

'Our Students' Versus 'My Students'? Experiences of Subject Teaching by Maltese Primary Church School Teachers

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Abstract

Focusing on Year 5 and Year 6, this qualitative study encompasses a sample of six teachers who have employed the subject teaching approach in recent scholastic years in church schools in Malta. This study addresses these teachers' experiences with the subject teaching approach, while also exploring associated benefits and challenges. The research delves into the perceptions of the teachers and the implications of subject teaching, offering valuable insights into the pedagogical landscape. The study exposes the phenomenon of learning compartmentalization and highlights the possible negative impacts and beneficial outcomes resulting from this pedagogical approach. These are presented in a comprehensive table which not only encompasses the perspective of teachers but also identifies perceived benefits and challenges for learners. While acknowledging the significance of subject teaching at the primary level, the authors recognize the necessity of future research to assess the subject teaching's comprehensive impact, particularly the psychological support teachers offer within the broader context of holistic education. This paper stands as a catalyst for informed deliberations on the viability of subject teaching, both in Malta and internationally. It may also contribute to potential policy formulation while igniting further investigations in similar domains.

Keywords

Generalist Classroom, Maltese Education, Pedagogy, Primary Education, Subject Teaching

Introduction

Spreading over 316 square kilometres, Malta is an archipelago in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea. Malta's education is divided into three main sectors: state, church and independent schools. Within the primary schools of the

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respective sectors, a generalist or departmentalised approach to teaching is adopted. Strohl et al. (2014) note how in a generalist classroom, learners are taught by the same teacher all day and for all subjects. Any other type of classroom teaching should be considered as departmentalisation; however, as highlighted by Chen (2015), schools receiving teaching from specialist teachers for specific subjects such as Art, Music and Physical Education (PE) are often referred to as generalist classrooms. For this reason, defining the key terms is important to avoid misconceptions and confusion (Minott, 2016):

The Generalist Classroom. Teaching is delivered by one class teacher who is with the learners all day. Additionally, specialist teachers deliver specific subjects such as Art, Music and PE. In Malta, these specialist teachers are referred to as peripatetic teachers. Since the specialist teacher covers only one lesson per week, the class teacher is still expected to deliver at least one other lesson per week for the majority of these specific subjects. The class teacher must deliver both weekly lessons if the specialist teacher is not available. While in literature, generalist classrooms are also referred to as self-contained classrooms and both terms can be used interchangeably, for the purpose of this paper the authors will refer to the one-teacher classroom as 'the generalist classroom'.

The Departmentalised Classroom. Teaching may take various forms. Learners may have two or more teachers delivering core subjects as well as specialist teachers delivering specific subjects. Teaching duties within departmentalised classrooms are divided amongst teachers. Even though classroom setups may differ amongst schools, the same principle applies to all: that of having more knowledgeable teachers delivering specific subjects or content to more than one class across the same or different year groups. While in literature, departmentalised classrooms are also referred to as 'subject teaching' and both terms can be used interchangeably, for the purpose of this paper, the authors will refer to this approach as 'subject teaching'.

Subject Teaching in Malta

Subject teaching in Malta is more common in church and independent schools than in state schools. While there are a few state schools that use the subject teaching approach, primarily the Attard and Gudja primary schools, it is safe to state that generalist classrooms in Maltese state schools seem to be the standard arrangement (Pollacco, 2013; Williams, 2009). This paper

focuses on the church school sector, which is administrated by the Secretariat for Catholic Education (SfCE), and admittance to a church school is granted through an intricate ballot process. There are 27 primary church schools spread across Malta, out of which 14 utilise subject teaching in one or more year groups (Appendix A). Moreover, one school is considering the possibility of introducing subject teaching, while another school has used this approach for two years and is reverting to the generalist classroom approach. Out of the 14 church schools adopting subject teaching, nine schools are using this approach in Years 5 and 6, three schools utilise it only in Year 6, one school uses this approach in Years 4, 5 and 6, and one school implements it with one class per year group. Through this qualitative study, the authors explore the experiences of subject teaching classrooms in Years 5 and 6 within Maltese primary church schools and gather in-depth viewpoints of teachers who have experienced this approach in recent scholastic years.

