

## Diverse voices, dynamic classrooms: Exploring changing demographics, pedagogical shifts, and training perspectives in Maltese multilingual primary classrooms.

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### ABSTRACT

**EN** Malta is a small island in the Mediterranean Sea with a history of foreign occupation and British colonisation. Although bilingualism is a quintessential feature of being Maltese, recent, rapid, and unprecedented demographic shifts are altering the country's linguistic landscape from a bilingual to a multilingual one. This situation is mirrored in Maltese schools, with classrooms becoming more linguistically and culturally diverse. This paper explores how 145 Maltese primary school educators perceive and approach teaching students with diverse language and cultural backgrounds by examining their attitudes toward employing flexible language strategies, such as code-switching. The results of this research highlight the evolving dynamics of language use in Malta and the resulting impact on its educational system. This requires the reassessment of professional development initiatives in light of the current migration patterns. The aim of this study is to ultimately develop guidance and customize practical training and consultation sessions focused on culturally and linguistically responsive teaching.

**Key words:** MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION, MULTILINGUAL TEACHING PRACTICES, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, FLUID LANGUAGE PRACTICES

**ES** Malta es una pequeña isla en el Mediterráneo con una historia de ocupación extranjera y colonización británica. El bilingüismo es una característica esencial de la identidad maltesa; sin embargo, los recientes y rápidos cambios demográficos están transformando el panorama lingüístico del país, pasando de ser bilingüe a multilingüe. Esta situación se refleja en las escuelas maltesas, donde las aulas son cada vez más diversas desde el punto de vista lingüístico y cultural. Este artículo explora cómo 145 docentes de educación primaria en Malta perciben y abordan la enseñanza a estudiantes con diversos antecedentes lingüísticos y culturales, analizando sus actitudes hacia el uso de estrategias lingüísticas flexibles, como el cambio de código. Los resultados de esta investigación arrojan luz sobre la dinámica evolutiva del uso del lenguaje en Malta y el impacto resultante en su sistema educativo. Esto exige una revisión de las iniciativas de desarrollo profesional a la luz de los patrones migratorios actuales. El objetivo de este estudio es, en última instancia, desarrollar orientación y sesiones de formación práctica y consulta personalizadas, centradas en una enseñanza cultural y lingüísticamente receptiva.

**Palabras clave:** EDUCACIÓN MULTILINGÜE, PRÁCTICAS DE ENSEÑANZA MULTILINGÜES, DESARROLLO PROFESIONAL, PRÁCTICAS LINGÜÍSTICAS FLUIDAS

**IT** Malta è una piccola isola nel Mediterraneo con una storia di occupazioni straniere e colonizzazione britannica. Il bilinguismo è un elemento essenziale dell'identità maltese; tuttavia, recenti e rapidi cambiamenti demografici stanno trasformando il panorama linguistico del paese da bilingue a multilingue. Questa situazione si riflette anche nelle scuole maltesi, dove le classi stanno diventando sempre più linguisticamente e culturalmente diversificate. Questo articolo esplora come 145 educatori della scuola primaria maltese percepiscono e affrontano l'insegnamento a studenti con diversi background linguistici e culturali, esaminando i loro atteggiamenti verso l'uso di strategie linguistiche flessibili, come il code-switching. I risultati di questa ricerca evidenziano le dinamiche in evoluzione dell'uso linguistico a Malta e il conseguente impatto sul sistema educativo. Questa situazione richiede una rivalutazione delle iniziative di sviluppo professionale alla luce dei modelli migratori attuali. L'obiettivo di questo studio è infine sviluppare linee guida e sessioni di formazione pratica e consulenza su misura, incentrate su un insegnamento culturalmente e linguisticamente responsivo.

**Parole chiave:** EDUCAZIONE MULTILINGUE, PRATICHE DIDATTICHE MULTILINGUI, FORMAZIONE DOCENTI, PRATICHE LINGUISTICHE FLUIDE

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## 1. Introduction

The past few decades have seen a significant global increase in human mobility and migration flows, leading to widespread linguistic and cultural diversity across Europe and beyond. This has resulted in the prevalence of multilingual classrooms, with students speaking a variety of native languages, and some not using the school's language(s) of instruction within their home environments (Dockrell, Papadopoulos, Mifsud et al., 2023; Duarte & Günther-van der Meijb, 2022; Van Laere, Rosiers, Van Avermaet et al., 2017). Migrant children are among the most vulnerable in society, making their protection and support a critical humanitarian and policy issue in many European countries. These students often face the challenge of learning and being evaluated in the official language(s) of education, which can lead to them underachieving when compared to their native-born peers (Eurydice, 2019). Additionally, children who lack support for their native language in educational settings often experience social and academic disadvantages (OECD, 2012). In today's educational landscape, it is imperative for educators to receive proper training to leverage the advantages of multilingualism and multiculturalism (Duarte & Günther-van der Meijb, 2022). This training should be designed in ways that equip educators to meet the diverse needs of all students and to support the development of children's cultural identities and linguistic heritage while preparing them for a globalised world. This can be accomplished through teaching methods that incorporate flexible language strategies like code-switching and translanguaging (García, Johnson, Seltzer & Valdés, 2017), programs that emphasise the global value of English (Cenoz, 2019), and initiatives that support the preservation of the host country's language(s) (Panzavecchia & Little, 2019, 2020). Creating effective and equitable learning environments is crucial for the success of these children and requires pedagogical approaches that are responsive to the local multilingual context. A pivotal starting point for understanding education in these settings is to examine the perspectives and practices of educators themselves (Dockrell et al., 2023; Michala, Manoli, Lavidas & Koustourakis, 2024; Wagner, 2021).

This paper is a follow-up to a doctoral study focusing on bilingual Maltese teachers' identities and the ways in which their backgrounds impact their perceptions and pedagogical practices (See Panzavecchia, 2020). The present research is a continuation of the original study, with a much larger sample size and additional insights related to teaching within multilingual environments. The first original qualitative study focused on the views of nine Maltese teachers in relation to their bilingual identities and their experiences related to bilingual and multilingual classrooms. This follow-up study was deemed necessary due to the rapidly occurring demographic changes on the island of Malta and its experience of the global trend of linguistic diversity, within the context of its unique bilingual situation which forms part of its historical legacy. It explores teaching within multilingual classrooms due to the island's current transformation from a bilingual to multilingual society as a result of ongoing demographic shifts (Ariza, Calleja, Vassallo Gauci, 2019; Bonello, 2020; Caruana, Scaglione, Vassallo Gauci, 2019; Farrugia, 2017; Panzavecchia, 2023; Paris & Farrugia, 2019). This state of affairs is mirrored in our schools through the arrival of a number of non-Maltese children speaking a variety of languages (Camenzuli, Lundberg, Gauci, 2023). This has inevitably impacted our schools both culturally and linguistically, and is the source of both enrichment and challenges. One such challenge sees Maltese teachers increasingly faced with teaching young students who do not speak either English or Maltese. Language is one obstacle which prevents students from ethnic minorities from fully benefiting from education. However, it is often argued that the primary challenge lies in schools that fail to effectively address student diversity. Educators play a critical role in overcoming these barriers, as they possess significant potential to foster the holistic inclusion of diverse students. Nevertheless, it has been observed that achieving positive change requires appropriate support systems to be in place (Parnis & Schembri, 2023).

The current study is an attempt to address such challenges by gathering data from educators in relation to their experience of multilingual classrooms, and their perceived needs in this respect. This study was conducted through a mixed-methods approach, which included the dissemination of an online questionnaire to all primary state-school teachers in Malta. The questions are related to the ways in which Maltese primary school teachers are supporting multilingual students, together with their viewpoints regarding the use of fluid language practices such as code-switching. The aim of this study is to shed more light on the current situation, and to eventually offer schools guidance and practical training and consultation sessions that are tailor-made to specific needs on how to mitigate challenges related to linguistically diverse classrooms. The results of this research illuminate the changing aspects of language use that Malta is currently experiencing, together with the resulting impact on its educational system. This necessitates the revisiting of professional practice and professional development, in light of the current migration trends which are resulting in classrooms becoming more linguistically and culturally diverse. Multilingual education and cross-linguistic pedagogies are the way forward within ever-increasing globalised societies (Baker, 2011; Beres, 2015; García, 2009; García et al., 2017; García and Wei, 2014; Milton, 2011, 2016; ; Milton & Panzavecchia, 2019a). The results of this study are indicative of the rapidly

changing demographic makeup of the Maltese primary classroom, marked by an unprecedented linguistically diverse environment. In this respect, the need for customised professional development training sessions was expressed by the large majority of the participants. Maltese teachers are open to employing innovative linguistic pedagogies as required by the island's changing demographic composition; however, they feel the need to be equipped with the necessary skills to legitimise organically occurring fluid language practices, and to provide a socially just and equitable education for all.

