

Chapter 3: Working in International and Multicultural Schools

Social and Academic Preferences of Migrant Students in a Secondary School: The View from Within

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Abstract

This paper studies perceptions of migrant students from one particular cohort attending a Maltese state school. The students, whose parents are all migrants, come from different backgrounds and cultures. Informal conversations were held and data gathered was collated with participant observation. The results show that when migrant students are small in number, irrespective of whether they had been born in Malta or abroad, they did not find difficulties to integrate with their peers. Such integration depended also on the work carried out by the teachers and learning support educators whose work is indispensable to make them feel academically integrated. Sports is a good medium to socially integrate these students, irrespective of gender. National policies are important but success finally lies in the individual approach taken by the school.

Keywords:

migrant students, secondary schools, integration, sports



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Introduction

1. Who are the Students from Migrant Backgrounds?

Migration is a phenomenon found within the EU, with some countries having more migrants than others. The Maltese Islands are not an exception. Immigration began soon after Malta joined the EU in 2004 and has continued unabated. Whilst for many years in the twentieth century, Malta was a country which sent out emigrants, the tide has now turned. Malta is now a country attracting immigrants from all over the world. Thus, in Malta, one finds migrant workers who are either EU citizens or non-EU citizens. These move to Malta for employment purposes, to escape hardship, conflict and persecution and also to seek a better life (Farrugia 2007). In the last two decades, Malta has seen an increase of 'irregular immigrants', illegal and asylum seekers from sub-Saharan Africa, Syria and other places in the Middle East. In fact, in 2018, there was a large leap in the arrivals of people coming to Maltese shores by boat, following unrest in Libya and in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Grech (2019) cites figures compiled by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which show that migrants arriving in Malta by boat reached 1,455 in 2018. This is a high number when compared to 23 in 2017. However, in his article, Grech explains that not all these people came by boat as there were some who flew into Malta from faraway countries, like Bangladesh. Some of these migrants come on their own. Some come with their children and some have children while in Malta. Others bring over their family after having settled in Malta. For this reason, there is also a wide range of children who fall under the category of migrants. These can be defined as those who have recently arrived in a country, and thus can be considered as first-generation migrants. If they are born while their parents are in Malta, they are normally considered as second-generation migrants. Both types of migrants were taken into consideration in this study. However, this study did not analyse students where only one parent is a migrant. Then, there is the category of returning migrant children and young people. Like their parents, migrant children can be both from within and also from outside the EU. The legal status of such migrants also varies. They can be

citizens, residents, asylum seekers and also refugees (Eurydice Brief 2019: 6).

Background to the Study

1. Education in Malta

As education in Malta is compulsory, irrespective of which of the above categories children of migrants fall under, their parents are bound by law to send them to school and the government is bound to offer them an education. Malta has three types of schools: state, church and independent. Unless particularly well-off, and thus able to enrol in an independent school, migrant students are enrolled in one of the state colleges found within the main island, Malta, and a college in the smaller island of Gozo. Otherwise, they can opt for a Church school education.

Maltese schools are grouped into ten colleges, with the cohort being from the surrounding catchment areas. The students, both boys and girls, move seamlessly together from kindergarten until the end of their compulsory education in year 11.

The author undertook this study in a government secondary school, which has a population of nearly 500 students. Students come to this secondary school after spending year 7 and year 8 in the middle school, which is situated in a neighbouring village. The five migrant students involved in this study were all Year 9 and were chosen because of the author's direct contact with this cohort of students. These five students were the total number of migrant students in this year group. Three of these students were newcomers to Malta while two out of these five children had attended middle school, that is, Year 7 and Year 8, with their peers.

