

Exploring Adolescents' School Experience in Malta

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Abstract

Adolescents who experience school as a nurturing and supportive environment have better educational outcomes, health and wellbeing (Currie et al., 2004; Rathmann et al., 2018; Coelho & Dell'Aglia, 2019; Inchley et al., 2020). Hence, schools must consider their impact on adolescent wellbeing and development (Cefai et al., 2021). This paper delves into the school experience of secondary school students in Malta, specifically in Years 7, 9 and 11. It analyses some of the data collected as part of the 2022 Health Behaviour in School Children study (HBSC): school satisfaction and school-related pressure and stress, perceived academic performance, support from teachers and classmates; how these interrelate and whether they are underpinned by demographic factors (school year and biological sex).

Keywords

Adolescents, school satisfaction, school-related stress, schoolwork pressure, teacher support, classmate support, perceived academic performance

Introduction

There is strong evidence that education and wellbeing are interlaced (Karkada & Pai, 2016; Medeiros et al., 2018). Schools must broaden their concern to encompass not only academic outcomes but also wellbeing outcomes (Cefai et al., 2021). Understanding students' perception of how school settings and education systems impact students' wellbeing can be a first step towards developing promotion and prevention interventions that aim to positively contribute towards students' holistic development including health, wellbeing, and education outcomes (Kaczmarek & Trambacz-Oleszak, 2021). To this end, this paper delves into the school experience of secondary school students in Malta, specifically exploring their school satisfaction, school-related pressure and stress, perceived academic performance, and support from teachers and classmates. It also aims to investigate whether the variables are impacted by age and sex and by one another.

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School as a Developmental Context

Bronfenbrenner proposed that individual development is influenced by the ecological environment, which comprises interrelated and nested structures (Franco et al., 2022; Hong et al., 2021). Within this framework, school is an important microsystem for students (Franco et al., 2022; Hong et al., 2021; Rudasill et al., 2018). The time spent at school, the relationships formed at school and the school schedule influence students' academic development and success, their social development and overall wellbeing (Hamre & Pianta, 2010; Inchley et al., 2016; Blackburn et al., 2021; Marquez & Main, 2021; Klik et al., 2023).

The impact of school is especially important during adolescence,¹ a period of rapid physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development (WHO, n.d.; Torsheim & Wold, 2001, and Klinger et al., 2015, both cited in Löfstedt et al., 2020). Knowledge, skills, attitudes and habits apprehended during adolescence impact adolescents' present and their future lives as adults (Bennett et al., 2015; Ogundele, 2018; Inchley et al., 2020).

That said, education does not only *influence* wellbeing, but is also *influenced* by students' wellbeing (Basch, 2011). Healthy children are more likely to be socially and academically well-integrated into the education system and, consequently, in society (European Commission, 2019). They are more likely to attend school regularly, be more engaged and motivated, score highly in standardized tests, complete courses, and have better educational prospects (Forrest et al., 2013; Medeiros et al., 2018; OECD, 2023). In the longer term, educational outcomes may translate into socio-economic outcomes, including improved employment prospects, higher earnings, and greater social mobility (OECD, 2023).

As developmental microsystems, schools need to be understood in terms of their psychosocial aspect, and its consequent effect on students' wellbeing (Bennett et al., 2015; Ogundele, 2018; Eugene et al., 2021; Rudasill et al., 2018). This matters because it impacts schools' ability to reach their desired social and academic outcomes (Medeiros et al., 2018). Understanding students' school experience is a prerequisite for developing promotion and prevention interventions (Kaczmarek & Trambacz-Oleszak, 2021). Whilst school experience encompasses several variables, this paper discusses the following elements of school experience: school satisfaction, school-related stress and pressure, perceived academic performance, teacher support and classmate support.

School Satisfaction

School satisfaction is the students' subjective evaluation of the quality of their school life (Coelho & Dell'Aglio, 2019; Löfstedt et al., 2020). It is a complex assessment that comprises the value placed on the school, the school community, and interpersonal relationships experienced at or through school (Huebner & McCullough, 2000, cited in Coelho & Dell'Aglio, 2019). Furthermore, the judgment on school satisfaction does not only depend on the relationships and events that take place within the school itself, but also on those outside the school, including the student's leisure activities, their relatives and friends, and their health (Coelho & Dell'Aglio, 2019).

Research has found positive associations between high school satisfaction and educational outcomes, including school adjustment, academic engagement, motivation and achievement, teacher and classmate support and general and academic self-efficacy (Bond et al., 2007, and Blum, 2005, both cited in Vašíčková et al., 2017; Liu & Lu, 2011, and Danielson et al., 2011, both cited in Löfstedt et al., 2020; Suldo et al., 2014, cited in Coelho & Dell'Aglio, 2019; Ladd & Burgess, 2001, Walker & Graham, 2019, Riglin et al., 2013, all three cited in Graham et al., 2022). High school satisfaction is also positively associated with mental and physical wellbeing outcomes including life satisfaction, self-esteem, reduced risk behaviours and brighter future expectations (Engels et al., 2004, and DeSantis-King et al., 2006, both cited in Telef et al., 2015; Karatzias et al., 2002, Huebner et al., 2009, Suldo et al., 2014, and Alves et al., 2015, all cited in Coelho & Dell'Aglio, 2019).