The Study's Outline

After examining the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (2012) as well as the Learning Outcomes Framework (2015), both of which are important policy documents that the Maltese educational system adheres to, the authors have noted that there is no specific reference made to how classrooms should be set up. Thus, there are no precise parameters regulating which classroom setup schools opt for, leaving it exclusively up to the school's senior leadership team (SLT) to choose the preferred classroom structure. Moreover, there is a lacuna of literature with regards to the subject; hence, the authors aspire to primarily add significance at a local level.

Taking into consideration the local context, and given the lack of research, the authors' main aim is to understand the experience of subject teaching in Years 5 and 6 in church primary schools. Stemming from this aim, the authors have two objectives related to the teachers' experiences: to identify potential benefits and challenges arising from subject teaching, and to identify how and if subject teaching affects the learners' experience of primary schooling. Ultimately, the authors aim to answer these research questions:

1. What do primary teachers adopting the subject teaching approach in church schools experience?
2. What benefits and challenges, if any, arise from subject teaching?

Review of the Literature

Creating a positive and encouraging classroom culture is one of the most important goals teachers should achieve. Similarly, the NCF (2012, p. 34) states that “children are expected to acquire social, communicative and intellectual competences in an environment which fosters personal wellbeing and positive learning dispositions.” Additionally, the NCF (2012, p. vii) focuses on how all learners should be given “the opportunity to grow in an educational environment which the teacher may regularly transform to fit the learner’s abilities” through a learner-centred curriculum.

History of Subject Teaching

McDonald (1958) describes how in the United States of America subject teaching can be traced back to the end of the 18th century. Differing from what is known today, such classrooms were composed of two teachers, referred to as “masters”, each having their own classroom, and learners switched from one master to the other at noon with one covering reading and the other writing. In 1900, subject teaching classrooms progressed to include more subjects. The school day was still split between morning and afternoon; however, the first half of the morning or afternoon sessions covered fundamentals, such as geography, history, language, maths, reading and spelling, and the second half covered special subjects. Teachers covering the fundamentals had a “homeroom”, while teachers covering special subjects delivered their lessons in auditoriums, gymnasiums, libraries, and the like. This meant that learners alternated between the homeroom and the special subject rooms, with teachers in the latter taking on two or three groups at a time (McDonald, 1958). Papert (1993, para. 1) elaborates on how teachers were freed from the burden of delivering subjects that they are not talented in, becoming better teachers of the three Rs: “reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic.” Over the decades, schools adopted various generalist and subject teaching classroom approaches. Various studies showed the effectiveness of subject teaching classrooms and are more inclined towards them. However, even though interest in subject teaching grew, generalist classrooms remained the most commonly used type of classroom.

Benefits and Challenges of Subject Teaching

Bahner (1965, p. 337) specifies that there are various subject teaching setups, and thus describes it as a “self-contained team with specialization”. Moreover, Shawn et al. (1973) emphasise how teacher attitudes improved when

working collaboratively as opposed to when they were working in isolation within a generalist classroom. McPartland (1987, p. 1) mirrors this response and remarks that “the quality of teaching in specialized subject matter” increases within subject teaching classrooms, while Shulman (1986) delves deeper and identifies the difference between the content studied and the skills required to teach it (pedagogical content knowledge). Thus, light is shed on the importance of the necessary pedagogies and strategies required by teachers to teach a subject. Strohl et al. (2014) and Stronge (2017) emphasise how subject teaching increases teacher satisfaction which in turn reduces teacher stress and turnover. The fact that teachers can focus on fewer subject areas reduces their workload and increases morale. It is also beneficial when it comes to professional development, as teachers can improve and refine their content knowledge through specific professional development sessions. This in turn also affects learners, as highlighted by Hood (2010), who elaborates on how learners are presented with the experience of different learning environments and different teaching approaches (e.g., focused questioning techniques), whilst the monotony and uniformity of the day is interrupted.