2. The Research Question

In this study, the author sought to undertake a qualitative analysis to see how these students perceive their education, thus giving them a voice. This is in line with the Eurydice Brief 2019, wherein it is explicitly stated that educators should focus

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on developing migrant students' language skills and promoting their learning in general. The author hopes that this study helps educators to be in a better position to promote the migrants' personal, social and emotional development. To achieve this, the author started by analysing whether these students feel integrated and supported at school, and what can be done to aid them more. This is in view of the fact that in most European education systems, migrant students are falling behind native-born students (Eurydice Report, 2019). Thus, this paper sought to answer the following research question: *How do migrant students perceive education and the school support given to them?*

Methodology

Will Gibson (2013) recommends that after one has formulated the research question, it is important to 'reflect on the various types of data that each available method may produce...' (60). The author thought deeply about the research design and, in order to answer the research question, she chose a qualitative approach. This is because the author wanted to explore and explain new theoretical insights (Hammond and Wellington 2013) and generate new theoretical models after an in-depth study of the data resulting from how people experience a given research issue.

The author decided to use participant observation and also made use of informal conversations with migrant students. This tallies with what Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) state: that participant observation is vital as it allows the researcher to gather first-hand material. Informal conversations are also salient means of getting information as the subject is not under pressure or stress. These two methods are reliable and valid as attested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Denzin (1989).

The informal talks were conducted with the students, both alone and in a group of friends. They took place anywhere in the school, sometimes during morning or break supervision in the school grounds, in the corridors between lessons or even during a replacement lesson. The author coded and categorised what the students told her with their words and what she observed through their actions.

Epistemology, Ontology and Positionality

1. Epistemology

The author's position in the school is one of trust and authority. Normally, these are seen as positions of power. The author wanted to go beyond the question of power and she viewed her position as an opportunity to build a relationship between herself as a researcher and these students. In this, she was being inspired by the way Crotty (1998) defined epistemology. He defined epistemology as 'how we know what we know' (8). Schwandt (1997) asserts that the information accumulated should be studied both in terms of knowledge and its justification. In this case, the author applied the epistemology of constructionism. She believes that meaning is derived from one's engagement with the realities of the world and she could do this by personally experiencing interactions with students attending on both formal and informal occasions.

The author had numerous conversations with these students about their plans for the future and their expectations of the world 'out there' after they finished their compulsory education. What did they aspire to be in the future? How did they view themselves in the school environment? How did they feel within the school environment? What did they have to say about their integration in the school? As a person in a position of trust, the author always tried to understand their concerns and had sought to guide them to the best of her knowledge. According to Cropley (2019), all these questions are part of the epistemological facet of qualitative research.

The author knew that, even though she had acquired a good knowledge of the students' academic background and social situation, she had to hear their stories to be able to personally experience their feelings and emotions. In her position as a participant observer, she was sure that there were new things which had yet to be uncovered, and which she had not elicited directly from the participants themselves, in the quest to get a detailed insight about their life at school and the services that they are getting. Whilst Davidson (2000) questions what the truth is, the author was looking forward to contributing new knowledge to this area of educational research, which has not,

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as yet, been well researched in the Maltese sphere.

2. Ontology

Epistemology is heavily entwined with ontology. There are different definitions of what ontology is. Scotland (2012) defines it as 'being concerned with the assumptions we make in order to believe that something makes sense or is real, or the very nature or essence of the social phenomenon we are investigating.' Hammond and Wellington (2013) say that ontology concerns claims about the nature of being and existence.

Cropley (2019: 36) speaks of ontology as being the view that each person actively "constructs", an individual "reality" out of his or her own particular experiences, as each person's reality is different. In addition, he states that when people interact with others, they shape reality. Thus, reality is 'socially constructed'. In other words, Cropley sees individuals as "actors" who "construct" the world they live in.

Thus, whilst conducting her research, the author sought to examine her underlying belief as a researcher. The author sought to check her assumptions and verify whether she was doing any generalisations about migrant students. For this reason, she sought to investigate the essence of the social phenomenon of her subjects and how the students could have a better future. This was also for the benefit of the country, as a whole. The author ascertained herself that the number of investigated individuals was enough to derive a general conclusion because in qualitative studies, five cases are the minimum for a correct analysis (Mason 2010; Englander 2012; Robinson 2014).