However, not all students come to know school as a positive and nurturing experience (Blackburn et al., 2021). Low school satisfaction has been associated with risk behaviours, including increased involvement in bullying perpetration and victimisation and substance use, lower self-rated health, and increased somatic and psychological symptoms (Spriggs et al., 2007, as cited in Vašíčková et al., 2017; Huebner et al., 2009, cited in Coelho & Dell'Aglio, 2019; Joyce & Early, 2014, Vogel et al., 2015, Langille et al., 2015, Rossen et al., 2016, and Lew et al., 2019, all cited in Löfstedt et al., 2020; Currie et al., 2008; Inchley et al., 2020; Rathmann et al., 2018). Löfstedt et al. (2020) noted that low school satisfaction and risk behaviour may be associated because students who lack school motivation may seek motivation elsewhere, possibly in areas that pose risk.

An overall decline in school satisfaction over time has been observed in several Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study (HBSC) countries (WHO, 2020). Furthermore, school satisfaction decreased with age (Alves et al., 2015, as cited in Coelho & Dell'Aglio, 2019; Vašíčková et al., 2017). Girls were more likely to report school satisfaction, and this too decreased with age (Currie et al., 2012; Suldo et al., 2014, as cited in Coelho & Dell'Aglio, 2019). Löfstedt et al. (2020) found that, in 2002, 15-year-old girls reported higher school satisfaction than boys in 15 of the 32 countries studied; however, thereafter (2004–2018) there was an increase in boys reporting high school satisfaction. In 2018, this resulted in sex differences becoming insignificant in most countries, with boys reporting higher school satisfaction in 6 countries, and girls reporting higher school satisfaction in 5 countries (Löfstedt et al., 2020).

Schoolwork Pressure and School-Related Stress

While often used interchangeably (Löfstedt et al., 2020), “pressure” and “stress” represent distinct concepts. Academic pressure refers to the perceived demands and expectations from school, family, and society concerning learning, which commonly include peer interactions, expectations, workload, and performance anxieties (Wiklund et al., 2012; Cosma et al., 2020; Blackburn et al., 2021; Moustaka et al., 2023). In moderate amounts, pressure can motivate and enhance performance, contributing to positive development (Cosma et al., 2020; Löfstedt et al., 2020). However, studies have reported an association between excessive schoolwork pressure and feelings of inadequacy and anxiety, as well as reduced school satisfaction and engagement (Vašíčková et al., 2017; Coelho & Dell'Aglio, 2019; Löfstedt et al., 2020). Furthermore, excessive pressure can lead to stress (Inchley et al., 2016; Cosma et al., 2020; Löfstedt et al., 2020).

Stress is an emotional, behavioural, and physiological response to demands perceived to exceed one's ability to meet them (Mariotti, 2015; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987, cited in Löfstedt et al., 2020; van Loon et al., 2020; Blackburn et al., 2021). Research demonstrates that stress is detrimental to cognitive and academic functions, hindering decision-making, concentration, information retention, engagement, and exam performance (Suldo et al., 2011, cited in Coelho & Dell'Aglio, 2019; Blackburn et al., 2021). Beyond cognition, stress is linked to various health perceptions, physiological symptoms, psychosomaticism, mental health issues and externalizing behaviours (Wiklund et al., 2012; Inchley et al., 2016; Lima et al., 2017; Rathmann et al., 2018; Cosma et al., 2020; Blackburn et al., 2021).

Additionally, pressure and stress are correlated with school satisfaction, self-efficacy and life satisfaction (Moksnes et al., 2016; Lima et al., 2017; Sari, 2017; Coelho & Dell'Aglio, 2019). While causal relationships require further investigation, the consistent findings across studies strongly suggest a deleterious effect of excessive pressure and stress on adolescents' overall health and wellbeing (Löfstedt et al., 2020).

Analysing trends in perceived schoolwork pressure in 36 European countries, Cosma et al. (2020) observed an increase in 20 countries, while a decrease in only 7 countries. Such increases were also observed in individual-country studies, such as Sweden (Nygren et al., 2019, cited in Cosma et al., 2020) and the Czech Republic (Vašíčková et al., 2017). Studies have revealed that schoolwork pressure and school-related stress are affected by gender, with higher prevalence among girls, and age, with older students reporting higher levels (Currie et al., 2004; Vašíčková et al., 2017; Sotardi & Watson, 2019, and Klinger et al., 2015, both cited in Löfstedt et al., 2020; Kaczmarek & Trambacz-Oleszak, 2021).

Perceived Academic Performance

Perceived academic performance considers the students' opinion of how their teachers regard their academic achievement (Diseth & Samdal, 2014). Subjective performance has been associated with several school-related and wellbeing factors, namely school satisfaction, school climate, life satisfaction and bullying (Diseth & Samdal, 2014; Shek & Li, 2016; Vašíčková et al.; 2017; Izaguirre et al., 2023).

