Formative assessment in online teaching and learning during the first COVID–19 Malta lockdown — Educators' voices, types of practices and users

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Abstract

School closure in March 2020 necessitated a rethinking of the modus operandi in compulsory education as the unpreparedness for the first closure was a crisis management situation due to the huge lacuna in class educators' and school leaders' training. Nonetheless, educators tried what they knew best — transporting the traditional classroom approaches online. Understandably, their world has been shaken and with their only safety net being their class comfort zone of practice, this was expected. With the lack of training, the use of formative assessment (FA) within such modality has declined significantly. Further analysis into this decline reveals the use of two types of practices — teacher centredness (one–way traffic) in asynchronous sessions, and shared participation between the teacher and the student (two–way traffic) in real–time encounters, and four types of users — regressive, consistent, progressive and unwavering/resistors.

Keywords

Formative Assessment (FA), online teaching and learning, synchronous and asynchronous learning, teaching effectiveness and efficiency

Introduction

This paper portrays Maltese educators' views across all sectors about their embedding, or not, of formative assessment (FA) in online teaching and learning during the first COVID–19 lockdown in Malta, March to June 2020. In so doing, this study aims at not only understanding the educators' position but also at empathizing with them for better support through my academic work and professional positionality as Education Officer (EO) for Curriculum. Hence,

the purpose is threefold – to inform, to assist, and to enrich. The study aims to inform through knowledge–sharing with the outside community through public ethnography (Vannini & Heather, 2013) and with policymakers to perhaps consider educators' voices when drafting the National Assessment Policy and in updates of the current major policies pertaining to the compulsory education sector. Assistance is intended for the Assessment for Learning (AfL) Malta team in its efforts to promote further the AfL philosophy by providing it with local evidence on where the focus needs to be. Enriching will occur through the additional contribution of new knowledge from the Maltese context to both the local and international literature.

The study presented here extends a previous one published in the *Malta Review for Educational Research – Special Edition – December 2020*, whose focus was at understanding and giving a first insight into the frequency of use of FA (Said Pace, 2020). Contrastingly, here, a more in–depth insight into how teachers used the FA strategies and their justification of such use is intended.

The structure of this paper consists of a brief introduction to the Maltese educational system, a discussion of the related literature and the theoretical framework, the research design, the discussion of the findings, the implications and the recommendations.

The Maltese educational system

Malta offers a triad system of school choice in compulsory education as parents can choose between the State, Catholic Church, and the Private Independent sectors. The student cohort accounts to 60% in the State, 30% in the non–state Secretariat for Catholic Church and 10% in the Private Independent sector (National Statistics Office, 2018).

Formal summative end–of–year exams for the state sector start in Year 4 (8 years old), whereas in the other sectors there might be some variations of this. Half–yearly exams[1] have been replaced by a system of continuous assessment (CA) since the introduction of the learning outcomes framework (LOF) (Bugeja, 2018a, 2018b; Unknown, 2018). This change to a developmental approach from a prescriptive one emanated from the recommendations of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), (Ministry for Education & Employment, 2012), a binding document for all sectors. Differences emerge in the implementation phase of the LOF as the state opted for a gradual process and for using the

guideline support documents issued by the respective Education Officers following a consultation process (Bugeja, 2018b), while the non–state sector has more elbow room into when they start implementing it, with which year groups and which documents to follow — the supporting documents or the original broad documents.[2] The removal of half–yearly exams, the introduction of a more balanced assessment system, and the implementation of the LOF are part of a much larger reform aimed at emphasizing and offering a higher quality education for all by equipping learners with the necessary skills and competences to become lifelong learners thus leading them to be active and employable citizens. However, this huge reform consisting of restructuring physical buildings by creating new learning spaces and re–culturing of the learning ethos (Shilling, 1992) never included this unprecedented pandemic situation. Therefore, COVID–19 has shaken the trajectory of the Ministry for Education (MFED) and necessitated several re–adjustments to ensure, or at least attempt to offer, quality education in the online modality.