3. Positionality

The author is aware that because of her position, the students might not have been telling her the truth during the informal chats she was having with them. To counter this, she did not base her research on just one informal discussion. She had been in contact with them since September 2018, and so after one year of working and talking with them, she could be sure

that what they were saying was not made up. This element of truth was further strengthened as students had the tendency to repeat the same facts without changing their original version even when informally asked the questions which were worded differently.

Then, to corroborate the participants' replies, the author also spoke with the students' parents. Some of them come to school for Parents' day and whenever it is necessary. They cooperated often with the school administration. The author has also keenly observed these students while interacting with their peers, and their body language has shown that they are at ease.

Students' Profiles

These migrant students are not a homogenous group, but have different profiles. Three of these are refugees, the other two are the children of economic migrant workers. They are all aged 14 and when this study took place, they were in year 9. The students are three girls and two boys.

Student 1: She comes from Syria. Her parents came to Malta 20 years ago to seek work. She is the fourth of seven children. She defines herself as Maltese, as she was born in Malta. However, she is still Syrian by culture. She started to wear the hijab as soon as she became a woman, which caused her a lot of shame as all the school wanted to know why suddenly she had started wearing the hijab.

She keeps to herself a lot, mostly because her culture does not let her get close to boys. She is extremely well behaved and seeks the company of other such-minded girls. Her father is interested in her schooling. He comes for Parents' day and also sees that she comes to school on a regular basis. He admitted to me that he wants his daughter to become a doctor or a nurse, to have a better job than him (he is a tile-layer and plasterer). He clearly has high expectations for his daughter.

Student 2: She is from Ethiopia. She arrived in Malta 5 years ago. She is the second child from three siblings. Her family are very poor. In fact, this year, she has started to qualify for

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scheme 9; a government scheme which was initiated to help economically disadvantaged children. She wears the hijab, and is a good netball player. However, because of her prowess in netball, she is sometimes hated and mocked, especially with words such as 'I will take off that veil', during games at school. She thinks that all the teachers are helpful. She knows that they try very hard to help her fit in. She is very well behaved and is part of a group of girls who are from the same village. She seems to be happy at school. She spent a year at the induction centre in Naxxar to learn Maltese and English. However, she still prefers to speak in English.

Student 3: He is half-Italian, half-Polish and came to Malta last year when his father got a job here and he moved all the family to Malta. He is very well behaved, knows English and after a year in Malta, he has grasped Maltese and even though he does not speak the language, he can understand it quite well. He has a circle of friends.

Student 4: He is a Syrian boy who was born in Malta. He is very well behaved and ambitious. He is in an average class and studies chemistry and biology. His father wants him to be a doctor. He stays in class during the religion lesson and sometimes even participates in it.

Student 5: Her family arrived in Malta in June 2019. In her home country, Bulgaria, she had quite good marks in all the subjects. At first, she found the Maltese system baffling, because the educational system in Bulgaria is not subject to periodic tests and examinations but is based on assignments. Thus, in a number of subjects, there was discrepancy in the subjects' level. Her standard of education in certain subjects is far below that which is taught in Maltese schools. While the first few weeks were bumpy, she has been accepted in a circle of friends. She is a very polite, respectful and obedient girl.

Findings

1. Views on Teachers and Learning Support Educators

The findings can be mainly divided into two: their views on

teachers and learning support educators and their views on their peers and the school environment in general.

The major findings are that the students feel very safe at school. They are being supported through many services and the majority feel integrated. They all find the environment of the school they attend to be very accepting. In part, this is thanks to their teachers. Although Phoenix (2009) describes that teachers looked down on migrant students as being inadequate and not desired in the classroom, the students I talked to had words of praise for the teachers, whom they described as being very caring. They also had words of praise for the learning support educators, whom one student described as '*an angel*'. He really appreciated her patience. She used to translate for him in the first few weeks, and to explain the lesson all over again to make sure that he understood.