In past iterations of the HBSC study, around two-thirds of respondents in the WHO European region claimed to believe that their teachers rated their performance as better than that of their peers,² dipping to 56% in 2018 (Currie et al., 2004; Currie et al., 2008; Currie et al., 2012; Inchley et al., 2016; Inchley et al., 2020). Results for Malta were consistently above those of the HBSC average, but 2018 results suffered a similar drop³ (Currie et al., 2004; Currie et al., 2008; Currie et al., 2012; Inchley et al., 2016; Inchley et al., 2020). Previous studies have shown that, in Europe and in Malta, perceived academic performance decreased as the students got older (Diseth & Samdal, 2014; Shek & Li, 2016; Currie et al., 2004; Currie et al., 2008; Currie et al., 2012; Inchley et al., 2016; Inchley et al., 2020). Currie et al. (2004) posit that one possible explanation for this decrease is that older children feel a greater responsibility, which may result in increased pressures.

Historical HBSC data reveals that girls generally perceive their academic performance more positively than boys (Currie et al., 2004; Currie et al., 2008; Currie et al., 2012; Inchley et al., 2016). However, while some studies found these perceptions to be statistically significant (Lopez-Gil et al., 2022), others recorded no significant difference between boys and girls (Diseth & Samdal, 2014; Shek & Li, 2016). Moustaka et al. (2023) posit that girls assess their performance more positively since they are more likely to consider academic performance as a highly significant task. Malta data reveals that a higher proportion of girls positively rated their performance in 2002 and 2006 (Currie et al., 2004; Currie et al., 2008). However, in 2010 and 2014, this was limited to 11-year-olds (Currie et al., 2012; Inchley et al., 2016). By 2018, both 11- and 15-year-old girls perceived teacher bias in their favour, while 13-year-old boys reported the opposite (Inchley et al., 2020). These mixed results indicate that the impact of gender on perceived academic performance may be declining and that other factors better predict perceived academic performance.

Teacher and Classmate Support

School is a primary context for young people to develop relationships: teachers and classmates can be an important source of emotional, behavioural, social and instructional support (Pianta & Hamre, 2009; Kim & Kim, 2013, as cited in Telef et al., 2015; Vaiciunas & Smigelskas, 2019).

The trust built by teachers who foster supportive and nurturing relationships with their students facilitates learning and development, and can be critical to student academic achievement, to setting and working towards own goals, and to developing self-assessment (DeSantis King et al., 2006, and Jiang et al., 2013, both cited in Telef et al., 2015). In fact, positive relationships with teachers have been correlated with better engagement in learning and academic gains, positive school climate, increased school satisfaction, connectedness to school, reduced risk of suspension, and reduced risk of school disengagement (Rathmann et al., 2018; Hughes & Kwok, 2007, Roorda et al., 2017, Monahan et al., 2010, and Quin, 2017, all cited in Graham et al., 2022).

Additionally, positive and supportive relationships with teachers have beneficial wellbeing outcomes. Teacher support correlates negatively with school-related stress and risk of concerning adolescent behaviour (Moore et al., 2017; García-Moya et al., 2020; Gustafsson et al., 2023; Rathmann et al., 2018; Inchley et al., 2020). Conversely, it correlates positively with better

physical and mental health outcomes, higher adolescent subjective wellbeing and life satisfaction (Diseth & Samdal, 2014; García-Moya et al., 2020; Inchley et al., 2016).

Interactions with and support from classmates are important for adolescents and contribute greatly to their sense of identity and subjective wellbeing (Currie et al., 2008; Rathmann et al., 2018; Marquez & Main, 2021). Classmate support is a protective factor positively associated with high school satisfaction, school motivation, good academic performance, high self-efficacy, and a buffer against the negative effects of school pressure and school-related stress (Currie et al., 2004; Currie et al., 2008; King et al., 2021; Kinley et al., 2023).

In the HBSC 2018 survey, more than half of adolescents in Malta reported high classmate support, recording increases in support over the 2014 survey in all groups except for 15-year-old boys (Inchley et al., 2020). Studies have noted that both teacher and classmate support decrease with age (Currie et al., 2004, 2012; Inchley et al., 2016; Vašíčková et al., 2017; Vaiciunas & Smigelskas, 2019; García-Moya et al., 2014, as cited in Marquez & Main, 2021). Notwithstanding this, and although adolescents seek authoritative independence (Vašíčková et al., 2017) and prioritise support (Rathmann et al., 2018), high teacher support usually remains more prevalent than classmate support (Vaiciunas & Smigelskas, 2019).

Differences between sexes on perceived classmate support is mixed. Some studies report no clear sex patterns, while others report association, with girls generally being more likely to rate classmate support positively (Currie et al., 2008, 2012; Inchley et al., 2020).⁴

Relevance of the Literature to the Present Study

The literature review confirms a strong link between adolescents' school experience and academic and wellbeing outcomes. However, despite Malta participating in HBSC since 2002, there is little HBSC data available on Malta: reports focusing on Malta are infrequent (Ministry for Health, 2010) and Malta is often left out of studies involving multiple HBSC countries (see, for instance, Rathmann et al., 2018; Cosma et al., 2020; Löfstedt et al., 2020; Marquez & Main, 2021). This is concerning given that the documented variability in children's perspectives on school-related matters vary between countries, and also vary in circumstances where this variability is greater in school issues than in other areas (Currie et al., 2012; Inchley et al., 2016; Rees & Main, 2015, in Marquez & Main, 2021).