## **2. The Maltese context**

The island of Malta is situated in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. Maltese is the national language of Malta, whilst the Constitution of Malta states that both Maltese and English are official languages on the island. When Malta joined the European Union (EU) in 2004, Maltese also became an official language of the EU. While the majority of Maltese people are considered bilingual, there exists significant variation in proficiency levels among speakers (Vella, 2012). The Maltese language is Semitic in its foundations; however, it is written in a Latin script and in a left-to-right direction (Francesconi, 2010; Paris & Farrugia, 2019). It also merges elements of English and Romance languages owing to its strategic position and history of foreign occupation. The prevalent use of the English language is linked to the island's colonial heritage, which lasted until 1964 (see Panzavecchia & Little, 2019). The sociolinguistic situation in Malta is one of a widespread societal bilingualism without diglossia since neither of the two languages is assigned a High or Low function and both are used in most domains (Camilleri Grima, 2013). Malta is, however, currently experiencing unprecedented and rapid demographic shifts, which are resulting in an inevitable linguistic shift from bilingualism to multilingualism.

## **3. Recent demographic shifts on the island**

Ever since 2002, Malta has been perceived to be a symbolic gateway into Europe, resulting in an influx of asylum seekers and refugees due to shifting migration patterns and globalisation. Malta joined the EU in 2004, which further increased transnational migration, as more EU citizens are choosing to make Malta their home (International Organisation for Migration, 2016). Additionally, Malta's 2021 national census reveals that Malta's demographic makeup has also been impacted by the importation of foreign labour by the government to sustain economic growth over the past few years. Currently, one fifth of Malta's population and over a quarter of Malta's workforce is made up of foreign nationals. The past decade has seen an increase of over 95,000 non-Maltese nationals on the island (Borg, 2023). The population of Malta stood at just over half a million in 2021, making it the most densely populated country in the EU with 1,649 residents per square kilometre (Malta is 27 km long and 14.5 km wide). Italians make up the large majority of non-Maltese living on the islands, followed by British residents. Other common nationalities residing in Malta include Indian, Filipino, Serbian, Bulgarian and Libyan populations. In the 2012/2013 school year, the number of migrant pupils in Maltese schools stood at 1,890. In 2021/22, this number increased to 6,819, hence in 9 years the number has more than tripled (National Statistics Office, 2024). At the same time, the number of Maltese births is steadily decreasing since Malta has the lowest fertility rate in Europe (Eurostat, 2021). Maltese primary schools host the largest percentage of non-Maltese children, standing at 15% of the schools' population in 2020/21 (National Statistics Office, 2023). This state of affairs is inevitably impacting schools both culturally and linguistically.

## **4. The present study**

The current paper is a follow-up of a doctoral study conducted in 2020, with the aim of reaching a larger sample size, capturing new insights pertinent to the evolving scenario, and gathering data related to the way educators are supporting the ever-increasing number of multilingual students in their classrooms. This encompassed an exploration of their current practices and perceptions of implementing fluid language pedagogies, and an assessment of their perceived training requirements on this topic. This study aimed to paint a more comprehensive picture of the situation, ultimately paving the way for the development and provision of customised consultation sessions, tailor-made professional development, and comprehensive support in addressing these educational challenges.

### **4.1. The participants**

The total population for this study comprised 145 participants, encompassing a diverse range of roles within the educational sector, including teachers, supply teachers, activity teachers, Learning Support Educators (LSEs), Kindergarten Educators (KGEs), and members of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). It is worth noting that Kindergarten Educators have been included in this study because of an overlap between kindergarten and the initial phase of primary education in Malta, as the first two years of primary education

are considered an extension of the two-year kindergarten period (Eurydice, 2023). In Maltese state schools, kindergarten classes are in fact generally located within primary schools and the Head of Primary School is also responsible for this cohort.

The majority of respondents were teachers, followed by Learning Support Educators. Teaching experience among the participants ranged between 0 – 20 years, with most participants having over 20 years of school practice. The majority of respondents hold a bachelor's degree, followed by those holding a Diploma and a Master's degree respectively. There was an even distribution of educators in the Early years and Junior years, with approximately half of the participants teaching in each sector.

Table 1  
*Participants' employment status*

<b>Employment status</b>	<b>%</b>
Teacher	62.33%
Learning Support Educator	22.6%
Senior Leadership member	9.59%
Kindergarten Educator	4.79%
Total	99.32%
Invalid	0.68%
Total	100%

Table 2  
*Participants' teaching experience*

<b>Teaching experience</b>	<b>%</b>
5 – 10 years	24.66%
10 – 20 years	22.6%
0 – 5 years	22.6%
Total	97.95%
Invalid	2.05%
Total	100%

Table 3  
*Level of education distribution among participants*

<b>Highest academic qualification</b>	<b>%</b>
Bachelor's degree	47.26%
Diploma	28.08%
Master's degree	17.81%
A' Levels	4.11%
O' Levels	1.37%
Total	98.63%
Invalid	1.37%
Total	100%

#### **4.2. Methods**

For this study, a mixed methods approach was employed, administering a comprehensive questionnaire that incorporated both quantitative and qualitative elements. The multiple-choice question responses were subjected to statistical analysis. Initially, the data was cleaned and subsequently analysed using descriptive statistical methods. Quantitative data analysis was performed with DataTAB software, from which percentage responses were extracted. The data derived from the open-ended questions underwent thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), providing a qualitative exploration of participants' perspectives and insights. The gathered data was categorised based on similarities, differences, and other

relevant factors, and was colour-coded for organisation. Overlapping themes were examined and refined, while newly emerging themes were further subdivided into sub-themes. This dual-method strategy facilitated a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research topic, combining the strengths of numerical precision with the richness of qualitative insights.

An online questionnaire was developed for the purpose of this study, with the aim of gathering data from educators in relation to their experiences of multilingual classrooms and their perceived needs in this respect. The questionnaire included an information section related to the scope and nature of the study, highlighting the fact that participation was completely voluntary, whilst guaranteeing the respondents' privacy since all data is anonymous and therefore cannot be traced back to the participant as an individual. Additionally, the participants were advised that the questionnaire would take approximately 10–15 minutes to complete. The questionnaire consisted of 27 questions, out of which 17 were multiple-choice questions, and 10 were open-ended questions where the participants were free to voice their personal opinions on the subject. Some of the multiple-choice questions also provided participants with the opportunity to express their own views and provide additional comments, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of their perspectives. The questions focused on their linguistic backgrounds and bilingual identities, their experience related to teaching children with diverse language backgrounds, the benefits and challenges related to multilingual classrooms, the strategies employed for effective communication and teaching within linguistically diverse classrooms, their viewpoints on monolingual approaches and on fluid language practices, and the level and type of support they feel both educators and students require within multilingual teaching and learning environments. This questionnaire, together with an explanatory email, were systematically distributed to all heads of primary state schools in Malta, who were then responsible for disseminating the survey to their respective staff members for voluntary participation in the project. Prior to initiating this process, ethical approval was obtained from both the researcher's institution and the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research, and Innovation. A copy of this questionnaire can be found in the Appendix of this article.

145 participants responded to the online questionnaire. The National Statistics Office (2023) reports 3651 educators working in the primary sector in Malta; this sample is 3.97% of the total population, which gave the researcher a margin of error of 3.57% with a confidence interval of 95%.

## 5. Results

The results of this research indicate that the participating educators are fluent in both Maltese and English and use both languages equally and interchangeably in their daily communication. Most of the respondents are also fluent in the Italian language. Code-switching is a typical feature of bilingual and multilingual speakers (Baker, 2011; Paradis, Genesee, Crago, 2011; Wei, 2007), and the findings show that fluid language practices, such as code-switching and translanguaging, are organically employed by the large majority of the respondents; however, the participating educators are paradoxically unsure of their benefits and how to use them strategically in the classroom (Panzavecchia, 2020, 2023).