Various drawbacks of subject teaching classrooms have been highlighted in literature. Liu (2011) argues that there is a lack of opportunity to get to know learners on a personal level and elaborate on how learners may struggle to relate to their teachers. “It is difficult to develop a close rapport with individual students when [teachers] see seventy-six children each day” (Dropsey, as cited in Pollacco, 2013, p. 19). Additionally, McPartland (1987) identified learner-teacher relationships and quality of teaching as two main deterrents in subject teaching classrooms. Furthermore, Moffet (1975) suggests that the needs of individual learners may not be identified, since teachers’ time with learners is limited and teachers have many learners to cater to. Advocates of the generalist classroom also note how time wasting may reduce teaching time – for instance, Williams (2009) highlights how teachers and learners may take longer to settle in when switching from one classroom to another. Furthermore, in line with attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), younger learners crave dependable relationships with a teacher who is present with them throughout the school day and year. As remarked by Liu (2011, p. 48), younger learners require “simplicity and predictability” since they may find it perplexing to experience constant daily transitions.

The Experience of the Learner in Subject Teaching

Pollacco (2013, p. 21) notes how learners within a subject teaching classroom may face risks and claims that "departmentalization assumes to some extent that all children learn in the same way", when in reality "social and physical development, and intelligence rates do not proceed for all children at the same rate". Concentrating on social needs, mainly the social adjustment aspect, a study conducted by Mitchell (1994) concluded that learners needed security and familiarity to minimise transition shock when moving from primary to middle school. Hence, the 'one-peer-group' classroom (generalist classroom) was needed for this to be achieved. Mitchell (1994) elaborates that for subject teaching classrooms to be effective, a link and exposure to the 'homeroom group' when transitioning between classes was indispensable. However, Harris (1996) argues that there is no evidence for such claims and that socially speaking, subject teaching classrooms were neither helpful nor harmful to learners who were taught by more than one teacher (Pollacco, 2013).

Concentrating on academic achievement, researchers have varying opinions and studies reveal diverse results. Contrary to Reys and Fennel (2003), who argue that learners within subject teaching classrooms achieve higher results in mathematics, Mitchell (2013) concluded that there was no significant impact on results in mathematics between learners receiving lessons within subject teaching and generalist classrooms. Furthermore, Hood (2010) notes that academic achievement results were notably higher within a school that shifted towards implementing a subject teaching classroom approach.

The Experience of the Teacher in Subject Teaching

With extensive curricula and different learners' needs, teachers seem to be overworked and overwhelmed by teaching demands. Chang et al. (2008) note how teachers in generalist classrooms feel that there is not enough time to accomplish their daily tasks as well as give their learners the individual attention necessary to reach their potential. Andrews (2006) notes how teachers in subject teaching classrooms have a reduced workload since they can focus their time on specific subjects, and Johnson (2013) claims that teacher satisfaction is higher for those working in a subject teaching setting. The study reports how a few of the reasons for a more positive experience can be linked to less stress due to reduced subjects, better time management when planning, and the strengthening of subject knowledge, making the teacher an expert. Teaching within one's comfort zone ensures a boost in morale, especially because of

having confidence and being knowledgeable about the content (Brogan, 1966). Moreover, teachers using the subject teaching approach are more able to help learners individually since they have more time to assess and plan for the learners' specific needs.

Methods and Methodology

For the purpose of this study, the researchers adopted a qualitative method using semi-structured interviews. Patton (1990) highlights how qualitative inquiry focuses on gaining in-depth information through rather small samples and selecting participants purposefully.