Malta's response to online teaching and learning

Legal Notices 41 and 77 of 2020 by The Superintendent of Public Health (2020a, 2020b) ordered school closures with students ending six months out of school (Demarco, 2017). Some students, either because of their vulnerability or otherwise, have been out of school even in the subsequent scholastic year as students' attendance was left as a prerogative of the parents, without any legal responsibility to send children to school. Those deciding to keep their children at home had to shoulder the responsibility for their education as teachers in state classes were not obliged to follow on the work of students who remained at home (McNamara, 2020). The grave consequences of such a decision will be borne by the future generation and the country as the loss in learning will be huge (Guttentag, 2020), especially when considering that 'roughly half of the absenteeism is unjustified' (Unknown, 2020). Students' disappearance is just one factor of the teachers' frustrations (Gewertz, 2020). Others include the crisis management approach adopted by the Department to upskill the teaching staff and to inform parents and students on the way forward during the first lockdown (Camilleri, 2020). Certainly, informing parents on their role within such modality requires further attention by schools and training institutions. In response to these unprecedented times, the initial phase disruption, as Fullan et al. (2020) refer to it, was characterized by several requests and provisions for support in the form of webinars for all stakeholders (Aquilina, 2020; Grixti, 2020; Seguna, 2020). According to Abaci et al. (2020, p.

1), "this unprecedented need for quick support" was to be expected given the sudden shift to online teaching without preparation (Hodges et al., 2020). The webinars offered by the Directorate for Digital Literacy and Transversal Skills (DDLTS) included, amongst others, training on the use of MS Teams (setting a class, assigning a task, the options available when correcting a task and security controls amongst others), Flipgrid, Nearpod, J2E and JIT5, Mentimeter, Screen recording, PowerPoint with voiceover, MS Forms and Padlet.

In each session, the FA features were pointed out; however, to my knowledge, there was not one specifically on making the best use of FA in the online modality neither for the educator nor for the student. Attempts were made by the AfL (Malta) team through their social media presence.

Such novel circumstances demanded a learning–by–doing approach (Newcomb, 2020), which unearthed the level of digital literacy and accessibility in Malta. Lack of technological provisions among students in terms of both devices and connectivity were identified and attended to (The Office of the Permanent Secretary, 2020). Contemporarily, resource packs were delivered on a fortnightly period to the homes of those students to mitigate their disadvantages in comparison to their peers who could connect and follow the learning online (Cachia, 2020c). Sadly, such a huge and good initiative did not necessarily translate into the full usage of these resources. Such measure aligns, and responds, well with the UNICEF's[3] caveat that "COVID–19 has disproportionately affected the poorer and the most vulnerable" (Dreesen et al., 2020). Additionally, MFED has worked tirelessly to create and populate a website, https://teleskola.mt, with a plethora of lessons covering almost all the syllabi for the students' continued self–paced learning (Bugeja, 2020), but this could reach only those who had access. This group was also recipient to other modes of online teaching and learning experiences as indicated in the findings about the types of practices: some students were exposed between two/three times per week to daily synchronous sessions while others were exposed to a varying frequency of asynchronous methods. These were in the form of recorded lessons and/or PowerPoints uploaded on school management systems, or instructions and tasks communicated either by email or social media groups.

Across all these new practices, educators refrained from carrying out assessment for formal purposes as no report was sent to parents about the continuous and summative assessment. Hence, this created a huge paradox

because it kept teaching and learning separate from assessment. Implications of this decision saw middle and secondary students across various school sectors without summative assessments and lack of feedback on their continuous and summative assessments. Consequently, formative assessment remained the only type of assessment which could have been capitalized on, hence the reason for this study to investigate the educators' positionality about it.

Theoretical framework

Behaviourism, cognitivism and constructionism are three main theories of in-class teaching and learning. The first one reminds us of Freire's (1970, 2000) banking model of education which views learners as empty slates. Constructionism, in contrast, views students as partners in knowledge creation, thereby not ignoring the effect of the environment (Vinod, 2011). FA is precisely about this, the meaningful interaction between the partners in learning, be they teacher-to-student and/or student-to-student. Since FA does not limit itself to investigating the student's thinking processes, but it elaborates on that through dialogic talk to uncover and expand on them (Lamb & Little, 2016), it parts from cognitivism.