The findings show that the large majority of participants are currently teaching in multilingual classrooms, without being given appropriate support, guidance, and training. Educators appear to be striving to reach out to all the children in their care; however, this is mainly done out of their own initiative, and not linked to professional training (Scaglione & Caruana, 2018). The participating educators seem to be open and willing to improve practice given the appropriate training, for which the large majority reported a dire need. In this respect, educators need to be offered professional development and training programs which would enable them to legitimately implement bilingual and multilingual pedagogies advantageously (Beres, 2015; García et al., 2017; García & Wei, 2014; Milton, 2011, 2016; Milton & Panzavecchia, 2019a), which would in turn guarantee inclusion and social justice within linguistically diverse classrooms (Wei, 2023).

The rest of the findings have been split up into sections pertinent to the scope of this study. Verbatim quotes are also included in the data, which was analysed thematically. This approach serves to enhance the validation of this study, providing participants with a "voice", and allowing readers to comprehensively grasp the interviewees' expressed views and sentiments regarding their experiences related to teaching within multilingual environments.

### 5.1. Participants' linguistic background

93.8% of the respondents consider Maltese to be their mother tongue, or the language they feel most comfortable communicating in, whilst the same percentage consider English to be their second language. A small number of participants mentioned other languages, notably Italian as either their L1 or L2 (first or second language respectively). All participants feel they are very, or quite proficient, in the second language. 80% of participants speak other languages apart from their L1 and L2, with Italian also

being spoken by the large majority of educators, including those who listed multiple languages (three or more languages) as forming part of their repertoire.

This linguistic scenario is depictive of the sociolinguistic situation in Malta, which is one of a widespread societal bilingualism without diglossia. It also evidences the prominence of the Italian language, which is at times spoken as a third language in Malta (Ariza et al., 2019), as a result of the countries' geographical proximity, historical and commercial ties, and Italian media exposure (Caruana, 2007; Caruana, Cremona, & Vella, 2013).

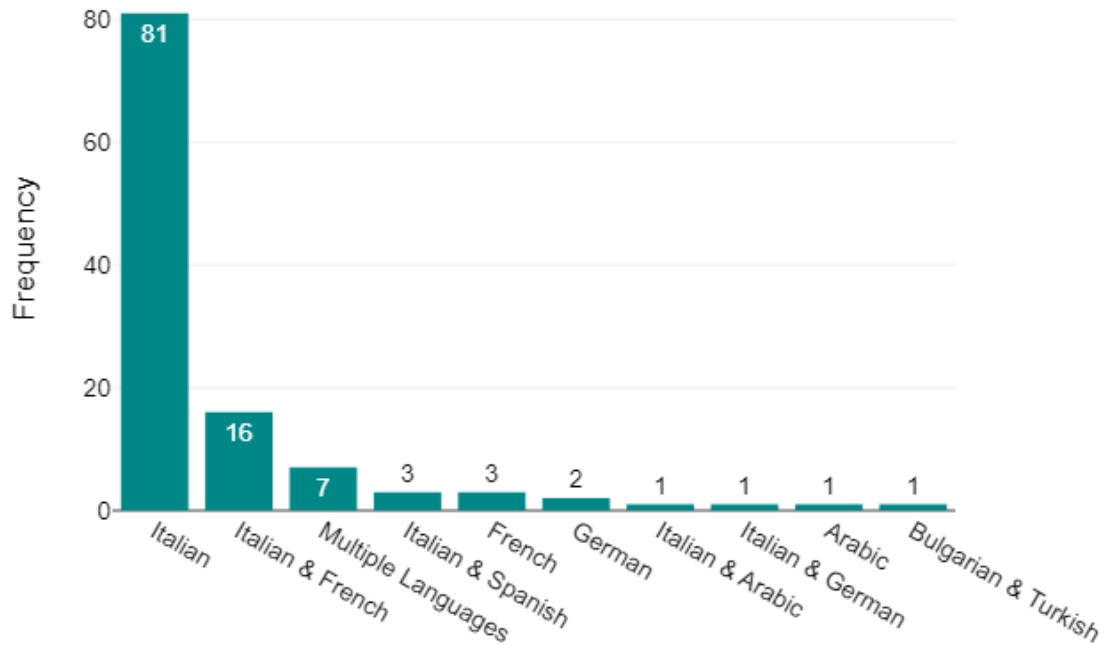


Figure 1. Other languages spoken by participants (not including Maltese and English)

## 5.2. Linguistic and cultural demographics in Maltese classrooms

80.3% of the participants stated that they were teaching children with diverse language backgrounds (other than Maltese and English), whilst 83.3% claimed that they had never received training related to teaching in multilingual classroom environments. In contrast, the participants who had received some form of training credited this to specific modules in their academic studies or self-sought professional development. Only one respondent claimed to have received school-based professional development on the topic. This is indicative of an educator workforce which is not being adequately supported and trained to navigate the shifting linguistic and cultural dynamics of Maltese classrooms (Milton & Panzavecchia, 2019b; Panzavecchia, 2020; Panzavecchia, 2023; Panzavecchia & Little, 2019; Scaglione & Caruana, 2018).

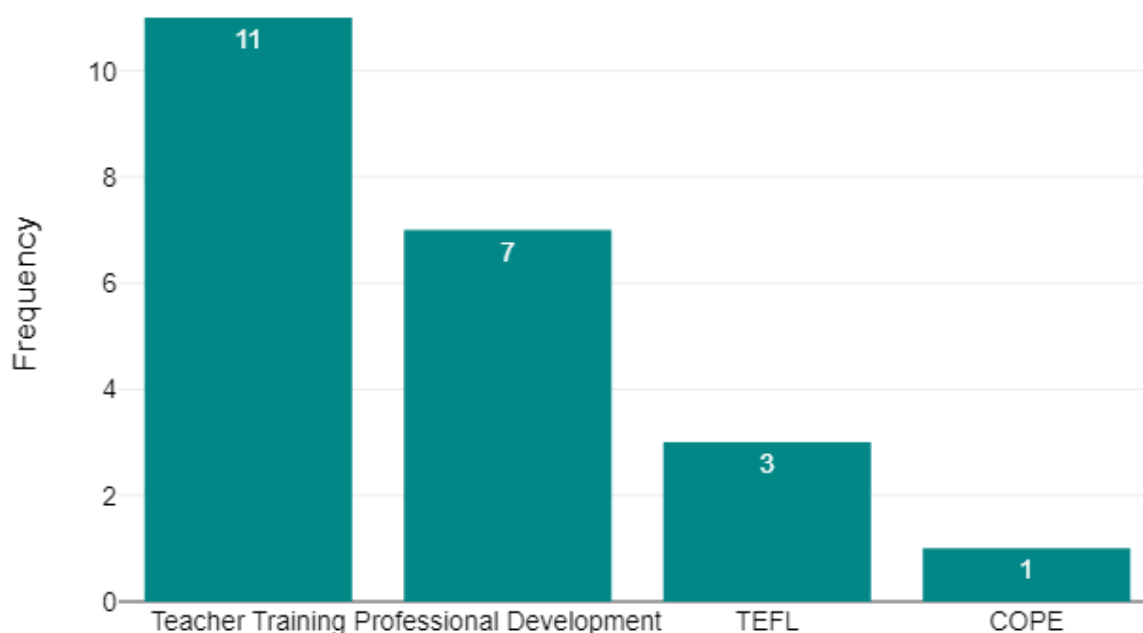


Figure 2. Training related to teaching in multilingual classroom environments received by participants

90% of the participants had a classroom of 20 or over children in class, which is indicative of largely populated classrooms in Malta. 34% of the participants claimed to have between 0-10% of their class consisting of non-Maltese/migrant children, whilst 17% had between 11%-20%. The study revealed a diverse linguistic landscape in the classrooms, with participants reporting the presence of children speaking a wide array of languages. Notably, some teachers mentioned children conversing in categories such as 'Indian,' 'African,' 'Syrian,' 'Pakistani,' or 'Egyptian,' unwittingly attributing these labels to languages, when, in fact, they do not represent distinct linguistic entities.