Research Sample

Using purposive sampling, the researchers were able to identify prospective participants according to their relevance to the study and their knowledge of what the study set out to achieve. This was done by compiling a list of all Maltese church schools (Appendix A). These were then contacted individually to obtain the necessary information about classroom subject teaching, mainly if and which year groups adopt this approach in each school. This allowed the researchers to better identify eligible schools. Next, these eligible schools were contacted, provided with an information letter and asked to express their interest in the study. Interested schools were then asked to disseminate a participant information letter to eligible teachers. The letter informed prospective participants about how they could participate in the study should they be interested in sharing their views. Given the limited number of teachers and the numerous study participation requests, teachers may be experiencing 'research fatigue' and be reluctant to take part in the research. To mitigate this limitation, the researchers tried to identify schools that would find the study relevant to their school needs by analysing responses and feedback from the schools' gatekeepers (Schembri & Sciberras, 2022). For this study, the researchers carried out six interviews with teachers who are currently using or have used subject teaching in Year 5 and Year 6, as highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1*Demographical Data of Study Participants*

Participant pseudonym	Gender	Highest qualification	Total teaching years in primary	Total teaching years in a subject teaching setting
P1	Female	B.A. (Hons) degree	4	3
P2	Female	B.A. (Hons) degree	12	8
P3	Female	B.Ed. (Hons) in Primary Education	10	4
P4	Male	B.Ed. (Hons) in Primary Education	11	3
P5	Female	Postgraduate degree in Marketing	4 (and 6 in secondary)	3
P6	Male	B.Ed. (Hons) in Primary Education	22	12

The Interview Guide

For this study, the researchers developed an interview guide which revolved around the study's aim and objectives. The interview guide consisted of 19 questions. The first set of questions aimed to gather demographical data about the participants. The second set of questions addressed the first research question, aiming to gather a general and personal perspective on the subject teaching classroom. The third set of questions addressed the second research question, which aimed to gather information about the benefits, the challenges, and the concerns of those using this approach.

Data Collection and Analysis

Following ethical approval from the Institute for Education, the researchers proceeded to gather the necessary ethical approval from the SfCE. Once ethical clearance was granted, the researchers contacted the gatekeepers (heads of schools). The chosen sample was contacted to schedule the interviews, and data were collected throughout December 2022. Interviews lasted approximately 40 to 65 minutes, and to minimize the risk of business harm to participating schools and the SfCE, all interviews were conducted after school hours or during Christmas recess.

The researchers used an inductive thematic approach to ensure that the participants' responses were reflected in the findings and that the themes were generated by the data and not by the researchers' notions. Having said that, this study was confronted by a number of limitations. Considering the size of the sample, the first limitation was that the results could not be generalized since the aim of this study was to explore the experiences of teachers using subject teaching. Another limitation was that the researchers used purposive sampling, and thus respondents were all teachers who were currently using subject teaching, so they may have been biased when asserting their responses. Since the voices of teachers who work in generalist classrooms are not represented in this study, the inquiry is based solely on perspectives viewed from the lens of teachers working in subject teaching settings. The third limitation is that the study focused on classroom subject teaching within Maltese primary church schools; however, no local publications were available on the matter. Even though a similar study was conducted by Pollacco (2013), it is important to note that the study focused on comparing the generalist and subject teaching classrooms within primary schools. Furthermore, the study was carried out back in 2013 and aspects of the Maltese educational system have changed. Given the lack of local literature, the researchers based their assumptions on and compared them to foreign studies, which may impact the study's validity and reliability.

Results and Discussion

The results and discussion section of the paper will be based on Table 2: 'Potential Benefits and Challenges of Subject Teaching in Primary Schools in Malta'. This diagram, created by the researchers, draws on the main findings after two rounds of data analysis: first as an individual exercise and then as a collaborative one.

Table 2*Potential Benefits and Challenges of Subject Teaching in Primary Schools in Malta*

