). (2019b). *A National Inclusive Education Framework*. MEDE.
- National Statistics Office, (NSO). (2023, February 16). *Census of Population and Housing 2021: Final Report: Population, Migration and Other Social Characteristics (Volume 1)*. NSO Publications.
- Palazzo, T. (2020). *L'esperienza di studenti italiani nelle scuole maltesi, e la percezione degli insegnanti nei loro confronti*. [Master's dissertation, University of Malta]. OAR@UM. <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/78183>
- Romaine, S. (2006). Planning for the survival of linguistic diversity. *Language Policy*, 5, 443–475. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-006-9034-3>
- Vassallo Gauci, P. (2017). Making the needs of migrant learners a priority. *European Migration Network (EMN) Newsletter*, 2017–2018, (3).