Table 4  
Percentage of non-Maltese/migrant children in participants' classes

Non-Maltese/Migrant Students	%
0 – 10%	33.56%
11 – 20%	17.12%
21 – 40%	15.07%
61 -80%	11.64%
41 – 60%	10.27%
81 – 100%	8.9%
Total	96.58%
Invalid	3.42%
Total	100%

Table 5  
*Languages spoken by children in participants' classrooms.*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Language</b>
Local	Maltese, English
European	Italian, French, German, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish, Dutch, Polish, Slovak, Croatian, Czech, Ukrainian, Serbian, Russian, Hungarian, Swedish, Macedonian, Bulgarian, Estonian, Lithuanian, Latvian, Albanian, Greek, Irish, Armenian, Slavic
Asian	Chinese, Japanese, Cantonese, Turkish, Urdu, Filipino, Hindi, Tamil, Sinhala, Malayalam, Thai
African	Arabic, Somali, Tigrinya, Nigerian language, Afrikaans
Other	Sign Language

### ***5.3. Multilingual Strategies employed by Maltese primary educators***

When asked about the strategies employed to address language barriers and to promote effective communication among multilingual students, the participants were given a list of possible answers from which they could choose more than one option and/or add their own ideas. The majority of respondents stated that they were using scaffolded instruction for different proficiency levels in class (Durán & Palmer, 2014), thus breaking down complex tasks or concepts into more manageable steps. Participants also claimed that they were striving to provide clear instructions, offering support as students progressed through each step. Respondents further mentioned incorporating diverse and culturally relevant content, reflecting the background and experience of the students (Wagner, 2021). Additionally, they also used a language buddy system (Sclafani, 2017), pairing students for language brokering and to support each other in learning the target language, whilst sharing their mother tongue. Other notable responses encompassed encouraging language use (Gort & Sembiente, 2015), where some educators created opportunities for students to use their native languages during certain parts of the day with technology integration by using language learning apps and online translation tools to facilitate communication and language development. Paradoxically, the selection of self-sought professional development emerged on the lower end of the response spectrum. This might be indicative of a teacher workforce which does not generally pursue independent learning unless it reaps tangible rewards, such as promotion or a salary increase, and where training is usually provided by third parties. This mentality could also be linked to Malta's culture of competitive achievement, where the educational system is heavily reliant on examinations, and therefore based on extrinsic, rather than intrinsic motivation (Panzavecchia, 2020). These findings confirm the analysis conducted by the European Commission in 2019, which indicates that over half of all service teachers in Malta are either unmotivated to attend Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses or face challenges in doing so due to additional responsibilities. The promotion of more self-directed learning for personal and professional growth is therefore crucial in today's evolving classroom demographics (Back, 2020; Gorter & Arocena, 2020; Menken & Sanchez, 2019; Panzavecchia, 2020).

When asked about the strategies employed to teach the children in class, respondents were once again provided with a list of options, allowing them to choose multiple responses and/or contribute with their own ideas. The use of visual aids was mentioned by the large majority of participants, followed by code-switching, translating and revoicing (Gort & Sembiente, 2015), language buddies (Sclafani, 2017), and technology integration (Van Laere et al., 2017). The use of flexible assessment methods appeared at the lower end of the response spectrum.

When enquired about their level of confidence when employing these strategies, nearly half of the participants expressed confidence, a substantial 36% felt uncertain, and 14% did not feel confident. The participating educators exhibited initiatives, creativity, and proactiveness related to teaching within multilingual environments. However, the results of this study indicate that this is done out of their own free will, without a clear association with professional guidance and training (Panzavecchia & Little, 2019; Scaglione & Caruana, 2018). In this respect, although it appears that Maltese educators are willing to

address the realities of their linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms, half of the participants are either unsure or do not feel confident about the strategies they are employing (Ariza et al., 2019; Farrugia, 2017; Scaglione & Caruana, 2018;). This indicates that teachers need to be “explicitly taught ways to incorporate heteroglossic ideologies” into their pedagogy (Goodman & Tastanbek, 2020, p. 1). It also underscores the necessity for systemic structural support to facilitate the incorporation of multilingual pedagogies into both education and teacher training programs (Szelei, Pinho, Tinoca, 2021).

Table 6  
*Confidence in applying multilingual strategies in class*

<b>Confidence</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	47.95%
Not sure	35.62%
No	13.7%
Total	97.26%
Invalid	2.74%
Total	100%

#### **5.4. Incorporating culturally and linguistically relevant material**

Participants were also asked whether they try to incorporate culturally and linguistically relevant material into their classes. Responses were varied, but it appears that the majority of educators do endeavour to incorporate such resources in order to make their classrooms more inclusive. However, for a substantial number of participants, the extent of using such material is mainly limited to labelling items around the classroom in different languages. Other mentioned material was related to games, stories in reading comprehensions, books, flashcards, word banks, and video clips. A few participants stated that they organised multicultural days and involved students in multicultural projects throughout the year. They also endeavoured to include children’s cultural backgrounds, especially during Christmas and Easter activities. One participant stated that their school’s Christmas concert has now moved away from religious themes or associations and is merely a celebration of love and kindness.

##### *Excerpt 1. Representative resources*

I make sure my resources are representative. I make sure I know greeting words in their languages. I strive to learn about their countries and mention things in passing. I have the Crayola skin tone set that has every possible skin tone in class (not just ‘peach’). I celebrate their feasts and try to increase awareness of them within the school.

##### *Excerpt 2. Cultural exchange*

I have students engage in projects that involve communication with peers from different language backgrounds, fostering cultural exchange.

Although these responses are very encouraging, highlighting an educator workforce that is attempting to provide inclusive education for all, there were also several other teachers who stated that they do not manage to incorporate culturally and linguistically relevant material in class. This was attributed to a lack of available resources, together with time constraints and uncooperative students.

##### *Excerpt 3. Loaded curricula*

Curriculum and assessment and students’ academic level don’t allow for much flexibility.

##### *Excerpt 4. Time constraints and student resistance*

As an Ethics teacher, the syllabus allows me to draw from different cultures. When I was a class teacher it was much harder, as there were time constraints, syllabus and more resistance from students to learn Maltese and English.

#### **5.5. Participants’ understanding of code-switching**

The large majority of participants has a clear understanding of what code-switching entails and described it as alternating between two or more languages in conversation or switching between languages during lessons to ensure mutual understanding. Two participants believed that it was similar to

translanguaging. Both code-switching and translanguaging refer to an organic switching between languages for various communicative purposes, and both can occur spontaneously or be used intentionally for pedagogical reasons. Translanguaging is a broader term that includes a range of language practices, possibly encompassing code-switching (García, 2009), reflecting a different understanding of bilingual cognition (Otheguy et al., 2015, 2019), with overlapping aspects between the two (Baker & Wright, 2017; Goodman & Tastanbek, 2020). The key distinction is that code-switching involves switching between two separate, distinct languages, while translanguaging views language as a unified, fluid system from which speakers draw according to their particular requirements at any given time (Goodman & Tastanbek, 2020; Otheguy et al., 2019). It is also interesting to note that some respondents appeared to draw parallels between code-switching and translation, potentially reflecting a perceived overlap in their features (See Pintado Gutiérrez, 2021).

### **5.6. Participants' views on code-switching in the classroom**

There was a clear division of opinions related to participants' views on the use of code-switching in the classroom. The general feeling is that although teachers wish to maintain distinct languages, they also believe that this could inevitably create related complexities, particularly for children who are not fluent in either English or Maltese.

What emerged strongly was the fact that almost half of the respondents were not in favour of this practice, stating that it is 'inappropriate', 'tiresome' or 'problematic'. Most of these respondents used the word 'confusing' to justify their aversion to this practice. Some participants voiced their concerns that students would not learn much this way. One participant also claimed that it was school policy to discourage children from using their own languages in class. This is very concerning since it evidences a deficit model of education, where the focus is on Maltese and English, thus disregarding the heritage language and often resulting in social challenges and academic setbacks associated with home languages not being adequately celebrated and valued (Micallef Cann & Spiteri, 2014; Panzavecchia & Little, 2019, 2020; Scaglione & Caruana, 2018). However, the majority of these educators was still using fluid language practices in class because they felt they had no other option, stating that this practice was 'inevitable', and 'having no other way', or doing it 'only because it is absolutely necessary', 'as a last resort' and because it is 'the only way', or 'unavoidable'.

#### *Excerpt 5. It is a must*

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There is no other way, otherwise children will not understand. In state schools we try our best to give instructions and explanations in Maltese, but when having more than half the students who do not speak Maltese, code-switching is a must.

#### *Excerpt 6. Splitting oneself in two*

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*Mhux sew li għalliem wiehed jinqasam fi tnejn. Bilfors trid tagħmilha għax hemm min jifhem bil-Malti aktar milli bl-Ingliż, u viċi-versa.* (Translation from Maltese to English): It is not right that a teacher is required to split themselves in two! You have to do it because there are those who understand Maltese better than English and vice-versa.

#### *Excerpt 7. Maltese, Maltese – English, English*

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I encourage learners to speak in Maltese if they are using this language. Whilst when speaking in English they should speak this language properly too. Code-switching can cause language confusion. My motto is Maltese, Maltese – English, English!