	Themes	Benefits	Challenges
Teachers	Time & Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • decreased workload • time for planning • time management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rigid lesson schedules • unbalanced workloads
	Subject Expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • stronger teacher expertise • personal satisfaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'losing touch' with the holistic education of learners • subject segregation
	Learning Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • environments conducive to learning • relevant classroom setups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • frequent change of classrooms • procedures and routines set by other teachers
	Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • opportunities for collaboration • opportunities for cross-curricular teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • barriers to collaboration • timetabling issues
	Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • engaging resources • recycling of resources • sharing of resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • authentic resources (expensive and time-consuming) • carrying cumbersome resources
	Alignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • classes alignment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • subjects alignment
	Themes	Benefits	Challenges
Learners	Relationship with Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exposure to more teaching styles • getting to know more teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • weaker bond with the teacher • not getting along with a teacher
	Learning Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more motivated to learn • having expert teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • moving classrooms • teachers' different expectations
	Personalized Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • deeper knowledge • teachers knowing the learners' needs from one year to another 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being compared to other classes within the same or different year groups

Experienced Benefits and Challenges of Subject Teaching for Teachers

The first theme emerging from the data was time management in relation to planning and preparation. Consistent with Strohl et al. (2014) and Stronge (2017), P2, P3 and P6 all noted how they can manage their time better through classroom subject teaching, with P6 emphasising how it allows to “focus your time and energy on a particular subject”. The participant, who has a total of 22 years of teaching experience, further elaborated on how lesson preparation becomes “less time-consuming” and explained that since the lesson would be repeated with more than one class, they “can spare more energy and time on a particular resource or lesson plan”. Paradoxically, P6 still pointed out time as the biggest challenge, clarifying how “unlike a generalist class, you have your time slot and then you leave”. However, P4 and P5 suggested that subject teaching has positively impacted their work-life balance. While P4 explained how less subject planning is “equal to less work” and therefore having “more time”, P5 elaborated on the fact that not having to “switch” between subjects when marking learners’ work speeds up work and thus reduces time, making their work-life balance “much better”. Linking to Andrews (2006) and Johnson (2013), having fewer subjects might or might not reduce workload. When asked about their workload, all participants noted that there was still a copious amount of paperwork involved and that lesson preparation was still necessary, with participants stating that it was “still very hectic” (P2), “pretty much the same” (P3 & P6), and “more or less the same” (P1). Nevertheless, P4 noted how planning is somewhat easier and, similarly, P3 and P5 expressed that “it allows you to focus on your subjects”. P5 further elaborated how the teacher is only planning for one subject and hence there was more “time for planning”, which is also highlighted by Chan and Jarman (2004). Likewise, P1 and P6 saw the possibility of “focusing” on one subject as a more efficient way of doing things (Andrews, 2006). P5 pointed out how different subjects have different workloads, and hence “certain subjects have more corrections than others, especially languages”, making them more time-consuming. Thus, distributing subjects equally amongst teachers might prove to be more complicated than one might anticipate. Another mentioned timetabling matter was the necessity of “having a double lesson at least weekly”, as outlined by P2 and P6 respectively. Elaborating further, P6, who has been teaching in a subject teaching setting for the past 12 years, explained how this allowed teachers to “catch up and revise more thoroughly”.

The second emerging theme was subject expertise. When asked whether lesson repetition yielded any benefits, participants were adamant that the effects were positive. Consistent with Williams (2009), who highlights the positive effects yielded through lesson repetition, the six participants noted how subject knowledge and content depth are heightened through lesson repetition, and classroom subject teaching allows a teacher to “focus” and become an “expert” in their respective subject or subjects. For instance, P3 explained how subject teaching helped her to “focus on the topic” which consequently aided “time management” and “planning”. These experiences are also consistent with arguments put forward by Brogan (1966) and Johnson (2013), who focus on the benefits yielded when teachers focus on fewer subjects and hence gain knowledge expertise and content depth. Differing from statements made by advocates of the generalist classroom such as Gerretson et al. (2008), who presume that a generalist teacher is equally knowledgeable and qualified in all the subjects they teach, participants highlighted how through subject teaching they became an “expert”, with P1 remarking how “you become a reference point” in relation to the subject they teach, even with colleagues who “turn to you” (P4) with any queries related to your subject. Moreover, P1 elaborated by explaining how it leaves room to “look into different ways of teaching the subject”, while P6 stressed that it allowed them to “flourish in [their] subject”. Similarly, P2, who has been teaching in a subject teaching setting for the past eight years, explained how they were “always learning and evolving” and constantly “reflecting and improving on a specific subject”. These remarks are congruent with Gerretson et al. (2008), who note that it is unrealistic to expect the same level of knowledge from generalist classroom teachers.