The students said that teachers, in particular, were their main supporters. They were committed to getting them to achieve more academically. To counter the problem of language, throughout the lessons, teachers continually switched from Maltese to English and vice-versa. Teachers also conducted extra lessons during breaks so that the migrants could catch up; a fact which was encountered by Falzon et al. in 2012 in their study in the Maltese educational system.

The support that teachers give to migrant students was also commented upon by Gibson and Hidalgo (2009) who studied young women migrants. They maintained that teachers are important agents. They were described as the agents whose support to the young migrant women was important for the building of relations within the school.

2. Integration Through Sports

On their part, these migrant students showed eagerness to integrate with their peers. The author noticed this herself. One student eagerly played during break time in a sports competition. Upon asking the girl why she was so eager to participate in sports, she told the author that she had joined in the games organised during mid-day break, in which she excelled and through which she became popular. She admitted

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that her participation in sports helped her to make new friends. She recognized that her popularity came from the fact that she is a good player and wins games for her house. However, sometimes, especially during decisive games, she is insulted because of the colour of her skin and because she wears the headscarf. On her part she said that she tries not to take any notice.

Sports have been mentioned to be a good means of integrating students (Pisani 2018; Galea et al. 2011; Nguyen 2017; Spiteri 2020) and the above paragraph shows that this is true. In fact, the insults this girl sometimes receives whilst playing are related to her proficiency in sports and therefore are not purely racial or of a religious matrix. The author knows that this latter observation may sound controversial, but it should be stressed that these insults were levelled at her only from the supporters of the rival team, jealous at her high command of the sport.

3. Relationships With Their Peers

In a study done by Galea et al. (2011), migrant girls were asked about their relationships with their peers. In this study, migrant students did not articulate any conflicts. While the migrants in the year under never had any conflicts, some issues like the situation above, where the migrant student was insulted because of her proficiency in sports, do occur. On the whole, the migrant students in this school felt accepted by Maltese students. They all said that Maltese students were welcoming and very friendly. This made them feel accepted in class. In the words of the Italian migrant, *'the boys are fun'* and they make him laugh. He admitted that he does not know how to speak Maltese fluently and therefore language can be a barrier. But still he manages to communicate in English and sometimes he resorts to his native language. Integration occurred quickly, as soon as he was asked to go out with them in the weekend. The same situation has developed with the Bulgarian female student. She too is being invited to go out with her fellow classmates. It should be stated that these invitations are gender-based, as the boy was invited by other boys living in his village and who attend the same school, while the same can be said for the girl. She was invited by other girls. However,

the author has not managed to gather any information about the other three migrants who are all Muslims. These were very reticent and did not like talking about their life after school hours.

The need to fit in is also manifested by the migrants' students desire to dress like their friends. One day, the author saw that the Bulgarian student came to school with jet-black hair. She asked the student why she had dyed her hair black. Her natural hair colour, light brown, was beautiful. However, she just shrugged, smiled and told the researcher that like this, she looked more Maltese! As Mirza (2010) puts it, they have learnt "how to move between worlds." (135)

While Galea et al. (2011) found in their study that girls were eager to engage in activities like the rest of their peers and that they were very polite, the author could feel that in this study, this was a trait which stood for both girls and boys. The migrants in this particular year group behave extremely well and show respect and gratefulness to their superiors, including the researcher.

The integration of migrant students with an Arabic background, from countries such as Syria and the Maghreb region is somewhat different. The fact that Maltese is of Semitic origins helps a lot in their integration in school. This is an advantage which is not present with the other migrants and this may explain why the Bulgarian girl put more emphasis on her looks. The migrant students from Syria do not need to focus on their appearance but rely on language to integrate better with the other students. As Pisani (2018) rightly points out, migrants originating from Arab countries find it easier to learn the spoken Maltese language. This gives them an advantage in state schools where Maltese is the main medium of communication. This also seems to be a characteristic of Syrian students, in that they blend in Maltese society immediately (Pisani 2018: 132). The students I talked to showed this trait. While the Syrian students talked to me and everybody else at school in perfect Maltese, the students from the other nationalities preferred to talk in English. This is despite the fact that one of them had spent a year at the induction centre in Naxxar.