This study aims to address this gap by first presenting HBSC data for Malta on school satisfaction, school-related pressure and stress, perceived academic performance, and teacher and peer support. By analysing these data, we aim to identify key factors shaping adolescents' school experience in Malta and their impact on academic performance and wellbeing. The findings will inform future interventions and policies to better support adolescents in Malta's schools, fostering their academic success and overall wellbeing.

Methodology

This paper presents a small part of the data collected in the 2021/2022 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study (HBSC): a collaborative cross-national study that considers adolescent health behaviours within various social contexts. HBSC collects data among 11-, 13- and 15-year-olds, which in Malta corresponds to students in Years 7, 9 and 11 (Y7 being the first year of Middle school, and Years 9 and 11 being the first and last years of secondary school, respectively). The methodology used for the HBSC is prescribed by the HBSC collaboration, and the methodology specific to Malta's 2021/2022 data collection is described elsewhere (Vassallo, 2024).

Aims and Research Questions

This paper is concerned about adolescents' school experience in Malta, specifically aiming to:

- Investigate the perceptions of secondary school students regarding their school experience, including school satisfaction, school-related pressure and stress, perceived academic performance, and teacher and peer support;
- Examine the influence of age and sex on the perceptions of secondary school students' school experience;
- Explore the interrelationships among factors contributing to school experience.

This paper set out to explore the following research questions:

1. How do secondary school students perceive school satisfaction, schoolwork pressure, school-related stress, perceived academic performance and teacher and classmate support?

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2. How are school satisfaction, schoolwork pressure, school-related stress, perceived academic performance and teacher and classmate support impacted by age and sex?
 3. How do school satisfaction, schoolwork pressure, school-related stress, perceived academic performance and teacher and classmate support interrelate?

Analytic Variables

Biological sex and school year are the independent variables in our analyses, which focus on the dependent variables outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Dependent Variables Analysed in this Study

Analytic variable	Survey item(s) and original	Response options
School satisfaction	How do you feel about school at present?	I like it a lot, I like it a bit, I don't like it very much, I don't like it at all
School pressure	How pressured do you feel by the schoolwork?	Not at all, a little, some, a lot
School-related stress	Keeping up with schoolwork	Not at all stressful (or has not happened), a little stressful, Moderately stressful, Quite stressful, Very stressful
	Teachers expecting too much from you	
	Having to study things you do not understand	
	Putting pressure on yourself to meet your future goals	
	Having to make decisions about future work or education	
	Concern about your future	
	Having too much homework	
	Not enough time for activities outside of school hours	
Not getting enough time for leisure		
Perceived academic performance	In your opinion, what does your class teacher(s) think about your classroom performance compared to your classmates?	Very good, good, average, below average
Classmate Support	The students in my classes enjoy being together	Strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree
	Most of the students in my classes are kind and helpful	
	Other students accept me as I am	
Teacher support	I feel a lot of trust in my teachers	Strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree
	I feel that my teachers care about me as a person	
	I feel that my teachers accept me as I am	

Analytic variable levels	Validity and reliability
<p>High satisfaction (I like it a lot) Not high satisfaction (I like it a bit, I don't like it very much, I don't like it at all)</p>	Analytic variable levels were consistent with previous studies (Inchley et al., 2016; Löfstedt et al., 2020).
<p>Negligible pressure (Not at all, a little) Pressured (Some, a lot)</p>	This measure is well functioning and has been validated in several countries and included in other validated subscales measuring school pressure (Torsheim & Wold, 2001, and Klinger et al., 2015, both cited in Löfstedt et al., 2020).
<p>Negligible stress (Not at all, a little, moderate) Stressed (Quite, very)</p>	<p>There are various versions of the ASQ. The full ASQ, covering 56 items across 10 domains, has received mixed results as to its validity and reliability. It has been reported as being reliable and adequate for testing adolescent stress in Australia (Byrne et al., 2007), Spain (Lima et al., 2017), New Zealand (Sotardi & Watson, 2019) and Greece (Darviri & Hadjichristou, 2014). Its internal reliability and construct validity were also acceptable for Europe,⁹ although its factorial structure was called into question, and test-retest reliability and criterion validity were rather poor (De Vriendt et al., 2011).</p> <p>Short forms of the ASQ were developed in order to facilitate data collection for research and screening purposes (Blanca et al., 2020). A short form of the ASQ was developed and validated in Norway, covering 7 domains (Moksnes & Espnes, 2011). Another short form, covering 9 domains (27 items), was validated for Sweden (Anniko et al., 2018) and the UK (Klingberg et al., 2019; McKay et al., 2019). These studies concluded that the shorter versions of the ASQ were valid research and clinical tools, yet concerns regarding convergent validity (McKay et al., 2019) and factorial structure (Moksnes & Espnes, 2011) remained. Furthermore, the 9-domain version was analysed for its applicability in Switzerland, Germany and Greece, finding poor to moderate internal reliability across all three countries and failing to confirm the 9-dimension factor structure (Ertanir et al., 2021). Consequently, Ertanir et al. (2021) tested a modified 6-factor structure, which showed acceptable model fits while demonstrating form invariance across the three countries, and demonstrated adequate concurrent validity, although caution was raised about translating the questionnaire for international administration.</p> <p>This study used a shorter form of the ASQ, comprising three subscales, each having three items pertinent to school-related stress: Academic performance, Future Uncertainty, School/Leisure conflict. This version of the ASQ demonstrated high reliability in Spain and Sweden (García-Moya et al., 2021).</p> <p>The 3-domain scale demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha=0.887$), consistent with research on the ASQ showing that the more items on the scale the higher the internal consistency (Ertanir et al., 2021). For this reason, the 9-item ASQ was computed into one variable, providing the total school-related stress score.</p>
<p>Analysis 1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very good • Good • Average • Below average <p>Analysis 2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better than peers (good, very good) • Not better than peers (below average & average) <p>Analysis 3:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very good/good • Average • Below average 	
<p>High support (Strongly agree/agree) Neutral Low support (Disagree/strongly disagree)</p>	<p>Confirmatory factor analysis from several European countries supported a two-factor structure for these support scales and confirmed the test-retest reliability and measurement invariance across HBSC countries.</p> <p>In this study, good internal consistency was obtained for the classmate support scale ($\alpha=0.773$), and high internal consistency ($\alpha=0.840$) was obtained for the teacher support scale.</p>