The third emerging theme was the class environment and routines. Minott (2016) notes the positive effect that changing classrooms has on learners’ interpersonal skills. In fact, P3 specified that they feel that subject teaching and having learners move classrooms has made their setup routines easier and better. They allude to the fact that it is less time-consuming to set up one class for one subject, and thus they can focus their time and energy on creating a more learning-conducive and relevant atmosphere. On the other hand, Liu (2011) claims that moving between classrooms and the discontinuation between material and resources causes frustration among teachers. P4 perceived “changing classrooms” as a main drawback of subject teaching. Worth noting is how P1 remarked that creating classroom décor is not always possible given the change in classrooms. P3 further reflected on challenges

encountered when dealing with so many “different class rules” set by other teachers. The participant also recalled how initially it was challenging to “set your own way how to work” and “eventually manage to give a lesson” with all the initial setting up and adjusting that needs to be done by the learners and the various teachers.

The fourth emerging theme was that of collaboration with colleagues. Participants mentioned how classroom subject teaching affected their working relationships with colleagues. P3 explained how a good working relationship was always present at school, yet the introduction of subject teaching “enhanced collaboration between year groups”. However, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6 stressed the need for collaboration for the best outcomes, especially when it comes to incorporating cross-curricular activities. Echoing Timmerman (2017), who notes how having a strictly subject-based curriculum encourages subject segregation and limits the ability to use a cross-curricular approach, P1 explained how at times collaboration might seem slightly more challenging given that subjects may be perceived as stand-alone topics. Elaborating further, the participant noted that due to “the different timetables and the different schedules, coordinating lessons was difficult”. The participant gave an example: “if there was a Maltese comprehension passage that was linked to Social Studies, we would try to coordinate and create a cross-curricular lesson. However, we found it difficult to coordinate and we would do them [the lessons] separately”. Schembri & Sciberras (2020) explain that within an educational system underpinned by an inclusive approach, planning should be done more collaboratively. In fact, P5 mentioned how sharing of planning and resources with learning support educators (LSEs) and other teachers has become common practice to “keep each other on board”, whilst P4 emphasized respecting each other’s work, especially “in terms of timing.” Such responses mirror suggestions made by Abdallah (2009), who implies that collaboration between colleagues can offer unique insights on teaching and learning, learners and lessons.

Two minor themes that also emerged from the data in relation to the teachers’ experiences of subject teaching were the resources needed and the lesson alignment across classes. When it comes to resources, most participants agreed that this is mostly a personal issue and, as highlighted by P2, “it depends on the teacher’s willingness to create resources.” However, they further explained how they can create more resources given that they can focus their energy on a specific subject or subjects. For instance, P6 highlighted how

they “can easily prepare more resources that are fun and engaging”. On the other hand, P1 noted that although certain resources may be reused, creating authentic resources for a number of different classes is time-consuming and “more expensive”. Elaborating further, P1 explained the difficulties they are faced with when having to carry cumbersome resources from one class to another.

When it comes to lesson alignment across classes, P4 noted how planning becomes “more rewarding” which, as highlighted by Strohl et al. (2014), increases morale and teachers can spend more time planning the same topic, especially considering how “more learners” will benefit from the “same lesson”. P3 and P1 both mentioned uniformity between the different classes; however, they perceived the matter opposingly. P3 focused on the fact that “as much as possible, I try to keep them [the learners] on the same wavelength” and elaborated by further explaining how they “know that what I’m giving to one class is being given to the other”. P1 showed concern about the challenges faced when trying to maintain different classes at the same level of learning because of how dynamic schools are and the numerous activities, at times experienced as ‘distractions’, happening at school.