#### *Excerpt 8. I do not encourage it*

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Yes, as most of my students switch. Even from dialectal Arabic to modern, standard Arabic. I have to use it but I do not encourage it as Maltese students find it easier to talk in English rather than using the Maltese language.

### **5.7. Potential language endangerment**

As observed above, the fact that native Maltese children are encountering problems with communicating in Maltese was also mentioned by some of the participants. Other participants argued that English was rapidly becoming the main instructional language in Maltese schools to enable better communication. One participant commented that they believe they had recently increased their use of English in order to maximise understanding, whilst another stated that they were now using mostly English in class. This is indicative of a shift to 'an English-only medium of instruction' in Maltese classrooms, since teachers are finding it easier to use the English language predominantly and sometimes exclusively in order

to reach out to the migrant, non-Maltese-speaking children in their care (Camilleri Grima, 2018, p. 38). This also corresponds with the results documented in the most recent national census, indicating that 23.4% of Maltese children under 10 years old grew up speaking English as their main language (National Statistics Office, 2023). The fact that Maltese would no longer be a required form of communication within an increasingly globalised society may also equate to language endangerment. For some participants, the maintenance of the Maltese language is indeed a problem in itself, as they voiced their concerns about the possible, eventual extinction of the language as a result of the increasing numbers of non-Maltese children in class.

### **5.8. Language islands within multilingual environments**

One participant stated that they discourage code-switching and speaking in different languages, because some children tend to say 'bad words' in their language during these instances. Another related concern was linked to migrant learners who speak a common language and sometimes tended to form language groups. This often hinders integration with the rest of the class since it excludes other students from joining in, and because the groups themselves do not feel the need to further integrate. The creation of these language islands is also problematic for teachers who may feel isolated and experience a lack of class control within multilingual environments (Panzavecchia, 2020; Ticheloven, Blom, Leseman et al., 2019).

### **5.9. Participants' views on the benefits of code-switching.**

Half of the participants were conversely keen on using fluid language practices in class, recognising the benefits of this practice within linguistically diverse classrooms. In this respect, the fact that this practice is 'helpful', 'beneficial', 'effective', 'motivational' and that it 'encourages better communication' and 'maximises understanding' emerged strongly.

#### *Excerpt 9. Use of non-verbal communication*

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Yes, especially with foreigners to help them integrate and learn more certain things. I tend to switch from Maltese to English in order to translate what I say, so that I make sure that everyone is understood. At times translating into English is not good enough as I have children who barely understand English. So, I use hand gestures and pointing and use of visual aids so that I make sure they are understanding.

#### *Excerpt 10. A normal way to communicate*

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It is normal for a child to code-switch when exposed to multiple languages. When a child code-switches, I show him/her that I understood and then I repeat the whole sentence in one language, it could be L1 or L2. It is important not to correct the child continuously as you may hinder him from speaking. By showing that you understand him, even by gestures in the beginning and using single words will encourage language development.

#### *Excerpt 11. A natural and valid linguistic behaviour*

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I recognise code-switching as a natural and valid linguistic behaviour, often influenced by cultural background and social context. By encouraging code-switching, it contributes to an inclusive and culturally rich environment where students feel comfortable expressing themselves.

Plurilingual pedagogies are currently being promoted in Malta through initiatives such as the National Literacy Strategy, which acknowledges the fact that code-switching is an important element of bilingual societies and endorses access to different languages in schools (Ministry of Education and Employment, Malta, 2014). The Language Education Policy Profile for Malta (Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2015) also promotes the idea of a plurilingual society where competence in multiple languages may naturally lead to switching between languages when and as the situation demands. Other local policies and documents have also recently been changing guidelines on the use of code-switching as a learning tool (See The Malta Ministry for Education and Employment's A Language Policy for the Early Years in Malta and Gozo, 2016; A Language Policy for the Junior Years in Malta and Gozo, 2023). Code-switching is in fact now considered a widely shared and valid practice within bilingual and multilingual environments, and therefore embracing the concept of language mixing as a pedagogical tool may effectively be the way forward for language education in Malta.

### **5.10. The use of multiple languages versus monolingual approaches in class**

Participants were asked their opinion about the use of multiple languages and monolingual strategies in class. The findings show that the vast majority of participants perceive multiple language approaches as challenging to implement, describing plurilingual approaches as 'stressful', 'uncomfortable', 'confusing', 'time-consuming', and 'not easy'. What emerged strongly was the fact that since these educators cannot speak the different languages spoken by the students in class, they feel that using multiple languages is not a possibility. Other participants claimed that they did not feel confident employing these strategies, attributing this once more to a lack of training in the area. Once again, the fear of language loss was voiced by some participants. There was also talk of potential discrimination towards Maltese students when multiple languages are used as a way to accommodate all students. There were also a number of respondents who believe that using multiple languages in class may lead to problems related to classroom dynamics and classroom management.

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#### *Excerpt 12. Challenging classroom dynamics*

I think there is a lack of training and when used incorrectly this approach may cause classroom dynamics which can be quite challenging, especially when students start to insult each other instead.

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#### *Excerpt 13. More stress for educators*

We already have Maltese and English, the command both of which leaves much to be desired in some cases. I do not think that more languages than these two are a good idea. Moreover, including a third or more languages in class would most likely imply less time on task and more stress for the educators.

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#### *Excerpt 14. I am not a walking encyclopaedia*

I am not a walking encyclopaedia and the limited time to my lessons forbids me to translate everything into the children's mother tongue (5 different languages!).

These findings indicate that this section of Maltese educators, despite seemingly acknowledging that linguistically diverse students are on the increase and that this warrants a potential reconsideration of pedagogy, are somewhat still traditional in their perceptions of how language should be used in class. These ideas stem from uncertainty, lack of confidence, lack of knowledge, and concern, especially about their lack of mastery in the different languages spoken in class. There is also the misguided perception that utilising multilingual strategies requires a teacher to be proficient in all the languages represented in class. Wei (2023, p. 6) contends that including the use of multiple languages and fluid linguistic practices such as translanguaging as pedagogy requires 'a different mindset' on the part of educators, which shifts the role of a classroom teacher into that of a co-learner. Wei believes that a diverse student community provides rich 'funds of knowledge' through which there could be a wealth of opportunities for mutual gain. In this scenario not only is the focus on an inclusive classroom, 'but also to engage in real-world meaning making and identity exploration, which are crucial yet often neglected aspects of learning'.

Educators are often viewed as a solution to a perceived 'language problem' brought about by demographic changes; however, they are still provided with 'tools' which were developed prior to the current influx of migrants in alignment with Vertovec's (2007) concept of superdiversity. Hence, the concept of categorising languages as L1 or L2, together with the prevailing perceptions of bilingualism needing to be revisited and reassessed (García, 2017, p. 15). Some participants believe that encouraging the children to communicate in Maltese and English is imperative for effective integration into our society, advocating minimising the use of the students' heritage language. This points once again towards a misguided deficit model of education. Maltese schools do not fully capitalise on the "extent and value of immigrant children's language repertoires and of the potential benefits that could result if children's languages of origin were adequately exploited" (Scaglione & Caruana, 2018, p. 141). Mother tongue support programs are practically non-existent within the Maltese educational system, for a variety of pragmatic reasons, mainly related to a lack of financial and human resources. It is impractical to anticipate teachers mastering proficiency in every home language spoken by their students; however, they can endeavour to create learning settings that incorporate students' native languages, implement initiatives which encourage parental participation at various levels, and establish particular moments during their lessons for linguistically diverse students to use their mother tongue. This approach aims to counteract the 'linguistic hierarchies that exist in school' (García & Seltzer, 2016, p.24). In this scenario, students would be organically linking the multiple languages present in class, 'fulfilling a scaffolding function offering temporary bridges between languages' (Duarte, 2020, p. 12), whilst aiming 'to acknowledge and safeguard the linguistic rights of migrants, including TCNs' (Caruana & Santipolo, 2021, p. 148).

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*Excerpt 15. The importance of communicating in our national languages*

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While it is important for students to feel like they belong, and I allow students to translate where needed. I do insist that they try to communicate in the national languages – I see it as part of their entitlement to acquire these languages in order to better function in society. For example, good mornings might be exchanged in any language, however, discussions are in English or Maltese.

Conversely, another section of participants does believe that multilingual, as opposed to monolingual, practices should be the way forward within our evolving classrooms. These educators argue that monolingual practices within linguistically diverse classrooms evidence a ‘selfish’ and ‘unfair’ way of teaching, lacking inclusivity, which in turn adds to disruption in the classroom due to student disengagement and lack of interest. They also mention the fact that learning multiple languages helps with language transfer (Brooks & Kempe, 2014). One participant also believes that monolingual approaches may hinder speech and cognitive development, whilst another commented that multilingual children outperform monolingual students in areas beyond language skills (Bialystok, Craik & Luk, 2008; Bialystok, 2011).