Results

In the present study, the analytic sample consisted of 3456 adolescents between the ages of 11 and 16. The sample was evenly distributed between boys and girls (49.7% and 50.3%, respectively, $n=3415$). The proportion of participants ($n=3451$) in Y7 and Y9 was similar (38% and 35.9% of participants respectively), while that of Y11 was less (26.1%) because of attrition commonly observed in the second term of Y11. No weighting was used during the analysis.

High School Satisfaction

The proportion of high school satisfaction was 35.7%. School year was significantly associated with high satisfaction ($\chi^2(2)=403.564$, $n=3413$, $p<.001$; Cramer's $V=.344$, $p<.001$), with satisfaction halving from Year 7 (58.5%) to Year 9 (25.4%) and further decreasing in Year 11 (19.6%). The cohort with the most prevalent high school satisfaction was that of Y7 girls (58.5%), yet boys reporting high school satisfaction outnumbered girls in Y9 and 11.⁶ That said, analysis (neither when analysing Y7, Y9, Y11 separately, nor aggregately) showed no significant gender effect, suggesting factors other than gender might be driving the decline in satisfaction.

Schoolwork Pressure

Just over half the participants reported feeling pressured by schoolwork (55.5%),⁷ with significant differences across school years ($\chi^2(2)=356.582$, $n=3433$, $p<.001$; Cramer's $V=.322$, $p<.001$). Over one third of students in Y7 reported being pressured by schoolwork (35.4%), doubling to 65.7% in Y9 and increasing to 71.4% in Y11. A weak but statistically significant sex difference was found ($\chi^2(1)=30.996$, $n=3401$, $p<.001$; $\Phi=.095$, $p<.001$), with girls generally reporting higher pressure levels.⁸ Although no differences were observed in Y7 ($p>.05$), girls in Y9⁹ and 11¹⁰ reported higher pressure than boys.¹¹ Notably, the highest prevalence of schoolwork pressure (79%) was observed among Y11 girls.

School-Related Stress

Each item on the school-related stress scale was deemed stressful by 35–40% of respondents, save for two items (both on the school/leisure conflict scale) (see Figure 1). Overall, respondents seemed most stressed about meeting present and future expectations, and decision-making for the future. School stress was not normally distributed for boys¹² or girls¹³ and across all three school years (Y7,¹⁴ Y9,¹⁵ Y11¹⁶). Statistically significant difference between

school years was observed,¹⁷ with students in Year 7 reporting lower mean stress scores (1187.65) than those in Year 9 (1803.56) and Year 11 (2118.41). Girls (M=1805.34, N=1646) reported higher levels of school stress than boys (M=1465.58, N=1626).¹⁸

Perceived Academic Performance

Most participants believed that their teachers rated their performance favourably (23.6% very good; 48.1% good). One quarter believed that their performance was within the average (24.4%), while 4% deemed their performance below average. Weak association was found between school year and perceived academic performance (perceived academic performance binary: $\chi^2(4) = 57.055$, $n=3395$, $p<.001$; $\Phi=.125$, $p<.001$). Specifically, our findings reveal a drop in perception of academic performance between the first and latter years of secondary schooling. Y11s were more likely than students in other years to rate their performance at or below average (Y7=23.6%, Y9=26.6%, Y11=37.5%), while they were less likely to rate their performance as better than average (Y7=76.4%, Y9=73.4%, Y11=62.5%). No significant associations were found between perceived academic performance and sex ($p>.05$).