Since the online environment is not a replica of the traditional teaching environment, Siemens (2005, 2017) presents another learning theory – connectivism – whose need emanated from the knowledge-age in the digital world – an age which is not catered for by any of the theories mentioned above. Connectivism is interested in the 'know-how' rather than the 'know-to-do', a shift to "the skills and competences needed by the students to make sense of the knowledge" (Said Pace, 2020, p. 251). This new theory fitted the purpose of remote connection and learning as otherwise "online teaching and learning would [remain] poorly defined and theorized" (Harasim, 2012, p. 87). Since connectivism facilitates online collaborative learning (OCL) by focusing on knowledge building and creation, (Harasim, 2012; Skills, 2009), its rationale aligns with FA practices in online teaching and learning. Way before the pandemic, Black et al. (2003) and Wiliam (2011a, 2011b) sustained that including FA in distance-learning platforms is not an option but a necessity if teachers want to register the significant learning gains advocated for the physical class. Consequently, an e-social constructionism system must be aimed for.

Literature review

This section focuses on three main themes – teacher–centeredness in FA, the teachers' emotional challenges within the online environment, and the role of parents in this new modality – because they are the key areas in the findings.

The teacher's and student's roles in formative assessment

FA has strong research–based evidence for its impact on student achievement, if used well (Black et al., 2004; Black & Wiliam, 1998a, 1998b). Amongst the various definitions for FA the most cited one is that by Black and Wiliam (2009) highlighting the role of teachers, learners and peers during the learning and more importantly, what they should do if the actual learning does not align with the intended learning (Marzano, 1998). Simplistically put, Wiliam (2017) stresses that "assessment is a procedure for making inferences about learning" (p. 397). This is done through the implementation of the five principles developed by Wiliam & Leahy (2015, p. 11) that have been translated into six FA in–class strategies as demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Five FA principles translated into six FA in–class strategies

Principle	FA In-Class Strategies
1. Clarifying, sharing and understanding learning intentions and success criteria	Learning intention/goal/objective and success criteria
2. Engineering effective discussions, tasks, and activities that elicit evidence of learning	Effective questioning and meaningful dialogue
3. Providing feedback that moves learning forward	Oral and written feedback
4. Activating students as resources for one another	Peer assessment
5. Activating students as owners of their learning	Self-assessment

Several studies by Klinger et al. (2012); Jonsson et al. (2015); Darling–Hammond (2017); Said Pace (2018) and Giordimaina (2020) have consistently shown that teachers' assessment literacy levels need to improve by shifting from a teacher–centred to a student–centred system. Making this transition takes time as, before building the capacity in the approach to be taken, the issue of beliefs and perceptions must be tackled, two matters which "are never a finished process because humans are continually in the process of changing and becoming" (Fives & Buehl, 2012, p. 490). Considering FA the responsibility of

the teacher would reaffirm the perception that students should not be involved in their learning (Black et al., 2006), a position which Wiliam (2011b) is strongly against as he sustains, and rightly so, that students should be responsible for their learning. Students not taking ownership of their role in assessment might explain why the state primary school teachers in a study by Said Pace (2018) had argued that the success, or otherwise, of FA depends on the students' dispositions towards learning.