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*Excerpt 16. Children feel unaccepted*

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The child may feel foreign and not accepted. Sometimes I look up words in the child’s language and their face lights up when they hear their mother tongue at school.

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*Excerpt 17. Language transfer*

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Language development needs other languages to develop. Example in Maltese it is beneficial to connotate certain words to other words from another language, as the words may be similar, and students may be able to relate to the new words more. Example wieħed in Maltese is similar to Arabic wahid [واحد].

**5.11. Support needed by educators and non-Maltese children within multilingual classrooms.**

Educators were asked to give their views on the kind of support required by both educators and non-Maltese children to enhance teaching and learning within multilingual classrooms. In this respect, training for educators was once again high on the list of responses. Educators voiced their need for ‘mentoring with follow up’, ‘professional development sessions’, ‘specialised courses’, ‘workshops’, and ‘demonstration lessons’. One participant also stated that when training was provided, this was usually done by lecturers who do not have any experience in multilingual classrooms, whilst another suggested sharing experiences with other educators as a means of mutual support (See Panzavecchia, 2020).

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*Excerpt 18. More training for educators*

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Training! I have had foreign students in my class for multiple years, and I was not given any training when it came to adopting an MFL (Maltese as a foreign language) program. I did this through my own volition and because I felt that these children needed the opportunity to learn at their own pace and not be involved in the mainstream classes at once.

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*Excerpt 19. Training on how to reach various parents*

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More help in how to reach parents better. We currently have help at school to target parents from Arabic speaking families, but we have no support to reach learners from Chinese families.

Additionally, a substantial number of participants hold that children who cannot communicate in the two national languages require more time outside the classroom, be it during pull-out classes, or during induction courses which are held specifically for non-Maltese children before they are integrated into class. The prevailing sentiment among these educators is a need to fully or partially shift responsibility for these students, advocating induction classes, or their segregation in specialised schools, as a way to resolve the challenges related to linguistic diversity. This scenario presents concerns linked to integration, with students separated from their peers sometimes struggling to access the main curriculum, if too much emphasis is placed on language acquisition above content acquisition (Nilsson & Bunar, 2016).

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*Excerpt 20. Pull-out programs*

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Pull-out programs for Maltese and/or English. All other lessons in mainstream classrooms. I think that support is being given and non-English speaking students are attending induction classes, which is giving a lot of benefits to these students as they are then able to integrate in the mainstream after a few months.

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Excerpt 21. Grouping children in a special school

They need to be grouped in an international school for a long period of time, that is ... more than a year, before attending mainstream schooling. They need to be grouped depending on the level attained after sitting for a formal assessment at national level. All educators teaching in this school need to attend a degree in teaching Maltese and English to multilingual students.

Educators also mentioned the need for peer preparation programs for students in order to foster inclusion and to understand and welcome diversity in class. Another point that emerged strongly was the need for in-class support. Educators believe that the employment of specialised teachers or classroom assistants, trained in culturally and linguistically responsive teaching, would significantly contribute to improving the teaching and learning experience. Other important themes that arose are linked to the need for reduced class sizes and more investment in resources.

One theme which emerged clearly was related to the need for programs which would encourage more parental involvement, since this is believed to be pivotal for academic success (Ariza, 2000; Attard Tonna, Calleja, Galea et al.2017). Respondents also remarked that some parents seem to disregard the host country's languages, focusing solely on their mother tongue when communicating with their offspring.

Excerpt 22. Acquisition of Maltese as a prerequisite

Motivation on a larger scale, even parents are demotivated to speak the language. There should be pressure from the state to enforce the acquisition of Maltese as a prerequisite to working and living here.

A language barrier for migrant learners can arise as a result of a lack of parental involvement. The achievement of this involvement is challenging due to language and cultural barriers, coupled with 'entitlement gaps'. Maltese parents may feel entitled to actively participate in their children's education, while migrant parents may not 'feel empowered enough to do so' (Attard Tonna et al., 2017, pp. 86-87). Ariza (2000) warns against attributing behaviour solely to linguistic or cultural differences. Migrant parents may seem disengaged from their children's education due to unawareness or discomfort with cultural expectations, contrary to typical practices in westernised societies. Additionally, migrants often view language as a crucial connection to their lives and identities (Mazzaferro, 2018) and this connection may carry varied significance across different generations (Little, 2017; Wilson, 2020). Teacher training related to immigrant children's parental involvement is therefore warranted in this situation (Ariza et al., 2019). Parental involvement initiatives should include educational programs focusing on current pedagogy, migrant learner inclusion, eliminating racial intolerance, and promoting diversity.

**5.12. Concluding insights from participants**

At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked to include some final reflections on the situation. 62 participants added their own ideas on their experiences of teaching within multilingual environments. The large majority of these responses was emotionally charged, where it was very evident that participants were feeling 'overwhelmed', 'exhausted', and 'unprepared' in class. Their responses were akin to a cry for help, with some comments containing subtle racial and xenophobic undertones, reflecting an 'us' and 'them' sentiment. These perceptions may be linked to the general feeling which might be prevailing on the Maltese islands related to the large influx of non-Maltese nationals, which has contributed to the country being densely populated, bringing about challenges within the country's infrastructure, education, and healthcare.

Excerpt 23. Inclusion detrimental to Maltese students

This culture of including foreign students within our educational system comes to the detriment of certain Maltese students. One must keep in mind the reality that when a Maltese student goes abroad to a foreign country, the foreign educational facility will not cater for our Maltese speaking student to the detriment of their local student. The Maltese student is left to find private and expensive paid education where the English language is used, while foreign students in Malta receive free education, which comes with parents' expectations, not normally found in their originating countries.

Excerpt 24. Focus on integration

Unless the country makes it mandatory for all workers to have working use of Maltese and English (as seen in countries such as Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Austria etc.), things will never improve. The working class, Maltese included, will continue to be exploited and systemic injustices will persist. Teaching is a political act but unfortunately most teachers I know do not consider it as such. A multilingual classroom should not focus only on inclusion but also on integration. The two aspects work

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together. It should be give and take – wherein one is free to express their culture and beliefs but in an informed manner within this context. We must teach upon the context of a pluralistic society.

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*Excerpt 25. Cultural clashes*

I am sorry to say that some cultures do not fit in our traditional classrooms and children from these countries just run away from class and cause trouble.

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*Excerpt 26. Unrealistic expectations*

It is not fair for us, as Maltese citizens, to be pushed aside to accommodate and include people from different countries and this by no means suggests in any way whatsoever any form of racism on my part. But even as a language, Maltese is losing its value: even Maltese families talk to their children in English, then they come to school not knowing their mother tongue which to me is just disgraceful. We need to support foreign students by all means, but not at the expense of exhausting teachers in trying to figure out how to communicate with them, given the ridiculous workload and pressure and unrealistic expectations coming from those who are in authority that teachers face.

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*Excerpt 27. Taking a huge toll on teachers*

It is taking a huge toll on us teachers, apart from the situation being what it is nowadays, we have to deal with language barriers, adapted work for students who eventually end up doing the same exam paper at the end of the year, code-switching and not being able to do proper Maltese lessons, while it is our native language. We need the situation to change for the better, not everyone keeps closing their eyes in regards to this.

However, notwithstanding perceived challenges, it is important to acknowledge that the situation is not viewed as entirely negative by the participants. A substantial number of educators also voiced their strong beliefs about the benefits of multilingualism and multiculturalism, stating that there is a need to ‘embrace diversity’ since ‘multicultural and multilingual education is beneficial for all’.

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*Excerpt 28. They learn from each other*

The best thing about having multilingual students is that they learn from each other. Moreover, I believe that it helps children to learn to become more diversity-friendly as they grow up.

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*Excerpt 29. An opportunity for growth*

This phenomenon brings many challenges, but it is also an opportunity for growth, and we should support each other to focus on what can be gained from this situation, while supporting our educators who are feeling overwhelmed and helpless at times.