Teacher and Classmate Support

The responses to each of the items on the teacher-support scale and the classmate-support scale are depicted in Figure 2. Most respondents positively regarded their support from classmates, with each item on the classmate-support scale receiving 68.9–77.1% agreement. Classmate support was not normally distributed for boys¹⁹ or girls²⁰ and across all three school years (Y7,²¹ Y9,²² Y11²³). Significant differences²⁴ were observed between classmate support and school year, with support decreasing as adolescents progress through the education system.²⁵ Sex effect was also observed, with boys (M=1731.82, N=1666) rating classmate support more positively than girls (M=1635.12, N=1699).²⁶

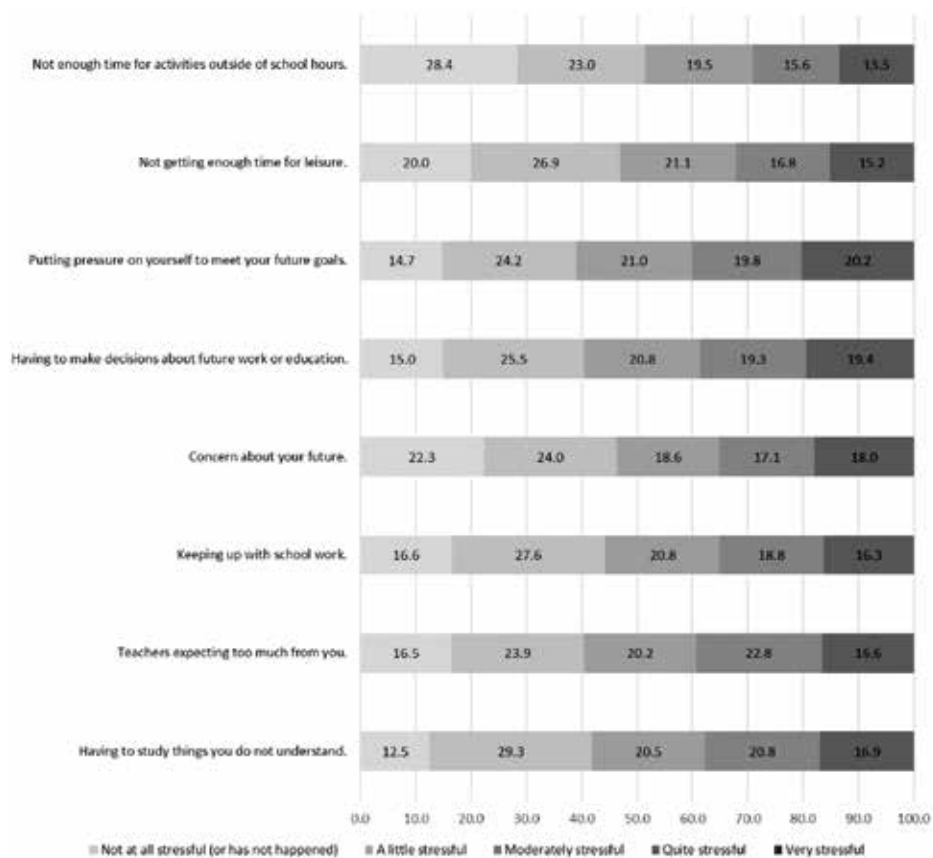
Figure 1*Distribution of each Item of the School-Related ASQ*

Figure 2

Distribution of each Item of the Teacher-Support and the Classmate-Support Scales



An overwhelming portion of participants deemed their teachers accepting (81.8%) and caring (72.0%). However, adolescents were more cautious about teacher trustworthiness, with the largest proportion of respondents expressing uncertainty (44.5%) and only 12.4% expressing trust in their teachers. Teacher support was not normally distributed for boys²⁷ or girls²⁸ and across all three school years (Y7,²⁹ Y9,³⁰ Y11³¹). Significant differences³² were observed between teacher support and school year, with support decreasing as adolescents progress through the education system.³³ Sex effect was also observed, with boys (M=1800.62, N=1699) rating teacher support more positively than girls (M=1617.35, N=1717).³⁴

Variable Interrelatedness

Schoolwork pressure and school-related stress were positively associated,³⁵ with those who felt pressured having a mean school-related stress score double that of those who did not report feeling pressured (pressured: M=2113.12, N=1835; not pressured: M=1066.47, N=1462).³⁶ Association was observed between schoolwork pressure and classmate-support:³⁷ the mean classmate-support score of students with low pressure (M=1923.62, N=1496) exceeded that of students who felt high pressure (M=1512.35, N=1891). School-related

stress was negatively weakly associated with classmate support ($r=-0.285$, $p<0.001$), and moderately associated with teacher support ($r=-0.433$, $p<0.001$). This indicates that classmate support and, more so, teacher support can be a mitigation against school-related stress.³⁸

Moreover, high school satisfaction mitigated against school-related stress:³⁹ adolescents reporting high school satisfaction also reported lower mean school-related stress scores ($M=1219.05$, $N=1176$) than those who did not ($M=1876.07$, $N=2104$). High school satisfaction was positively associated with teacher support and classmate support. Teacher-support scores⁴⁰ were higher among those who reported high satisfaction ($M=2259.75$, $N=1219$) than those who did not ($M=1403.56$, $N=2198$).⁴¹ Likewise, classmate-support scores⁴² were higher among those who reported high satisfaction ($M=2047.62$, $N=1204$) than those who did not ($M=1482.47$, $N=2164$).⁴³

No significant associations ($p>.05$) were found between perceived academic performance and high school satisfaction, schoolwork pressure and school-related stress.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper provides insight into adolescents' experiences of school in Malta by delving into school satisfaction, school-related pressure and stress, and teacher and classmate support for adolescents in Years 7, 9 and 11. While declines in school satisfaction are observed internationally (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2020), Malta stands out with consistently high scores.⁴⁴ Despite this high satisfaction, adolescents in Malta also report high levels of schoolwork pressure. Our study explored these seemingly contradictory findings and their association with age and gender.