The Perceived Effects of Subject Teaching on Learners

The first emerging theme is the various relationships forged with different teachers. In line with Minott (2016), P6 noted how subject teaching exposes learners to different teachers, which impacts teacher-learner relationships. P3 and P4 highlighted that they “now know more learners” and P5 elaborated on how this dynamic allowed them to have better classroom management. On the other hand, P2, who has a total of 12 years of teaching experience, noted how the relationship was different and that there was “less of a bond.” P3, P5 and P6 mentioned how learners who might not get along with a particular teacher were not bound to stay with this teacher all day long. Additionally, P6 stated that “when a teacher is sick, learners only miss one lesson and not a whole day.”

The second emerging theme was learner motivation. Echoing Valerio (2012), who sheds light on intrinsic learner motivation and lists the different necessities to boost it, participants noted how learners’ motivation is “something personal”. While P2 and P5 could not link learners’ motivation to classroom subject teaching per se and believed there was no difference, P6 argued that learners “seem more motivated” due to subject teaching. Additionally, P1 and

P3 explained that having a different teacher helps learners' motivation, while P4 argued how the change in environment when learners change classrooms may contribute to learners being "more excited and willing to learn". Likewise, P6 pointed out that "teaching and learning is more effective", and P3 and P4 noted how learners gain more through "more knowledgeable" and "expert" teachers, respectively. P1 also highlighted how through subject teaching a change in learners' maturity is observed, and P4 pointed out that learners become more "responsible" and "independent". P5, who has been teaching in a subject teaching setting for the past three years, elaborated further, noting how changing classrooms "splits the day and allows for movement", which resounds with Hood (2010), who states that changing classrooms interrupts the monotony of the school day.

The third emerging theme was personalized learning. P2 explained how teachers see learners' progress through the different year groups and how lessons can be "more personalised," which addresses local policies and curriculum requirements (MEDE, 2012). Delving deeper, P4, who has experience teaching in both primary and secondary schools, alluded to the fact that since lessons are repeated, teachers "learn more from their learners", especially through the "answers and different responses from learners". Whilst P1 noted how experience is gained from every lesson and that every lesson is different, P3 and P4 seemed to agree on the fact that the "second lesson goes much smoother" (P3) and better examples and questioning can be used. Besides, P2 also noted how, when subject teaching is integrated across year groups, the teacher knows learners from previous years, and thus they can better adapt their teaching since they would already know the learners and their needs.

Reflections and Conclusion

A reflection put forward by the researchers is the potential piloting of subject teaching within different schools across Malta to allow teachers and SLT members to identify and mitigate any possible difficulties. P1 and P6 pointed out that the SLT must be on board and understand the benefits and challenges associated with classroom subject teaching and thus be able to make informed decisions. Similarly, policymakers should gather statistical data in relation to subject teaching and study its effects on teachers and learners alike.

All participants also noted how they would require further support from the SfCE by being provided with training and Community of Professional Educators

(CoPE) sessions. Hence, a second reflection brought forward is that such training provision be tailor-made to suit the needs of the particular school or particular teacher. This way, teacher efficacy is ensured by encouraging subject specialisation (subject knowledge, knowledge and pedagogies attributed to a particular subject). This would also positively impact the learners' experience given the expertise of their teachers.

Having positive working relationships encourages teachers to collaborate and share good practices. P1 noted that there needs to be "time to coordinate with colleagues and plan as a team". As a third reflection, the researchers suggest that SLT members ensure that teams are working well and to their full potential. This can be done by allocating time slots where team members can collaborate and co-create schemes of work as well as cross-curricular lesson plans. Likewise, teachers should be able to share ideas, suggestions, and concerns freely and as needed.

A final reflection is to encourage collaboration between Heads of Department or Support Teachers employed by the SfCE to facilitate a subject across all church schools and teachers employed in schools. The former may guide content knowledge and depth, thus facilitating capacity building in relation to the subject itself.