### **5.13. Implications, recommendations, and limitations**

Owing to its geographical position, Malta’s diverse heritage has been shaped significantly by influences from Europe and North Africa. Paradoxically, however, the Maltese exhibit a surprisingly homogeneous identity that has demonstrated a notable resistance to foreign influences and multiculturalism, making a potential shift to a multicultural society ‘slow and difficult’ (Debono, 2021, p. 9). In the words of Fsadni and Pisani (2012, p. 24),

a critical look at Maltese history not only makes a mockery of any notion of some pure ‘natural’ identity or culture, but also draws attention to the transformative nature of Maltese society and the diversity therein. Indeed, 7000 years of emigration, immigration and colonial rule renders any essentialist discourse on what it means to be ‘Maltese’ as nonsense and the ‘threat to the Maltese way of life’ as somewhat ambiguous.

Demographic shifts on the island are happening rapidly, and it is clear that not all people are willing to welcome migrants. Even when they do, they may not be equipped to meet all the needs of the migrants and their families, be they cultural or linguistic (Bezzina & Vassallo, 2019; Scaglione & Caruana, 2018). As a result of the sharp influx of migrants flocking to our islands, the general Maltese perception of multicultural education and multiculturalism is tainted with feelings of ‘mistrust, deep concern and anxiety’ (Bezzina & Vassallo, 2019, p. 214). Maltese people feel that the island is too small to accommodate the present dense population brought about by immigration (Debono, 2021). They also believe that migrants contribute to the strain on the country’s welfare system and exacerbate issues related to crime (European Commission, 2017).

Attitudes towards Third-Country Nationals (TCNs) seem to be more negative compared to those towards migrants from the EU (Debono, 2021). 63% of respondents in a 2017 Eurobarometer survey feel that immigration from outside the EU is a problem rather than an opportunity for the island. In a general opinion survey of the Maltese population conducted by The Faculty of Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta, nearly half of Maltese surveyed (48%) stated that immigrants are more of a burden to the country, while only 16% think that immigrants do more to strengthen the country (Azzopardi, Bonnici, Marmara, 2021).

The Human Rights Directorate 'Turning the Tables' 2021 report finds that barriers encountered in education stem from wider social and attitudinal challenges, in particular 'a lack of cultural knowledge and education, especially among older teachers not used to teaching in a multicultural context and for whom the increased number of migrant learners is a cause for distress and resistance rather than a welcome opportunity for learning and interaction that can ultimately benefit all students' (p. 18). As a result of the lack of support for both students and teachers, educators often perceive the inclusion of migrant students as problematic (Chircop, 2022)

The addition of several other languages in Maltese classrooms 'has put Maltese-English bilingualism out of balance' (Camenzuli et al., 2023, p. 3), as teachers are now finding themselves faced with a situation where being fluent in Maltese and English, and to a lesser extent Italian, is simply not sufficient to meet the requirement of all students in class. The quality of education students receive is significantly influenced by the attitudes of teachers towards diversity (Chircop, 2022). These ideas towards migrant students appear to be 'framed in an "us" and "them" paradigm' (Chircop, 2022, p. 156). Chircop contends that

educators rarely questioned the dominant culture, which positions those who fall within its range of acceptable qualities as insiders, while those deemed different and undesirable as being outsiders, and thus comprehending and embracing diversity within the school context can only be achieved once educators grasp these constructions. (Chircop, 2022, p. 156)

This aligns with the idea that schools, and the country in general, must eradicate discrimination, xenophobia, exclusion, and racism, fostering integration beyond ethnic, cultural, and religious differences (Attard Tonna et al., 2017; European Commission, 2017).

Teachers' views may also point to a lack of adequate training on the subject, especially at a CPD level. Pedagogical training tailored to the needs of migrant students is not offered to educators, except for occasional two-hour sessions of continuing professional development that some schools may have organised. As a result, schools are predominantly left to their own devices, and formulate their own policies based on what they believe works best for their specific context (Chircop, 2022). The participating educators believe that teachers should be taught about current research on language practices, which would in turn legitimise their naturally occurring plurilingual practices in class. However, the results of this study also contradictorily indicate a lack of actively pursued self-sought professional development.

A large number of participating educators believe that pull-out classes and well-organised induction hubs may offer the best solution to the problem, arguing that migrant children and their families should be obligated to learn Maltese and English before being allowed to join regular classes. This indicates that notwithstanding the fact that a number of respondents seem to understand the need to shift towards plurilingual pedagogies, they still advocate monolingual approaches which align with a subtractive bilingualism/multilingualism model (Baker, 2011).

The findings highlight the need for innovative pedagogies, including cross-linguistic strategies such as García's (2009) concept of transglossia, based on the interrelation of languages within a globalised society, with an emphasis on more authentic opportunities to apply concepts learned, and where children can actually put language to use. Ironically, Maltese teachers are still hesitant about how and when to use naturally occurring, fluid language practices legitimately in their classrooms, and how they can judiciously utilise these strategies as pedagogical tools for the benefit of all the students in their care. In this respect, the participants recognise the need for formal guidelines and training on how to support students struggling with Malta's two official languages.

### **6.1. Pedagogical implications**

The main findings of this research focus on educators' experiences and challenges related to linguistic diversity within their multilingual classrooms. The participants voiced their concerns related to communication difficulties and a lack of training programs for educators. These concerns may stimulate change in Maltese education systems, with the aim of improving the experience of both educators and students. This can be accomplished through innovative teaching approaches, such as cross-linguistic

strategies, programs promoting the preservation of the Maltese language, and initiatives highlighting the global significance of the English language. It also involves creating school environments that support, value, and celebrate children's cultural identities and linguistic heritage. Additionally, the findings indicate that educators should have greater authority in decision-making related to professional training, curricula, syllabi, and teaching methods to cater for the needs of all students under their care.

In this respect, following the results of this study, professional development and consultation sessions will be developed and offered to educators within Maltese state schools in an attempt to address these issues and to improve aspects of bilingual and multilingual primary education in Malta, and possibly beyond. The proposed training sessions have been driven by the views of the participants and are by no means all encompassing. It is therefore important to point out that training would merely be a starting point and hopefully a catalyst for change, and that therefore, additional research on the topic, together with the development of further professional development sessions, is highly recommended.

## **6.2. Limitations**

Research focusing on multilingual classrooms and fluid language practices is on the increase; however, it is interesting to note that there are few studies which specifically relate to teachers' perspectives and views on language pedagogy. The aim of this study is also to bridge this gap in the literature, particularly at a local level. This is being done within the limitations of the study, keeping in mind that, owing to time constraints and the number of participants, the drawn conclusions are not representative of all Maltese educators. However, notwithstanding the limitations of this research, the results are indicative of some of the challenges that educators in Malta are currently facing. Additionally, the participants' viewpoints may be used as a valid and significant resource to recommend further studies and make suggestions for future implications. This research may also serve as a means of supporting educators who may be going through the same experiences, as they realise they share common challenges related to bilingual and multilingual settings. Ultimately, the insights gleaned from this study can be selectively implemented to offer recommendations to educational institutions, policy-making bodies, and programs for initial teacher training and professional development, aiming to enhance practice in culturally and linguistically responsive teaching.

## **6.3. Conclusion**

This research focuses on the experiences of Maltese educators in view of increasingly diverse student populations as a result of demographic shifts on the island. The results of the study present implications related to the Maltese educational system, pedagogy in multilingual classrooms, and teacher training. Fluid language practices are naturally and spontaneously occurring within bilingual and multilingual environments; however, educators need to be supported in ways which would enable them to legitimately harness cross-linguistic practices as pedagogy. This requires training programs and clear recommendations that would empower them to employ multilingual pedagogies advantageously, as opposed to viewing them as a last resort (Beres, 2015; Chircop, 2022; García et al., 2017; García & Wei, 2014; Milton, 2011, 2016; Milton & Panzavecchia 2019a).

The participating educators share common concerns related to challenges faced by the teaching profession and educational system as a result of changing populations on the island. These unprecedented demands are being addressed by the Maltese education authorities, and as a result, the island is currently undergoing a paradigm shift in education (Panzavecchia & Little, 2019; 2020). This is highlighted by the redesigning of policies and documents focusing on mitigating challenges brought about by increasingly superdiverse classrooms (Vertovec, 2007), and through initiatives that support the integration of learners into mainstream education. However, the results of this study also highlight the fact that educators are reluctant and do not feel adequately trained and guided to support all the children in their care (Ariza, et al., 2019; Farrugia, 2017; Scaglione & Caruana, 2018). The findings presented in this study evidence a teacher workforce which is open and willing to improve practices if given appropriate support and training. Such upskilling may ease any ambivalence educators may feel when implementing multilingual language strategies in a natural and effective manner (Panzavecchia, 2023).