Our findings align with previous research (Currie et al., 2004, 2008, 2012; Wiklund et al., 2012; Moksnes & Espnes, 2013; WHO, 2014; Vašíčková et al., 2017; Coelho & Dell'Aglio, 2019; Inchley et al., 2020) in showing that progressing through education impacts high school satisfaction (-), schoolwork pressure (+) and school-related stress (+). Associations were noted between schoolwork pressure and school-related stress (+).

One may argue, as others have done previously, that as academic demands increase, so does pressure to perform, potentially contributing to higher stress

and lower school satisfaction, contributing to a more negative school experience (Vašíčková et al., 2017; Coelho & Dell'Aglio, 2019; Kaplan et al., 2005, as cited in Löfstedt et al., 2020). In particular, our results revealed a marked difference in school experience between Y7 and Years 9 and 11. Y9 marks the start of upper secondary education and embraces a clear focus towards the end of compulsory education and exams leading to higher education. Y11 marks the end of compulsory education and major life decisions. Furthermore, 2022 data collection coincided with Y11s' approaching examinations, likely amplifying stress and anxiety. This aligns with our finding of heightened concerns about expectations and future decisions.

Furthermore, our findings indicate that adolescents who felt supported by their teachers and/or classmates were more inclined to report high school satisfaction and lower schoolwork pressure and school-related stress levels. Additionally, students who reported high school satisfaction also reported lower schoolwork pressure and school-related stress. Additionally, students who felt highly satisfied with school reported higher levels of support from teachers and classmates.

Notwithstanding the benefits of trusting and supportive relationships, as others have previously reported (Currie et al., 2004, 2012; Inchley et al., 2016), our findings suggest that trust in teachers is poor and that classmate support and teacher support were highest among Y7s and decreased with age. This may point towards unmet support needs at a critical time in secondary school students' trajectory.

Furthermore, our findings support the notion that girls generally feel more burdened by school demands (corroborating, among others, Currie et al., 2008; Vašíčková et al., 2017; Sotardi & Watson, 2018, and Klinger et al., 2015, both cited in Löfstedt et al., 2020; Blanca et al., 2020; Moustaka et al., 2023). Girls in Malta reported higher pressure and stress than boys across most years (except Y7 pressure), and boys reported higher levels of support from both classmates and teachers. Interestingly, sex did not significantly impact high school satisfaction, aligning with reports of declining sex impact on this variable (Löfstedt et al., 2020).

While previous studies report declines in perceived academic performance with age, our findings only showed a weak association, with Y11s self-reporting

lower ratings. Additionally, no significant gender effect was observed, mirroring the mixed results in existing literature (Currie et al., 2004, 2008; Inchley et al., 2012, 2016, 2020). This suggests that perceived academic performance is not a strong predictor of school satisfaction, pressure and stress.

This study points towards the need for a deeper understanding of the declining school experience as adolescents go through the education system. In particular, more research is needed to understand the factors underpinning the gender difference in school experience. Implementing universal promotion and prevention initiatives to help adolescents cope with school demands are also warranted. Such initiatives may include unfragmented social and emotional literacy and mental health literacy programs, and programs aimed at improving self-efficacy, such as problem-solving and decision-making skills, positive thinking, effective communication and goal setting, time management (Frydenberg & Brandon, 2007, cited in Blanca et al., 2020; European Commission, 2023a). Additionally, evidence-based interventions aimed at supporting students' wellbeing and school experience may be warranted. As suggested elsewhere, such initiatives must be tailored to the specific needs of the various stages of adolescence, different genders and communities (Cosma et al., 2020).

It is worth noting that although this study focuses on students, this does not imply that other school players cannot contribute to providing insight on adolescents' school experience and its repercussions (Inchley et al., 2016). However, adolescents must remain at the core of efforts to design research, policy and interventions that will affect them.

Notes

1. Adolescence covers the period of between the ages of 10 and 19 years (WHO, n.d.).
2. 2002–2014: 60.4%–67.3%
3. 2002–2014: 66.0–73%; 2018: 61%
4. Reports from Romania have revealed that boys are more likely to positively report classmate support (WHO, 2020).
5. The study considered six European cities: Ghent, Stockholm, Vienna, Zaragoza, Pecs and Athens.
6. Girls: Y9=24.9%, Y11=17.3%; Boys: Y9=26.1%, Y11=22.5%.