If students are not explained their role in FA in a manner relative to their age, how can educators then claim that it does not work with a certain segment of students? It is within this contextual scenario that the Maltese teachers have found themselves when they had to shift to the online teaching and learning environment. Consequently, the excessive control by, and the students' expectations towards, the teacher have led to a feeling of loss on both sides because independent learning was not taken care of when still in class. In fact, the teachers in the study by Busuttil and Farrugia (2020) had recommended the need for independent learning as the pandemic has brought to the fore the degree of independent learning among students. Having the right attitude is extremely important in both environments but pivotal in online learning (OECD, 2021). Therefore, being away from the physical classroom, especially for those students who were highly dependent on the teacher, has led to high levels of frustration which could be mitigated to a certain degree by the synchronous (real-time) sessions. The decline in their frustration could be explained by the sense of immediacy in synchronous learning as the feedback is given the minute it is needed. Timeliness in learning is crucial (Hattie, 2012, 2014), meaning that in synchronous sessions the feedback is more effective because it happens in the moment that it is needed. With both face-to-face and online asynchronous learning, there is always a lag of time between the submission of the work, the correction and the feedback. In fact, Liberman et al. (2020) point out that in asynchronous teaching and learning, teachers and students are separated by space and time. Also, the use of certain applications like Quizizz and Kahoot will not provide appropriate feedback as it is limited to just a right or wrong answer. Hence, if hinge questions (Barton, 2018) are not used to control the guessing element, than the feedback would neither be formative nor bespoke according to the students' thinking, as made evident during a synchronous conversation, which makes it less effective. Nonetheless, there are digital assessment tools which fill this gap,[4] so what is important for educators is not the use of any tool for the sake of including a digital resource, but their consideration of whether

the chosen tool contributes to the assessment process during the learning. This aligns with Darling-Hammond and Kini's (2020) argument that technology must be in support of learning, including its in-built assessment forms. Learning can be supported if the in-built features allow for verbal and written feedback to assist the students to move forward in their learning (Wiliam & Leahy, 2015).

It is very welcoming to note that Busuttil and Farrugia (2020) found that their participants prefer synchronous sessions, which augurs well for FA. The positive effect of the synchronous modality has been highlighted in a UNICEF report by Sachs-Israel et al. (2021, p. 22) where they state:

> online learning facilitates synchronous completion of tasks and submission of assignment can be very positive for students. Coursework is reviewed quickly by teachers, who can also receive students' critical feedback in real time and student allows simultaneous access to the teachers' feedback … .

Furthermore, the report acknowledges the challenges faced by parents, educators, the school and the education authorities and stresses the need for "clear guidelines for the implementation of FA" (p. 35) and a clear explanation of the "roles of various social agents in relation to FA" (p. 37). Establishing the expectations is important for a harmonious collaboration, as certain habits need to be developed and sustained in the e-world like e-tech habits to follow emails and to send announcements, upskill digital literacy, controlling health and ergonomic issues and dealing with students' low response rate (Deidun, 2020; Directorate for Digital Literacy and Transversal Skills, 2020; Gupta, 2017).

Online teaching and learning (OTL)

OTL is an overarching term for different learning modalities which take place over the e-world (Friesen, 2014; Stern, 2020). Synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (at the students' pace but within a controlled environment) are the most commonly used modalities, thus offering a blended approach to learning (European Commission Directorate for General Education, 2020). The former scenario offers the possibility to interact in a similar way to the physical class while the recorded lessons delay the interaction and consequently, the students' actions on the teachers' suggestions are delayed too. Awareness of such variations places teachers to be "proactive evaluators of whether the ingredients that will be used are appropriate for online consumption" (Sims et

al., 2002, p. 36). In line with this, Huong and Ki Au (2020) report that with the variety of measures that have been adopted by countries to manage exams and assessment, it is a challenge for educators to "select the appropriate tools", hence their emphasis on the need to strengthen the digital FA capacities of educators when re-opening educational systems. Therefore, a sound understanding of how FA should be practised in the physical world is essential if they are to analyse and adapt the best "assessment methods for online delivery" (Berridge et al., 2012, p. 68). It is imperative to have this knowledge, as educators regard online teaching as of inferior quality despite this not being supported by research (Hodges et al., 2020).