The participants also expressed concerns on potential language loss, advocating for an increased focus on preserving the Maltese language within a continuously expanding multilingual community. Furthermore, there is a demand for additional investment in human resources and culturally inclusive, multilingual material, which would ensure that every child's linguistic and cultural identity is not only acknowledged but also celebrated. Additionally, this research shows that there is no one-size-fits-all solution, and the particular context of each specific school, together with the classroom intake and population of each individual year, needs to be taken into consideration when designing programs.

These proposals should serve as a point of departure, but require adaptations based on the individual requirements of each educator and on further research in the area. The proposed professional development sessions would be developed based on the educators' feedback together with the most recent research on the subject. However, they are not aimed at providing a general solution for all, but to suggest ways by which educators and students may be equitably supported. In addition, teachers should be trusted with more agency, given opportunities to share examples of good practice and be encouraged and supported to carry out further research related to linguistically diverse classrooms. Finally, the results of this study hold salient implications for training at Initial Teacher and Continuous Professional Development levels, which needs to focus on shifting demographics on the island, thus requiring the development of a teacher workforce that is more culturally and linguistically responsive to meet the demands of Malta's increasingly diverse classrooms.

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## Appendix A

### Teaching within multilingual environments questionnaire

Dear Educator,

Owing to unparalleled and rapidly changing demographics on the island, Malta finds itself shifting from bilingualism to multilingualism, effectively becoming a cultural and linguistic melting pot of sorts. This state of affairs is also mirrored in our schools through the arrival of a number of non-Maltese children speaking a variety of different languages. This has inevitably impacted our schools both culturally and linguistically and is the source of both enrichment and challenge. One such challenge sees Maltese teachers increasingly faced with having to teach young students who do not speak either English or Maltese.

The Institute for Education is attempting to address such challenges through gathering data from educators related to their experiences of multilingual classrooms, and their perceived needs in this respect. The aim of this study is to shed more light on the current situation, and to eventually offer schools guidance and practical training and consultation sessions tailor-made to specific individual needs on how to mitigate challenges related to linguistically diverse classrooms.

In order for this process to run smoothly, and for the project to succeed, we would require the input of educators themselves, therefore we would appreciate if you could kindly take the time to complete this questionnaire. All data in the questionnaire is anonymous and cannot be trailed back to you as an individual. This questionnaire will take you about 10 - 15 minutes to complete.

Please answer the following questions based on your experiences and perspectives.

1. Please state your current employment status.
  - Class Teacher
  - Supply Teacher
  - Learning Support Educator
  - Senior Leadership member
  
2. Teaching experience
  - 0 - 5 years
  - 5 - 10 years
  - 10 - 20 years
  - over 20 years
  
3. What is the year group you are currently teaching?
  - Early years
  - Junior years
  
4. Please state your highest academic qualification
  - O' Levels
  - A' Levels
  - Diploma
  - Bachelor's degree
  - Master's degree
  - Doctoral degree
  
5. What do you consider to be your first language (mother tongue)? (The language you feel most comfortable communicating in).
  - Maltese
  - English
  
6. What do you consider to be your second language?
  - Maltese
  - English
  
7. How do you feel about your proficiency in the second language?
  - Very proficient
  - Quite proficient
  - Not proficient

8. Do you speak any other languages apart from Maltese/English?
  - Yes
  - No
9. If yes, which other language/s do you speak?
10. Are you presently teaching children with diverse language backgrounds (children having different first languages/mother tongues, other than English and Maltese)?
  - Yes
  - No
11. Have you ever received training related to teaching in multilingual classroom environments?
  - Yes
  - No
12. If yes, please specify what kind of training was received.
13. What are the main benefits of teaching in multilingual classroom environments? (You may choose more than one answer).
  - Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity: In a multilingual classroom, students and teachers are exposed to diverse cultures and backgrounds. This exposure fosters cultural awareness, empathy, and sensitivity, promoting a more inclusive and respectful learning environment.
  - Enhanced Language Skills: Exposure to multiple languages in the classroom can significantly improve students' language skills.
  - Improved Communication Skills: In a multilingual classroom, students often need to find creative ways to communicate effectively, especially if they share limited language proficiency.
  - Global Perspective: Exposure to multiple languages and cultures in the classroom helps students develop a more global perspective. They can understand global issues, appreciate diversity, and collaborate with people from different linguistic backgrounds more effectively.
  - Increased Empathy and Inclusivity: Students in a multilingual classroom learn to be more empathetic towards their peers, especially those who are learning a new language.
  - Positive Teacher Development: Teaching in a multilingual classroom challenges educators to develop innovative teaching strategies and cater for diverse learning needs. It can lead to professional growth and improve the overall quality of teaching.
14. What are the greatest challenges related to teaching in multilingual classroom environments? (You may choose more than one answer).
  - Communication Barriers: Language barriers can hinder effective communication between students and teachers.
  - Language Proficiency Variability: Students in a multilingual classroom may have varying levels of proficiency in different languages. It can be challenging for teachers to cater for individual needs and ensure that all students are appropriately challenged and supported.
  - Curriculum Adaptation: Creating a curriculum that accommodates students from diverse linguistic backgrounds can be complex.
  - Limited Teaching Resources: Finding appropriate teaching materials and resources for each language represented in the classroom can be a daunting task. The availability of textbooks, educational materials, and language-specific resources may be limited.
  - Teacher Training and Professional Development: Not all teachers may be adequately prepared to teach in multilingual classrooms. Training and professional development programs focused on strategies for teaching in diverse linguistic settings are essential but not always readily available.
  - Classroom Management: Multilingual classrooms can be dynamic and diverse, which may require different approaches to classroom management. Teachers need to establish an inclusive and respectful environment where all students feel valued and engaged.
  - Parent and Community Involvement: Involving parents and the community in a multilingual classroom can be challenging if language barriers exist.
15. How many children are there in your class?
  - Less than 10
  - 10 - 20
  - Over 20

16. What is the percentage of non-Maltese/migrant children in your class?
  - 0 - 10%
  - 11 - 20%
  - 21 - 40%
  - 41 - 60%
  - 61 - 80%
  - 81 - 100%
17. What are the languages spoken by the children in your class?
18. What strategies do you employ to address language barriers and promote effective communication among multilingual students? (You may choose more than one answer).
  - Multilingual Resources: Providing instructional materials, handouts, and resources in multiple languages spoken by students in the classroom.
  - Culturally Relevant Content: Incorporating diverse and culturally relevant content that reflects the backgrounds and experiences of the students.
  - Multilingual Support: Utilising multilingual support, such as parents, other students, and/or colleagues to act as interpreters to help facilitate communication between teachers and students who speak different languages
  - Scaffolded Instruction: Breaking down complex tasks or concepts into smaller, manageable steps. Providing clear instructions and offering support as students progress through each step.
  - Language Buddies: Pairing students who speak different languages as language buddies to support each other in learning the target language and share their respective languages.
  - Technology Integration: Utilising language learning apps, online translation tools, and language-specific software to facilitate communication and language development.
  - Flexible Assessment Methods: Offering a variety of assessment methods that allow students to demonstrate their understanding in different ways, such as presentations, projects, or written assignments.
  - Culturally Responsive Teaching: Developing lessons and activities that integrate students' cultural backgrounds and experiences, creating a more inclusive and familiar learning environment.
  - Professional Development: Engaging in self-sought research and seeking professional development for teachers to enhance skills in addressing linguistic diversity, cultural responsiveness, and effective communication strategies.
  - Encouraging Language Use: Creating opportunities for students to use their native languages (including code-switching) in classroom discussions and activities, fostering a sense of identity and belonging.
19. What strategies do you employ to teach the children in your class? (You may choose more than one option).
  - Translation
  - Code-switching
  - Language groups
  - Visual aids
  - Multilingual resources
  - Culturally relevant content
  - Language buddies
  - Multilingual support (colleagues, students, parents)
  - Technology integration
  - Flexible assessment methods
20. Do you feel confident about employing these strategies?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Not sure
21. Do you incorporate culturally and linguistically relevant materials and resources in your teaching? If yes, please provide examples.
22. What is your understanding of code switching, and do you encourage it in your classroom? Why or why not?
23. How do you feel about the use of multiple languages to support learning among your multilingual students?

24. What are your thoughts on using monolingual approaches (strictly using the target language/one language) for teaching multilingual students?
25. What kind of support do you feel that non-Maltese children require to help them learn within a multilingual environment?
26. What kind of support do you feel you require to help you teach within a multilingual environment?
27. Are there any additional comments or insights you would like to share regarding teaching multilingual students?

Thank you for participating in this questionnaire!

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