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4. Issues Faced by Migrant Students

Despite all of the above, the students expressed also reservations. Such reservations came mainly from students having an Islamic background. The cultural dilemma here is very real, as their way of dress (Nguyen 2017: 36) and culture sometimes hinders them from integrating wholly within the system. In the case of Malta, this is not linked to the school but could be real in homes as their integration outside school is less present. None of the Muslim girls spoke about any extra-curricular activity. In fact, the Muslim students do not like to speak about their home environment. The language barrier is very real for those students whose native language is not of a Semitic background. But this element was overcome by an integration that went beyond the school environment.

The students also commented that while the majority of the students and teachers who they came across at school were helpful, there were still a handful of students who made life difficult, who did not help them to adjust, but rather hindered their integration. However, the migrant students whom the author talked to did not let this set them back, but they moved on from this and proceeded to surround themselves with a circle of friends. This shows a lot of resilience, something which Spiteri (2020) also discusses in his paper. Yet, it should be pointed out that even Maltese students can undergo such experiences from other Maltese students. This is more an issue of bullying, which needs a separate analysis.

5. The Role of Migrant Parents

In this situation, the role of the migrant students' parents is important. The latter should be encouraged to work hand in hand with the school. The findings from Falzon et al. (2012) suggest that the parents of migrant children take an active role in the education of their children. These include attending Parents' Day and being involved in school activities which are organised during the scholastic year. Yet this is a point where theory and practice fail to go hand in hand. Many of the parents of the migrant students in my school are not involved, mostly because they are busy working. This situation was encountered also by Spiteri (2020: 172) in his studies of

a similar situation. Not all the parents of migrants came for Parents' day, either. In this study, when the author asked the students why, they replied that their parents could not afford to take a day off because of their hectic work commitments. The author sought to counter this by communicating with their parents by telephone. In most cases she found them very receptive and cooperative.

6. Limitations

The author wishes to state that these are not the only migrant students in the school but she observed all the migrant students in one particular year, that is, year 9. Thus, this study was subject to a selective process which was conditioned only by age and year of study of these migrants but then, there was no more selectivity as all the student migrants in that particular cohort were included in this study.

Another limitation is related to the fact that this study was undertaken in one school and was covering only migrant students from a particular catchment area. Areas can affect the number of migrant students in particular schools.

Conclusion

In this study, teachers are well prepared to carry out their duties with migrant students as the students themselves have stated that teachers knew how to cater to their needs. In 2012, Falzon et al. argued that teachers needed more training on how to deal with migrants. This issue has by now started to be addressed but this does not mean that work in this field should stop. Training and support to staff in schools should continue. While, according to migrant students, teachers and learning support educators are doing a great job, more knowledge about migrants and migration would help to erase any stereotypes that staff and students might have with respect to the different nationalities. It could also help to erase the 'them' and 'us' mentality, which has been hinted at by students and surfaced in this study during sports.

The truth remains that migrant children are still facing many challenges and will continue to do so. These challenges are

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best addressed by having clear national policies in place (Eurydice 2019; Caruana and Francalanza 2013). But what this study brings out is the need for school guidelines. The cases studied show that migrant realities are specific as the students come from diverse backgrounds. Therefore, a one-size-fits-all policy is not recommended. Thus, while a general national framework should be in place, schools should have leeway to set their own guidelines and policies. These would prepare better the school staff for the new environment made up of diverse cultures, some of which are new to Malta and which may be different from one school to another.

On the other hand, these guidelines work when the number of migrants in a year group is small. At least in the cases analysed, the fact that the number of students was small definitely facilitated their integration. When the number is small, gender is not an issue for the integration of the students. For sure, the school environment plays a role and such a success needs also to be analysed with the background and policies of the school.

More studies are needed about migrant students. The author hopes that this study helps to give policy makers an insight into how these students are feeling when they are a small number in a year group and what can be done better so that their needs are better catered for. In this case, these students are enjoying their school experience.

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