Teachers' emotions

Aiming at increasing students' achievement is the core business of teachers and schools. Conscious of this fact within the uncharted territory brought about by the pandemic, teachers' emotional well-being has been immediately affected (Grech & Grech, 2020), with the most common emotional state being that of frustration (Busuttil & Farrugia, 2020). In this study, the same feeling has resurfaced as the results in the discussion section will show. In the UK, teachers were similarly affected by the COVID situation, showing high stress levels including exhaustion and burnout (Beswick, 2020), which could well be resulting from the multifaceted complexities of being thrown in a never-imagined work scenario (Newcomb, 2020). The new environment threatened the teachers' job efficacy due to their lack of confidence in online digital technology for teaching and learning (Yeigh & Lynch, 2020) and trying to import lessons from a world which does not fit neatly into the newly operating one, (Fofaria, 2020), which has led them into a survival mode state (Gewertz, 2020). Such emotional state should concern societies, and Beswick (2020) warns us to take care of our teachers as without the educational service, countries would be grounded. An example of this is the recent industrial dispute in Malta to grant state school teachers the possibility to work two days remotely following the spike in the cases after Christmas (Farrugia, 2021; Sansone, 2021). Ensuring success in the new way of operation requires a stronger collaboration and supportive systems between schools and families where both parties look on each other as partners (Thompson et al., 2014).

Parents as partners

Parents want the best for their children; however, their definition of best might not necessarily be acting in the children's best interests when it comes to the curricular experience. Understandably, although parents may be educators of content knowledge, they lack the pedagogical knowledge and expertise on the best way for students to learn and on the best way to reach students' diverse needs and abilities. In view of this dearth, the call for a strong partnership between school educators and parents is crucial, now more than ever, so they will not unintentionally hinder the learning process. Parental engagement has always been important but in the online environment it has become crucial, especially in early childhood and for the most vulnerable students on the learning continuum (Sachs–Israel et al., 2021). Therefore, as Compton (2016, p. 53) stresses, "communication is vital" for a mutual understanding and for a fruitful online learning experience (McCarthy & Wolfe, 2020).

Research design

Aiming at understanding and identifying a phenomenon to empathize and support, thick descriptions of data are the fittest for the purpose (Cohen et al., 2018), thus ensuring quality in qualitative research (Tracy, 2013). This marker was attained through a balanced set of closed and open–ended questions in a web–based questionnaire. The latter type of questions allows a degree of participant–centredness as their input is not conditioned by pre–set statements (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Greener, 2011), whilst the former facilitates the processing and analysis of the data.

Voluntary sampling through purposive invitation by the Department's Information Management Unit (IMU) within the Ministry For Education (MFED) via an email shot to all iLearn account users, and the snowball effect on social media were used for the participants' recruitment. Permission was sought and granted from the Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employment for the State Sector, The Secretariat for Catholic Education, and the respective Heads of School within the independent sector. Additional support through advertising of the research on the Malta Union of Teachers' (MUT) website was provided (Malta Union of Teachers, 2020).

Key findings and discussion

In total, 385 primary and secondary school educators from all the sectors participated in the research, constituting 214 secondary school educators and 171 primary sector educators. The predominant representation of the secondary school educators was surprising as support in FA has been present for more years in the primary. Therefore, having so many voices from this cycle of compulsory education is a first for Malta. Each sector was represented by approximately the same national quota of student percentage population – 61% (state), 28% (church) and 11% (private–independent sector). Overall, a female voice dominated as the Maltese teaching cohort includes 86% female educators within the primary in contrast to 64% in the secondary (European Commission, 2019).

Table 2 and 3 illustrate the frequency of FA practice prior to and during the COVID–19 Malta lockdown. The data should not be interpreted as the same category of people having decreased their practice but overall, as there are some educators who have increased their frequency.