7. Some pressure: 31.0%, n=1064; a lot of pressure: 24.6% n=851.
8. Girls: 60.3%; Boys: 50.8%.
9. Y9: $\chi^2(1) = 35.140$, n=1219, p<.001; $\Phi = .170$, p<.001
10. Y11: $\chi^2(1) = 27.936$, n=884, p<.001; $\Phi = .178$, p<.001
11. Girls: Y9=73.9%, Y11=78.7%; Boys: Y9=57.8%, Y11=62.7%.
12. Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (1626)=100.06, p<.001; Shapiro-Wilk W=.982, p<.001
13. Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (1646)=104.64, p<.001; Shapiro-Wilk W=.977, p<.001
14. Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (1251)=.082, p<.001; Shapiro-Wilk W=.966, p<.001
15. Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (1191)=.049, p<.001; Shapiro-Wilk W=.987, p<.001
16. Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (862)=.076, p<.001; Shapiro-Wilk W=.979, p<.001
17. H(2)=533.107, p<.001
18. U=1,060,283.00, Z=-10.29, p<.001
19. Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (1664)=.145, p<.001; Shapiro-Wilk W=.929, p<.001
20. Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (1699)=.146, p<.001; Shapiro-Wilk W=.932, p<.001
21. Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (1277)=.150, p=.000; Shapiro-Wilk W=.909, p<.001
22. Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (1206)=.146, p=.000; Shapiro-Wilk W=.937, p<.001
23. Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (880)=.129, p=.000; Shapiro-Wilk W=.946, p<.001
24. H(2)=130.195, p<.001
25. Y7: 1938.77, Y9: 1587.85, Y11: 1504.18
26. U=1,333,925.500, Z=-2.916, p=.004
27. Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (1699)=.487, p<.001; Shapiro-Wilk W=.151, p<.001
28. Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (1717)=.469, p<.001; Shapiro-Wilk W=.128, p<.001
29. Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (1312)=.502, p=.000; Shapiro-Wilk W=.147, p<.001
30. Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (1240)=.460, p=.000; Shapiro-Wilk W=.136, p<.001
31. Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (899)=.470, p=.000; Shapiro-Wilk W=.140, p<.001
32. H(2)=288.858, p<.001
33. Y7: 2086.98; Y9: 1439.30; Y11: 1442.90
34. U=1,302,080.500, Z=-5.479, p<.001

35. $U=1,070,959.500$, $Z=-12.278$, $p<.001$
36. $U=489,719.000$, $Z=-31.381$, $p<.001$
37. Classmate support was not normally distributed for those who felt pressured by schoolwork (Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (1480)=.153, $p<.001$; Shapiro-Wilk $W=.909$, $p<.001$) and those who did not (Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (1880)=.134, $p<.001$; Shapiro-Wilk $W=.945$, $p<.001$).
38. The relationships between school-related stress and teacher support and classmate support were analysed using Spearman correlation because all three variables violated the normality assumption ($p<0.001$).
39. $U=741522.500$, $Z=-19.065$, $p<.001$; school-related stress was not normally distributed for those who expressed high school satisfaction (Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (1176)=.145, $p<.001$; Shapiro-Wilk $W=.892$, $p<.001$) and those who did not (Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (2104)=.057, $p<.001$; Shapiro-Wilk $W=.090$, $p<.001$).
40. Teacher support was not normally distributed for those who expressed high school satisfaction (Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (1219)=.491, $p=.000$; Shapiro-Wilk $W=.106$, $p<.001$) and those who did not (Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (2198)=.460, $p=.000$; Shapiro-Wilk $W=.142$, $p<.001$).
41. $U=668,321.500$, $Z=-24.520$, $p<.001$
42. Classmate support was not normally distributed for those who expressed high school satisfaction (Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (1198)=.145, $p<.001$; Shapiro-Wilk $W=.892$, $p<.001$) and those who did not (Kolmogorov-Smirnov D (2162)=.137, $p<.001$; Shapiro-Wilk $W=.946$, $p<.001$).
43. $U=865,537.000$, $Z=-16.329$, $p<.001$
44. The 2022 figure, 35.7%, is the highest reported since Malta started taking part in HBSC.

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Exploring the Affordances and Propensities of Multimodality in Narrative Pedagogies through Multimodal Ethnography

Edward Wright

Abstract

This paper seeks to reflect on the propensities and advantages of multimodality in teaching and learning, and its rich exploration through multimodal research. It will also report and reflect upon the findings of a small-scale multimodal ethnographic study that was conducted over one scholastic year. This investigated whether, and how, the use of multimodal creative productions can facilitate adolescents' search for meaning through the re-configuration and re-imagination of life experiences shared in a classroom context. The pedagogical context of this research consisted of RE (Religious Education), and MLE (Media Literacy Education) classrooms, enabling an exploration into a possible fruitful dialogue between these two curricular subjects. Another related aim of this paper is to investigate how a narrative-hermeneutic approach to learning can facilitate meaning-making when applied to and through multimodal production tasks in RE and MLE. The results indicate that through multimodality, made possible by the advancement of creative digital technologies, narrative pedagogies can become more effective. This transpires from the fact that multimodality expands the range of resources available for students to construct and share their narratives, as it integrates the auditory, visual, gestural, linguistic, and spatial modes, augmenting the overall narrative experience. Moreover, this study shows that multimodality can facilitate meaning-making by promoting and nurturing a pedagogy for creative expression, a pedagogy of empathy and compassion, a pedagogy of agency and authenticity, a pedagogy of vulnerability, and a pedagogy through the use of metaphor. The paper also makes specific recommendations on how a narrative-hermeneutical approach through multimodality can promote the specified pedagogies in the context of the mentioned curricular subjects.

Keywords

Multimodality, ethnography, narrative learning, narrative pedagogies, critical reflection, self-reflexivity, identity exploration, Media Literacy Education, Christian Religious Education

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