Living in the 21st century and in such progressive and diverse societies has brought about different realities within education systems, even in Malta. Primary teachers are expected to take on numerous roles and still meet all curricular expectations, while acknowledging that primary schooling is no longer only about the transfer of knowledge. Moreover, more importance is being given to the process of learning and the learners' holistic experience of education. The results indicate that subject teachers feel more confident and view themselves as experts in the particular subject, and thus they are empowered in their role. The researchers predict that through subject teaching, learners are taught by teachers who are experts in their subject and this would potentially allow for more positive learning experiences. Subject teaching would also allow teachers to improve their practice by creating more meaningful resources whilst allowing them to evaluate and improve their work promptly, resulting in improved teaching and better outcomes for learners. Finally, the researchers hope that if subject teaching practices were to be adopted, these would in turn create a dynamic learning environment and allow teachers to co-plan, hence providing

a more holistic learning opportunity for learners in each subject area. This also means that teachers become acquainted with each other's lessons, topics and outcomes, hence cross-curricular lessons can be integrated to further engage learners and make learning more relevant.

This paper offers a depiction of the reality at both national and international levels, anchoring its research within a network that fosters potential policy formulation. Additionally, it catalyses stimulating further investigations in analogous domains related to subject teaching in Malta and abroad. The paper reveals the existence of learning compartmentalization, which can detrimentally affect students. Concurrently, it highlights the positive outcome of enhanced expertise in teachers resulting from this form of pedagogy. The paper also advocates ideas and recommendations concerning the cultivation of a conducive culture to strengthen effective teaching and learning practices.

The researchers are aware that in order to decide whether subject teaching at the primary level is the best way forward, or otherwise, further studies need to take into consideration the effects this pedagogy has on learners. In this regard, studies should investigate the psychological support that the teacher provides in light of the social and emotional domains of holistic education.

Notes on Contributors

Fiona Schembri has held various roles within the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR) in Malta, namely as Kindergarten Educator, Supply Primary Teacher and Learning Support Educator. She is in her final year of the Bachelor of Education (Hons) in Primary Education at the Institute for Education. Fiona previously read for a Diploma and an Advanced Diploma in the Early Years.

Heathcliff Schembri is a Senior Lecturer in Early Years within the Institute of Community Services at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). Previously he held the roles of Head of Department (Curriculum), Primary Support Teacher and Primary Classroom Teacher within the Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) in Malta. He holds a B.Ed. (Hons) in Primary Education and an M.A. from the University of Malta. Heathcliff is currently reading for a Ph.D. in Education at the University of East Anglia, focusing on system-wide change, curriculum theory, educational leadership and the teaching and learning processes in Maltese primary schools.

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Appendix A

Subject Teaching in Maltese Church Schools

School Name	Subject Teaching in Year
Archbishop Seminary, Rabat	No Subject Teaching
De La Salle College, Junior School, Vittoriosa	Years 5 & 6
Laura Vicuna, Ghasri	No Subject Teaching
Our Lady Immaculate, Hamrun	Years 5 & 6
Sacred Heart School, St Julians	Year 6
St Albert College, Valletta	No Subject Teaching – considering the possibility
St Aloysius College, Balzan	No Subject Teaching
St Augustine College, Marsa	Year 6
St Benild's, Sliema	n/a
St Dorothy's, Sliema	Years 5 & 6
St Dorothy's, Żebbuġ	Years 5 & 6
St Francis, Cospicua	No Subject Teaching
St Francis, Birkirkara	No Subject Teaching
St Francis, Rabat (Gozo)	No Subject Teaching
St Francis, Msida	No Subject Teaching
St Theresa School, Kerċem	No Subject Teaching
St Joan Antide, Gudja	Years 5 & 6
St Joseph, Blata l-Bajda	Years 5 & 6
St Joseph, Paola	One Class Per Year Group
St Joseph, Sliema	Years 5 & 6 for 2 years during Covid-19 Pandemic – reverting to generalist classrooms
St Monica, Birkirkara	Years 5 & 6
St Monica, Gżira	Years 5 & 6
St Monica, Mosta	n/a
St Paul's Missionary College, Rabat	Years 4, 5 & 6
Stella Maris College, Gżira	Year 6
Theresa Nuzzo School, Marsa	Years 5 & 6