Table 2: Frequency of FA practice pre–Covid–19

Frequency of FA FA Practice	Pre-COVID-19	Primary	Secondary
Yes, daily	221	101	120
No	28	16	12
Sometimes, twice or thrice a week	136	54	82

Table 3: Frequency of FA practice during Covid–19

Frequency of FA FA Practice	COVID-19	Primary	Secondary
Yes, daily	120	42	78
No	74	39	35
Sometimes, twice or thrice a week	163	74	89

The sharp decline in the use of FA practices relates mostly to the teachers' unpreparedness for this modality of teaching in that their comfort zone was heavily threatened. Since frequent users of FA had to learn how to teach online, it could be that they reduced their practice to *sometimes* to allow time to experiment with the new digital tools. This could explain the decrease in the daily use and the increase in the occasional use. A study by Webb and Jones (2009) on the effect of training on the implementation of AfL found three types of teachers – "trialling, integrating and embedding" (p. 170). Similarly, in this study, the change in the practice could be categorised in four types of practices: **regressive, consistent, progressive and unwavering/resistors**. Definitions of each are as follows:

- **Regressive** – those who have reduced their frequency practice.
- **Consistent** – those who maintained the same frequency of practice of implementation.
- **Progressive** – those who ventured and increased their frequency of practice.
- **Unwavering** – those who never used it and remain adamant about the lack of need to include it.

Variances in this type of practice amongst the primary educators, irrespective of the sector, are given in the Table 4 below:

Table 4: Insight into the frequency of FA practice by primary school educators before and during COVID–19

Frequency of FA Practice	Frequency Pre-COVID-19	Frequency During COVID-19		
		Yes, daily	Sometimes, twice or thrice a week	No
Yes, daily	101	35	45	21
Sometimes, twice or thrice a week	54	7	29	18
No	16	0	0	16

Translating the figures in Table 4 in terms of percentages leads to the situation illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5: Insight into the percentages of the frequency of FA practice by primary school educators before and during COVID–19

Frequency of FA Practice	Frequency Pre-COVID-19	Frequency During COVID-19		
		Yes, daily	Sometimes, twice or thrice a week	No
Yes, daily	59%	20.5%	26.3%	12.3%
Sometimes, twice or thrice a week	32%	4.1%	17.0%	10.5%
No	9%	0.0%	0.0%	9.4%

Both Table 4 and 5 clearly show that almost two–thirds of the participants were engaging in FA practices prior to COVID–19 which, albeit quite positive, indicates that students of the remaining educators had less exposure to such assessment mode. Consequently, this begs the question: should quality be a matter of luck in terms of with whom the teacher happens to be? The colour–coded part illustrates the percentage rate of the types of practices – regressive represented by the red boxes, consistent – by the orange ones, the green ones including the progressives with an increase in the frequency, and the unwavering ones marked in grey. A similar picture is seen across the secondary educators as portrayed in Tables 6 and 7 below. However, secondary education educators appear to have been considerably more engaged in FA practices during COVID–19. Of secondary school educators, 9.3% are progressive when compared to 4.1% of primary school educators, and 47.7% of secondary school educators compared to 37.5% of primary school educators are consistent. This is all the more surprising in view of support in FA having been present for more years in the primary. This finding would certainly warrant further research in the possible reasons for this.

Table 6: Insight into the frequency of FA practice by secondary school educators before and during COVID–19

Frequency of FA Practice	Frequency Pre-COVID-19	Frequency During COVID-19		
		Yes, daily	Sometimes, twice or thrice a week	No
Yes, daily	120	58	45	17
Sometimes, twice or thrice a week	82	20	44	18
No	12	0	0	12

Table 7: Insight into the percentages of the frequency of FA practice by secondary school educators before and during COVID–19

Frequency of FA Practice	Frequency Pre-COVID-19	Frequency During COVID-19		
		Yes, daily	Sometimes, twice or thrice a week	No
Yes, daily	120	58	45	17
Sometimes, twice or thrice a week	82	20	44	18
No	12	0	0	12

A possible justification for the regressors and consistent users' frequency of FA practice as well as the progressive use of FA strategies could be the lack of training prior to the pandemic in the use of FA in online environments, as highlighted by some of the comments obtained in open–ended answers as shown in Table 8. Some of those who attended training, 77%, might have been more creative and dared to explore further the strategies of FA within this context. These could include the consistent and progressive users, as they could have seen the facilities provided by the tools as either more appealing or they may have tried them, and found them well received by the students.

Therefore, the training had to reach two aims – getting educators familiar with the digital tools through an overview of what was possible and then using

that same tool to foster assessment procedures. According to the teachers, two-hour sessions were not enough, even though there were a multitude of sessions which could have been taken. It could be that the emergency created additional demands on the stressed and exhausted teachers, as they had to concurrently manage lesson preparation adapted for online learning, their training, practicing the new tools learnt, and their personal lives. Educators stressed that training during professional development sessions and school development planning needs to be more relevant to today's needs. This is an important point and calls for an inductive approach to in-school professional training; however, to this end, schools must be given more autonomy.

Within the local context where the summative procedures were put on hold, the FA should have taken unprecedented prominence and importance. Comments by educators from both cycles of education, as per Table 8, affirm the need for further training in the two areas. Also, the training needs not only to tackle the practical use of the tool but also to allow time for discussions to tackle misconceptions, mostly from secondary school educators, about the "the effectiveness of live lessons": "once COVID is over, there will not be any need for online teaching as it is tedious"; "not comfortable going online with part of the group"; "no privacy to my teaching"; "it is hard to use FA online, especially questions and discussions [due] to less interaction". Asynchronously, there is delayed interaction, and the effectiveness of FA is not instant, but it can still be effective. If the impact of FA is questioned on the level of interactivity, then for synchronous sessions this should not be a concern as the interaction is live unless the teacher is adopting a one-way traffic where the 'Power of the I' dominates. This has featured in statements like:

I ask a lot of questions.

I give a lot of feedback.

I explain the learning intention, provide constant feedback and I scaffold tips.

I ask ... I state ... I write ... I set ... I point out ... I tell ...

It follows that a good understanding of the roles of the teacher, the students and the parents is needed for a meaningful online teaching and learning experience. For instance, synchronously, there is, and should be, more shared

participation based on quality rather than quantity of interaction. Therefore, immediate effectiveness is a characteristic of the real–time sessions which should be prioritised. Being meaningful in FA is hugely dependent on the evidence that it is collected, and how it is collected. In this study, reference to the *use of mini–whiteboards, asking for opinions about answers, communication in chat, student's explanation of how they got the answer, students send photos, show and tell, encouraging students to speak* – were made. Isolated reference to digital technology was included through MS Quiz Form, Quizizz, Kahoot, PPT, Flipgrid and game applications. The usage of such tools by the few warrants that further training is carried out for all the stakeholders. Even though schools have re–opened, the temporary right given to the parents to decide on whether to send their children to school or else to home–school leverages further the need for collaboration as, if parents do not follow what is happening at school, their children's learning gap will be massive (OECD, 2020).

Believing in the power of the students' abilities is extremely important as otherwise the teacher would be limiting the students. It is indeed worrying to have had comments about the students' aptitude stating that "there are students who care and want to learn, others who do not". This begs the question, Is it really they who do not care or else is it the system who led them to this state of affairs? More concerning is a comment from an educator who is following an accredited certification in FA who stated that "it is difficult to implement certain strategies like success criteria and self–assessment because students lack the skills". Again, here I raise the question, Is the student the problem or the approach? Students' aptitude is not simply a corollary of the pandemic although the home background of those severely affected has surely had its impact, but studies prior to the pandemic have shown the same educators' position (Said Pace, 2018). Such perception might have been reaffirmed by the high number of students who did not participate in online teaching and learning activities as can be shown from Table 8 below.

Table 8: Educators' views highlighting training, emotions and parents

Primary Educators	Secondary Educators
• difficulty reaching certain students; • training not provided; • difficult to use success criteria and self-assessment with a Year 2 class (PG Certified AfL educator); • frustrated with the clerical work whilst some parents are not accountable; • overwhelmed that I have had to do many things that I did not attend any training for; • uncomfortable, anxious; • frustrating to adapt; • did not attend training as I did not want to spend more time in front of the screen.	• worst thing is the lack of human contact; • no boundaries of working hours; • huge limitations to my subject (PE); • hard to get through to students; • had to sort things out on my own despite the isolation and the tensions; • unfair that we are scrutinized, and some students do whatever they please; • not reaching all the students ... no training ... sheer determination to deliver some sort of lesson; • first weeks were maddening; • tiring; • time-consuming and exhausting to correct and provide feedback; • no training ... too much to expect FA in the online modality.

Irrespective of the cycle, the educators' comments share certain similarities with underlying references to the role of parents and their own emotional state, meaning that the training must attend to these issues too.

Limitations

In being a qualitative study, the findings are not meant to be generalised despite being represented by an encouraging number of participants from all the sectors. A downside of this study is the lack of human interaction with the respondents that would help to delve deeper into their responses (Reja et al., 2003). Counteracting such limitation would have been possible by using interviews for data collection, but that would not have allowed the same participation rate, hence fewer voices would have had to be contented with. Another limitation is the global context of the study, that is, the current pandemic is still evolving, research is currently being carried out so it is difficult to keep up with the current work and to situate the study within the context of others. Lastly, with the fluidity of the current scenario, certain issues raised might have already started to be tackled during the second lockdown as by then it was not any longer a question of unpreparedness.

Recommendations

Despite the numerous challenges faced by the educators, they have tried their best, albeit with limited expertise of what the digital world offers for teaching and learning within compulsory education, to import and adapt the classroom practices in the online environment. Nonetheless, the factions of users and the type of practices indicate that further training is needed in both the tacit beliefs held and the practice. Training in *the inclusion of FA techniques for the teachers and the students in both synchronous and asynchronous modalities; the rationale of FA techniques for parents;* and *synchronous and asynchronous modalities in pre-and in-service teacher education training* is necessary.

Apart from training, there should be an evaluation of the impact of the PG Certificate (AfL) on teachers' perceptions of AfL, as it is of concern to have had a participant questioning the viability of the strategies with a class when these teachers should be pioneers in their schools.

It is also timely to restart the discussions about the national assessment policy which should now embrace e-assessment modality and how there can be in-built systems which would converge the educators' ticking of a learning outcome to a score. This would spare teachers having to stop from their teaching and learning activities to carry out continuous assessment activities for the sake of getting a mark. For instance, there can be automatic in-built systems which run assessment reports based on the teachers' feedback and the students' actions.

Further research

This study has built on a previous analysis that presented the first insights of the use of FA in online teaching and learning during the lockdown in Malta. In this paper, attention revolved around the reasons for the differences in the frequency of practice. Hence, the differences in feedback provided by primary and secondary educators could warrant further research, particularly in view of FA having been present for more years in the primary.

Conclusion

The study sought to understand and identify the differences, if any, in the teachers' frequency of FA practice prior to, and during, the COVID-19 Malta lockdown. Data show that across compulsory education there was a significant decline, but this dip was characterized by fluctuations in the three types of

frequency with some educators even increasing their practice. Within this dip, four types of users were identified – regressive, consistent, progressive and unwavering – whose practice was either teacher–centred, shared with the student or else delayed. The findings highlight that issues of FA effectiveness and efficiency vary per modality, in that effectiveness is more synonymous with synchronous sessions due to the immediacy in the interaction between the teaching and learning stakeholders. The delayed approach could be a hindrance to the FA process which calls for further training and guidance for all the stakeholders, especially teachers, students and parents. Such multi–purposive training would not only be targeting the issue of FA knowledge but more importantly, the teachers' well–being during remote teaching, so their frustration levels, either due to lack of confidence in either FA or digital technology or the parents' interference into their job, would be mitigated.

Notes

1. https://curriculum.gov.mt/en/Pages/Home.aspx

2. https://www.schoolslearningoutcomes.edu.mt/en/

3. https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence–for–action/lessons–from–covid–19–getting–remote–learning–right%e2%80%af/

4. https://www.pdst.ie/DistanceLearning/AssessmentandFeedback

Notes on contributor

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